

# The Lived Experience of School Belonging: A Phenomenological Study of Middle School Students with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders

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**Boston College**  
**Lynch School of Education and Human Development**

Department of  
Teacher Education, Special Education, and Curriculum and Instruction

Program of  
Curriculum and Instruction

**The Lived Experience of School Belonging: A Phenomenological Study of Middle School  
Students with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders**

Dissertation

By

Scott D. Lapinski

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## **ABSTRACT**

Belonging in schools is an often-researched topic. However, the lived experiences of students with disabilities as related to belonging have not been explored in great depth. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to begin to understand the lived experiences of belonging for middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) through a relational lens (relational here was meant as more than just focusing on relationships). This phenomenological approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how participants understand belonging and how it impacts their lives.

Ten student participants were interviewed over a series of four interview sessions in which they discussed their experiences with and understanding of belonging in school. Findings revealed complex and multifaceted subjective lived experiences of belonging. Findings are presented here through participant summaries, across participants in broader descriptive themes, and through the creation of a participant model. Interpretive themes are also presented to help guide further analysis and understanding of the findings. Considering the qualitative nature of this study, these themes are not meant to be reductive, but rather to generate additional questions. In keeping with this purpose, a Generative Model of Belonging was created from the broader literature base on middle school belonging, and this model was revisited and revised based on the findings of this study. It was also used to create the aforementioned participant model.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Human development is intertwined in sociality. It is through our continual, relational interactions with complex social systems that we ultimately create our sense of identity and purpose. As such, a sense of belonging within these systems represents an important aspect of how we understand individual development. Belonging has been held to be a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943), and the presence of an individual's sense of belonging impacts psychological and behavioral well-being. When we perceive that we belong, we develop positively and only further our self-identification with particular social contexts, which in turn influences what we become. When we feel isolated, disconnected, and marginalized within normative contexts, we suffer a number of negative psychological and social consequences. Yet, even in isolation the need to belong does not easily fade. Those who do not feel a sense of belonging in one context seek other social contexts in which to belong so as to avoid the negative consequences associated with loneliness and marginalization. As humans, we cannot avoid this process of ever seeking to belong.

It is, in part, within the normative social contexts of schools that individuals begin to answer fundamental questions about who they are, where they belong, and what they will become. From meeting friends the first day of kindergarten to the process of choosing extracurricular activities in secondary school, a student's sense of belonging has an impact on student identification, development, and motivation (Osterman, 2000). Yet, the need to belong in school is not simply an individual need. Rather, it is highly intertwined with the school environment and those within said environment (Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010). Belonging, in this sense, is best understood as relational (May, 2013) and says something important about the

individual, as well as something important about the school context. When a student says they do not feel like they belong in school, it is not simply an agentic disavowal or a reflection of an innate desire to distance. It is a statement that reflects a personal experience of a subjective state of awareness, but also reflects the culture, norms, rules, and structures of the school.

Though there has been a great deal of research regarding belonging in schools (Juvonen, 2006; Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013; Osterman, 2000), there has been a less substantial examination of students with disabilities and school belonging. While select issues of identity such as gender and race have been explored, disability status remains far less explored. Despite students with disabilities comprising approximately 12% of the student population (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016), we know little about their experiences of belonging in schools. Although students with disabilities have traditionally been marginalized within schools, schools are starting to shift towards educating students with disabilities within inclusive placements (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). However, little is known about their subjective experiences of belonging. This is problematic not only for how we understand the experiences of student with disabilities, but also for our understanding of how to create environments that effectively educate the whole child.

### **Students with Disabilities and School Belonging**

Belonging in schools is complicated for any student, and though the specific experiences of students with disabilities have yet to be explored in great depth, belonging is likely increasingly complex for students with disabilities. This is, in part, because students with disabilities remain a primarily marginalized group. Despite a presumption of inclusion and individualization under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), their needs are often met outside of the general education classroom (Snyder et al., 2016), they are often subject

to stigmatization and discrimination based on their labels (Hehir, 2002), and, subsequently, have limited opportunities for advancement (Connor, 2008). This makes it likely that these students' experiences of belonging are different than their peers in general education environments, adding layers of complexity to the already complicated terrain of belonging in school.

These potentially complicated conditions associated with exclusive placements have led some disability advocates to argue for increased inclusion of students with disabilities. While the concept of inclusion is not a new one and specific definitions of inclusion vary (Osgood, 2005), a number of important advancements have been made within conceptualizing and implementing inclusion both within the United States and internationally in recent years (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Lawrence-Brown & Sapon-Shevin, 2014; Sailor, 2014).

Inclusion is now considered to be a whole school reform initiative that goes beyond simply thinking about inclusion as place. Rather, inclusion is now thought to be a transformative initiative that involves redesigning school environments, implementing inclusive practices, and proactively restructuring the purpose and intention of the school community itself. The goal is to create communities where all students, whether or not they have a disability label, are welcomed and accepted as learners and individuals from the start. The goal of creating a school that is truly inclusive of all learners is indeed a lofty goal, but it remains an important aspiration for inclusive school reform.

Despite these advances, questions still remain about whether students actually feel included and what conditions are necessary to facilitate their inclusion from the student perspective. Creating more inclusive school environments requires one to go beyond exploration of students and environments as isolated from one another. Rather it requires one to look at student experiences as necessarily subjective, embedded in the here and now, and relational with

respect to individual and environment. This requires the exploration of constructs that help illuminate the individual experiences, environmental affordances and constraints, and relational space that exists between the two. One such construct that can help build this understanding is belonging.

### **Belonging and Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBDs)**

The experiential location of students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBDs) represents an ideal place to begin this exploration of belonging and students with disabilities for a number of reasons. As previously stated, there is little that is known about how students with disabilities experience belonging, but we can speculate as to the conditions that could lead to an increasingly complicated experience of belonging for this particular group of students.

### **Understanding and defining EBD in the school setting.**

Over time, students with EBDs have been assessed and treated within schools in a multitude of ways, ranging from psychological to behavioral, depending on the prevailing psychological theories at the time (Brigham & Hott, 2011). In more recent years, much of how EBDs have been conceptualized within schools coalesced around the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Wery & Cullinan, 2011). This definition has been adopted by over 75% of states and of the remaining states, 20% have modified this definition to be more inclusive whereas only 6% of the states narrowed the definition (Becker et al., 2011). IDEA provides the following definition for emotional disturbance:

“...a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:

(A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.



- (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004))

As stated in the definition, students must exhibit one of the above conditions for a “marked degree” and “over a long period of time”, which implies severity and duration should be key considerations when determining eligibility. This language, however, has caused much debate, as this is neither well defined nor does it provide specific diagnostic criteria, which leaves a great deal of interpretation on the part of the Local Education Agency (LEA). Additionally, a student’s behaviors cannot be attributed to “social maladjustment”, a nebulous and relatively controversial exclusion criterion (Smith, Katsiyannis, Losinski, & Ryan, 2014) that has added to the already complex labeling process.

It should also be noted that the IDEA definition is predicated on the presence of adverse effects to students’ educational performance, and as such emotional disturbance is not a diagnostic category (Becker et al., 2011). Because of this, there are a range of different diagnoses that fall under the emotional disturbance label. According to a document originally created by the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) and now curated by the Center for Parent Information and Resources, categories often include the following: anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders, conduct disorders, eating disorders, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia (NICHCY, 2015). One important diagnosis not included within this category, but often considered to be part of the larger EBD

umbrella is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This falls under Other Health Impairments in IDEA, but there is a great deal of overlap under the broader category.

### **Potential relationships between belonging and students with EBDs.**

While the specific experiences of belonging for this particular student population are not clear, there are a number of potential indicators pointing towards this population having more complicated experiences of belonging than their non-disabled peers.

**Diagnosis and Labeling.** Within his discussion of diagnosis and labeling students with EBDs, Thomas (2013) pointed towards a number of potential relationships that warrant further discussion when considering school belonging. Notable is the very act of diagnosis and labeling of these students as having EBDs. In labeling these students' behaviors as aberrant enough to warrant a specific label and subsequent services, the school is making a judgment about the students' psychological functioning. The problem is that behaviors are far from simple reflections of underlying psychology, but rather reflect a complex interaction between person and environment. Labeling students as EBD medicalizes their behaviors and enters them into the bureaucratic process of special education and potential exclusion for the sake of service delivery (Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996). This process ignores the potential contributions of the school, as well as other socio-cultural contexts. This results in a school attempting to address student "needs" when it may be the school practices and culture that require alteration. Ultimately, when this is the case, the school does not improve to better serve students, rather it simply isolates students for aberrant behaviors with the guise of more effectively meeting underlying, individual student needs.

Importantly, for the consideration of belonging, labeling these kinds of behaviors is in and of itself a relational act. A relational theory of belonging will be discussed in greater detail

later, but for now three key aspects are of importance. First, the label itself is not context agnostic. When students receive an EBD label, this cannot be considered independently of the school and the individuals involved in the labeling. What is considered to be an aberrant behavior in one context, might not be considered one in the next. Second, the act of labeling students represents the school's recognition that the behavior as exhibited by the students does not fit the standard for acceptable behavior as set forth within the school. While a certain behavior might garner disciplinary attention in one school, another school might react differently to the same behavior. Thus, students might theoretically receive services under the EBD label in one context, but not another. Finally, students with EBDs often cite difficulties in school related to having an EBD label (Davies & Ryan, 2013). The label itself is problematic in that it only causes further strain on relationships and confirms for students their outsider status. Again, of importance to the focus on belonging is the relational nature of these labels. They are confirmation of difference, but this confirmation is specific to the context and structures of schooling. This is related to the idea discussed below: stigma.

**Negative attitudes and stigma.** Even with increasing rates of inclusion, negative attitudes prevail regarding individuals with EBDs. People with EBDs are still highly stigmatized within American society and even admitting having such a disorder can be difficult for an individual (Corrigan & Kosyluk, 2014; Hinshaw, 2007). They are often stigmatized as unpredictable, resistant, and lacking self-control. This is often reflected in the narratives that hold people with EBDs as: violent outcasts, dangerous introverts, uncontrollable misanthropes, social drains, and broken sociopaths. This stigmatization leads to misunderstandings and marginalization; social rejection and distancing; and, importantly, a great deal of self-stigma

(Hinshaw & Stier, 2008). Stigma for these individuals would necessarily complicate the conditions under which they may or may not belong.

This negative stigma is more than just ideological and individual. Stigma is enacted and experienced within social contexts in both explicit and implicit, as well as structural ways (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigma in this sense is a relational process that is embedded within social organizations and individual actions and beliefs. Within schools the stigma related to EBDs is reflected in the conceptualization and enactment of special education for this student population. Interventions are often delivered in separate or more restrictive placements (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough, 2002; Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003), and individualization for this group of students has often meant delivery of services in restrictive environments. This exclusion only reinforces the cyclical nature of stigma and negative perceptions, resulting in the perception that exclusion is not only preferred, but necessary. In other words, this stigma is embedded within a structure of caring for students' needs, as well as bureaucratic processes of intervention and service delivery that then reinforce further stigma. Exclusion, and potentially a lack of belonging, in this sense seems predetermined for students receiving services under this label despite the presumption of inclusion within IDEA.

**Under-identification of EBDs in the school context.** Related to the issues of labeling is the relative under-identification of EBDs within the school context. Overall, there are approximately 354,000 students who receive special education services under the emotional disturbance label, which represents slightly under 1% of the total student enrollment (this does not include the percentage of students receiving services for ADHD) (Snyder et al., 2016). However, CDC found that approximately 17% of students were found to have a current mental health diagnosis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), while other studies have

found that a 12% point prevalence and 25% cumulative prevalence of EBDs among school-age students to be a more reasonable approximation (Forness, Kim, & Walker, 2012). This discrepancy warrants further investigation, but of particular relevance to belonging is why such a limited number of students are identified when such a relatively large number of students might be experiencing clinically significant mental health symptoms at any given time.

There have been a wide number of possible explanations given for this discrepancy. One explanation that is particularly important when thinking about belonging is related to the cultural and bureaucratic nature of schooling and special education (Thomas, 2013). It is possible that these students exhibit behaviors that run counter to the norms and culture of the school, while those who are not identified are still seen as appropriately compliant. In other words, these students are labeled due to cultural violations as opposed to an internal quality that predicates the need for specialized services. The impact is potentially expressed in two ways. First, students who exhibit externalizing behaviors (behaviors that in this case actively violate school behavioral norms) are more frequently referred and provided services than students who exhibit internalizing behaviors (behaviors that are less likely to interfere with the order and rules of schooling) (Papandrea & Winefield, 2011). Second, this is also potentially reflected in the identification and labeling practices related to students from non-dominant ethnic groups (Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, & Bogan, 2013), as these students do not always learn, behave, and communicate as the dominant group might (Gay, 2010).

**Placement of students in segregated settings.** Students with EBDs tend to struggle in school in both academic and behavioral ways. No matter what setting they are placed within, they tend to make little academic progress (Siperstein, Wiley, & Forness, 2011), and their progress still lags behind their non-disabled peers (Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein,

2004). The relative lack of progress for these students has led to a robust debate about what actually constitutes a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for these students.

More recently, the trend for all students with disabilities has been towards inclusive placements (Osgood, 2005), and students with disabilities who have access to general education environments tend to do better academically in both reading and mathematics (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013). However, special education for students with EBDs has been traditionally marked by placement in restrictive settings based on the idea that these students have “needs” that require specialized attention (Thomas, 2013). Though students with EBDs are now educated in general education classrooms more frequently than in 1990, significant advances remain to be made (McLeskey et al., 2012). Approximately 17% are placed outside of general education schools, and, even for students who do attend general education schools, only 47% of students with EBDs spend 80% or more of their time in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The former is a surprisingly high number of students considering only students labeled as having multiple disabilities (approximately 24%) and deaf-blindness (approximately 29%) are placed in outside of general education schools more frequently.

These exclusive and sometimes entirely separate placements lead to important questions about where and how these students develop a sense of school belonging. If students are excluded or provided services in separate placements, it is entirely likely that they will feel little connection to the school environment or individuals within the school community as they are already considered outsiders. This is problematic as a lack of belonging only leads students to seek out their belonging in other potentially non-normative ways, which only further isolates students and confirms to students their outsider status.

**Teacher relationships.** Students with EBDs tend to have complicated, and often negative, relationships with teachers. Despite an increasing number of initiatives focused on social-emotional learning and behavior management within schools (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015), general education teachers tend to hold negative views related to teaching students with EBDs (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). This is particularly true regarding students with externalizing rather than internalizing behaviors (Liljequist & Renk, 2007). Teachers tend to think that the presence of these students is potentially problematic for the organization of the classroom, which could in turn negatively affect the learning of other students. This type of negative viewpoint is then often reinforced when students misbehave or do not follow the rules in class (externalizing behaviors), which then reinforces the behaviorally focused viewpoint of the teacher. These types of reciprocal interactions often lead to negative student-teacher relationship patterns and an over-emphasis by teachers and individuals within the school environment on trying to fix problem behaviors (Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008). Yet this overly specific behavioral focus tends to lose sight of the impact of effective student-teacher relationships on student success, as well as the impact of this relationship on teacher well-being (Breeman et al., 2015).

The above point is particularly germane to an examination of these students' potential experiences of school belonging. The literature on school belonging consistently points towards student-teacher relationships as playing an important role in the development of belonging in both positive and negative directions. When students have positive relationships with teachers, and with one teacher in particular, they are more likely to feel a stronger sense of school belonging. If these students tend to have a difficult time developing relationships with teachers, this raises important questions about these students' potential sense of belonging.

**Teacher preparedness.** Teachers also often feel unprepared to teach students with EBDs or meet the behavioral challenges these students might present (Shepherd, 2010). Teachers report feeling unprepared and under resourced to meet the needs of these students and the many challenges they may pose in terms of behavior management (Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava, 2010; Goodman & Burton, 2010; Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2013). Additionally, special educators tend to have little pre-service training in proactive approaches to behavior and classroom management and need more experience learning how to react to problem behaviors (Oliver & Reschly, 2010). These discrepancies have led some to speculate as to whether or not general education teachers can even be trained to meet these students' needs and whether inclusion is ever appropriate for these students (Mock & Kauffman, 2002). While this lack of knowledge and preparation amongst general educators should not be seen as a sufficient condition for exclusion, it is an indication of the culture of many classrooms in which students with EBDs find themselves.

**Mental health and belonging.** Students with EBDs also represent an important group to consider because belonging has been frequently linked to both positive and negative mental health outcomes (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Summarizing the influential Wingspread Declaration (2004), when students feel like they belong, they feel more motivated and exhibit more pro-social behaviors. They report less depression and exhibit fewer risk-taking behaviors. When students do not have a sense of belonging they often struggle with mental health related issues including anxiety and depression, and in extreme cases suicide. Additionally, students who do not feel a sense of belonging tend to take more socially unacceptable risks such as drinking and drug use. The relationship between school belonging and students diagnosed with EBDs is, however, not clear.



**Middle school and belonging.** Middle school represents a complicated developmental time for all students. It is a time that the structure and culture of schooling changes significantly. Students move from spending their day with the same classmates in the same classroom with the same teacher to finding themselves in a complex system where they no longer spend the day with one teacher, independence is the expectation not the ideal, and learning requires self-regulation and strategy. The middle school years also represent an increasingly reflective time for students. They can look backwards to their elementary school experiences and forward to their high school experiences. Lastly, it is a time that students begin to develop their identity. They look beyond themselves towards social contexts and other individuals to define who they are and who they might become.

It is also a complicated time for student belonging. Within middle school, all students generally report a decreased sense of belonging in comparison to their experiences in elementary school (E. M. Anderman, 2002; L. H. Anderman, 2003; Espinoza & Juvonen, 2011). It is those students who feel a less acute drop that tend to do better academically and feel more motivated (Osterman, 2000). When combined with the above considerations, the middle school context is likely an increasingly complicated yet important time to consider belonging for students with EBDs.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to begin to investigate belonging as it manifests itself within the lived experiences of middle school students with EBDs. To begin to unravel this complicated experience of belonging, this study will begin with three guiding questions:

1. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) experience belonging in schools and how do they feel this affects them as individual learners?
2. What personal and environmental factors do students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) feel most contribute to their school belonging?
3. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) conceptualize an idealized space of belonging within school?

Overall, these questions will be approached through an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), which prefaces the importance of understanding and interpreting the meaning students' make within their subjective, lived experiences. What is of primary concern to this study is the phenomenon of belonging as it manifests within the subjective experience of students with EBDs relative to the context and conditions of belonging within schools. Since little is known about belonging and students with EBDs, the study will be necessarily exploratory and based in the real-world experiences of these students.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

To begin to understand the experiences of belonging of students with EBDs, attention must be given to the literature on belonging more generally. Beginning in the early 1990's with Carol Goodenow's pioneering work, belonging has been studied from multiple perspectives and various larger theoretical frameworks. In some sense, this has led to over-theorizing and lack of consensus around the concept (C. Goodenow, 1993; Libbey, 2004). Yet the problem is not necessarily over-theorizing or lack of consensus. Rather, these often divergent paths point towards a core aspect of belonging itself. It is complex, multidimensional, dynamic, and, necessarily experienced subjectively. There is not one way to capture the meaning of belonging or one process for arriving at a state of belonging. As such, belonging is not easily reduced to averages or reductive theories that might reify its lived and experiential nature. Yet the question remains, how can we begin to understand school belonging as a lived, relational experience that is both individually and contextually dependent, and how can this understanding, once achieved, help us more fully appreciate the student experience and the structures and culture of schooling that shape that experience? In addressing this question, there is much in the extant literature worthy of consideration.

### **Review Procedures**

To further explore the nature of school belonging as a lived experience, a thorough and expansive literature review was conducted. A number of research databases were used in the literature search. These included: ERC, ERIC, PsychINFO, and PsychARTICLES. Key word searches such as: belonging, "sense of belonging", "school belonging", "school attachment", "school relatedness", "school bonding", "school connectedness", and "sense of community" were used to reflect the diversity of terms used to represent the same concepts within the

literature on belonging. Literature was collected from elementary, middle, and secondary contexts, but pre-school and post-secondary contexts were not included as this search was limited to K-12 schools. While the middle school context is the primary context under investigation here, a broader approach was deemed necessary for this literature review as these varying contexts can help illuminate the concept of belonging more generally. Additionally, middle school is by definition between elementary and high school, and as such understanding potential prior belonging and future belonging is important for a relational concept. Studies after 2000 were included, as this is when Osterman published her influential review of belonging. It should be noted that highly cited, seminal works were also considered. Literature was also excluded if it did not directly address belonging, but simply referred to belonging without having belonging as a central concept of study.

The literature was then reviewed through the lens of the two key questions: what influences school belonging and what happens when students perceive themselves to belong or not belong? The purpose of the literature review was to better understand the structure and process of belonging as it relates to the lived experiences of students. Again, the focus was not on exclusivity, reduction, or reification of belonging as a construct, but rather on an elaboration and elucidation of the potential pathways belonging may take in the lived experiences of students seeking to belong.

To accomplish this, relevant articles were first organized into elementary, middle, and secondary contexts, and then analyzed to begin to address the two core questions. The results of this analysis were synthesized into a Generative Model of School Belonging that includes:

- themes related to potential factors that contribute to belonging at both the individual and school level

- relational aspects of belonging
- results of students perceiving themselves as belonging within the school environment
- results of students perceiving themselves as not belonging within the school environment

The purpose is to more fully elucidate the lived experience and relational nature of school belonging. If understood in this way, the model should be capable of generating new questions and thus deepening our understanding of a topic whose importance is widely acknowledged in the literature. Importantly, such a model also aids in a more thorough and open-minded exploration of a relatively unexplored topic such as belonging and students with EBDs.

### **The Concept of Belonging**

On a colloquial level the term “belonging” is used quite frequently, but it is often difficult to articulate its meaning without resorting to truisms like “belonging is to feel like one belongs” or “you will know it when you see it”. Likewise belonging has not been consistently defined at the academic level, as different researchers have focused on different aspects of belonging, which has resulted in a certain degree of over-theorizing about what belonging actually is in the first place (Libbey, 2004). This can make it difficult to know exactly how to define belonging to capture these many nuanced understandings.

### **Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Belonging**

To begin examining the literature on belonging it is first important to understand the theoretical orientations that have been used to approach the topic. Researchers from a variety of fields have taken myriad theoretical approaches in attempting to understand the meaning of belonging. Depending on how belonging is conceptualized and the discipline from which the study was conducted, a number of key theories have been used to further elucidate belonging. Key theories include: belongingness theory, self-determination theory, person/stage-environment

fit theory, social identity theory, sense of community model, and relational theories. All of these theories provide interesting clues as to how belonging might be experienced by students and what belonging might actually be.

**Belongingness theory.** One of the more common conceptualizations of belonging was written by Baumeister and Leary (1995). Building from Maslow's idea that belonging is a fundamental human need, on the most simplistic level the theory holds that "people are motivated to form and maintain interpersonal bonds" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Their review examines this proposition by looking at a number of criteria. Overall, their criteria for determining belonging as a fundamental need and their principle findings were as follows:

Criteria (Baumeister &  
Leary, 1995, p. 498)

Principle Findings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, pp. 520–521)

(a) produce effects readily under all but adverse conditions	• People form social bonds readily, even under seemingly adverse conditions. People who have anything in common, who share common (even unpleasant) experiences, or who simply are exposed to each other frequently tend to form friendships or other attachments. Moreover, people resist losing attachments and breaking social bonds, even if there is no material or pragmatic reason to maintain the bond and even if maintaining it would be difficult.
(b) have affective consequences	• Forming or solidifying social attachments generally produces positive emotion, whereas real, imagined, or even potential threats to social bonds generate a variety of unpleasant emotional states.
(c) direct cognitive processing	• It is also evident that people think a great deal about belongingness. They devote a disproportionate amount of cognitive processing to actual or possible relationship partners and interaction partners, and they reserve particular, more extensive, and more favorable patterns of information processing for people with whom they share social bonds.
(d) lead to ill effects (such as on health or adjustment) when thwarted	• Deficits in belongingness apparently lead to a variety of ill effects, consistent with the view that belongingness is a need (as opposed to merely a want). Both psychological and physical health problems are more common among people who lack social attachments. Behavioral pathologies, ranging from eating disorders to suicide, are more common among people who are unattached.
(e) elicit goal-oriented behavior designed to satisfy it (subject to motivational patterns such as object substitutability and satiation)	• The need to belong also appears to conform to motivational patterns of satiation and substitution. People need a few close relationships, and forming additional bonds beyond those few has less and less impact.
(f) be universal in the sense of applying to all people	• When a social bond is broken, people appear to recover best if they form a new one, although each individual life tends to involve some particularly special relationships (such as filial or marital bonds) that are not easily replaced.
(g) not be derivative of other motives	• The nonderivative hypothesis is probably the least well supported aspect of our theory, not because of any clear evidence deriving the need to belong from other motives but simply perhaps because it is relatively difficult to collect compelling data to show that a motive is not derivative.
(h) affect a broad variety of behaviors	• We reviewed evidence that the need to belong affects a broad variety of behaviors; indeed, the range is sufficiently broad as to render less plausible any notion that the need to belong is a product of certain other factors or motives.
(i) have implications that go beyond immediate psychological functioning	

*Table 1: Principle Findings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, pp. 520–521)*

As the above findings illustrate, what Baumeister and Leary were able to find was that not only is the need for belonging ubiquitous, wide-ranging in scope, and uniquely motivating, it also appears to be a universally important need that humans will necessarily seek to fulfill. Though they did not specifically apply their thinking to the context of school, this theory is very much evident in later work on belonging in schools, particularly research focused on the psychological aspects of belonging. It has been influential in moving forward research that aims to understand how, and in what contexts, this fundamental need to belong is fulfilled. For many studies this

research provided the foundation and justification for understanding if schools were places where students have found belonging, and would thus be further motivated in school related tasks.

**Self-Determination Theory.** Similar to, though conceptually different than belonging, is the concept of relatedness put forth by Deci and Ryan within self-determination theory (SDT). In providing an overview of key ideas within SDT, Deci and Ryan (2000) wrote:

SDT differentiates the *content* of goals or outcomes and the *regulatory processes* through which the outcomes are pursued, making predictions for different contents and for different processes. Further, it uses the concept of *innate psychological needs* as the basis for integrating the differentiations of goal contents and regulatory processes and the predictions that resulted from those differentiations. Specifically, according to SDT, a critical issue in the effects of goal pursuit and attainment concerns the degree to which people are able to satisfy their basic psychological needs as they pursue and attain their valued outcomes. (p. 227)

The key point worthy of mention in a discussion of belonging is that of “innate psychological needs” as associated with Basic Psychological Needs Theory. They postulated that relatedness, autonomy, and competence are the three psychological needs that fundamentally drive both intrinsic motivation and internalization (Deci & Ryan, 2000; R M Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are met individuals have greater intrinsic motivation. That is, they are more likely to act based on personal will and interest than external pressure. Intrinsic motivation, in turn leads to greater self-regulation, which allows for further independent action. In SDT these three needs are the primary drivers of human action.

Relatedness plays an important though less direct role in the development of self-determined actions. Deci and Ryan wrote: “People often engage in intrinsically motivated



behaviors (e.g., playing solitaire, hiking) in isolation, suggesting that relational supports may not be necessary as proximal factors in maintaining intrinsic motivation. Instead, a secure relational base appears to provide a needed backdrop—a distal support—for intrinsic motivation, a sense of security that makes the expression of this innate growth tendency more likely and more robust” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 235). This implies that relatedness is fundamental in the sense that it allows for effective fulfillment of other needs.

Research on belonging through this perspective has focused on self-determination and motivation more generally, but it has also examined the process of internalization discussed within self-determination theory. Self-determination theory does not assume that all behaviors are intrinsically motivating. Rather, there are a variety of behaviors that we must internalize. This occurs through two different but related processes: introjection and integration (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). In particular, the process of integration has been discussed as a potentially important aspect to understanding the impact of school belonging, as this process reviews how an externalized value or behavior becomes internalized and intrinsically motivating over time. It has been theorized that this might be true of aspects of school belonging, as not all aspects will be equally motivating.

**Person/Stage-Environment Fit Theory.** The person/stage-environment fit theory was put forth by developmental psychologists to help explain why some environments foster positive development while others foster negative development (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). This theory has been applied to the developmental context of school. As stated by Eccles and Roeser (2012):

When individuals have some choice over where to spend their time, they will spend the most time in those social contexts that best fulfill their needs for a sense of competence,

high quality social relationships, for respect from others for their autonomy and individuality, and for a sense of being valued by one's social partners. If they can fulfill these needs within social contexts that reinforce normative behavior, they are likely to do well in school and other culturally valued institutions. If they cannot fulfill their needs in these types of social contexts they are likely to seek out other social contexts, which, in turn may reinforce more norm breaking and problematic behaviors. Thus, if we want to support positive, normative developmental pathways for our children and adolescents, it is critical that we provide them with ample opportunities to fulfill their basic human needs in social contexts that reinforce positive normative developmental pathways. Schools provide a unique opportunity to provide such developmentally appropriate social contexts. (Eccles & Roeser, 2012, p. 277)

In short, this theory holds that development occurs most ideally when there is congruence or fit between the developmental stage of the individual and the environmental affordances, and as such environments need to be "developmentally responsive" (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 99). This differs from aforementioned theories, in that it prefaces examining the context and the individual.

Many later studies on belonging have used this theory to help explain why some individuals might not feel like they belong within a particular environment. For instance, it has been used to discuss the difficult transition from elementary school to middle school for some students (Eccles et al., 1993). What is important in terms of understanding belonging is not the emphasis on individual or environmental deficits per se, but rather on the potential mismatch between the two. This implies a continual and reciprocal, positive interaction between person

and environment that could lead to greater sense of belonging as the student feels like they fit better within the context of school.

**Social Identity Theory.** There have also been multiple studies that have approached belonging through social identity theory and the related theory of self-categorization. Within social psychology these two concepts are sometimes combined into what is referred to as the social-identity approach (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). Overall, research using this theory has attempted to describe the processes related to social categorization and social comparison. Notably, how individuals identify themselves, gain personal satisfaction in relation to others, and subsequently identify with groups in comparison to others (Spears, 2012).

These theories relate to belonging in that one would theoretically want to know if students were incorporating the school values and related academic behaviors into their personal identity or if they felt like they belonged to different non-academically related groups. In other words, do they categorize themselves as a student and what does this mean in terms of interacting with other students? Studies have also tried to look at reasons why students might have incorporated aspects of school and learning into their identities and why they might not have (B. S. Faircloth, 2009; Hughes, 2010). Research from this perspective has focused on identity in and of itself, and identity in relation to group membership.

**Sense of Community Model.** The Sense of Community Model has also been important in the study of belonging. This theory, which built on a number of other community based theories, has been used to understand how a school setting might provide support for the psychological needs of students (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When schools do provide a psychologically supportive community, students are able to flourish academically and socially, and avoid difficulties related to relative alienation.

In other words, are schools truly communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999)?

This work has also been tied to understanding social networks within schools and the social capital that might be derived from participation and place in the networks. Researchers have also looked at the structure of these networks and how they relate to other potential social networks within the school. For instance, it is not enough just to examine teacher-student relationships or peer-peer relationships. One needs to study how each of these networks are structured and how they interact. Again the focus is on the networked interactions.

**Other relevant models.** Belonging has also been studied through a number of other lenses. Another model commonly discussed is the sociometer theory developed by Leary. This theory holds that self-esteem acts like a meter that monitors an individual's perceived relational value (Leary, 2005). These studies have tended to look at students' perceived relational value as shown through self-esteem, as a measure of belonging. Other studies have drawn from a conceptualization of sense of belonging as related to an individual's mental health. This approach was put forth by Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992), and has been influential in driving studies from medical fields. This model has a relationship to belongingness theory as well as self-determination theory in that it holds that positive mental health is related to fulfillment of the need to belong (Hagerty et al., 1992).

A number of studies have focused on "not belonging". Particularly related to the field of education have been studies on withdrawal and delinquency. There were generally two primary models used in these studies. First, many used the identification-participation model reviewed by Finn in 1989 in his study of why students drop out or withdraw from school. This model is similar to the person-environment fit model in that it proposes that environmental factors play an

important role. It holds that disengagement is a gradual process over time, and there is generally not one factor that causes disengagement (Finn, 1989). Related to Finn's conception of withdrawal from school is Hirschi's social control theory (Hirschi, 1969). This theory postulates that it is primarily through the individual's perceived bond with society that an individual follows societal rules. When individuals do not feel a bond to society, they do not feel a need to follow the rules of that society. Considering this theory has been, in part, associated with criminology, the studies that have used this theory have looked at delinquency and negative behaviors like risk-taking and drug and alcohol consumption. Research guided by each of these theories tend to focus on the negative outcomes associated with not belonging; in particular, anti-social and risk-taking behaviors.

**Relational approaches to belonging.** The work on belonging has also been approached through a relational lens. While this is highly related to the above theories, it represents a departure from traditional ways of approaching belonging. A relational approach to belonging was articulated in May's *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World*. May (2013) defined belonging as "the process of creating a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places, and material objects" (p. 3). In this definition, belonging unfolds in a variety of ways and through a variety of means. Belonging is related to others, place, culture, space, and a variety of other factors. It is represented by a "feeling of ease" (May, 2013, p. 3) within an environment, and occurs when the individual understands the rules, wants to play by them, and feels others recognize their participation as valuable. This relational conceptualization represents an important shift from person-environment interactions to a focus on the space that lies between these two aspects. Belonging is indeed complicated and focusing simply on the individual or the environment is likely insufficient.

In explicating belonging, May further broke down the concept into three key types: relational belonging, cultural belonging, and sensory belonging (May, 2013). Relational belonging is the type of belonging many people traditionally consider “belonging”, and more aligned with traditional conceptualizations of a “relational” theory. This type of belonging occurs between particular individuals, and is the type of belonging that is found within relationships. It is having friends and feeling a part of social groups and organizations. Cultural belonging differs in that it is not between individuals, but belonging to a larger cultural milieu. This is a felt sense of connection to the broader institutional practices and rituals, and the personal integration of those larger norms. Finally, sensory belonging begins to delve into the importance of perception and environmental affordances. This type of belonging is often forgotten, but equally important in understanding belonging. We necessarily experience everything within a physical world, and belonging is not different. An individual’s sense of belonging is impacted by the space that exists around them. For instance, the maintenance and care within a certain environment can impact belonging in that it indicates to the individual how much others care in said environment. Importantly, what these different dimensions point towards is the need to explore life as it is lived and not just ideas.

To further elucidate this relational approach to belonging, an example will suffice. What does it mean to say that you belong on a baseball team? It means that you have found a kinship and acceptance amongst the coaches and players (relational belonging). It also means that you have understood and are able to enact the rules of baseball as a game and the rules of the clubhouse. You know the technical specifications and have the appropriate skills, but also the unwritten rituals like wearing a rally cap when your team is down late in the game (cultural belonging). Finally, to feel like you belong to a baseball team you also need to feel comfortable

with activities like running the bases and wearing the uniform (sensory belonging). If one of these aspects is missing, it is likely a given individual will not feel like they belong.

The relational nature of belonging also introduces a vital point when thinking about why belonging is necessary to consider in education. Belonging not only affects the self, but, to use May's terms, "society" as well. To continue the baseball example above, we can learn a great deal about the team by better understanding who feels like they belong and under what conditions. If a new player is traded to the team, what would it mean for the player to be a member? What attributes would they have? What skills and prior experiences would they have? Would the player need to engage in some sort of initiation? How would they be expected to act? Belonging in this sense allows us to explore the culture, organization, and social order of the clubhouse, not just the individuals within the clubhouse. As seen through the baseball example, May's relational conceptualization only helps further the understanding of what it means to belong both for the individual and society more generally.

### **The Appropriateness of a Relational Approach to the Study**

As discussed, many orientations have been used to study belonging. For the purposes of this review, the more inclusive relational conceptualization put forward by May is most appropriate to focus the exploration. A relational conceptualization, like other key theories of belonging, recognizes belonging as a fundamental need experienced by all individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and incorporates a view of the environmental contributions of a particular context to belonging (Eccles et al., 1993), but it also focuses on the bidirectional connections between the individual and their context. This bidirectional relationship results in the creation of a shared space of influence. This idea is particularly applicable in thinking about

how a student might experience the mercurial nature of school and how the structures of school are reflected in the experiences of the individual.

### **What Is School Belonging?**

Of primary importance to the work on belonging in schools has been conceptualizations from the psychological literature, in particular, belonging as it relates to motivation and engagement. Though have been many different definitions of belonging used depending on the research area (Mahar et al., 2013), much of the work within the school context stems from a seminal study conducted by Goodenow in 1993. Within this study, she defined school belonging as, “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” ( p. 25). This definition, which has some commonalities with May’s relational conceptualization, points towards a number of important aspects of belonging within the specific context of schools.

First, the definition emphasizes that belonging is not an imposed construct. Rather, belonging is felt and perceived by an individual student. Students do not belong because someone says they do. Belonging must be felt and experienced at an individual level. It is a subjective perception that only the student can experience. Second, the definition relates more specifically to potentially important actors within education environments: teachers and peers. This begins to point towards how belonging might manifest within schools, and it emphasizes relational dimensions of belonging. Of particular note is the addition of teachers. Teachers are a key conduit through which students interact with the school as an institution, and it stands to reason that school belonging is contingent on these relationships. Third, a certain degree of reciprocity is implied within Goodenow’s definition. It is not just the individual student who



needs to fit in. Rather, it implies that the school can help foster belonging by active encouragement and valuing of individuals. Belonging is, therefore, representative of a reciprocal exchange, and not merely an individual desire.

Though this definition does not address the relational nature of belonging explicitly, it does begin to move towards both individual and environmental aspects of belonging within the school setting. Taken with May's previously discussed relational conceptualization, this leads to a number of important ideas about what school belonging actually is. It appears that school belonging is:

- A subjective perception of relational conditions
- A derivative of tangible and intangible experiences and perceptions
- A series of ongoing reciprocal exchanges
- Necessarily related to the specific contexts, as opposed to solely something a student carries with them
- Necessarily related to specific individuals within specific school contexts
- Mutable and multidimensional

As previously mentioned, there is no one definition of belonging. The purpose of this review is not to create a definitive definition, but rather the goal is to build from a synthesized definition. Within such a definition belonging is: the multidimensional, relational process of student identification and re-identification with the school as an organization as well as key actors within the school, as manifested within the student's subjective sense of belonging (the feeling of oneself to be or not to be an important, valued, accepted, included, member of the community). This definition is reflective of relational models as well as previously developed definitions of school belonging.

## **What Influences School Belonging?**

As the larger theories of belonging suggest, there are both individual and environmental (school in this case) contributions that mediate a student's sense of belonging. These are not always easy to tease apart, and there is much overlap between the two, but understanding the perception of belonging requires an examination of what might influence that perception. Previous literature reviews have discussed some of these potential mediators. Of particular note, the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections (2004) found three key preconditions: high academic expectations and rigor coupled with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and safety: both physical and emotional. As seen within this review, these are common findings associated with belonging.

### **Influences of School Belonging at the Elementary Level**

Considering many elementary schools' emphasis on social and emotional development, it is surprising that school belonging has not been more of a focus at the elementary level. There have been some studies, but these are far more infrequent than at the middle and secondary schools. However, the studies that have been conducted have illuminated some interesting elements of belonging, as well as showing that the foundations of belonging begin at this level.

**Individual contributions.** There were a number of interesting contributions that were discussed at the elementary level that were not discussed at other levels. A potential factor related to belonging at the elementary level is prior affiliative motivation. In a study that ranged from grades 3-12, Hill and Werner (2006) found a consistent relationship between affiliative motivation and a sense of belonging across the different grades. In other words, students who were more likely to seek out social relationships were more likely to report a higher sense of belonging. This is related to the study by Mouratidis and Sideridis (2009) who found that

belonging was related to the presence of social development goals. According to the results of their survey, students who had socially positive goals had higher levels of belonging, and subsequently more prosocial skills. These studies point towards the implicit motivations that students bring to school with them regarding socialization and goals and how these might impact belonging.

Another study by Morrison, Cosden, O'Farrell, and Campos (2003) looked more specifically at Latino students. They found that within fourth grade, English language learners' sense of belonging started to decrease. This was interesting because they did not find a general decreasing trend in belonging for other students. They also found that belonging was more associated with teacher evaluation of school performance in fourth grade, but belonging was more associated with peer self-concept in sixth grade.

There is also evidence that school belonging might be developmental. There was one longitudinal study by Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, and Abbott (2001) that reviewed an intervention within grades 1-6 to increased belonging, and they found that increased belonging at an early age was associated with later levels of belonging. Adding to this Hernandez, Robins, Widaman, and Conger (2014) found that students of Mexican origins with higher levels of belonging at the elementary levels (fifth and sixth grades) had higher levels of academic competence later in middle school (seventh and eighth grades). This points towards evidence of a developmental trajectory that is influenced by prior experiences. This is in line with theoretical orientations that see belonging as related to past, present, and future orientations.

**School contributions.** There were a number of studies that examined school contributions to belonging at this level. McMahon, Wernsman, and Rose (2009) conducted a study that focused on understanding the relationship between the school context and perceived

belonging of fourth and fifth grade students. They found that sense of belonging was indeed connected to factors within the classroom environment. In particular, they discussed the importance of a safe, supportive, non-judgmental space to support the development of academic self-efficacy. Environments that were positive and supportive fostered a greater sense of belonging, which subsequently contributed to the development of self-efficacy as it related to academic tasks. However, self-efficacy within math was more related to how difficult students found the work, as opposed to in language arts, where the source of self-efficacy was found more in the positivity of the environment.

Other studies have reiterated the importance of students perceiving teacher relationships as being emotionally supportive. Madill, Gest, and Rodkin (2014) found that when teachers were emotionally supportive children felt a greater sense of community and closeness with teachers. This was opposed to children who felt less supported and close with teachers, and in turn had additional behavioral issues. Similarly, in another study, a positive mentoring program helped students build more self-esteem and positive school relationships (King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002). Each of these studies point towards the importance of having supportive and positive relationships with teachers for students' sense of belonging and their positive emotional development. Beyond emotional support, belonging also appears to increase when teachers are effective and use more collaborative learning (Abbott et al., 1998). This indicates that academically effective environments can also play a role in fostering belonging, a finding that has been associated with the middle school level as well (Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman, 2016).

### **Influences of School Belonging at the Middle Level**

Though the number of studies at the elementary level are limited, there is a boon of studies at the middle level. Beginning with Goodenow's seminal work in 1993, belonging has been highly studied in the middle school context. Middle school represents a transitional period for students. Notably, middle school is a transition from time spent within an individual classroom with an individual teacher to a model where students have multiple subjects and multiple teachers. With these structural changes there is also a greater focus on students' active exploration of their personal independence. Further, middle school is a time when students begin to explore their identity, and students begin to develop more complex social relationships.

Goodenow (1993) identified that belonging for all students, but particularly among males, decreased from sixth grade to eighth grade. This decrease in turn impacted students' academic motivation and self-concept. This downward trend, which was also found in other studies (L. H. Anderman, 2003; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012), indicates that students' sense of belonging decreases within their time in middle school, in particular within the sixth-grade.

**Individual contributions.** One important individual aspect to note is the potential role of prior belonging. Anderman (2003) has found that belonging generally declines for all students, but declines were partially associated with students' prior motivational levels, school achievement, and experiences within supportive environments. This indicates, as research at the elementary level indicated as well, that previous belonging experiences in a variety of contexts continue to have an impact beyond the immediate school context.

Outside of prior experiences, there are a number of potentially important individually related mediators that have been identified within the literature regarding middle school belonging. The literature begins to point towards the importance of the individual and identity development at the middle school level. Murphy and Zirkel (2015), in part, found that belonging

was highly influenced by the setting and the degree they felt represented within it. This degree of self-representation was also found to be important at the secondary level.

One related factor is self-esteem. This concept has been put forward by Ma (2003) as a predictor of whether or not students feel like they belong in school (Ma, 2003). This concept of self-esteem as a gauge of relational value is similar to that put forward in the sociometer theory (Leary, 2005). Ma also found that after self-esteem, mental and physical health was the most important factor related to belonging. It was hypothesized that this was likely due to an ability or inability to participate in school activities. This appears to align with other studies that have found participation in extracurricular activities (Fischer & Theis, 2014) and time spent in school (Nichols, 2008) to play a role in belonging.

Building on the importance of the individual and identity development, one study looked at how school belonging was related to potential identity threats, the potential devaluing of self due to perceived negative stereotypes. The study found that school belonging played the role of a mediator of potentially negative outcomes associated with identity threat (Shnabel, Purdie-Vaughns, Cook, Garcia, & Cohen, 2013). By having students write about belonging, potential identity threats were minimized. Importantly, this finding did not relate to non-stereotyped groups indicating a differential impact on marginalized groups. As such, it does appear racial self-identification of multiracial students does have an impact on belonging (Burke & Kao, 2013).

There are also a number of potential contributors to a student's sense of belonging from outside of the school. Peer-peer relationships play a role in belonging at the middle school level (Nichols, 2008; Wei & Chen, 2010). When students have a greater sense of belonging, they see their peers as more supportive, responsive, and accepting (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014;

Beverly S. Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Other studies have shown that parent relationships also have an impact on belonging, potentially more so than peer relationships (Schneider, Tomada, Normand, Tonci, & de Domini, 2008). This indicates that, though teacher relationships are still important (we will see this further in the review), teacher relationships alone cannot account for student belonging.

In their study, Thompson et al. looked at a wide range of potential factors. They wrote:

School connectedness was greater among younger students, students in 2-parent households, students who performed well in school, students who participated in many extracurricular activities, and students with a large number of friends. Also consistent with past work at the school level, there was less connectedness in larger schools, (Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006, p. 385)

Adding to these findings they noted that neighborhoods with over 25% renters had a lower sense of school belonging.

**School contributions.** One factor that seems to be consistently related to belonging at the middle school level is relationships with teachers. Support and respect from teachers were identified as being important to student belonging (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; C. Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). When students felt teachers did not have respect for them as individuals they reported lower belonging. Not only did teachers need to be supportive and respectful, but they also needed to have high expectations that students would be able to be successful (Ma, 2003; Waters et al., 2010). Equally important was the affective and academic climate that teachers create. When teachers created climates that supported students' emotional needs, had high academic expectations, had appropriate goal orientations, and represented students' identities in instruction (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015), students were more likely to

develop academic motivation. This in turn, could affect students' self-efficacy and reported motivations.

Adding to these many potential factors related to belonging, Waters, Cross, and Shaw (2010) found that the schools physical environment made a difference in student belonging. Schools that were clean, neat, and graffiti free tended to have students with higher levels of belonging. This physical structure is potentially reflective of students feeling that the environment is safe and comfortable (Cemalcilar, 2010) and fair (Ma, 2003). Safe and fair environments allow students to take risks and develop academically oriented identities.

### **Influences of School Belonging at the Secondary Level**

The secondary context is a uniquely complicated time for belonging. At this point students tend to become more forward facing. Their K-12 experience is coming to an end and they begin to explore who they will be as a professional and a person. Secondary education has also been traditionally marked by academic and social separation in the guise of preparedness for life. This makes it an interesting context in which to consider the influences of belonging.

As with the middle school context, there also appears to be a developmental influence. A study by Gillen-O'Neill and Fuligni looked at belonging over the course of high school. They found that belonging was still very much related to motivation across the years, and when students felt higher belonging they also felt that school had greater intrinsic and utility value (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). In other words, students with higher belonging felt that school was more practically and personally useful. In looking longitudinally, belonging on average did appear to decrease from the beginning of high school to the end of high school, in particular for females who began high school with higher levels of belonging than males. This drop has also been reported in other studies (M. K. Johnson, Crosnoe, & Thaden, 2006). Overall, they found



that it was important to study individual factors related to belonging, as it was likely that indicators like teacher-student relationships and participation in activities would differentially affect students.

**Individual contributions.** As within the literature focusing on middle school, there are a number of studies focusing on the secondary level. Many of these studies pick up on similar themes to the middle school studies. Most generally Wallace, Ye, and Chhuon (2012) examined the different sub-dimensions of belonging in high schools. They found four relevant dimensions: connection with teachers, connection with a specific teacher, participation in school activities, and perceptions of fitting in with a peer group. These are similar to aspects that have been previously found (Juvonen, 2006). Other studies have found that when relationships are not present there is evidence that students might seek out peer groups that are non-academically oriented to fulfill their need for belonging (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012), and this, along with the way schools and classrooms are structured, can lead to greater alienation and further decreased belonging (Berends, 1995).

Studies have also focused on identity, self, and belonging. Faircloth argued that belonging and students' search for identity are inextricably tied (B. S. Faircloth, 2009). Students who felt like they were able to make a connection between their personal identity and the school context, felt like their experiences were valued, and were able to openly discuss their identities were more likely to feel a higher sense of belonging. This was also found to be true for students who were recent immigrants (Cartmell & Bond, 2015). In short, when there was congruence between the school and the student's personal identity there was greater belonging. This study did not invalidate the importance of contextual mediators such as supportive teacher-student relationships or peer-peer relationships, but Faircloth found that even these experiences were

colored by the search for identity. This identity theme was also discussed through the study of specific groups of students. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) found that across multiple ethnic groups reported belonging played an important role in understanding students' academic motivation and overall success. It is worth noting that part of their measure of belonging was related to perceived discrimination, as this could be a potentially important aspect of whether or not students feel welcome within a school.

Multiple studies looked specifically at understanding African American students' sense of belonging. Booker (2007) found that a small sample of African American students felt more school belonging when they saw the school environment and those within the environment as more similar to themselves, the environment was more tolerant, and the environment was more comfortable. When environments were tolerant and comfortable students were more willing to express their views and less likely to drop out.

Participation also appeared important at the secondary level. Faulkner et al. (2009) found that poor physical health and lack of extracurricular involvement were associated with lower levels of belonging. Further, disconnectedness was higher for girls who did not routinely exercise. Though they did not find a causal link between school disconnectedness and poorer health and negative risk-taking behaviors, they did find that these were correlated. This finding is consistent with other studies (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, Shochet, & Romaniuk, 2011; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Dever et al., 2012; Liljeberg, Eklund, Fritz, & af Klinteberg, 2011; Giannotta & Özdemir, 2013; Hart & Mueller, 2013; Resnick et al., 1997; Wilson, 2004) that found relationships between disconnectedness and risk-taking, anxiety, depression, violent behaviors, transportation risk taking, general delinquency, overall rate of injuries, sexual activity, and use of illegal substances.

Adding to the previous list of potential demographic-type mediators related to belonging discussed at the secondary level, Lapan, Wells, Petersen, and McCann (2014) also found that English-Language Learner status, poverty, and overall student mobility were related to belonging. Maurizi, Ceballo, Epstein-Ngo, and Cortina (2013) found that for some Latino students neighborhood belonging was negatively related to school belonging, suggesting perhaps a potential perceived incongruence between belonging within the neighborhood and the school for some students. These studies point to the differential impact the outside environment can have on school belonging. There is not a uniform effect and it depends largely on the context itself.

**School contributions.** The literature focusing on the secondary level has lent a great deal to the understanding of school contributions to belonging. Notably is the role that teachers play in fostering belonging. Ozer, Wolf, and Kong found that when students viewed teachers as instructionally and managerially effective; supportive and caring; and respectful of them as individual learners, students felt higher levels of belonging (Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008). Similarly, the theme of support and care for individuals as learners points toward the importance of considering academic, as well as social and emotional components. This includes putting trust in students to make the right decisions regarding their learning (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012, 2014). This is representative of the important roles that teachers and students play in the school context. When teachers respect that relationship and treat them as valued learners, students are more likely to feel like they belong.

Similar to relationships with teachers was a focus on the importance of having an effective and academically oriented peer group. Drolet, Arcand, Ducharme, and Leblanc found that having positive support from other peers, as well as having a close circle of friends, was

associated with more school belonging and in some cases even mediated the effects of having negative relationships with peers outside of their close circle of friends (Drolet, Arcand, Ducharme, & Leblanc, 2013). This did not imply teacher relationships were not important, but rather peers also played an important role. Students who feel they belong to a peer group also have been shown to increase care for and desire to protect classmates from injurious behaviors (R L Chapman, Buckley, Reveruzzi, & Sheehan, 2014). This does not imply that any peer group is equally effective in fostering academic engagement. Groups that are negatively oriented can increase disengagement (Beverly S Faircloth & Hamm, 2011). Further, membership within non-academically oriented groups appears to only further decrease sense of belonging in school (Beverly S. Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Additionally, other studies have found that unrequited desire for a peer relationship or perceived mistreatment were related to lower sense of belonging (Eisenberg, Neurnark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007). An important aspect related to peer relationships is social trust (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). When adolescents have more social trust they are more likely to feel connected. This is particularly true of trust that students feel their teachers have in them.

Among other relationships that were explored as being potentially important to school belonging was the relationship students had with parents and neighborhood belonging. Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, and Wong (2001) found that attachment to family in conjunction with school had a mediating effect on deviant behaviors, even when taking into account community context, ethnicity, and gender. This is opposed to the previously cited study by Maurizi, et. al., that found neighborhood belonging might have an inverse effect for some Latino students. Though Shochet, Smyth, and Homel (2007) did not find a direct link between

attachment with parents and attachment to school, they hypothesized that the attachment with parents helped contribute to individuals' perceptions of school.

Beyond relationships alone, there are a number of other mediators associated with school climate and structure that have been discussed. One study that looked specifically at school climate factors that impacted belonging found four main influences: classroom management climates, student participation in extracurricular activities, fair discipline policies, and smaller school size (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Participation in extracurricular activities was viewed as an important aspect in a number of studies (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013; Brown & Evans, 2002), and has been related to increases in student belonging. The finding on school size is potentially related to a larger issue of school type. In comparing students in vocational tracks versus academic tracks, Van Houtte and Van Maele (2012) found that students in vocational tracks had lower sense of belonging. However, when they took trust (teachers' beliefs that students are honest, caring, competent, good-hearted (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000)) into account these differences were greatly mollified.

Related to the importance of having fair discipline policies, as discussed in the McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum study, was a study by Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, and Bradshaw (2014) that found students had greater levels of school engagement when they felt like the school context was fair and equitable. Students who felt that they were not being treated fairly had lower sense of belonging and lower school engagement. This was further emphasized by two studies that found schools that were structured in non-traditional ways had students with higher levels of belonging (Hope, 2012; L. S. Johnson, 2009). Another study found that belonging was higher for students who had a say in school policies (Whitlock, 2006). These studies seem to

reinforce the idea that for students to belong they need to feel like they are valued and equal members of the community.

There are two case studies that are particularly relevant. One study was completed by Tabane and Human-Vogel (2010). They looked specifically at a school in South Africa that was recently integrated to see how students perceived their own belonging within this context and the overall social cohesion within the school. They found that there were eight key themes related to social cohesion and subsequent belonging. They listed: school as welcoming, belonging, respect, security, equality in socialization, care, motivation, and freedom (Tabane & Human-Vogel, 2010). This picks up on a number of key elements already discussed, but addresses them in the context of a school that is specifically focused on issues around social integration. Within this context they concluded that sense of belonging for students was indeed intertwined with perceptions of social cohesion indicating the potential important role that school culture has on student belonging.

Another case was conducted by Green, Emery, Sanders, and Anderman (2016). They interviewed students at a secondary STEM school about their belonging. They confirmed that, as other research has indicated, belonging was related to motivation, academic engagement, and teachers. However, they also added an important point. They highlighted that there can be multiple pathways to belonging and that one pathway would not capture the complexity of the students' experiences. It was not just things like having friends and solid relationships, but also things like academic success that contributed to belonging, and students could experience any combination of social and academic belonging.

### **What Happens When a Student Perceives Themselves to Belong or Not Belong?**

Understanding the lived experience of belonging also requires one to think more broadly about: what happens when a student perceives themselves to belong or not belong within a school? We have learned a great deal about this question from previous literature reviews. Osterman (2000) found that belonging was related to a number of dimensions related to motivation and well-being. Students who felt more belonging had lower anxiety and stress levels, more motivation for school related activities, higher self-esteem, more perceived control, more engagement, and more prosocial behaviors. For students who did not have high sense of belonging almost the opposite was the case. These students felt alienated and marginalized, and subsequently had little engagement in school.

Osterman's findings were reiterated in the Wingspread review (Blum & Libbey, 2004). They found that increased school connectedness could impact: academic performance, incidents of fighting, bullying, or vandalism, absenteeism, school completion rates. Secondly, they found that increased connection promotes educational motivation, classroom engagement, and improved attendance. In the opposite direction, they found that increased belonging also decreases: disruptive behavior, school violence, substance and tobacco use, emotional distress, early age of first sex.

### **Belonging and Not Belonging at the Elementary Level**

Unfortunately, there has been very little work on what happens when students perceive that they belong or do not at the elementary level. Considering the focus on social relationships in the previous literature discussed, one could surmise that belonging should impact relationships, but outside of this only one paper was found. Underwood and Ehrenreich (2014) theorized that bullying might be related to belonging in an interesting way. As opposed to the idea that bullying and perceived discrimination would lead to less belonging, they theorized that

a lack of belonging leads to an increased amount of bullying. Students who bully are using this as a strategy to ameliorate the difficulties of not belonging, and while these strategies might seem detrimental to the greater need to belong, the strategies do serve a more immediate purpose.

### **Belonging and Not Belonging at the Middle School Level**

The work of Goodenow has provided a great deal of information about the impact of belonging at the middle school level. In two separate studies she found that students' sense of belonging was related to academic motivation, the internalization of the values of the school, increased expectations for personal success, and overall effort towards school related activities (C. Goodenow, 1993; Carol Goodenow & Grady, 1993). These were related to students' academic achievement as these factors contributed to an increase in academic engagement. Other studies have found that belonging in both an experienced and anticipated sense was related to increased interest, motivation, and investment (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), as well as a willingness to take academic risks (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Beverly S. Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

In addition to the potential academic and motivational benefits derived from school belonging, a number of studies from the medical field have examined the impact of belonging on student health. Students who report higher school belonging also report having more positive mental health outcomes both at the time of reporting (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012; Lester, Waters, & Cross, 2013; Shochet, Smith, Furlong, & Homel, 2011), and one year later (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). There have also been studies that have found school belonging to have a mediating effect on drug and alcohol use (Henry, Swaim, & Slater, 2005; Shears, Edwards, & Stanley, 2006), as well as conduct problems (Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). Similar to this, Oelsner, Lippold, and Greenberg (2011) found that within sixth



grade lower levels of belonging were related to low achievement, deviant behaviors, and having an anti-social peer group.

A study by Roche and Kuperminc (2012) also found school belonging to be a potentially important mediator within stressful situations. In this case they looked at the impact of belonging on acculturative stress (discrimination-related and immigration-related) within a group of Latino immigrants. They found that the relationship between discrimination-related stress and eventual grades was moderated by school belonging. When students felt less discrimination and more belonging, grades increased. This is similar to a longitudinal study conducted by Hernandez, Robins, Widaman, and Conger (2014) that found belonging to be a resource that promotes academic competence and students' expectations of themselves. Studies also discussed belonging as potentially related to stereotype threat. One particularly interesting study found that students in marginalized minority groups reported lower levels of school belonging when under identity threat than students not in the same stress conditions (Mello, Malien, Andrem, & Worrell, 2012). Other studies have looked at school belonging as a mediator of the effects of negative family experiences (LeCroy & Krysik, 2008; Loukas et al., 2010), and even gang membership (Baskin, Quintana, & Slaten, 2014). This implies that relationships with parents and others outside of school does impact school belonging, but schools can still have an impact of belonging outside on these relationships.

### **Belonging and Not Belonging at the Secondary Level**

Similar to the literature at the middle school level, research has found belonging to be related to a wide range of possible outcomes. There is a line of health related research that has related school belonging to positive psychological and behavioral outcomes (Georgiades, Boyle, & Fife, 2013). This literature is largely derived from the medical field. Led by the seminal work

of Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993), which found that connectedness and caring acted as protective factors for a number of at-risk behaviors. Other studies have extended this line of inquiry to include finding a relationship between belonging and depression (Joyce & Early, 2014), as well as greater psychosocial adjustment within refugee students (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). As within the middle school literature, this area has been frequently approached by researchers interested in student health and well-being.

Unlike the middle school literature, there are a number of studies focused on the impact of belonging and not belonging on particular groups of students. In studying Latino students and gender, Sanchez, Colon, and Esparaza (2005) found that students' sense of belonging was related to positive academic outcomes such as motivation, but it did not influence GPA or expectations (Sánchez et al., 2005). Other studies have also found that increased school belonging was related to decreases in deviant behaviors (Diaz, 2005), but this is possibly dependent on the presence of close peer-peer bonds (Vaquera, 2009). This points towards the possibility that Latino students' experience of school belonging is similar, but different from other students' belonging.

In a unique study, Cheng and Klugman (2010) examined school belonging and biracial students. This represents a unique population to study in that these students could have already formed multiple identities. They found that in general these students had a lower sense of belonging. When they looked at the overall racial composition of the school, they found that students who were part white had approximately equal belonging in majority black or majority white schools. However, students who were part black felt a greater sense of belonging in schools that were majority black.

Though multiple discrepancies were reported in some studies, others found few differences between ethnicities and genders. One study pointed towards a potential reason for

these differences. Mellow, Malien, Andrem, and Worrell (2012) looked more specifically at the effects of stereotype threat on school belonging. They found that students who felt they had been marginalized and were in a threat related condition had a lower sense of belonging. This would indicate that it might not be ethnicity, but rather the feelings of marginalization that might accompany subjugated status.

### **A Generative Model of School Belonging**

The above literature was reviewed with two key questions in mind: what influences school belonging, and what happens when students perceive themselves as belonging or not belonging? Interrogation of the literature with these guiding questions led to the creation of a generative model of school belonging. Again, the purpose of this model is to generate new questions and discover potential implications regarding school belonging. Before looking at the specific details, it is first important to discuss the general structure of the model. Once this is done, specific details will be included to further explore how belonging might be experienced in schools.

#### **The Basic Structure of the Model**

In part, understanding the basic structure of the model requires one to revisit the previously established definition of school belonging. Previously it had been defined as the following: belonging is the multidimensional process of student identification and re-identification with the school as an organization, as well as key actors within the school, as manifested as a feeling of oneself to be an important, valued, accepted, included, member of the community. This definition points towards belonging as a relational and re-iterative process, but also something that is ultimately perceived by the student at a particular moment in time. This perception is subject to change and is influenced by the structures of the individual school

context. Though the definition is itself focused on the perception of belonging, the results of the perception are emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. With these conceptual and definitional aspects in mind, a basic process of belonging as it is manifested in schools can be established:

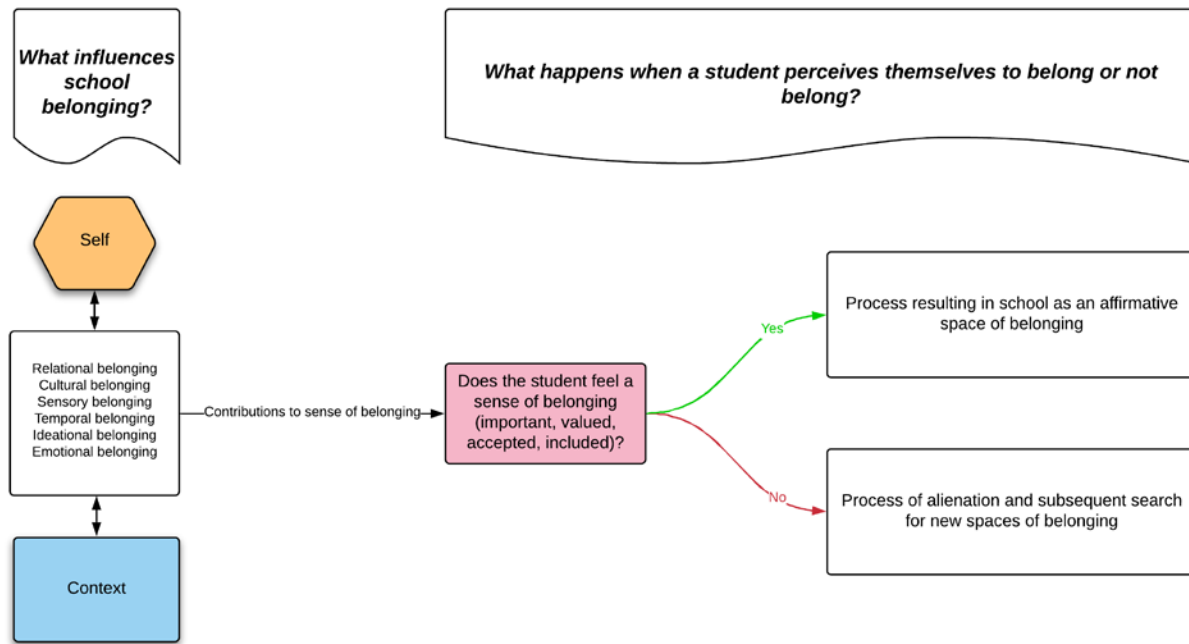


Figure 1: Basic Structure of the Model Based on Literature Review

Within this basic process one can see the various contributions from both the student and the environment and the relational nature of belonging on the left side of the diagram. These were the elements that were found to contribute to the momentary perception of belonging, which manifests itself in a student's sense of belonging. The right side of the diagram begins to address what happens when the student does or does not feel a sense of belonging.

### A Generative Model of School Belonging Based on the Literature Review

Using this basic structure above, the following Generative Model of School Belonging was created:

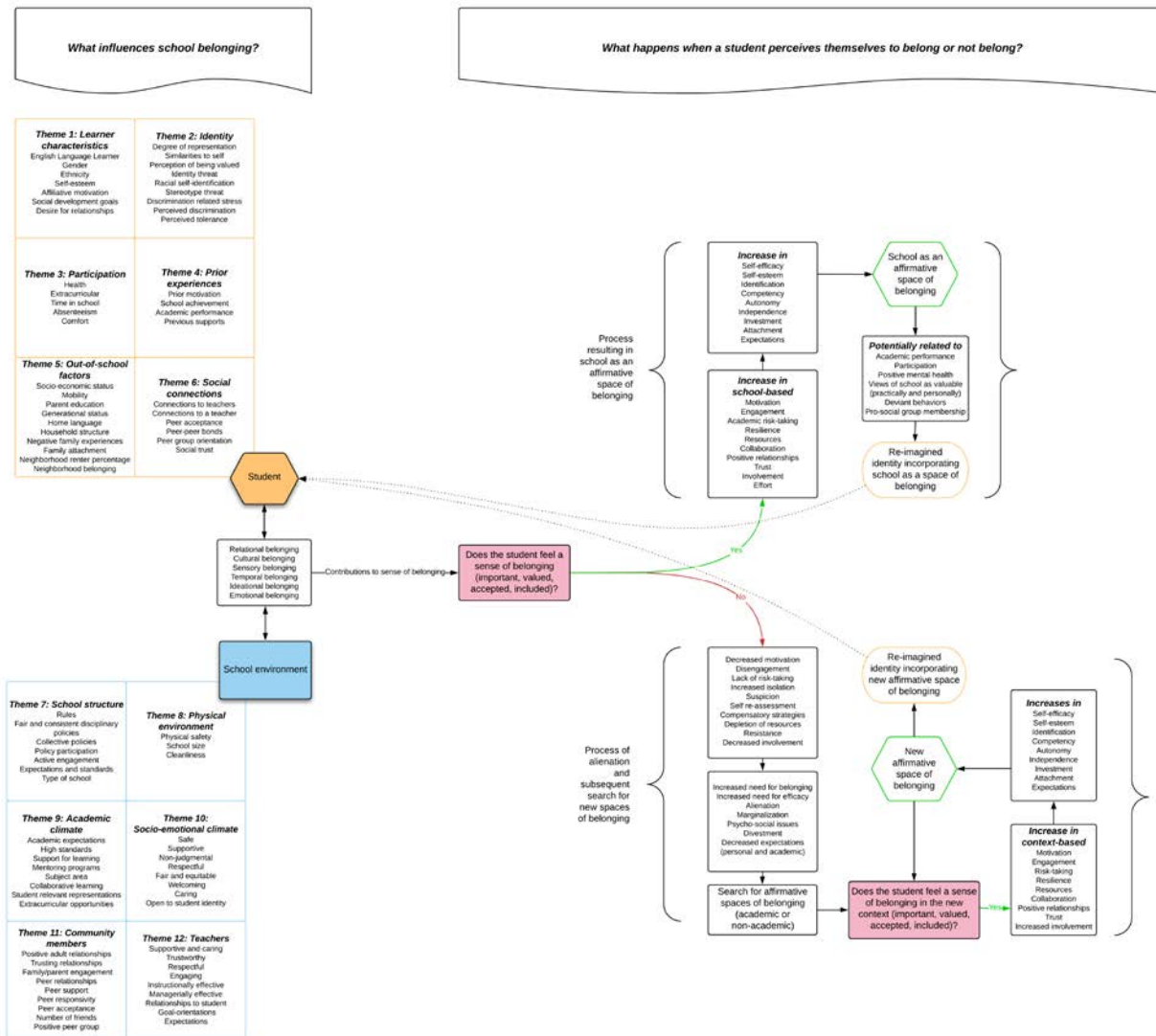


Figure 2: Generative Model of Belonging Based on the Literature Review

Before diving into the content of the model, it is important to continue to discuss the added structure previously established when discussing the basic structure. There were additions based on the literature review, but it is an expansion from the basic process of belonging just discussed. The first primary additions were to the section on the left that addressed the question: what influences school belonging? In this selection, and in the subsequent sections of this paper, three components were further fleshed out: factors potentially related to the student, factors

potentially related to the school environment, and, finally, the relational components of belonging. The factors related to the students were arranged into six key themes with the influences discussed in the literature listed below this theme. Likewise, factors related to the school environment were also organized into six key themes with the potential influences listed below.

The next additions were to the right side of the model, which addressed the question: what happens when a student perceives themselves to belong or not belong? Both the affirmative process and the process of alienation and search for belonging were both further expanded based on the literature that was analyzed. This expansion has been represented in the labeled brackets. The processes are also represented in the arrows that lead one directionally through the process, but also lead back to the student. This was done intentionally to indicate the reiterative nature of belonging.

### **Influences on School Belonging**

One of the key questions in this review was: what influences school belonging? The above literature emphasizes individual, environmental, and relational mediators as being important in understanding belonging. Belonging in this sense is not simply something a student seeks out and finds, or something an environment can impose on an individual. Rather belonging occurs within a relational space where individuals seek belonging, and schools promote or do not promote belonging through culture and practices. There are, therefore, a number of mediators of belonging on both the individual and contextual sides. For the purposes of this generative model the potential mediators raised within the literature were further analyzed for key themes. These twelve themes represent key areas to consider when thinking about school belonging.

**Student contributions.** Student contributions to school belonging can be captured in six themes: learner characteristics, identity, participation, prior experiences, out-of-school factors, and school connections. Each of these components appears to make a unique but interrelated contribution to understanding how students experience belonging. If we were to focus on only one aspect of these contributions, we would necessarily fall short of elucidating the actual experience of school belonging. For instance, we might see that students' current identities play a role in belonging, but past experiences can also play a role. What is necessary is a more robust, intersectional approach that considers the multiple aspects of a student's concept of self and experiences within the school.

***Theme 1: learner characteristics.*** Unsurprisingly, a variety of potential influences were found related to specific learner characteristics; belonging did not appear to be experienced in a universally uniform way. Some studies focused on and found there were differences in how different groups of students tended to experience belonging. One particularly interesting and relevant finding is that belonging seems to be increasingly complicated for English Language Learners and minority students. These students tend to have a more complicated and nuanced relationship to schools due to culture, language, and a host of other mediating factors. Yet, this does not imply that these students do not seek out belonging in schools. Belonging is still very much a part of their lives, and those students who do experience greater belonging still tend to do better in school.

There also appear to be gender differences in terms of how belonging is experienced. In particular, some studies have pointed towards the ways in which a different developmental trajectory of belonging might be related to gender. Though all students seem to level off in terms of levels of belonging by the end of high school, it appears the male students have a more

precipitous drop in belonging in middle school while females tend to have a more gradual drop over time (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). It is not clear why this might be the case, but differences can be seen across gender in an individual and developmental way. Of course, this does not mean gender differences are somehow innate to individuals. Considering the relational approach to belonging taken here, gender differences are reflective of unique interactions between the individual and the context.

***Theme 2: identity.*** One consistent theme throughout the literature was a focus on identity and identity related issues. This builds from the previous section on learner characteristics. However, it diverges in the sense that identity speaks more to how the students understand who they are and their overall place in the social strata, which speaks to the relational nature of belonging.

Two key issues were raised as being related to belonging from the above literature review. First is the idea that for there to be belonging students needed to feel like their identities were represented within the school and the instruction. Students wanted environments that were accepting of them as the individuals they saw themselves as. This points towards a necessary degree of individualization and flexibility within the school culture. Second, belonging was also related to perceived discrimination. When students felt discriminated against it was in a sense an active push from the community, and inaction against this discrimination only further confirmed the cultural rejection. The message was clear: students like them were not welcome. Each of these findings is in line with recent research that points towards the importance of cultural and individual responsiveness within instruction and schools more generally (Gay, 2010).

***Theme 3: participation.*** Participation was also a key theme. In short, students who spend the most time engaged in school related activities, and school more generally, tend to feel a



greater sense of belonging. Extracurricular participation in particular was raised as a potential factor a number of times. Though extracurricular participation does not have uniformly positive effects on students more generally (Farb & Matjasko, 2012), participation in this case seems to be related to engagement and the subsequent investment of personal resources. Perceiving oneself to belong tends to lead to further engagement and additional time spent in school related activities. This only leads to a cyclical process of further participation.

Of course, it would be hasty to conclude that time alone was the key contributing factor. Quality and not just quantity of participation likely makes a difference. Students who over-schedule activities do not necessarily have positive outcomes (Fredricks, 2012). Again, this seems to imply certain types of participation can be more valuable than others.

***Theme 4: prior experiences.*** Belonging is impacted not only by the confluence of factors in the immediate context. Prior experiences appear to play a role in whether or not students feel a sense of school belonging at any given point in time. This impact has been discussed in other areas here, but it is worth mentioning again that belonging does appear dependent on prior experiences of belonging in the school setting. A student's individual history of belonging does appear to impact both present and future ideation of belonging, and likely begins even as early as pre-school. Belonging in this sense seems to have a lingering and ongoing impact. What is not clear is exactly how these experiences will manifest themselves. Positive experiences tend to lead to more belonging and negative experiences tend to lead to additional decreased belonging, but there are likely individual differences in specific effects.

***Theme 5: out-of-school factors.*** There are also a number of other factors within a student's life that were identified as potential influences that had little to do with the impact of the school itself. For instance, schools cannot directly affect the socio-economic status of a

student. Despite this more direct relationship, schools are not somehow helpless to the factors found here. Many of these factors are related to issues raised around parent and community engagement; an aspect of education that has been seen as increasingly important in recent years (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). This might not ultimately affect family attachment of an individual student, but it could influence parent buy-in, attitudes towards schooling, and cultural responsiveness, which could influence further student belonging. However, the literature also raised the important potentiality of incongruence between belonging to other groups or neighborhoods and belonging to school. For some students, belonging to a neighborhood might mean a decreased belonging to school. This again points towards the necessity of taking a lived and experiential approach to understanding student belonging.

***Theme 6: social connections.*** The final theme was more directly related to the relationships and connections that a student has within the school context. Though the general literature has pointed towards the importance of social connections and communities of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2007), the belonging literature seems to indicate that this is one potential contribution to a student's sense of belonging. It does appear to be important, but how it is important is not always clear or uniformly directional.

The two key groups discussed within the literature review above are teachers and peers. Teachers have a great deal of influence over whether a student feels school belonging. In short, when students feel a sense of connection with teachers, they feel more connected to the school. This is not surprising given that teachers are the school representative that students interact with most frequently, and the people who are largely responsible for the tangible elements of their educational experience. The effect that peers have is a little more clouded. Peer acceptance and having friends does appear to be important, but whether that leads to more school belonging is

dependent on the orientation of the peer group itself. If the peer group is focused on non-academic areas, then it is possible that school belonging is decreased.

**School contributions.** Similar to the student contributions, there have been a variety of school contributions identified within the literature as well. These have also been organized into six key themes: culture, physical environment, academic climate, emotional climate, community members, and teachers. As with the student contributions, all of these are unique, but interrelated. A key difference here is that these are all areas where schools can have a more direct influence on belonging. For instance, a teacher would not be able to directly influence a student's prior experiences or gender, but they would be able to create academic and emotional climates that support the development of belonging. This is not to say that schools do not influence the individual aspects. Belonging itself is indeed relational, so schools and students are constantly interacting and influencing each other. However, a teacher or school might have considerably less influence on the individual aspects previously discussed, but have considerable influence over whether or not they have high expectations and standards. This makes these elements potentially important leverage points in understanding how to create environments that foster belonging for all students.

**Theme 7: school structure.** The first aspect that arose related to school contributions from the literature review is school structure. Many of the previously discussed studies looked at the importance of policies and rules and how these impact student belonging. Overall, these studies seem to indicate that when students are actively engaged in policy making and they view the policies as fair and equitable then they are most likely to feel a sense of belonging. Student participation in policies is particularly interesting for schools as it is a way that they could also build student self-determination as well as building their belonging.

However, even without direct participation in the process, school policies and rules have an impact on students in terms of how they structure the experiences of students. For instance, student belonging would likely be affected by policies that limit their access to peers, such as tracking or exclusive special education practices, and practices that are ineffective at meeting student needs. School policies in this sense can help set the conditions for how belonging might occur and how it might be structured for students.

***Theme 8: physical environment.*** Though often overlooked for more social and academic aspects, the physical environment also seems to play a role in whether or not students feel like they belong in school. The literature reviewed points towards the importance of a clean and physically safe environment. It seems that the physical environment impacts that experience of belonging, as students ask themselves if the environment is worth belonging to in the first place. When environments are not clean or safe, it is likely students have more difficulty seeing themselves as being able to belong.

The role of physical environment as a mediator is also potentially related to the accessibility of environments as experienced by all students, including those with disabilities. When environments are not built for all individuals, as is suggested in initiatives such as Universal Design in the architectural sense (Hitchcock & Stahl, 2003) and Universal Design for Learning in the learning and cognitive sense, then it is likely student's will experience these environments as alienating. If the school is not designed for them, then it is a likely indication it is not a place for them to find belonging.

***Theme 9: academic climate.*** Academic climate also appeared to be an important factor contributing to school belonging. Belonging was fostered when schools had high expectations and standards for all students, and support them in reaching these expectations. Yet high

expectations alone do not appear to be enough. Schools also need to create the supports that help students achieve at high levels. Multiple studies pointed to teacher and overall academic effectiveness as related to belonging. Schools in this sense need to have a climate that is academically safe and supportive, as well as rigorous and challenging.

Importantly, this theme points towards two key points. First, schools do appear to be unique contexts for belonging. This means that there could be a great deal of difference in terms of how belonging itself is structured within schools as opposed to other environments, but also indicates there could be significant differences from school to school. This would make it difficult to come up with one particular interpretation of school belonging, instead indicating multiple interpretations are necessary. Second, it is not just the mission statement of a school that matters, but how the daily practices are implemented and how students perceive these practices to reflect the purpose of the school that makes a difference. It is within these daily interactions that students come to understand the purpose of the schools. When schools are viewed as academically effective then students are more likely to feel like it is a place where they can belong as students.

***Theme 10: socio-emotional climate.*** The socio-emotional climate of a school was also found to impact belonging. When environments are supportive, safe, and caring in both social and emotional ways students can begin to see schools as places where they can belong. The importance of considering students' socio-emotional development more generally is well-established and wide-reaching (for instance see (Durlak et al., 2015)). However, social-emotional learning alone is not enough to foster effective learning environments (Humphrey, 2013); a broader approach that includes academic and other factors is necessary. This same sentiment was

reflected in the literature on belonging. While social-emotional climate was an important mediator of school belonging, it was one of multiple potential mediators.

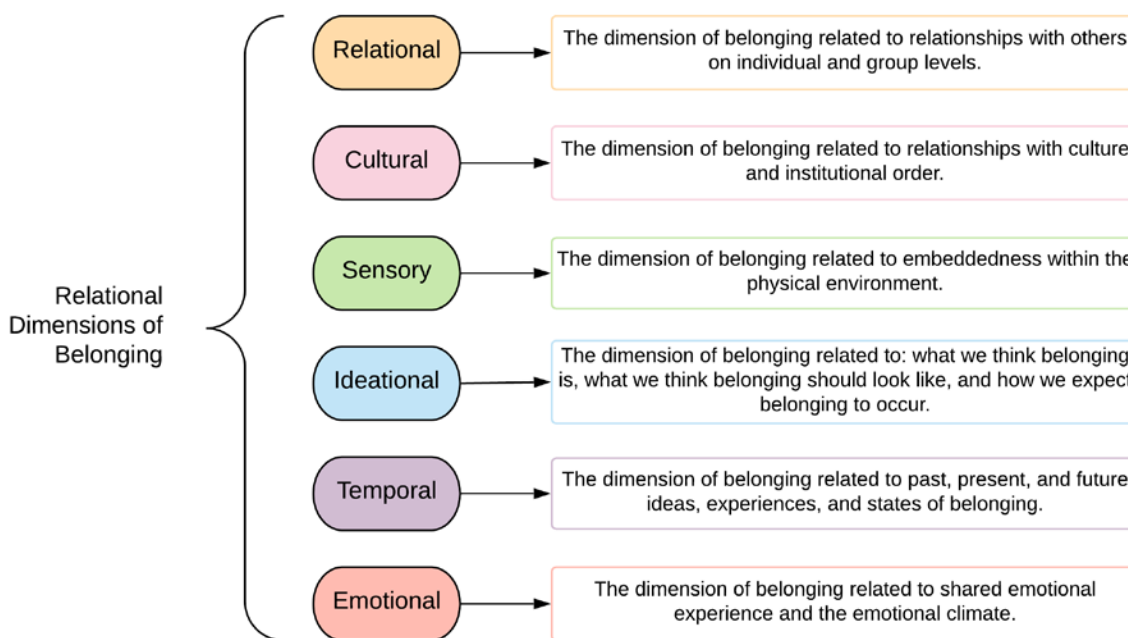
***Theme 11: community members.*** Specific members of the school community also impacted belonging. This included positive relationships with other adults within school, but also peer relationships. Peers tended to come up often in the literature on middle and secondary schools. Though this seemingly was addressed in the previous section on social connections, this theme has an important difference. While the previous theme was focused on the individual's connection, this theme focused on how the environment structures these interactions, and how individuals within the environment seek to actively foster belonging. Belonging is very much relational (this was discussed in the theoretical orientation section), and as such one unidirectional view of the community connections would not accurately depict the lived experience of belonging.

***Theme 12: teachers.*** Though community members were just discussed, teachers deserve special attention when thinking about school belonging. Teachers are the adult representatives of the school that students interact with most often, they are the key implementers of academic initiatives, and they help set the climate and culture of the classroom. As such, they appear to play a unique and important role in student belonging. The impact of teachers does seem to be important across the grade levels, but the specific impact is likely different based on how the schools themselves are structured. In elementary schools, students spend most of their day with the same teacher, while in secondary and middle schools they spend their day with many different teachers. Of course, teachers at any level do indeed need to be caring, trustworthy, and respectful, but they must also be instructionally and managerially effective. They need to be

respectful as people, but they also need to be effective teachers. This speaks to the contextualized nature of school belonging.

### Relational Dimensions of School Belonging

Before moving on to the processes associated with belonging, it is important to look at the relational aspects of the interaction between the individual and the context (school in this case). May (2013) laid out an important foundation when she discussed the following: relational belonging, cultural belonging, and sensory belonging. However, in reviewing the literature three new relational aspects of belonging emerged as relevant: temporal belonging, ideational belonging, and emotional belonging.



*Figure 3: Relational Dimensions Based on Literature Review*

The above graphic provides an outline of the six relational dimensions featured within this model. As previously stated, three of the dimensions were already discussed in great detail in the

work of May, and do not need to be elucidated here. The final three, however, emerged from the review of the literature review above, so deserve particular attention.

**Ideational belonging.** The first dimension added to this model was ideational belonging. In some of the literature what seemed to be at play were the various, sometimes competing, ideas about what belonging is, what we think it should look like within the particular context, and how we expect belonging to occur. This constitutes a relational dimension because it is not just a student's ideas about these aspects that is important, but the school's, and those within the school, as well. Belonging appears to require an alignment of perspectives. For instance, within a traditional secondary school the ideal notion of a student who belongs might be an academically gifted, athletic, social student. Yet by the very nature of variability amongst students, only a few students will belong within this narrow definition of belonging. Likewise, if students adhere to this traditional notion of belonging it is unlikely that they will feel a sense of belonging unless they are academically and athletically gifted. What is necessary is ideational alignment between the school and the student. The student might need to expand their notion of belonging, but, more relevant to potential intervention points, the school needs to be flexible enough to allow the space for varying and changing definitions. Schools that are ideologically limited in terms of who can and cannot belong in their schools will necessarily foster more exclusion than inclusion.

**Temporal belonging.** The second relational dimension added here is temporal belonging. The literature points towards belonging being complicated by past, present, and future (anticipated) states of belonging. This was clearly shown through studies that showed belonging as having a snowball effect of sorts. Those who felt they belonged had their belonging further reinforced through the reinforcing effects experienced within the affirmative process. Yet the very recursive nature of belonging means that belonging itself will change. It is not a constant



state, achieved and retained. Rather, the perception of belonging is subject to change over time. This in some ways is positive, as it also means belonging is malleable, but it also indicates we carry our past experiences of belonging with us.

This is very much a relational category in that schools are also changing their ideas about who belongs based on past, present, and future orientations, as well as experiences with students. For instance, if a school seems to have a difficult time including some students, then they might determine that those students do not belong within their context, and future disengagement is the likely outcome. Again, belonging in this sense is a two-way temporal street.

**Emotional belonging.** The last relational dimension added was emotional belonging. This was added in large part due to the number of emotional components that mediate a student's sense of belonging, as well as the importance placed on the emotional climate of the school. Belonging is very much emotional; it is felt and lived. Students need to feel that they belong for there to be belonging; it cannot be thrust upon them. For this to occur the emotional climate needs to be supportive, caring, and inclusive. It becomes a relational notion in that the emotional experience of students in turn influences the emotional climate of the school. What we consider to be the emotional climate is an aggregate of multiple micro-interactions with multiple individuals throughout any given school day. Belonging in this sense is certainly an individual experience, but it is also a shared emotional experience of a single individual with other members of the community.

### **What Happens When a Student Perceives Themselves to Belong or Not Belong?**

The other key question reviewed here was: what happens when a student perceives themselves to belong or not belong? The perception of belonging or not belonging appears to have a distinct impact on students. If students perceive themselves to belong in the school, then

this leads to a number of direct and indirect consequences; most notably increased motivation and engagement. When students do not feel a sense of school belonging, their well-being suffers and they are left feeling disengaged with school and with an acute need to belong. This is significant as it points towards real and tangible consequences for the subjective perception of belonging. It is important to note that the process of belonging or not belonging itself becomes an important influencing factor in school belonging. It is very much a recursive and reiterative process that does not simply end with the perception. For this reason, the process put in motion by the perception of belonging cannot be easily overlooked for both immediate and lasting reasons.

**The process resulting in school as an affirmative space of belonging.** When a student perceives themselves to belong within the school environment an affirmative process of identification begins. This process begins with the immediate result of increased engagement, motivation, positive risk-taking, increased collaboration, positive relationships, and increased trust. The literature points towards belonging as having a more direct effect on these aspects.

When these aspects are present students begin to feel more efficacious in their roles as students, have high self-esteem, personally identify with the individuals within the school as well as the values and goals of the school itself, build competency, and begin to build autonomy. It is at this point that students feel that they are already part of the school culture or are already well on their way to becoming a valued community member. This success and self-worth affirm that the school is indeed an affirmative space of belonging, which again feeds back to students' perception of belonging.

It is through these different aspects that many of the positive results of belonging appear to be seen. For instance, belonging does not appear to be directly related to academic

achievement. However, engagement is directly related to school success, and belonging appears directly related to engagement. The perception of belonging appears to mediate the impact and enactment of the aforementioned factors. The process, however, does not simply end there. The resulting belonging only further influences the ongoing process of identification and re-identification within the school. Students who find belonging in school seem to be more likely to continue to find belonging.

**The process of alienation and subsequent search for new spaces of belonging.** When students do not feel like they belong in schools a very different process is put into motion. Whereas perceiving oneself as belonging seems to result in positive, prosocial, and certainly more pro-school outcomes, a lack of belonging leads to a great deal of uncertainty and difficulty for a student. There are real and tangible consequences for this misdirection.

The process of dis-identification and marginalization begins with the perception that as a student they do not belong within their school environment. Once they have this perception, they are at risk of losing motivation, disengaging with the environment, taking less academic risks, becoming increasingly isolated, and feeling less trust in the school and school personnel. This disengagement and subsequent lack of effort only leads to a lack of efficacy, alienation, marginalization, psychosocial issues, and an increased need to belong resulting from deprivation. All of these aspects act to decrease school belonging and increase marginalization. However, this process does not simply end with a disassociation with school.

Considering that belonging is a fundamental need, students will not wish to remain in a marginalized state for long. At this point, they will necessarily seek out an alternately affirmative source for belonging, but potentially within another context or with other groups. These groups or contexts might support positive development, but this is not certain. Subgroups can develop in

many ways, and for many purposes. Whatever the orientation of the group, when the need for belonging is fulfilled the student begins to shape their identity and self-concept around the orientation of that particular group. This process follows a similar path to that of school belonging, but, depending on the orientation of the group, could result in positive or negative affiliation with school and school values.

Considering the developmental importance of school environments for students (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), as students are engaged in this process of seeking new spaces of belonging, they will continually try to align their burgeoning identity with the school culture and climate. In doing so they will re-imagine their new identity as a student, which in turn affects their experiences within the school. If students have chosen a non-academic identity, then the school environment could respond negatively or positively. A positive reception to this new identity will lead toward the affirmative process of identification, but a negative reception might only lead to further marginalization. In the extreme scenario, the students' re-imagined identity will be incompatible with their experiences in school, and they will conclude that this incompatibility cannot be rectified. If this is the case, students could attempt to "pass" for the socially dictated normal, hiding their identities for the sake of social acceptance; they could stay within school, suffering the consequences of not belonging until the point where they can leave school for a space of belonging that is compatible with how they have chosen to identify; they could reject their own identity, and suffer the consequences of feeling personally unacceptable; or they could simply withdraw from school, abandoning the potential opportunities afforded by school for the seemingly less damaging option of leaving for the sake of more immediate well-being.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

As outlined in the problem statement above, belonging for students with EBDs, in contrast to other categories of disability, is potentially quite complicated. The purpose of this study was to explore how school belonging is experienced and understood within the lives of students with EBDs. The study sought to answer the following three questions:

1. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) experience belonging in schools and how do they feel this affects them as individual learners?
2. What personal and environmental factors do students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) feel most contribute to their school belonging?
3. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) conceptualize an idealized space of belonging within school?

These three guiding questions were in keeping with the overall interpretive phenomenological analysis approach taken within this study which sought to understand an individual's lived experience of the phenomena of belonging. Further, the questions also left room to explore the relational nature of belonging as exemplified in the generative model, which was also revisited in light of the findings.

### **Why Phenomenology and Belonging?**

Phenomenology is a research methodology that finds its roots in the philosophical approach also referred to as phenomenology. There are a number of traditions that apply this broader philosophy, but here interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen to guide the design, implementation, and analysis of the study.

### **Exploration of Belonging**

One of the key reasons phenomenology was chosen was the exploratory nature of the topic itself. Previous conceptualizations of school belonging have tended not to include students with disabilities, let alone students with EBDs, and few studies have focused on the experiences of these students. Phenomenology was an ideal methodology for exploring and expanding the conceptual boundaries of belonging for these students due to the open researcher stance and collaborative construction of experience (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenological methods allowed for the exploration of this little known area and, subsequently, upon what we think we know about belonging and belonging within the contexts of schools.

### **Focus on Lived Experiences**

Phenomenological methods also seek to abandon misconceptions and simplistic distillations to begin to understand lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). At the core of phenomenology lies the idea of subjective experience. This is not simply experiences as remembered and recalled, but in the actual way things are experienced and understood through said lived experience. There is a particular focus on the essential structures and possible conditions related to the subjective experience (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). The concept of belonging is necessarily lived within the experiences of individuals, and to turn to belonging requires one to turn to experience. Belonging makes little sense without an experiential referent to which one may belong.

### **Illumination of Common, Taken-for-Granted Experiences**

Philosophically, phenomenology is also most suitable for exploring broader concepts or shared experiences with the goal of “illuminating the details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with the a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). For instance, a phenomenological

study of perception would not focus on the mechanisms of perception, but rather the very act of perceiving in the first place. What is it like to perceive an object? This makes phenomenological exploration unique in its orientation towards aspects of experience that are not always explored in depth.

Belonging as a concept fits this orientation quite well. Belonging is colloquially understood and experienced by all people in some way (May, 2013). We all experience belonging and have a need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but do not always question what it means as a phenomena. For instance, one might say they feel a sense of belonging with their family, but not necessarily question why they feel this way and what contributes to this feeling. In this sense, we are aware of the resulting feeling, a sense of belonging, but not as aware of the experience itself.

This is also evident in definitions of belonging, which are often fraught with subjective and somewhat vague, value-laden terms: accepted, valued, included, encouraged. Though on the colloquial level these terms seem to further clarify belonging, when you delve into the concepts, they read more like synonyms of belonging than a concept that has been adequately defined. This orientation leans towards operationalizing belonging as understood through past experiences and does not capture the potential richness of belonging as manifested within the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Phenomenology seeks to go beyond these vagaries by focusing on individual experience in all its conceptual and contextual complexities.

### **Why Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)?**

There are a number of possible traditions in phenomenology that have guided research. In a broad sense, there are both descriptive and interpretive traditions depending on the particular philosophical orientation behind the methodology. IPA is a notably interpretive tradition. This

approach builds from the work of Heidegger and other notable scholars in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, but is ultimately eclectic in that it draws from multiple traditions.

Importantly, IPA provides a systematic way to explore “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 45), and this orientation aligned well with the overall purposes and research questions of concern to this study. Belonging is necessarily personal, and exploring this in a relational way necessitated a methodology that explores meaning as embedded.

Finally, as a methodology it inherently seeks and values individuals and their lived experiences in an open and respectful way, and seeks to understand the meaning made by individuals. While recognizing any researcher’s limited ability to speak directly for participants or capture every aspect of a given human experience, it does begin with understanding the meaning that was made by participants within their actual experiences. This is an ethically and morally just stance when approaching studying a potentially marginalized group of students.

### **Research Context**

Two schools were chosen as research sites. To help understand the research context and how belonging might play out within each given context, two teachers and one administrator were interviewed within each site. The goal was not to confirm or invalidate participant responses, but rather to bring light to the contexts in which participant experiences take place. Overall there were four teachers, two teachers from each site, that were interviewed. One teacher at each site specifically worked with students with EBDs, and the other was a general educator who had one or more of these students in their classes. As previously stated, this perspective is important in understanding the school context in which students find themselves. These teachers were chosen with the help of the school administrator. In addition, one school administrator



from each site was interviewed. This helped illuminate another level of context that teachers might not be able to speak to.

## **Research Sites**

**Site A.** Site A was a small suburban, grades 6-8 middle school in the New England area. The district itself is a small district with limited student enrollment. The district has open enrollment and as such educates students within the immediate town, as well as select students from neighboring towns. At the time of the study, students within the district more broadly, but also the school more specifically, were primarily white and native English speaking. Additionally, approximately 20% of students were economically disadvantaged, and approximately 20% of students received special education services.

In terms of specific services for students with EBDs, the school primarily offered inclusive supports, but also had a social-emotional learning room that students who qualified could access for targeted instruction or when students required breaks. The goal was not to have this room as a primary classroom, but instead as a resource for students when necessary. Students still attended their classes as everyone else, but with supports and access to the social-emotional learning room as needed.

**Site B.** Site B was a midsized suburban, 6-8 middle school in the New England area. The district consists of multiple elementary schools and then one middle and one high school. The student population was diverse (approximately 10% African American, 10% Asian, 10% Hispanic), but was still majority white. Of those students approximately 25% of students were non-native English speakers with 10% of students English language learners. Additionally, approximately 25% of students were economically disadvantaged, and approximately 20% of students receive special education services.

Services for students with EBDs were provided in two ways. First, some students who have more intensive needs were enrolled in a specific program for students with EBDs. Students from grades 6-8 are enrolled in this program. In recent years, the program shifted in focus from delivering supports and often instruction in substantially separate environments to focusing more on ensuring inclusion of these students with supports within the classroom. Specific social-emotional and behavioral supports, such as access to special educators, a specialized classroom space, and additional social-emotional learning, are made available for students as necessary. Three of the participants from this site were directly enrolled within this program. The remaining two students were not enrolled in this program because they were deemed to have less intensive needs. These two students were fully included and had access to supports such as guidance counselors, but not the intensive supports available through the specific program.

### **Participants**

Within each of the two aforementioned sites, five participants with EBDs were recruited to participate in the study. This ultimately resulted in ten student participants all of whom were identified as having and receiving services for EBDs.

### **Participant Recruitment Process**

Participants for the study were recruited using purposive sampling in collaboration with administrators at each of the sites. Administrators were seen as valuable collaborators in helping recruit students as they had intimate understanding of the students themselves, the overall school schedule and routines, and would have access to parents and guardians. Each administrator helped choose appropriate students and helped to make the initial contacts with both students and parents or guardians. They helped facilitate communication with parents or guardians to ensure

everyone was appropriately informed about the nature and goals of the research and consent was ethically obtained.

In terms of recruitment of participants, the primary concern was that all participants needed to receive special education services for an EBD at the time of the study. A general split between emotional and behavioral types was specifically searched for, but the population was not narrowed beyond that point. For instance, severity of disability, a specific service or accommodation, or specific origin of disability was not used to narrow the student population.

Again, what was of greater concern was that the student was formally receiving services under IDEA. While all of these factors could be considered exclusionary in other studies, the purpose of this phenomenological study was not to generalize or make broad conclusions. Rather it was to better understand the subjective experiences of these students as a means to question and better understand the phenomenon of school belonging. For this reason, a diversity of perspectives was sought so as to ensure a more in-depth exploration of potential experiences.

**Recruitment and consent.** Once initial contacts were made, in person meetings were arranged with interested students to ensure they understood the study and were willing to participate. Often this meeting also included parents or guardians. If an in-person meeting that included the parent was not possible due to scheduling, phone calls were arranged with parents to ensure they also understood the study. Overall, this resulted in 3 phone calls with parents. During these initial meetings with students, a one-page study overview was presented, along with the required IRB information and interview protocols. The goal was to help orient potential participants to the study and help them evaluate whether or not they wanted to participate. Importantly, participants were also informed of their rights should they choose to participate. During this time students were also informed that their IEP would be reviewed to better

understand their disability and the services that they received. (See Appendix X for the consent forms)

Once consent was gathered from both students and their parents or guardians, the participants were coded to ensure additional anonymity. Participants were coded based on three factors: site (A or B), participant type (L: learner), and with a number based on the number of participants at the site. This system resulted in the following codes:

- For site one: AL1, AL2, AL3, AL4, AL5
- For site two: BL1, BL3, BL4, BL5, BL6 (BL2 was initially used as a code, but this participant decided after recruitment not to participate)

### **Sample Size**

Sample size is a contested topic within phenomenology (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Sample sizes are generally smaller as the complexity of the topic increases, as complex topics involve more in-depth exploration. Given the complexity and depth of studying belonging, there were ten students (four interviews per student) selected from this study from two different sites (5 students from each site). This number of participants allowed for an exploration of belonging with each participant, as well as provided a variety of perspectives and meanings about different experiences of belonging.

### **Participants**

Student participants were all middle school students who were labeled as having an EBD and were currently receiving special education services for their EBD label.

	Age Range	Grade Range	Gender	Primary Diagnosis
Site A	13-16	7-8	2 Female 3 Male	3 Emotional 2 Behavioral

Site B	13-15	7-8	3 Female 2 Male	2 Emotional 3 Behavioral
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*Table 2: Participant Demographics*

As seen in the above table, participants were all between 13-16 years of age and in either grade 7 or 8 at the time of the interview. There was a concerted effort to ensure there were even numbers of male and female participants as well as students who had emotional or behavioral disorders. Participants had a number of specific diagnoses (for instance, anxiety disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), as well as other secondary diagnoses. Seven of the ten participants had both emotional and behavioral disorders, two participants only had emotional disorders (there were no participants who only had a behavioral disorder), two students also had a specific learning disability, and one participant who also had Autism Spectrum Disorder. As indicated in the table above, between sites there was an even split between participants with emotional and participants with behavioral disorders as their primary diagnosis. Importantly for the purposes of this study all students were currently receiving special education services for an EBD under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Relevant to belonging, five of the ten participants were relatively new to their current school district (within the last three years) and an additional one participant had spent the majority of one previous year in another district.

### **Interview Location and Times**

Interviews took place in the middle school from which the participants were recruited. In keeping with phenomenological research, the interviews were conducted in quiet spaces that were comfortable to the given participant (Vagle, 2014). For one site, all interviews took place within the office of an administrator, while at the other site interviews took place in the office of an administrator, as well as a classroom. Again, the goal was a private, safe place where students

would not be distracted by other students and would feel unsafe sharing personal experiences. Though the spaces were private, a school staff member was always nearby and available via phone in case of any potential issues. Fortunately, this individual did not need to be called during the interviews.

Considering there were approximately four hours of interviews with each individual student, one significant challenge in conducting this study was coordinating interview times. Part of the challenge was finding times that both the school would allow and the student would prefer. Participants often would not want to attend at certain times because they did not want to miss a class or use their free time for interviews. Because of this, interviews with students were conducted before, during, and after school, however the majority of interviews occurred during school hours at times when participants would not miss important academic or instructional time. When participants did need to meet before or after school, parents were consulted to ensure appropriate transportation and that the interview did not interfere with events or homelife.

### **Initial Pilot**

To ensure that the student protocols accurately address the research questions within this study, a small pilot was conducted with one student with an EBD from one of the sites. Since the pilot was conducted one year before the official data collection, the participant that was chosen was a student who was graduating from the middle school. This would ensure the particular participant was not within the potential sample during the interview process.

The goal of the pilot was to ensure that the overall approach and specific questions aligned to the intent, and were able to accurately address the lived experiences of students. The pilot participant went through all of the stages to ensure consent (as previously described for the broader study), as well as all four interviews. Data collected were used in a strictly qualitative

way to revise the protocols as needed. Outside of this revision process, data collected was not used in the overall study or in the data analysis. The pilot resulted in relatively minor changes to the interview protocols in terms of overall content and structure. For instance, any comparison or rating charts were printed out as full charts so participants would not have to write out their responses in unstructured ways.

### **Data Collection**

Traditional phenomenological methods consist of data that are collected through widely open and individually interpretivist interviews. While this intent is still preserved, IPA also suggests conducting semi-structured interviews as a primary means of data collection. Within this particular study, semi-structured interviews represented the majority of data that was collected. In addition to the interviews, individual students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were reviewed, and memoing took place at routine times during the process.



Figure 4: Data Collection Methods

### Semi-Structured Interviews with Activities

Within traditional phenomenological interviews (this does vary slightly by descriptive or interpretive orientation), the researcher asks an open question about the individual's experience, which then initiates a dialogue between the researcher and the participant (van Manen, 1990).



This open dialogue allows for a shared exploration of the lived experience. Data collection within IPA retains this general interpretative orientation, but also stresses the need for unique and eclectic approaches. Generally, IPA calls for in-depth interviews that are either semi-structured or more open. In the case of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Notably, interviews included the use of an interview protocol with open-ended questions, as well as specific activities that allowed for a more robust understanding of their lived experience and their understanding of belonging by exploring experiences in different ways.

While IPA does not directly advocate for the use of activities as part of the interview process, structured activities were added for number of reasons. The first reason relates to the nature of consciousness. Some have argued that consciousness, and therefore subjective experience, is in part predictive in nature (Hohwy, 2013; Koch, 2012). While the debate around consciousness is far more detailed than can be summarized here, one general idea holds that consciousness emerges from a need to interact with the world in a predictive manner. This has important implications for how we come to understand cognition and how we understand lived experiences in that it focuses attention on the mind as embedded, embodied and enacted. These ideas shaped how the interview activities were created in that the focus was not simply on what was recalled by participants. Instead the focus was on exploring past experiences, present ideations, and future predictions. All three aspects are necessary to begin to understand how any given individual student might experience the dynamic nature of belonging. Simply asking questions might not be sufficient to capture this complexity.

In a similar way, the approach taken here was also guided by the idea that subjective experience is multidimensional. Many approaches to understanding subjective states have been based on asking the participant to recall the experience. Yet, this might fail to capture the very

lived nature of the experience phenomenological methods seek to capture. In terms of the interviews, this was important in that there was a focus on more than just past experiences or reflection. Interviewees were asked to engage in: a process of reflection, activities that required them to actively think about their own or someone else's belonging, and activities and questions that helped them think about themselves and about their context. These types of diverse interview questions and activities were revealing in that they further strip back the layers of experience and begin to reveal a more complete picture of how participants make meaning within their context.

**Initial learner interviews (LI1).** The student interviews began with an initial interview focused on learning more about the participants themselves. One goal of this interview was to begin to learn more about the students and their school lives, such as information about their interests and their social relationships. An interview protocol with open ended questions, as is dictated in the phenomenological tradition, was created to help explore and guide questioning around these areas. Additionally, another goal was also to build trust and rapport with the students. Though there was a previous meeting focused on reviewing the study, IRB information, and consent forms, there had not been any additional meetings for students to share more about themselves. Belonging is a necessarily personal subject, and it was important to begin building trust and understanding early. Along with learning more about them as individuals, this interview helped lay the groundwork for subsequent interviews.

**Belonging focused learner interviews (LI2).** The purpose of the second student interview was to collect data that directly addressed students' experiences with and understanding of belonging. The creation of the interview protocol was guided by potential dimensions listed in the Generative Model of School Belonging, but since it was a semi-

structured protocol, discussion was not limited to the protocol. One key idea within phenomenology is not to limit possibilities, but rather stay open and sensitive to many possible tangible and intangible meanings (van Manen, 2015). As such when new pathways or ideas were raised by participants, these would be explored.

**Activity focused learner interviews (LI3).** Students also took part in three activities focused on understanding how belonging is enacted and lived in their school context. This is significant as it allowed for a more thorough exploration of how they actually experience belonging. There were three activities. All of these activities involved consideration of their current school context in unique ways.

1. ***Places of Belonging***

For the first activity, students were given a map of the school and school campus to discuss places of belonging. The purpose of this was to begin to explore how belonging might intersect with physical space. The literature does seem to point towards the importance of considering space, and this activity allowed for students to discuss belonging as it exists in the current space, as well as conceptualize how physical space might be used differently.

2. ***Two Characters***

The second activity involved students thinking about two “characters”. In the activity, they were asked to design one character who would belong perfectly in their school and one character who would struggle to belong. It was up to the students to develop characteristics and qualities of the characters. When students struggled to generate characteristics their existing interview on belonging was used to help them generate possible answers. This activity differed from the initial interview in that it allowed

students to step outside of their own first-person experience and assume a third-person stance.

### 3. *Rules of Belonging*

The final activity involved students actively explaining the rules of belonging in their school to a fictional new student. They were read a scenario about a new student entering their school and were asked to discuss what that new student would need to understand and what they need to do in order to belong in their school. The goal was to have students discuss the school rules and the intangible, socially defined rules of belonging in their school.

**Concluding learner interviews (LI4).** All participants were interviewed one final time. This final interview served two critical purposes. First, data were initially analyzed, summarized, and presented to students as a member check. These summaries were read to students and edited within the interview if students wanted to make any changes. This process helped confirm the themes being generated from each individual participant were relevant and accurate. Second, there was also a forward facing component that explored where they feel like they will belong in the future and what they feel is necessary to ensure everyone belongs in school. This helped to explore the predictive nature of experience and cognition (Hohwy, 2013) regarding the experience of belonging. It also began to address an important connection between belonging and becoming, as well as the perceived impact of belonging or not belonging. These concepts are intertwined, as how we conceptualize what we will become is highly influenced by where and how we experience current states of belonging.

**Confidentiality of participant data.** The primary method for capturing data was through the audio recording of the interviews. Data were recorded on a portable recording device, and

then transferred onto the primary investigator's computer. Data were not shared with anyone else. Any physical data, such as writings completed during activities, were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the home office of the primary researcher. Digital files were kept on a secure external hard drive and the primary investigator's computer. The external hard drive was also kept in a locked file cabinet in the primary researcher's home. Transcriptions of the audio recordings were created by a transcription service, Same Day Transcriptions, which ensured data anonymity and shared a non-disclosure agreement. Once transcriptions were completed any additional identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity. Once the audio recordings were fully transcribed and checked for accuracy, they were deleted to ensure confidentiality.

### **Memoing**

The use of an IPA approach requires a great deal of self-reflection on the part of the researcher. This includes reflection and positioning prior to the study in the form of bridling (Vagle, 2009), but it also includes a constant process of writing and re-writing on the part of the researcher (van Manen, 1990). Within phenomenology this active exploration is considered an important data collection method as well as a reflexive activity (reflexivity and bridling will be discussed in a later section). In the context of this study, using memoing for data collection involved the researcher writing their evolving thoughts and the meaning they were making (Saldana, 2016). This process helped in understanding emerging themes in later analysis. Importantly, this process was systematic and not just journaling exercises. For the purpose of this study, memos were specifically tagged with the following: <memo type>, <memo purpose>, <step in the research process>, <date>. Additionally, memos were also created at specific times in the research process:

- After each initial recruitment/consent meeting

- After each interview
- After each IEP review
- At the conclusion of the student interviews at one site
- At the conclusion of all data collection at one site
- At the conclusion of all data collection
- During data analysis

Memoing also happened at spontaneous times when the researcher deemed them appropriate to capture an important thought or moment. This spontaneous memoing is not to be confused with note-taking. Note-taking is less structured, and is what can be used to generate a more formal memo.

### **Review of Student Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

Finally, students' IEPs were reviewed to develop a more in-depth understanding of the nature of each student disabilities, as well as the services that they receive. An Individualized Education Program is a quasi-legal document that articulates the learning goals and special education and related services that will be provided to a student who qualifies as having a disability. This plan includes information related to: "present levels of academic achievement and functional performance", "annual goals", "child's progress", "special education and related services", "supplementary aids and services", "program modifications or supports for school personnel", "extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children", "individual accommodations", and details related to service delivery (Billingsley, Brownell, Israel, & Kamman, 2013). While all of this information is relevant to understanding students' educational experiences, it also speaks to the overall relational approach that is taken in the study. An IEP is a collaborative document that represents perceived student needs and services

the school feels they can provide to address said needs. In some ways, this document therefore helped to illuminate a number of relational aspects of belonging. For instance, sensory belonging relates to the idea of physical embeddedness within one's environment. The IEP is a document that specifically lays out student placement and location of service delivery. This type of information was important in understanding some of the conditions that influence a student's experience of school belonging.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis within phenomenological studies is considered to be an ongoing reflective process, but within interpretive traditions is based in large part around analyzing the texts generated from interviews in multiple ways. Gallagher and Zahavi (2012) outlined the four key aspects to consider within traditional phenomenological data analysis:

1. The epoche or suspension of the natural attitude
2. The phenomenological reduction, which attends to the correlation between the object of experience and the experience itself
3. The eidetic variation, which keys in on the essential or invariant aspects of this correlation
4. Intersubjective corroboration, which is concerned with replication and the degree to which the discovered structures are universal or at least sharable (p. 33)

While these represent a classical and notably more philosophical approach to phenomenology they also guide the overall approach to data analysis in all phenomenological studies. Namely, the overall approach includes an open attitude towards subjective experience of the participants, a process of reductive analysis with the goal of understanding the concept of student, in this case belonging, and looking across experiences to better understand what is common. These core

aspects take on many different forms and are described in different ways depending on the overall goals of the study, but they are evident in phenomenological studies.

The specific analysis methods that were employed within this study are based around the steps described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) for data analysis within IPA studies.

Overall, their steps are as follows:

1. Reading and Re-Reading
2. Initial Noting
3. Developing Emergent Themes
4. Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes
5. Moving to the Next Case
6. Looking for Patterns Across Cases

These steps provided the basic framework for analysis, but additional steps were added because of the specific requirements of this study.



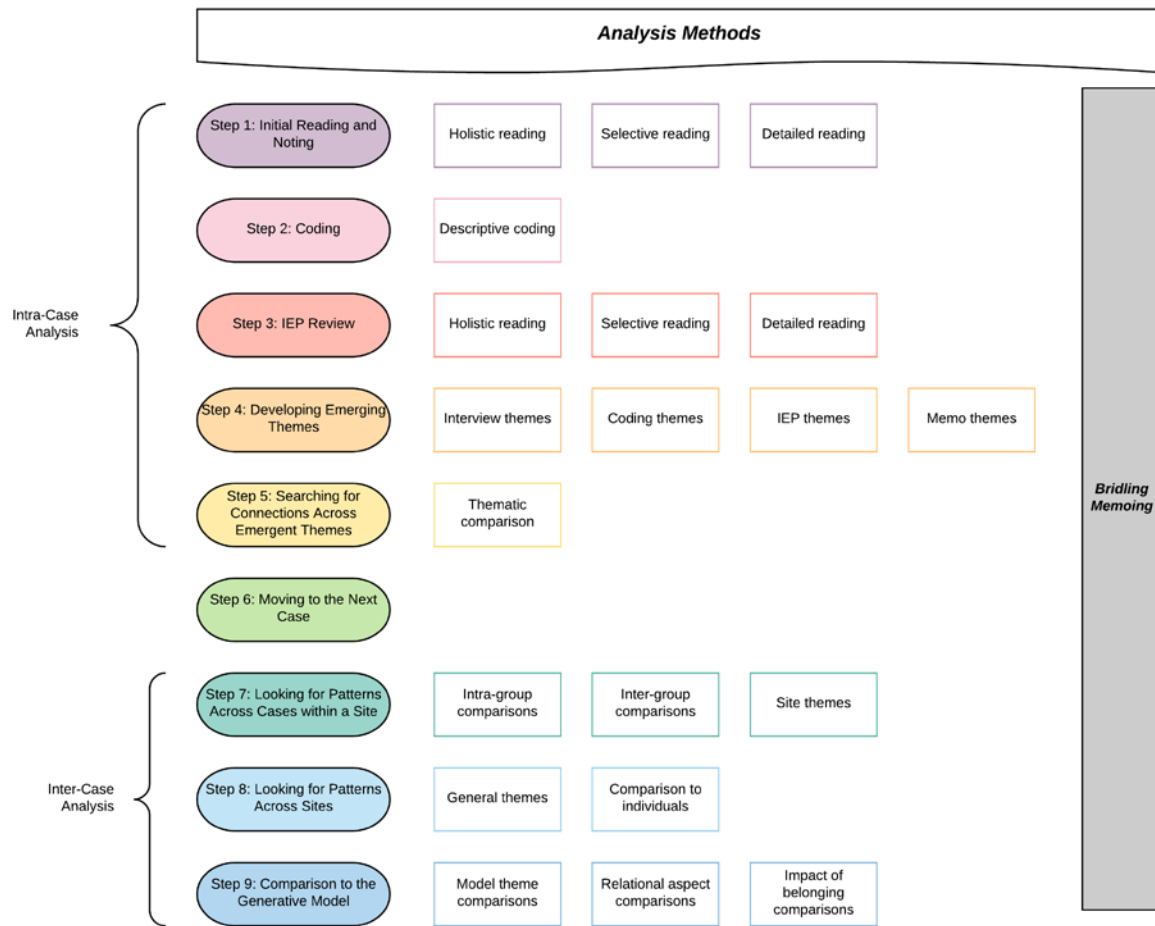


Figure 5: Data Analysis Methods

## Bridling and Researcher Reflexivity

Before reviewing the analysis steps, the concept of bridling needs further elucidation. One foundational concept within qualitative research more generally is researcher reflexivity. This concept relates to the position, biases, emotional reactions, knowledge, and power of the researcher in actively exploring, understanding, and creating knowledge as related to both the individual being researched and the research context (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). This idea is inherently related to the open stance adopted within phenomenological methods, and is directly related to the idea of bridling (Vagle, 2009).

Bridling is an important part of understanding meaning because if we do not openly confront what we already think we know, then we cannot understand what we are seeing. We need to put aside potential bias even if it conflicts with previous conceptualization for a more open perspective. This does not mean a researcher can adopt a completely neutral stance as implied within more traditional phenomenological methods, but rather in being aware of ourselves, we can more appropriately approach the others and the meaning they make or account for the interpretations researchers are making in a more transparent nature (Vagle, 2014). This orientation helps retain a degree of skepticism about data collected and helps the researcher approach data from multiple lenses.

There are a number of questions that can guide bridling: How do I feel? What do I think I know? How do I think I know it? What was I expecting to know? Are there other interpretations that might be equally reasonable? Are there perspectives that have not been considered? These questions were continually asked, but also specifically asked within memos. This approach to including these types of questions in memoing helped to ensure that bridling is not simply a passing concern, but instead a vital part of the methodology.

### **Step 1: Initial Reading and Noting**

There are many ways to begin a thematic analysis. The methods used within this study to initiate the thematic analysis were based on the processes discussed by van Manen (2015). He laid out a number of key steps to consider. The first step he discussed was holistic reading. This involves reading through the interview transcript in its entirety without stopping or taking individual notes. The goal is to begin to generate an initial understanding of fundamental meaning without putting particular credence on any individual section. There are two general steps after the holistic reading: selective reading (a reading to highlight parts of the interview that

seem essential or important), and detailed reading (a line-by-line analysis of the text) (van Manen, 2015, p. 320). The purpose of these readings is to look at both the parts and whole, individual and collective, context and concept, in ways that overall themes can begin to be generated. These are the steps where the process of initial noting begins. In a general sense, this noting process includes general comments and reactions, but more specifically within IPA this includes descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe these types of comments as:

- Descriptive comments focus on describing the content of what the participant has said, the subject of the talk within the transcript
- Linguistic comments focused upon exploring the specific use of language by the participant
- Conceptual comments focus on engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level (2009, p. 84)

The goal is to begin to organize the descriptive notes and analysis for the later interpretive process of developing themes. While the focus was primarily descriptive, interpretive notes were also taken as a means of remaining open to the research process, as well as bridling. To help assist in organizing these notes, each note was labeled with the line number and the student code. This helped to track information in later steps that are focused on thematic analysis.

## **Step 2: Coding**

Though some phenomenological methods do not specifically call for the use of coding techniques as these can be constraining and prevent openness, coding techniques were used to help manage data and assist in comparing subjective experiences across participants. Without codes there was a risk of failing to adequately compare necessarily complex experiences.

Descriptive coding was used for this study. This method most generally involves labeling different topics that are discussed, and is similar to an in-vivo coding style that seeks to use the participants' words as codes (Saldana, 2016). This type of coding was used because part of phenomenology involves breaking down the narrative into component parts. In this case, the use of descriptive coding helped to organize and understand the multifaceted nature of lived experiences.

The coding itself was done within ATLAS.ti (version 8), a coding software commonly used within qualitative research. Descriptive codes were created for each individual interview. Once all interviews were coded, any repetitive codes were combined. This occasionally happened due to misspellings or a switch to a plural from a singular. Once repetitive codes were eliminated, codes groups were created to begin organizing the data across participants for later analysis. Importantly, codes were not changed during this process as this would lead away from the descriptive nature of the codes. Instead, the groupings were used as a means of organizing, but not losing meaning.

### **Step 3: IEP Review**

As previously stated, students' IEPs were also reviewed as a means of further understanding the relational and contextual aspects of student experiences. Importantly, of primary importance was understanding the meaning students made of their lived school experiences. With this in mind, the IEP review was not meant to be a means of contradicting or finding flaws in their subjective experiences. Rather, the purpose was to develop a more robust understanding of what might contribute to these experiences.

In terms of specific analysis, the IEPs were treated in a similar way to the interviews in step one of this analysis process. One key difference, though, was how these were read and

where. A student's IEP is a very sensitive document. Because of this, all IEPs were read at each site in the office of an administrator. The documents were not removed from school property at any point in time. While in the office of the administrator, the IEPs were read holistically by the researcher, after which a memo was taken. Then they were read in a selective way, followed by a detailed reading. Again, this was a means of better understanding the contextual and relational aspects of the student's experience.

#### **Step 4: Developing Emergent Themes**

This step in the analysis builds from the previous steps, but differs in that it is more specifically interpretive. The purpose of a thematic analysis is to look at both the parts and the whole in ways that overall themes can be generated, and, for this study, ultimately come to a better understanding of how students with EBDs experience belonging. This process involved going back to the previously generated notes and memos, the coding, and the IEP reviews to begin to develop specific themes associated with students' experiences and meaning associated with school belonging. At this stage, themes were generated in each of these data sources independent from the other data sources, but not as divorced from raw data. For instance, themes were developed from the codes, but frequently the initial interview transcript was reviewed to better understand the context of the given code. This was done to ensure that meaning was not divorced from the given context.

**Methods for developing themes.** In terms of how these themes were developed, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) discussed a number of ways that this can be done. They listed:

- *Abstraction* – the process of putting similar themes together and a new theme is developed
- *Subsumption* – the process of grouping themes under a pre-existing theme

- *Polarization* – the process of creating themes based on difference as opposed to similarity
- *Contextualization* – the process of grouping themes around an existing event or context
- *Numeration* – the process of supporting a theme based on frequency of support
- *Function* – the process of developing themes based on the function served in the interview

Within this study the above purposes were kept in mind, but specific thematic analysis techniques were based primarily on abstraction and subsumption. However, considering the evolving nature of phenomenological interviews additional methods were used when appropriate. For instance, numeration was used when thinking about the contributions that students discussed as being related to belonging, and polarization was used when thinking about how students specifically defined belonging.

### **Step 5: Searching for Connections across Emergent Themes**

One of the key purposes within phenomenology is the idea of searching for overarching themes or in a traditional phenomenological sense ‘essences’ (van Manen, 2015). Within this study the overarching research questions were used to begin to categorize and focus themes that were being generated. However, as with other phenomenological studies, there was also a focus on understanding the themes as emergent from the experiences of the students.

After themes were generated from the individual aspects previously discussed, intra-case comparisons were made. Overall, this included comparing themes from the interviews, the coding, the IEP review, and the memos. These themes were not initially compared to those from participants from other sites. This type of inter-case comparison occurred in later steps. The goal here was to begin to develop themes to illuminate the three research questions as experienced by a single individual.

### **Step 6: Moving to the Next Case**

Prior to this point data analysis methods discussed have occurred in an intra-case manner. That is, steps 1-5 focused on analysis for data collected from and about a single individual. This resulted in themes that were unique to each participant. Step six represented an active move to another individual. This is not to imply that analysis was beginning to happen across individuals, but rather this step represented the move to a new participant case.

This is an important and intentional step within phenomenological research. Notably, when conducting a phenomenological study one must retain an open mind; a suspension of the natural attitude (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). This is true of the researcher orientation towards the phenomenon of study, but also towards the experiences of and the meaning made by each participant in the study. When moving to a new case, one must not let the previous case bias the analysis. Each student has a unique set of experiences, and, therefore, the researcher must approach thematic analysis as unique for each individual. This, however, does not mean that cross case thinking must be put aside; this will happen naturally. In this case memos and researcher reflection took place to ensure each students' experiences were analyzed to the greatest extent possible without bias and work developing previous themes was bridled.

### **Step 7: Looking for Patterns across Cases within a Site**

After all of the cases were individually analyzed for themes, attention was then turned to looking for patterns across the multiple cases within the site. Within this step themes across groups were developed with the goal of developing broader site themes.

**Intra-group comparisons.** Up until this step data was strictly inter-case analysis. In other words, data analysis had been done on the strictly individual level. The first step in looking for patterns and themes across the site was to look within the individual groups for additional

themes. The goal was to move from having individual student themes to having student themes more generally. Again, when developing these themes there was continual reference back to the individuals so as to avoid straying too far from subjective lived experiences.

**Inter-group comparisons.** Once the intra-group comparisons were completed, the groups themselves were compared. Importantly, this happened on the whole group level, but also on the individual student level. It was vital to revisit the individual level so as not to stray too far from the subjective, lived experience, but also to ensure that data retain relevance to student voice.

**Development of site themes.** The final aspect of this step was the development of overall site themes. This analysis built from all of the previous steps in a way that begins to address the specific research questions in a site specific way.

### **Step 8: Looking for Patterns across Sites**

After the data were analyzed within each site, a comparison was made across the two different sites. This step involved two aspects:

1. Looking across the two sites to develop broader themes
2. Comparing the broader themes back to the individual student cases

Once again, an important aspect of this thematic analysis was focused on returning to the individual students. It cannot be emphasized enough that the students' lived experiences were of primary concern. This meant that a comparison between the individual students' themes and the overall themes needed to occur. However, it is in this step that broader themes were related back to the original research questions to develop answers in a more generic way:



1. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) experience belonging in schools and how do they feel this affects them as individual learners?
2. What personal and environmental factors do students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) feel most contribute to their school belonging?
3. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) conceptualize an idealized space of belonging within school?

### **Step 9: Comparison to the Generative Model**

One final step in the analysis process was a consideration of how the Generative Model compared to data that was collected. The purpose of the Generative Model was to lay out a number of possible pathways and factors related to belonging as well as encompass the varieties of experiences that were already documented via research. As such it was important to specifically use the model to think about how the individual participant's experiences compared to the broader literature base.

This comparison was done in three ways that mimic the model itself. First, the themes related to the student and environmental contributions in the model were compared to the themes found within the study. Second, the relational aspects discussed in the model were compared to the relational aspects of belonging that emerged from within the study. Finally, the impact of belonging for the students was compared to the impacts discussed in the model. This process helped inform the model itself, but also helped situate this particular study in the broader context of research on school belonging.

Finally, this step also included revisions to the model itself to add new aspects and refocus others. This included highlighting pathways that were most salient, as well as creating

new pathways as they emerged from data. This revision is vital to understanding what the generative model can engender, but also to ensure the model is more representative of possible belonging within schools.

### **Issues of Credibility, Dependability, and Transferability**

There are many different perspectives on how validity and reliability should be considered in qualitative research more generally and phenomenological research more specifically. The terms chosen here (credibility, dependability, and transferability) were chosen due to their prevalence within qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

**Triangulation.** Credibility was primarily addressed through data source triangulation and methodological triangulation. The later occurred through the variety of questions and activities used within the interviews, while the former occurred through student interviews, memoing, and review of student IEPs. Triangulation also occurred within each set of interviews. As previously stated, the protocols were developed with the notion of the predictive mind as a guiding principle. As such, the questions asked looked at past, present, and future states of belonging, as well as looking at belonging from first and third person perspectives. In understanding what belonging means to the individual participants, these three different states and perspectives played a role in better understanding their experiences of belonging.

**Member checks.** Objectivity has often been raised in relation to phenomenology. Phenomenology is necessarily a first-person research methodology in that the researcher is recognized as necessarily describing and interpreting data that are found (Gallagher, 2012). The objectivity that is therefore present is within the bridling of bias and predispositions and through the open stance taken. It should be recognized, however, that qualitative research of this sort can

easily become an enterprise of personal interpretation as opposed to reflecting the subjective experiences that it sought to originally understand.

To help avoid this potential limitation in this methodology, member checks were used within the final interview with all participants (Creswell, 2013). During this interview the initial analysis of data was presented to see if it accurately reflected participants' subjective experiences as well as their perception of school belonging more generally. Though in some member checks interview transcripts are included (Carlson, 2010), this was not done as the goal was to understand if the interpretations are trustworthy on both a personal and general level. As such what was presented was the researcher interpretation of their experiences and understanding of belonging.

**Transferability.** The results from such a relatively small sample cannot generalize to all students with EBDs or all environments, and that is not the intent of this study. However, it was still possible to work towards a degree of transfer within the given student population through the phenomenological methods employed. A large part of phenomenological research involves searching for the essential elements of an experience or concept. This involves questioning the essential elements of an experience. This can occur within the small set of ten students interviewed, and the students' experiences can also be compared to the Generative Model of Belonging. Again the goal here was not reductive, but phenomenology does involve attempting to understand essential elements of a given experience. Additionally, research was conducted in multiple sites as a way to further explore experiences across contexts. It should be noted though that the contextual level was not of primary concern, rather individual student experiences were the focus.

### **Positionality: Approaching the Study of Belonging**

This study represents an attempt to understand what belonging is at its core. An important part of understanding belonging has to start with understanding one's own experiences with said concept. As any individual has, there are moments where I have felt a great deal of belonging and other moments where I have struggled to belong. As with all students, there are classes where I have felt a great deal of belonging and others where I have struggled to find belonging. Though the details might be different, we all experience these moments, and it was, in part, those moments that inspired me to explore this topic.

When I talked with participants in this study about how they felt unsuccessful in a certain class, I related to the class I was kicked out of under the assumption that the class was not for a student like me. When participants talked about finding success and belonging in classes, I thought about realizing as an undergraduate that I could do the "school thing" after I was complimented by a history professor after a presentation I thought I bombed. When participants talked about a teacher who negatively impacted their belonging, I thought a great deal about an English teacher whom I never seemed to be on the same page with despite efforts otherwise. When they talked about a teacher who made a positive difference, I thought about my ninth-grade biology teacher, who not only made a world of difference to me, but was able to successfully teach all students in his class. When they talked about finding friends they simply clicked with, I thought about the different friends who came and went and the meaning they had to me at different times. When they talked about not belonging with groups, I thought about the feeling I had when I refused to smoke cigars with my baseball teammates and subsequently never really felt part of the group. When participants talked about belonging, on one level I knew exactly what they were talking about.

Yet at the same time, I was aware that my life and experiences are not the participants' lives and experiences. On the most granular level, my belonging is not their belonging. This is a critical point in terms of positionality. In talking to others about belonging I had to recognize these experiences as my own and not the participants. In a sense, we are all experts in belonging, but we must recognize that we are experts in our own belonging. My own personal experiences necessarily played a role, but were not the focus of the study. As such, it was important for me to recognize them, understand them, and do my best not to let them get in the way of exploring the experiences of the participants.

### **My Experiences as an Educator and Researcher**

As an educator, I have had many conversations about belonging. I often heard that it was important to foster belonging for all our students and that belonging was an important goal. This is very hard to argue with as the alternative seems negligent at best and discriminatory at worst. Yet, often in those conversations I felt that belonging was something that seemed to be taken for granted. We discussed what belonging was related to, what contributed to it, and the hopeful outcomes associated with it from our perspective as educators, but not about how belonging was actually experienced and understood by individual students. It was something that was clearly wanted, but the approach and actions necessary to ensure it were not always so clear.

Belonging continued to come up as I transitioned from my work as an educator to my work at CAST. While there I focused on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), accessibility, the flexible use of technology, and inclusive education. At CAST, I had the opportunity to think more about how to design learning environments that met the needs of all learners, not just students with disabilities. Belonging was not directly addressed through UDL, but the concept of belonging was raised multiple times as a potential outcome of having well-designed and

inclusive classrooms. Yet, we did not talk as directly about what belonging was and how we might address it.

When I started my doctoral work at Boston College, I had the opportunity to continue to explore inclusion and teaching students with disabilities. This began with my work on a school-wide accessibility report where I was able to interview key administrators across campus on how they were addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Though the goal was to focus on improving accessibility, it was quickly seen from the interviews that inclusion and belonging were the focus of most interviewees. Accessibility was just one way to start meeting broader goals. This report was shared with key individuals on campus as a means of helping to make Boston College a more accessible and welcoming place for students with disabilities. While teaching both at Boston College and the City College of New York, I also talked about belonging with students in my classes. It was directly addressed through courses on special education and inclusion, and I even found myself addressing it in indirect ways in courses on assessment and instruction and in practicum courses.

Despite all of this work and conversations around belonging, I still had a lot of questions. I decided that I needed a better understanding of what belonging actually is. What exactly are people talking about when they say belonging? Are they even talking about the same things? How do students with disabilities experience belonging in schools? I had lots of new questions. I began reading (and of course annoyingly asking lots of questions to unsuspecting friends and family) about belonging within schools and how others have come to understand the concept. I quickly found that there was a wide range of approaches to understanding belonging and why it may or may not be important to address in school. Some of these approaches directly addressed belonging, but others seemed to simply use the language of belonging; referring instead to

concepts like engagement, participation, or motivation. Though all were informative and important in understanding what belonging is, how it might function, and what it could lead to, I was still left with questions around the experience of belonging. This, along with my previous experiences, led to the development of this study and the pressing question, what exactly is belonging?

### **Why Phenomenology?**

I began to think more about how I could explore the subjective experience of belonging of a given individual. This quickly led down a rabbit hole of philosophical objections and ruminations on consciousness. However, two possible pathways began to emerge as possibilities: phenomenology or case studies. While both methodologies could allow for further exploration of subjective experiences, phenomenology was ultimately chosen. This was because of the overall philosophical orientation related to conceptual exploration.

As discussed above, phenomenology allows for the exploration of “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). This idea was particularly important as I began to think more about how I could explore belonging in schools. Similarly, it was also important because belonging is necessarily subjectively experienced. I potentially feel belonging differently than you do, and you potentially feel belonging differently than they (used generically here) do. That is not to say that a case study would have been a bad option either. Future research can and should explore belonging through this methodology. My primary concern for this study, however, was focusing on the subjective experience and understanding belonging through the lens of students.

### **Why Students with EBDs?**

I have long held a personal and professional interest in the appropriate education of students with disabilities. In particular, how can we design environments to meet the needs of students through inclusion, accessibility, and intersectionality? In my various experiences with inclusive education, the concept of belonging has frequently been raised. Generally, I heard it discussed alongside inclusion in both practical and aspirational kinds of ways. It was raised as a practical outcome of inclusion, and something that guides the development of inclusive environments. Yet the connection between inclusion and belonging was not always clear and I began to question what belonging is and how it is actually experienced by students with disabilities. My concern was not only around inclusive environments, but around all school environments.

There is a range of student groups that could have been examined here. For instance, conducting this study with students with learning disabilities or autism could yield very interesting and unique findings. However, students with EBDs were an important group to explore. Some of the key reasons why this group is important were discussed above in the rationale so do not need repeating here. However, in terms of positionality, I felt this group was important to choose as this group remains highly controversial in terms of inclusion. Often, I have read about the difficulties and concerns around including these students (training, social skills, intervention availability, etc.), and how separate classrooms or spaces might benefit both the student and the school more generally (Kauffman et al., 2002; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). This is not to say that there are not valid concerns to be had around how to best serve this student population. There certainly is a lot to debate, but one must question the effects of being excluded, even when done with the best intentions. The idea behind this study was in part to



better understand how these students may or may not experience belonging within their school experiences.

### **What did I expect to find?**

In terms of positionality, I have been heavily influenced by the open-minded approach and bridling advocated by phenomenology. Part of this process involved thinking clearly about potential bias before the study so as to better bridle these possible biases. As such, as a researcher I thought a great deal about what I as a researcher thought I might find and what might interfere with potential interpretations. In looking back at my personal memoing from early in the process, there were a couple of key things that I thought I might find.

First, I had a preconceived notion that the students in the study might feel a lack of belonging in school. I assumed this would be the case because these students do not always receive the same services and sometimes they receive them in separate environments. This connection to inclusion was a key assumption of mine going into the study and I thought this might be confirmed within the study. As the next two chapters will show, this assumption was not founded as participants did feel belonging in some ways and not belonging in others, how and in what way is another more interesting story.

Second, I assumed that this study would allow me to say something about the belonging of students with EBD in this particular study in a more aggregate way. I wanted to be able to say that “the findings were clear that all students with EBDs felt that...”. Though I did not want to reduce the subjective experiences of participants, I did find that I felt like I wanted to say something that was aggregate and reductive. To help avoid this I actively planned and considered belonging across a wide spectrum of possibilities and made sure questions in interview protocols reflected this possible diversity of experience. Of course, subsequent studies exploring the

student experience of belonging will likely raise more issues and more diversity of experience as new perspectives are unearthed. As will be seen within chapter four, I also retained the greatest amount of participant interview data as possible. While summaries were made when possible, the goal was to capture experience and perspective and I quickly realized that this could not be done through reduction.

Lastly, I also assumed that I as a researcher would be able to truly understand the holistic experience of belonging of each individual student and then represent that perspective here. This was overly ambitious and ill founded. Participants shared a great deal of information and experiences, but there were also potential gaps in what was shared. Some participants nodded to past experiences or current life circumstances that they did not want to share with me. These were moments they mentioned as being influential, but would rather not talk about why. As a researcher, it is important that I was respectful of students, and I did not further pursue these lines of inquiry so as not to violate trust or delve into issues that would be potentially upsetting. However, they were stark reminders that understanding the total perspective of a given individual is challenging. This has helped frame my overall open-minded approach to understanding the data that was shared with me. The question then turns to what was shared with me and why? This shift was important in terms of analysis and framing of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT DATA**

During the interview process, participants discussed a wide range of issues related to belonging and their experiences of belonging. The purpose of this chapter is to help illuminate these responses. Interview data can be presented in a number of ways. Here the focus is on presenting data in two ways. Two means of presentation were chosen so as to help further unfold the complex lived experiences of belonging as expressed by participants.

Section one contains individual participant narratives. These narratives are summaries of each participant's individual perspective on belonging based on the first three interviews conducted with each participant. As such the narratives are necessarily reductive in nature as they are summaries of perspectives as written by the researcher for the student. That does not mean, however, that they were written without participant input. The narratives were shared and directly edited with participants during the fourth interview. As a means of seeing individual participant perspectives, these narratives are shared within section one as was agreed upon by each participant. The only editing after sharing with participants was to ensure basic grammar, spelling, and syntax were appropriate.

Section two is a broader presentation of data based on the interviews as a whole. This was generated by descriptive coding and organized into thematic categories (these are the categories listed above). As discussed within previous chapters, one of the goals is to continue to unfold the concept of belonging as opposed to reduce it to overly summative categories. Section two is in keeping with this broader goal in that the focus is on presenting meaning across participant narratives and sharing these in a non-reductive way. In a practical sense, the interview data is presented as said by students so as not to exclude or reduce participant perspective. The

goal is not summative, but rather generative so the voice of students is critical in exploring the data in a variety of means.

### **Section One: Participant Summaries**

A critical part of the interview process was the summarization and sharing of individual data with Participants during the interview process. The primary goal was to see if the researcher accurately understood and was able to summarize each individual participant's perspective on belonging. As such, they were written in a way that directly addressed the student using a second person point of view. As previously noted, after being edited directly with participants, the only changes were minor ones related to grammar, syntax, and spelling. These participants summaries are shared here.

#### **AL1**

**What is belonging?** To you belonging is: fitting in, being accepted, feeling included, sharing a common interest, and sharing a common obligation. While everyone can experience belonging, it will not be the same for everyone. Importantly, belonging does not mean conformity. It means being able to be yourself, and since everyone is different in terms of their thought process, interests, and tastes, belonging in one way would not actually be belonging at all.

One important thing is that you feel strongly that belonging in school should be automatic as long as you are a human being. This reflects that idea that all people have the right to belong and should be able to belong in school. The only catch is that you have to "want to learn" as a student because that is the primary purpose of school. That does not always mean students feel a sense of belonging at school though.

***Does belonging matter?*** Yes and no. Yes, because everyone deserves to belong in school. Everyone is worthy of belonging and idealistically should belong as themselves. Belonging does matter because it means you are accepted as yourself by others in the school. This feeling helps you feel motivated to come to school and to be successful when you are there. Students who feel like they belong are students who have been included. At the same time, it also does not matter as long as there is still the hope of belonging somewhere else. For you that could be somewhere else or with other people who are accepting of others who are less judgmental.

***What is belonging related to?*** Belonging is most closely related to: being yourself, following the rules, being a good student, and being accepted by others (in particular a group of students).

***What role does identity play?*** One of the most important factors related to belonging was the idea of being yourself. This is the basis of belonging. It is the basis because the people in your environment have to accept you as an individual. Students are more likely to belong in environments that are more accepting and understanding of diverse people and viewpoints. This acceptance cannot just be at the school level. Students themselves also need to be accepting and understanding.

***What role does being a good student play?*** To belong in a school, students have to be “good” students. This generally includes things like following the rules and being a good learner. When students do not do those things then they are unlikely to feel a sense of belonging. This is because the purpose of school is to learn, and they wouldn’t be meeting the purpose of school.

***What role does being accepted by others play?*** Being accepted by others is critical. It is ultimately the groups of people who either accept you or do not accept you. This does not mean

that you will be accepted by all groups of people, but finding some students who accept you is very important. You have to connect with people your age, but sometimes connections can happen with teachers too.

Similarly, not being discriminated against by others is important. This in some ways is the opposite of belonging, and can cause people to feel like they do not belong at all. People in your school tend to be accepting, but there are still specific groups of people who are more or less accepting.

**What is your sense of belonging?** Overall, you do not feel a strong sense of belonging at your school, but that is not a bad thing. Belonging fully would mean that you would have to act like everyone else, and you would not like that. You like being different and appreciate diversity. You do have a few friends, but do not feel strongly about being in one group.

***Is belonging related to having a disability?*** Disability plays a role in your belonging in two ways. First, before you were on the appropriate medicine you did not even want to come to school. This was a problem for belonging, because to feel belonging you need to be there in the first place. Second, your anxiety plays an important role in where you feel belonging. If you feel uncomfortable or uneasy in an environment you are not as likely to belong there. Anxiety in this way helps indicate whether or not you belong.

***How is belonging related to the design of the school.*** The way schools are designed has a major impact on belonging. You expressed that you are not even sure anyone can really belong in schools because schools are not designed for the diverse learners of today. No one really should be in schools because it is not the best place to learn as school can be too restrictive. A good example of that is the time you have to get up in the morning, since not everyone can be at their best when waking up that early.

## AL2

**What is belonging?** When you talk about belonging you mean: fitting in, being like other people, being accepted and accepting others, enjoying school, and being acquainted with large groups of people. An individual who belongs is also worthy of being there. This means that they feel worthy, but also that others make them feel this way. An individual who belongs can also be more successful because they fit in, but one can fit in even if you are not successful. Despite being able to talk about these aspects of belonging, belonging is also very hard to define because it is something that you know when you feel it or when you see it. Sometimes it simply happens in a moment, and you just know.

You also see belonging as a multiple step process. That belonging does not just happen automatically. This is related to the idea of having to build relationships and participate in school activities, but also figuring out how to act and what the rules are within the school. If students are just like everyone else in terms of looks, personality, and background (the average) then this process is much easier, and they will fit in quickly. Students who are different might struggle to find belonging but depending on the school could still find it.

***Does belonging matter?*** Yes. Belonging does make a difference because it allows you to feel successful and have lots of friends. In some ways not belonging has even bigger consequences. If you do not belong, then you will not want to come to school and you will not feel like participating. This causes a lot of problems.

**What is belonging related to?** Belonging in school is related most strongly to: other students, knowledge, and language.

***What role does knowledge and language play?*** Knowledge and language make important contributions to belonging, as well as being indicators of belonging. Knowledge and language are interrelated, but if you had to choose one that was more important you would choose knowledge because it can provide the language. When students speak the same language and have the same knowledge, they are more likely to belong together. When the school uses the same knowledge and language, then students are more likely to belong.

***What role do other students play?*** Other students play a very important role because they are the ones that will accept or not accept you. It is their actions that make a big difference. You have a few good friends, and feel like you can be a part of activities such as certain clubs. These individuals enjoy your humor and your puns, but also are able to talk with you on your intellectual level. Because of this you feel a fairly strong sense of belonging. There are some students who will not belong in school. These are students who choose not to get along with others and not play by the rules of the school. They tend to come off as “jerks”, and while they might have a lot of friends, they are not well liked.

***What role do teachers and adults play?*** Teachers and adults can impact belonging in a class, but not belonging with friends. This is because teachers don’t really understand how students interact on a daily basis. They might think they know, but in the end they really don’t. For instance, they might not understand that students can be judgmental and disrespectful at times. With that said, a nice teacher can help a great deal in making you feel a sense of belonging in their rooms. In part this is because they are understanding if you make mistakes, provide you extra help when you need it, are accessible to you, help when you might be feeling blue, and check in with you to see how you are doing.



**What is your sense of belonging?** Overall, you feel a pretty good sense of belonging in your school because you have friends, you feel like you can be successful, and you feel like you can be yourself. However, you do not want to belong fully. Doing this would make you feel average because that is the main message from the school. This is the happiness propaganda, and you are more of a sad realist. This means that you fit in to some degree, but not exactly as the school might want you to. In short, there are aspects of you that belong in specific places, as opposed to feeling a complete sense of belonging.

You also feel like belonging is flexible at your school. In other words, there are lots of different ways to belong. That does not mean that everyone feels a sense of belonging to the school, but they will still feel a sense of belonging to a certain group of friends. At the very least, this school is much better than your previous schools in fostering your belonging. This is because they are more accepting and they provide you with more effective services. These services help you learn at a more advanced pace and align with your goals.

***Is belonging related to having a disability?*** In terms of disability, it does not play a significant role, but what does matter more is that the school puts you in a position to be accepted and succeed. This includes providing the right kinds of supports and services, and making sure you have lots of opportunities to connect with your fellow learners in academic and non-academic settings.

***Are school belonging and classroom belonging the same?*** No. You feel different degrees of belonging in different classes. In the classes and with the teachers that do not allow you to be yourself, you feel less belonging. This is particularly true in classes where you cannot use your intelligence or your sense of humor. Classes where you feel the most sense of belonging

are generally science and design courses because they challenge you to think. Gym and other competitive classes are the ones in which you feel the least belonging.

### **AL3**

**What is belonging?** First and foremost, belonging is really hard to define. The easiest way to define belonging is by saying: belonging is belonging. It is something that is felt, but not easy to break down. However, if you had to be pressed into a definition, belonging is the feeling of attachment, feeling comfortable somewhere, like you want to be there, you want to engage in the activities, and you like the people. Belonging triggers happiness, it makes you want to be there and makes you more interested.

***Does belonging matter?*** Belonging in school most definitely matters. It matters a lot. It can affect your learning, if you want to be there, and in the end your future outcomes. When students feel a sense of belonging, they are generally happy, like being in school, and like the people and activities. They also walk confidently, smile, talk a lot, ask questions, and are generally quite friendly. This results in students being more engaged with their work and school activities.

However, when students do not belong they don't want to be in school and don't like the activities there. They also likely won't feel safe there or like the people. These are the students who tend to walk alone or eat lunch by themselves in one corner. Without belonging they might stay to themselves and not like to do their work.

**What is belonging related to?** There were a wide range of things that belonging is related to: interactions with others (students, teachers), the rules, and depression and anxiety.

***What role do other students play?*** Other students play a two-sided role in belonging. On the positive side, other students can help you feel belonging by being accepting and friendly. On

the negative side, students could decrease belonging by being mean, spreading rumors, telling others not to be friendly, or generally engaging in conflict. Most students in school are fairly neutral though. They don't help you feel more belonging, but don't necessarily make it worse either.

***What role do teachers play?*** Teachers play a very important role in your belonging. When teachers are flexible in how they teach and strive to understand you as a learner, you are more engaged and feel a greater sense of belonging. They do not necessarily have to teach a subject area that you like, but it certainly helps. On the flip side, when you have a bad teacher, it is hard to belong in their class. When this is the case, you don't feel engaged with the work and you don't want to be there.

***What role do rules play?*** Sometimes rules can also interfere with your belonging. If you do not agree with the rules or feel like the rules negatively impact you, then they can decrease your belonging. For instance, you are not able to use computers at lunch time and that means you can't code or play games, so your free time does not really feel like your own.

***Is belonging related to disability?*** Disability plays a big role in your belonging, but also a big role for other students with disabilities. One way for you is through how you feel in certain places. When you feel safe and you have less anxiety you are more likely to feel belonging. Likewise, when you feel depressed, you might have an anxiety attack and this can be a spiral where you wind up feeling sadder, and then feeling even less belonging. When you are sad, then you get sadder about school and become even less fond of school.

Another way that disability impacts your belonging is that it can frame the way you are thinking. For instance, last year when you were not on a medication that worked for you, it made belonging and interactions with others really difficult.

Additionally, visible disabilities can impact belonging because it would be easier to call people out for their differences, and that might mean that others will be mean to them.

**What is your sense of belonging?** Overall, you do not have a very strong sense of belonging in your school, but you do feel somewhat of a better sense of belonging than you have had in the past. Not fully belonging is not necessarily a bad thing though. Fully belonging would mean having to be like everyone else. This would mean that you would have to be average, and you don't want to be average. You want to be your special and interesting self. Of course, that does not mean that you would not want to have more friends and social connections. You do not want to be popular, but being able to connect with more people would be nice.

***Has your belonging changed over time?*** Yes. Generally, you have not felt a very strong sense of belonging in school ever since 2nd grade. Though you are not sure exactly why it seemed like it was at that point where you started to have less positive interactions with others. This year is a little better because people seem to be more mature, but your belonging is still not high.

#### **AL4**

**What is belonging?** Belonging can mean many different things, but belonging primarily means fitting in with a group. Fitting in with others is based on things like personality, common interests, and having shared activities. Importantly, to really belong, you need to belong as yourself. You cannot force belonging, and you cannot just mold yourself into someone you are not. There is, however, a balance because if you want to build relationships you need to adapt to other people's personalities. When students do not belong, they are far more aware of their own belonging, and think about it more often. They also might try and pretend to belong with others.

***Does belonging matter?*** That really depends on what kind of belonging you are talking about. Belonging to a group, having friends, is very important. If you are talking about belonging to the school more generally that does not really matter much.

***What is belonging related to?*** Belonging is most closely related to friends, but it is also related to being yourself, and the teachers.

***What role do friends play?*** Friends play a critical role because they are the people that you ultimately belong with. At your school, it is fairly easy to make friends and find a group. Depending on what you are looking for there are larger and smaller groups of people. Looks do play into it, but you can still find belonging without much issue.

***What role does being yourself play?*** Being yourself is critical to belonging. You cannot force belonging, and you cannot force yourself into groups. This often happens at your school though. For example, students on your field trip had to change seating because they were putting themselves with people that they do not belong with, and this was causing a lot of problems. This is reflective of a broader tendency of students to try and force themselves into belonging with particular groups.

***What role do teachers play in belonging?*** Teachers can impact student belonging. When teachers limit access to friends and unnecessarily break up groups, this can make students feel less belonging. Additionally, teachers who are more understanding of students today are more likely to help students belong in their classrooms.

***What is your sense of belonging?*** Overall, you have a strong sense of belonging with your friends. You have a number of close friends within school, as well as others who you can talk with in school. Though you might not actually hang out with these people outside of school, they do contribute to your overall sense of belonging. You do wish there would be more of a

recognition of your religious identity, but this was not a major factor in your sense of belonging. With that said, you do not feel a strong sense of belonging to your school.

***Does disability have anything to do with belonging?*** Disability does play a role in belonging. Students with visible disabilities or things like anger issues might struggle to find belonging in school. For instance, a student who has had a past or current anger issue might have a bad reputation. Even if they are not currently acting out their reputation can follow them and impact their belonging in the future.

Disability can also play a role in self-esteem, which can impact belonging too. If someone feels bad about themselves, then they will not feel good about being with others or might put themselves down.

## **AL5**

***What is belonging?*** Most importantly, belonging is when someone is included. When a person is included they feel good because they have friends and have found their niche. They feel respected and are comfortable being themselves. Importantly, to know if someone belongs you have to really know the person. People might look and act like they belong, but inside they might not really feel that way.

Not belonging can be difficult for a student. When they do not belong, they might have to fib it by pretending to be someone they are not, or they might have to seek out different people who will accept them. Many people have to fib their belonging until people actually think they do belong. This can be tricky in a small school because everyone already knows each other and their past.

***Does belonging matter?*** Yes. Belonging matters because when you feel a sense of belonging that means you can be your true self. You also feel more comfortable in school and

have more friends. Importantly, when you belong you do not have to think about whether you belong. If you do not belong then you might have to strategize friendships because you are trying to figure out ways that you can belong.

**What is belonging related to?** Belonging is related to: being a member of groups, being yourself, and the teachers.

***What role do groups play?*** Groups play a very important role in belonging because to belong you need to belong to something. Belonging to different groups can also impact your broader school belonging. When you belong to a popular group, then you might be more engaged in school and freer to think about issues beyond belonging.

***What role does being yourself play?*** Being yourself is very important to belonging. It is even questionable whether or not you can really belong if you are not being yourself. If you are not being yourself, then people are not accepting you. They are accepting a “fake” you. People also respond better to people who are being themselves and not putting others down as a way to be popular.

***What role do teachers play?*** Teachers impact belonging because they are the ones who are creating the groups in classes. They also can impact belonging by singling students out. For example, if a teacher sees someone sitting alone and they tell a student to go sit with them, this is not likely to lead to belonging. It might even do more harm than good if it alienates or calls out the student.

**What is your sense of belonging?** Overall, your sense of belonging is pretty strong. You are comfortable with being yourself and you have a number of different friends. That is not to say you belong perfectly. You have recently had some issues with close friends and this has meant your belonging has shifted. While you might have had a lot in common last year with your

close friends, this year, as you have branched out and are acting more like your true self, they do not seem as accepting of you. Luckily, you have not always had the same group of friends and know a lot of people. This means that you can easily find other people who will accept the sometimes quiet, but sometimes crazy you.

***Does disability have anything to do with belonging?*** Yes. Disability does play a role in belonging. For students who can hide their disability, there might not be a big impact on belonging. They might be able to have friends and look like they are members. They might, however, be faking it a bit if they have to deny the aspects of themselves related to disability. Belonging is more difficult for students who have visible disabilities. These things make them seem different, and it could be harder to belong, especially if people are not open minded.

## **BL1**

**What is belonging?** Belonging is the sense that you successfully fit in with a group of people and those people care about you. Importantly, to really belong, you need to fit in as yourself and not as something you are pretending to be. You have to be nice and be yourself. When people feel belonging they: feel happy, feel comfortable in the environment, have friends, and feel like people actually understand them. This results in students feeling uplifted in spirit and that they have worth. These are usually the students who smile often and are open to others around them. When there is not belonging, students shut themselves off to the world and keep to themselves. It is often hard to tell who these kids are though because many kids just pretend like they belong even though they might not feel that way.

***Does belonging matter?*** Belonging definitely matters to you. You had initially moved around a lot and when you did you were not able to form a strong sense of belonging anywhere. Now that you have been in the same place for a while, you feel a greater sense of belonging. This



is even to the point where you would be very sad to have to leave your school. It is an environment where you are free to be yourself as someone who thinks outside the box.

**What is belonging related to?** Belonging is most strongly related to having friends in school. However, belonging is also related to: teachers and the classes, having a lot in common with the people, and the person who is trying to belong.

**What role do friends play in belonging?** You feel that friends play the most important role in belonging. That is because to belong you need to have friends and feel connected to them. For example, the places where you feel the most belonging in school are the places where you can talk and collaborate with your friends like the library and cafeteria. The ideal thing would be for there to be no specific groups of friends, but instead people could move easily between groups. This would help them explore themselves and their personal interests. This is not always the case though.

**What role do teachers and classes play?** Teachers can impact a student's belonging. If they judge students ahead of time or do not give them the benefit of the doubt, students will have a hard time belonging in their classrooms. For instance, a teacher might be quick to judge a student because of their past behavior or reputation. This is not fair, and can interfere with belonging because the student will feel like they are in trouble for things they did not do. The teacher also impacts belonging based on how much access they provide to friends for communication.

The subject area of the class also makes a difference because when the activities do not fit with what the student likes to do it is harder to belong there. For example, you have a harder time belonging in gym class because you are not a competitive person and feel awkward in the locker room.

***What role does having things in common with others play?*** Importantly, everyone should be able to find belonging no matter who they are. However, it is easier to belong and find friends when you already have a lot in common with other people in the environment. When you speak the same language, understand how to dress, and are familiar with what other people are interested in, it is easier to belong.

***What role does the person play?*** Even if you do not have a lot in common with others, it is easier to belong if you are outgoing and talkative. That is because that kind of person is always trying to seek out friends. When you try and seek out friends it is much easier to make them, and fitting in will be much easier.

***What is your sense of belonging?*** Overall, you have a pretty strong sense of belonging with people at your school. You have a lot of friends and are known around the school. That does not mean though that you have only one group of friends. You have friends from lots of different groups and feel that everyone should do the same. When people have friends from lots of different groups, they are more open to others and can be free to be themselves.

This does not mean you have very strong sense of belonging with your school more generally. You sometimes feel like you hate school, especially before noon or during times when people annoy you. Your experiences are not all negative though. You also feel the school is safe, caring, and welcoming. There are students who are mean or rude but most students are not that way.

***Is belonging related to having a disability?*** Disability can impact belonging. If a student has a disability that makes them seem different, this can make it harder for them to fit in. These students might also be made fun of or called out for their differences. Of course, even if someone has a disability, the person should still give other people with disabilities a chance.

### **BL3**

**What is belonging?** Most generally, belonging means fitting in and clicking with one group of people and society more generally. In short, you are just like everyone else. This does not mean that you have to stop being yourself. It is more important that you get along with people and can click on a deeper level than it is to have everyone look and act the same.

When someone belongs, they are social, outgoing, and well known. Students who feel a sense of belonging are also engaged and frequently participate in classes. When students do not fit in, they tend to be shy and antisocial. It is harder for them to open up to people. Even though there are differences in belonging, everyone is the same and should have a chance to belong. It is important not to discriminate against anyone, and in an ideal world we wouldn't even have these kinds of groups.

***Does belonging matter?*** Belonging most definitely matters. It is important to feel comfortable and safe. Without belonging it would be very difficult to engage in learning and you would have less communication. Ultimately, not belonging is a bad thing. Each individual is different though in terms of how much belonging matters to them.

**What is belonging related to?** **Belonging** is most strongly related to having friends. It is also related to being able to be yourself and the teachers you might have.

***What role do friends play?*** Friends play a very important role in belonging. They are the people you make connections with and ultimately belong with. You can relate to them more because you can talk with them about your life. If they are the same age, it can be easier to relate to them because they have the same experiences as you. You have a strong connection with friends. They are people you can share your thoughts and feelings with.

If you want to belong you have to get along with others and fit in with them. When people are more open to all individuals they are more likely to belong with others.

***What does being yourself have to do with belonging?*** It is important that you are able to belong as yourself. You could fake it and pretend to belong with a group, but then it is questionable whether that is really belonging. There are some students at your school who might be pretending to belong, but it would be hard to tell that without talking directly to them.

***What role do teachers play?*** Teachers do play a role in belonging. When teachers are engaging and have an appropriate tone, then it is more likely that students will have a better sense of belonging with them. These are teachers who respect you as an individual, are fair, and are able to teach students in the way they learn best.

***What is your sense of belonging?*** Overall, you feel a strong sense of belonging at your school. You have a number of friends and some acquaintances and you like your teachers and classes. Of course, you still feel homesick for your former home. You miss your friends and miss all the activities like a free nearby pool. With that said, you do feel a sense of belonging in your school.

That is not to say you have the same sense of belonging all the time. When you feel a bit down and “slow”, you do not feel a strong sense of belonging. On these days you are not as engaged and don’t really want to be at school. You keep to yourself more and do not participate as much.

#### **BL4**

***What is belonging?*** Belonging means lots of different things. Belonging can refer to your belongings. These are the things that you carry with you and you own. In other words, these are the things that you own. Your possessions. Belonging can also mean feeling like you want to

be somewhere. When you feel like you want to be somewhere you participate and feel like part of the team. When this is the case you can be yourself and you have friends. Lastly, belonging can mean being required to be somewhere. For example, everyone is required to be in school, so everyone belongs there. This means everyone in school in one sense belongs.

Not everyone belongs in all parts of the school though. It depends on the classes you are in. For instance, “SPED kids” belong in SPED classes and advanced kids belong in advanced classes. There is some fluidity, but these groups tend to belong in their spaces and not the other.

***Does belonging matter?*** Belonging does matter because it is related to the places where you are. For instance, it is a good thing to belong to a team. Belonging to a team means that you can make friends and that you have somewhere to be.

***What is belonging related to?*** Belonging is most closely related to being in a specific place and student characteristics.

***What does place have to do with belonging?*** Not all people want to be in all places. When you do not want to be there you are less engaged and you feel it is harder to learn. This can be because it is a boring subject or because you have a bad teacher. Environments that are calm and allow you to relax are helpful for your belonging because you want to be there.

***What student characteristics influence belonging?*** When students have “clout” they are more likely to belong. This would be someone who has influence. It helps if that person is also savage and willing to do what is best for themselves. They wear nice clothes and are great at sports. It would be much harder for a student to belong if they aren’t more open to the world and don’t ask to hang out with people.

***What is your sense of belonging?*** Overall, you feel a strong sense of belonging here because you have to be here. However, you do not feel like you want to be here. You would

prefer a school that is larger so you can make more friends. You also would like to have teachers that teach in a more hands on and practical way. It is also not clear how many of the things you are learning will be useful to you in the future and that makes it difficult to be in school.

***Does disability have anything to do with belonging?*** Yes. Disability does play a role because if you have a disability then you might be labeled as a “SPED kid”. This means that you will then primarily belong with the “SPED kids” in the “SPED classes”. This limits the places where you will belong and can influence how you see yourself.

## **BL5**

**What is belonging?** Belonging is best understood as fitting in with a group of students or at school. When students fit in they have friends, feel comfortable being themselves, and feel good inside. They are not worried about what other people think and do not feel judged by others. When students do not belong, they might feel like they don’t matter or they are stupid. They also might feel like people are judging them and don’t care about how they feel.

***Does belonging matter?*** Yes. Belonging most definitely matters. You know this from experience. Before this year, you were very shy and did not reach out to others. This year you have talked with more people and were more open to meeting new people. This has helped you make more friends who you can trust and now you feel a greater sense of belonging.

**What is belonging related to?** Belonging at school is most closely related to having friends. However, it is also related to the person who is trying to belong, teachers, and bullying.

***What role do friends play in belonging?*** Friends play a very important role in belonging because they are the people you will belong with. Importantly, they are also the people who will help you connect with others in the environment. Once you do this, then you can start building more of a network of friends.

***What role does the individual play in belonging?*** The individual plays a very important role in belonging. They ultimately must make the effort to belong. They have to be open to others and open to making new friends. If they choose not to participate or are overly shy, then they are less likely to belong in school.

There are other individual factors that play a role like how they look. Students who are more attractive will have an easier time belonging. Similarly, how students dress makes a big difference in their belonging. Students who dress well and have nice shoes are likely to have an easier time belonging.

***What role do teachers play?*** Teachers who actually listen and provide students with options help the most with belonging. However, belonging is not really up to them. Belonging needs to happen between students and, as previously stated, is very much dependent on individuals and the efforts they may or may not make. Teachers can make a difference, but students play a more important role.

***What role does bullying play in belonging?*** Bullying is related to the idea that some people are mean or rude to others. When people bully others it can decrease the belonging of the person being bullied. Additionally, these two people can then sometimes bully back and forth and this only makes belonging worse for both people.

***What is your sense of belonging?*** Overall, you feel a pretty strong sense of belonging with your friends. This is something relatively new for you because in the past you have not felt as much belonging. You were shy and reserved, but this year you were more open to making lots of new friends. This has helped you build your own belonging.

***Does disability have anything to do with belonging?*** Disability does play a role in belonging. Students with disabilities that are more visible will have a harder time belonging than

students who can hide their disability. For example, students who have behavioral issues will have a harder time belonging than students with emotional issues. Students with emotional issues can hide what is inside, and can more strategically reveal themselves to others.

## **BL6**

**What is belonging?** Most importantly, belonging means feeling safe and comfortable as well as having friends in the school. When you feel belonging you are social, talk with people, make eye contact with them, and speak publicly. In addition, students who belong feel more supported and they are more willing to put their trust in others.

When students do not belong, they are likely to be more anxious and closed off to the world. These are students who tend to keep to themselves, avoid eye contact, choose not to speak in public, seem uncomfortable or shy, and do more individual type activities. They tend to be students who are anxious or depressed. Not all students who do not belong look that way though. There are also a lot of students who “fake” their belonging. These are students who might look like they belong initially, but when you get to know them you quickly realize they do not feel like they belong.

***Does belonging matter?*** Yes. Belonging does matter because there are important consequences for not feeling belonging. As previously mentioned, these are students who are closed off and have few friends. This can impact them negatively when they come to school.

**What is belonging related to?** Belonging is related to: having friends, having at least one supportive teacher, and being yourself.

***What role do friends play in belonging?*** Having friends is critical to belonging. To belong you have to belong with people. This does not mean that you have to have a huge friend



group. Someone who belongs can have a few good friends. As long as they are comfortable and confident in themselves, then this might still be ok with the student.

***What role do teachers play in belonging?*** Teachers and other adults in the school play a very important role in belonging. In particular, it is important to have at least one supportive and caring adult. This is someone who will listen and understand, but also can give advice. These types of adults or teachers are also good at relating to students, so tend to be younger teachers. Younger teachers can still remember their experiences from middle school so they can provide more relevant advice.

***What role does being yourself play?*** Being yourself is very important in belonging. Ultimately, people do not want to hang around someone who is not themselves. Someone who is basic. By basic you mean someone who dresses in an average way and does average things like going to Starbucks. With that said, it is also easier to belong here if you have a normal homelife, are white, like football and basketball, and like connecting with people.

***What is your sense of belonging?*** Overall, you have a strong sense of belonging here. You have close friends and feel supported by your teachers. There are also two adults that you can highly relate to. You can go to these two people for advice and for understanding. Though not everything is perfect, the beginning of the year was tough, your ego provides you with some resilience and things have turned around.

***Does disability have anything to do with belonging?*** Disability does indeed have an impact on belonging. You tend to feel more belonging when you are not anxious in an environment. Disability also has an impact for other students. Students with behavioral difficulties might actually have an easier time belonging than students with emotional type disorders because they might be seen as being savage and outgoing.

## **Section Two: Interview Data**

Outside of the participant specific summaries, one of the key goals within this study was to avoid the mere reduction of experience to summaries alone. Rather, as with the model that was discussed within chapter 2 and will be revisited in chapter 5, the goal is also generative. In that sense it is important to present interview data as thoroughly as possible across participants to better capture the lived experience of belonging. Whereas section one focused on participant perspectives, section two focuses on all that was said about belonging. Data is presented based on descriptive themes generated by the researcher, but again the goal was generative so the researcher attempted to capture all meaningful statements around belonging and present them here.

During the interview process participants discussed a wide range of issues related to belonging and their experiences of belonging. Participants discussed:

- [Defining belonging](#)
- [The importance and impact of belonging](#)
- [Contributions to an individual's sense of belonging](#)
- [Indicators of belonging](#)
- [Their personal belonging](#)
- [Means of improving belonging](#)

## Defining Belonging

One primary question asked to participants was: what is belonging? As shown within the narratives featured in section one, participants defined and experienced belonging in a wide variety of ways. This is reflective of personal experiences, as well as contributions as outlined in later sections of this chapter.

**Difficulties in defining belonging.** Prior to going into more depth on how belonging was defined, it should be noted that though definitions were eventually elucidated participants often struggled to provide a clear definition of belonging. As one participant said, “I mean belonging can mean a few things. It’s not like black and white.”<sup>1</sup> Though they were often facile in discussing the impact of belonging or some of the factors impacting belonging, they often struggled to generate a specific definition.

Multiple participants struggled to define belonging because of the experiential and emotional nature of belonging. In discussing the relatively inexpressible feeling of belonging one participant remarked that when thinking about whether someone belongs or not one just feels “weird vibes”<sup>2</sup>. In further explaining what “weird vibes” meant, they said, “It’s like an awkward thing. Most of the time when someone starts belonging, it just happens. It’s very hard to keep track of what does and what doesn’t make you belong.”<sup>3</sup> They went on to say, “It’s like building up antibiotics in your immune system. Slowly building up over time.”<sup>4</sup>

Another participant echoed this sentiment. They said, “I don’t know. It’s just hard to think about an answer for them, to define belonging, because belonging is a hard definition for

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<sup>1</sup> 24:5 (14723:14815)

<sup>2</sup> 5:16 (15584:15826)

<sup>3</sup> 6:57 (33811:33979)

<sup>4</sup> 5:41 (34919:35005)

me to define”<sup>5</sup> They continued, “I don’t know. Because belonging is self-explanatory in its own way”<sup>6</sup>. “It’s kind of like some sort of energy sort of thing. It’s just you’ll know it when you see it. It’s kind of that type of situation.”<sup>7</sup> For participants who raised this issue, belonging was something experienced and known within the feeling of a given experience as opposed to something logical.

**Defining belonging.** As outlined in the above section, belonging is not always easy to define. Often students discussed outcomes of belonging or simply used synonyms to describe belonging. However, participants were able to generate a number of definitions, which when taken holistically provide guideposts to understanding what belonging is and how it is operationalized within the experience of these participants.

**Fitting in.** One way that participants defined belonging was by talking about fitting in. By fitting in they tended to discuss feeling a sense of integration amongst a group of individuals or the school more generally. One participant said, “Belonging is fitting in with a group of people based on anything, and based on things like personality. Belonging isn't forcing yourself on other people.”<sup>8</sup> Beyond school alone, belonging was also related to fitting in within society. One participant said, “When you fit in with other people in a society, and... it doesn’t, you don’t really need to be like them or like act the same way as them, but just like clicking with each other.”<sup>9</sup> Another participant talked about this as finding your “clique”, while another summarized this perspective by saying, “belonging is people not seeing you as an outsider.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 9:64 (36984:37123)

<sup>6</sup> 9:3 (2160:2227)

<sup>7</sup> 6:58 (34189:34334)

<sup>8</sup> 13:45 (24546:24699)

<sup>9</sup> 52:37 19564:19739)

<sup>10</sup> 5:4 (6311:6377)

Again, belonging in the sense of fitting in is related to the feeling of and knowledge regarding personal integration.

***Being accepted.*** Related to the idea of fitting in is that of being “accepted”. Conceptually this differs from fitting in in the sense that being accepted was less focused on the integration component and more focused on the willful acknowledgement of others that the individual is part of the community. This discussion of acceptance took two forms: being accepted by individuals and being accepted in school more generally. Being accepted by individuals was more commonly discussed (friends will also be discussed in more detail in the [contributions section](#)). For instance, one participant said, “That (*belonging*) goes with acceptance cause to belong you have to be accepted by the people where you belong”<sup>11</sup>. They further explained, “Like having a lot of friends and then being acquainted with the friends of those friends would probably be fully accepted.”<sup>12</sup>

Participants also discussed being accepted within school more generally. Though specific individuals continued to play an important role here, what distinguished this type of acceptance was that participants were referencing being accepted within the culture of the school. In particular, they were accepted unconditionally as who they were, and they could engage with the school on their own terms. This idea was often discussed in relation to not being accepted and who was not accepted in their schools.

***Being included.*** Conceptually being included was discussed as being able to participate in all necessary aspects of what is happening within a given moment. One participant remarked that belonging involved “including you in conversations or in games or say ‘hey, do you want to

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<sup>11</sup>5:2 (5287:5568)

<sup>12</sup> 5:20 (17330:17451)

sit with me over here’?”<sup>13</sup> Being included was often discussed synonymously with being excluded. One participant remarked, “I know someone belongs because they aren’t excluded. They definitely like always have people that are willing to talk to them.”<sup>14</sup> Another participant related this to having a specific place. They said, “Belonging is not being the odd one out in a place or being where you shouldn’t be.”<sup>15</sup>

Discussion of inclusion often was related to being a member of a team. One participant remarked, “You’re committed to that team. You already are part of that team. Every person on the team’s a big part of the team. Say like, if we don’t have the comedian on my baseball team. He’s pretty bad, but he’s a comedian. He’s funny. He entertains us.”<sup>16</sup> For this and other participants, teams were a tangible representation of what being included looked like and how it functioned as it helped illustrate inclusion through membership and the articulation of an appropriate participatory role for a given individual.

It should be noted that not all participants felt that you needed to be included within a specific group to feel belonging. One participant said, “I think that you can belong without a group. Like I think that some people they can just jump around. They can do their own thing and be happy. They can have multiple friends.”<sup>17</sup> For this participant, belonging was therefore not defined solely on inclusion within a particular group, but rather inclusion in a particular classroom, within a school, or society could be sufficient to establish belonging.

***Feeling welcomed, supported, and cared for.*** Belonging was also defined by talking about how one might feel within a given environment when one feels a sense of belonging. Some

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<sup>13</sup> 24:6 (15943:16038)

<sup>14</sup> 13:21(10970:11205)

<sup>15</sup> 5:48 (43757:43839)

<sup>16</sup> 65:48 (30120:30510)

<sup>17</sup> 47:41 (28572:29523)

participants emphasized feeling welcomed on a daily basis as well as being welcomed if you were new to the school. One participant said that belonging is, “not seeing someone as an outsider would mean like not discriminating against someone because they're new.”<sup>18</sup>

Considering the number of students who were new or relatively new to their schools (half the participants had only come to the district within three years), this was something that was often discussed in relation to what belonging means.

Related to feeling welcomed was the idea that once you are welcomed into a given environment you are also supported and cared for. This care was discussed more generally, but also more specifically in relation to groups of individuals. In discussing what belonging is one participant said, “Like being in a group, people who care for each other.”<sup>19</sup> This reciprocal sense of caring was reported to contribute a great deal to the overall feeling of belonging.

***Feeling comfortable and safe.*** Participants also discussed the relationship between belonging and feeling comfortable within the school and with others in the school, and ultimately with one’s self. Regarding belonging within the school one participant said, “I feel like being comfortable with the school. I’m like, if you’re comfortable with the school, it’s like you feel like you belong.”<sup>20</sup> Another participant added that when one is comfortable, they also feel like they can be themselves. They said, “I guess when they feel comfortable enough to, I guess show who they are.”<sup>21</sup> Another participant reiterated this same point. They said, “I think that belonging basically means to feel comfortable in your own skin and actually feel good about yourself. Is

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<sup>18</sup> 5:5 6598:6705)

<sup>19</sup> 13:2 (304:357)

<sup>20</sup> 61:10 (4413:4544)

<sup>21</sup> 24:36 (42491:42815)

how I think of it.”<sup>22</sup> This is important to note considering the broader focus on belonging as needing to be genuine.

Safety was also raised as an important factor in feeling comfortable. As one participant put it, “Well, they feel comfortable. They feel it’s a safe environment.”<sup>23</sup> As will be discussed in the contributions section, multiple participants expressed concern for their physical safety. On a very basic level, participants discussed how one cannot be fully comfortable if there are questions about physical safety. Additionally, participants raised that belonging is also related to feeling emotionally safe.

***Feeling happy.*** Participants also thought about belonging as related to happiness or depression. Again, this echoes the challenge of belonging as being felt. One participant said, “Belonging is, belonging in school looks like--belonging is being happy. You like school, the people there. You like the activities there. Belonging in school looks like you have a smile on your face every day. You walk down the hall confidently. When the students belong, they usually have a friendlier tone of voice, like to talk a lot and ask a lot of questions.”<sup>24</sup> For this participant they knew that someone belonged when they could see that person was happy, and if they were then it was more likely that they felt belonging.

***Being respected, heard, and worthy.*** Participants also talked about belonging as related to feeling respected, heard, and worthy. In talking about respect, participants discussed how important it was to feel like others in the environment understand and are comfortable with the role that they play. As one participant put it, “Belonging, you feel like you have a role. You have

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<sup>22</sup> 47:17 (11003:11139)

<sup>23</sup> 9:46 (24703:24794)

<sup>24</sup> 9:60 (35186:35550)



your place. People respect who you are and how you act.”<sup>25</sup> They continued to say, “Not belonging in school looks like kind of just floating around and like not really knowing where your place is. The analogy like you're wandering. You really don't know where you're supposed to fit in, a puzzle piece that's upside down and backwards. I don't know where I'm supposed to be.”<sup>26</sup> Respect was similar to the idea of feeling worthy. One participant said, “belonging is being worthy or meant to be within a place.”<sup>27</sup> In this sense, belonging means you have a place somewhere and are respected within that given place.

Similar to the idea of being respected was the idea that belonging in part means being heard. This differs from being respected in that participants discussed how not only did people respect who you are, but they also see you as an active and important contributor to the community. One participant remarked “When people don’t listen to you, it doesn’t feel like you’re supposed to be there because they’re ignoring you or just not listening to you. It’s like, your input isn’t being accepted so why would you be accepted?”<sup>28</sup>

**Clarifying what belonging is not.** Outside of discussing not belonging as the opposite of their definitions of belonging (for instance, if defined as being included, then not belonging is being excluded), participants also raised a number of key clarifications. One particular issue that was raised was that belonging does not mean conformity. One participant referred to belonging as “everyone clicking in a unique way”<sup>29</sup>, while another said that not belonging could actually be better. They said, “sometimes it can be even better. Because if you belong, that might entail that

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<sup>25</sup> 24:16 (21513:21619)2

<sup>26</sup> 24:53 (55343:55633)

<sup>27</sup> 5:47 (42576:42632)

<sup>28</sup> 3:6 (6985:7204)

<sup>29</sup> 51:5 (2399:2434)

you're boring. You can't enjoy yourself.”<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on belonging while appreciating the diversity and differences of a given individual ran counter to conformity and belonging by being like others.

Belonging is also not permanent. Participants did not feel that belonging meant that you had to belong there forever, though one certainly could. Substantial and appropriate belonging could very well happen in a temporary way. For instance, one participant remarked, “A belonging definition? Being in a place that welcomes you, has nice people, and not necessarily your destiny.” While this student did echo larger themes of feeling welcomed, they were also clear that belonging in school did not need to be permanent.

Belonging also cannot be “faked”. That is not to say that people do not fake their own belonging, but that is not, as one participant put it, “genuine belonging”. When referring to genuine belonging this participant was referring to being somewhere where they could fully be themselves. Someplace where they wouldn’t have to hid or compromise who they were. They said, “It's kind of like sometimes being included, you maybe know it's not genuine. That kind of makes you feel a little bit more, like a bit worse. Because you know they don't really want to, but they have to. It's just awkward.”<sup>31</sup> This sentiment was also echoed by another student who said you know someone belongs somewhere if they can fully be themselves. They said, “When students belong, they're just literally being themselves. When they don't belong, they're pretending to be someone else.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The Importance and Impact of Belonging**

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<sup>30</sup> 1:67 (39466:39585)

<sup>31</sup> 24:8 (16794:17015)

<sup>32</sup> 1:99 (63442:63567)

Participants also talked about how important belonging was to them and others. Though all students recognized the importance of belonging more generally, perspectives on their personal belonging were more complicated (as documented in the next section).

**The importance of belonging.** Participants were clear that belonging in a general sense was not only very important to them personally, but also for everyone. Participants talked about equality and fairness, and how everyone should have the opportunity to belong in school. One participant remarked that “I think everybody’s equal and everyone is unique in their own ways. And like... everyone should feel like they belong.”<sup>33</sup> They went on to say, “even though there are differences in belonging everyone is the same and should have the chance to belong. It is important not to discriminate against anyone, and in an ideal world we wouldn’t even have these kinds of groups.”<sup>34</sup> Participants also recognized that belonging can play an important role in future development and opportunities as well. In discussing why belonging was important, one participant said, “it can affect your learning and your future outcome.”<sup>35</sup>

There were two participants, however, who felt that belonging in school did not matter very much. When asked about how important belonging was to them, they remarked, “On a scale of one to ten, one being I don’t care and ten being, Omg, I need this—like a five, five and a half. At most a six.”<sup>36</sup> For this participant there were other more important things to consider, and even if they did not feel belonging they could still pursue their interests and be successful. Another participant echoed this sentiment. When asked about why they didn’t think belonging in school was very important they replied that they felt that as long as they found belonging

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<sup>33</sup> 53:5 3829:3945)

<sup>34</sup> 53:10 (11663:11887)

<sup>35</sup> 9:28 (16017:16075)

<sup>36</sup> 5:29 (23956:24080)

somewhere it didn't really matter. They said, "It doesn't really matter too much. You're going to fit in either way. You're going to make friends either way. As long as your character is good, as long as you're a good person. Like it's not the most important thing in the world."<sup>37</sup> To these participants school was something temporary and they were aware that in the future they would have more opportunities to belong.

**The impact of belonging.** Participants also talked a great deal about the potential impact of belonging. There were a range of positive and negative impacts discussed. Though their experiences were not always as dichotomous in reality, participants explored both ends of this spectrum, and in doing so found both positives and negatives.

***The positive impact of belonging.*** Participants discussed a range of positive impacts related to belonging and specifically feeling a sense of belonging in school. On a general level, participants discussed the positive psychological effects belonging can have. When students felt belonging they felt "happier", less "anxious", and more "confident." As one participant put it, belonging just "feels nice". Summarizing this perspective, one participant said, "Lucky go happy kids, just get school, do good at school, get into a good college, get a good job and live life. Usually ones that don't have bad anxiety, or they could have bad anxiety and still be happy all the time, depression, I meant."<sup>38</sup> Another participant talked more directly about how belonging can impact student confidence. They said, "Because it would kind of boost your confidence a little bit. One can assume that it would help them be in the state of mind where they can succeed."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 21:82 (38226:38487)

<sup>38</sup> 9:59 (33250:33488)

<sup>39</sup> 7:3 (10590:10737)

This connection to learning and success was also made by a number of other participants. Most participants agreed that if you feel a strong sense of belonging in school then you will want to learn and do well. One participant said, “If you’re happy, if you’re in a good environment, then you’re going to want to learn.”<sup>40</sup> They went on to say, “Well, belonging in a place is related to learning, because when you’re learning and you feel comfortable with the teacher teaching you things, and you like what they’re teaching—you don’t necessarily have to—it affects your belonging. Because it affects whether you want to be at school or not.”<sup>41</sup> Another participant also made the connection to learning and engagement. When asked about what areas are impacted by belonging they said, “pretty much all forms of success, academic and social, it can string off of the fitting in part of belonging.”<sup>42</sup>

Two participants talked directly about the impact of belonging on student’s future as well. They both felt that belonging was very positive because it would eventually help students be more successful in the future. One participant thought this was the case because students who belong receive better guidance. They said, “that they feel comfortable and that there's a place they belong, so that they have a sense for what they like and what they don’t, they know where they can go to feel comfortable when they grow up. It's like, a lot of good guidance like that.”<sup>43</sup> The other participant made the connection more specifically to the academic impact of belonging. They said, “Belonging and doing your work could result in you getting in a good college. That’s a good consequence.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> 9:31 (16327:16466)

<sup>41</sup> 10:7 (7602:7896)

<sup>42</sup> 7:2 (10073:10178)

<sup>43</sup> 3:40 (37973:38218)

<sup>44</sup> 9:63 (36455:36558)

Other participants made more specific connections to interpersonal impacts. One participant, for instance, discussed how students who belong tend to be respected and have “clout”. They said, “clout would be you have influence, you are able to influence others, that you have, um, associated with respect, usually. That you have influence and respect. That’s how I see it.”<sup>45</sup> Belonging in this sense meant being more respected and accepted by peers. Another participant talked about how once you belong within a space then it starts a cycle of acceptance. They said, “Well, the good ones is being accepted as kind of like a feedback loop. So, once you’re accepted you get invited to do things with your friends and the people that accept you. And when you’re invited to do things and do those things and join in on it. You’re accepted a little more, and then the cycle repeats.”<sup>46</sup> For both of these participants and others that talked about positive social effects, belonging meant more influence and friends, but also the promise of more influence and friends.

***The negative impact of belonging.*** Belonging within school was not uniformly seen as being a good thing. Three participants talked about how to fully belong at school you would have to be “average” and not “special”. When talking about who is most likely to belong in schools, one student said, “Just like being an average person, average looking, average intelligence, average vocabulary, average physical statistics. Like not an Usain Bolt, but not a snail. Not an Arnold Schwarzenegger, but not a Pee-wee Herman.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly another student said that people who belong fully in school are “basic”. For these participants, belonging was very important, but not at any cost. They felt that if they had to be “average”, then belonging simply would not be worth it.

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<sup>45</sup> 66:17 (15764:15946)

<sup>46</sup> 5:23 (20036:20344)

<sup>47</sup> 6:78 (47782:48002)

Other participants discussed how belonging to particular groups within school might foster a sense of individual belonging but might not be positive based on the group to which one belongs. Of particular note, they felt belonging to certain groups could be limiting or stigmatizing. When thinking about other negative impacts of belonging, other participants talked about how being in a certain group might lead one to act inappropriate or do bad things. One participant said,

Sometimes people can belong to part of a bad group. Like some people they can... umm... go into the rude kids kind of group. Like they're some kids that hey they might think "oh. They're cool. They like video games just like I do. Or they might be the cool kids. Oh wow. I'm part of the cool kids group." But then they don't realize "wow. They're being jerks to everyone else around me though." You know. And they might not realize it until they do something so terrible and I noticed "oh my gosh what did I just do?" You know. They don't realize until it's too late and they can't really exit that group because if they exited that group then the group is gonna shun them and a lot of other people are gonna think a lot of bad things about the person because they've been part of the.. you know... bad kids group.<sup>48</sup>

Though developing a sense of belonging was positive, the social impact could be negative if one develops belonging with a "bad" group. Another participant discussed a similar thing. They said, "with the bad stuff, the bad things are if you get appointed by some of the people who are more likely to do things against the rules or whatever of that sort, you might get dragged into it."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> 47:42 (29605:30413)

<sup>49</sup> 5:24 (20348:20538)

Three participants discussed how once you belong to a particular group it can be very challenging to leave that group. For instance, one participant said, “if you join the group of mischievous jerks you’re probably not going to be able to leave ever.”<sup>50</sup> In talking about why that might be the case, a different participant said,

I think it’s because they’re like umm too afraid that they are gonna miss out on something or when they’re out of that group, even for the littlest bit, they’re gonna be kicked out for good or they’re gonna be forgotten. I feel like that might be a worry to some people. But I can’t really tell cause I’m not those people. But that’s my opinion. I think that they’re too afraid because they might be kicked out of that group, and they’re afraid that they’re gonna be lonely because of their interest.<sup>51</sup>

While belonging to a particular group might not be perfect, belonging somewhere was more important than taking a risk of being in another group and not belonging at all.

***The positive impact of not belonging.*** When talking about belonging, participants also discussed not belonging and some of the positive things that can come from not belonging. The primary benefits related back to the idea that belonging fully means that one has to be “average” or one has to conform to an ideal that they do not agree with. Participants discussed how not belonging gives one the freedom to be yourself and be “special”. One other participant said that not belonging allows one to think “outside-the-box”, which the participant felt was often not done by students their age. Regarding not belonging, one participant said, “Sometimes it can be even better. Because if you belong, that might entail that you’re boring. You can’t enjoy yourself.”<sup>52</sup> They continued, “The only consequences to not belonging are there are just a few

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<sup>50</sup> 6:41 (23777:24021)

<sup>51</sup> 47:25 (16346:16846)

<sup>52</sup> 1:67 (39466:39585)



little unimportant things I feel that are blown way out of proportion and are way too valued.”<sup>53</sup>

For this participant, group membership and what it affords was not better than the benefits of non-conformity and comfort with one’s self.

***The negative impact of not belonging.*** Lastly, participants talked about negative impacts of not belonging. Of the different impacts, participants most frequently talked about not belonging and what this might mean for an individual. One participant said simply when students lack belonging, “they don’t like being in there.”<sup>54</sup> Another participant elaborated on a similar point. They said, “Because if you don’t belong somewhere then why would you be there or why would you want to be there. If you belong somewhere, of course you want to be there.”<sup>55</sup> This increased feeling of disassociation was also related to students seeming “uninterested”, “dull”, “isolated” and might not “like their school or where they are in life”<sup>56</sup>. They might also feel “depressed”, “sad”, “stressed out”, “angry”, or “upset”, as well as have “a hard time learning”<sup>57</sup> and frequently “complain”<sup>58</sup>.

Participants did not roundly agree on whether not belonging would be a negative in terms of academics. Participants who disagreed that not belonging had an academic impact felt that one could still be academically successful without having many social connections, and often people who were extremely “intelligent” might struggle to belong because this would be a marker of difference and they might not find people with common interests. This relates back to the previous point about individuals who are average having the easiest time belonging. On the other

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<sup>53</sup> 1:69 (41960:42117)

<sup>54</sup> 52:15 (7422:7453)

<sup>55</sup> 56:12 (6344:6502)

<sup>56</sup> 5:53 (46921:46990)

<sup>57</sup> 10:51 (38117:38295)

<sup>58</sup> 5:52 (46050:46193)

hand, some students felt that there was a more direct line between academic engagement and belonging. One student remarked, “And if you don’t like school, then you might not want to do the work or be defiant, and just say you don’t want to do it or just be lazy and kind of be sloppy on your work and get your grades down.”<sup>59</sup>

Participants also made more connections between not belonging and feeling socially outcast. One participant said, “you don’t like school. You don’t like the activities going on. You feel you’re not safe in school or you just don’t like people being mean to you. What it looks like is you’re really not necessarily down all the time, but you don’t like to hang out with people a lot and you kind of just like to eat lunch in that one corner of the room.”<sup>60</sup> The social aspect highlighted at the end of this participant’s statement was also discussed in terms of feeling lonely. One participant said, “not belonging in school looks like being isolated or being alone.”<sup>61</sup> Another participant said that they personally have felt a lack of belonging and the loneliness that comes with it. In talking about their personal experience, they clarified the difference between being alone and being lonely, “I don’t feel particularly lonely. I do feel alone but that’s different. Lonely is when you’re sad and upset about being alone. Alone is just being alone. You don’t have other people.”<sup>62</sup> Not belonging was more associated with loneliness rather than simply being alone.

One participant talked a great deal about the social impact of not belonging. They began by talking about how when students do not belong “they think a lot about who they need to be. Who they think they need to be.” What this translates to is engagement in a social “game” to

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<sup>59</sup> 9:29 (16077:16273)

<sup>60</sup> 9:61 (35554:35910)

<sup>61</sup> 5:50 (45521:45664)

<sup>62</sup> 21:111 (42866:43049)

build their own belonging. As the student put it, “You might have to strategize friendships, when you belong you feel like you don’t have to strategize friendships. It’s if you’re not belonging, you’re kind of saying what can I do to belong. And that’s when you try to strategize I guess relationships with other people.”<sup>63</sup> The student went on to explain,

It felt like the game of Survivor, the game show Survivor almost. How do I get to this position where I control things? How do I find this power position? Looking back on it, it was like, "What was I doing? Why was I even thinking about that. But you can kind of realizes when you're young, you don't really know better. All you want to do is.... You don't really think about the future. You think about how you want to make yourself out to be right now, and at that moment, how you want to feel then and there.”<sup>64</sup>

Not belonging pushed this student toward seeking belonging and therefore strategizing about how to get more friends. This statement was similar to that of another participant who felt that not belonging makes you more “aware”. They said, “Not belonging, it looks like people being different than you were with. When students belong, they're usually oblivious to other people. When students don't belong, they're more aware.”<sup>65</sup> For these two students, not belonging meant that you had to think about school and sociality differently than when you experience belonging.

Not only is there additional awareness and “self-consciousness”, but participants also talked about how the core experience of students who have or do not have belonging is very different. Emblematic of his point, one participant remarked,

The plebs, Plebeians and Patricians, you're like as a Plebeian. You're like all you're thinking about is, "How can I move up a social class?" Or how can I look like I'm this

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<sup>63</sup> 25:3 (9342:9665)

<sup>64</sup> 24:42 (46220:46940)

<sup>65</sup> 13:46 (24704:24888)

person you all want to hang out with? I'm this person. But really once you are a Patrician, you don't think about that. You don't care as much. Because you've found out how that feels. You think, 'I mean, it feels nice, but why was I spending so much time worrying about it?'"<sup>66</sup>

The student elaborated that once this point is reached, there is a great deal of comfort because the individual no longer needs to worry about being someone else or caring what they think. This was a good place to be as there was less concern and awareness of social circumstance.

### **Participant's Sense of Belonging**

Previous sections outlined definitions of belonging as well as the importance and impact assigned to belonging by participants. Before discussing contributions to belonging shared by participants, it is important to think specifically about participants' reported sense of belonging. Most generally, students discussed their personal belonging as related to their: current belonging, past belonging, and future belonging.

**Current sense of belonging.** Overall, participants shared a range of responses regarding their current sense of belonging. On one level, three participants shared that they felt a great deal of belonging within their schools. Participants felt their schools were comfortable, safe, and accepting. One participant said, "I'm really comfortable with the school, because I have like an ego that can't be shattered (laughs), um, so I don't... when I walk in the hall I hold my head up, I make eye contact, I say hi, I know my way around, I know every teacher in the building, I'm familiar with every teacher, I'm just comfortable being here, and I feel like this is a safe place."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> 24:41 (45526:45978)

<sup>67</sup> 61:11 (4714:5066)

Another participant who felt strongly about their belonging discussed their belonging in relation to having to potentially move or go to school somewhere else. They said,

I feel like I do, and I would be really upset if I had to move because I have so many friends and so many memories here in the <names school system> to be honest. Like I have so many good friends, and I know a lot of people here. And I feel like a lot of the times when kids they move randomly and they don't know if they're gonna move and they don't know a lot of people from the places that they're gonna move, they feel very shut out. You know. They feel very... like... like they don't belong. Like I just belonged somewhere and now I can't be there. You know. Some people might feel like that when they move.<sup>68</sup>

This feeling of comfort and security as well as having the ability to make friends and socialize was critical for participants who felt they belonged within their school.

On the opposite end of the spectrum five of the participants felt little to no belonging to the school itself. This is not to say they did not feel belonging at all. All of these participants reported feeling belonging in some way within their school, primarily in a social sense with either fellow students or their teachers. However, their overall sense of belonging in relation to their school was low.

One participant who felt very little belonging discussed how they do indeed like learning, but they felt the environment was not designed for them and they have little in common with their peers. They said, “Like I always say, I hate school. That’s just something I’m always going to say because it’s just I don’t like school. I don’t like how things are set up and how people are

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<sup>68</sup> 47:44 (30990:31599)

treated all the time. And it's just really frustrating but I don't belong with a group really. I just I don't have a lot of the same common interests as those people. We don't hang out after school or anything."<sup>69</sup> This same participant went on to say, "I don't really care that I don't belong here because I know that I don't belong here. I know that there is somewhere else where I will belong. That's what I really have my eyes set on."<sup>70</sup> For this particular participant, they did not feel a sense of belonging at their school, but this was not important to them as they were hopeful of finding belonging elsewhere.

Other participants who related they felt a low sense of belonging discussed how they do feel some belonging in certain aspects, but not others. In particular, one participant discussed how they liked socializing, but disliked the work. They said, "I mean... it's... it's pretty fun coming to school. Cause like I get to socialize with a bunch of people. Make new friends and stuff. But then when like school happens and teachers get serious. They're like "oh you have to do your work. You have to do this. You have to do that. You got to do this. You got to do that." That's kind of annoying. So, I'm like 50% I guess."<sup>71</sup> Belonging for this participant was strong socially, but challenging academically. This meant that they could belong on one level, but could not belong on another.

Another participant also discussed how they felt partial belonging. Similar to the previous participant they said, "I feel like I'm on a half-in/half-out sort of thing."<sup>72</sup> According to this participant, that was not a bad thing though. They said, "I feel comfortable where I am. Like fitting in perfectly doesn't appeal to me, but nor does standing out all the time."<sup>73</sup> They went on

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<sup>69</sup> 21:110 (42187:42566)

<sup>70</sup> 1:60 (36313:36490)

<sup>71</sup> 64:39 (19408:19774)

<sup>72</sup> 5:10 (10263:10314)

<sup>73</sup> 6:74 (44237:44355)

to explain, “Like say you have a basketball court. One side really blue, the other side is orange. And there's a gray line down the middle. I have one foot in the orange and one foot on the gray, or I have one foot on the gray—or a foot and a half on the grey and another half of the half of my foot on the blue. So I'm partially in the blue, but the rest of me is on that gray middle line.”<sup>74</sup> This multifaceted view of their personal belonging meant that belonging was not simple or unidirectional for these participants.

**Past sense of belonging.** Though less so than discussions around their current or future belonging, some participants also talked about their past belonging and how this impacts their current sense of belonging. Two participants discussed their belonging decreasing significantly as early as the second grade and another student discussed belonging decreasing in third grade.

One of those participants whose belonging decreased in second grade said that the group they belonged in referred to themselves as “the leftovers”. They said, “Because we're like Chinese food is always better the second time around. We had called ourselves leftovers. We all really enjoyed that. We were like, ‘We don't have to abide by those rules. Everyone else does.’”<sup>75</sup> They went on to explain, “Yeah. It's kind of sad that we realized that people labeled each other at that age. We were also the ones labeling. I later realized was like that's the issue with that and all that kind of stuff.”<sup>76</sup> Though recognized as an overall negative, they felt that this self-organization was something students naturally do. They said, “but, it's just kind of how things fell into place, too. That's how people organize themselves. There should be no pressing

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<sup>74</sup> 5:15 (13646:14023)

<sup>75</sup> 1:22 (16111:16320)

<sup>76</sup> 1:23 (16485:16681)

matter to organize yourselves like that.”<sup>77</sup> From that point, belonging was quite low for them, and they resigned to finding belonging outside of school.

For the other participant, they felt late first grade and second grade were times that they started to struggle socially. They said, “I started thinking about, well, I mean in second grade, I mean in kindergarten and first grade I had friends. But at the end of first grade and then start of second grade, I really just had no friends at that point. That’s when I got separated from everyone, the end of first grade and the beginning of second grade. And from there on until now so.”<sup>78</sup> For this student second grade was a point where their belonging dramatically decreased and it was only within the past year that they felt a little more belonging. They attributed this to other students caring less about being in cliques and social boundaries becoming more permeable.

Another participant discussed how their belonging started to change in third grade because they began to develop anxiety around social grouping. They said, “Yeah, but it was more of me having anxiety, going back to third grade where I just stopped talking to anyone cause I thought I was the problem and I thought I needed to change from what she said. I was beating myself up about it pretty badly and now looking back on it, I do not think it was my fault; it was not an issue with me.”<sup>79</sup> Though looking back the participant felt differently, third grade marked a time of decreased belonging.

In addition to talking about past grades, a number of participants talked about past schools they had attended. Overall, there were six students who attended different schools for either short or long periods of time. For these participants, their other school districts and

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<sup>77</sup> 1:24 (16686:16848)

<sup>78</sup> 22:65 (30567:30915)

<sup>79</sup> 23:50 (26863:27193)



subsequently schools were an additional source of comparison. These comparisons led to both positive and negative responses. Three participants were very positive about their current school and pleased with the teachers as compared to previous schools. This was exemplified by one student who said, “the biggest difference between here and XXX, is that you can get help. Like people care, and they want to help you. Like, all the teachers here are really nice and open, and they'll be like, "If you need help with anything, you can ask any of us," things like that. It wasn't like that in XXX.”<sup>80</sup> This comparison led to more positive feelings about their current circumstance.

Not all participants saw their school positively in light of the comparison to their former schools. Two participants felt very negatively about having to leave their previous school district. One student said they felt “homesick” and didn’t quite fit in within their current town or the school. They had friends that they missed and didn’t like being where they were. Similarly, the other participant felt decreased belonging because they no longer had access to their friends group. They even went further and said they were upset by the fact that it was a smaller school because they would have less of a chance to make friends.

**Future sense of belonging.** Participants also discussed potential belonging in the future. Most participants were positive about their sense of belonging looking forward. They felt that there was a possibility to belong in high school due to it being a new context that featured additional choice and their fellow students maturing. They were even more positive about their belonging after school. After they completed school, they could choose where they wanted to belong and they were confident they would be able to find people they belonged with.

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<sup>80</sup> 20:54 (29263:29560)

***Belonging in high school.*** Most participants felt hopeful and encouraged by the potential to belong within high school. Participants were looking forward to being able to choose their classes, and some possibly even their school. In discussing their future belonging, one participant said,

I think it will probably be better because in high school people are starting to figure out who they are more and exploring who they are more. Maybe falling into how they feel more. I think there's a lot of kids in high school that I might feel more connected with than just middle school. When you're in middle school, you're just really learning responsibility and stuff. Sixth grade, fresh out of elementary school. Those are little kids. Seventh grade, you're getting the hang of it and doing it again. Eighth grade you're studying for high school. Middle school is just one big transition. High school is a lot of just preparation. All school is really just preparation. I think in this school specifically, there's a lot of artsy kids and people that are interested in the same things that I am.<sup>81</sup>

Other participants also focused on their peers and how they see their peers as being more accepting because they were maturing. In thinking about why their personal belonging would improve in high school, one participant thought more about the tendency to exclude amongst their peers. They said, "Because we're all getting mature, but it doesn't really happen anymore. But still, for a long time, I wanted to change schools. I've just been stuck here for a long time."<sup>82</sup> This sense of being in a new environment with new people was cause for hope.

Also associated with the idea of maturing was the idea that students would not be as petty and judgmental of them in high school. Some participants, in particular eighth graders, felt this

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<sup>81</sup> 3:51 (46075:46876)

<sup>82</sup> 9:38 (19121:19297)

would occur because of an overall trend in students becoming less judgmental. One participant said, “I guess they’re open to more of my personality and things like that. I’m kind of glad because the grade has kind of shifted its focus from people’s views into just not really caring. Before, it was caring about people’s views a lot.”<sup>83</sup> This increased openness to the views of others gave participants hope that the trend would continue into high school.

It should be noted that not all participants agreed that people would be more open in high school. Another participant felt that rather than being open peers would be more closed off to meeting new people and there were also fewer opportunities to make new friends. They said, “I mean I can see myself finding friends, but I mean, I find it.. I find that I would probably be harder in high school cause, you think about it, you don’t get any recess. You get lunch sometime. I mean you get lunch there of course. But I mean you know by then almost everybody’s gonna be in their own cliques still. You know. It’s gonna be hard.”<sup>84</sup> For this participant, finding belonging might be increasingly challenging.

Students across both sites discussed possibly transferring schools and how they felt this would positively impact their belonging. In particular, students talked about going to local technical schools. Participants saw technical schools as providing the opportunity to meet new and like-minded people, and to learn hands-on skills, which would help them get a better job in the future. As one participant said, “I like doing hands on things. That’s why I want to go to <names local technical school> cause I’d learn better there.”<sup>85</sup> Other participants echoed this sentiment and praised the potential future opportunities associated with learning practical skills.

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<sup>83</sup> 12:60 (34018:34250)

<sup>84</sup> 49:15 (20880:21365)

<sup>85</sup> 64:14 (8704:8836)

This possible transfer was not an easy one for all participants. This was especially true for participants who felt more belonging in their current school. One participant discussed this difficult decision. They said,

Well my future kind of depends. I really want to try out for <names technical school>. It probably won't happen, but on the slight chance that I do make it into <names technical school> that's gonna be tough for me cause my friends, my best friends, you know, my main best friends. They don't want to go to <names technical school>. They just want to go to regular <names district high school>. And you know then I feel like I might lose touch with them, but the thing is I'm not sure if I'll be able to make friends in high school or not. Like new friends you know. When the majority of kids that I know from here are gonna go to regular <names district high school>. But if I do somehow make it into <names technical school> that would be a huge thing for me cause they have a lot of art programs there, and I really want to be part of the art program.”<sup>86</sup>

For this participant they found themselves struggling between staying with friends and comfort and leaving for a school that might provide better preparation for their future career goals.

Belonging in this sense made this decision very difficult. For another student, however, belonging made the decision easier, as they felt that if they left their current school, they could always come back.

***Belonging after high school.*** Students were more positive about their possible belonging after high school. They felt that there would be far more freedom and choice and this would allow them to associate with people that they felt belonging with and disassociate with people

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<sup>86</sup> 49:12 17387:18830)

they did not feel belonging with. In talking about why they felt being done with school would be positive, one participant remarked, “‘Cause I won’t be stuck with people that I don’t enjoy, just go to work for people I don’t see, ‘cause if I don’t like people I can just change jobs, and if I don’t like too many people I can just transfer jobs.”<sup>87</sup> Another participant discussed a similar line of thinking, “After college, my job probably. Because that’s, I feel the most comfortable because I’m working with things that I like. Because I’d feel like I belong because if you like something, you’re obviously going to feel like you belong doing that.”<sup>88</sup> In thinking about belonging after school, there was a positivity and hopefulness as they could meet more people and find a place where they felt they could fit in better.

### **Contributions to an Individual’s Sense of Belonging**

Experiences of belonging are dependent on the context in which belonging will take place. There are, therefore, a wide range of possible contributions to an individual’s sense of belonging. Participants discussed a number of contributions to an individual’s sense of belonging, but most generally they fell into three interrelated categories:

- Personal factors
- Interpersonal factors
- Contextual factors

In the lived experience of belonging, these three categories were often very difficult to tease apart as a student’s sense of belonging at any given moment is often both consciously and unconsciously influenced by all three of the factors at the same time. Here, however, the

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<sup>87</sup> 63:2 (17056:17266)

<sup>88</sup> 11:7 (15657:15898)

contributions discussed by students will be separated as a means of further identification and clarification.

**Personal factors.** Of critical concern to students were contributions related to personal factors. Middle school is a time of change and development, and this mercurial time of exploration, reflection, and self-definition was reflected within student responses. Also reflected within responses was the overlapping nature of many of these contributions. Participants rarely called out only one factor influencing belonging. Instead they offered many potential factors as this participant did: “Your race. Umm... your height. Your looks. If you’re like smart or not.”<sup>89</sup>. Here these potential contributions will be separated as to better explore individual elements, but their interrelated nature should not be lost as their effects could be exponential.

**Identity.** Participants discussed aspects of identity in a variety of ways. Primarily, in regards to belonging they talked about who someone was in relation to others within the context, as well as how one views themselves. In thinking about identity and belonging one participant said, “It depends on how you want to view you”<sup>90</sup>. Multiple students emphasized the importance of how you view yourself and how that interplays with the broader view of who you are and how you act. As one participant put it, “It sometimes feels like they think one version of you belongs, but if you act this other way then you won’t belong.”<sup>91</sup> Students could feel belonging not only in different ways, but belonging as more or less aligned with different aspects of their own identities.

Participants discussed how students often had to hide their identities from others who might feel they are socially unacceptable. For instance, one student said,

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<sup>89</sup> 52:36 (18759:18865)

<sup>90</sup> 21:65 (33278:33316)

<sup>91</sup> 24:17 (22068:22183)

“I have a couple of friends who are furries and they like stuff like that. You know. Not in the weird fandom way, but they like to draw. They like to do stuff like that. You know. But they can’t really share that and they can’t really express that because then people will make fun of them. You know cause there is not a lot of furries in this school. There’s like maybe three that I know of, and they’re all in 8th grade. You know. So they’re gonna feel like they don’t belong. You know. So they try to keep that secret or maybe like different people with their own sexuality or preferences like that.”<sup>92</sup>

This was not an uncommon experience to relate. As discussed later within this chapter, students also talked about having to hide their disability from other students for fear of its impacting their belonging.

Despite having to possibly hide aspects of their identities, one thing was clear from all the participants, to really belong, you must belong as yourself. Authenticity was, therefore, an important contribution when thinking about identity. In talking about what type of people tend to belong within their school, one student remarked, “People are drawn to people who don’t try to find reassurance or try to push themselves down so that people can lift them up. They are drawn to people who are just going to be themselves. They’re going to be straightforward. They’re not going to push them down so that they can be popular. They’re going to try to be frank with you.”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, a participant remarked that to belong you need to also not necessarily care what others think about you. They said, “Be savage, be open to anything, you should be free, you should be savage.”<sup>94</sup> Whether or not that authentic self was acceptable within their school context was an interrelated but different issue.

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<sup>92</sup> 47:62 (46372:47045)

<sup>93</sup> 18:28 (30654:31049)

<sup>94</sup> 66:16 (11337:11409)

*Culture, race, and sexuality.* Cultural background, race and sexuality were also discussed by students as being contributions to student belonging. These aspects were primarily discussed by two participants who had directly experienced feeling personally or being very close to someone who felt a lack of belonging because of differences within these areas and two participants who felt strongly about social justice issues. This is worthy of note because it highlights that certain contributions might be relevant to some and not others, and even when relevant might be so for different reasons.

In discussing how culture had contributed to their experiences of belonging, one participant remarked, “Even like kids who come from another foreign country, like myself. It’s kind of hard transitioning and adapting to new types of culture and like the environment and everything.”<sup>95</sup> This participant focused on their own cultural adjustment and how this made belonging in the school more challenging because they felt they had to adapt to others and learn a whole new way of belonging. Another participant reiterated a similar point when talking about possible barriers to belonging. They said a student would struggle to belong “if you grew up in a completely different country and your values weren’t the same or things like that.”<sup>96</sup>

Race was raised in two separate ways by participants. First, participants raised that race can play a role in that some students found themselves marginalized and this then only encouraged isolation and a degree of self-segregation. One participant said, “There are not a lot of black kids at this school or like other races, it’s like most of the kids, they’re not popular.”<sup>97</sup> They went on to say that these students, “all hang out with each other.”<sup>98</sup> Second, race was

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<sup>95</sup> 53:13 (14857:15034)

<sup>96</sup> 21:81 (37968:38086)

<sup>97</sup> 62:32 (18846:18972)

<sup>98</sup> 62:33 (19188:19221)



discussed through the idea of normality. When thinking about who has the easiest time belonging in their school, one participant said, “That’s really it, you’ve got to be straight and white.”<sup>99</sup> In this sense the “normal” was straight and white, and anyone who did not fit this frame was either pushed aside or forced to adapt.

As indicated in the paragraph above, participants also talked about sexuality as potentially impacting student belonging. Participants talked about how many students within the schools are not accepting of LGBTQ+ students. As one participant said, “There’s a couple open, gay kids, but the school isn’t that accepting of them. It’s kind of annoying,”<sup>100</sup> This sentiment was reiterated across both sides. Participants were in agreement that though there were students who were accepting, there were also students who were not.

*Other aspects of identity impacting belonging.* Religion was not something that was raised by students outside of one particular participant. They discussed the importance of religion in defining themselves and how they lived their life. They did not, however, think that their religious identity impacted their belonging. They said, “I don’t think my religion has any effect really, well only except for personal self like my moral compass.”<sup>101</sup> It was, however, raised by that student in terms of teachers and how they felt teachers often taught with a bias as they did not represent their religious views. For instance, they shared an example of a teacher posting a pro-LGBTQ+ message, which they took to be biased against their way of thinking.

**Personality.** Related to identity was the idea of personality. Participants talked a great deal about how personality impacts belonging. Often the critical aspect discussed was how introverted or extroverted an individual might be. Participants generally agreed that people who

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<sup>99</sup> 60:69 (30649:30702)

<sup>100</sup> 60:67 (30168:30273)

<sup>101</sup> 13:34 (18792:18897)

are more introverted are more likely to struggle to belong. As one participant said, “Like somebody really quiet and shy. And not that open. Yeah. If you’re quiet in all your classes, it’s gonna be kind of hard for you cause you have no friends.”<sup>102</sup> Much of the focus on introversion was because students felt it would be harder to make connections with others and they felt this was a prerequisite to belonging. Students who were extroverted would have an easier time belonging because they were not “afraid to talk to people”<sup>103</sup>.

Not all participants, however, felt the relationship to introversion and extroversion was so dichotomous. Three participants talked about how there was “flexibility”<sup>104</sup> in terms of personality. In talking about critical contributions to belonging, one participant said, “personality. They’re probably... they could be too introverted or too extroverted.”<sup>105</sup> This participant felt there needed to be an effective balance struck as too much of one or the other would not be beneficial. Relatedly, another participant felt strongly that personality might matter to some people, but it was not something that should matter. They said, “Your personality. Although, personally, I think it doesn’t matter about your personality. I don’t know. I’ve also never really took that into thought, but usually, I don’t care what kind of personality I have. I care about being nice to other people and them being nice back to me. That’s all I really care about there.”<sup>106</sup> This was reflective of the open-mindedness that this and other participants expressed as being vital to effectively belonging.

*Humor.* Humor was often raised by participants as being an important characteristic to help students belong within school. For some participants this was because humor was a shared

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<sup>102</sup> 52:34 (17397:17565)

<sup>103</sup> 48:23 (15484:15517)

<sup>104</sup> 6:66 (40102:40150)

<sup>105</sup> 14:24 (18372:18453)

<sup>106</sup> 9:42 (22066:22385)

positive trait that was sought out by fellow students. In talking about personality traits that helped students belong, one participant said, “Probably your sense of humor. If you like to joke a lot. People here like to joke a lot, they like to have fun.”<sup>107</sup> Being able to be humorous was a way to potentially attract peers, and a way to continually bond with friends.

Participants were quick to add that not all humor will help with belonging, and not all efforts towards being humorous were successful. Rather, some attempts at humor can be counterproductive in terms of belonging. For instance, one participant discussed how humor can quickly become an insult depending on how it is received. They said, “well yeah, because it’s not a joke if the other person doesn’t think it’s funny. It’s an insult then.”<sup>108</sup> Another participant similarly clarified the types of jokes that could alienate their classmates. They said, “If you make a really racist or homophobic joke or something, someone’s going to get offended and be like don’t say that. Did you really just say that? Then you’ll probably make enemies.”<sup>109</sup> Again, being funny could be advantageous, but unsuccessful attempts at humor could be potentially harmful.

*Consistency of personality and moods.* Personality was discussed in a more generic sense as related to overall approach and presentation, but it was also discussed in terms of consistency and knowing what to expect from a particular individual. Participants were in agreement that someone who is inconsistent in terms of their personality or moods is less likely to belong. In talking about people who do not belong in their school, one participant said, “They switch personalities depending on where they are. One of them, if he’s with someone else, he’ll act like a jerk, if he’s with another friend that he’s really close with. And they’re just not the greatest

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<sup>107</sup> 21:68 (34607:34718)

<sup>108</sup> 61:35 (22540:22640)

<sup>109</sup> 21:70 (34769:34953)

people.”<sup>110</sup> The focus of this participant and others who raised similar concerns was that it is hard to make friends and socially navigate when the individual seems to be changing who they are based on context.

When participants talked about their own potential day to day inconsistencies, they tended to talk more about moods than about personality. Multiple participants talked about how they might feel more or less belonging based on whether or not they are in a “good mood” or a “rainy day mood.”<sup>111</sup> If participants found themselves in a good mood then they tended to feel more belonging and they felt like they wanted to be in school. If, however, they found themselves in a bad mood then their belonging suffered.

In general participants tended to talk more about the potential impediments associated with being in a bad mood. One participant directly compared a good versus a bad mood. They said, “honestly it depends on the day because if I am feeling really good, in a really good mood, then I will definitely be able to do a lot more and be a lot more productive in school. If say I am distracted by something or I am not feeling the best then I might be fresh or snappy.”<sup>112</sup> Another participant discussed a very similar experience. This in turn affected how they interacted with others and others interacted with them.

In general, students talked more about bad moods as related to depression, being upset, or angry and how these impacted their belonging. One student remarked, “If I’m mad or pissed off then that shows I’m probably not gonna do my work.”<sup>113</sup> They went on to explain, “Well I usually draw a lot, but usually if I’m trying to keep my head down or if I’m just not focusing at

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<sup>110</sup> 12:34 (17325:17541)

<sup>111</sup> 52:16 (7769:7846)

<sup>112</sup> 4:43 (35030:35328)

<sup>113</sup> 46:42 (26542:27126)

all on the work like if I put my work on the floor that means, that probably means, yup I'm not going to do anything and I'm probably not in a good mood."<sup>114</sup> While this particular participant tied their belonging more to anger and frustration, another participant tied their moods more directly to depression. "And it's like with the depression it's like sometimes I just get in these moods. It takes a lot to come out of them, but I'll come out of them eventually."<sup>115</sup> What was common amongst the participants who discussed moods was that when they were in a bad mood they simply did not want to be in school, complete assignments, or interact with others, and it often took time and concerted effort to change their mood.

Similarly, instead of talking directly about moods, some participants talked about what kind of day they were having. One participant discussed the differences between a good day and a bad for them. They remarked, "Well a good day would be like I'm happy. I'm smiling. I don't have a lot of stuff to stress out about. A day where I'm not stressed to the limit. You know. And then a day where I'm having a bad day would be where I'm stressed out. I don't know what to do. And there is a lot of work on my plate right in front of me."<sup>116</sup> Having a day where they were already feeling overwhelmed necessarily led them to feeling less comfortable and more on edge, which in turn led them to feel less belonging.

*Sleep.* One important factor often discussed related to student mood or the kind of day that they were having was sleep. A majority of participants discussed how they often did not get enough sleep each night and that directly affected the kind of day they were having. As one participant said, "A bad day is, well I got under five hours of sleep"<sup>117</sup>. They went on to compare

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<sup>114</sup> 46:41 (26265:26541)

<sup>115</sup> 60:26 (14203:14357)

<sup>116</sup> 48:14 (9713:10039)

<sup>117</sup> 4:48 (36725:36774)

this to a good day. “A good day is I get at least seven hours of sleep, which is actually a lot less common than most would think for pretty much everyone.”<sup>118</sup>

Participants attributed this lack of sleep to busy lives, homework, and simply not being morning people. As one participant put it, “I’m just going to say, sometimes, it goes against the way I work. Because, I don’t like to wake up early in the morning; I need a lot of sleep. But I sleep better in the morning.”<sup>119</sup> This particular participant felt strongly that this experience applied to the majority of students. “When you get in your teens, you need a lot of sleep because your body’s going through so many changes it just needs that rest. But you don’t get it because you have to be school by 7:25 or 7:30. It just doesn’t work like that.”<sup>120</sup>

*Superficial aspects of student identity.* Some of the key contributions to belonging related by participants were based around superficial aspects of student identity. These superficial aspects such as physical appearance or the way students were dressed acted as quick means of determining whether students will belong or if other students do belong. In this sense they acted as indicators to students as to whether they belonged or others belonged within a given group, but also more broadly within the given context. It should be mentioned, that most participants did not think these aspects should influence belonging. One participant remarked, “People like you for who you are, not for how you dress and stuff like that”<sup>121</sup>. However, all participants recognized the practical reality that these aspects did contribute to belonging.

Participants discussed physical appearance in terms of appropriate social standards within their given environments. This is not to say they agreed that it should make a difference, but it

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<sup>118</sup> 4:44 (35507:35640)

<sup>119</sup> 20:78 (41498:41675)

<sup>120</sup> 21:4 (3005:3229)

<sup>121</sup> 56:2 (1688:1761)

was a recognition that it does. One participant remarked, “Honestly, they have to be good-looking, they have to dress good, and they have to be open to people. Those are the main things.”<sup>122</sup> In addition, participants also felt that physical appearance could be a negative influence on belonging if it resulted in marked difference. One participant commented, “in terms of looks, you really don’t want to stand out, because it helps your chances if you don’t.”<sup>123</sup> This applied to someone’s looks, their hair, their clothing, and even the way they sound. This difference could result in students being picked on or teased for their apparent difference. As one participant said, “I was wondering, oh, what they look like. That wouldn’t really affect it. But then I was like, oh, wait. Actually, that could affect it, because you could have anything. You could look weird, have people laugh at you. Which I’ve seen before, and I didn’t like that. I’ve seen people get picked on for the way they looked like before.”<sup>124</sup>

One participant raised an interesting aspect of physical appearance as it relates to maturity. They said that having some acne, but not too much, was seen as a positive. They said, “Yeah, it’s really counterproductive. Because when I think of like the popular kids I always think of like, you know, like I look at them and they all have acne. Like me and my friends, none of our friends have acne. I don’t really get acne, she doesn’t really get acne, and if we do, we take care of it, and then our friend doesn’t get acne, It’s weird.”<sup>125</sup> They went on to explain that “I see acne as a sign of maturing, and I guess other people do, too.”<sup>126</sup> Physical appearance in this sense was not just about what you look like, but what you look like in relation to your maturity and development.

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<sup>122</sup> 58:12 (6003:6130)

<sup>123</sup> 6:64 (38457:38555)

<sup>124</sup> 10:32 (27976:28349)

<sup>125</sup> 61:4 (1970:2325)

<sup>126</sup> 61:5 (2791:2857)

Clothing and shoes seemed to be particularly important factors as these were tangible markers of group and social standing. Though most participants said they had their own style, a style that tended to be different than what others might wear, they often questioned whether standing out due to clothing was necessarily a good thing or not. Though dressing differently could be an effective way to express one's individuality, it could also be a marker of difference. One participant remarked, "it's middle school and not every kid is gonna be nice to you even if you're like nice to them. Umm... like, they like may not be your friend because of the way you look or the type of shoes you wear."<sup>127</sup> Another student put it more bluntly, "If you don't dress right, people don't like you."<sup>128</sup>

**Interests.** One contribution often discussed by participants was interests. Interests played an active role in belonging in a few important ways. First, interests were discussed as markers of social grouping. Participants discussed how a certain interest might be something a group coalesces around or distinguishes one group from another group. One participant put it succinctly, "If you hate something, you're going to probably fit in with one group over another."<sup>129</sup>

Second, interests were discussed in terms of personal interests as related to the likelihood of belonging within their given contexts. Though participants agreed that you could be interested in anything you wanted, that does not mean you are guaranteed to find others in the school who like the same things. In these cases, if a student wanted to belong, then they might even have to hide their interests. One participant said, "For interests, if you're into certain things, you might have a harder time (*belonging*). But kids are... you have to keep that. Like you don't have to

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<sup>127</sup> 50:71 (34135:34383)

<sup>128</sup> 55:11 (6325:6380)

<sup>129</sup> 21:84 (38620:38703)



have people know that. I definitely have things that I am into that I don't tell other kids.”<sup>130</sup>

Some participants clarified the types of interests that were less accepted. For instance, participants mentioned liking “my little pony” as an extreme example of an interest that might make belonging more difficult.

*Popular interests within participant contexts.* There were three general interests that were most commonly discussed as being related to belonging: athletics, creative arts, and video games. Participants felt strongly that being athletic and subsequently being good at sports were important potential contributors to student belonging. They related that the popular kids were often very good at sports, and sometimes “jocks”. As one participant put it, “I feel like the majority of the kids that like fit in easily like play sports and stuff.”<sup>131</sup> Which sports were more popular differed by the sites, but students across sites agreed that being athletic was a factor.

Being interested and successful in the creative arts was also related to students having an easier time belonging. Participants discussed interest in a range of styles of art and often discussed, as with being athletic, being creative as an important characteristic. One participant focused heavily on the importance of being creative and artistic. In discussing the role creativity plays in belonging they said, “I’ve noticed that a lot of people who think outside the box. You know. A lot of people who have invented stuff. You know. They’re the ones that really get things done cause they think outside the box and they’re creative. And it’s ok to be creative. You know. As long as you’re using your imagination. You know. To something that you enjoy then it’s good.”<sup>132</sup> Being creative in this sense was being tied to being imaginative, which was a quality that would be attractive to other students.

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<sup>130</sup> 14:28 (21456:21814)

<sup>131</sup> 52:29 (15224:15341)

<sup>132</sup> 48:30 (18074:18887)

Lastly, participants discussed how important video games were to belonging. As one participant put it, “You don't really need any skills, but some things help, like video games and sports, what they like to do. I don't think there's really anything that really hurts your reputation, unless it's something that's taboo, like your interests.”<sup>133</sup> In particular, playing certain kinds of video games could help with belonging. Most participants talked about Fortnite as a game that most people play and playing this game could help with belonging as it would be something that one would have in common with many other students. This is not to imply that being overly interested or solely interested in video games was advantageous to belonging. In talking about who might struggle to belong, one participant said, “nerdy kids. Or closest to what we have to nerds. They like video games and kind of I'd say maybe techy stuff.”<sup>134</sup> In this sense, liking certain games was good, but being too far into video games might not be.

*Extracurricular activities.* Directly related to interests was participation in extracurricular activities. Participants discussed how participation in these activities can be an important marker of belonging because students are able to choose the activities in which they would like to participate. Participants were involved in a wide range of extracurricular activities available through the school and some available through other means, though as will be discussed in the following paragraph, participation was limited for most participants. Clubs students were involved in ranged in topics focused on specific interests such as video games, art, science, and sports teams. Overall, participants felt their participation in these activities did help with their belonging, but participants did not think the impact was significant. Often the main advantage was that it allowed them to meet more people.

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<sup>133</sup> 14:25 (18521:18757)

<sup>134</sup> 21:52 (28725:28834)

There were four participants who were not involved in any activities at all, and three more who were only minimally involved in extracurricular activities. Reasons for why they did not participate varied. Some participants did not have the time to participate due to responsibilities at home and others simply did not like the clubs or activities. For these participants they often spent their time outside of school in unstructured time with friends. During this time participants would “hang out” with friends, watch movies, and go out to eat. One participant said that they spent quite a bit of time at the YMCA. Two other participants said they mainly spent time alone and one participant spent the majority of their time looking after a sibling.

*Academic performance.* Participants all discussed academic performance as a factor related to belonging. In part, this was because participants recognized learning as a common goal amongst students. One participant said, “we all want to learn. Just having the common learning interest is what makes you belong at school.”<sup>135</sup> In this very broad sense there appeared to be some agreement among participants. Yet when the impact of academic performance was discussed at the individual student level, participants were often not in agreement. It appeared that the reasons for this were less due to differing views of academic performance itself as indicated in recognition of a common goal, but more around the lens through which participants discussed the role of academic performance.

Students who felt academic performance played a role in belonging tended to think about academic performance in relation to the broader school climate and potential experiences within a given school. In contrasting their personal experience with that of their more academically

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<sup>135</sup> 1:78 (47261:47366)

successful peers, one participant said, “It’s like only like the smart kids that get good grades and know they’re gonna get something out of school. Only really want to be here. School like really isn’t for me. I belong here. Like earlier, but it’s not for me. I like I learn better hands on. Doing things. Like in lab. Like a lab in science.”<sup>136</sup> Other participants agreed with this idea. Another participant said, “for kids who are in accelerated class and get good, great grades, then that’s gonna be easier for them. You know.”<sup>137</sup>

Relatedly participants discussed students who might struggle with learning and the impact that could have on belonging. One participant was particularly articulate about how the experience of a student might differ depending on how easily they comprehend a given topic. They said,

I feel like there are some kids who if they do not understand the topic they are not as respectful to the adults. Then you see them in a different class where they really get the topic well and they are really respectful and enjoy learning, I think that is because they do not feel like they are being singled out or they do not feel like they cannot do it. They do not feel like it is pointless.”<sup>138</sup>

In this sense, fluidity of performance impacts whether or not a student feels comfortable enough to engage with the content and others within the context. This same participant went on to discuss a lack of success can lead to students simply giving up for fear of failure. They said,

I see their side when they want kids to try they want to do good so they want people to try instead of give up. I also see the part where it is like people are just going to laugh at me, why do I try. Why do I try if I know I am going to fail? That part of it where you just you

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<sup>136</sup> 65:46 (27243:27562)

<sup>137</sup> 49:14 (20509:20800)

<sup>138</sup> 23:82 (51451:51847)

do not want to look like that one person that cannot do it. It is better to pretend like you do not want to do it, rather than cannot do it.”<sup>139</sup>

Struggling with academics in this sense had a direct impact on belonging because struggling with schoolwork might be cause for being alienated or called out by others.

Other participants expressed the opposite views. They felt that academic performance was not related to belonging. This appeared to be related more to thinking about belonging at the individual group or peer level. One participant remarked, “no one really cares about academic abilities or anything.”<sup>140</sup> Another participant went into more detail on why they felt it had little to do with belonging, “No I don’t think that matters cause we’re all different. So like your academic skills doesn’t really matter.”<sup>141</sup> What each of these interpretations had in common was that they referenced specific membership within social groups whereas participants who said it did matter were referring more to broader social and contextual structures.

Related to academic performance, one participant in particular felt that knowledge and language were key contributors to belonging since these aspects related to communication and collaboration. In part, this participant referenced what they felt separated them from other students. They said, “I’ll use like a fifth-grade vocabulary, and they’ll suddenly be ridiculed because no one knows what it means. I’ve noticed a lot of people here, you have a very, very young vocabulary.”<sup>142</sup> They also went on to explain, “Kids just are not really taught so much to think, but just to understand things. This is the way that they are. You need to understand

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<sup>139</sup> 23:80 (49860:50573)

<sup>140</sup> 14:19 (16004:16061)

<sup>141</sup> 52:26 (13241:13349)

<sup>142</sup> 5:7 (8865:9053)

that.”<sup>143</sup> Knowledge and language in this sense served as common reference points and in some ways the basis of communication, but also as a potential marker of difference.

Language was also identified by another student as something that can interfere with belonging on more practical grounds. This participant discussed language being potentially misconstrued or misinterpreted, which in turn could lead to misunderstandings. They said, “a lot of kids get in trouble for saying things but they do not mean it in that way it is just how kids talk.”<sup>144</sup> When these misunderstandings occur, belonging might be impacted due to the misinterpretation.

***Previous school experiences and reputation.*** When thinking about the impact of past school experiences with belonging, participants thought beyond the impact of academics alone. They also thought more broadly about how students have interacted with others in socially acceptable and aberrant ways. Aberrant behaviors as related to student reputation were a particular focus of most participants. In thinking about who would have the most difficult time belonging, one participant said, “someone with an embarrassing – as it relates to dumb things. That would definitely be someone's bad reputation. People who are just deemed annoying. People who are just, I guess deemed weird and things like that.”<sup>145</sup> The same student went on to elaborate, “Like in elementary school, there was a kid who bit a kid's arm, that's always stuck with him, and it's kind of his reputation, and he has anger problems – at least, he used to. It kind of was on the back of people's minds. So, while kids may not think about it, it's just like

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<sup>143</sup> 1:14 (13441:13613)

<sup>144</sup> 15:14 (12534:12678)

<sup>145</sup> 13:38 (21161:21372)

unconsciously just kind of there.”<sup>146</sup> Reputation for this participant was an “aura” that “sticks with you”<sup>147</sup>.

Another participant discussed their personal experiences in school related to subsequent difficulties in belonging. They said,

People would spread rumors around the school about me saying swear words in class, and people used to spread rumors about me that I used to get kicked out a bunch of schools and this is like the fifth school I’ve been in, even though I’ve been here since kindergarten. No one remembers it anymore except this one person, and he still comes up to me and says all that. But I don’t shout out as much as I do. I rarely shout out. I usually raise my hand now, but it used to be bad in elementary.<sup>148</sup>

For this participant their past behaviors heavily influence how they felt others perceived them, and subsequently narrowed where they could belong and who they could belong with. That is not to say that participants felt that someone’s reputation should be a factor in belonging. “you know, as long as you actually try to change you deserve another chance. And as long as you actually do want to change. I think everybody deserves a second chance. You know.”<sup>149</sup>

In terms of reputation, participants also expressed concerns that they would be seen as the “sped kid”. One participant said, “You know some people might see me as the girl who’s in the sped class, which is not ok with me. You know? Or like I would hate it when teachers would have to go with me to classes cause then I would think that people are always staring at me. But I wasn’t sure if people were or not. I’m not sure if it was like in my head or not, people were

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<sup>146</sup> 14:26 (19832:20142)

<sup>147</sup> 13:35 (19394:19553)

<sup>148</sup> 9:39 (19559:20205)

<sup>149</sup> 48:31 (20411:20909)

staring at me or if they weren't.”<sup>150</sup> Other participants felt similarly that having that particular label could only interfere with their belonging.

*Approach and willingness to belong.* Participants roundly agreed that belonging within a given context takes a concerted effort on the part of the person who wishes to belong within that particular context. Although some students might have an easier time belonging than others, all students need to put forth the effort to belong. As one participant put it,

Not belonging I think sometimes, not all the times, but I feel like sometimes not belonging like can also be the person's fault. Like I mean. Let's say they try to shut themselves out from everybody else around them. Like they try to put a bubble around them where no one else can go in. You know. No one else can talk to them. You know. Some people are like that and they are very seclusive, and they don't really feel like they belong anywhere.<sup>151</sup>

Another participant put it succinctly, “There's nothing a school can really do to make you feel comfortable. It's all up to the student, the kid, if they want to feel comfortable or not.”<sup>152</sup> Stating a similar point another participant said, “If you act more distant, people are going to treat you more distant.”<sup>153</sup> The commonality amongst responses was that to belong students needed to take personal responsibility and have the motivation to belong.

In terms of overall approach to belonging, participants also emphasized how important it was for students to be flexible and open-minded if they wanted to belong. Participants discussed this open-mindedness in terms of exploring their own identities and in terms of being open to

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<sup>150</sup> 46:34 (20366:20914)

<sup>151</sup> 47:27 (17925:18866)

<sup>152</sup> 67:12 (9209:9495)

<sup>153</sup> 21:67 (34039:34107)



others. In terms of being open to exploring one's self, one participant said, "I think just being open to kids exploring themselves and exploring different interests and activities they might want to pursue. Things like that. Being open to it and not saying, oh well if you do this then you're going to have to do it for the rest of your life."<sup>154</sup> Another participant also said, "It's much harder for a student to belong if they, it's like, aren't open to the world and don't ask if they want to hang out with people."<sup>155</sup> This indicated a certain level of openness to both others and self if a student wants to belong. In short, if students want to belong, they must be open to belonging and open to belonging with a range of people.

***Family and homelife.*** Family and homelife were often discussed by students as contributing to belonging in both direct and indirect ways. In terms of indirect influences, students talked about how their families might interfere or help with belonging through prior experiences and individual development. As one participant put it, families contribute to a student's "long backstory", and this backstory can guide experiences of belonging. Participants related that students whose backstories are relatively "stable" and "normal" tend to have an easier time belonging within school. One participant talked about the impact a dysfunctional family life can have on students when they come to school. The key response that the participant pointed to in terms of impact was that "they probably feel stupid."<sup>156</sup> This in turn impacted their academic performance, but also their self-esteem and confidence.

Participants also said that family and homelife issues can interfere with belonging because they can be very consuming and overwhelming. One participant said, "I worry about my Mom just occasionally, just sometimes just in general, 'cause, like, you lose a family member

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<sup>154</sup> 3:53 (48771:49034)

<sup>155</sup> 67:3 (6416:6552)

<sup>156</sup> 56:66 (31101:31273)

and then you get a problem”. Another participant discussed a similar idea, but within the context of potentially having a parent in prison. The participant remarked, “You could have a parent in jail. You could have had a fire at your house. You could have had someone die.” They elaborated on this point, “Because that triggers your emotions. And when you’re sad, or nervous, or angry that affects your learning. Because you could be thinking about that when you’re learning, and that would be hard.”<sup>157</sup> For these participants, it was hard to belong at school when focus was elsewhere.

That is not to say that difficulties at home were always met with negativity. One participant discussed how the challenges they faced were helpful in shaping who they are today. They said, “I was dealing with a lot of stuff in fifth grade and a lot of family stuff. And just having to deal with that, and go to school, and have that happen that was a little bit stressful for me.”<sup>158</sup> They continued, “I always said I just wish I had a normal life. But now I realize that’s what makes me special.”<sup>159</sup> In reflection, though they still disliked that period of their life, they still recognized it as being formative in positive ways.

*Parents and guardians.* In terms of having an impact on belonging, participants had a wide range of opinions on and experiences with their parents and guardians. On the one hand, there were three participants who felt strongly that their parents were not understanding or there was a values misalignment and this made exploring their identities more difficult. One participant related a time when they were talking with their parents about issues related to the LGBTQ+ community. They said,

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<sup>157</sup> 10:42 (31791:31983)

<sup>158</sup> 10:29 (24345:24562)

<sup>159</sup> 10:36 (29880:30078)

I had had a pretty intense conversation with my dad and my sister about gay marriage and everything. And my dad was like, "Well, some people think it's against religion, and doesn't go along with it and stuff, so they don't want it." And then we were like, "Yeah, but love is love." And like, "What does it matter if two people of the same sex get married? Like why do you care? They're not harming you." So, we had just talked about that a lot, and he was kind of the opposing force.<sup>160</sup>

While the student said they do not currently identify as LGBTQ+, it was an area of their identity that they feel is important to explore. When their parents showed that they were potentially not accepting of this, it only further added to the complication of exploring this aspect of identity in school as the identity was already potentially stigmatized.

Participants also discussed how their parents might not understand the stresses and pressures of school and, therefore, make it more difficult to cope with school-related stressors at home. One participant said, "I feel like sometimes the parents don't really understand that kids are stressed out at school. They're like 'oh school's so fun. You get to be with your friends. You just have to sit down all day.' I'm like 'ok. Imagine an office job where you had to sit down all day and you only get one 30 minute break and that's for lunch.'"<sup>161</sup> For this participant, this misunderstanding led to having a number of additional responsibilities at home, which only added to the pressure they felt.

Participants also talked about their parents interfering with the belonging because their parents did not help them participate in activities outside of school. One participant talked about how their parent did not help with their belonging in part because their parent did not sign them

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<sup>160</sup> 20:8 (1233:2254)

<sup>161</sup> 48:16 (10730:12469)

up for team activities. “He was supposed to sign me up for football like a month ago and he didn’t.”<sup>162</sup> This was frustrating for the participant. They very much wanted to join the team because they enjoyed the sport, but it was also a time where they felt they could meet new people and “socialize”. Without parental permission, however, they could not engage in the activity.

While the prior examples were potential negative impacts, participants also talked about positive impacts parents and guardians have had on their belonging. One participant discussed how their parents ultimately helped their belonging because of the things their parents taught them. The participant said, “My dad like tricks me into learning things I would say. He will always just start talking about a certain topic in science or something without me knowing and all of a sudden the next day that will come up and I will be – I know about this.”<sup>163</sup> The knowledge that the student had helped them better participate in class activities and improve their academic performance (another contribution discussed within this section).

Participants also considered the possibility of a student not having any parents or foster parents. One participant talked about how having foster parents might make things more challenging. The participant said, “Well he’s gonna feel very self-conscious about where he’s been and where he’s come from and you know... some people... like I think he’d be self-conscious about telling people about his foster parents and how, you know, he doesn’t have real parents anymore.”<sup>164</sup> This participant felt that having foster parents would effectively set the student apart from other students, and this would be a difficult gap to overcome. The other participant who discussed not having parents as interfering with belonging discussed similar reasons for why it could be problematic. The participant said, “You might feel a little distant

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<sup>162</sup> 64:24 (14166:14293)

<sup>163</sup> 23:58 (33781:34243)

<sup>164</sup> 48:46 (31858:32111)

because everyone else has parents and they just don't really understand you as much."<sup>165</sup> Again, the focus from the participants seemed to be around the lack of shared experiences and reference points that the student would share with others at school.

*Siblings.* For a wide range of reasons, not all participants discussed siblings. Participants who did discuss siblings talked about how their siblings had an effect on their belonging in that they often felt judged by the actions of their siblings. This was particularly true of participants with older siblings who recently went to the same school. One participant said that "teachers judge you based on what your sibling did."<sup>166</sup> This judgement whether based on positive or negative actions or traits of their siblings routinely interfered with belonging.

One participant discussed the challenges of having a sibling with a disability and how it impacted their belonging because they did not have time to be a kid. They said, "Well, 'cause like my brother has autism, and so my parents are always taking him to appointments, you know.... So they are always busy with him, and like they'll deny it, but like I just step up and like I didn't... they'll deny this, but I feel like I didn't have time to act out and be a kid, because they're always so busy with him, and I didn't want to bother them with me."<sup>167</sup> This was not to say they resented their sibling, they were quite reverential, but rather that this added pressure at home impacted their experiences of belonging because it impacted who they were and how they were developing.

*Where students grow up.* Another contribution related to homelife is the town in which students are raised. Not all participants grew up in the towns where they were currently attending school. Five of the ten participants interviewed discussed their experiences growing up in other

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<sup>165</sup> 21:75 (36774:36894)

<sup>166</sup> 63:10 (20045:20111)

<sup>167</sup> 60:2 (2887:3259)

towns and their transition into the school district. Of these five participants, two felt very strongly that they would prefer to be back in their previous communities. One participant said, “No it’s not... it’s not the people... it’s just like... it’s like I’m so used to being in the city. I’m like homesick. I... it just like takes me a while to like really open up and stuff like with other people and becoming their friends.”<sup>168</sup> These differing environments and experiences within said environments acted as a source of constant comparison leading to both positive and negative appraisals.

One participant discussed the difficulties belonging in school because of the segregated nature of their neighborhood. They said, “it’s really divided, I mean you have all these kids who only know what’s been around them, because they’re in a neighborhood of only them, when you bring them to the school and you have different identities you have clashes, because it’s not what they grew up in.”<sup>169</sup> They also pointed towards racial segregation in the town as being a factor to why students tend to self-segregate in school.

***Disability.*** One of the goals of this study was to better understand the experiences and understanding of belonging for students with EBDs. Participants, all of whom receive special education services primarily for EBDs, quickly revealed a complicated picture that could not be reduced to the effects of disability alone. Some participants recognized disability as having an important impact, while others felt disability played little to no role in their experiences of belonging. Disability notably was part of their experiences, but the weight given to disability as a personal or general contribution varied.

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<sup>168</sup> 50:23 (10522:10755)

<sup>169</sup> 60:71 (31427:32160)

*Personal experiences with disability.* Participants had a range of personal experiences and recollections regarding the impact of disability on their belonging. Before exploring some of those experiences it is important to note that not all participants directly identified with their labels. Multiple participants were very clear that they did not “identify” or agree with their label. This is important to note as some participants made a concerted effort to share that their label was only a small part of who they were. As one participant said, “Well I more identify as I have a label on my head basically. That’s basically how I look at it.”<sup>170</sup> This is not to say disability did not play a role for each of these participants, but they assigned very different weights to disability as a contribution in relation to other contributions. Another participant said, “I don’t really call it depression, I just get lost in time. I don’t get sad, I just get lost in thoughts.”<sup>171</sup> For this participant their focus was on the rumination and tendency to become lost in thought that occurs as opposed to the feeling of sadness. They, therefore, felt that the disability was not as impactful as what they perceived to be the functional impact of their disability.

Another student who had been diagnosed with a number of different disabilities discussed how they felt their labels applied to them did not fit who they really were. In talking about one of their labels they said, “I technically do not identify with it, but I do know that I have Asperger’s which is on the autism spectrum for a time was separate but now people are starting to think that Asperger’s autism and normal autism are technically the same thing. But it reacted differently to the way I metabolize thought so instead having a learning disability, I have a learning enablement.”<sup>172</sup> Again, as with other participants, their focus tended to be more on the functional impact of their disabilities as opposed to what the label may or may not mean.

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<sup>170</sup> 46:28 (15175:15271)

<sup>171</sup> 60:28 (15413:15918)

<sup>172</sup> 4:31 (24530:24901)

*The impact of emotional challenges.* Some of the participants reported primarily struggling with emotional challenges, namely anxiety or depression, that impacted their belonging. As one participant said, “Most people who have anxiety and depression, they like don’t belong.”<sup>173</sup> Anxiety and depression were discussed as being challenging in large part because they hindered the ability to engage with work and others within the environment. Though not all participants had anxiety and depression, participants who did discussed the complicated and interrelated nature of these challenges.

Most generally participants talked about how having an emotional challenge can interfere with engagement with work. One participant, who had both emotional and behavioral challenges, discussed how anxiety caused them to struggle to catch-up with their work after absences. They said, “I mean I think it started as me getting into a spiral, the anxiety of coming back and have so much work to do. Say I have one sick day because I am actually sick, it would be so much harder for me to go back because I knew that I would have more work to do and then I would just get so anxious about going there I would miss another day and it would just pile up.”<sup>174</sup> This cycle made reengagement with their work very challenging, and not doing their work only made them feel more anxiety. The participant went on to explain that, though their disability made it challenging to engage with work at times, equally challenging was how the environment was designed once they did engage. In talking about their disability, they said it was, “Just a difference. It is say we were doing something where you needed a lot of energy they would be at a disability because I have a lot of energy. It just depends on the environment you are in and

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<sup>173</sup> 61:58 (34679:34784)

<sup>174</sup> 23:35 (17773:18264)



what you are better suited to.”<sup>175</sup> This participant did feel that anxiety played a role but to them misalignment with the environment was also an important issue related to belonging.

Another participant also discussed the impact of emotional challenges. In this case, they talked about how panic within a given moment can lead to further disengagement from a given moment. They said, “Certain triggers I’m not aware of, or it could be anything like you don’t like something that happened or someone said something to you. Usually, when I have an anxiety attack, something bad has been said or happened to me. And then as I’m getting sadder, I start thinking about other things that aren’t even related. So it’s basically a bottomless pit.”<sup>176</sup> The participant went on to explain that this greatly impacts their belonging in ways that other students without anxiety and depression do not experience. They said, “Lucky go happy kids, just get school, do good at school, get into a good college, get a good job and live life. Usually ones that don’t have bad anxiety, or they could have bad anxiety and still be happy all the time, depression, I meant.”<sup>177</sup> Anxiety in this sense only led to feeling increasingly disengaged and this was not an easy cycle to break, and this was something that most students would not experience or understand.

One additional participant discussed how their anxiety has caused a range of issues for them in two different ways. First, they talked about a similar cycle as discussed by other participants. “Well with the anxiety I pick at my nails and stuff, yeah, and I’ll think about things that happened like five years ago that I betcha the other person has forgotten about.”<sup>178</sup> This cycle leads them to further ruminate and further disengage. Second, they talked about how their

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<sup>175</sup> 23:66 (37574:37802)

<sup>176</sup> 9:21 (10227:10580)

<sup>177</sup> 9:59 (33250:33488)

<sup>178</sup> 60:25 (14031:14202)

anxiety can lead to further misalignment with a given environment. They said, “I get really bad anxiety in a big group, especially people I don’t know, like classes are okay, because I know them. I went to this camp, an overnight camp and I didn’t know anyone there, and so I got kicked out, ‘cause it wasn’t the right fit for me,”<sup>179</sup> As with the participant who discussed the alignment with the environment as being more critical, this participant also thought alignment was an important consideration as their anxiety often led to increased misalignment.

Other participants felt the challenges stemming from their anxiety and depression were interrelated. For one participant, depression had meant that they could not even come to school to attempt to engage in the first place. In reflecting on how they felt things had been improving lately, they said, “I just wake up. I’m like this isn’t the worst thing I could be doing right now. Before, it would literally be a living hell to get out of bed. But, I could just get up now. It’s fine.”<sup>180</sup> The same participant went on to explain that they felt that creating any space for them to belong would be very challenging due to their social anxiety, which in turn impacts the ability to engage with other students. They said, “For me, it’s not necessarily like - it’s not easy to make me feel completely comfortable in a class because you’d basically just have to clear everyone out.”<sup>181</sup> Not only did their anxiety make it challenging for them to engage with the environment, but it also impacted how others viewed them. They said, “I really concentrate on all the right social cues and things like that, and I overthink it, I think. So, I just end up saying nothing, and I’m fine with that. I think I freak people out a little bit”<sup>182</sup> Another participant discussed anxiety and depression as having a similar spiraling impact on their belonging. They said, “Depression

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<sup>179</sup> 61:26 (14321:14576)

<sup>180</sup> 1:55 (34771:34953)

<sup>181</sup> 3:33 (33308:33464)

<sup>182</sup> 20:15 (12083:12281)

and anxiety can get on you sometimes. If you have bad depression when you could just out of the blue think of something sad or anxiety, have certain things trigger you--it's different for a lot of people, but certainly that's how it works for me. When I have an anxiety attack, I start thinking about other bad things.”<sup>183</sup> Anxiety and depression in this sense were not simply moments of disengagement, as the impact could be exponential.

One participant had a different perspective when thinking about how their emotional challenges impacted their belonging. In thinking about emotional and behavioral disorders more generally they said, “If you have anger issues people are not going to want to be around you. If you have emotional issues, you can hide that more than behavioral.”<sup>184</sup> They went on to explain that “people might not want to be around you if you tell them oh, I have emotional issues, and they're like, uh, what does that mean? Does it mean that you are stupid or something? Or like a problem, like I mean you don't tell them that. People think I have no problems at all because I never show them that”<sup>185</sup> For this participant, since emotional challenges could be hidden, emotional challenges had less of an impact on belonging because other individuals would not be able to perceive the potential difference.

One participant also discussed how their disability impacted their friendships. They discussed how the friend group they had was not as accepting of them now that they were less anxious. They said,

I don't know. It just feels like last year, such a tight knit group of friends. That was just because we were all struggling so much. But this year, I mean I found my bearings. I've started to kind of branch out to more people. They keep telling me things like, "You're

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<sup>183</sup> 9:26 (12979:13333)

<sup>184</sup> 56:45 (23598:23747)

<sup>185</sup> 58:24 (11881:12216)

acting different. You're being different." The only thing I have noticed is that I have more confidence now. Sometimes it's just kind of like, "Wait, but do I really fit in with them, if they think that maybe that was me?" When really before that and right now is what I actually am. They think I have changed. But really at that point, I wasn't me.<sup>186</sup>

The participant felt that since working on their anxiety their friend group no longer accepted them, but they felt more like themselves without the anxiety. As such this led to questioning friendships.

*The impact of behavioral challenges.* Other participants discussed the impacts of behavioral disorders, namely attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as their primary challenge, and as such having an impact on their belonging. One student related their behavioral challenges to the anger and annoyance they feel. They said, "My ADHD and my temper I guess. I don't know I get annoyed."<sup>187</sup> This annoyance in turn made it challenging for them to want to engage with others, be in the school environment, or be comfortable.

The emphasis on how others react to behavioral challenges was discussed by another participant experiencing similar challenges. They said,

Basically some people if they're very eccentric or like energetic, then they might actually make some friends cause a lot of people like energetic people. You know. They might think it's fun to be around energetic people. But then there's some people who are just really sad and they don't really talk or do anything like that, and then people are gonna think "oh. Well that person's weird. I'm just gonna leave them alone." Because you know some people are like that or some people they get mad really easily. Me sometimes.

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<sup>186</sup> 24:26 (27748:28421)

<sup>187</sup> 64:32 (17015:17073)

Sometimes little random things get me angry. But usually I try to calm my senses and think of you know stuff.<sup>188</sup>

What was most important in terms of belonging here was how these behaviors were perceived and understood by others within the environment.

Another participant related their behavioral challenges to self-esteem. They said, “Probably, it's low self-esteem. It probably relates to ADD.”<sup>189</sup> They went on to explain that behavioral challenges can impact how they are perceived by other students and this in turn impacts belonging. They said, “Because kids with low self-esteem will think other kids in our school would not like them as much so they put a negative impact on themselves by doing that.”<sup>190</sup> The same student also talked about their anxiety and how it was not always recognized as important by the school, but that often it plays a more important role in their belonging. In talking about how their anxiety impacts their belonging they said, “Sometimes there are rituals that I do, like physical rituals, so it'll make things harder. So I just usually have a lot of anxiety and I can't do something else. I have to think about the anxiety. It'll make me discouraged from doing things.”<sup>191</sup> For this student ADHD impacted how they felt about themselves and were perceived by others, but their anxiety also played an important role in their initial disengagement.

*Reflections on the experiences of other students with disabilities.* Disability was not only discussed in personal terms, but also in terms of the perceived experiences of others. In talking about the possible challenges posed to belonging by disability, participants often discussed

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<sup>188</sup> 47:64 (48327:48961)

<sup>189</sup> 13:14 (6609:6673)

<sup>190</sup> 15:3 (5233:5389)

<sup>191</sup> 12:20 (9441:9682)

tangible markers of difference and the potential barriers to taking the actions necessary to belong.

*Disability as a marker of difference.* What was clear from participants is that having a disability often makes students stand out in ways that can be alienating. Much of this impact was discussed as being related to the severity<sup>192</sup> and type of disability. One participant said, “it depends, because if you’re not you know completely right, you know, you might have a hard time, or they might not even understand what they are doing. So it kind of depends on what kind of disability you have.”<sup>193</sup> Another participant further clarified and made an additional connection to disability as a marker of difference. They said, “Like normal disabilities that don’t really set you apart. Like if you have diabetes, that might not set you apart, but if you have a problem like Downs Syndrome, something like that, you might have a harder time because you might not know what you are doing.”<sup>194</sup> Most notably, disabilities that set one apart from others were discussed as being impactful. As one participant succinctly summarized, “Kids with noticeable disabilities are definitely impacted. They're definitely seen as different.”<sup>195</sup>

Three participants specifically called out students with autism as struggling to belong within their schools, in part, because of the way their differences might be perceived by others. One participant said, “There is a kid in our grade who has autism. Definitely, you can tell he's trying to get a sense of belonging. But he can't because of a disability. He tries to. The kids definitely are not merciful and acting like inclusive.”<sup>196</sup> Another participant provided an example of how others might not be inclusive of people with autism. They said,

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<sup>192</sup> 65:27 (17234:17277)

<sup>193</sup> 56:41 (22579:22812)

<sup>194</sup> 56:44 (23178:23437)

<sup>195</sup> 13:39 (21566:21661)

<sup>196</sup> 13:40 (21750:21979)

Well I remember in one of my older schools there was a kid with autism and we were in an assembly and umm the microphone made a loud noise. And the kid kind of made a noise too because he got scared. And then I heard another noise from a kid in like a row behind me make fun of that kid by, you know, mocking him. And I was like “that’s terrible. Why would you do that?” You know. And he didn’t get punished for it. You know. The kid who made fun of the other one. I’m like “that’s messed up.” You know. And people will make fun of those people and make fun of those kids, which I don’t think is right.”<sup>197</sup>

What is notable is that the student did not talk about the disability itself, but rather other kids who were not accepting.

Another participant discussed the impact of having learning disabilities. In particular, they talked about how having a learning disability can present a challenge because as a student that individual will not fit the preconceived idea about what a successful student is like. In talking about why students with learning disabilities might struggle to belong they said, “I understand why. Because she has got a lot of learning disabilities and stuff. She doesn't feel like she belongs. You need to be this way. She just isn't. There is no hope.”<sup>198</sup> This misalignment with what is expected and what they are able to do played a role because the particular individual with a disability would never fit the ideal.

Two participants discussed how having physical disabilities has a potential negative impact on belonging. In thinking about who might struggle to belong in school, one participant said, “Could be someone like a severe disability, or severe facial deformations, or it could be

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<sup>197</sup> 47:48 34235:34837)

<sup>198</sup> 1:84 (52800:52973)

anything. I remember when I was in XXX, some kid, he had his whole hand all burned because he was in a fire. And everyone used to make fun of him for that. And he eventually quit school. He moved to a new school.”<sup>199</sup> Again, these physical disabilities were a marker of difference that other students subsequently used to ridicule and exclude.

Interestingly, participants talked about other students with EBDs and why they might have challenges belonging based on being seen as different or not. In talking about other students with EBDs there was no consensus around who might have more barriers and why. On the one hand some participants believed that behavioral issues would present bigger issues for student belonging. As one participant summarized, “Behavioral, that’s going to be a problem.”<sup>200</sup> They went on to explain, “Because if you have anger issues people are not going to want to be around you. If you have emotional issues, you can hide that more than behavioral.”<sup>201</sup> Another participant agreed that students with behavioral issues might have an easier time belonging, but for different reasons. They felt that often students with behavioral issues were viewed as “savage” and rebellious, which could be positive for their image. This was the opposite of another student who felt that “emotional” issues would make belonging far more difficult for students. Participants who felt emotional challenges would be more difficult thought this would be the case because students would feel far more uncomfortable with and have a harder time fitting in at school. Interestingly these participants seem to be discussing emotional challenges as problematic because they present more barriers to action.

Disability as a barrier to action. Participants also discussed how having a disability could impede one’s ability to take the actions necessary to belong. In particular, two participants

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<sup>199</sup> 10:38 (30502:30802)

<sup>200</sup> 56:43 (23099:23139)

<sup>201</sup> 56:45 (23598:23747)



discussed communication disorders and how that could interfere with belonging. One participant discussed the impact of a student who struggled with communication and how making connections with that student can make a difference. They said,

there's kids here who have disabilities, and when you figure out what they're saying, like the light on their face, like you figured out what they're saying and you get them, it's the best thing ever. Like there's this one girl who is always asking what we are getting for lunch, and I know what she's saying, so every time I reply pizza, and she'll light up, knowing that I understand what she is saying."<sup>202</sup>

Once the functional communication barrier was overcome, students were more likely to feel a sense of belonging.

**Interpersonal factors.** Participants talked a great deal about the importance of understanding relationships with others as key contributors to belonging. Participants discussed belonging with others and also having their belonging influenced by others. As one participant put it, "it's not about what you know, it's about who you know."<sup>203</sup>

**Peers.** Considering the socially oriented definitions put forward by participants, it follows that all participants talked about their peers as being primary contributors to belonging. Peers were the fellow students with whom participants found or did not find belonging. There were also more indirect effects in that peers were also observed and frequently used as comparisons for participant experiences. At the center of much of the conversation was friends.

**Friends.** The most commonly discussed peers in relation to belonging was friends. This included discussion around particular individuals, but also around their group of friends. Most

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<sup>202</sup> 60:83 (39163:39593)

<sup>203</sup> 60:52 (24647:24704)

generally, friends were discussed as the individuals that participants spent the most time with and to whom they felt the closest connection or bond. Friends helped participants feel comfortable and welcome, and they were peers they could share interests and experiences with.

*The central importance of friends in understanding belonging.* One thing was clear from the participant interviews, friends are central to understanding belonging. In comparing peers who are friends and those who are not, one participant highlighted the importance of friends in understanding belonging, “If they’re a friend then they would be on your side. They’d back you up. They would talk to you. You’d hang out with them. If they’re not a friend, they’d be fake to you. They’d call you names. They’d be rude to you. Not there for you if you need them.”<sup>204</sup>

Relating this directly to their belonging, another participant said, “if I wasn't with them, I would feel nothing.”<sup>205</sup> Another participant also felt friends were central to student belonging. They said, “People belong when they have friends or they have somebody they can rely on to just comfort them, or like you know friends. Friendship is a lot. It’s a main. It’s like a really really important thing in the sense of belonging I think. Because I mean... without friends then you really wouldn’t have anywhere to go.”<sup>206</sup>

*Attributes of a friend.* Participants discussed a number of factors that contribute to someone being a friend. Many of these centered around how friends treated each other. Friends were discussed as being “respectful”, “accepting”, “nice”, “loyal”, “trustworthy”, “forgiving”, and conversations were not “forced”. These were peers who cared about them and that they cared about in a reciprocal manner. One participant remarked, “I like someone no matter what you are, and I can’t be giving it 100 in our relationship and them be giving nothing, like I can’t be caring

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<sup>204</sup> 65:14 (11686:11955)

<sup>205</sup> 13:20 (10477:10582)

<sup>206</sup> 47:20 (13896:14376)

for someone who doesn't care about me.”<sup>207</sup> This feeling of reciprocity meant that friends were being related to as equals.

Friends were also peers who shared the same mindset and values. One participant referred to this commonality as having the same “thought process”<sup>208</sup> and having a “common goodness”<sup>209</sup>. Finding someone who shares the same mindset was not always easy for all the participants, but it was always a worthwhile endeavor. One participant said, “I just... I haven't really met anyone my age with a similar kind of, mindset. I mean, my one friend <names friend>, we really just bonded because we both kind of have common sense.”<sup>210</sup> This is not to imply that participants felt that they had to think exactly like their friends (multiple participants talked about how they had many differences with their friends), but that they needed to share important common values.

One common value often discussed was open-mindedness. As one participant put it, “What I look for in a friend is someone who is not all about one thing and is willing to learn other things or try new things.”<sup>211</sup> Related to open-mindedness, another shared value was being flexible in understanding that sometimes people need second chances. One participant said, “Try to look past some people's problems and issues. You know. Try to be their friend cause sometimes people just need a friend to get them through a hard time. And they might actually be a really nice person when you get to know them.”<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> 61:27 (15360:15544)

<sup>208</sup> 1:31 (19263:19419)

<sup>209</sup> 1:42 (27651:27836)

<sup>210</sup> 3:23 (20194:20661)

<sup>211</sup> 4:38 (32624:32749)

<sup>212</sup> 48:35 (23677:23943)

Importantly, friends were people who were there for them no matter what the problem might be and no matter how they might do in activities or school. For instance, one participant remarked, “Yeah, like when she broke up with her girlfriend I was there for her, and then when I... I will say break up for lack of a better term..., she was there for me. So I feel like after that we became closer, because we realized that no matter whatever, we were both there for each other.”<sup>213</sup> Similarly, another participant discussed how friends accept them unconditionally. They said, “You feel like, ‘even when I’m trying to do sports, it doesn’t matter how bad I do.’”<sup>214</sup> In other words, belonging with friends was not contingent on doing particular things, but instead was based around a deeper connection between individuals that transcended actions alone.

In part “being there” for each other was also related to trusting that the person would be there in the future. When asked what the most important thing they look for in a friend, one participant remarked, “Trust. Being there when I need him.”<sup>215</sup> In talking about friends, another student said, “I’ve had proof that they do like me as a person.”<sup>216</sup> Further if this trust was violated, then it often could mean the end of a friendship. One participant said, “I mean at first I accept everyone. Cause like more friends, more fun. I accept everyone. And once I lose their trust or whatever, I won’t accept stuff and them.”<sup>217</sup> Trust in this sense could be violated.

Friends were also discussed as being individuals that have shared common interests. At times students reported common interests as being something students coalesce around. For instance, one student remarked, “Well some people like sports a lot. They might, you know, find

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<sup>213</sup> 60:23 (13288:13567)

<sup>214</sup> 24:39 (43931:44149)

<sup>215</sup> 65:7 (5474:5601)

<sup>216</sup> 13:4 (1620:1667)

<sup>217</sup> 65:15 (12300:12460)

friends who like sports and that's good for them. They belong in that group.”<sup>218</sup> Interests in this sense can bring people together, but also help define who they are.

Another factor was having particular experiences in common. In reflecting on peers within their school one participant succinctly put it, “They don't know what I'm going through. How can they possibly relate to me? How can I possibly be friends with them?”<sup>219</sup> The shared experiences that united individuals ranged in terms of specifics. Multiple students discussed developmental experiences and age as contributing to belonging. One participant remarked, “People like your age, you have a lot of stuff in common with them because they're also going through a lot of changes.”<sup>220</sup> Another participant said that connecting with people their age showed “that I'm not the only one going through this”<sup>221</sup>

For some of the participants who had attended the school within the same district their whole lives, simply being in the school was the basis for a broad range of shared experiences. As one participant put it, “I grew up with most of the kids that I'm friends with. Cause we went to school together since like elementary school.”<sup>222</sup> Another participant felt similarly and clarified that shared experiences led to a great deal of comfort with their friends. They said, “I'm not worried about what anybody's thinking about me because I've been around these people for years.”<sup>223</sup> This was an experience that new students could not have. This could be advantageous as the student might be able to shed previous reputation, but disadvantageous in that they have less of a common base of experiences from which to draw. It should be noted that increased

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<sup>218</sup> 47:21 (14635:14782)

<sup>219</sup> 1:92 (56316:56432)

<sup>220</sup> 53:17 (18145:18327)

<sup>221</sup> 10:3 (4959:5013)

<sup>222</sup> 50:27 (12385:12540)

<sup>223</sup> 22:44 (20500:20603)

familiarity might not necessarily lead to increased friendships. They said, “The better you know someone, the better you're going to be friends with them or not friends with them. And that’s just kind of how schools work.”<sup>224</sup> This is important to note as it would appear there could be an opposite effect regarding familiarity.

*Peers outside of the friend group.* Participants also talked about other peers in their school that they did not consider to be friends. Often these individuals were not discussed with hostility or “othering”, but rather they were discussed in neutral terms. They were peers they simply did not know or had other interests. In talking about why they are not connected with some of their other peers, they said, “Just interests. I don’t really find what they’re into really that interesting.”<sup>225</sup> That did not mean there was any apparent issues with them or they affected their belonging one way or the other, but that they were not close with them.

There were, however, other peers discussed as negatively impacting belonging, and interactions with these individuals often seemed to outweigh more neutral interactions. These peers negatively affected participant belonging because they contributed to the environment being more difficult to navigate, less comfortable, and at times openly hostile to who they were and what they wanted to accomplish. Certain peers were described in outwardly negative terms related to how they treat others. Participants talked about these peers as being “annoying”, “mean”, “snobby” or “rude”, and often talked about them as being exclusionary. As one participant said, “they like to exclude you a lot, and they do say pretty mean things, I would say, about people. They talk a lot about people. They’ll even be mean to you in your face but kind of like in a passive aggressive way.”<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> 24:50 (52699:52912)

<sup>225</sup> 12:35 (17991:18069)

<sup>226</sup> 12:38 (19212:19423)

*Bullies and bullying.* Participants also talked a great deal about bullying and the detrimental effect bullies can have on an individual's belonging. As one participant put it, "Bullying can make it harder for people to belong, much harder for people to belong."<sup>227</sup> Another participant shared a similar thought, "Why would you want to be somewhere that you're getting bullied, I should say?"<sup>228</sup> Bullies were discussed in ways that were different than when they talked about peers that were simply rude or mean. Rather, bullies were peers who systematically targeted other individuals because of who they were, and sometimes for reasons not understood by participants. Bullies were often discussed as a seemingly inevitable part of schools. As one participant said, "There's always going to be that student who looks different and gets bullied."<sup>229</sup> They went on to explain, "Each school has a different form of bullying, but each school does have bullying."<sup>230</sup>

Interestingly two participants talked about how they were not bullied anymore. They attributed this to their personal efforts to fight back against people who might bully them, and not to outside intervention. In discussing why they are not bullied anymore, one participant remarked, "It depends, if it's who the person is. If I get pissed at the person, then I start screaming at them. If I don't, then I'm like, I really don't care, or I make a joke out of it, and then they start laughing and I start laughing and it's all over with."<sup>231</sup> This participant felt they had to take matters into their own hands, and in doing so successfully coped with their bully.

Another participant made it clear that though they did not consider it bullying per se there were many kids who were "annoying". They said,

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<sup>227</sup> 7:21 (31764:31947)

<sup>228</sup> 56:10 (5730:5818)

<sup>229</sup> 7:19 (31133:31368)

<sup>230</sup> 7:20 (31516:31697)

<sup>231</sup> 56:16 (8153:8419)

There's a lot of kids that are annoying though. Just make fun of you. It's not really like a bully situation. They don't push you around. They don't like really do those things. They don't come up to you specifically and say "oh you're fat. You're stupid. You're annoying." Like a lot of kids don't do that. But if you go up to them and say hi, they would say "shut up. Go away. You're fat. You're ugly." They would do something like that.<sup>232</sup>

They went on to clarify that they felt bullying was primarily related to physical abuse and not verbal abuse.

One participant also talked about online bullying and the impact it can have on belonging. They said, "Like this kid was getting bullied online. But everywhere else he was a well-liked kid and no one really knew that was happening. They probably used that example to say things like stay safe online and like it's dangerous and stuff like that. It's like just because of this one situation and that's what you're taking out of it. Not that no one else cared enough to talk to him if he seemed upset. It was just absolutely backwards"<sup>233</sup> The hidden nature of online bullying often meant it was not taken as seriously as in-person bullying, but as this participant pointed out, the effects could be just as detrimental to a student's belonging.

***Peer groups.*** Outside of the individual level alone, participants also spent a lot of time discussing the impact of groups on belonging. Participants agreed that students tended to group themselves naturally. As one participant said, "People just tend to organize themselves"<sup>234</sup>, and

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<sup>232</sup> 65:31 (19177:19616)

<sup>233</sup> 21:24 (13562:13995)

<sup>234</sup> 21:45 (27766:27804)



another participant said, “This grade’s definitely divided into groups.”<sup>235</sup> This led participants to think about groups more generally, but also what membership within a given group might mean.

*Groups within their schools.* When talking about belonging participants tended to talk more about belonging with particular people or groups than with the school as an entity. One participant had insight into why that was. They said, “School is kind of like... there's a lot of variation in people in there. It's more like an umbrella term. I guess. The school is the umbrella. There are different subgroups in there.”<sup>236</sup> For this particular participant, as well as others, school was too broad and subgroups were really where belonging was enacted. It was through this enactment that more general belonging occurred.

Most generally, participants tended to discuss groups in terms of shared interests. For instance, one participant said, “I would say being in a group and having a shared set of personality, interests, and things like that.”<sup>237</sup> Commonly participants talked about the “athletes”, the “artistic kids”, and a range of other interest and activity groups. Participants felt this grouping was natural given the variability among students in terms of their interests and personalities. As one participant said, “That's one of the issues with school. It's like not every single kid is going to emo. Not every single kid is going to come in wearing a Supreme shirt. That's not how it is. You need to belong, but you also need that diversity of these different people.”<sup>238</sup> Given this variation it was natural that students would find other people who are like them and share common interests.

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<sup>235</sup> 12:36 (18760:18803)

<sup>236</sup> 13:6 (2573:2797)

<sup>237</sup> 13:3 (1059:1160)

<sup>238</sup> 1:74 (46438:46690)

Not only was grouping natural due to the diversity among students, once students were in groups some participants felt students tended to stay within their groups. One participant said, “People usually don’t have the time or the interest to talk about to a lot of different people outside of their clique.”<sup>239</sup> Another participant from a different site said, “I’ll say that there’s not a lot of people in the school who are willing to make new friends. I’ll tell you that.”<sup>240</sup> Groups for these participants tended to be something that was relatively stable and not subject to change. Not all participants agreed with this assessment though. Some participants felt there was a certain degree of permeability among groups. One participant said, “Well a lot of people here they... I mean they usually stick to like the same groups usually. But they are open to letting other people join their group all the time. A lot of kids here are actually really nice, and they’re ok with other people just joining into their groups.”<sup>241</sup> In this sense much seemed to depend on the openness of the group itself.

Another participant felt that, though students are often dependent on groups, they should not be necessary for belonging. They said, “I think that you can belong without a group. Like I think that some people they can just jump around. They can do their own thing and be happy. They can have multiple friends.”<sup>242</sup> This was presented as more of an ideal than a reality, as they also recognized that students grouped naturally and tended to be somewhat exclusive after doing so.

*Popularity.* A particular group of students that came up most frequently was the “popular” group. Though often relatively undefined, it is a group that deserves particular

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<sup>239</sup> 46:67 (48184:48605)

<sup>240</sup> 22:58 (27335:27707)

<sup>241</sup> 47:30 (21049:21400)

<sup>242</sup> 47:41 (28572:29523)

mention here because participants had an interesting range of thoughts on this group of students who are generally thought to potentially have a great deal of belonging because they are the pinnacle of what one student referred to as the “social class pyramid”<sup>243</sup>

According to participants, popular students were often students who helped set the “trends” and as such had a great deal of influence and a good image. One participant discussed why popular kids might feel more belonging. “Popular kids can seem like they belong because they control a lot of other people's ideas. They have a lot of control in peer pressure and stuff. That can be why people might think someone else belongs and not me because they have so much power and so much control over the other people. They get it their way, so that's where they're supposed to be.”<sup>244</sup> Sitting atop the social class pyramid afforded these students certain privilege to not only have more control over their own belonging, but also the belonging of others.

Some participants did not feel popular, but could understand why popularity was something people sought. As one participant said, “People are heavy trend followers in our school, and I’d say that I’m a little bit of one. I do like following trends because I do like sometimes to follow it because I feel like you have more social interaction when you do it.”<sup>245</sup> If this student was more popular, then they would theoretically have more successful social interactions and more friends. Not all participants agreed that seeking popularity was a good goal. One participant said, “I don’t care if I’m popular or not. People aren’t going to remember if I was popular in school, they are going to remember like, how I acted and like grades and stuff

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<sup>243</sup> 5:30 (24874:24893)

<sup>244</sup> 3:9 (8126:8475)

<sup>245</sup> 12:59 (32785:33428)

like that.”<sup>246</sup> For this participant being a good person and performing well academically was far more important than being popular.

In discussing why they do not seek popularity, another participant discussed how popularity can obscure the nature of someone, giving a false picture of who they are. They said,

I don't like the word popular because it's too vague. But at the same time, it targets such a small group of people. I'd say I don't know the word to describe them. It's outgoing, extroverts. Then the kids that try to kind of.... There are the kids that you would think they would be very outgoing or say good public speakers. But then, sometimes you find that some of the kids really aren't. They're really actually just going along with what their friends do instead. There's this one girl. If I wasn't in like say drama class, I would never talk to. I didn't realize that she really doesn't like talking in front of people.”<sup>247</sup>

For this participant, popularity was an undesirable outcome as it could mean abandoning yourself, and as pointed out earlier to belong in a genuine way, participants felt you must belong as yourself.

**Teachers.** Peers were most commonly discussed in relation to belonging, but teachers and other adults within the school were also discussed as playing a role in belonging. Teachers were a particular focus, in part, because they were the adults that participants most frequently interacted with. Yet teachers also played a larger role as key representatives of the school and individuals to whom students often looked for guidance and support. One participant summarized this perspective, “Teachers have a lot of influence on kids because it's just - if my teacher says it, then it's okay. Because they're the adults and they're the ones who tell you what's

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<sup>246</sup> 61:9 (3724:3923)

<sup>247</sup> 24:22 (25574:26227)

right and wrong. Just, that's why it's kind of a difficult job because if you make a mistake, it's not always that easy to fix. You can easily ruin a kid's entire middle school experience or elementary school experience.”<sup>248</sup> In this sense student belonging is not entirely dependent on teachers, but it is highly influenced by them.

Participants discussed a wide range of ways teachers can influence student belonging. Much of this focused around the teachers themselves and the context of the classroom. What was common among participants was the focus on the individual teacher and who they are, as well as the specific role participants perceived teachers to play. This is significant because the way belonging was discussed was necessarily different when being talked about in regard to peers or in regard to teachers. That is not to say that there were not similarities. For instance, trust and mutual respect were important to students across contexts. However, belonging was necessarily tied by participants to the role of the given individual. Whereas peers were often discussed in terms of shared participation in activities, teachers were discussed through their roles and actions. For instance, effective practice and behavior management were both raised. This recognition of role was seen throughout the participant interviews and is an important consideration.

Before further discussing these areas, it is important to note that there were two participants who doubted whether or not teachers could impact their belonging. One of the participants said, “It’s more like an automatic thing cause they’re kind of paid to accept students.”<sup>249</sup> The participant went on to explain, “They don't influence your belonging, they more influence your knowledge levels cause they are teachers.”<sup>250</sup>. Besides questioning possible

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<sup>248</sup> 3:11 (9069:9456)

<sup>249</sup> 5:43 (38922:39001)

<sup>250</sup> 5:42 (38625:38728)

motives, they also questioned how much teachers really understand the nature of student relationships, “they don't understand how a friendship between students can work.”<sup>251</sup> The other participant who questioned the role teachers could play in belonging said, “I’ve never heard of a teacher influencing a student before.”<sup>252</sup> What these perspectives have in common is that they question the role of teachers based on the idea that belonging is something that ultimately occurs between peers, and not directly with teachers. For these two participants, any teacher influence was more indirect through things like allowing access to friends.

*Teacher personality and approach.* One of the key areas of focus by participants was on teacher personality and their overall approach. Participants viewed teacher personality as being key to how they connect with a given teacher and how that teacher interacts with them. When teachers were “rude”, “mean”, “moody” or had a “bad tone”, participants reported feeling less belonging within the teachers’ classrooms. When teachers were authentically “supportive”, “respectful”, not “biased” and “helpful”, then participants reported feeling more belonging within their classroom. As one participant put it, “If a teacher interacts in a positive manner with a student, that student can feel a little better about themselves.”<sup>253</sup> In part this was because a teacher’s bad attitude was seen as being reflective of the teacher’s attitude toward the student as an individual, as well as being reflective of how engaged the teacher is with their job. One student remarked that many of their older teachers just wanted to get to “retirement”<sup>254</sup> and didn’t really care about their job, which caused the student to feel less belonging in their classes.

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<sup>251</sup> 5:55 (47969:48034)

<sup>252</sup> 11:26 (24575:24634)

<sup>253</sup> 7:31 (40223:40401)

<sup>254</sup> 61:54 (32313:32426)

Participants felt teacher personality and approach necessarily impacted subsequent teacher actions. One student provided a germane example of how teachers might respond to a student in distress. They said,

Some teachers are really nice and sweet and they talk calmly when they need to talk calmly. Like when somebody's really upset and crying. They know how to talk calmly. But then there's some teachers who are just really mean and are like, "Why are you crying? Just calm down or I'm going to have to call the office." You know. I'm like "that's not how you're supposed to treat a kid who's crying." You know that's messed up. I mean not all teachers, but some teachers are like that.<sup>255</sup>

The teacher in this scenario who reacted calmly and knowledgeably was able to provide appropriate guidance as well as connect with the student personally. This affected belonging because not only was the student's immediate need met compassionately, but they would then feel a greater belonging with and around that teacher. Teacher's with helpful and understanding personalities were simply easier to connect with and more helpful.

This is not to say that any degree of help is always welcomed or appreciated. Often participants related that teachers would simply try to help without asking if they wanted help or schools would assign an accommodation without understanding the impact it would have. When discussing one thing effective teachers do, one participant said, "I have constantly teachers saying do you need help, do you need help, it gets annoying after a while, and then you forget what you were supposed to do."<sup>256</sup> Further this participant discussed how other students might view this help. They said, "Yeah, 'cause it kind of shows that you are like...what's wrong with

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<sup>255</sup> 46:49 (32576:33072)

<sup>256</sup> 56:21 (9928:10087)

you, why do you need this much help?”<sup>257</sup> Though well intentioned, teachers being overly helpful could have a deleterious effect on belonging.

Openness and understanding. In terms of overall approach, participants also discussed teachers’ openness to understanding and learning more about the experiences of students as playing a pivotal role in student belonging. When teachers expressed openness to understanding who their students were as individuals, participants said that students would feel more belonging. In talking about their favorite teacher, one participant said, “They make it feel like I have someone to talk to, someone listens, um, if I have a problem I can go to them. Them just being here makes me feel better.”<sup>258</sup> They went on to say, “Other people’s brains are different than mine. Maybe they don’t want that teacher, but.... I do!”<sup>259</sup> Having at least one supportive teacher was vital for this participant.

Another participant talked more directly about teachers’ openness and understanding as related to disability. They said, “The teachers didn’t really have any personal experience with anxiety and depression, which is what I was going through at that point. They just didn’t understand”<sup>260</sup> The student went on to explain that, “That’s a really important thing. Just like not all teachers are like that, though. That can make you feel really alienated. Like I’m not like these other kids. I don’t learn like these other kids.”<sup>261</sup> When asked what they wanted teachers to understand, another participant said, “I’m not perfect. I have a lot of things going on in my

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<sup>257</sup> 56:24 (11650:11751)

<sup>258</sup> 61:43 (26950:27101)

<sup>259</sup> 63:17 (23413:23508)

<sup>260</sup> 3:22 (18771:18997)

<sup>261</sup> 1:91 (56115:56311)



life.”<sup>262</sup> Again teachers needed to be open and understanding to supporting students on the terms of the student.

When teachers were unwilling to understand and support individuals, it could lead to alienation, as well as a misguided view of the student. In talking about their own experiences with a teacher who was not understanding, one participant said, “I don’t think she works around my ADD and she has kind of like this false view of me. She thinks I don’t care, which I kind of get where the impression is from because the way I cope with my anxiety is I’ll act like I don’t care. And she sees me as kind of arrogant.”<sup>263</sup> Since teachers did not understand they were not able to effectively respond and help the participant.

The other student who discussed the age of teachers felt that teachers in general are not in touch with the experiences of students “Some teachers tend to pick up on it, I guess, more teachers who want this kind of thing pick up on it, but not really teachers who are older and haven’t gone through it in a while.”<sup>264</sup> Another participant echoed a similar point. They said, “I guess she doesn’t know how, I guess, our generation of kids think and act.”<sup>265</sup> Importantly, this generational gap was more related to a lack of understanding that resulted from potential age differences, than age itself. Being an older teacher did not mean they were destined not to understand students’ experiences, but it did mean for these participants that it would be more challenging to do so.

Participants also frequently pointed to the importance of teachers being open to and being able to understand the experiences of students directly in their classroom. Being a student comes

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<sup>262</sup> 10:37 (30195:30311)

<sup>263</sup> 12:46 (23888:24164)

<sup>264</sup> 61:53 (31893:32072)

<sup>265</sup> 14:13 (10231:10307)

with a host of challenges as related to academic performance and socialization. Participants felt effective teachers understood this balance. In talking about an effective teacher, one participant said,

She's pretty straight with everyone. And then she'll laugh if it's actually something funny. It's a class that you get a lot of work done, because I guess she's just good at teaching math I guess. Her teaching style is good. But then you also, you have time that you get to talk with friends. But you get the work done. But then she knows that sometimes you need to kind of let them get their energy out and just speak for a minute.<sup>266</sup>

In part, this teacher was effective because they let students interact and engage as opposed to sit and listen. This point also relates to the role of teachers as effective instructors.

*The instructional role of teachers.* As seen in the above section, participants felt that teacher personality played an important role in how students may or may not connect with an individual teacher. This aspect is similar, though different because of their instructional role, to that of connecting with their peers. What was equally important was the participant recognition of the instructional role teachers play and how successfully they were able to teach and whether they can successfully teach a wide range of learners. When teachers were effective, a broader range of students were able to feel successful. As one participant put it, "A teacher can help with that feeling of success via talking with the student and asking how they know so much about a subject. Because that will often boost students' self-esteem; and other things of that general manner."<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> 18:12 (10953:11385)

<sup>267</sup> 7:34 (41562:41783)

Teacher flexibility. One important aspect of whether or not teachers were instructionally effective was whether or not teachers were able to be flexible. Multiple participants talked about how they felt they learned differently than other students in their classroom, and they particularly appreciated when teachers were flexible in meeting their needs as learners. One participant said, “I’m a complicated learner. I have my own ways. I’m not necessarily flexible in that. But that if they can try to be flexible with me because I’m not, I’m just a complicated learner. I learn in different ways.”<sup>268</sup> They further elaborated, “They’re the one teaching the material, so they could demonstrate it any way that they could and still get their salary.”<sup>269</sup> In talking about how they wanted teachers to address their learning the same participant said, “Well, first of all, I’d say have teachers be told that they should be a little more flexible. Because a lot of teachers that I’ve had in the past, they’re not necessarily as flexible and they don’t have a lot of patience.”<sup>270</sup>

Another student also talked about flexibility as being important because they learn differently. They said,

Some things like that, I understand why we're doing this, so I'd rather do it in a different way. In a different space or without so much instruction from the teacher. I personally like assigned seats because it's like, this is your desk, this is your space, this is where you're supposed to sit just because I have an issue with space. I hate having to choose my seat, especially when I don't have friends in the class. Just things like that.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> 11:13 (18456:18670)

<sup>269</sup> 9:54 (30261:30570)

<sup>270</sup> 11:17 (20457:20678)

<sup>271</sup> 3:36 (34556:34998)

Participants learned differently and had different needs, and they wanted teachers to understand and allow them to learn in ways that were more aligned with their needs. Without this it could be challenging to belong with a particular teacher.

Other students also focused on being flexible and patient in terms of wanting teachers to understand that they might need more time or a different pace. One participant discussed how they felt an effective instructor is, “Someone who takes time to explain stuff, but lets you go at your own pace. It’s like I work faster and I get done real quick, so like when they explain all the work at one time so I can just go ahead and do it, while I would wait for everyone to finish everything else.”<sup>272</sup> Other participants felt that teachers needed to slow down their pace because they often were requiring students to do too much too quickly. One participant said that they felt their classes were too difficult because there was, “Too much to do, too overwhelming, and they don’t always give you what you need.”<sup>273</sup> What this participant wanted was additional flexibility in terms of what they had to do and at what pace they had to complete the work.

That is not to say that participants felt that only teachers needed to be flexible. There was also a recognition that they, as students, needed to adapt as well. When talking about what makes a good learner, one student said, “A learner that can get used to the work quickly, that can be adaptive to any styles of learning that the teacher provides for them.”<sup>274</sup> Flexibility in this sense was a two-way street. However, if teachers were not flexible, then this would be a challenge to student belonging.

*Relevancy of instruction.* Another primary focus of participants was the emphasis on a teacher’s ability to make instruction engaging and relevant to them as individual learners. A

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<sup>272</sup> 62:10 (4981:5250)

<sup>273</sup> 54:56 (31043:31121)

<sup>274</sup> 11:18 (21213:21344)

common issue raised by participants was that many of their classes seem irrelevant to them and their lives. One participant said,

I think in math, they focus on things that aren't even really needed. I don't really know when I'll need Pythagorean theorem in my life, and we haven't really learned any essential things in math that we'll actually need in adulthood. We just spend time learning things that I'm just going to forget about when I stop using them. And a lot of it's just like doing it over and over again until it gets in your memory. It's nothing really else. It's just doing the same things over and over again. It doesn't really work for everyone.”<sup>275</sup>

Two participants provided examples related to relevancy. One participant said, “It was just a boring class. I just got bored really fast. And I was like, I need to switch. It was a lot of old songs that were just not my generation. A little bit of what she wanted to hear, not what we wanted to hear.”<sup>276</sup> The other participant provided a specific example of how a teacher helped make learning relevant to them. They said, “I also like how they introduce subjects to us and relate it to things in real life. Like in math we are doing percentages, at my old school we already did percentages cause at this school we are doing things in a different order than my old school. They started us off with finding twenty percent of a price at a restaurant for giving tips and not having to pull out your phone or using a tip chart.”<sup>277</sup> What was common among these issues was that, whether the content being taught was relevant or not in the broader scheme of things, participants did not see it as relevant. When teachers were able to make the learning relevant to

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<sup>275</sup> 12:26 (11817:12349)

<sup>276</sup> 18:3 (4766:4981)

<sup>277</sup> 4:70 (46324:46726)

students, they were more likely to feel belonging because they actually wanted to be in the class and agreed it was important. In this sense, there was a shared alignment of goals.

Specific instructional practices. Participants also talked about specific practices teachers use that may or may not help students learn and ultimately belong within their classrooms. While there were some effective instructional practices identified, more often than not participants discussed ineffective practices and a general dissatisfaction with how some teachers teach. As one participant said, “School’s kind of like--it’s okay, except I don’t really care for the way they teach things.”<sup>278</sup> As with other areas discussed here, the connection to belonging tended to be around helping students feel comfortable and successful.

There did appear to be some agreement among participants as to what practices were more effective than others. In terms of ineffective practices, participants agreed that workbook packets, memorization, and cold-calling all negatively impacted students. In talking about what would make an ineffective teacher one participant remarked, “Like if you’re really basic and just like dry and giving us packets. Nobody would be into that.”<sup>279</sup> The same participant also added that teachers often cold-called them, which only increased their anxiety and made them feel trapped. Multiple participants also discussed cold-calling and other practices that can result in students feeling “called out”. One participant said, “If you’re being called out, that’s bad, but if you are just not like if you’re in a group and you’re not talking to people, that’s not as bad as being called out.”<sup>280</sup> They went on to explain, “Cause if you’re in a big group and they are like, oh, look at you, look what you just said, that’s like it’s a little embarrassing, and everyone looks

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<sup>278</sup> 12:25 (11671:11762)

<sup>279</sup> 51:29 (12366:12475)

<sup>280</sup> 56:34 (16355:16544)

at you like you're the biggest idiot on earth, then like it's very embarrassing.”<sup>281</sup> The goal of teachers using these practices might be good, fostering student engagement and learning through unprompted recollection of information, but the unintended consequence of the practice is the potential alienation of students who might not know the answer or are able to quickly recall information.

Hands on learning was also commonly discussed as a practice that participants liked and appreciated. Often this type of learning was put in contrast to more traditional means of instruction. As one participant put it, “Just sitting and listening to things is not the best way for everyone to learn. A lot of people will remember things better if you can do hands-on stuff or there are different ways you're absorbing things at that time.”<sup>282</sup> The ability to learn in a hands on way was also commonly discussed as reasons why students liked particular courses like woodshop and some of their art courses.

Two participants also talked about instructional modeling as a practice used by effective teachers. One participant said, “So let's say I'm like say if... umm... the math teacher's explaining how to do a problem. I would like to see her like do an example. Like talk it out in order for me to like actually know what I need to do.”<sup>283</sup> For these students being able to have a model to help them solve problems was important for their learning because it helped guide them in understanding the task and ultimately being successful.

*Instructional materials.* Though not talked about as frequently as instructional practices, two participants discussed the importance of instructional materials to their belonging. One of the participants discussed how they liked how technology was incorporated by their instructors.

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<sup>281</sup> 56:38 (20399:20631)

<sup>282</sup> 21:6 (3639:3855)

<sup>283</sup> 50:36 (17257:17491)

They said, “I also like how they integrate technology, advanced computer technology into classes a lot because the computers that they integrate into classes make it really easy to do work instead of like reading out a question that is like paragraphs long and hard to understand in a textbook. Or reading out an article on a computer and then answering some questions and typing small response to it.”<sup>284</sup> Technology in this sense helped them do their work more effectively but was also interesting for them to use.

The other student who talked about instructional materials did so for different reasons. This participant talked about the challenges in acquiring some of the instructional materials assigned by teachers. In talking about a challenging learning experience they said, “Science project. On like actually the one we’re doing now, she’s like bring in materials from home. History project, you guys need to go and buy a tri-fold. I don’t want to buy a tri-fold. You give us the tri-fold. And they’re not easy to find, too, because they’re a three thing, there’s not a regular poster, they have to... they are a little hard to find.”<sup>285</sup> For this participant the challenge for their belonging was on being able to find and purchase the necessary materials. They could not engage in the work because they couldn’t procure the materials and they felt further ostracized because of this.

*The classroom management role of teachers.* Not only did participants discuss the impact teachers can have on belonging as instructors, but they also discussed the role they have on belonging in terms of classroom management. This contribution was discussed in two ways. First participants talked about the tone that the teachers set for the classroom. One participant in talking about their most effective teacher said, “it’s like she’s very serious. Like she doesn’t

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<sup>284</sup> 4:69 (45681:46070)

<sup>285</sup> 54:58 (31627:31989)



really goof around. And I feel like that like gets the students on track. Even though like they don't... she like puts you in a serious mood. Like even if you feel like daydreaming you still know what's happening. So... she's a very good teacher. She teaches very well."<sup>286</sup> This particular student felt they were able to engage more effectively in their work and be successful because of this teacher. Other participants felt that teachers can be too serious. In describing a teacher they thought was effective they said, "I guess not too serious because sometimes teachers are a little bit too serious."<sup>287</sup>

The other, and more common, way that management was discussed was through the idea of fairness and equity. Participants often discussed discipline and classroom management, and how bad classroom management was not fair to all students. As one participant put it, "A bad teacher would kick you out for not saying anything in the class. I've had it happen to me multiple times."<sup>288</sup> They went on to explain, "I've gotten kicked out of the classroom before because they thought I said something out loud even though it was another student. And it's hard to justify the fact that I didn't say it."<sup>289</sup> There was frustration by a number of participants who felt they were treated unfairly. One participant related this directly to their label and subsequent participation in special education. They said, "I'll just be in class and then someone else will do something and then they would immediately jump to me because I'm the SPED one."<sup>290</sup> This is in contrast to students who were seen as being favored by teachers. As one participant said, "If you don't do good, then they are just going to treat you like nothing, but if you get straight A's then you're

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<sup>286</sup> 50:65 (31314:31626)

<sup>287</sup> 12:49 (27328:27481)

<sup>288</sup> 22:56 (26654:26764)

<sup>289</sup> 22:57 (26938:27123)

<sup>290</sup> 64:54 (25386:25516)

like their favorite student.”<sup>291</sup> Another participant addressed what they perceived as biased treatment by teachers regarding students with past behavioral issues. In speaking to this bias, they said, “Teachers aren’t fair because there are teacher’s pets and there are some students who cause problems. But even then sometimes the students who cause problems are just trying to do the right thing to turn around their act. But the teachers don’t realize that and other things like that you know.”<sup>292</sup> They went on to explain that often students with behavioral challenges are just assumed to be the perpetrator if issues arise. In this sense, performance might not only affect how students feel about themselves but also how they are ultimately treated by their teachers.

One participant thought punishments were inequitably harsh. They said, “It’s like how often they do it, and how like, how intense, it’s like over the top, I guess. Like for being two minutes late to class you get a detention. It’s like lunch detention.”<sup>293</sup> Not only was there a potentially inequitable response based on who the person was, but this response would also not fit the challenge it sought to address.

***The impact of other adults within school.*** Teachers were notably the most common adult that was discussed as having an impact on student belonging. They were not, however, the only adults mentioned. Some participants also talked about the impact of specialists and administrators.

*Specialists.* The terms specialist can mean a wide variety of things within a school context, but here it refers to special educators and guidance counselors. Participants had a complicated relationship with specialists, and opinions on how they impacted belonging differed between each site due in part to how these specialists were utilized.

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<sup>291</sup> 59:17 (11547:11688)

<sup>292</sup> 47:11 (6392:6733)

<sup>293</sup> 60:91 (43458:43642)

Special educators. Within the site with a specific special education program, participants discussed how often special educators were helpful, but used in a way that at times interfered with their belonging. In particular, participants disliked the practice in which special educators would often accompany them to classes. One participant said, “I have a teacher go with me to every class and they sit literally directly behind me.”<sup>294</sup> They continued, “I go for them for help. I don’t need them right here, I need them near me, but I don’t need them constantly asking me for help.”<sup>295</sup> Having a special educator with them in class was highly stigmatizing and because of this participants felt called out and unnecessarily separated from their peers. When asked why having a special educator follow them was problematic, one participant said, “Because my friends see me walking down the hall with a teacher next to me. Makes me look like I’m retarded”<sup>296</sup>

Within the other site, students reported more positive experiences with special educators, even when they would follow students to classes. One participant said,

When kids have an adult with them, kind of like an aide. That's what XXX or XXX does. She's completely like, made this year so much better. I'd be in such like, a much worse place than I were right now if she wasn't here. Everyone, all the kids really like her and they really enjoy hanging out with her. She doesn't really put on such a big teacher facade. It's like... She's not like that. I think she's experienced a lot of issues when she was in middle school and things. She's dealt with similar things that these kids are going through and that's why she can get down on that level. It's really comforting to a lot of

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<sup>294</sup> 59:11 (8902:8994)

<sup>295</sup> 56:25 (12005:12132)

<sup>296</sup> 64:45 (22000:22105)

people to know that there's an adult that actually knows what's going on and that wants to know, and wants to help, and that acts that they want to know and want to help.”<sup>297</sup>

This particular special educator had many of the same qualities of effective teachers, and they were more integrated into the classroom. There was, therefore, less stigma around having them within the classroom.

Guidance counselors. Guidance counselors were also discussed quite frequently across both sites as specialists who impact student belonging. In part, this was because guidance counselors were adults in the school that this particular population of students tended to work with regularly. Across sites, participants found guidance counselors to be very helpful and having a positive impact on their belonging. In talking about their guidance counselor one participant said,

She's just offered like, so much. She's given me a lot of advice and new opinions, and perspectives, and things in my own struggles and that's been so incredibly helpful. She's just like... Probably one of the most open-minded people I've ever met. The way she described what she likes to do with kids, because she works in residential too. So, she works with kids that are in that really low point.<sup>298</sup>

Another participant had a similarly positive experience. They said, “They make it feel like I have someone to talk to, someone listens, um, if I have a problem I can go to them. Them just being here makes me feel better.”<sup>299</sup> Guidance counselors were essential supports for these students because they provided them with supportive guidance as well as a consistent resource that they could go to if problems arose. They were a consistent source of support utilized by students. So

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<sup>297</sup> 3:12 (9833:10690)

<sup>298</sup> 3:15 (11981:12380)

<sup>299</sup> 61:43 (26950:27101)

much so that multiple participants complained that they wish the guidance counselors had more time to meet with them.

The guidance office also offered a space to students that was safe and comfortable. In talking about spaces where they felt like they belonged, one participant said, “Guidance office because when I need to take a break or a breather. And then I like the auditorium because it’s quiet. And sometimes I like to do my work there because it’s nice and quiet. It’s not too loud, but it also not too dark, but it’s enough light to do my work.”<sup>300</sup>

That is not to say that all students found guidance counselors helpful. There was one participant who felt strongly that they did not like guidance or the guidance counselors. This was because of an incident in which they revealed personal information to the counselor, and felt that this information was inappropriately revealed to others. “They... you can’t talk anything to them. Say it to anyone, so yeah.... No trust, no.”<sup>301</sup> After the incident the student lost trust in the counselors, and no longer saw them as a helpful resource.

*Administrators.* Participants also discussed administrators as having a more indirect effect on their belonging. Importantly, they viewed administrators through a slightly different lens than they did teachers. While the role of teachers was seen as more instructional, these two participants viewed administrators as being more involved in discipline and having an influence on teachers. This led to a different standard of effectiveness in that the focus was more on fairness. As one of the two participants put it, “I’d say real administration, because they’re all pretty nice, and they’re all really justified in what they do. And I feel like the administration is kind of the people who are supposed to crack the whip and come down on kids like that. But they

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<sup>300</sup> 48:3 (1943:2222)

<sup>301</sup> 57:12 (5211:5292)

really don't unless you—you really deserve it.”<sup>302</sup> Students across sites felt the same way. They saw administrators as generally fair when they have had to interact with them. These interactions, however, were often minimal.

One participant raised a different point regarding how an administrator influenced their belonging. They said, “I don't know him personally, but when we did the walkout against gun violence and stuff, he was out there, and he was like, "I just want you guys all to know that I completely respect what you're doing, and I'm really proud that you're all standing up for yourselves and what you believe," and things like that. And I was like... it was really cool.”<sup>303</sup> This administrator was helpful in promoting belonging for the participant because the participant felt they had the support of the administrator. This only further validated their actions as being the right ones to take.

**Contextual factors.** In addition to discussing personal and interpersonal contributions to belonging, participants also discussed contextual contributions. Here the word context is used broadly to include all factors related to contributions from the school environment not including the participant themselves or other individuals within a given context. Though there were differences across sites, as will be highlighted within this section as appropriate, there were many more similarities in terms of contributions discussed by participants. Most generally, participants considered, the nature of belonging within schools, the design and structure of schools more generally, the design and structure of special education, and the influences of school culture.

On the broadest possible level, there was disagreement about whether you could belong to a school. Some participants felt belonging could only occur on personal and interpersonal

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<sup>302</sup> 20:71 (39104:39396)

<sup>303</sup> 20:70 (38607:38962)

levels. For instance one participant said, “You have to feel comfortable, the school can’t make you feel comfortable.”<sup>304</sup> Similarly, in talking about the impact the school can have on an individual another participant said, “No because schools can’t affect people’s thoughts.”<sup>305</sup> Other participants felt you could belong to a school even if you do not feel belonging with individuals within the school. One participant said, “You don’t necessarily belong with the people there, but you do belong at school.”<sup>306</sup> This disagreement came back to a fundamental question: could you really belong to a school or do you belong to the people within it? The answer to this question in part relied on how participants saw the nature of school and the nature of belonging.

***The nature of belonging in schools.*** When thinking about possible contributions of the school context, participants reflected on the very nature of schools as an entity. This reflection affected their overall perspective on the nature of belonging. As with teachers, participants recognized the importance of understanding the functions and role of school and how effectively schools can meet the intended goals. Participants did not see schools as separate from purpose, rather they related that schools were a specific, unique type of environment with stated and implicit goals focused on improving current and future circumstance.

Schools were seen as places where learning occurred, but also places of socialization. In talking about the “grading system”, one participant summarized this dual role, “School is a place where you’re supposed to learn, and get good grades, and meet people there. And that’s why school was created, first of all, and it’s just to learn knowledge, and then get a job, and grow up. That’s how life works. But also, it’s used as a socialization platform basically.”<sup>307</sup> Another

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<sup>304</sup> 67:5 (7441:7725)

<sup>305</sup> 11:32 (28591:28641)

<sup>306</sup> 1:72 (45678:45757)

<sup>307</sup> 10:23 (19374:19720)

participant emphasized the learning aspect saying, “I mean what school was designed for was to learn. And do the work that was assigned by the teachers.”<sup>308</sup> Importantly both of these aspects of the nature of schooling, learning and socialization, helped frame further reflection on belonging. For instance, multiple participants discussed how struggling or succeeding within these areas would impact belonging.

In addition to thinking about key learning and socialization functions of schooling, three participants also discussed the compulsory nature of schooling and how that impacts belonging. They felt that by definition everyone belonged in school because students were required to be there. One participant said, “It’s like, everyone belongs in school. If you’re in school. If you’re not retired or graduated. If you’re under 18 you belong in school. Like everyone belongs in school if you’re under 18. But if you... if... how am I gonna phrase this... if you don’t wanna be in school then you don’t want to be in school. But you still belong in school.”<sup>309</sup> For this and the other two participants, simply being school age and forced to go to school meant that students did belong there. Whether they actually wanted to be there was a different question.

***The structure of schools.*** Outside of thinking about the nature of schooling, participants thought a great deal about the overall structure and design of schools.

*Design of schools.* Regarding the structure of schooling, one participant discussed in detail how they felt schools were not designed to effectively help students learn and socialize. In thinking about how schools do not necessarily promote socialization, they said,

I think things like that, grades and school districts, things like that, is a little too like...

separating. When it's not a very important difference between two people. If I had a really

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<sup>308</sup> 22:76 36966:37241)

<sup>309</sup> 65:30 (18627:18960)



good friend in the high school or not necessarily a good friend but if there's someone in the high school that I'd really like to get to know better, it's just like, we don't really have a lot of time and there's no time in the school day to talk to them or anything. Maybe you could schedule a time just so my schedule would allow it, that we could both meet up in the library because we have one library and we share that. That's a good place where you can kind of, do that.<sup>310</sup>

They went on to discuss how schools were not only ineffective in terms of promoting socialization, but they are also not designed to promote learning for all students. They said,

Belonging in school looks like no one really belongs in these particular schools. Because they're not set up like scientifically to how humans learn and process things. But it's set up just by tradition. The desks and the teacher at the front of the room with board, like that's just traditional. We've just kept it that same way. Probably more scientific ways of doing things, more proven methods of studying is to do things with color, and interactive, and hands-on kind of things.<sup>311</sup>

Continuing their thinking about design they related this directly to EBDs. "it's not designed for people and people traits. Like humans. It just isn't. Especially for people with mental issues and stuff. It's extra hard, depending on what it is but it's extra hard."<sup>312</sup> For this participant, there was little chance for students to belong most effectively because schools were not designed with current students in mind.

Likewise, other participants discussed how challenging it can be to belong because of the inflexibility of schools and how they function. Two participants felt that belonging really doesn't

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<sup>310</sup> 3:30 (31494:32158)

<sup>311</sup> 1:96 (60753:61239)

<sup>312</sup> 21:9 (5392:5590)

change between schools, because schools themselves do not change. Belonging in this sense would be somewhat predictable because of a consistent influence from the school environment.

*School size.* School size was discussed as contributing to belonging by a number of students. However, there were differing opinions regarding how and why school size can contribute to belonging. Most commonly participants discussed how a larger school would be advantageous to student belonging. In part, participants felt that a larger school would lead to greater social opportunities. As one participant said, “I would rather seek out belonging. But I think the problem is that most kids realize that there's not a lot of people to find. If you were in a bigger school, this wouldn't even be a problem.”<sup>313</sup> Similarly another student said being in a small school means that students rarely could have a “fresh start”<sup>314</sup> because everyone already knows each other. Being in a larger setting would allow for easier reinvention. For these participants a larger school would mean more access to socialization on their own terms.

Participants who discussed preferring a smaller school tended to do so because of difficulties with social anxiety. As one participant put it, “I’m glad it’s a small school because I hate being in large groups. I mean I’m glad I live in a small town because I mean when I went to XXX, there’s just so many people there and it gives me a panic attack.”<sup>315</sup> One participant differed in their reasoning for preferring a small school. This participant felt that they might not receive effective, individualized services in a larger setting. They said, “Things I like about my school. I guess since it’s smaller, things like special education department is a lot better than what I’ve heard from other kids who go to a bigger school. They’re department of education is

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<sup>313</sup> 13:30 (16178:16369)

<sup>314</sup> 23:84 (52896:52969)

<sup>315</sup> 22:60 (28306:28563)

not that great, probably because it's bigger. So it's more of a focus on you.”<sup>316</sup> This student liked the personalized services they received, and were worried that their needs would not be adequately addressed in a larger setting.

*Rules and policies.* Participants also talked about rules and policies within their schools and how they impact their belonging. Rules and policies with each site tended to be discussed in terms of fairness and equity. This was, in part, previously documented in the section about teachers and behavior management, but was also applicable to school-wide rules.

Participants also talked about how rules and policies can have unintentional consequences when considering belonging. One participant shared a specific example of a rule that can have unintended consequences. They said,

When people have a different sense of what's perfect, that's when things.... You're kind of like, "I don't belong in this group of people." Then sometimes when... we have in the cafeteria a rule that no one sits alone. It kind of goes back to that genuine having to talk to you or not having. If you'll actually be that kid to say, "Okay. I'll go sit with them," it feels worse when the teacher try to force people into doing stuff. Because you're like, "My God, this is just drawing so much attention." It's just so awkward. You know this kid doesn't want to be talking to you, but they have to.<sup>317</sup>

Though the rule in their cafeteria was well intentioned, the result was only further alienation of a student potentially already struggling to belong.

This same participant talked about another policy with unintentional consequences. The policy itself was focused on improving prosocial and academic behaviors. It was set up to reward

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<sup>316</sup> 12:42 (21658:21950)

<sup>317</sup> 24:47 (50882:51490)

students for performing certain actions and subsequently all individuals would benefit. One of the key indicators used was attendance. The participant said that they had previously had attendance issues due to their disability, and this subsequently reflected negatively on not only their possible rewards, but also rewards for their whole class. This only led to a feeling of further isolation because they felt they were letting their classmates down by not being there. The intent was to improve behavior, but it only further worried and isolated the participant.

Participants also talked about the impact of the overall school schedule. This was discussed in a few ways. First, students talked about the schedule in terms of access to their peers. In particular, in one site that had a few different class groupings, participants talked about having their good friends in different groups and not being able to talk with them during the school day due to the schedule. Likewise, they could not remove themselves from frustrating or difficult social interactions with difficult peers because they were always grouped with them. Second, participants talked about the impact of simply being required to be in certain locations for part of the day. They reported belonging somewhere because they were told to be there and “Cause you’re on the sheet for attendance and stuff.”<sup>318</sup> Being told where to be necessarily limited where someone could belong in the first place. Lastly, school schedule was discussed in terms of sleep. Participants felt their school day started far too early. As discussed in an earlier section, sleep was an often discussed contribution.

*Physical safety.* Overall participants felt a high degree of physical safety in their schools, and this contributed positively to their belonging. Simply put, when participants said they did not feel physically safe somewhere, they did not want to be there. This is not to say participants felt

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<sup>318</sup> 65:21 (15250:15301)

uniformly safe. One participant mentioned feeling uneasy because of unlocked doors while another was worried over people walking around school without name tags. Multiple participants also mentioned their worries about possible school shooters. One participant remarked, “The thing is there’s a little bit of like... because I’m just worried about all the school shooters everywhere. So I mean you can’t really say “ok my school is safe 100%”. Cause you know not every school is safe unless they have high security like a prison or something.”<sup>319</sup> While participants did feel safe for the most part, there were still worries and concerns, which participants felt did impact their belonging.

*Available technology.* Two participants discussed liking their school because of the access to materials and technology that it provided. One participant said “I think another one would be all the materials this school has available.”<sup>320</sup> They elaborated, “I also like how they integrate technology, advanced computer technology into classes a lot because the computers that they integrate into classes make it really easy to do work instead of like reading out a question that is like paragraphs long and hard to understand in a textbook. Or reading out an article on a computer and then answering some questions and typing small response to it.”<sup>321</sup> Having access to technology for the student helped them by providing them with flexibility in terms of what they accessed and how they did their work. Additionally, both of the participants felt strongly that they had a personal interest in technology so it was engaging to be able to use technology.

*Type of space.* Before discussing the different kinds of spaces discussed by participants as related to their belonging, it should be noted that one student did not believe that the physical

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<sup>319</sup> 47:6 (3775:4167)

<sup>320</sup> 4:65 (44348:44458)

<sup>321</sup> 4:69 (45681:46070)

space made an impact on belonging. As one student said, “It’s a lot of the groups that you’re in is how you feel. So sometimes I’ll associate—I guess sometimes it’s kind of confusing. Because in a multiuse room, sometimes you’re in there with a really good class that you really feel like you belong. And then sometimes your new class, it’s like, I know no one.”<sup>322</sup> The student put more emphasis on the people within as well as what happens within that space, and felt that ultimately students could belong in any space. That is not to say they do belong everywhere, but that they could. Another student also emphasized the importance of others in the room, “Depending on who you’re seating near and how well you know them, it could be a variety of things. There could be everyone is listening intently or everyone could be making the classroom fall into anarchy.”<sup>323</sup> As with other contributions, the difference, in part, came down to how belonging was understood.

Academic classrooms. Participants discussed their belonging in academic classrooms in terms of the teachers in those classrooms, whether they enjoyed the subject area, the types of activities they engaged in, and whether or not they had access to their friends. Participants discussed academic classrooms (math, English, science, history, etc.) as being more traditional in terms of what they taught and how they taught it, and this led most participants to feel less belonging within academic classrooms because it was misaligned with the way they liked to learn. In reflecting on a time when they felt the least belonging one participant thought about their fifth grade English class. They said, “Fifth grade English was a hard thing for me. Just because what we were doing in class, I’m definitely not, as I said, the writing type. We did just so many writing things. They were always making PowerPoints, or doing this worksheet, or just

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<sup>322</sup> 18:1 (3019:3340)

<sup>323</sup> 6:53 (31096:31310)

doing this. It just was so stale.”<sup>324</sup> Participants also felt that more traditional academic classes also tended to have less relevancy to their lives. One participant said, “We just learn things that we don’t use in life. And teachers try to say like, “oh you need it in life. You need it in life.” And I’m like “What do you need it for?” And then they don’t respond to you. Cause like they know you don’t need it in life. It’s like. Don’t tell me that if it’s not true.”<sup>325</sup> The student explained their point further with an example, “Learn things we need in life. We don’t need to learn about Romeo and Juliet. Life isn’t a love story ok. It’s not. Life is hell and heaven combined. Life is a mixture of everything you can think of.”<sup>326</sup> This echoes similar concerns about relevancy when participants talked about their teachers.

One of the primary distinctions participants made between academic classrooms and specials (art, woodshop, chorus, etc.) was the relationship to relevancy and value and the means of instruction. Participants discussed specials as places where they could learn useful things and where they could be creative. As discussed above as well, relevancy and value were very important for many participants, and courses like woodshop allowed them to do more hands-on work on projects that had real life implications. Whereas some participants struggled to see the value in Romeo and Juliet, it was far easier to see the value in learning to build a shelf. Likewise, specials like health allowed students to deal with topics that were more tangibly relevant to their daily lives.

Participants had disparate experiences in the library (considered here as a special). While some participants were very positive about the library because it was a place where they could socialize and get appropriate help from adults, other students felt it was anxiety provoking. “I’m

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<sup>324</sup> 18:16 (21126:21982)

<sup>325</sup> 64:40 (19891:20187)

<sup>326</sup> 65:41 (25323:25556)

just very anxious in there. Oh my god, like do people think I'm weird and am I sitting in the right place, like is this for high schoolers or something."<sup>327</sup> The unstructured nature could be overwhelming, but the freedom to socialize was a draw for many participants.

*The lunchroom.* The lunchroom is a particular space that garnered attention from a number of participants as a place that can be challenging for belonging, but by other participants as a place that can foster belonging. It was an interesting space because it is one of the only times there are many students together in a relatively unstructured environment. Participants talked about teachers and monitors being present, but there was little other structure. For some students this led to the lunchroom being an important social testing ground, where students will really show you who belongs with whom.

Students who felt little belonging in the lunchroom tended to be students who struggled socially and had fewer friends. One participant summarized this perspective when they discussed how they feel when they are in the lunchroom. They said, "A lot of anxiety. It's just there's too many people in there, and it's loud, and I just don't like it. And I never really go to it. I've never been to it in a while."<sup>328</sup> The student went on to explain that when they do go to lunch they sit at the "reject table"<sup>329</sup> if they do go into the space. On the other hand, there were participants that relished the opportunity to go to the lunchroom. For these participants, it was a time that they could hang out with friends and socialize, and there were few other times in the school day that they could socialize. In talking about why they felt a great deal of belonging in the cafeteria, one

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<sup>327</sup> 21:30 (19517:19706)

<sup>328</sup> 10:5 (5797:5962)

<sup>329</sup> 22:74 (35583:35615)



participant said, “I mean that is usually where I hang out with my friends cause I don’t really get to hang out with my friends a lot after school. So there’s a lot of fun.”<sup>330</sup>

The gymnasium. Gym was another place that was discussed by participants that generated very disparate responses. Some students very much enjoyed gym and felt like they belonged there. Other students had very negative reactions to having to be in gym. Often this was because students said they were not athletic. As one student said, “I’m not in shape, so you’re not really like a gym person if you’re not in shape, they don’t really like you.”<sup>331</sup> Again not all participants agreed with this idea. Another participant said they were not very athletic either, but it did not really matter. They said, “Basketball is definitely not my strong suit. But I feel like kids don’t really care. So I feel like I do belong there.”<sup>332</sup>

Another participant shared a different perspective on why the gym was a place where they felt very little belonging. They said,

I mean some games are fun and some games are not fun at all. Like when I forget to bring like extra change of clothes for gym which is all the time. I always forget to do that and like another thing is I don’t like the locker room. Like I do not go in there. I will avoid that. I was like “nope. I will not go in there.” Cause it’s awkward. I don’t like it. I mean if there were stalls to get changed in then I would do that. But I mean there are kind of some stalls, not a lot. There are, but the thing is that sometimes people will accidentally open the curtain or something and it will be like awkward. With them just running into you like that.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> 48:1 (1465:1696)

<sup>331</sup> 62:11 (5526:5633)

<sup>332</sup> 18:8 (7664:7822)

<sup>333</sup> 48:7 (3468:4122)

For this participant, though there were some fun activities and games, the locker room made it a space where they felt like they did not belong because of feeling very awkward and uncomfortable there.

*Online learning.* Neither of the sites had specific online courses, but in thinking about the types of spaces, one participant reflected on their past experiences in an online school. While there were benefits, ultimately, they found their time in the online program detrimental to their overall belonging within the school and in a more long-term way as well. They said, “Doing the online school, and being as isolated as I was, which I didn't help myself with; I didn't ask friends to hang out outside of school.”<sup>334</sup> For this participant, being isolated socially only triggered a downward spiral of further isolation, and a feeling that they did not practice vital social skills.

*The structure of special education.* Though both sites were inclusive schools, each site took a different approach to providing services for students with EBDs. As such each program is discussed differently here.

*Special education program for students with EBDs.* One site enrolled students within a specific program dedicated to providing services to students with EBDs. This was in a sense a homeroom type model where students would be based within one classroom where they would have some instruction, but would still attend their courses in general education classrooms with additional supports. For some students this support was having a special educator accompany them to classes. It should be noted that not all participants from this site were enrolled in the program. Only three of the five participants were enrolled with the specific program. All participants, however, discussed the program as well as the services more generally.

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<sup>334</sup> 20:36 (18828:19552)

Though their direct experiences within the special education program were not necessarily bad or negative, participant enrollment within the program was reported as negatively perceived. For instance, when asked what it means to be in the special education program, one participant said, “You’re stupid. Or you’re not as smart as everyone. Or you have a disability.”<sup>335</sup> This participant went on to explain that they are further isolated because they are not in accelerated classes. They said, “I’m in the stupid class. And the intelligent kids are in the accelerated class. So I’m not really in the intelligent class.”<sup>336</sup> When participants were in classes with students without disabilities, they often felt that they stood out because of their status within their program. In talking about how they feel like they stand out within their classes, one participant said, “Because I’m special, I’m the only special one in that class.”<sup>337</sup> Though the program might be helpful in some ways, there was trepidation about what it means for their identity and how they are perceived by others.

Students did find positives about being in the special education program. One participant in particular felt that the program was very encouraging and helped them express their creativity. They said,

I mean there’s some things that I like about... about the umm SPED class that I’m actually in. <names teacher> room. Like umm. When... when everybody meets a monthly goal of behaving themselves and stuff then we get a prize, and that’s actually good encouragement to any student. I feel like. You know. Which is a good thing. Like it can be the littlest things really. I mean. Hmm. I don’t know. But I mean this can’t really be provided to every students, and I understand that cause you know the school isn’t rich.

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<sup>335</sup> 65:26 (17019:17095)

<sup>336</sup> 65:23 (15836:15974)

<sup>337</sup> 56:22 (10301:10360)

You know. So I mean but I like that we get chances to do stuff like that and that <names teacher> is letting me express my creativity by painting on the wall.<sup>338</sup>

The special education room for this participant was a safe space where they could develop and express themselves safely. Though this participant did express struggling in other ways, this was one place that helped them gain a sense of belonging.

*General education supports and a social emotional learning space.* The other site provided a range of in-class supports as well as access to a social emotional learning space. This space was available to participants at different times in the day and was someplace where they could go for breaks or to do work when necessary. It was staffed by special educators and had a variety of quiet areas and alternative activities. Considering the overall focus on inclusion, it was not a primary instructional space, but specialized instruction was provided as necessitated. This included a range of programing related to social-emotional learning or other student needs. Students also had access to the space when they needed it for breaks during the day.

Overall, participants talked very highly of their experiences within the space, finding it both safe and comfortable. In part this was because participants recognized the space was designed to better suit their needs. One participant said, “I mean they’re not classrooms and there usually isn’t a whole classful of kids in there. And they’re more designed to, they are designed to pay attention to the anxiety and mental health stuff.”<sup>339</sup> Another participant agreed with this and added that the specialist who had specific training in EBDs was also very helpful for them. They said, “Well, I like <names teacher> because she’s patient, and she’s awesome, and she really helps me out with my work. And she does a lot of cool events for us. Also why, I love math a lot.

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<sup>338</sup> 46:64 (44001:44719)

<sup>339</sup> 21:34 (21753:21947)

I feel safe and comfortable in the room. And also the SEL room is self-explanatory—safe learning environment. And I usually do most of my work in there.”<sup>340</sup> Other participants discussed how it was a place where they could go to have personal space, which was something they otherwise would not have during the school day, and a place where if students were feeling overly anxious, they could go to relax there.

Another participant also felt safe, and added that they appreciated being able to be in a space where other students understood some of the issues they might be experiencing in terms of their disability. They said, “Well, there’s just other kids in there who have the same feelings, and thoughts that I do, and disabilities that I do. So also it’s just a nice comfortable room where I go. I have my work in there and stuff.”<sup>341</sup> This space was unlike their other classrooms in the sense that they could connect with others around issues related to having a disability.

Though participants tended to talk very little about their services, two participants from this site talked directly about accommodations. One participant was questioned about whether they are comfortable with their accommodations. They said, “Yeah it just makes me feel like I cannot compare myself to other people if I am getting different accommodations. There is a lot of comparing and a lot of competition especially with a few people I know, it is almost as if you need to be better than they are. It just does not feel genuine when I do it.”<sup>342</sup> In this sense the accommodations might have helped, but the participant was not sure it would be fair to utilize them.

***School culture.*** In addition to more structural type aspects of their school, participants also discussed school culture and how it may or may not contribute to student belonging. In

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<sup>340</sup> 10:1 (4114:4445)

<sup>341</sup> 10:2 (4597:4804)

<sup>342</sup> 23:63 (36583:36886)

talking about school culture, participants talked primarily about others within their school and the mindset that they have in terms of inclusivity. This took different forms, but often they discussed open-mindedness, acceptance, and understanding as key glimpses into how the general culture of the school impacted belonging. One participant remarked, “Because being nonjudgmental, people will be more accepting of people. The school is open. That means that there more people were accepting, and different personalities, and yeah, being fair. Because I think people are judged too much on little things about people.”<sup>343</sup> This is not to say that all participants felt their school was open to everyone in reality. For instance, one participant said, “There’s a couple open, gay kids, but the school isn’t that accepting of them.”<sup>344</sup> They explained that in part they knew this because “I hear gay jokes made all the time when they walk by in the hallways.”<sup>345</sup> Students from both sites were clear that inappropriate joking was often a key indicator of the underlying culture, and a detriment to belonging for students being ridiculed, as well as students who are more open and accepting of a diverse range of people. Though not the target of the joke, participants often discussed being offended by derogatory jokes and therefore would not want to be around the person or people telling the joke.

That is not to say that students perceived their school as particularly racist, homophobic, or sexist. Though one participant did openly say they thought their school was, most participants felt the culture of their school was accepting. As one participant put it, “This school in particular, has got a really good, positive outlook on a lot of things But it’s just not as in-depth as it could and should be.”<sup>346</sup> However, even within this accepting climate, not all students are equally

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<sup>343</sup> 13:33 (17472:17735)

<sup>344</sup> 60:67 (30168:30273)

<sup>345</sup> 60:68 (30393:30461)

<sup>346</sup> 21:17 (10118:10263)

accepted. The same participant went on to explain that they felt LGBTQ+ students tended to be excluded within their school. They said, “we're trying, the way things are going right now, we're trying to just normalize LGBTQ plus. We're trying to normalize that stuff. Some people that aren't LGBT, et cetera, they need to accept that there are people like that, and the same other way around. That does not mean by any means that you need to segregate them.”<sup>347</sup> Though there might be acceptance among their particular group, there was still a feeling of segregation and isolation because of perceived lack of acceptance within the broader school culture.

*School messaging around inclusion.* Part of what indicated this “positive outlook” to students was the messaging around inclusivity. Participants talked about the multitude of posters and other types of messaging within their schools. This was a particularly relevant issue for participants in the site with the SEL classroom. Participants from this site felt both positive and negatively about the inclusive messaging. One participant questioned whether there was significant meaning behind things like posters on the walls that encourage inclusion. They referred to these types of ephemera as “happiness propaganda” as a way of illustrating that these were not meant to elicit real change, but rather they were just meant to influence. They said, “I am going to quote myself the ‘take your happy pills propaganda’. Cause, they have all these – be individual or be positive or stay happy propaganda plastered all over the walls and floor and ceiling.”<sup>348</sup> However, other participants within the same site drew a great deal of inspiration from the same posters. One participant said, “There’s a lot of posters around the school related to belonging. It’s one of the posters in the school, it’s right in the hallway that says, “Why are you trying to fit in when you were born to stand out?” So I notice that every day.”<sup>349</sup> Another student

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<sup>347</sup> 1:73 (46026:46386)

<sup>348</sup> 4:73 (51249:51462)

<sup>349</sup> 10:46 (33862:34404)

said a similar thing, “One of them is like, they’re kind of corny because it’s school, but they’re pretty solid posters. And if she didn’t have the outlook on things, they wouldn’t be hanging up.”<sup>350</sup> What is important about both the positive and negative perspectives on the posters is the interpretation of underlying intent of the messaging, which was interpreted differently.

*Culture and disability.* Participants also talked about the overall approach and culture around mental health in their schools. Participants across sites felt like there was still a lot of stigma around disability in their schools, and often major issues related to mental health were not appropriately addressed. This was problematic for participant belonging. As one participant said, “I don’t belong with someone who thinks that mental health is just in your head.”<sup>351</sup> Without an understanding of mental health many students felt misunderstood and stigmatized.

This was evidenced in two ways. First, was through participant conversations regarding passing, a phenomenon well documented in disability studies where an individual with a disability hides part of their identity or behaviors to “pass” as normal, and having to fake belonging. Participants at both sites talked about how it was important to occasionally hide who you are if you want to belong. This was discussed in terms of being less “crazy, as well as toning down your personality. It was also discussed in terms of who might struggle to belong the most. As previously discussed within this chapter, some participants felt that having emotional disorders was better than having behavioral disorders because one can hide an emotional disorder. What is important regarding school culture, is the fact that participants felt the need to hide those aspects of themselves.

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<sup>350</sup> 21:16 (9479:9651)

<sup>351</sup> 61:25 (14033:14187)



Second, students from the site with the specialized program talked a lot about the negativity surrounding the label: “sped kid”. This term was used by multiple students and they related it was often used in a pejorative or negative way. This label represented difference and both sites talked about not wanting to be called out for differences. For participants, the label had additional meaning because they often questioned what it meant about who they were. “Sped” was also a label that influenced the perception of who they were, and often led to incorrect assessments. As one participant said, “There’s a lot of bad labels that count, kind... of contradict that you know the good statements in somebody”<sup>352</sup> Participants from the site felt they were often the scapegoat because of their label. In talking about teachers unfairly treating them, one participant said, “I’ll just be in class and then someone else will do something and then they would immediately jump to me because I’m the SPED one.”<sup>353</sup> It was not only teachers, but also peers who viewed them through this skewed label.

In general, participants across both sites questioned the value of labels. One participant had a particularly interesting perspective in that they felt labels are merely temporary markers and might reflect a moment but are subject to change. Summarizing this perspective, they said, “A label, when you put a label on something that means you put a label on a container and you label your container soup. You will only put soup in it and it will always be for soup but if you put a temporary sticker on it, you can change it eventually and change your soup container to a pasta container or a steak container or pulled pork sandwich container.”<sup>354</sup> Other participants echoed similar statements and sought understanding both of the immediate circumstance and of their past behaviors. Labels simply did not tell the whole story.

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<sup>352</sup> 46:33 (18871:19057)

<sup>353</sup> 64:54 (25386:25516)

<sup>354</sup> 4:34 (25764:26122)

*Culture and learning.* In terms of overall school culture, students talked a lot about what it means to be a good learner within their schools. There was a great deal of agreement around this point across sites. Participants felt strongly that a good learner is someone who is engaged, participates, tries their best, is quiet, and follows the rules. For instance, one participant said, “I wouldn’t say in particular somebody who gets all straight A’s. Like I mean you could be a good student in a lot of different ways. Like maybe you’re not a good student in this class but like you can be a good student in the other class. Like I guess it’s like how long like you pay attention in class and like get your work done.”<sup>355</sup> Another student reiterated this same point. They said, “I guess someone who really cares for their work and that really tries. I think a lot of kids that are in school have a false perception of what a good learner is. A lot of kids think that grades really matter with your intelligence, but that’s not really true.”<sup>356</sup> For both of these participants what really mattered was effort, engagement, and persistence, as opposed to grades or other similar measures.

That is not to say that all learners were accepted in their schools. Participants from both sites said that certain kinds of learners are far more accepted and valued. As one participant put it, “Learning, like you know.... People who learn differently are kind of not liked.”<sup>357</sup> For this and other students learning differently meant struggling in classes, which in turn meant being called out for their differences. This was echoed by many participants’ calls for more hands-on and practical work.

### **Indicators of Belonging**

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<sup>355</sup> 50:61 (29109:29513)

<sup>356</sup> 12:48 (25651:25908)

<sup>357</sup> 60:96 (46339:46415)

Participants also discussed a number of indicators of belonging. These responses vary from definitions or contributions in that they are operationalizing what belonging may or may not look like. For instance, if one was to walk into a school and look for belonging, what would one look for? Participants had a number of suggestions on what one could look to observe.

Before outlining some of the indicators discussed by participants, it is important to note that multiple participants discussed how difficult it can be to observe belonging. This is aligned with what was discussed in the definitions section about belonging as being felt. In detailing how to tell if someone belongs or not, one participant said, “Well, you could look at his facial expression, what he could be doing, if he was somewhere, if he was in the office. You never know. Someone who gets in trouble a lot could like school, but not the fact that they get in trouble all the time. That’s really hard to determine because you never know what anyone’s thinking, until we develop the technology.”<sup>358</sup> Another participant echoed the same sentiment, “They might look like they’re really happy and they’re just fine with their situation. And then some kids really deep down inside, they might feel like, I don’t really have a lot of friends. I don’t really talk. I’m just trying to keep a happy face so I don’t look even worse. You know. They might do that.”<sup>359</sup>

Importantly, you can observe certain things that would indicate belonging is more likely or not, but to really know how participants felt one would have to talk with the individual themselves. As one participant put it, “How would you know? Well, they could just straight up tell you “I like school. I don’t like school.” Or you could ask them “Do you like school because the activities are fun or you have cool friends or the people here are nice?” They could just say

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<sup>358</sup> 9:48 (26172:26525)

<sup>359</sup> 47:59 (43949:44254)

yes or no.”<sup>360</sup> Yet, even these questions might not reveal the full experience of the student.

Multiple participants talked about how students might be reluctant to share their experiences, and it is not always easy to tell when this is the case. One participant said, “So it’s like everyone says they belong, but it’s like they’re really good at bluffing. I’m like really bad at bluffing. You can tell when someone really belongs or they don’t, someone’s truly comfortable when they’re not.”<sup>361</sup> Observing belonging was necessarily complicated.

**Presence.** One basic indicator discussed by students is presence. Presence here refers to whether or not students were allowed to be in certain places and under what conditions students were allowed to be there. As one participant put it, “I know someone belongs when they are there at whatever the situation.”<sup>362</sup> Another participant discussed how they do not feel belonging in certain classrooms because they are not in the honors classes and that is where the honors classes were held. One student summarized that you could tell a student belonged within a class because they were “in that class”.<sup>363</sup> On a basic level, observing where students are and are allowed to be is an important indicator of belonging.

**Communication.** Participants related that one of the key indicators of belonging was communication. This was discussed broadly to include student-student communication as well as adult-student communication. As one participant put it, “You’d probably know if, I guess, people talked to you. If people engage you in conversations. If you feel like you can talk to other people.”<sup>364</sup> Importantly, one could look for whether the communication was happening, and if it was occurring in a reciprocal way. One participant emphasized this reciprocity. They said,

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<sup>360</sup> 9:49 (27313:27572)

<sup>361</sup> 61:51 (31317:31538)

<sup>362</sup> 65:18 (13556:13624)

<sup>363</sup> 65:8 (6305:6329)

<sup>364</sup> 24:39 (43931:44149)

Specifically, because like anyone can have a large amount of interaction by walking up to every single person in the room and saying hi. But it's those other people are the ones that walk up to them and say hi. Then that's when you know they're acquainted with those people. Because you can see a person out on the street, greeting every single person as they go, but that doesn't mean they know every single person that they greet.<sup>365</sup>

This type of communication was not simply exchanging pleasantries, but rather deep conversation that indicated underlying connections. Another participant made a similar point. They said that communication also involves being heard and having input respected. They said, “When people don’t always listen to you, it doesn’t feel like you’re supposed to be there because they're ignoring you or just not listening to you. It's like, your input isn't being accepted so why would you be accepted?”<sup>366</sup>

One can also look to see if the communication itself is fluid or forced. Multiple participants discussed how you can often tell if someone does not belong if other people are hesitant to talk with the individual. As one participant said, “If you’re in a group and you feel like everyone’s hesitating to talk to you, I’ve had that happen before, like I kind of insert myself into conversations sometimes, it’s not my best characteristic, but you can tell when they don’t want to talk to you. You can tell when they hesitate to talk around you and it’s like, okay... so not belonging in a group.”<sup>367</sup> When there was a degree of hesitation, this was an indicator that they might not belong fully within a group.

Communication was also discussed as being related to engagement with others. This differed from communication in that engagement was something more indicative of an in-depth

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<sup>365</sup> 5:34 (26947:27379)

<sup>366</sup> 3:6 (6985:7204)

<sup>367</sup> 61:16 (7859:8353)

connection. It was not just talking, but collaborating with others. As one participant put it, you will know a student belongs when, “the ball is being passed to every teammate”.<sup>368</sup> Similarly, another participant said, “If they’re all getting along. And like nobody’s trying to start drama.”<sup>369</sup>

**Non-verbal communication.** Related to communication, some participants discussed the importance of looking at students’ non-verbal communication as well. In particular, participants talked about things like making eye-contact and watching facial expressions. In talking about how people who do not belong might look, one participant said, “When they speak, they avoid eye contact, they don’t say hi to people in the hallway, they’re more closed off than other people.”<sup>370</sup> Similarly another participant said, “You can see their facial expression, the way they’re acting, you know if they’re in a bad mood.”<sup>371</sup> As with communication more generally, one cannot always really tell if someone belongs based on non-verbal communication alone. As one participant said, “you can’t be 100% for sure.”<sup>372</sup> However, it can be one indicator in the larger scheme of things.

**Engagement in class.** Participants also discussed how one might be able to know if a student felt belonging within a class. Participants discussed that you could see how engaged students are with the activities and content in class. One participant said you could see students belonged in a class, “when there’s a lot of participation in a class.”<sup>373</sup> They went on to elaborate, “I guess it’s like engaging in the class. For example, like there’s a student in my class. He raises his hand to answer questions like some of them are not the accurate answers, but he participates

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<sup>368</sup> 51:16 (7571:7618)

<sup>369</sup> 51:9 (4392:4471)

<sup>370</sup> 61:52 (31612:31738)

<sup>371</sup> 58:10 (4413:4506)

<sup>372</sup> 9:50 (27696:27900)

<sup>373</sup> 51:18 (7700:7747)

stuff like that.”<sup>374</sup> If students were unwilling to participate, it was unlikely that they felt like they belonged there. In part, this could be because, as one participant put it, they might not feel “comfortable making mistakes”<sup>375</sup>.

Other participants talked more specifically about engagement with other students or activities in class. One participant said, “Just not in being awkward and just sitting there, like if you need to talk. Or if it's a group project or something, just saying something is better than nothing.”<sup>376</sup> What was important was that students were engaged and comfortable enough in the environment to engage, not only with others, but also the activities in the class.

One participant discussed engagement as an indicator in terms of paying attention. They said, “Sometimes you can tell just by the way they are acting if they feel like they belong or not. If they’re glancing over or if they aren’t really paying attention to what’s happening. You maybe say ‘they feel like they aren’t supposed to be in that group’ or if they don’t have a place in that group.”<sup>377</sup> This again goes back to belonging as something felt, but also points towards understanding levels of engagement or in this case disengagement when thinking about belonging.

**Engagement in the hallways and lunchroom.** Participants discussed how observing student interaction in the hallways and lunchroom would be very informative in terms of understanding belonging. This was because each of these places was relatively unstructured and as such was an area where students engaged more authentically than in other places. In talking about observing belonging in the hallways, one participant said, “Well, no one really interacts in

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<sup>374</sup> 51:25 (10626:10845)

<sup>375</sup> 61:31 (17558:17778)

<sup>376</sup> 24:10 (18167:18328)

<sup>377</sup> 24:11 (19571:19878)

the hall unless there's someone they really know well. Sometimes if they're going to the same class, they'll talk on the way. Or someone you know might ask you what the homework is in a certain class, but that's pretty much about it for hallway interaction."<sup>378</sup> The same participant said that the lunchroom was a good place to observe belonging. They said, "Well if they have three or more people at their lunch table, that means they're probably friends with those three people. Because if you're sitting with one other person at a lunch table, you might just be sitting there because it's the only table with an open seat. But if you have like three other people there, then you're probably in a conversation that is meaningful."<sup>379</sup> One could observe belonging in classrooms, but this would not necessarily capture the more authentic dynamic between students.

**Respect and authenticity.** Participants also discussed the importance of looking to see if students are respected and able to be themselves. These issues were raised in interrelated ways. If students were respected or had "clout", then they likely felt more belonging because they could have influence. When respected, they could also be more authentic because they could be comfortable being themselves. As discussed within the defining belonging section, participants felt strongly that one needed to be oneself to belong. Feeling respected for who you are can help with that aspect, and is something that could indicate belonging.

**Student choices.** Another interesting indicator raised by three participants was the idea of understanding the choices that students make as a means of understanding belonging. In particular, one can look at decisions made by the student and also the group. For instance, one student talked about needing to know if students would make the same choices outside of school too. Within school they seemingly had friends and social connections, but these same individuals

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<sup>378</sup> 6:52 (30748:31038)

<sup>379</sup> 5:36 (28292:28686)



did not want to do things with them outside of school. For this participant, that was a clear indication that they did not really belong with that other individual. What this points towards is understanding student choices, but also understanding those choices across contexts.

### **Means of Improving Belonging**

In keeping with the overall participant focus on both individual and environmental contributions, participants discussed means of improving belonging at both the school level and the personal level. Despite having advice on multiple levels, it should be noted that participants often said that they were struggling to articulate clear and concise means of improving belonging and often doubted they knew how to really address the issues.

Participants were not always clear on why that might be the case, but one participant felt it was because there was not much that could be done to change belonging. They said, “It's still a school environment. I mean, school environments can't change that much between grades. The school environment and classrooms will always have the occasional bad apple. It will always have the occasional unliked class or mean teacher.”<sup>380</sup> This participant went on to say, “Students will often just tell the teacher what they think they want to hear. You've got to be really attentive to what they say. Because us students often feel like we can handle issues on our own. Oftentimes we can because we know the solutions to things. We just don't have the authority to enact those solutions.”<sup>381</sup> For this participant, change was difficult within schools, yet if a change in belonging was going to happen teachers and administrators needed to start listening to students and giving students the autonomy to enact solutions.

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<sup>380</sup> 7:17 (29985:30230)

<sup>381</sup> 7:29 (38508:38834)

**Advice regarding school change.** In thinking about how to improve belonging participants often talked about changes to aspects of the school. These suggestions ranged from addressing scheduling to overall school culture.

***Change school culture.*** In terms of school level advice, participants were clear that to encourage belonging within schools, increased understanding and appreciation of diversity were necessary. Summarizing this type of advice one participant said, “Do not punish them for being different.”<sup>382</sup> This participant and others discussed building a school culture that is more open, accepting, and respectful of all individuals, and this in turn would influence and impact the students as well. As one participant remarked, “Well I think they should do like... they should keep trying to get kids to like respect each other. Like if that... if there’s an answer to that this whole like fitting in stuff would be better.”<sup>383</sup>

One participant recommended having support groups for different diverse populations such as the LGBTQ+ population, as a means of improving belonging. They said,

That's why it is important to kind of have diversity, and stuff, and for there to be like gay support groups. Or, people that have shared the same kind of experiences everywhere.

Because people get in that head space. This is the end of the world. This is what my life is. I'm not like these people. That's not okay. That's the issue. It should be shared that it's

not the end of the world. It's gonna get better.<sup>384</sup>

Support groups were seen as a way to help LGBTQ+ students process and make sense of their experiences and become more comfortable with their identities.

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<sup>382</sup> 63:18 (23751:23790)

<sup>383</sup> 53:27 (25075:25289)

<sup>384</sup> 1:66 (38627:39063)

***Facilitate social interaction.*** Participants also discussed improving belonging through the facilitation of social interaction among students. Some participants felt it was difficult to make new friends in middle school. For instance, one participant said, “Because now we’re in middle school and high school. You can’t really...it’s hard to make new friends. Because usually you make all the friends in elementary school because you’re always outside, you have recess. And we have just outside time and not a lot of people do stuff outside.”<sup>385</sup> Participants who felt this way recognized the importance of helping facilitate social interactions that would encourage the building of friendships. This was something they felt was no longer done within the increasingly academically focused middle school environments.

It is important to distinguish facilitating social interactions from simply having a student go sit with a student who is alone, which according to participants is an often used but ill-advised strategy. As previously discussed, in many ways, students felt like if it had gotten to the point where a student was sitting alone it was too late to intervene, and simply telling another student to go sit with them would only serve to call additional attention to them. Additionally, the student who already might not feel belonging would know that the interaction was not genuine. That is not to say that teachers or other adults in the school could not help facilitate these interactions, but that particular strategy was identified as not always being effective.

If teachers or other adults were to identify someone who could connect with a person who might be struggling to belong, participants discussed finding a student who is open to making new friends themselves. This could be someone who has friends already or not. Most importantly they are a student also seeking social connections. As one participant said,

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<sup>385</sup> 11:31 (27228:27509)

Maybe they can try to find another nice student who is open to going and actually being friends with other people. You know. Like how I was saying that everybody should be open to everybody else. Well maybe a teacher can find somebody who is open to everybody and ask that person, “Can you try to conversate with this person. They don’t seem like they have a lot of friends.” You know, but without the teacher saying something to the person who is struggling. Because then that would just make them seem like they’re... like... like that will just lower their self-confidence even more. Like “wow. I’m that lonely. I’m a loser. I don’t have any friends.” You know. So maybe just ask somebody politely. Like somebody who is nice and trustworthy to be a good friend to that person.<sup>386</sup>

Importantly, the teacher in this scenario was identifying students who were open to making friends and helping them connect with someone who might want friends. The idea was not to simply address the fact someone is sitting alone, but rather to address why they are sitting alone in the first place in a way that is not further alienating. This participant went on to talk about one possible strategy for helping facilitate this type of more positive interactions. They discussed having a scheduled time where students can have a show and tell type activity. They said,

“Maybe like once every couple of months there could be a day out of the week where everybody could show... kind of like a show and tell kind of day of what they like. And they can write down things that they like and they can pass it around to people. Kind of like... kind of like a pen pal, but you know they just switch with a random person that they don’t know. Like a teacher could get all the papers and then switch with people. And

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<sup>386</sup> 49:7 (10041:10839)

then they could find each other, and be like “oh. You like this and this? Well I like this and this.” You know. Maybe try to find people who like the same things.”<sup>387</sup>

This could help improve belonging because students would be able to learn more about each other and make personal connections they normally would not have made.

Another participant discussed having specific times planned where people from different groups can spend time together. They said, “school should just like... make kids put kids in like different groups of people like they don’t know and really like connect with. And just like have them sit together and have a conversation.”<sup>388</sup> As with the suggestion from the previous participant, this activity would in turn help students learn more about each other and discover commonalities that they would not otherwise have found.

***Increase options and choices.*** Multiple participants discussed how they felt belonging could be improved with additional options and choices. At the school level, participants often discussed how helpful it would be if they were able to choose their own classes. One participant said, “More classrooms. You can... you can like... there’s more off team classes you can take. Instead of art or gym you can pick like, like wood class. And stuff like that.”<sup>389</sup> Similarly, another participant talked about how there would be more options to learn at a different pace. They said, “Each school can help a person in different ways. This one helps with the sort of advanced learning that I would like to have. Because I like to learn at a fast pace. Because if I learn at a fast pace, then I can have it for any situations where I need it or any situation where I want to use it.”<sup>390</sup> Choice of course was prefaced on having productive and interesting options

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<sup>387</sup> 49:8 (12155:12750)

<sup>388</sup> 53:22 (22190:22382)

<sup>389</sup> 64:13 (8379:8541)

<sup>390</sup> 7:8 (21690:22024)

from which to choose. Simply choosing from two non-productive options would have little effect on belonging.

***Additional environmental changes.*** Participants also thought about ways to improve the environment in other ways. One participant discussed how they would like to have time for additional sleep during the day. They said, “I wish that we could have like a nap time. ‘Cause we like 8th graders, 7th graders, high schoolers need that.”<sup>391</sup>

***Advice for teachers and staff.*** In addition to advice around changing school more broadly, participants also had a lot of advice to give to teachers and staff.

***Be caring.*** One of the more salient pieces of advice given by participants to teachers was simply to care about them as people and understand how important the role of a teacher can be. As one participant said, “To be concerned with your students' wellbeing and that's a part of having these jobs because you're shaping people. This is the future. You are in charge. It's a big responsibility and you want to make sure you do it right.”<sup>392</sup> Teachers can have a large impact on the experiences of students both directly and indirectly, and this participant felt that teachers need to first and foremost be aware of this responsibility.

***Be fair.*** One of the key ways in which participants talked about improving belonging was through having teachers be fairer. One way in which teachers could be fairer was by understanding the individual needs of their students. One participant said, “Maybe in a class, like if it's a student that you know has maybe had troubles in the past, make sure they have, like if they do get along with any kids, like one kid in the class. Because just with projects and all that

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<sup>391</sup> 50:56 (26397:26547)

<sup>392</sup> 3:39 (37712:37935)

stuff, it makes you feel a lot more included in the class. Especially with discussions and you feel you're not being judged by everyone.”<sup>393</sup>

Fairness was also discussed in terms of punishment and behavior management. Participants felt that often punishments were unfairly or inappropriately applied. As one participant said, “There are different levels of problems. But you know there's not really a lot of different levels to take care of the problems?”<sup>394</sup> The idea was not to eliminate punishment or discipline, but rather to understand what might be appropriate given the situation and adapt the discipline to the given situation without it being biased by history of previous behaviors. Often participants felt students were pre-judged and not given the chance to explain behavior. To increase fairness, teachers should give all students a chance to explain their behaviors as any other students would. As one participant said, “Even if the student has a record for you know being troublesome or making trouble sometimes. You know. The teacher should still give the person a chance to you know explain themselves.”<sup>395</sup> When discipline or correction was necessary, then teachers also need to be sensitive to how this discipline was delivered so as not to stigmatize or isolate students. Notably, participants did not want to feel “called out”. One participant said, “Maybe be a bit more discreet about talking to them. Like instead of saying I need to talk to you right in the middle of class. Like maybe catch them after class. It just feels like really embarrassing and feeling like oh god, the only kid who has to do this.”<sup>396</sup>

***Be flexible and patient.*** Participants also talked about patience as being very important for them in terms of improving their belonging within classes. One participant said, “Be more

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<sup>393</sup> 25:31 (30148:30524)

<sup>394</sup> 46:61 40082:41244)

<sup>395</sup> 46:60 (39007:39190)

<sup>396</sup> 25:36 (34812:35070)

patient. That's all I would ask."<sup>397</sup> They continued, "Well, first of all, I'd say have teachers be told that they should be a little more flexible. Because a lot of teachers that I've had in the past, they're not necessarily as flexible and they don't have a lot of patience."<sup>398</sup> This participant focused on how teachers being more patient would help them with their belonging because they would in turn be more successful within their classes. Another participant agreed that patience was critical in helping students who might be struggling. They said, "Maybe like they don't understand something, not getting as frustrated towards them. Because you know that may not be their strong suit and that might not I guess help in the process. They might just start thinking oh god, I'm not good at this, I'm not good at anything. And then they don't think about what's actually supposed to be getting done."<sup>399</sup>

Other participants focused more on flexibility. One participant listed a few different ways that they would like teachers to be more flexible. They said, "Some things like that, I understand why we're doing this, so I'd rather do it in a different way. In a different space or without so much instruction from the teacher. I personally like assigned seats because it's like, this is your desk, this is your space, this is where you're supposed to sit just because I have an issue with space. I hate having to choose my seat, especially when I don't have friends in the class. Just things like that."<sup>400</sup> These were just a few of the many ways that flexibility was discussed.

Participants also felt that belonging could be improved by giving students more input into their own learning and education. One participant presented a unique idea as to how student input might be incorporated. They said,

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<sup>397</sup> 11:21 (22192:22234)

<sup>398</sup> 11:17 (20457:20678)

<sup>399</sup> 25:34 (31874:32223)

<sup>400</sup> 3:36 (34556:34998)



Every year or so before summer starts or something we could have our own umm. Like everybody could have a vote on what next year for art class we should do for like assignments. Different assignments that we should do. You know. Or maybe like every week or something when art class first starts or something people could say what they think we should do for art class. And they could have votes for, you know, maybe a ballot box or something for different things. You know. To give kids more options.<sup>401</sup>

What this participant and others were pointing out was the importance of giving students additional say in their own education and learning. Often, they felt like education was simply being delivered to them, as opposed to being shaped by them.

***Increase understanding of individuals.*** The idea of teachers being more patient was also often tied to the idea of having teachers be more understanding of students as individuals. In particular, participants wanted teachers to understand who they were as people and as learners. Multiple participants discussed wanting teachers to understand more about EBDs. As one participant said, “It’s like a lot of my life has been consumed by anxiety and affected by anxiety and at one point depression. And all these issues and it’s like no one knows a lick about any of this if they haven’t experienced it. But that would be really helpful if they did.”<sup>402</sup>. Increased understanding of their experience could lead to practices that are more sensitive, compassionate, and better suited to meeting their needs. One way this participant felt that understanding could be built was through additional teacher training regarding EBDs. Within the context of talking about one particular teacher, they said, “I think that's an issue with her. Teachers don't have any

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<sup>401</sup> 46:19 (10414:10924)

<sup>402</sup> 21:18 (10413:10674)

mandatory training or knowledge about mental disabilities, and learning disabilities, and things like that. Most of team do really well with it, though.”<sup>403</sup>

Other participants wanted teachers to understand who they were as learners. One participant remarked, “I’m really hard on myself about that stuff. So maybe I don’t know, yeah, like patience. Know that I’m already kind of mad at myself about not knowing it.”<sup>404</sup> Other participants wanted teachers to understand that they do better with hands on learning. They said, “I like to learn hands on more, and that would like help me a lot in school.”<sup>405</sup> This was commonly discussed by participants as something they felt teachers did not understand.

One other participant discussed understanding student interests as being important, mainly because if teachers understood their interests they could make learning more engaging. They said, “I guess have kids use that, but have it incorporated with their interests. So they would be at least a little bit more interested in doing it instead of just doing plain numbers on the board that kids don’t really care about.”<sup>406</sup> As previously discussed, when learning was engaging, this meant students felt more belonging because they wanted to be there and participate in the learning. Understanding student interests was one way in which this could be done.

Related to understanding students more thoroughly, participants also felt belonging could be increased if teachers were aware of potential mental health issues students might be experiencing, and whether or not that might be affecting their belonging. One participant said, “The teachers that work here should keep their eyes open more for like kids who feel like

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<sup>403</sup> 1:88 (54974:55184)

<sup>404</sup> 25:30 (27930:28120)

<sup>405</sup> 64:59 (28209:28354)

<sup>406</sup> 12:29 (13214:13439)

they're... who seem like they're alone, and like seem depressed and stuff like that because like they might not show it but it's not good."<sup>407</sup>

Two participants mentioned paying particular attention to whether someone is experiencing bullying. One participant said, "People should be aware of the difference between a game, like mockery, or bullying, and a friendly competition."<sup>408</sup> They went on to say, "They should ask if they are having a bad time. If it sounds like someone is just saying what they believe someone wants to hear, then they're probably being bullied."<sup>409</sup> The other participant who felt it would be important to understand whether a student felt bullied said, "Like if a kid says that they've been bullied, then they're not going to sit around and wait for something else to happen, like they're going to take action, they're going to talk to this kid, and they actually would do things like that."<sup>410</sup> These participants discussed how feeling bullied led to feeling less belonging and as such teachers needed to be aware of whether students felt they were being bullied.

One participant also discussed talking a strengths-based approach. In thinking about what teachers can do differently, one participant said, "A teacher can help with that feeling of success via talking with the student and asking how they know so much about a subject. Because that will often boost students' self-esteem; and other things of that general manner."<sup>411</sup> As a participant said before, students take the lead from their teachers in terms of how to act and how to approach success and failure. In this case, if teachers choose to focus on the strengths of a student, then that student will be more likely to focus on their own strengths too.

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<sup>407</sup> 53:28 (26822:27217)

<sup>408</sup> 7:44 (49244:49354)

<sup>409</sup> 7:28 (36523:36689)

<sup>410</sup> 20:73 (39537:39777)

<sup>411</sup> 7:34 (41562:41783)

***Decrease homework.*** Participants talked about how challenging it can be to have the burden of homework after a long day at school. For students who were already experiencing school as stressful and anxiety provoking, additional homework was not helpful for them. As such, multiple participants discussed decreasing the amount of homework as an important aspect of improving their school experience. One participant felt that even adding an hour to the school day to do homework would be helpful. They said, “There is no reason that we would have to take it home if we just added another hour onto the day. Even if we all go into the library and do that, that would be so much better than having to take all the work home. I do not know it is just hard to keep myself on task especially and that is like when the medicine wears down so I am going crazy and all I want to do is go outside, grab my bike and not be sitting down inside.”<sup>412</sup> No matter the practical solution, the result would be that students would be able to go home, relax, and enjoy their limited free time.

***Increased classroom inclusion.*** Multiple participants discussed how teachers could increase belonging by adopting more inclusive practices. On one level participants discussed making the instruction itself inclusive to all learners. One participant said, “Make sure that, if you're teaching a subject, make sure it's a subject that the whole class can comprehend.”<sup>413</sup> In thinking about how instruction can be more inclusive one participant said, “Some kind of way where it varies in how a person learns it, some kind of option.”<sup>414</sup> Another participant gave a concrete example of the type of option they would find useful. They said, “If I could record myself and play that to the teacher, I would do that instead of writing something.”<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> 23:29 (14536:14960)

<sup>413</sup> 7:45 (49470:49576)

<sup>414</sup> 12:27 (12417:12496)

<sup>415</sup> 23:13 (8128:8228)

On another level participants talked about including a wide range of learners, including students with disabilities. One participant said, “Giving them chances to participate with the rest of the class, and do what the rest of the class does, if they have a disability.”<sup>416</sup> The same participant went on to elaborate, “Giving students the ability to participate, like if the student can’t walk, then let them join and do something that they can participate in, and join in with. Try to choose activities that everyone can do, not just like the majority of the class.”<sup>417</sup> Another participant also felt that students with disabilities should be given a chance to succeed. They said, “I think that you should say for the end part that even if somebody has a disability the person should still give the other people who have disabilities a chance.”<sup>418</sup> This echoed the larger point about being more effective in meeting the needs of all learners.

**Advice for fellow students.** Throughout all the interviews participants had a number of suggestions for their fellow students on how to approach belonging. What differed in these responses from the school level advice was that participants were more focused on personal improvement through individual change and successful contextual navigation.

***Be yourself.*** One of the key things participants discussed in terms of advice for their fellow students was to be yourself. Authenticity was often discussed as being important to belonging, but participants also discussed how important it was to being healthy and happy more generally. Part of why being yourself was important was that it would help find people who really are of similar mindset and have similar interests. One participant said, “You’re going to want to meet some new people and find common interests and maybe look for a favorite class. Or try and talk to someone about the lunch foods or something, which are actually pretty quality

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<sup>416</sup> 7:38 (44341:44469)

<sup>417</sup> 7:39 (45260:45506)

<sup>418</sup> 49:1 (3371:3550)

here, unlike most other public schools.”<sup>419</sup> Finding common interests could also include things like joining clubs and participating in activities. One participant said, “I would actually recommend joining a club after school, because we do have clubs after school, which is really awesome.”<sup>420</sup> If students are not themselves, then they will never really find an environment to suit their needs.

***Be open and accepting.*** Participants also felt it was important for their fellow students to be open and accepting if they wanted to belong. Advice for the students therefore also revolved around being open and accepting of others. One participant said, “Just get to know the people who reach out to you, even if you think, oh, they aren’t popular. Why would I have to get to know them? They’re the ones trying to make a relationship and a friendship.”<sup>421</sup> Another participant said that often the popular group also was not the best group to belong to. They said, “Well some of the ruder type of people. Like sometimes it’s the popular kids that can be very rude. You know. Or just mostly the rude kids. You have to watch out for them. Make sure... you know... try to ignore them if they are rude to you. You know. I can’t really think of anything else.”<sup>422</sup>

Similarly, one of the above participants discussed how students often look to be popular to feel a greater sense of belonging. This, however, is not always the best strategy. They said, “Don’t hold the popular people too highly, because they aren’t really popular. It’s all kind of in your heads almost. It’s what you make it. They don’t have to be popular if you don’t want them

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<sup>419</sup> 6:37 (21311:21581)

<sup>420</sup> 10:17 (16463:16655)

<sup>421</sup> 18:29 (31161:31356)

<sup>422</sup> 48:29 (17771:18055)

to be. It just boils down to that. No one can be popular unless everyone thinks they are.”<sup>423</sup> What was more important was being oneself and finding a group of people who were similar.

***Fake belonging and adapt to others if you need to.*** Participants also talked about how you might have to adapt to other people if belonging is desired but not readily achievable. This, in part, involved not taking things too seriously. As one participant said,

Well, I think they need to know that deep down, everyone inside probably doesn’t think they belong. So don’t take it too much to heart, and don’t be too critical to yourself about what you do, or what you say, or what people say to you. Because they might mean it a different way. They might not mean it so rudely. Just don’t take anything too serious, unless you really know what they’re trying to say. Also, just be you instead of trying.

Because I’ve tried doing that, and that’s just boring. It’s not you. Just skip that step.<sup>424</sup>

This could also involve faking belonging if you want it but do not have it. As one participant explained, “You just, like, just go... I don’t like this school, but I’m just gonna act like I do, fake confidence, just fake it. It’ll work, trust me. It works, I’ve been here for two years, dude, it works... I do that tactic.”<sup>425</sup>

***Engage in class and do well in school.*** Participants also advised their fellow students to engage in coursework and be respectful to teachers. As one participant put it, “Be very polite to teachers, because they can make your life miserable if you’re not nice to them, so you have to be very nice to teachers, which, even if you hate them with a passion.”<sup>426</sup> Another participant felt that simply going to classes would be a great way to meet other students. They said, “Go to your

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<sup>423</sup> 18:22 (28241:28561)

<sup>424</sup> 18:21 (27663:28195)

<sup>425</sup> 66:11 (7844:8055)

<sup>426</sup> 58:11 (4783:4992)

classes, man! (laughs) There's a lot of people in your classes, so like you'll find someone in your classes."<sup>427</sup> Attending classes and doing well were both advantageous to belonging.

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<sup>427</sup> 62:15 (10024:10142)



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

Belonging as manifested within schools is an often-studied concept. Yet how students with EBDs experience belonging in schools has not been explored in great depth. This study sought to better understand these lived experiences and ultimately answer the following three research questions:

1. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) experience belonging in schools and how do they feel this affects them as individual learners?
2. What personal and environmental factors do students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) feel most contribute to their school belonging?
3. How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) conceptualize an idealized space of belonging within school?

The purpose of this section is not to provide summative or definitive answers to those questions. Considering the diverse subjective experiences of belonging related within chapter four, it would be potentially overly reductive to do so. Rather, what is presented here are thematic guideposts that will help readers reflect upon and potentially shed new light on the findings and belonging more generally.

Within this chapter, themes related to the research questions are presented. These interpretive themes were generated from the data and experiences of participants through coding, re-reading, and detailed analysis. The themes are presented within individual research questions to help guide further interpretation. To further elucidate meaning, both potential implications for practice and for research are presented within each theme. After presenting themes, the Generative Model of Belonging is revisited and revised. There was a great deal of fit between the

model and the findings, but there were revisions and additions made because of the data. The revised model is then used to create a participant model to, not only present the study data in a new way, but also as a way to compare the subjective experiences of participants to the broader literature base. Lastly, potential limitations of the study are presented.

### **Research Questions: Interpretive Themes and Analysis**

This study was developed and guided by three primary research questions. Here these research questions will be addressed through interpretive themes that emerged from the participant interviews. These themes are necessarily interpretive, which implies they come from the perspective of the researcher. As such, the goal is to present them as a means of generating further interpretation and reflection on the previously presented data. In short, the themes are meant to provide a different lens through which to view the previous chapter. This non-reductive stance is vital, as the goal is to respect the experiences of participants and not to re-imagine or invalidate said experiences.

#### **Overview of Themes**

- [Question 1: Experience and Impact](#)
  - Theme 1: Belonging as Individually Experienced and Understood
  - Theme 2: Belonging as Felt
  - Theme 3: Belonging as Enacted
  - Theme 4: Belonging as Embedded
  - Theme 5: Belonging as Costly
- [Question 2: Contributions to Belonging](#)
  - Theme 6: The Primacy of People and Social Interactions
  - Theme 7: The Impact of Direct and Indirect Experience

- Theme 8: The Differential Impact of Contributions
- [Question 3: An Idealized Space of Belonging](#)
  - Theme 9: Summarizing Participants' Ideal School for Belonging
  - Theme 10: Achieving the Ideal Is Challenging in the Real-World Context
  - Theme 11: Ambivalence Towards School Belonging as a Goal
  - Theme 12: Striving Towards the Ideal Must Consider Daily Interaction

### **Question 1: Experience and Impact**

*How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) experience belonging in schools and how do they feel this affects them as individual learners?*

One of the key goals of the study was to better understand how belonging was experienced by participants. All participants discussed unique experiences and understandings of belonging. The goal is not to summarize them here as they were discussed in multiple ways in the previous chapter and will be revisited yet again in the participant model. Rather the goal here is to provide a different interpretive lens through which to view these experiences.

**Theme 1: belonging as individually experienced and understood.** There is a common saying in the disability world: once you have met one person with a disability, you have met one person with a disability. This same phrase necessarily applied to the participants in this study in regards to the subjective experience of belonging. All participants related unique and complex experiences of belonging based on a wide range of factors and considerations, disability being just one of the many contributions. This should come as no surprise. Though one could ask an individual about their sense of belonging in any given moment, what contributes to the appraisal will be unique because it lies at the intersection of the individual and the context as exhibited

across many relational dimensions (these are revised from the initial review and discussed later in this chapter during the model revision).

When considering the individual nature of belonging, one must also be careful when potentially divorcing this subjectively assigned meaning from the individual context. As belonging becomes increasingly abstracted from the original context of a given individual it loses a certain degree of meaning. This is particularly germane to the study of belonging, as subjective lived experiences can quickly become lost among the variety of experience. For instance, in regard to this particular study, one could say that all participants felt belonging in their schools. This is an accurate statement for all the participants in the study as they did all report feeling belonging to one degree or another. The problem with such a statement is that it does not begin to capture the complexity of their experiences of belonging, the meaning participants assigned to belonging, or what belonging actually meant to them.

This is not to say that belonging cannot be discussed in a more generic way or that individual experiences of belonging could not align. One could compare, contrast, and determine frequency, and there is much that can be learned from this. These instances are important to highlight and understand. However, we must also ask, what is lost when belonging is divorced from the individual context or interpreted beyond the lens of a given individual? Belonging is subjectively experienced, and divorce from the given subject and context will necessarily alter meaning.

***Implications for practice.*** Belonging is an idea that is often misunderstood within education. There is a tendency to want students to belong because we assume that belonging to a school context will be beneficial to them. Yet if we understand belonging to be experienced from unique perspectives and positions, we cannot assume alignment to school culture and norms or

even success within school will be seen as inherently beneficial (this will also be addressed in a later theme). What this means for practice is that to address student belonging one cannot rely on euphemistic messages and the occasional assembly celebrating diversity and the acceptance of everyone nor can we rely on what is perceived to be the inherent value of education. While these things might contribute to an individual's perception of the context as being welcoming, one cannot assume all individuals will experience these acts as uniformly positive or motivating. Addressing belonging at the individual level requires the co-construction of a shared space of belonging. In this sense it is not merely about helping a student fit into a school. Instead it is about re-imagining the space as one that is more inclusive and purposeful, and one that allows for the validation of a range of subjective experiences.

That is not to say that there are not more general aspects that will make belonging more likely or less likely, but these form a baseline from which to work. For instance, having a culture that is accepting, open, and flexible, having teachers that are helpful and effective, having peers that are friendly and understanding are all part of the baseline. For some students, perhaps even the majority of students in some places, this baseline will be sufficient in fostering their belonging. Yet this baseline will likely be insufficient in addressing the belonging of all learners. Rather, belonging must be fostered for all students in flexible ways. For some students, further individualization needs to occur to ensure belonging.

Pathways to further individualization regarding belonging need not be created from scratch. There are a great number of lessons that can be gleaned from both inclusive and special education:

<i><b>Potential Pathway</b></i>	<i><b>Individualization in Inclusive and Special Education</b></i>	<i><b>Belonging</b></i>
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Essential for some, good for all	Though most students do not specifically need specialized services, all students would likely benefit from many specialized and inclusive practices. For instance, captions are essential for Deaf students, but many other students will benefit from the presence of captions.	There will be some students who are disproportionately impacted by interventions focused directly on belonging. However, all students could benefit from additional practices focused on belonging as all students are continuously appraising self to context.
Individualized assessment	When particular students seem to be struggling more than others or in unexpected ways, we individually analyze what might be happening through a range of measures and across a range of contexts. We then continue to collect data in on-going ways.	Addressing belonging would also need to be assessed at the individual level with multiple measures across multiple contexts. Asking a student if they belong is important, but this would be insufficient in capturing student belonging for the range of reasons discussed here.
Individualizing student experiences	As educators we assemble a team, including the student and guardians, to think about what we can change and what skills we can help students build (this is ignoring that many IEPs are written to help fit the student into a broken environment, but that is a longer story). What results is a thorough consideration of how a given individual can build towards a more successful future.	If we were to think critically about how we could help particular individuals feel a greater sense of belonging in school, we could look at belonging in a more holistic way. We could examine the experiences and think critically with the student about possible ways to change the environment and help them build important skills that meet a range of goals.
Assessing effectiveness	Individualization does not end with the co-creation of a plan, but the plan is merely a guide. As such effectiveness is assessed and continually monitored, resulting in alterations when necessary.	Belonging is also on-going. We are continually appraising self to context. This is a natural process (belongingness theory points towards this innate process). As such any steps taken to address belonging would need to be assessed over time and on multiple levels.

Table 3: Comparing Pathways to Individualization

These parallels potentially provide important starting points in considering how further individualization within belonging might occur.

Before continuing on, it needs to be noted that this comparison is imperfect and not to be meant in a literal sense. Advocating for some sort of belonging IEP is certainly not the goal here. Addressing belonging is necessarily complicated and would unlikely to be adequately addressed through such a document. As participants pointed out, social dynamics and other relational aspects of belonging can be quite challenging to address by educators in ways that do not result in students feeling increasingly alienated, stigmatized, or marginalized. However, there are many lessons to be learned in regard to addressing belonging successfully at the individual level from previous individualization efforts. In particular, there are a number of additional comparisons that can be drawn between belonging for students with EBDs and efforts such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) not only in terms of individualization, but also in regards to addressing overall school culture and climate (Horner & Sugai, 2000; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

***Implications for research.*** The key implication here is that one must be very clear in what one is measuring as belonging can be experienced and mean very different things at the individual level. For instance, consider the complexities of even a simplified decision-making process related to the subjective feeling of belonging.

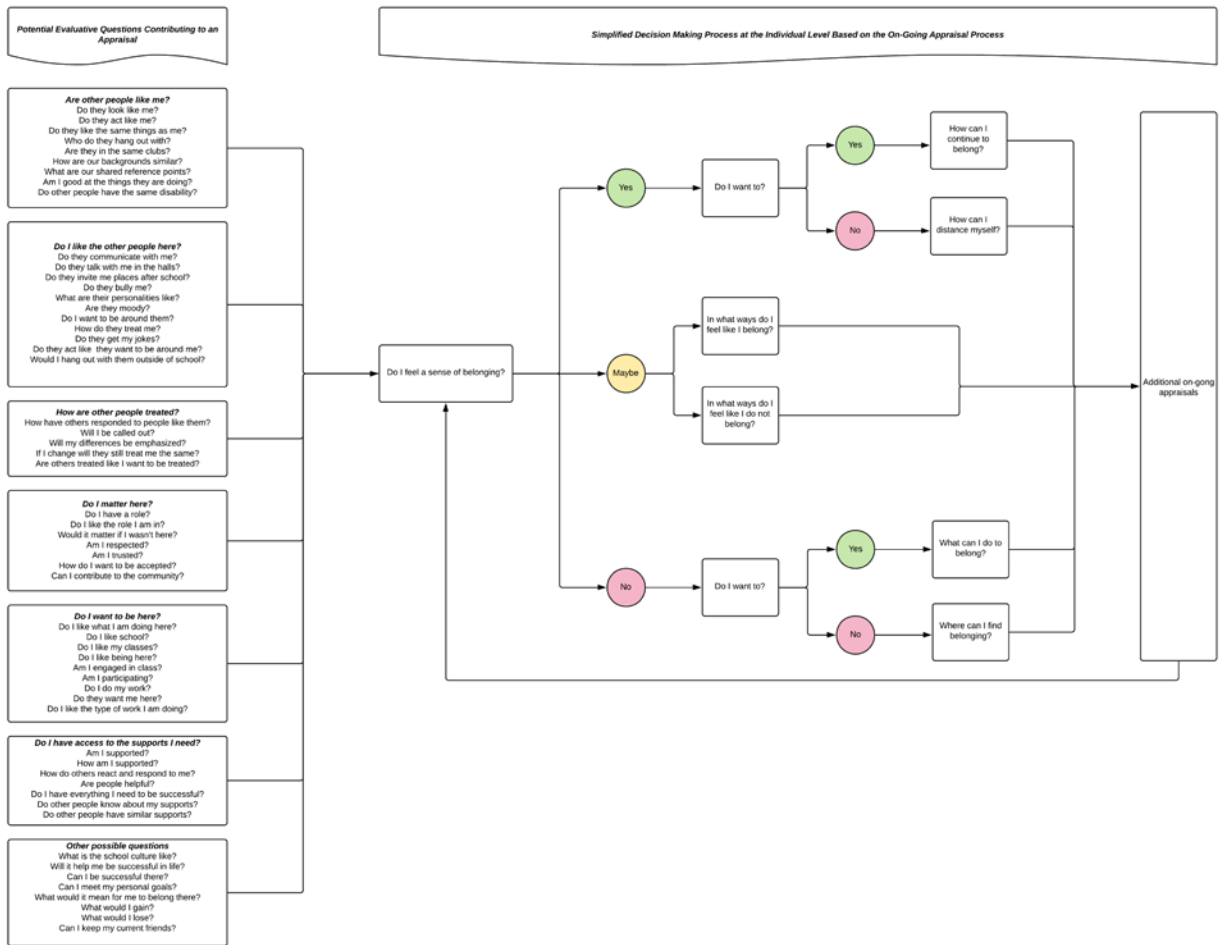


Figure 6: Simplified Decision-Making Process

While this is a very simplified appraisal process, the focus was on the many different factors that could lead a student to a given appraisal. When a student is asked what their sense of belonging is, they certainly would not review all of the questions on the left-hand side of the figure, but they are questions that have likely been asked before, contribute to their answer in the given moment, and are weighted differently depending on perspective. Future phenomenological research could continue to break down and explore what occurs within a given moment of appraisal.



Research can and should address belonging at multiple levels. Looking at belonging across all students does indeed say something important about belonging. However, without references to the individual experience and context, one must be very careful in what one can conclude. A caution was provided by participants within this study. To use one participant as an example, when asked about their school belonging outright, they said it was “pretty good”. However, when one began to break down what that meant for them, they said that they had a lot of friends, but hated school. They did indeed feel belonging in school, but how and why was not revealed by the outright inquiry. Diving deeper into the individual experience of belonging was vital as this revealed social belonging in school, but a lack of school belonging to the school itself.

In terms of individual experience, research should also consider what is most salient to an individual at a given time depending on their particular functional needs. Functional need is used broadly here to encompass a range of possible needs (emotional, social, physical, etc.). For instance, while the physical environment was not a primary consideration for participants in this study, it might be for students with physical disabilities based on potentially inaccessible or disabling environmental conditions. Consideration of the physical environment, therefore, might be very relevant to some students but not to others. This diversity of potential need should be considered proactively when thinking about how to address and understand belonging, yet care must also be taken so as not to assume salience of factors for individuals. This would necessarily bias both questions asked and direction taken.

**Theme 2: belonging as felt.** Another important theme regarding the experience of belonging was related to the nature of how belonging is experienced. The experience of belonging was not subsumed by a simple definition. Belonging was defined using a wide range

of synonyms (fitting in, being included, etc.), and though each of these terms captures something meaningful about the nature of belonging, the lack of ability to generate specific definitions is equally illuminating and indicates something central to the meaning and experience of belonging. It was often difficult to define outside of the “feeling” of belonging. When asked about their belonging participants were quick to respond as to whether they felt belonging. The accessibility of the feeling was central. However, when they were asked why they felt how they did, the query was frequently met with a pause and an initial response modified by an “I don’t really know”, “I guess”, or other expressions of uncertainty. That is not to say contributions could not be generated, as shown in the preceding chapter, they certainly were, but the feeling of belonging had significant weight.

It should be noted that the impact of belonging is not uniformly felt. Generically feeling a sense of belonging does appear to be related to positive mental health outcomes (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Hagerty et al., 1992), but in some ways this might not capture the complexity as captured within the lived experiences of participants. Belonging might feel good in some ways and not in others. For instance, belonging within a particular group might feel positive, but belonging to the same group could restrict what a student could become which could feel negative. This could be particularly true for students who have EBDs and might struggle with positive mental health regardless of belonging. Another possible reason why belonging is not uniformly felt is that the weight given to this feeling might be quite different for different individuals. As participants discussed, having belonging and not having belonging makes one aware of and value different contributions, as well as of potential sacrifices and opportunities. Not only does a given environment contain particular affordances, but the very nature of experience shapes the accessibility of the affordances.

***Implications for practice.*** Belonging as being felt has a number of important implications. If belonging is felt, then it might be more fruitful to address the contributions to and the affordances of a particular environment to help foster belonging, as opposed to attempting to directly influence an individual's felt sense of belonging. One cannot impose belonging on someone else, but one can influence the feeling of belonging in both immediate and on-going ways. As such, belonging must be engendered and encouraged through building environments that more effectively address given contributions. How exactly to create such environments are on one level very simple, but on another level complex and individualized. This type of ideal space will be discussed further in answering research question three.

***Implications for research.*** If belonging is felt then we must also think about how we can actively observe and measure belonging. First, if we ask about the feeling alone (what is your sense of belonging) then students could answer honestly. They could say exactly what they are feeling. However, in doing so we assume that students can:

1. Access and identify the feeling
2. Are comfortable sharing this feeling once accessed
3. Have the language to communicate this feeling
4. Can reasonably communicate this feeling to the researcher

That is not to say that students should not be asked directly, but that we must be cautious in understanding the given expression.

Likewise, we must also think critically about how to observe the feeling of belonging. Participants in this study laid out a few of the indicators of belonging that could provide guideposts to what could be observed (presence, communication, non-verbal communication, engagement in the hallways and lunchroom, respect and authenticity). However, feelings might

manifest in a wide variety of ways depending on both the individual and the context. This very issue was raised by participants in their discussion of “faking” belonging. While observations are important, one must exercise caution in observing belonging. Additionally, one cannot assume what is being observed is directly related to the subjective experiences of a given individual. For instance, one might see a great deal of engagement by a student in the lunchroom, but one cannot assume it means they belong with the given group.

**Theme 3: belonging as enacted.** Belonging is individual, it is felt, and it is enacted.

Enacted in this sense is meant to imply that the feeling of belonging is something that has the potential to and often does guide and influence behavior within lives of individuals in both immediate and long-term ways. An individual’s sense of belonging could impact how they view and experience their given context, and, as theories such as Basic Psychological Needs Theory suggests, their motivation within a given context as well (Richard M. Ryan & Deci, 2017). Participants talked about avoiding places where they did not feel belonging and wanting to be in places where they felt belonging. The feeling of belonging in this sense was not a rhetorical or theoretical idea, but enacted and guiding. Behaviors, including but not limited to learning behaviors, changed in the short term and the long term based on the appraisal of one’s belonging.

In the short term, belonging was enacted within small daily interactions (this will also be discussed later within the following section). For instance, a student might wish to avoid going into a particular classroom if they feel like they do not belong there. Because of this, the student might act in an avoidant or disengaged way in class, and in more severe situations they might even avoid class altogether if they have a particular aversion. These seemingly smaller interactions can, in turn, potentially lead to more long-term changes in behaviors. For instance, the same student who does not feel a sense of belonging in the class and who is disengaged, will

likely not seek out similar circumstances in the future or build the necessary skills to engage in related work. This could limit future opportunities to learn and to belong within similar contexts. In this sense, the impact of belonging can be exponential, and cumulative, as well as transferable to new and distal contexts.

***Implications for practice.*** In terms of practical implications, if belonging is indeed enacted as was expressed by participants here, then this implies that at any moment a student's sense of belonging can have meaningful implications for how they interact with the school context in immediate and long-term ways. This could occur in smaller interactions such as avoiding saying hello in a hallway or larger things like choosing to engage or disengage with a particular classroom. A student's sense of belonging has real and tangible impacts on their experience of and engagement with school, to what extent is again individualized and differential (the differential impact of belonging is discussed in a subsequent theme).

Belonging as enacted also means that understanding the actions of a given student can reveal something important about their experience of belonging. Though potentially complicated, observing how students communicate, places they tend to be or avoid, and who they tend to be around, are three ways in which one might begin to see how belonging is enacted within a classroom. This is not without caveats. Namely, as discussed within other sections as well, observation alone will not be sufficient. For instance, observing that a student who tends to work alone in a classroom does not imply they do not feel belonging in the class. Such a declaration makes a biased assumption about what belonging might represent. The student could simply be someone who likes to work alone, and in this case no further intervention would be necessary or warranted. As pointed out by participants, intervening in such circumstances could even have a deleterious effect. However, seeing another student working alone could indicate a lack of

belonging, and this student might benefit from additional help. One must understand the context and individual perspective to help interpret possible observations.

***Implications for research.*** Observing an individual within an environment would likely yield interesting data about an individual's belonging, but this might not be sufficient in addressing the embedded nature of belonging. If belonging is enacted, then one must look into how this feeling manifests within the actions and behaviors of a given individual in both intentional and unintentional ways. Importantly, this focus on intentionality can help bring observational data back into the realm of the individual's subjective experience as understanding intentionality requires reference back to the intent and purpose of behaviors from the student point of view.

For instance, one could observe specific interactions between teachers and students as a means of better understanding how belonging might be enacted. In doing so one could look at the frequency of social interactions as well as the quality of the interactions. However, to sufficiently address belonging, one must also address the specific perspective of the student within these interactions. While interactions might seem positive and the student might seem engaged, one must understand why students chose to take the actions they did from their perspective. The enacted quality of belonging is necessarily subjectively enacted in this sense and, therefore, behavioral observation can only go so far.

**Theme 4: belonging as embedded.** How belonging is felt, experienced, and enacted, is necessarily dependent on the context in which the student is embedded. Embedded here refers to the idea that belonging as experienced by any given individual cannot be detached or removed from a particular context without altering meaning or the given experience (context is again used broadly here to include the environment and actors within said environment). Belonging

necessarily occurs within particular contexts of varying degrees of fit (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), and individuals are continually appraising their comfort, role, and a number of other factors within a given context. Though this appraisal can be intentional and purposeful, appraisals can also happen as a product of simply finding oneself within a context. While there will necessarily be overlap between contexts (as will be discussed in a later theme), at the same time each context has the potential for unique challenges or opportunities due to the embedded nature of belonging. In this sense, each environment retains a certain degree of independence and potential. For instance, a student who is entering a new art class might have certain predispositions and proclivities related to potential belonging in the class. However, these ultimately influence belonging, but do not define it. If the environment is one that is conducive to belonging (as discussed in a later theme), then the student could still find belonging there. Each environment has a unique potential to influence belonging because of the embedded nature of belonging.

Additionally, one must also recognize the differences between embeddedness and abstraction in terms of belonging. Participants often discussed what it means to belong within school, with friends, with teachers, within a certain class, and a range of other contexts. Most often they discussed their belonging within particular environments in which they found themselves embedded. These were real and tangible contexts with real and tangible impacts. That is not to say that they could not see beyond environmental immediacy to more abstract environments. There was clear recognition that they were embedded in many different tangible and intangible environments at the same time. However, it must be recognized that there are differences between experiences of belonging as embedded and belonging as discussed in abstraction. Both aspects represent something important and should be explored, but conceptually there is potential for uniqueness.

***Implications for practice.*** If belonging is embedded, then belonging should, in part, be understood to occur within a specific context. The key implication for practice here is that when thinking about belonging in schools, one has to understand that each unique context has the potential to impact a student's belonging in unique yet overlapping ways. One must, therefore, consider the structures and affordances across a variety of environments. It would likely be insufficient to address school belonging without addressing classroom belonging, with the inverse being equally valid. Likewise, it would likely be insufficient to address belonging in one classroom without addressing other classrooms as well.

Often when thinking about school belonging broader things like messaging around inclusion or how special education services are delivered are the key considerations. These are likely to be quite important, but students' experiences of belonging are often not centered around abstraction. Rather they experience belonging in classrooms, in the hallways, in the gym, in the lunchroom, in the principal's office. While abstract notions of belonging can be important, understanding belonging as embedded requires one to look directly at where students are directly experiencing belonging.

***Implications for research.*** The embedded nature of belonging has a number of implications for research. The focus on embeddedness emphasizes the importance of understanding how an individual situates themselves within a given context in both immediate and abstract ways. It is not enough to merely understand the context, but rather one must understand how the individual sees and experiences the context. The experience of belonging can occur within a wide range of contexts, and knowing which contexts are most relevant and influential from the individual perspective is imperative.



A focus on embeddedness within tangible spaces puts particular focus on understanding the affordances related to belonging within a given context. In short, what contextual cues might signal to an individual that the environment is one in which a student can or cannot belong? In this sense affordances can also be examined within a relational space. While there might be more obvious things like welcoming people or similarities to past contexts, there are likely a range of other possible tangible and intangible contributions that could be further explored. This would also increase the focus on more direct subjective experiences as it would involve active engagement in shared environmental exploration. One potential pathway for further exploration of possible belonging affordances is research on school climate. Wang and Degol (2016) provided a conceptualization and categorization of school climate that could be helpful in breaking down some of the aspects of climate which could indicate some of the possible affordances:



Fig. 1 The conceptualization and categorization of school climate

Figure 7: Conceptualization and Categories of School Climate from Wang & Degol, 2016, p. 318

Many of these categories were raised by participants of the study as being related to their experiences of belonging, which comes as little surprise given the embedded nature of belonging. Notably absent from this conceptualization is the relationship of school climate to disability and special education. When thinking about how students with EBDs experience

school climate, further consideration would need to be made to focus disability and structures related to the provision of special education services. With such alignment to the subject experience of this particular population, exploration and potential for alignment with research around school climate could be fruitful.

**Theme 5: belonging as costly.** Most research has considered the many costs of not belonging. Participants in this study also considered many of the same possible issues (depression, decreased motivation, disassociation with academic goal, decrease in confidence, etc.). It then follows that belonging is discussed as a good thing, something to strive towards. Yet, belonging does not come without costs. Belonging is necessarily limiting in some ways and potentially quite costly to achieve and maintain, and often tangible decisions regarding belonging are equally informed by said costs. These are important aspects to consider when thinking about the experience of belonging.

In part, belonging is costly because belonging in one way necessarily limits potential pathways and possibilities to belong in other ways. For instance, if the group a student belongs to is particularly well respected, bestows a certain degree of status, or has permeable boundaries, then moving from the group and into other groups might not be problematic. If, however, the group is not particularly respected or membership is restrictive, then belonging within that particular group could be very limiting. Belonging to the latter group could mean further alienation from the larger context, thus potentially limiting future opportunities to belong.

Belonging is also costly because it takes effort and flexibility to achieve and maintain. To put it simply, one has to work to belong in many cases. Though some students might have an easier time finding belonging based on alignment between self and context (reasons for this abound), the majority of participants discussed that belonging not only takes work to initiate, but

it must also be maintained. Depending on the circumstance of a given student, belonging could subsume a great deal of resources and take a lot of effort. An individual who does not feel belonging and does not share many characteristics with others within a school, might have to put in more effort to belong and potentially more effort to maintain it.

***Implications for practice.*** On a practical level, these costs should be considered when thinking about not only how students experience belonging, but also how belonging is fostered. Often belonging is approached through a “more is better” type of mentality. The more students feel belonging the better the outcome. However, when thinking about school belonging, one must also consider what the costs might be for an individual to belong to a particular school. What might students lose and how it would impact their identities, friendships, career prospects, and daily interactions?

This seems to be particularly true regarding students who do not feel a sense of belonging and have disassociated with school to a certain extent. When a student begins to disassociate with a school it does not simply end with disassociation. Rather, the student will continue to seek out, develop, and refine their sense of belonging in other ways. This could mean delving into particular subject areas or finding opportunities outside of school altogether to belong. For these students, reassociation with the school could mean giving up the identity they strove to forge. Likewise, belonging could be more costly for students who find themselves in a group that does not affiliate with schooling or the norms or values of school. When this is the case, belonging within school could be a betrayal to their friends, the very people with whom they already feel belonging.

None of this is to say that belonging cannot be a particular goal for a school. There is an inherent value to education and the impact it can potentially have. However, we cannot dismiss

how costly belonging can be for some students or how costly belonging can be to build and maintain.

***Implications for research.*** Within this area, one critical implication is that the study of school belonging should not just ask: do students feel belonging and how, but also explore the potential costs and losses associated with belonging. These costs and losses are equally important in understanding a given experience of belonging. Measures of belonging should take these costs into account as they represent a real and salient aspect of how belonging is experienced and tell us a great deal about the subjective experiences of belonging, potentially across multiple contexts.

Likewise, in designing interventions related to belonging, one cannot assume that belonging to a school will be an unconditionally desirable outcome for students. Often interventions are designed with the assumption, as previously discussed, that school belonging is a beneficial for students, and that more belonging seems to be better. To effectively address school belonging for all learners, a range of potential costs would need to be directly addressed.

## **Question 2: Contributions to Belonging**

*What personal and environmental factors do students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) feel most contribute to their school belonging?*

Another key research question centered around the factors that participants feel contribute to their personal belonging. The goal here is not to summarize the most common contributions, as student responses have already been discussed in a previous section. The goal here is to consider broader themes that help with further interpretation and understanding of the previously presented data.

**Theme 6: the primacy of people and social interactions.** There were a wide range of contributions discussed by participants. These contributions were sometimes contradictory or divergent, but there was one very common contribution that continually came up: people and social interactions within social contexts. If people were open, friendly, understanding, and respectful and treated participants duly, then belonging was far easier. If people were close-minded, rude, and inflexible, then belonging was more difficult. Though superficiality was noted as being embedded within the cultures of each school, it was not something participants thought should matter. What mattered more was the approach and actions of a given individual.

This highlights an important point about belonging: to understand belonging one must examine and understand the social context. Research has shown that even minor social connections can have major impacts on belonging (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012), and even weak ties and minimal social interactions can be impactful on belonging (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2013, 2014). Participants within this study also emphasized the importance of social relationships and interactions. For instance, in attempting to understand the experiences of belonging of a given set of students in a particular classroom, one must look at the social dynamics at play within that environment. This will be vital in understanding belonging. Yet understanding belonging also requires examining a multitude of other factors such as whether or not an individual student wants to belong within a classroom or whether they feel they belong within other classrooms (a multitude of contributions were documented in chapter 4). However, much comes back to people, social interactions, and the social context.

***Implications for practice.*** Participants talked a great deal about finding time to interact with peers, and to foster belonging this appears to be essential. Students need time to make new friends and meet new people. They need time and space in which to foster and build

relationships. They need time to mend and heal broken relationships. All of this requires time and active effort on the part of educators to understand students' social lives and provide space through which to build and foster relationships. Additionally, structures need to be in place to ensure this could happen, and such structures might require a great deal of change at the classroom and school levels. For instance, at the school level this could mean breaking down the very grade level system that structures our schools. Multiple participants discussed how they have friends in other grades, but can never see them. That is not to say that participants wanted school to simply be a time for socialization. They did recognize that the purpose of school was to learn and develop, but the balance between learning and socializing was difficult to keep and often oscillated depending on the importance of either in a given moment. Increased access to friends is not without its challenges, but fostering belonging in a school requires understanding, managing, and fostering social relationships.

Yet, this can also be a double-edged sword when considering goals related to inclusion and diversity. Students tend to group with people with whom they feel more belonging already. This is not always negative for students, but it does become problematic because belonging to one group might mean not belonging to another. For instance, a student might feel belonging with athletes but in doing so lose belonging with peers more inclined towards academics. When this is the case, a student might feel more belonging within that group, but in doing so feel less affiliation with other students. This tendency towards comfort within exclusion and separation can lie in contrast to goals around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

***Implications for research.*** Research that further explores the social aspects of belonging could be particularly fruitful. There was one particular issue that was raised by participants around this area that deserves attention. As participants related, the world of the school is not the

world of students. Though there are lots of ways they overlap, participants discussed how teachers often did not really understand students' belonging because much of what influences a given appraisal of belonging occurs at the student level and necessarily outside the influence of teachers or other educators. Research needs to further explore this "student" space as related to belonging and how educators come to understand and influence this space.

Additionally, belonging could provide an important aspect to understanding social interventions for students with EBDs. There is a long history of interventions for students with EBDs that consider or directly address social dynamics (Farmer, Dawes, et al., 2018; Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018) as well as an abundance of research related to efforts like PBIS. Continuing to connect this literature base more directly with students' experiences of belonging could be important. Understanding a given student's sense of belonging as subjectively experienced could provide valuable insight into the environment as well as the impact on the given individual.

**Theme 7: the impact of direct and indirect experience.** Belonging is not something that occurs independent of influence. Though each context itself might retain a degree of independence and potential, an individual is not necessarily afforded the same independence. Individuals carry with them a host of prior experiences with belonging across a wide range of other contexts. They will have experiences, both positive and negative, with different settings: school, classrooms, teachers, peers, neighborhoods, and extra-curriculars, to name a few. Importantly, those prior experiences will necessarily influence their current states of belonging. To understand belonging, one must situate a given individual's subjective experience of belonging within this broader continuum.

Direct experiences of belonging should not be the only consideration. Although specific experiences within a classroom or with particular teachers are important, equally important is the



consideration of indirect experiences. Student belonging can and is influenced by what students might hear about belonging through friends, the observations they might make of others, and through experiences and understandings fostered by broader cultural notions. For instance, consider a student who might feel a lack of belonging in a math class. Their lack of belonging could be due to direct, negative experiences within previous classes. They might have learned that math is overwhelming and challenging or had teachers who were ineffective for the way they learn. However, this student's belonging could also be influenced by peers who have discussed taking the class with that particular teacher before or broader cultural stereotypes about who can be successful in math. In reality, it can be difficult to tease apart whether belonging is being influenced by direct or indirect experiences. However, both can and do influence a given experience of belonging. That is not to say that direct and indirect experiences are uniformly influential (past research has revealed variable impacts (Duerden & Witt, 2010; Millar & Millar, 1996)), but rather that they both can and do impact belonging.

***Implications for practice.*** The idea that belonging occurs across a continuum of experiences has a number of practical implications. First and foremost, one must understand that a student does not arrive in a given class with a clean “belonging slate”. Instead each student arrives in a given class already biased in terms of their personal belonging. Even in cases where students do not have direct experiences with belonging in a particular context, it is likely that they will already have a great deal of indirect experience. For instance, even though a student might be entering a new history class with a new teacher, they will have already experienced history classes and, even if they have not directly experienced history classes, will likely have a range of indirect experiences as well. While teachers might want all students to feel belonging

within their class, the amount of effort and strategies to do so will not be the same for all students considering the range of prior experiences.

Additionally, one must consider the possible protective factors gained from experiences within other contexts. All students' belonging will be challenged at some point within school and not all students will react to the challenges in the same way. For some students these challenges will have a minor impact, but for others the impact can be immense. For instance, two students might experience bullying. For one student this might be seen as an annoyance, but for another student it could be devastating to their belonging. Consideration of what factors might protect students from these challenges is important.

***Implications for research.*** This theme raises important research questions around how we understand a student's sense of belonging within a particular school. Notably, understanding the belonging of a given student requires exploration of both direct and indirect experiences. In particular, two important and distinct aspects:

1. The multiple, accessible direct and indirect experiences an individual might use to generate meaning
2. The moment in time in which a student finds themselves

When a student is asked what their sense of belonging in school is, their answer is generated in consideration of the above two aspects. Though a response in such a scenario could be considered unique and distinct, it is more accurately framed as a response that considers many experiences at a unique moment in time. Consideration of both indirect and direct experiences can lead to a more robust understanding of the possible influences across a possible continuum of experiences related to belonging:

Past Direct	Past Indirect
Present Direct	Present Indirect
Future Direct	Future Indirect

*Table 4: Possible Continuum of Experiences*

Though not all of these types of experiences will be accessible to the student and all will have differing impacts on belonging, they all represent potential influences on belonging that deserve additional consideration.

Germane to this study and consideration of a continuum of experiences, the examination of middle school belonging should be situated within the broader continuum of experiences within elementary, middle, high school, and beyond. All participants in the study discussed how their current states of belonging were impacted by: past experiences, the experiences of others, future aspirations and hopes, and the transitional nature of middle school. For these participants focusing on middle school alone could not reveal the whole picture of belonging. To better understand experiences of middle school, one must also understand past and future facing points on this continuum of experiences.

**Theme 8: the differential impact of contributions.** As previously discussed, there are a range of potential contributions that can be identified regarding belonging: peers, identity, disability, and teachers, are just a few mentioned within chapter four. Yet, in discussing these contributions, it is important to note that any given contribution can have a differential impact based on the weight the student gives to a particular contribution as well as the current position of a given student. For instance, while all students might benefit from being acknowledged, students who feel ostracized might differentially benefit from even minimal attempts at acknowledgement (Rudert, Hales, Greifeneder, & Williams, 2017). For students who might

perceive there is a misalignment between self and context, feel their belonging is being actively challenged, or are actively seeking belonging, certain factors might have a different impact than for students who already feel belonging or are actively seeking to maintain their belonging. Additionally, the impact of a given contribution could change for a particular individual over time.

Alignment between self and context appears to warrant additional attention (Eccles & Roeser, 2012; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; van Vianen, 2018). Participants were clear that though the ideal might be that everyone can belong on their own terms and in their own way, the practical reality is that belonging is a lot easier when there is already a great deal of alignment between self and context prior to meaningful engagement with the context. In terms of differential impacts, this implies that the fundamental experience of belonging is likely to be quite different for individuals based on potential alignment or misalignment at the point of engagement. Clothing can provide a tangible example. If a student comes to school and finds that they are wearing the same style clothing as everyone else, clothing might not be a remarkable contribution to their belonging. However, if a student notices that they are wearing clothes that are significantly different than other students, they will likely have to reconcile this difference. This is a process in which not all students will have to engage.

***Implications for practice.*** When considering practical implications for this theme, one quickly recognizes that there is no silver bullet nor is there necessarily a finish line when it comes to belonging. Addressing the differential impacts of belonging needs to occur in manifold and iterative ways at the school level, as well as, potentially even more importantly, at the individual level (as was discussed in a previous theme). Students will not experience belonging

in the same way and they will be impacted differently by diverse factors. The challenge for schools is how to take this variability into account.

When attempting to improve belonging, one must also address belonging in on-going ways. In particular, it is important to think critically about the impact of changing conditions on individual students. For instance, a student might feel a great deal of belonging with a particular group of friends at a given time. They might therefore feel strongly that friends positively influence their belonging. Yet if this same student loses those friends, they might weigh friendship differently in terms of their belonging. It is not enough to simply address belonging or ensure belonging reaches a particular level. Rather belonging must be addressed in iterative and on-going ways.

***Implications for research.*** In regard to research, assumptions regarding the impact of particular contributions should be very carefully examined. Contributions are not easily isolated as they exist within a broader range of contributions to a given appraisal, and one must understand the particular weight given to a contribution by an individual. Additionally, research that assumes a particular impact of a given contribution risks overplaying or underplaying the importance of said contribution. To consider this study, if disability alone was investigated, the impact might look more significant since disability would not be weighed against other contributions. Likewise looking at disability alone would fail to illuminate a range of other important contributions raised, which as previously discussed could have differential impacts even within the same individual at different moments in time. There are, of course, notable limits to any study, but when one assumes the impact of a particular factor one might lose vital aspects of the subjective experience of belonging.

### **Question 3: An Idealized Space of Belonging**

*How do middle school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) conceptualize an idealized space of belonging within school?*

The final research question was around what an idealized space of belonging would be when thinking about school. In short, what would such a school look like? It should be noted from the start that there was no single ideal school for participants. While one could look for specific policies, practices, or structures (many of which were articulated by participants in the study as seen in chapter 4), this could obscure an important point. In articulating an ideal space of belonging, participants focused their attention on the functions that the environment served.

An ideal space for belonging in this sense was not a specific type of place with a certain look (participants articulated there was flexibility in this area), but rather a place that fulfills certain functional roles. In other words, the focus was on what it does and allows students to do as opposed to what it looks like and how it is specifically structured. For instance, the question for participants was not around lunchroom policies, but rather the focus was on whether the lunchroom was an environment that helped them build friendships and a positive sense of self. While students did discuss policies and structures, these were simply a means to a much broader end.

**Theme 9: summarizing participants' ideal school for belonging.** When thinking about an ideal space for belonging, the focus needs to begin with the articulation of the broad role that a school might serve and whether or not those functions are being served successfully.

Participants within this study thought about an ideal space of belonging as one in which they:

- Could grow and develop as an individual and an individual learner
- Could explore their identity and potential identities
- Could make lasting social connections to peers and adults

- Mattered, were respected, were trusted, and important to peers and adults
- Enjoyed being there and others enjoyed them being there too
- Could participate without regard for proficiency
- Could make mistakes and be imperfect
- Would not be called out for their differences but embraced for them
- Could feel safe and comfortable in both physical and emotional ways
- Would be treated fairly and justly
- Build a successful present and future for themselves

When thinking about breaking down these broader ideals, participants further broke down their ideal in terms of the following: the feel of the school, the people, the work, and the structure.

As discussed earlier, belonging was necessarily something that students felt. This idea carried over to how they also thought about an ideal space for belonging and the functions it would serve. Key considerations in this area were around building a school that would be: comfortable, safe, engaging, and enjoyable. It would be a space where they would want to be and a place to which they want to return because it felt good to be there. It was a space that was comfortable and one where they would not have to worry. A place where they could be happy and enjoy their work. Similarly, it would not be a place where they felt uncomfortable, anxious, depressed, or worried nor a place where they were not accepted as themselves or understood as individuals. Often avoidance of these negative aspects was positioned as equally if not more important than the presence of the positive aspects.

Social interactions also played a vital role in participants' articulation of belonging, and as such were discussed as part of the ideal. When thinking about an ideal space, participants often discussed the people as being friendly, welcoming, accepting, and diverse. They would be

kind and helpful. They would be understanding and flexible. It would be a place where people not only liked them and accepted them for who they are, but outwardly showed this appreciation. Though students recognized they were still developing and they would likely change over time, an idealized space of belonging would have to be accepting of who they are as individuals. If belonging needed to be faked, then they really did not belong there.

School was recognized as a unique place with unique goals, and as such participants often talked about the work with which they would have to engage. The work would be useful and relevant to them as individuals. They would understand the purpose and be able to apply it to their own lives. The work would help lead them towards a successful future, and allow them to explore future possibilities. In this sense school was not just a place where students would learn things, but those things being learned would be practically relevant in the lives of individual students. The work would also be personalized to fit their needs and flexible enough to change when student needs changed.

Participants also thought about the structure of schools when thinking about idealized spaces. They felt an ideal school should be structured to be flexible, inclusive, fair, and developmentally relevant. It would be a place where they could be with people like them, but also meet new people and find new friendships. A place where they could feel included and have access to a variety of supports when they needed them. A place where they were not judged for their labels and discipline would be fair when needed. As with the work, the environment would be structured in a way that was flexible to meet their personal needs. It would be a place where they could develop their identity and seek re-invention and new understandings of self.

**Theme 10: achieving the ideal is challenging in the real-world context.** Though participants were clearer on what their ideal belonging could look like, participants were less



clear on how it might be operationalized in the context of a real school. They identified a number of barriers to accomplishing their ideals, and often seemed resigned to imperfection and the invariable nature of schools. For instance, participants often discussed how they would like to be able to choose more of their courses so they could find courses that were more relevant to their lives or frankly interesting and engaging. Yet they also felt that this would not be possible because schools were not always able to change in appropriate ways.

They also seemed resigned to being a part of social dynamics that were neither fully understood by their teachers or other adults in the school. Because of this lack of understanding, multiple students expressed they felt teachers and adults could have very little impact on these dynamics. For instance, some participants felt that their belonging would be much improved if everyone was able to be friends within the school. Yet they also recognized that, for a number of reasons, this would be impossible. They felt that there will always be students that do not get along or groups that are more exclusive, and there will always be teachers that do not understand their needs or are unjust in their discipline. For participants, the world of students remained relatively unknown to teachers and other adults. Yet it was the very world that must be understood to appropriately address belonging.

However, difficulty in achieving an ideal does not mean that having said ideal is not valuable or meaningful. Such an ideal lays the foundation for better understanding of what a school would need to look like if it did indeed help all learners belong. It also offers important insights into how students conceptualize belonging, what they find to be most essential, and the barriers that they encounter to their personal belonging.

***Implications for practice.*** Creating spaces where everyone can feel belonging is indeed challenging considering the diversity of any given student population. Though having one

pathway would make things far easier, one pathway would not allow for the belonging of all students. Achieving this ideal requires a holistic approach that considers taking individual students into account, and this is no easy feat. Often, we do not take the challenges of creating spaces where everyone can belong seriously enough. We tend to reduce fostering belonging to individual aspects. For instance, we think about:

1. Encouraging students to build relationships with peers or teachers
2. Fostering engagement within subject areas
3. Building self-advocacy and self-determination
4. Actively fighting stigma and stereotypes
5. Avoiding social exclusion
6. Building inclusive and welcoming spaces for individual learners
7. Providing multiple pathways and resources for students who require help

Yet within the practical world of a classroom, improving belonging might require addressing some of these, none of these, or a completely different combination of these things for students. The end result is a flexible baseline that takes into account the widest possible range of needs, but also is designed to seamlessly change for individuals as needed. As a goal, this type of environment is ambitious, but necessarily ambitious. Flexibility, in contrast to conformity, is critical so as to embrace the inherent diversity of all students.

***Implications for research.*** Research on belonging needs to address the practical realities of belonging within schools. This should involve active exploration of the conditions and importantly individual students' experiences of the conditions. It is not enough to know the conditions alone, but rather one must also explore the relational interactions between and

individual and their context. It is within this relational space where practical reality meets subjective experience.

Additionally, belonging interventions need to consider the same conditions. Fostering the belonging of all students is incredibly challenging. To better design interventions associated with belonging, further research into these practical challenges related to fostering belonging is important. Once potential barriers and affordances are identified, then these can be more effectively addressed.

**Theme 11: ambivalence towards school belonging as a goal.** Participants were clear that belonging was important to them. This is in line with belongingness theory as previously discussed (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). All students discussed wanting to find their group and their place. Yet there was noted ambivalence around whether or not school belonging should be or could be a realistic goal. For some participants, there was a sense that belonging to a school would mean having to be average and would require conforming to a uniform standard. It would require acting like everyone else, thinking like everyone else, and being like everyone else. Yet this was not desirable as students claimed they wanted to be themselves. This view says a great deal about how they viewed the overall school culture and what it means to belong in school, but it also says something important about belonging itself. Belonging in this sense cannot be built on conformity to an ideal, but instead must be built on diversity and acceptance. It is not about fitting students into the boundaries, but about expanding them.

Belonging is something that is desirable, but since belonging can be found within a variety of contexts and with a variety of people, school belonging is not always something sought by students. There are significant questions that need to be raised about why participants felt this way. For instance, what was it about the school culture that raised ambivalence? What in

their personal experiences might have engendered their feelings of difference? When considering these questions it is important to put aside the assumption that a school is an inherently valuable place to which to belong. Belonging in school does appear important in many ways, but for some participants, the costs associated with school belonging made them question its value and instead they may choose to focus their attention on belonging elsewhere. Whether that is because a student never saw school as valuable or because they have been increasingly alienated is something that must be explored at the individual level.

***Implications for practice.*** In some ways ambivalence towards belonging as a goal is not necessarily surprising, in particular in regard to middle school students. Middle school can be a challenging place in which to find belonging for any student. However, this ambivalence says something very important regarding practice. Namely, we can learn from aspects of why they are ambivalent and make potential changes in approach. Of central importance, there needs to be a respect and consideration of student voice. It is not enough to simply impose belonging on students, but rather belonging must be co-created right alongside students. Belonging is not conformity, and it cannot be treated as such.

Additionally, there needs to be consideration given to how we meet the needs of students with EBDs and what particular needs are being met and not being met. Participants frequently shared that school was not designed for them, in particular, how they like to learn and what is relevant to them. As participants pointed out, why would they want to be in a place that is not for them? Likewise, participants often reported feeling “called out” regarding services. Student ambivalence must give educators serious pause if belonging for all students is indeed a goal. Providing services that are exclusive or retrofitted to meet students’ needs is unlikely to foster belonging. Rather, environments must take into account how these students learn and how to

deliver individualized services so as not to have students feel “called out”. We must learn from why students seem ambivalent.

***Implications for research.*** Research should further explore this ambivalence, as it says something very important about the intersection between students and the school context. What leads a student to say “I am not sure I want to belong here” or “I don’t know if I should belong here” says a great deal about the context and the individual. Focusing on the context provides a potential pathway to explore the culture and how the individual might fit into it. It provides a potential pathway to explore social relationships. It provides a potential pathway to explore future projections of belonging. Much can be learned from this potential hesitation.

Yet it is also a hesitation that must be taken cautiously as a researcher depending on perceived position relative to schooling. Depending on the origin of said hesitation, potential affiliation with schools or the school system might be a factor in what is shared by the student and why. Students might be unwilling to share fully and trust might need to be built. This relative position for students could impact participation as well, as some students might hesitate to participate as they could see little use if conditions could not reasonably improve. When studying belonging, however, understanding this group of students’ experiences of belonging might be very important. Their experiences would likely provide a great deal of information regarding the conditions of belonging and what might lead to distancing from a given context.

**Theme 12: striving towards the ideal must consider daily interaction.** Though there might be ambivalence towards school belonging, that does not mean the previously articulated ideal state is something that cannot be strived towards. Many schools have already taken actions to support student belonging. For instance, there have been many efforts to make students feel comfortable and welcome and efforts to be more inclusive in schools’ messaging and outreach.

These broader considerations are all things that can be meaningful. However, participants were also clear that changing belonging in school requires addressing the daily dynamics at play within a given school.

Belonging is not something that simply happens, but it is engendered and nurtured through daily interactions: coming into the school building and being greeted by warm and welcoming individuals, being able to successfully complete a class activity, receiving help when needed, having people willfully sit together at lunch, being invited to a group activity. Research has even shown that simple things like eye-contact can make a difference in an individual's perception of belonging (Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012). These are all examples of daily interactions that can potentially help students feel they really belong within a school. Without these types of very practical daily interactions, messages around belonging and inclusion are simply rhetorical nods towards a disingenuous goal.

***Implications for practice.*** Belonging should be addressed at broader levels, but addressing belonging as lived by students requires one to narrow further into the daily lives of students. In large part, this requires concerted efforts to learn more about students and understand how they might interact with their context, in particular with their peers. Previously, in talking about social interactions, the point was raised that students often feel there is a student world that exists within any school. Addressing belonging requires one to step into this world to better understand how students are actually experiencing belonging. Additionally, it requires monitoring and evaluation at this level. It would be very easy to miss vital contributions to an individual's belonging if daily interactions were not considered. Having policies and messaging around acceptance and inclusion is not a bad thing, but if it is not backed up by daily interactions, then these messages will ring hollow.

***Implications for research.*** Most importantly, research should carefully consider the daily interactions of students. While understanding larger issues related to belonging might be very important, also understanding micro-interactions can be vital in understanding belonging. For instance, one could ask students broader questions around how and if they feel belonging, but also ask questions around micro interactions leading to a given appraisal. To use a participant generated example, observing both verbal and non-verbal communication over a period of time could be very important in understanding what leads to a given individual's appraisal of their belonging.

Methods that focus on the lived experience within context could be particularly helpful in this regard. It should be noted though that direct observation alone would need to be paired with students' subjective understandings. For many reasons discussed above, exactly what is observed and the relative importance of any given event should be put directly within the experiences of students. This is opposed to observations that focus more on confirmation or frequency. While these might be valuable, without subjective reference they might not be sufficient.

### **Revisiting of the Generative Model of Belonging**

One of the key aspects of this study was the creation and use of the generative model of belonging. The generative model of belonging was created as an attempt to better understand the possible factors, pathways, and subjective experiences related to belonging within school. It was created through a review of the literature and the focus was on possibility as opposed to reduction. This study was an attempt to bring light to the lived experiences of middle school students with EBDs, and as such it is important to think about the model in relation to the findings of the study. Overall, there was a great deal of fit between the content of the model,

how it was structured, and the findings of the study. However, there were changes that were made in light of the new study.

### Basic Structure of the Model - Revised

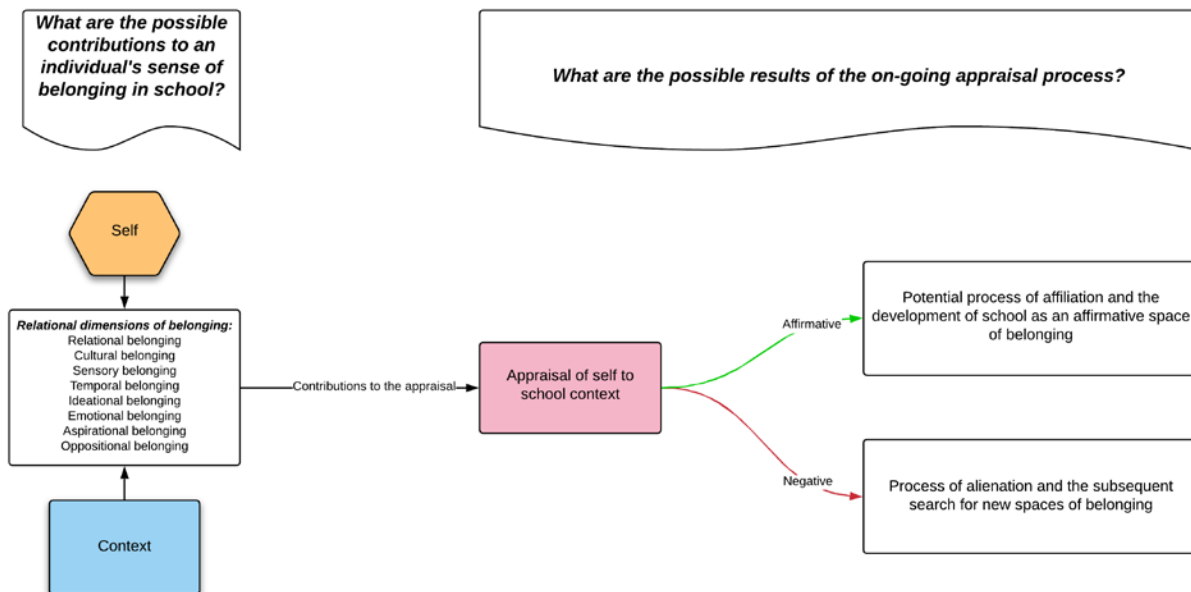


Figure 8: Revised Basic Structure of the Model

Before moving into the fully revised model, it is important to begin with the overview of the basic structure of the model. As will be discussed in more detail in proceeding sections, changes were made to the basic structure to reflect the shifting understanding of belonging based on this study. The revised generative model builds from this structure. Most critical to note at this point are language changes and the addition of two additional relational dimensions. Consistent with participant data, the basic structure did not change in terms of how it represented the function and contributing factors of school belonging.

### A Generative Model of School Belonging – Revised

Based on changes that will be discussed in a moment, the revised Generative Model of School Belonging is as follows:



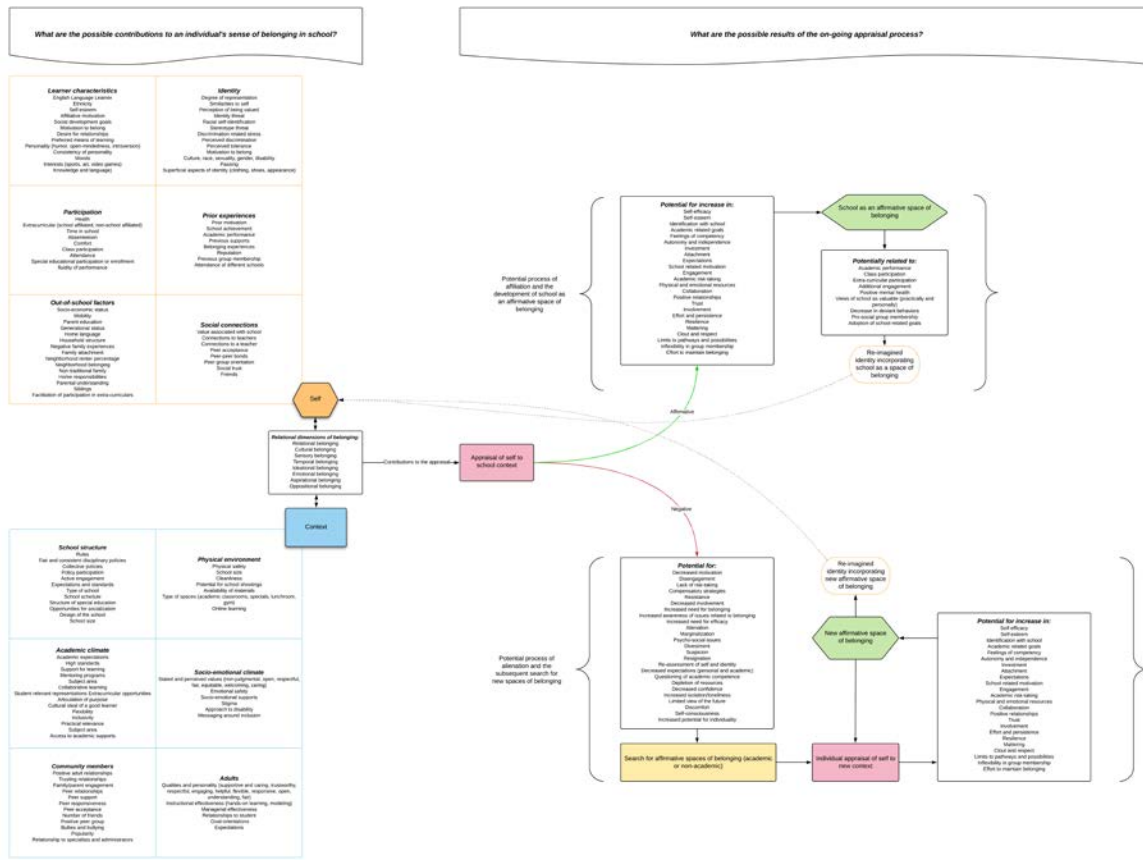


Figure 9: Revised Generative Model of Belonging

## Comparison to the Model

Overall, there was a great deal of fit between the model and the findings of this study, and few changes needed to be made to the overall structure of the model. Importantly, major changes did not need to be made to the overall structure of the model. The basic structure remained the same and was only expanded upon and clarified as opposed to being significantly revised. For instance, the same thematic groupings of contributions did not need to be changed, as they still encompassed the experiences of participants. In part, this indicates that, though specific experiences and understandings will differ, the model could be useful in beginning to understand the potential experience of belonging in school. Again, that is not to say it encompasses a particular subject experience; that was never the goal, but it does point one

towards potential contributions to be considered, as well as the potential impact of a given appraisal.

The lack of major changes also indicates that the experiences of students with EBDs are likely not significantly different from that of their peers. As exemplified within the unchanging overall contributions and structures, many of the same considerations were raised. Additional issues that were raised, however, were unique to their individual context and unique circumstance. Disability and their participation in special education did not necessarily change the structure of belonging, but it did change the considerations, contributions, and weight given to belonging. It might not change the equation itself, but it does change the elements of the equation.

**Model alignment to a changing understanding of belonging.** The most apparent changes were primarily related to the changing understanding of belonging engendered by participant data and subsequent analysis. As in any phenomenological study, careful examination of the lived experience of the concept led to new understandings of what belonging actually means. Before discussing how this is reflected in the model itself, it is important to discuss what belonging is understood to be. Findings did result in a revision to the definition of belonging:

<i><b>Previous Operational Definition</b></i>	<i><b>Revised Definition</b></i>
The multidimensional, relational process of student identification and re-identification with the school as an organization as well as key actors within the school, as manifested within the student's subjective sense of belonging (the feeling of oneself to be or not to be an important, valued, accepted, included, member of the community).	<p>Belonging is a derivation of the on-going comparative appraisal of self to context, as manifested within an individual's subjectively understood sense of belonging (the accessible feeling associated with said derivation).</p> <p>School belonging is a derivation of the appraisal of self to the <i>school context</i>.</p>

*Table 5: Comparing Previous and Revised Definitions of Belonging*

One key difference between the former definition and the revised definition is the focus on the idea of belonging as a derivation. In large part, this distinction was necessary to reflect a broad relational approach. Belonging is not a state that is experienced in static or uniform ways. Rather, belonging should be understood as malleable and continuously changing based on the interaction between self and context. As shown within the relational model, this sense of belonging can be derived from a wide range of sources, and can occur in both intentional (actively seeking to belong) and unintentional ways (merely finding oneself in a new context). The term derivation was used, in part, because it is more reflective of this on-going, relational understanding.

Another shift was the separation of belonging and school belonging. As shown within the participant data, belonging is necessarily experienced as embedded within particular contexts, school being just one of them. That is not to imply that schools are not important contexts in which to belong, but that conceptually we must recognize schools as unique and uniquely experienced by individuals. The new definition is an attempt to provide clarity in regards to this distinction by recognizing schools as just one context in which belonging can be embedded.

Another clarification that should be made is around the use of the terms “context” and “self” within the new definition. Here the term context is meant to be interpreted broadly to better include a wide range of possible contributions to a given appraisal. This could include: the physical layout of a space, individuals, activities, and a range of other factors both within and outside of school. The term self was used in the revised definition to be more respectful and understanding of a given individual. Being a student is just one of many different aspects of any individual, and referring to students seems to imply this student label should be our primary lens

through which we should understand an individual. While some individuals might strongly identify as students, others will not.

Conceptually there was also a shift to the term appraisal. Identification, which was previously used, seems to imply an active seeking process on the part of an individual to align self with context. Yet as participants showed, identification is not always something that is specifically sought. However, an individual is constantly appraising, be it consciously or unconsciously, the context in which they find themselves. Appraisal was also used because it is a more neutral term. One could have a positive, negative, or relatively neutral appraisal. Again, this relates back to the relational approach.

**Specific revisions to the model.** One of the most important revisions was ensuring the model was aligned with the emergent understanding of belonging. The idea of belonging as a derivation was still in line with the original intent of the model, and therefore structural changes were not necessary. Language changes, however, were necessary to ensure that the intent was clear. Key changes are documented in the discussion of the changing definition.

Another change was within the process resulting in school as an affirmative space of belonging. While there had initially been two separate types of potential influences to begin this process indicating a certain degree of causality, these potential influences were combined in the revised model. This was done because of the increasing difficulty of identifying differences within the sections. For instance, increased collaboration could lead to increased self-esteem, but just the same increased self-esteem could lead to increased collaboration. Making this only one section highlights this complicated, reciprocal, and sometimes inseparable relationship between factors.

Considering that the purpose of this model is to be generative, terms were not deleted. This would have potentially limited potential pathways and possibilities, and would have eliminated potentially important aspects of previous research. Terms were, however, added based on the subjective experiences of and understandings expressed by participants. Additions were made to contributions to both self and context, as well as within the affirmative and alienation processes after the appraisal.

**Revised relational dimensions of school belonging.** One aspect of the model that was revisited were the relational dimensions of belonging. These dimensions were elaborated from the initial three dimensions discussed by May, and are discussed in chapter two. Interviews with participants led to the development of two additional dimensions.

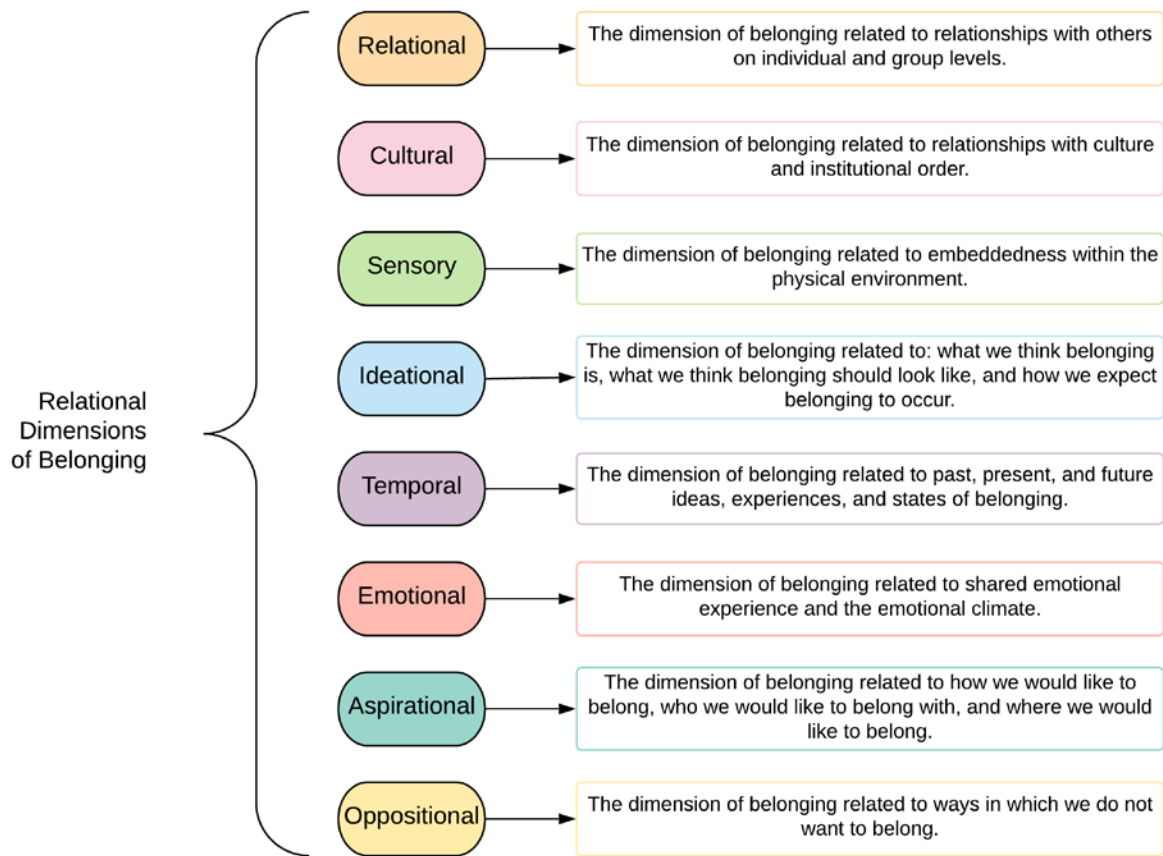


Figure 10: Revised Relational Dimensions of Belonging

**Aspirational belonging.** This aspect of belonging was added in response to the often aspirational dimension of belonging discussed by participants. Whereas ideational belonging addresses what students imagine belonging to be, aspirational belonging addresses what students want their belonging to be. Depending on perspective, belonging within school is not a uniformly good thing. Rather we seek out particular types of belonging based on our own aspirations. Whether we actively seek other people or particular group membership, what we seek is, in part, based on aspirations.

This implies that understanding belonging requires one to understand particular goals and aspirations of students on multiple levels. When thinking about a student who might not feel a

strong sense of belonging within a given school, one must also understand what that individual aspires to and if the school affords the opportunity to belong in that particular way. For instance, a student might see a pathway to belonging through the arts, but if there is not an appropriate pathway to exploring this aspect of self and goals, then belonging could be a challenge as they will not be able to belong as they aspire to.

***Oppositional belonging.*** The other dimension that was added was oppositional belonging. Often belonging was not only defined in affirmative terms, but also in the negative. A sense of belonging appears to be influenced by an understanding of who one does not want to belong with and where and how someone does not want to belong. In this sense, belonging is, in part, defined at the same time as not belonging. For instance, when thinking about peers, students will not only identify peers they would like to belong with, but also peers that they actively do not want to belong with.

Similarly, even when defining belonging in affirmative terms, there can be a sense of opposition. For instance, a student could actively choose to belong with a given group so as not to belong or be seen to belong with another group. In this sense, we define our belonging by those we do and do not belong with and where we do and do not belong. Both are equally informative.

### **Using the Data to Create a Participant Model**





however, based on their individual experiences within their context and their exploration and exhibition of identity.

### **Potential Limitations**

Within this final section of this chapter, potential limitations of this study are further explored. As a qualitative study, a goal was to raise additional questions, and what the study did not address is equally enlightening in helping to understand future directions. In this sense, the potential limitations are also potential pathways to further understand a complicated topic and are presented here as such.

### **Level of Analysis**

This study focused on belonging as it was reported by students. As such the goal was to view their experiences of belonging through their personal lens. Participants were allowed to respond as they wished and there were no additional explorations regarding the context that was being discussed. They were not observed in their context nor were other individuals asked about the belonging of particular participants. This was done intentionally so as to respect the student perspective. On the one hand, this offers an important perspective on what belonging is to these students. Belonging is indeed subjective and personal, but on the other hand, further contextual exploration could be done to better understand the embedded and enacted nature of belonging and student experience. Again, the focus of this study was not to go beyond the individual lens of the student, but this lack of in-depth contextual exploration could be seen as a limitation.

This pathway of exploring context, though valid, is one that is difficult to tread. Someone's sense of belonging cannot be dictated to them, and it would be unwise to explore contextual elements as a means of invalidating student experience or perspective. Discrepancies could be seen as potential areas of further exploration, but invalidation would not be in keeping

with the nature of belonging. However, contextual elements could be further explored to better understand some of the potential contributions related to belonging. For instance, thinking more about how special education is structured and delivered as well as the culture of disability could both be interesting pathways to pursue related to students with EBDs. This would need to be done through more detailed case study type explorations. Yet, it would still be equally important to understand the perspectives of individuals and not make assumptions about them within a given site. Further exploration of context could be valuable, but losing the individual for the sake of context would be unwise given the nature of belonging.

### **Sample and Sampling**

The study only included ten middle school students with a range of EBDs. This is a sample size that clearly cannot generalize to the broader population of students with EBDs or students with disabilities. It is very likely that due to the wide range of contributions discussed here that there will be a wide range of experiences of belonging, and this study will necessarily be limited in how those experiences might be addressed on a broader level. This lack of generalization is a limitation of this study.

Related to the participants in the study, the approach here was to recruit students who have EBDs under criteria previously defined. EBDs is a broad category that includes a diverse range of disorders. This study did not narrow into a specific disorder or even emotional or behavioral disorders such as bipolar or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This could be seen as a limitation as was revealed even within this study by the sometimes-variable impacts both individually and contextually of having a behavioral or emotional disorder.

Another potential limitation was, ultimately, there were no sixth-grade students that agreed to participate in the study. The idea was to recruit students across sixth, seventh, and

eighth grade, but unfortunately there were no sixth-grade students who agreed to participate. This is a limitation in that a third of the middle school population would not be represented here. While participants most certainly reflected back on their previous experiences within sixth grade, the accessibility of these experiences could be changed due to distality from the moment of experience.

However, the very idea of sample size and generalization itself is interesting to consider when thinking about belonging. Belonging is necessarily uniquely and individually experienced based on the wide range of considerations. To say that the experiences of the participants in this study were similar or dissimilar to those of other students belies something fundamental about belonging. While experiences can certainly be compared, one must do so while avoiding the reduction of subjective experience. Research questions regarding belonging in this sense must be carefully framed.

### **Recruitment**

Related to sampling, this study was also limited in that students were recruited with direct help from administrators at the two sites. While this greatly helped in recruitment, access to students, and scheduling, this necessarily limited the students who were recruited to participate. For instance, while the researcher did guide and ultimately approve all participants based on the criteria previously discussed in the methods section, it is not as clear as to which students were and which were not chosen by the administrator. To help mollify this limitation, a number of conversations were had with administrators around who could be recruited and on-going questions about recruitment were answered. However, this type of recruitment was necessarily limiting in who participated in the study.

### **Contextual Exploration**

Exploration of context was one of the areas that this study did not delve into with any great depth, and this could be considered to be a limitation given the topic of the study. The level of analysis was at the individual student level and as such the contours of the contexts in which students found themselves were not thoroughly explored. The goal of this study was to understand the subjective experience of students and gaining multiple sites was important to garner a range of experiences and perspectives, but further exploration beyond this point was limited. Further research that explores the structures and relationships within a given context would likely yield interesting results. If this were the case, rather than looking across multiple students, one could look across multiple experiential contexts or different categories of students within a given context.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

On one level, belonging is easy to understand. We all experience it. We all have memories of times we have felt or not felt it. We all can discuss people with whom we feel more or less belonging. Yet, when one begins to examine the lived experiences of belonging, a great deal of complexity begins to emerge. As the model implies, there are broader structures that might be similar, but belonging is necessarily experienced at an individual level within a particular context. This study sought to explore the experiences of middle school students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders, and in doing so there was much revealed about both the study of belonging and belonging as a concept.

### **Methodological Reflections**

At the core, this study took a phenomenological approach, but with what turned out to be some important caveats. In particular, there were decisions made within the process that were ultimately beneficial to the study of belonging and middle school students with EBDs.

### **Structuring the Interview Process**

While conceptualizing this study, there were questions about how to conduct the interviews themselves. Some within phenomenology encourage the use of unstructured interviews. The idea is that this relative lack of structure would allow the researcher and participant to explore the concept at hand in an unfettered way. While this might be effective for some populations, for participants in this study having semi-structured interviews and activities were important for ensuring that the interviews would be effective.

**Semi-structured interview protocols.** Belonging can be a particularly challenging concept to explore. It is often felt, difficult to articulate, and conceptually abstract. Adding additional structure to the interviews helped make the concept more accessible to participants

and provided them with a variety of means of articulating their experiences. This is not to imply that fully structured interviews would have been effective. Fully structured interviews would have been inappropriate given the exploratory nature of the topic. Imposing full structure requires a degree of conceptual certainty, and this study did not seek to explore such singularity. Additionally, fully structured interviews could have been too limiting for participants as they rarely shared their thoughts in a linear fashion. Though an initial question could have related to a particular concept, participants would often use the initial question to transition into exploring other concepts, generating new questions, or clarifying previous statements. Having an open interview structure allowed for this exploration. Strict structure would have limited this exploration and, potentially, what could have been shared.

**Interview activities.** An important part of the interview structure was the inclusion of activities. The purpose of the activities was to challenge participants to not only discuss belonging, but to actively use and apply their knowledge in different scenarios. This allowed participants to move beyond belonging as an abstraction and focus on meaning in context. Additionally, these activities helped participants discuss belonging in depersonalized ways. Belonging can be challenging to discuss at all, let alone with an interviewer who is effectively a stranger. Sometimes, in this sense, it was easier for participants to discuss belonging in action as opposed to being strictly limited to the discussion of consciously available personal instances of belonging or not belonging.

### **Scheduling Interviews**

The practical realities of conducting four, hour long interviews with students during school time proved to be a challenging aspect of the interview process. Participants had very little free time. They were required to attend certain classes, sometimes absent, away from school

on field trips, and had school events. Administrators and teachers within the sites proved invaluable in managing the scheduling process. This in and of itself says something interesting about the sites and how similar studies might play out.

Both sites were interested in learning more about how their students were experiencing belonging, and that is important to recognize. Not all schools are so willing to put in the effort for such a time intensive study, and one needs to carefully consider the type of schools that are willing to participate and what that might mean about possible study participants. These were schools who already were focused on inclusion and were thinking about belonging as an important aspect of what they do. Other sites might have very different orientations to belonging and therefore varying degrees of willingness to participate. Yet, some of these more unwilling sites might be very important to investigate as student experiences could differ in key ways.

### **Memoing and Coding**

A particular challenge within the analysis process was the time and effort it took in practice. The process included reading and re-reading multiple times, interrogating meaning on multiple levels, and interrogating personal assumptions. This was done for each line, each interview, each student, between students at one site, and then across sites. Memoing and coding proved helpful in addressing challenges within this process. Memoing allowed for a temporal record of key thoughts as they emerged. This running record could then be interrogated, as well as used as a tool for questioning analytical patterns. This helped with analysis and the bridling process.

Coding also helped address this challenge. Coding is not included in all phenomenological studies, but it was something that was invaluable within this study.

Descriptive coding allowed for a more thorough exploration than would have been possible with

reading and re-reading alone as it allowed for the linking of specific quotes to general topics and instances of similar meaning through categorization and grouping. Since there could be multiple meanings within a given statement, multiple codes could be applied. Coding in this sense allowed for meaning to be explored in multiple ways as a single quote could be linked to and inform multiple ideas. This process helped to create patterns that were more directly related to participant experiences.

### **The Importance of Flexibility**

There is by no means a lack of guidance around how to approach interviews with students. There are bigger things like: making sure to be respectful, honest, and open; ensuring there is trust and rapport; and listening compassionately. Flexibility was particularly important within this study. Flexibility, in part, relates back to the idea of semi-structured interviews and being open to exploring lines of inquiry generated by the student, as well as the multiple means of representing student data (participant summaries, interview data, and a participant model). Yet, flexibility also related to the logistics of how the interviews were conducted. Flexibility proved important when scheduling interviews, organizing and structuring the interview space, and within the pacing of the interviews. One example of how this flexibility expressed itself was with seating arrangements. There was one participant who, at multiple points, wanted to lie on the floor. For this participant, it was challenging to sustain their undivided attention for an hour-long interview. Lying on the floor was one way in which the participant coped with their energy, and it ultimately helped them focus. Overall, flexibility was key in ensuring all participants could participate and contribute in meaningful ways.



## **Conceptual Reflections**

Throughout the study, participants shared a range of experiences. While a reflection here cannot capture the complexity of the participants' expressed experiences (these can be found in the participant summaries, the interview data, and the participant model), there are a few broader points that should be highlighted in relation to belonging more generally.

### **What is Belonging?**

Belonging is a concept that is seemingly fraught with contradictions. It is something experienced by everyone, but also something hard to define. It is something that seems so obvious when we have it, but we do not always know how we got it in the first place. It is something that can guide our behavior, but we are not always aware of how. It is something that we actively seek when we do not have it, but we are not always clear on what we are seeking. This makes belonging simultaneously personal and meaningful, but also enigmatic and furtive. We know exactly what it is, but also cannot quite put our fingers on it. This says something very important about the nature of belonging. Belonging is an integral aspect of our experience, but also something that can be difficult to understand.

Critical to this experience is the feeling of belonging. It is challenging to talk about belonging without talking about the feeling of belonging. This feeling is often what we are consciously aware of related to our appraisal of self to context. To use a metaphor, while there might be a very long and detailed report comparing and understanding self in relation to context, the feeling of belonging is the executive summary. It provides a shorthand which we can then use to help guide our behavior, and this is a very important role. We need shortcuts to help us navigate our contexts, in particular our social contexts, because of the complexity of and shear

amount of detail within any context. The feeling of belonging provides important personal guidance without having to be bogged down in the details.

To understand student belonging, we must move beyond executive summaries alone, and this is where the challenges begin. We need the full report and this requires one to look at the individual, the context, and very importantly the intersections between the individual and context. The Generative Model of Belonging as revised within this study was an attempt to begin to capture some of this complexity. It detailed the many factors that can differentially impact belonging related to both the student and the context, the relational dimensions of this interaction, as well as the potential impacts of the feeling of belonging. The purpose was not to detail the most likely experiences, but rather possible experiences. In other words, to begin to explore belonging as lived, thus reading past the executive summary alone.

### **What Does School Have to Do with It?**

Belonging can be difficult to discuss outside of a particular context. Schools as entities are unique institutions and should be recognized as such. On one level, we need to recognize school itself as having an inimitable role in the lives of students. Schools are normative contexts within American society and, as such, special weight is put on belonging within schools. School belonging can mean increased access to opportunities, important connections to adults and others who can help them, opportunity to explore potential pathways in a safe space, and securing what can seem like an uncertain future. On the opposite side, a lack belonging in schools is not merely an inconvenience, but rather it can significantly impact how an individual views themselves and their role in society in the immediate and in the future. While belonging can be found in a wide variety of ways, not belonging in school is simply not the same as not belonging in another context.

On another level, we need to turn our attention to the lived experience of school. In doing so we quickly see that schools, as they are conceptualized today, are a very unique place to experience belonging. Students are enrolled within a specific grade and classes with specific students who are both a similar age and often from the same geographic location. This grouping only narrows further when considering class enrollment. While in classes they engage with peers they do not choose, and study specific subjects deemed important by educators and members of communities they often do not know. Within the secondary context, they learn from multiple teachers they may see for one year or less. Often, there are not pre-existing relationships with these teachers, so students are left to quickly determine how to effectively interact with and meet the standards and requirements of teachers. Each day is specifically structured to tell students where they are required to be at certain times. Within individual classrooms that restriction might even extend to limiting where students can sit and when they can leave their seats. Not only are there limits to student autonomy in terms of place, there are also limits on what actions they can take. School-wide rules and codes of conduct are clearly delineated. Acceptable behaviors tend to be pre-determined and the costs associated with disobedience are strict. Students complete the same work as their peers and are, in part, judged on not only how successful they were in completing the task, but also based on the performance of their peers. Learning tends to be indicated through pithy summations provided at strategic points in the year. These evaluations are stored and referenced not only within a single year or learning event but across one's entire school experience as indices of successful or aberrant development.

The purpose of fleshing out some of these ideas was not to simply reflect on or critique what middle school is like. We all have our own memories and understandings. Rather, the point was to begin to break down some of the unique aspects of schools and highlight some of the

structural and everyday aspects of school that might present barriers to student belonging.

Schools are complex and often contradictory places when it comes to belonging. We need to recognize that belonging in schools is not easy for many students and, in part, it is the very way we structure schools that is the problem. The affordances and conditions related to belonging in schools have primarily been constructed around restricted membership, segregated settings, reduced degrees of freedom, and deficit-based assumptions. These conditions ensure that those who already fit in will continue to do so and those who do not fit in will have few pathways forward beyond conformity or compliance. As educators, we must question whether it is sufficient to create conditions where some students can easily find belonging while others might struggle to belong.

### **What is Belonging for Middle School Students with EBDs?**

All participants within this study were middle school students labeled with EBDs. Though these particular participants do not necessarily represent all students with EBDs, there are important lessons that can be learned. First, it should be recognized that though participants did experience belonging in some unique ways, their experiences still followed a similar structure to that of other students. This was clearly seen in the comparison between the Generative Model and the participant model. While specific aspects might have differed, the overall structure remained the same. As with students more generally, participants in this study were not seeking something different than their peers. They were seeking acceptance and understanding, respect and justice, inclusion and supportive relationships (see the summarized ideal for far more of this complexity). Though the pathways to achieving these ideals might have differed based on a range of possible contributions, the goals appear to be much aligned. This is vital to understand if, as educators, we feel belonging should be a goal for students with EBDs.

Yet, experiences of belonging did potentially differ for these students. In part, this was due to the fundamental differences engendered by labels and practices of labeling. For better or worse, having an EBD label in school means that students necessarily had a different experience of belonging than their peers. That is because a label changes the equation. It alters how an individual is seen by others and by themselves, and it ultimately changes how an individual is treated. This is a critical point in relation to belonging. Though not all students identified with their label, they all had to deal with consequences of their label.

For some participants having a disability label did not simply mean individualization and access to additional supports. It meant that they were being treated differentially and being called out for their potential differences. Their label served as a marker of difference, and one that had significant implications for their experience of school. That is not to imply that these students were receiving ineffective or inappropriate services. Within both sites, students had access to a number of supports and, perhaps more importantly, supportive educators. Having a label and subsequently participating in special education, however, sometimes meant differential treatment and feeling called out. This in turn led to students either feeling relatively helpless within their state or feeling like they needed to focus on belonging within friend groups or additional sub-groups. In this sense, it was more about the expression of said label, than the label itself. Because of disability status, these students found themselves experiencing belonging in schools in different ways than their peers, and were often stuck asking if they could truly be their authentic selves.

### **Moving Forward with Belonging in Schools**

There has been a wide range of implications for schools discussed within the interpretive themes, but it is important to look across some of these implications to address how we can

approach school belonging moving forward. In particular, any approach to fostering belonging must be based in co-construction, the complexity of belonging as lived, and flexibility.

**The co-construction of belonging.** To truly foster belonging for students with EBDs, one would need to begin with the dismantling of conformist mentalities that are sometimes associated with school belonging. Belonging cannot solely be on the terms and conditions of a school. While there will certainly be school goals and a variety of educator goals, conformity will only engender belonging for students who already conform and resentment from those who do not. For schools to foster belonging for all students, belonging must be co-constructed. This means moving beyond merely seeking out student input or the occasional conversation. This dialogue might begin with a conversation, but it cannot end there. This implies that neither the student nor the school is the one dictating the terms, but rather there is a degree of equality and dialogue around establishing an environment where all students can belong. The challenge of doing this would be simultaneously difficult and transformative, but, to truly foster belonging for all students, a necessity.

**Recognition of the complexity of belonging.** There also needs to be a recognition of how complex and nuanced the lived experience of belonging can be. Though similar in nature, each student's sense of belonging is unique and individual at the lived level. That is not to say that we need to individualize for each and every student. There can be a great deal of overlap in terms of how individuals experience belonging. Rather, we need to understand that addressing belonging for all students requires a recognition of potential complexity. Belonging sits at the center of a complex, relational interplay between an individual and their context, in particular, their social context. Adding additional contributions like the impact of having a disability label

and receiving services for that label only adds to the complexity. Without this recognition, efforts towards fostering belonging will not be effective.

**The importance of flexibility.** Lastly, to build schools where all students can belong, a flexible approach will need to be developed. Not all students will belong or want to belong in the same ways, and we cannot, therefore, approach belonging as if it will work the same for everyone. No single contribution will be equally effective or equally necessary. For instance, even within this study, some participants found inspirational posters around their school meaningful and impactful, while others saw them as tokenistic nods to a reality that simply does not exist. Approaches will need to be flexible to ensure that there are multiple pathways to belonging.

Flexibility is also critical because student development does not walk a straight line. Students develop in a wide range of ways, but schools have often remained static and unchanging. This has meant that as students develop, there are varying degrees of fit, and, therefore, a student might experience belonging very differently over time. When there happens to be alignment, then school might be a great place to belong. Yet, there are also moments of misalignment and what happens in those moments is significant. The key difficulty is creating a space where a student can belong in different ways over time. Flexibility is critical to ensuring students' lived expressions of normative developmental pathways are not hindrances to their belonging.

### **A Return to Positionality**

Throughout this study, I kept thinking about a student I had in my class (I will call him John here). He was a student labeled as having an EBD and a student my colleagues warned me about before the start of the year. They thought that his medication was working and had him

stabilized, but you never really knew. He could explode at any time and who knew what could happen. There were stories they told in horror about bad language, threats, and things thrown in anger. He was also a child with a wide range of strikes against him so to speak. There were plenty of issues at home (too many to list here), and he had had very little success in previous years. From all accounts he was a student I was told to watch carefully not only for his sake but also for my own as an educator. He was a student with a bad reputation, and one that followed him through his academic record and teacher rumors.

During the year, these horror stories did not come to fruition. He progressed academically, though not as much as we all would have liked. His reading and math still lagged behind other students. But to his credit he never stopped trying and was one of the hardest workers in the class. He would do his best to focus and was open to learning strategies to help him keep on task. When he did get off topic, he would quickly return to the topic at hand. I still remember one time when I found him completing work in a totally different subject than the rest of the class. I asked him why he was reading social studies work when we were working on language arts. He chuckled and said he realized he was using the wrong schedule all day. We both laughed and he, undeterred, took out his social studies work and got going on the new work. He made a mistake, laughed at it, and moved right on.

Despite this academic progress, it seemed like he really struggled to get along with his peers. He tried to like similar things to his fellow students, but his family could not always provide him with the same experiences. He could not go to the baseball game, go see the latest movie, or take trips to local landmarks. He played video games like his classmates, but was always a few games behind. He lacked some important social and regulatory skills to help him make and keep friends, and he would often say awkward things in class or jump into a



conversation in which he was not really welcome. Sometimes he asked too many questions or was distracted during groupwork, and was often the last picked. He was quick to anger in competitive games and would often act out when he was losing, a trait that quickly gained him a reputation for being a bad teammate. To other students he was a bit immature and difficult to get alone with. They did not invite him to play in school let alone outside of school. Students were friendly to him, but there were also times when they actively excluded him. He did not just have a bad reputation with teachers, but with students as well. In looking back, despite progress in some areas, I would guess he did not feel much belonging in my class or the school.

The more I dove into the study and the concept of belonging the more I thought about John and how he experienced my class. How would he have responded to the interview questions? How would he have improved my classroom? What could I have done to help him feel more belonging? Why did I focus so much on academic progress, while paying far less attention to the social aspects of his experience? Why didn't I address his belonging? Why didn't I ask him about what he needed? I was busy. I had other priorities. I was worried about standardized tests. I was already overwhelmed with managing other students. There were lots of reasons why I just did not make the effort. I hate to admit it but I am not sure I really wanted to dive into the social complications of John's life. I never considered his belonging, in part, because of how complicated and involved I thought it might be. I know I did not do enough.

My situation was not a unique one. As educators we rarely have time to ask students about their belonging let alone co-construct learning environments with them to ensure belonging can happen. These are the practical realities that educators face on a daily basis. Yet, we also must question what we lose when we do not make sufficient time for understanding how students experience belonging. Whether we address it or not, all students are continually

experiencing belonging, and educators play an important role in this experience in both direct and indirect ways.

When it comes to students with EBDs, fostering belonging can be challenging and it is often a challenge not tackled in earnest. We have: added posters to our walls, put together assemblies, talked with students about getting along, encouraged pro-social behaviors, and created interventions to address struggles. All of these things could potentially be important, but none of them are sufficient because none of them ultimately address the systemic structures that only further push these students towards the margins. We create services in segregated settings, we create artificial differences through labeling, we limit how students can learn through inflexible practices, we punish students when they really need compassion, and we try to fit students into molds they will not and should not fit into. We do this and then still wonder why students do not always feel belonging in schools despite our other efforts. Until we address the daily lives and systematic inequalities of our system in relation to students with EBDs, little progress will be made in addressing their belonging.

At the completion of this study, I can say that I do think differently about my experiences with John than I did previously. I learned that his experiences of school belonging were likely far more complicated than I initially thought. I learned that, despite this complication, he was likely seeking to have similar functional needs met related to belonging (feeling wanted, mattering, etc.) as other students were. I learned that school belonging was likely a significant challenge for him because of the way school was structured, but also because of his social experiences. I learned that John's disability was just one potential influence, and one that was potentially outweighed by other factors. Most importantly, I learned that despite the complications, educators can and do have significant impacts on students like John. If, however, we want to

improve belonging for all learners, then we need a new, holistic approach to belonging that is premised on co-construction and flexibility.

Despite current conditions, as participants pointed out, there is still hope. We can: change our practices to ensure all students can find success; think more about creating flexible learning environments that are centered around key values like compassion and understanding; create schools and classrooms where all students can find belonging; and approach student needs in ways that do not simultaneously marginalize. Importantly, to do so, we have a key resource already available to use: the students themselves. We need to actively seek out the feedback of students and think about how we can co-construct learning environments where everyone can belong. Yes, this can be challenging and complicated, but I believe the alternative would be far worse. A new direction begins with understanding the experiences and opinions of students like John. I wish I knew that when he was in my class, but I am glad he has helped me realize that now.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Interview Protocols**

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (SI1)

Thank you very much for talking with me! I know you will be a big help to this study. Before we get started I want to make sure we go over the purpose of the study again. Then I can answer any questions you still have.

I want to know more about your experiences with belonging at your school. We will have four interviews. In each interview we will talk more about belonging. I really want to know what you think because you are the expert on your belonging.

I also want to make sure you know there is no right or wrong answer. All I ask is that you think about your answers carefully and ask questions if you do not understand. Remember, if you don't want to answer a question, you don't have to.

One more thing to talk about before we get started. Interviewing is a little different from a conversation. As the interviewer my job is to:

- Ask you questions
- Listen to your answers
- Clarify things I don't understand

That is a little different than just having a conversation. For example, when I ask questions it is not because I think you are wrong, but it is because I want to know more or don't understand. If I am quiet it is not because I am uninterested or don't know what to say, it is because my job is to listen and understand.

Do you have any questions or comments before we get started?

#### GETTING TO KNOW YOU

1. What are the most important things I should know about you?
2. If you had to describe yourself in one word or phrase, what would it be?
3. What do you like to do when you're not in school?
4. Let's talk a little about your disability
  - a. What disability do you have?
  - b. How does having your disability impact your life?
  - c. What do you think about your label?
  - d. How do you think other people see you?

#### GETTING TO KNOW YOU AS A LEARNER

1. Do you like school? Why or why not?
2. What do you like to learn about?
  - a. What is your favorite subject?
  - b. Do you ever learn about people with disabilities?
3. Who are your friends in school?
  - a. What are your friends like?
  - b. How important are relationships to you?
4. Are you in any clubs or on any teams at school?

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5. What is it like to receive special education services in your school?
  - a. What kinds of services do you receive?
  - b. Why do you receive those services?
  - c. Do you think they are effective?

#### GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SCHOOL

1. I want to know more about your Middle School. Considering that I don't know much, what is essential for me to know?
2. Let's make a comparison chart together. In the left column we will write down the things you like about your school. In the right column will be things you do not like.

Things I like about my school	Things I do not like about my school

3. What does it mean to be a good student in your school?
  - a. Do you think you are a good student?
  - b. Do you think your teachers think you are a good student?
    - i. Do they like having you in class?
    - ii. How do they support you?
4. Tell me more about adults in your school
  - a. What do you like about your teachers?
    - i. Is there anything you don't like?
  - b. Are there other adults that you like in the school?
  - c. Are there other adults that you do not like?

#### RATE YOUR SCHOOL

Before we end, I want you to rate your school. We will read each statement together and then you will give a rating from 1-10. 1 means you strongly disagree with the statement, and 10 means you strongly agree with the statement.

	<b><i>My school is safe.</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>My school is supportive.</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>People at my school are non-judgmental.</i></b>										



Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>People are respectful.</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>My school is fair and equitable.</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>My school is welcoming.</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>My school is caring.</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree
	<b><i>My school is open to people like me</i></b>										
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Strongly Agree

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (SI2)

In this interview, we are going to think more about what belonging actually is. We will go through a bunch of different questions, but they will all be about belonging. What I want to know is what you think and what you have experienced.

Your job is to answer as honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. Of course, you do not have to answer if you do not want to. If you have questions, feel free to ask!

WHAT DOES BELONGING MEAN TO YOU?

- 1. First let's write down what words come to mind when I say belonging. I will write them down as you think of them.
- 2. What is belonging to you?
  - a. How do you know if you belong somewhere?
  - b. How it is different from not belonging?
  - c. Are there consequences for belonging? Not belonging?
  - d. What things influence belonging?
- 3. Where do you feel like you belong?
  - a. Where do you feel like you do not belong?
- 4. How important is belonging to you?

WHAT DOES BELONGING IN SCHOOL MEAN TO YOU?

- 1. Before we talk about your experiences with belonging in school, I want to make another chart with you. This time I want to talk about what belonging at school is and how you know that.

I know someone belongs at school when...	I know because...

- 2. Do you feel like you belong at your school?
  - a. What are the biggest influences on your belonging?
    - i. Are there things that hold you back from belonging?
    - ii. Are there things that help you belong?
  - b. Does your disability make a difference in your belonging?
- 3. When have you felt the most belonging in school?
  - a. When have you felt the least belonging in school?
- 4. Who do you feel you most belong with?
  - a. Are there people who you don't feel like you belong with?
- 5. Do you think adults in school make a difference in your belonging?
  - a. What do you think your teachers or other adults think about you?
  - b. Do you feel like you get along with teachers or other adults?
  - c. What do teachers or other adults do to help you belong at school?
  - d. If I asked your teachers, what do you think they would say about your belonging?

## WHO BELONGS IN YOUR SCHOOL?

1. If you were to guess, what percentage of people would say they belong in your school?
  - a. What makes you think that?
2. Who belongs in your school? Why?
  - a. Give an example of someone who you think belongs in your school
3. Who doesn't belong in your school? Why?
  - a. Give an example of someone who you think doesn't belong in your school
4. Do other students with EBDs belong in your school?
  - a. What about students with other disabilities?

## DEFINING BELONGING

Before we end, I want to create a definition of belonging with you. We will create this together.

<i>Belonging is...</i>	<i>Belonging isn't...</i>
<i>Belonging in school looks like...</i>	<i>Not belonging in school looks like...</i>
<i>When students belong they...</i>	<i>When students don't belong they...</i>

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# PLACES OF BELONGING

In this activity, I want you to think more about belonging in your school. This time I want you to think about specific places. Are there places in your school that you feel like you belong more? Are there places you feel like you belong less?

Let's rate them and talk about why.



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### WHAT YOU WILL DO:

1. LOOK AT THE  
MAP OF YOUR  
SCHOOL
2. RATE HOW MUCH  
YOU BELONG IN  
EACH AREA 1-  
100
3. THEN RATE HOW  
MUCH YOU THINK  
OTHER PEOPLE  
BELONG THERE
4. TALK WITH ME  
ABOUT YOUR  
RATINGS

### REMEMBER

There are no right or wrong  
answers

It is always ok to ask  
questions



# OUR RULES OF BELONGING

In this activity, I want you to give some advice to a new student. We will read the scenario together and talk about some questions.

## The Scenario

Tomorrow, you wake up and head to school. Everything seems like a normal day. You talk with your friends and get ready for your classes. Just as you are about to go to your first class a new student approaches you. They say hello, and say that they are new to the school. They just moved to <>, and want to know what they need to do to belong.

As a welcoming and considerate person, you decide to give them some advice.



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## QUESTIONS FROM THE NEW STUDENT:

1. WHAT DO I NEED  
TO KNOW ABOUT  
BELONGING?

2. WHO SHOULD I  
GET TO KNOW?

3. HOW SHOULD I  
ACT?

4. WHERE SHOULD I  
GO?

5. WHAT ARE THE  
RULES I NEED TO  
KNOW?

6. WHAT SHOULD I  
DO?

## REMEMBER

There are no right or wrong  
answers

It is always ok to ask  
questions



# TWO CHARACTERS

For this activity, I want you to be creative. I want you to work with me to create two characters. Each of these characters is going to try and belong in your school. We are not changing the school at all, but we will design the characters differently.

Character 1:

- Will have the **easiest** time belonging
- What might happen to make this student not belong?

Character 2:

- Will have the **hardest** time belonging
- What can you do to help this character belong?



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FOR EACH CHARACTER THINK ABOUT:

1. WHAT IS THEIR BACKGROUND?

2. WHAT DOES THE CHARACTER LOOK LIKE?

3. WHAT IS THEIR PERSONALITY LIKE?

4. WHAT ARE THEY GOOD AT?

5. WHAT DO THEY LIKE TO DO?

## REMEMBER

There are no right or wrong answers

It is always ok to ask questions

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (SI4)

For our final interview, I want to do three things:

- 1. I want to see if I understand your experiences
  - a. The question for me is, do I understand your experience of belonging?
  - b. This will give you a chance to correct me or add new information
- 2. I want to think about your belonging in the future
- 3. I want you to help me think about how to ensure people with emotional and behavioral disabilities can belong at your school in the future.

Remember, you can always ask me questions. Is there anything you want to tell me before we get started?

SO, DO I GET IT?

[Summary/synthesis]

[Definition]

BELONGING IN THE FUTURE

- 1. What do you want to do after school? What do you dream of doing?
  - a. What supports do you want to accomplish your dreams?
  - b. What do your parents want you to be?
  - c. What do you think your teachers want you to be?
- 2. Do you think you will do well in high school?
- 3. Will you belong in high school?
  - a. Are you planning to join any clubs or join any teams?
- 4. What do you want to do after school?
  - a. Will you go to college?
  - b. What job do you think you will have?
- 5. Where do you think you will belong in the future?
  - a. Are there places where you think you will not belong?
- 6. Will you have the same friends?
  - a. Are there people you would like to make friends with?
  - b. Who are the people who will help you belong?
- 7. What supports do you wish you had in school to help you belong?
- 8. What do you want your future teachers to know about you?

GETTING BETTER AT BELONGING

How can your school be...	
These attributes will be generated from the previous interviews with the students	


1. How can the school change to be more accepting of students like you?
2. What advice would you give to your teachers?
  - a. How can they help everyone belong in their classes?
3. If you could change anything to help other students belong, what would you change?
4. Are there any school rules you would change?
5. Are there supports that the school should provide?

#### CLOSING THOUGHTS

Do you have anything else you want to tell me about?

Any questions you still have?



## **Appendix B: Consent Forms**

## Student Assent Form



Boston College Consent Form  
Lynch School of Education, Department of Teacher Education/Special  
Education, Curriculum and Instruction

**A Phenomenological Study of Belonging and Students with Emotional and  
Behavioral Disorders**

Scott Lapinski

Assent Form

9/22/17

You are being asked to help with my research study. This study is about students in special education. I want to know how they experience belonging in school. Some students feel like they belong in school, but some students feel like they do not belong. I want to interview students in your school to know how they feel.

***Why have I been asked to take part in the study?***

You are being asked to be a part of this study because you are a middle school student. I want to know if you feel like you belong in your school.

I am also asking you because you get special education services. I am interested in helping students with disabilities. To help, I want to know what school is like for you.

***What do I do first?***

Before you can help, you need to read this form and talk to me. Then you need to agree to participate. Your parents also have to say it is ok.

Please ask me any questions at any time. You are always welcome to ask me questions about the study.

Participant's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

***Who will take part in the Study?***

There will be 6 students who will be interviewed from your school.  
There will also be 2 teachers and 1 administrator.

***You agree to help, what will you do?***

- I will interview you 4 times about your belonging
- We will talk for about 1 hour each time
- You will answer questions
  - You can skip any question you want
  - You can ask lots of questions too
- I will record the interviews
- I will also review your Individualized Education Program (IEP)

***Are there risks to being in the study?***

One possible risk is that you might feel like people will know who you are and that you have a disability if you are in this study. As a researcher, I will ensure that what you tell me is private and confidential.

You also might feel uncomfortable talking about your belonging. If this happens, you can always choose not to answer a question or can stop the interview.

***Are there benefits to being in the study?***

No. However, you will have the chance to think about your experiences though, and this can possible help you and other students.

***Will I be paid to be in this study?***

No. There is no payment.

***Will anyone know I am in the study?***

Participant's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

Yes. Your parents and teachers will know. *But they will not know what you say to me.* Everything you tell me will be private and confidential (another word for private). I will not talk with your teachers or your parents about what you say. The only time I would say something to anyone else is if you told me something dangerous or illegal. Then I will tell someone so you are safe.

When I do write up my study, your name will not be in it. I also will not use the names of people you talk about. I also will not mention the name of your school.

I will keep my notes and the interviews in locked files. I might have to share the records with my school. If I have to share, then they will still not know your name or who you are.

***What if I don't want to be in the study?***

You do not have to help with this study. It is totally up to you. Nothing bad will happen to you if you do not help.

***What if I say I want to help, but then decide I don't want to?***

You can stop helping with the study at any time. It is totally fine to stop.

***Could I be asked to leave the study?***

Probably not. But you could be asked to leave the study if...

- You are not following the directions in the study
- The study is canceled

***Who can I ask questions to about the study?***

- You can email Scott Lapinski at Lapinsks@bc.edu
- If you believe you may have suffered injury or harm from the study, email or call Richard Jackson at 617-552-8429 or jacksonr@bc.edu. He will give you more information about what to do.

Participant's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

- If you have any questions about your rights as a person taking part in the study, you may call: Director, Office for Research Protections, BC at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu.

***Will I get a copy of this form?***

Yes, you will be given a copy of this form to keep.

***Statement of Consent:***

- I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form.
- I have been encouraged to ask questions.
- I have received answers to my questions.
- I give my consent to take part in this study.
- I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

***Signatures/Dates***

Study Participant (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Study Participant (Signature): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness/Auditor (Signature): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

# Parent Permission Form



Boston College Consent Form  
Lynch School of Education, Department of Teacher Education/Special Education, Curriculum  
and Instruction

## A Phenomenological Study of Belonging and Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Scott Lapinski

Parent Permission Form

9/22/17

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study that aims to understand how students with emotional and behavioral disorders experience belonging in school. Your child is being asked to participate in this study because she/he is a middle school student and currently receives special education services for an emotional or behavioral disorder.

### ***What is the Purpose of the Study?***

The purpose of the study is to find out more about how students with emotional and behavioral disabilities experience belonging in school. They tend to be a group of students that are excluded socially and academically, and I want to know how these experiences might impact their belonging in school. I also want to know how those experiences impact their views of themselves. While, we do know a little about belonging and students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, it is a subject that is largely unexplored. It will, therefore, be a qualitative study focused on exploring this topic.

Overall, there will be two schools involved in this study. Within each school there will be 6 students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, 2 teachers, and 1 administrator involved in the study.

### ***How Will the Study Work?***

If you give your child permission to participate in this study your child will:

- Be interviewed 4 times:
  - Interview 1 will just be a "getting to know you" type interview
  - Interview 2 will focus on how they experience belonging
  - Interview 3 will be an activity where I work with them on thinking about how we might design a game focused on belonging
  - Interview 4 will focus on whether or not I understand how they have experienced belonging. It will also be forward facing in that I am curious to know how they think they will belong in the future and the supports they would like to have.

Parent/Guardian's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

Each interview will be approximately 1 hour in length, and will be recorded. Interviews will take place at your child's middle school. They will happen over the course of 1-2 months due to the number of participants. However, this timeline might change depending on availability.

Importantly, your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) will also be reviewed. The purpose of this is to better understand their needs and the nature of their disability. This information will be kept strictly confidential.

In addition to your child's participation, there will also be 2 teachers who will be interviewed twice, and an administrator that will be interviewed twice. The purpose of these interviews is to better understand the school context and their experiences with your child.

***Are there risks to being in the study?***

This study should pose minimal risks to the participants involved. However, one potential risk is that through sharing their personal experiences, students might feel they will be able to be identified. To minimize this risk, all necessary steps will be taken to ensure anonymity in the recording of data, as well as the publication of data. This includes: discussing in detail how the data will be used with participants, ensuring all transcriptions are stripped of identifying information, and keeping all documents secure. They will also be informed that they can remove themselves from the study at any point, and will be encouraged to communicate with the primary investigator regarding any concerns they might have.

It is also possible that in sharing their personal experiences about disabilities they might potentially become upset or unduly uncomfortable. To minimize the potential risk of becoming uncomfortable when sharing about their experiences, participants will be informed that they can always choose not to answer a question or stop answering a question at their choosing. They will also be fully informed that they can drop out of the study if they need to.

Please note that there may be unknown risks.

***Are there benefits to being in the study?***

Potential benefits of participation in the study are limited. There is no monetary compensation. However, it is possible that one benefit will be that the knowledge gained from their reflective experience will benefit them and others in the future. The most immediate benefits are likely to the teachers and administrators. The final interview will be a reaction and reflection with them and during this time there will be a discussion of practices, students, and EBDs.

***Will there be compensation?***

No. There is no payment involved in this study.

***Are there costs for participating?***

No. There is no cost for your child to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

***Will the research be confidential?***

As a researcher confidentiality is very important to me. I understand that students with disabilities are already a vulnerable population. I will take all steps to ensure data is confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file. Access to these records will be limited to my advisor and me. Please note that sponsors, funding agencies, regulatory agencies, and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

Additionally, audio recordings from the interviews will be erased after 3 years to ensure confidentiality.

***Does my child have to participate?***

No. Participation is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences if your child decides not to participate. Likewise, if you decide you do not want them participating, there will be no ill effects. Choosing not to participate will not affect your or your child's standing with Boston College or your child's middle school.

If you and your child agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. If you withdraw, there will not be any penalty for stopping. It will not affect current or future grades or relationships with school personnel. Likewise, it will not affect any current special education services they receive.

***Can my child be dismissed from the study?***

Yes, but it is unlikely. If your child does not follow the instructions he/she is given, your child will be dismissed from the study. Also if the study sponsor decides to stop or cancel the study you will be dismissed from the study.

***Contacts and Questions***

- The primary researcher in this study will be Scott Lapinski ([Lapinsks@bc.edu](mailto:Lapinsks@bc.edu)), but Dr. Richard Jackson (Scott Lapinski's doctoral advisor) will also play a consulting role in the study. If you have any questions about the study, please direct them to Scott Lapinski.
- If you believe your child may have suffered injury or harm from the study, email or call Richard Jackson at 617-552-8429 or [jacksonr@bc.edu](mailto:jacksonr@bc.edu). He will give you more information about what to do.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a person taking part in the study, you may call: Director, Office for Research Protections, BC at (617) 552-4778, or [irb@bc.edu](mailto:irb@bc.edu).

***Will I get a copy of this form?***

Yes. You will be given a copy for your records and future reference.

Parent/Guardian's Initials \_\_\_\_\_



***Statement of Consent:***

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent for my child to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

***Signatures/Dates***

Name of Child (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian (Signature): \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness/Auditor (Signature): \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Site Permission Form

### Sample Site Permission Letter

This is just a sample. Please adjust your letter accordingly.

#### **Company/Institution Letterhead**

Boston College Institutional Review Board  
Office for Research Protections  
140 Commonwealth Avenue, Waul House  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

#### **Insert Date**

Dear Boston College IRB:

On behalf of <> Middle School, I am writing to grant permission for Scott Lapinski, a doctoral candidate at Boston College, to conduct her/his research titled, "A Phenomenological Study of Belonging and Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders". I understand that Scott Lapinski will recruit up to six students, two teachers, and one administrator and conduct interviews at <> Middle School over the next three months. We are happy to participate in this study and contribute to this important research.

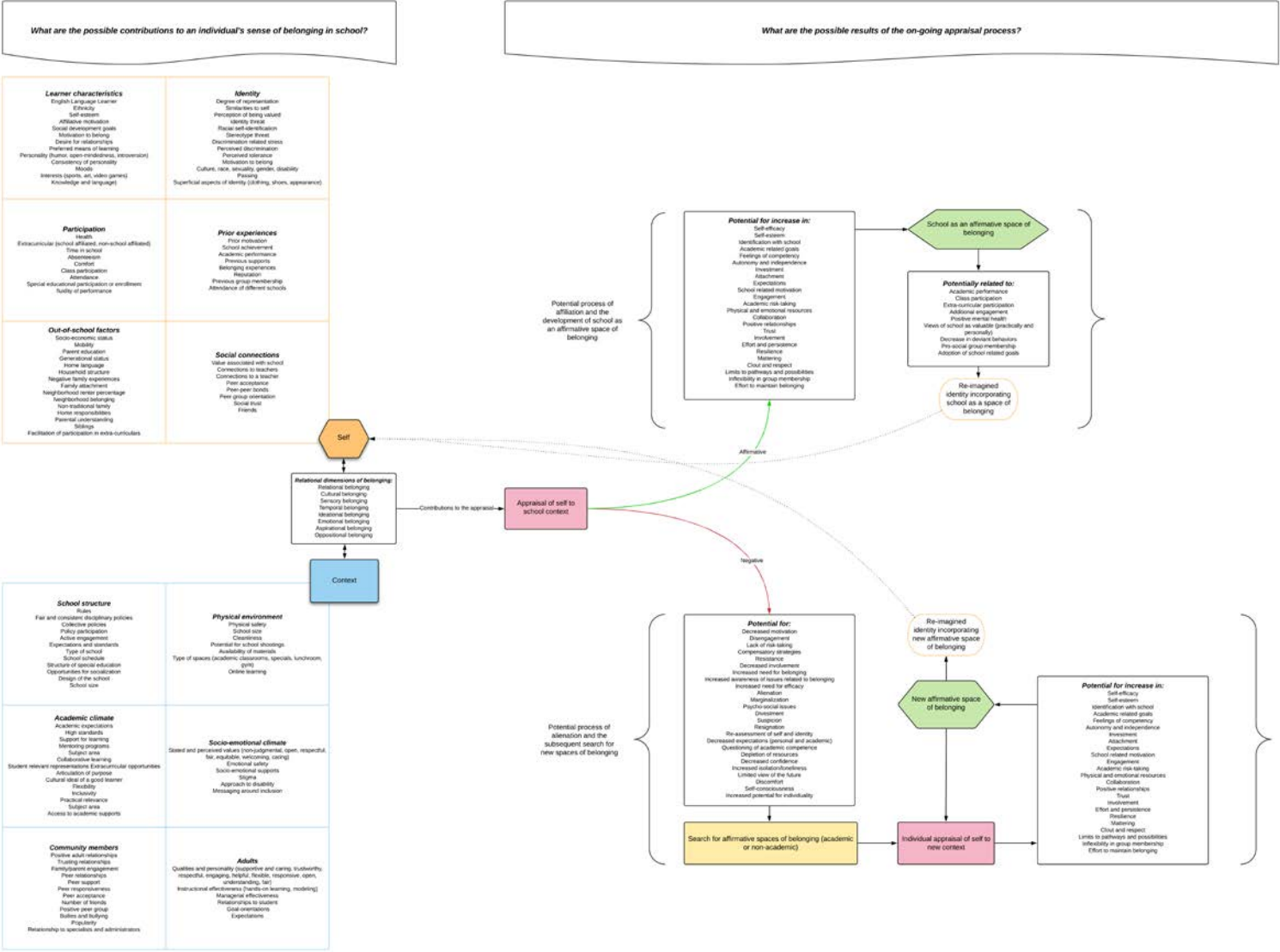
Sincerely,

**Signature**

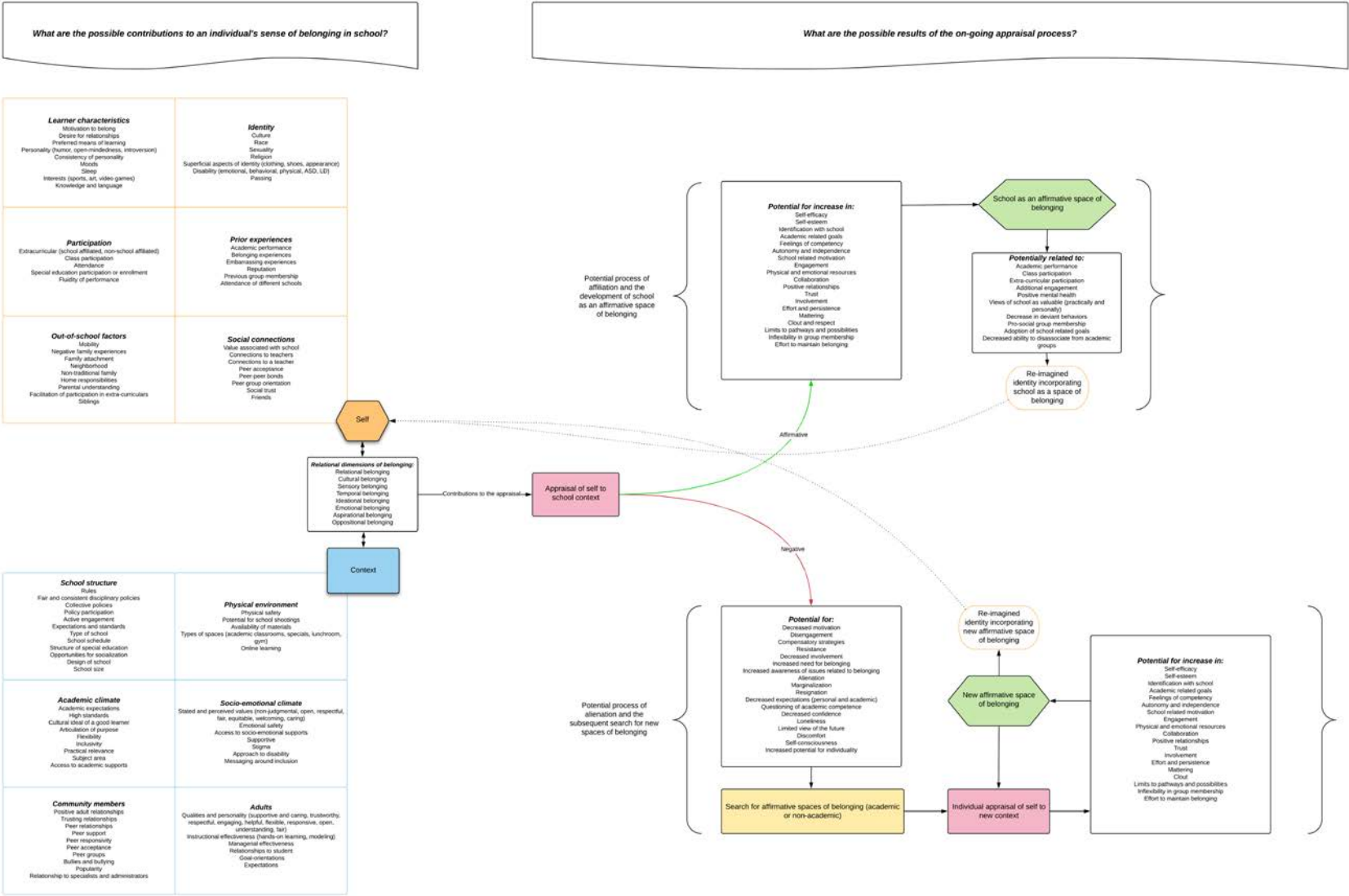
**Title**

## **Appendix C: Key Revised Graphics**

Revised Generative Model of Belonging



Participant Model Based on the Generative Model of Belonging



## Revised Relational Dimensions of Belonging

