

Students' School Belonging: Juxtaposing the Perspectives of Teachers and Students in the Late Elementary School Years (Grades 4–8)

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Abstract

Student belonging to school has been consistently correlated with many significant outcomes, yet there is little research that depicts how this sense is developed. This study explores the factors through which late elementary/middle school students (Grades 4–8) develop a sense of belonging to their school. Individual interviews with teachers and students indicated that students foster a sense of belonging through reciprocal caring relationships with teachers, through peer friendships, and through participation in extracurricular and school-based activities. These themes are discussed, and the responses from teachers and students are juxtaposed to highlight points of convergence and divergence, revealing opportunities for teacher professional development to support teachers' understandings of student school belonging.

Key Words: student belonging, teacher–student relationships, peer friendships, elementary schools, middle grades, junior high, qualitative research, Canada

Introduction

A sense of belonging is a relationally derived psychosocial construct that has been used to describe the “sense of fit” or “feelings of acceptance” that an individual feels to one’s community. Historically, this conception was concerned with the effects of affiliative motivation, that is, a tendency to want to

form and sustain close relationships with others, and was focused on explicating its saliency in adult functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Within the last two decades, scholars have become increasingly interested in the outcomes of children's sense of belonging, particularly within school contexts. Numerous lines of research have supported that children require a sense of school belonging to support positive development; yet, there has been less focus on explicating the factors that contribute to the formation of school belonging (for notable exceptions, see Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Nichols, 2008; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). This current study explored factors through which late elementary school students develop a sense of belonging to their school, revealing the points of convergence and divergence between teachers' and students' perceptions of school belonging.

The theoretical construct of belonging was described in Maslow's motivational hierarchy. He argued that humans have a basic need for belonging and that this need is ranked just behind the need for more fundamental requirements, such as the need for food and security (Maslow, 1943). Subsequent work by Baumeister and Leary (1995) has taken a critical stance on Maslow's model by proposing an explanatory theory regarding the relationship between a sense of belonging and motivation. The authors proposed that belongingness has two features. First, people need frequent personal contact or interactions that are predominantly free from conflict and negative affect. Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship that is marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The belonging hypothesis highlights situational and contextual factors that are associated with motivational processes (Wallace, Ye, & Chhuon, 2012). At the time of Baumeister and Leary's work, Goodenow (1993) challenged the current preoccupation with individual factors in educational outcomes by focusing instead on these situational and contextual factors, such as belonging, to describe students' engagement, efforts, and school success. Both works suggest that people have a need to belong in places where they spend significant time, and in Goodenow's work (1993), this particular context is the school.

School Belonging

In her seminal work, Goodenow (1993) described school belongingness as a sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by others and of feeling included in the life and activity of the class or school. Further research has provided compelling evidence of the association between a sense of school belonging and a variety of motivational, affective, and academic effects (e.g., Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011; Shochet, Smith,

Furlong, & Homel, 2011). The underlying consensus of belonging research indicates that students who feel a sense of belonging to their school environments are more likely to develop positive psychological, academic, and social outcomes and better overall health and well-being when compared to students who feel unsupported and disconnected from their school (Juvonen, 2006).

Additional research has theorized a sense of belonging within a schooling context. For example, Eccles et al.'s stage–environment fit model (1993) highlights the school as an environmental context that should meet the developmental needs of adolescents. More specifically, their model articulates the association between negative psychological changes in adolescents resulting from a mismatch between the needs of adolescents and the opportunities that are afforded by their social environments, including schools. The model points to the way that certain school characteristics and processes may contribute to a mismatch of students' developmental needs. As it specifically relates to belongingness, Eccles and her colleagues argued that developmentally inappropriate classroom organizational, instructional, and climate variables, along with poor quality teacher–student and peer relationships, contribute to negative changes in students' motivation.

Literature Review

Recent work on belonging has sought to examine the various dimensions of belonging in schools with particular consideration of the impacts of school characteristics (e.g., facilities, activities), the learning community, as well as teacher–student and student–student relationships (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Chiu, Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2016; Sakiz et al., 2012). These reports challenged previous studies that viewed belonging as a unilateral construct, not as an outcome variable in its own right. There is a large body of research that demonstrates the impact of school belonging on students' psychological, social, and academic outcomes. For example, important work by Lynley and Eric Anderman across a series of studies indicated that students with a higher sense of belonging are more likely to display increased cognitive and psychological functioning (L. Anderman & Freeman, 2004); increased academic motivation (including intrinsic motivation) and positive attitudes towards school (L. Anderman, 2003); and fewer psychological health and social problems (E. Anderman, 2002). This work has been consistently cited across multiple studies investigating student belonging, providing a foundation for scholars' understanding of the impacts of student belonging to school. There is a developing consensus, however, that research should also consider the antecedents of belonging, so that particular school environment variables can be targeted to

meet the developmental needs of children and adolescents (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014). These influential school environment variables, particularly teacher–student relationships, peer friendships, and school characteristics, will now be considered in turn.

Teacher–Student Relationships

The interpersonal variables that promote belonging to school have been granted considerable attention within belonging literature (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Juvonen, 2007). For example, Chiu et al.'s (2016) large-scale study that examined school belonging from 193,073 15-year-old students from 41 countries found that *teacher–student relationships* had the strongest link with sense of school belonging. Wallace et al.'s (2012) considerably smaller study also indicated that adolescents' school belonging could be explained through students' generalized connection to teachers, connection to a specific teacher, and perception of fitting in with peers. A significant finding of their focus group data indicated that adolescents' perceptions of "feeling known" by their teachers impacted their sense of school belonging positively. In a subsequent report, Chhuon and Wallace (2014) argued that there is an abundance of research that asserts that schools are relational communities that should be responsible for meeting the social and emotional needs of students. Yet they suggested that more research should probe the *quality* of these relational interactions, specifically between teachers and students. Sakiz et al.'s (2012) work highlighted that positive teacher affective support encourages the development of school belonging. Their study articulated nine core qualities of positive teacher affective support—when teachers "care for, value, and support them [students], whether students feel respected, encouraged, and listened to by their teacher, and whether students feel that their teacher is fair and holds high expectations" (Sakiz et al., 2012, p. 238). Taken together, these works underscore the value of examining specific qualities and interactions within teacher–student relationships that can enhance or diminish student belonging. Of note, the importance of the quality of teacher–student relationships is particularly pronounced with students from vulnerable caregiving environments, including students from low socioeconomic communities. Empirical work has indicated that students from low-income schools have a tendency to feel less connected to teachers and to the school in general, but that it is often these students from high poverty schools who rely most on this social connectedness with teachers for their overall psychological health and school outcomes (e.g., Battistich, Soloman, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Olsson, 2009).

Peer Friendships

Drawing from Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, and Coleman's (1997) work, Hamm and Faircloth (2005) described the association between friendship and belonging as providing a "secure base" that enables children to cope with challenges encountered at school. In their work depicting the relationship between friendship and belonging, Hamm and Faircloth (2005) found that their participants viewed friendship as providing a buffer to otherwise disengaging school environments. Specifically, they found that young people benefitted from their friendships as they allowed them to cope with unstimulating school settings and feelings of alienation or a lack of larger group membership. This research builds on previous work that demonstrated that when youth possess secure friendships, they are able to invest themselves more fully in school activities and to explore new settings (Ladd et al., 1997).

The association between peer relationships and belonging is less clear than the impact of positive teacher–student relationships on student belonging to school, particularly given the complex nature of group processes occurring in childhood and adolescence. Since cohesive friendships are more likely to be formed by members who share similar attitudes and values and are characterized by increased socialization effects as the friendship persists, we should be cautious to assume that a sense of school belonging derived through peer friendships is always associated with school engagement. Cohesive friendships are likely to amplify students' school-related behaviors, which may result in continued school misconduct if the group norms that characterize the friendship are deviant in nature (Juvonen, 2007). This was demonstrated in a study conducted by Dermanet and Van Houtte (2012), who found that greater peer attachment was associated with more school misconduct when students did not have supportive teacher–student relationships and that strong feelings of belonging *and* perceived teacher–student support were related to less school misconduct. This provided further evidence that the quality of friendships and friend-related behaviors jointly predict changes in student behavior. These results also speak to the potential for teachers to counterbalance unconventional peer relationships.

School Characteristics

A stage–environment fit model also presumes that the characteristics of the school, such as the school facility itself and extracurricular activities, should meet the developmental needs of students. Unfortunately, there has been little work that has examined the effects that the physical characteristics of the school or amenities have on student belonging (Cemalcilar, 2010; Johnson,

2009). This dearth of attention may be due to the inconsistent effects of school environment factors demonstrated in two seminal articles by Anderson (1982) and Weinstein (1979). The research that does exist, however, cites that objective features of school, such as school size, classroom size, grade configuration, and school composition can shape belongingness (e.g., E. Anderman, 2002; Kagan, 1990). The work of Nichols (2008) went further by assessing adolescents' subjective beliefs of school characteristics. With respect to school size, she found that students varied in their opinions of the impact of large versus small schools on student belonging, with some reporting that large schools felt impersonal while others said that small schools made them feel "too known." This work reminds us that variables often considered to be associated with poor belonging (i.e., large school or classroom sizes) may actually tell us little about a student's subjective sense of school belonging.

Student involvement in extracurricular activities has been demonstrated to positively affect both school attachment and achievement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Eccles's extensive work in this area has noted this association in diverse samples of students across multiple developmental contexts (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Earlier studies noted the association between participation in school-based organized activities and lower rates of early school leaving and substance abuse and higher rates of college/university attendance (e.g., Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). Specifically, the work of Fredricks and Eccles (2006) indicated that the benefits of extracurricular participation, including sports and structured events, related positively to school belonging. What remains less clear, however, are the particular characteristics of these school-based activities that promote student belonging.

Student and Teacher Perspectives

Nichols's research (2006, 2008) sought to uncover orientations of belongingness from the perspectives of students and teachers. Her data suggested that students varied in their perceptions of the important antecedents to their sense of belonging. To varying degrees, the students valued their interpersonal relationships, the learning and academic community, and the opportunities afforded by the school facility and activities. The students Nichols interviewed were all new students to a charter school, and while some reported that their new school provided a "fresh start," others reported that their feelings of belonging "worsened." Her research highlighted that students' school trajectories can be changed—for better or for worse—by a combination of factors that impact school belonging, such as the school's offering of activities, positive teacher–student relationships, and healthy peer relationships. Notably, her

2006 study compared students' responses with teachers' ratings of students' social standings and belonging. The findings indicated that teachers had difficulty identifying students who did or did not perceive that they belong to their schools. Nichols's work demonstrated that teachers' and students' perceptions of belonging may differ and that these differing understandings may cause teachers to erroneously assume that students feel a sense of belonging to school. As a result, teachers may underestimate, minimize, or potentially ignore indications of students' struggling to integrate into the classroom or school. This current study parallels those of Nichols by considering the belonging perspectives of both teachers and students, providing additional insight by focusing specifically on the areas of contrasting beliefs in order to highlight potential factors that could be utilized to support teachers' understandings of student belonging.

The Current Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore late elementary school (Grades 4–8) students' and their teachers' perceptions of student belonging, particularly in how belonging is defined and how it is developed within particular classroom and school contexts. Embedded within a constructivist framework, this study elicited the views of teachers and students who actively create and are subsequently affected by the context and relational processes that exist within the school environment. Constructivist researchers are concerned with their participants' meaning-making processes—in so doing, there is a marked adherence to the multiple contexts and realities that shape participants' narratives (von Glasersfeld, 2001). Qualitative research grounded in a constructivist approach can provide an inductive analysis of belonging development, a perspective that may expand on or extend from our predominantly quantitative understandings of school belonging.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do students define and develop a sense of belonging within the school context?
2. How do teachers define school belonging, and how do they perceive belonging is developed for their students?
3. How do teachers' and students' perceptions and experiences of belonging compare (i.e., similarities, differences)?

The participants' definitions of belonging provided an operational framework with which to consider their interpretations for how school belonging is fostered. Working from this definition of belonging, the students were asked to describe their experiences with developing a sense of belonging to their school

as well as the challenges that they may have encountered when establishing this connection. Teachers were asked to consider these questions with respect to how their students experience belonging within the school.

School Setting

Data was collected at one elementary school in a mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. The school had an enrollment of approximately 300 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. This public school was particularly appropriate to address the two research questions. The school served a low socioeconomic community with a population of students who were highly transient, as many students were new to the school or had moved from school to school within the school district. While school transience was not a condition for participation, five out of the seven student participants had moved from one school to another at least once during their elementary (K–8) schooling. This condition allowed many of the student participants to speak about the specific factors that positively or negatively contributed to their belonging across differing school contexts. All junior/intermediate students and teachers from the school were consulted to participate in the study. The convenience sampling procedures procured seven student participants and four teacher participants.

Participants

Seven students were interviewed for this study upon receiving consent from their parents/guardians. Junior/intermediate students (Grades 4–7) were specifically sought for this research because it is within this age range that students are particularly sensitive to the effects of interpersonal relationships within the school and to other school-contextual variables (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). A total of four females, given the pseudonyms Allie, Charlotte, Lia, and Sophia, and three males, Clark, Ian, and Alex, comprised the student sample (see Table 1). We did not specifically ask students about their family's socioeconomic status, but data released by the Ontario Ministry of Education School Profile in 2013 indicated that 41% of students from this school lived in lower-income housing, whereas the provincial average is 16.5% (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). In addition to the student interviews, two male and two female teachers—Roger, Jim, Anne, and Melissa—were also interviewed. These four junior/intermediate teachers were all experienced (ranging from 6–20 years of teaching) and had spent the majority of their careers teaching at this elementary school. All the interviewed teachers taught in combined-grade classrooms (i.e., students from two grade levels were taught in the same classroom by the same teacher), which is typical across Ontario schools experiencing declining enrollment (see Table 2).

Table 1. Student Demographics

Student (pseudonym)	Sex	Grade
Alex	Male	7
Allie	Female	4
Charlotte	Female	4
Clark	Male	6
Ian	Male	6
Lia	Female	6
Sophia	Female	8

Table 2. Teacher Demographics

Teacher (pseudonym)	Sex	Grade Taught
Anne	Female	7/8
Jim	Male	6/7
Melissa	Female	3/4
Roger	Male	7/8

Method

The design for this qualitative study involved individual, semistructured interviews. Interview questions for the students and teachers were adapted from Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (1993). The initial interview questions reflected the following themes: general perceptions of belonging, feeling a sense of belonging at school, factors that promoted a sense of belonging to school, and barriers to student belonging development (see Appendix for interview questions for students and teachers). As the interviews were semistructured, additional questions and elaborations were common throughout the interviews. The interview durations varied between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours in length (the teacher interviews were comparably longer than the student interviews). The first author conducted all interviews with the teachers and students. All interviews with the students took place during the school day in a private room attached to the school library. Each interview with the teachers occurred in the teacher's classroom at the end of the school day. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed by the first author.

The interviews with the students began by discussing their general feelings about their experiences at school as well as their beliefs about belonging to school more broadly. Students provided detailed descriptions of what belonging meant to them, how it was defined, how it felt within the schooling context, and whether they thought feeling a sense of belonging to school was an important consideration. Students were asked to draw on specific experiences in their life when they felt a strong sense of belonging to school. Students' narratives included hypothetical responses to questions like "if you were in charge of the school, what would you do to make your classmates feel like they belong?" or "if you could give advice to a new student trying to feel connected to the school, what would you suggest that they do?" Students were also asked to consider the strategies that teachers should use when fostering student belonging in the classroom and school.

Interviews with the teachers began by asking about the teacher's prior teaching experience and their perceptions of the importance of school belonging to students' successful school functioning. They were asked to provide an operational definition of belonging and their perceptions of how it feels for their students. The remaining questions asked teachers to describe a classroom where students had a high sense of belonging and a classroom where students had a low sense of belonging. They were also asked to describe what they perceived to be factors of the school and classroom that enhance student belonging. Throughout the interview, the teachers were asked to place themselves in students' shoes so that they could perceive the challenges and benefits of belonging for a junior/intermediate student.

Data Analysis

The data analysis approach first consisted of iterative readings of the interview transcripts, separating the teacher and student transcripts. Guided by Saldana's (2013) recommendations for qualitative coding, the first author conducted first-cycle and second-cycle coding to isolate emergent themes. First-cycle coding involved creating descriptive or in-vivo codes in the margins of the transcripts. During the second-cycle coding procedure, the data was reorganized into general categories and then themes. The student and teacher transcripts were analyzed separately using the same first-cycle and second-cycle processes. Example categories that were developed during the second cycle coding processes include *students' perspectives of school*, *focusing on school work*, *teachers' beliefs about belonging*, and *barriers to establishing classrooms of belonging*. After identifying these categories, the first author engaged in a cross-category analysis to identify similarities amongst the categories and subsuming codes. For example, when cross-referencing the codes within the categories *focusing on school*

work and *students' perspectives of school*, the first author interpreted one theme that represented these blended categories: *belonging as foundational*. This was conducted until the first author felt that the general categories and codes were captured within the overarching themes. Following this process of analyzing the results from the teachers and students separately, matrices were developed so that points of convergence and divergence between student and teacher participants became more apparent. To promote the trustworthiness of the data, we relied on rich verbatim extracts, which allows the reader to make their own assessments about whether the themes are true to participants' accounts. The first and second author also engaged in multiple discussions of the data, prompting critical reflection of the data and the researchers' sensitizing concepts. During these conversations, the researchers sought to demonstrate clarity in their thought processes by depicting their interpretations and decision-trails through the use of visual representations (e.g., mind-maps, Venn diagrams).

Results

The results suggested that teachers and students have a shared understanding of the importance of student belonging to school. However, their perceptions of the methods that promote student belonging differed in meaningful ways and will be discussed following the articulation of the key themes from the student and teacher interviews. The themes used to describe students' perceptions and experiences of belonging were classified as: *belonging as foundational*, *reciprocated teacher–student relationships*, *peer friendships*, and *school and extracurricular activities*. The data analysis process with the teacher transcripts procured two additional themes: *complexity of belonging*, and *commitment to belonging*. To provide an overview of students' and teachers' responses to the interview questions, we will treat each group of participants separately before assessing the nature and extent of commonality between the two informant groups.

Students' Perceptions and Experiences With School Belonging

Belonging as Foundational

Throughout the interviews, the students articulated the importance of feeling a sense of belonging to school. In their descriptions, the students stressed how their sense of school belonging is foundational and how other important aspects to their schooling experience, such as learning, rely on this sense. Ian reported, “without belonging, you wouldn't be having fun,” and he said that “if you didn't belong to school, you wouldn't get as many answers, and if you didn't get any answers, you wouldn't make any mistakes, and without mistakes

you wouldn't learn." Charlotte also spoke to the importance of feeling a sense of belonging first before tackling her work: "feeling belonging feels great because then I can sit down and do work." Allie stated, "it is important for me to feel like I like school...because that way I am not always feeling like I am somewhere else in class, and I can actually get to know people and learn." Alex believed that belonging was similar to feeling comfortable in your class: "belonging is feeling comfortable when you walk in and not feeling nervous...so you can walk in and not feel nervous or worrying that you are doing something wrong." Similarly, Clark found that if he did not feel a sense of belonging to school, he would not be able to "get any work done." Taken together, these students described belonging in terms of its importance to subsequently focus on additional tasks that were important to them, such as establishing friendships and completing schoolwork.

Reciprocated Teacher–Student Relationships

The student participants focused specifically on the importance of positive teacher–student relationships in student belonging. Many of the students discussed what a teacher can do to establish classrooms of belonging. Most notably, students described a teacher's dedication towards caring for students as both learners and as individuals in shaping positive interactions. At its foundation, Sophie articulated this when she stated, "I like it when my teachers ask me how I am doing." When specifically considering students as learners, the students felt that it was the teacher's supportive behaviors that impacted belonging formation. For example, when asked about the qualities of teachers that may inhibit belonging development, Alex responded, "they [teachers] say do your work, you get a little bit of help, then that's it, do the rest by yourself." Another student felt that when teachers helped her with her schoolwork, she felt an increased sense of belonging to school. Lia argued, "It's when teachers help you with everything. They help you learn to read better. They help you get better at subjects." Sophie spoke directly to her experience moving to a new school and how a teacher's helping behavior facilitated her belonging development: "They'll [the teacher] teach you what the other kids have learned already, and you'll catch up." Ian spoke specifically about a teacher's helping behavior in language class: "Say you are sitting there, and you get the wrong answer—he'll [the teacher] tell you why you got the wrong answer. I'm not very good at language, but he [the teacher] helps me get better." These comments specifically highlight the importance of a teacher's academic helping behavior in students' belonging development.

In addition to supporting students as learners by facilitating caring teacher–student relationships and student belonging development, students spoke to the importance of caring for students as individuals. In this study, caring for

students as individuals encompassed teachers supporting the social and emotional development of students. Lia spoke to this when she commented on the importance of teachers going beyond their traditional roles as instructors by considering their students' realities, both inside and outside the school:

If the kids have a test that day and the teacher tells you what you are doing, not just hands you the test and say, "this is what we are doing." The teacher may not know that I don't know what is happening. I may have missed school the day we were learning it because I was sick at home. The teacher should know this.

Here, Lia is speaking to the importance of teachers acknowledging and understanding the complexities that exist in students' lives. Sophie suggested that teachers should "help you by getting more friends if you don't have any friends...I know a teacher I had helped me get friends when I didn't have any friends. I was really quiet, and then he came, and he helped me [get] more friends." Sophie continued, "If it's your first day and they just add you to the group and don't introduce you to people, then you'll feel scared and not want to go to talk to people." The same student reflected on a particular experience she had when her teacher helped her solve a conflict that arose within her friendship group. Sophie felt that when she "got the teacher, and the teacher goes to talk to them," she and her peers were able to become friends again. This student felt that this gesture by the teacher demonstrated that the teacher was willing to help her within her social experiences.

When Clark arrived as a new student to this school, he appreciated the support from his teacher. He believed that it was the teacher's responsibility to "introduce me to everyone in the class and make me feel normal. I just want to feel normal." Alex argued that it was the teacher's responsibility to "look out for you and make sure that everyone is treating you nice—keep an eye on you." Teacher support was also echoed by Lia who argued that "if you get into an argument that day [with friends], and the teacher doesn't deal with it, I don't think that would be very welcoming." This commentary indicated that students have expectations that teachers will become involved in the peer ecology of the classroom and school and, through this involvement, will become supportive of students' peer relationships if a problem arises.

In discussing caring teacher–student relationships demonstrated by teachers supporting students as learners and individuals, the students touched on the reciprocal nature of these relationships, particularly as it pertains to knowing and supporting one another. That is, students recognized that belonging could be facilitated when teachers were willing to get to know their students, but also that teachers should be willing to share with students some aspects of their personal lives. Lia believed that teachers should "tell them some stuff about

yourself. Tell them how fun you are and some of your interests and favorite subjects.” Ian echoed this when stating that he felt that teachers and students should “know each other, who we all are outside of school.” He continued by stating that he felt that his relationship with his teacher improved when he was able to support his teacher. “I think we got closer when I started helping him more. Like feeling he could rely on me for help. It wasn’t much, just some little things in class.” Similarly, Allie wanted to feel like she was contributing to her classroom: “I feel good when I know I’ve helped my teacher. I feel like she liked me more.” These statements highlight the central role of reciprocity in fostering positive student–teacher relationships and student belonging in the classroom.

Peer Friendships

In addition to acknowledging the important role of teachers in facilitating belonging, students stressed the particular qualities of friendship that influenced their belonging to school. Although these participants did discuss how a more general feeling of peer acceptance was influential to their sense of belonging, there was a greater emphasis on the role of trusting friendships and feelings of companionship. Allie reported that good friends make her feel like she belongs when she is able to rely on friends for emotional support following self-disclosure: “What makes a good friend is when you are feeling sad... when something happens at your house you can tell them; they don’t tell anyone else, and they will make you feel better.” Clark echoed this comment on the importance of trust within a friendship: “Good friends are everything. You can trust them. They won’t lie. They won’t talk behind your back, nothing like that.” Sophie believed that good friends are “always with you, no matter what happens. They stand by you, always nice to you.” She continued by stating that “bad friendships” are “when they go around and tell all your secrets and stuff. You think, ‘I thought they were a good friend.’” This highlights the interaction between self-disclosure and trust within positive peer relationships.

Another common quality of positive friendships that influenced student belonging encompasses the role of companionship, characterized through similar interests and activities. Allie articulated this when she stated, “I feel that I have a lot of friends and that my friends like me for what I do and what I like to do with them.” Charlotte believed she felt a heightened sense of belonging when she got to “spend time with [my] friends at recess.” She stated further that she enjoys spending time with her friends engaging in mutual interests: “Me and my friends practically do every sport the school has together. We find a game that everyone wants to play. We find out what we want to do. If someone wants to do office duty, we all do it.” Ian also discussed the importance of commonality within his friendships: “Well, my relationships with my friends would be where we hang out even when school is over. We hang out when I am doing office

duty; someone may do it with me. We share stuff in common.” Clark believed that good friendships are characterized as “when you have similarities between each other, when you like the same things, when you do the same things.”

School and Extracurricular Activities

Throughout the interviews, students described many activities that were offered by their classroom teachers. They spoke specifically about their teacher’s instructional activities that promoted their sense of belonging, as well as extracurricular sports, school clubs, and volunteer opportunities. When Clark was asked to describe a time when he felt a strong sense of belonging to school, he mentioned that he enjoyed playing interactive games in French class. Charlotte also spoke of her French teacher who used games to help the students learn the language. She also felt that the instructional activities at the beginning of the school year could make a big impact on student belonging. She told a story of when her teacher brought them all into a circle to play a “get-to-know-you” game, and further mentioned that she would also like to play these games as the school year progressed.

It was common throughout the interviews for the students to describe the many school-based and extracurricular activities that were afforded by the school. Allie stated, “I like what we do here at this school, the different crafts that we do, and I like the things that we do for celebrations.” Ian described a positive “belonging” memory during the interview by outlining his important role in the school Christmas play. When asked about a time when he felt he really belonged to school, Ian said, “Last year in Grade 5 when we were doing the Christmas play and I was the narrator. I felt like I totally belonged.” He also cited how the time he spent doing office duty allowed him to meet people and feel accepted. Ian also listed the many activities that were offered at the school: “There is art club, photography club, sports club, and outdoors club.” Towards the end of each interview with the students, each was asked to pretend that they were the principal of the school and in charge of making sure that each student felt a strong sense of belonging to school. Nearly all of the students felt that the school should offer fun activities for the students. Ian stated that he would

[t]ake one kid after another to the office and ask them what they like.

Once I find something that they all have in common, I’d try to make a spirit day that involved something like that. That would be fun. Everyone would feel accepted.

Allie suggested, “I would get more fun things for the kids...I would let the kids open a club of their choice.” Charlotte also spoke to the importance of the school staff taking suggestions from the students when creating school activities. She told me that if she was the principal, she would “put a list of things,

and then whoever wants to write something down, like an idea, I would look at them and choose, and then I could try to do them.”

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging

Complexity of Belonging

Throughout the interviews, it was apparent that the teachers had a very complex and multifaceted understanding of school belonging. They spoke about belonging in terms of students feeling connected to peer groups, the classroom, the school, and the wider community. All four of the teachers spoke about their role in facilitating student belonging to school, but also commented on the challenges that they encounter when attempting to foster belonging for all students. Anne, a Grade 7/8 teacher, argued that feeling a sense of belonging can be both positive and negative and that it depends on where students are deriving their membership:

If they sense that they belong to the school and to the class, there is that sense of safety—the [negative] behavior tends to decrease. . . . If their sense of belonging happens to an outside group, like a group of friends that doesn't have anything to do with the school, then it affects behavior by increasing negative behavior.

Jim, a Grade 6/7 teacher, also spoke about how this need to belong to a peer group may act as a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging to the classroom and the school:

Our kids feel that belonging means fitting in. New kids to the school often feel that they need to misbehave to fit in because we have behavior problems at our school. Overall, I think that their sense of belonging is not being made fun of, avoiding being picked on, fitting in in any way they can.

This quote indicates that Jim interprets student belonging as being derived primarily from peer acceptance. Melissa, a Grade 3/4 teacher, also commented on how the community context and, particularly, the desire to belong to a peer group can complicate belonging for her students:

I guess the socioeconomic area, they grow up really fast, and they end up acting a lot older than they are, and I think that sometimes some of the behaviors go along with it—acting cool, leaving kids out who aren't cool, and I think that creates a rift. They may think that they belong to a small group but not the classroom. It's them and their friends against the world.

Commenting on the barriers to student belonging was common throughout the interviews. Most notably, the teachers felt that the values of the students'

families and the wider community also impeded students' feelings of belonging to the school. Melissa stated:

I had kids who had skipped from school to school to school and had never been a part of anything consistently, who felt like nobody noticed, nobody cared...I think for some of them, they didn't have that feeling of belonging before, so it was hard for them to know what it could be like.

Roger, who teaches Grade 7/8, argued that some of his students had a difficult time integrating with the school because of their family lives. He articulated that his students' low sense of self-worth combined with instability in the home made it difficult for students to derive a sense of membership to the school:

There are just a lot of adults in and out of their lives. Attendance is a huge issue, not eating properly, not sleeping properly. I think these kids are coming to school with a backpack full of baggage. They don't have any self-worth at home, and then they try to come to school and try to fit in.

Jim further articulated the critical link between home and school when he discussed how it relates to belongingness:

We have a unique challenge that our demographic doesn't take school too seriously to begin with. I don't think they have outside experiences that help them understand or relate to school. It's tough. I think it stems from home...they don't get the necessary support from home to feel that school is a priority.

In recognizing these barriers, Anne stated that "it takes a lot of effort on the teachers' part" to foster classrooms of belonging for students. She added, "Kids who don't have a sense of belonging are probably really stubborn and resistant to that, because, for whatever reason, whether it's a past teacher, past classrooms, past experiences, it's going to be harder to get them." Anne did feel, however, that it is possible for teachers to provide that sense of connection to school but suggested that it takes a strong commitment.

Commitment to Belonging

Despite the challenges that these teachers encountered when fostering classrooms and schools of belonging, they also believed that it was possible for teachers to provide opportunities to help redirect students' belonging to the classroom and school. This required teachers to be intentional in their commitment to foster belonging in the classroom. Jim felt that he was committed to "give the kids an opportunity for something to be proud of. We give them opportunity to show them why they live in a special area, why they live in a

special community. I think that is starting to transfer into their sense of belonging.” He continued,

They [the students] need to see that they are cared for. They want to be a part of something special. Sometimes they don’t know how to express that desire, don’t know how to include themselves. But I think they know they are all capable of being a part of a great community. It’s our job to provide great opportunities to become part of our school community.

Here, Jim is speaking to the potential for teachers to open up or redirect students’ feelings of belonging to a positive community (e.g., the school, a sports team, etc.). Melissa pointed out that the process of students coming to feel like they can become a valuable member of the school community takes time:

You have to go through the rough patches first. I think that it takes a lot of consistency, and I think that it can’t necessarily be done in one year...I think that the time the staff are willing to put in is a big factor...The staff showing love and caring and compassion towards the students is a really big piece. It seems simple, but it’s not when there are a lot of demands that teachers and support staff have to do in the day.

Anne reported that a sense of school belonging needs to be prioritized from the outset; she said,

It is one of the things that I work on for the first month, but I continually work on it throughout the school year. If there isn’t that sense of belonging, then I just think that academically, emotionally, socially, they will not be their best.

Roger believed that all of the school staff shared a similar philosophy of the importance of school belonging: “We want our students to become part of the school community. I think the school does a good job. We provide outlets for them...we are all there for them.”

Contrasting Student and Teacher Perspectives

The interviews with the students and teachers demonstrated that both groups had a similar understanding of the importance of feeling a sense of belonging to school. Students felt that it was necessary to establish this sense early so that they could focus on their academic and social commitments. The teachers also acknowledged the significance of school belonging for their students and viewed belonging as a complex phenomenon, one that is impacted by a variety of social–ecological factors (i.e., peer group, family, school, community). Broadly speaking, the teachers and students in this study all emphasized similar belonging factors, such as the important role of extracurricular and school-based activities, as well as interpersonal relationships, particularly peer

and teacher–student relationships. It is promising that both groups had similar understandings of belonging, as this provides a valuable starting point from which to build. The two groups' perspectives within these factors, however, differed meaningfully. Highlighting these differences provides opportunities for teachers to expand their understandings of student belonging in order to maximize student belonging in the classroom and school.

Most notably, the interviewed students articulated two forms of teacher support that they desired: *instrumental support* to help facilitate their learning and *affective support* to assist them in their peer relationships. During the interviews with the students, it was striking how much the students wanted their teachers to help facilitate the formation of friendships in the classroom and to provide support during friendship conflicts. While the teachers were not asked directly about the various types of support they provide their students in the classroom, their commentary indicated that the management of students' peer relationships was outside the realm of teachers' influence. Melissa mentioned a time when a new student came to her school and immediately gravitated towards a group of “popular” students who were disengaged from the classroom. She said,

I've definitely seen that happen several times, and you sit there and think—awww, that's not who they should be hanging out with—you just hope they figure that out. Once they are at the school a bit longer, they can figure it out.

Jim argued that when his students start to hang out with the “wrong kids,” it was really “out of his control.” He stated further:

I think they [students] find the spot that they fit in and then make changes slowly when they are comfortable. Generally speaking with our students, a lot of them come in and see the people who are acting silly... they are wrong kids for them to be hanging out with, but that is really out of my control. We just have to wait until they figure that out for themselves.

This commentary on students' peer relationships indicates that teachers may have a “hands-off” approach to students' friendships. Jim also felt that if a conflict occurred between friends, one that threatened feelings of belonging to school, these students “should figure this out on their own...they'll learn soon enough.” Conversely, statements from students Lia, Clark, Sophie, and Charlotte indicated that they would like their teachers to become involved in their social experiences, including assisting students in their friendship development and also by providing support in conflicts with friends. A significant theme from this work suggests that peer friendships are an integral factor to

developing a sense of school belonging; the teacher and student participants both articulated this. It is notable that the teachers suggested that although peer group acceptance and friendships are vital for belonging, they believed that this was outside their realm of influence. The students, however, suggested that they desired more support from their teachers to assist them in their social lives.

Although the teachers stressed the necessity of peer acceptance to students' school belonging, utilizing the terms "fitting in," "avoiding being picked on," and "their reputation to their peers is everything" to describe the primary goals of their students when fostering belonging, the students accentuated the value and quality of their friendships. Many of the students acknowledged that their friends were instrumental to feeling a sense of belonging, and, in particular, they believed that trust and companionship were important qualities of friendship. Students were less concerned, however, with their overall classroom acceptance. When he described his experience of feeling accepted by all of his classmates, Alex stated that it "didn't matter if everyone accepted me. I just need my friends." He argued that he "didn't care. If they have a problem with me, I just know it's not about me." When feeling like a classmate did not accept him, Clark stated that he would "try to figure out why they didn't accept me, and then I'd try to fix it, and if that didn't work, I'd get over it; maybe they won't. I have other friends." These two comments provided a glimpse into students' perceptions of peer acceptance versus friendship, indicating that, to these students, high-quality friendships might be more influential to student belonging than generalized peer acceptance. It is possible that when teachers were commenting on "fitting in" they were alluding to both peer acceptance and friendship, but the students' focus on friendship, in particular, points to specific qualities of friendship, such as trust and companionship, that can impact student belonging.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the ways through which students develop a sense of belonging to their schools from the perspectives of both students and teachers. This qualitative work supports existing quantitative studies in belonging research by providing accounts of the subjective experiences of students and their teachers within a specific elementary (K–8) school context that serves a population of students from a low socioeconomic background. First we provide a discussion on the specific belonging antecedents discussed by the students: reciprocal teacher–student relationships, peer friendships, and school and extracurricular activities. We follow this by discussing the contrasting perspectives of the teacher and student respondents, as this underscores the

potential areas for growth in school or classroom-based programming that aim to meet students' belonging needs.

An important theme from the interviews with the students encapsulates the seminal role of reciprocal, caring teacher–student relationships in students' school belonging. The process of caring has been conceptualized as an integral component to forging successful relationships (e.g., Noddings, 1984, 2005). Specifically, Chhuon and Wallace (2014) posited that teachers who know their students are better able to respond to students' individual needs, and this contributes to feelings of caring. Consistent with this perspective, Chhuon and Wallace also found that in order for students to feel known, teachers need to move beyond a “just teach” (p. 387) attitude and grant students the “benefit of the doubt” (p. 392). Both of these concepts were also echoed in an influential study conducted by McHugh, Horner, Colditz, and Wallace (2013); when adolescent students spoke about the bridges and barriers that impact students' experiences with teachers, they stated that it was their teacher's effortful engagement that contributed to positive relationship development. Similar to the present study, in McHugh et al. (2013), the concept of teachers engaging in conversations to understand students was the most commonly discussed practice to develop positive relationships.

This component is consistent with Noddings' (1984) concept of engrossment—the first integral component in a relationship of care. Noddings (1984, 2005) described that, in each caring relationship, the carer needs to meet the receiver of care with engrossment. That is, the one caring opens herself/himself to the one being cared for. The process necessitates full attention and receptiveness to the perspective of the cared-for person and the situation. Similar perceptions of the importance of knowing in caring relationships have been posited by Davis (2009), who articulated two themes of caring relationships between teachers and students: feeling understood and feeling that understanding matters. In her study, Davis found that students perceived teachers to be caring when teachers made authentic attempts to understand their students as individuals. It is within these supportive moments that students can begin to derive their sense of belonging to school.

Noddings' conceptual model also includes reciprocity. In her 2005 work, she defined a *caring relation* as:

A connection or encounter between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for. In order for the relation to be properly called caring, both parties must contribute to it in characteristic ways. A failure on the part of either carer or cared-for blocks completion of caring and, although there may still be a relation—that is, an encounter or connection in which each party feels something toward the other—it is not a caring relation. (p. 15)

This notion of reciprocity was evident throughout the interviews with the students in the present study. For them, teacher–student relationships required teachers to be willing to share their personal selves with students and suggested that through this openness, students will feel encouraged to support their teachers. This highlighted the importance for teachers to foster reciprocal spaces in the classroom, where students feel comfortable providing support to teachers. This support may be viewed as affirmation by the one caring, thus solidifying the caring encounter (Wilde, 2013).

The data from this study also demonstrated that students felt that teachers should be supporting students as learners and as individuals, most specifically through instrumental support (“they [teachers] will tell you why you got the wrong answer”) and affective support (“teachers should look out for you and make sure that everyone is treating you nice”). This was articulated by Ozer, Wolf, and Kong (2008) who differentiated these two constructs within their study on secondary school students’ perceived school connectedness. Contrary to the findings from the current study, Ozer et al. found that some participants felt that they could receive support from teachers academically but that they would not seek out teacher support in relation to personal concerns. This theme of expecting academic support but not personal support was echoed by McHugh et al. (2013), who also consulted adolescent students. Although in these studies students were often satisfied with a teacher caring relationship based on academic support, students in this current study were adamant that teachers should also support their emotional and social lives. This discrepancy likely speaks to the developmental and structural changes that take place from late elementary school to high school. The students from the current study were drawn from middle to late elementary school grades (4–8) and had not undergone a significant transition from one school level to another. Research suggests that there is instability associated with students transitioning from junior/intermediate classrooms to high school. During this time, students typically move from highly organized classrooms where there is frequent contact with one teacher to environments where students are increasingly called on to develop more self-care competencies due to the decrease in structure in later-grade classrooms. It is also typical that during this time, young adolescents begin to place more emphasis on their peer relationships (Goodenow, 1993). Lynch and Cicchetti (1997) found that this investment in peer relationships is met with more frequent reports of less positive relationships with teachers. The difference between the results of this study and McHugh et al. (2013), therefore, may be partially explained by a shift in students’ perceptions of the role of caring teachers from late childhood to adolescence.

The findings from this work indicate that students' peer friendships, characterized by features of trust and companionship, were critical to students' belonging development. These features of friendship have been described in previous studies on the qualities and provisions of friendships (e.g., Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009) and have been articulated in previous theoretical understandings of friendships, such as Sullivan's (1953) influential theory of the therapeutic potential of friendship. In Hamm and Faircloth's (2005) important work describing the role of friendship in adolescent school belonging, the authors found that friendship could be divided into provisions of reliable alliance/instrumental aid. These provisions include expectations for loyalty and support, intimacy involving self-disclosure amongst members of the friendship, and the enhancement of members' self-worth facilitated by feeling understood and validated through companionship. This current study supports Hamm and Faircloth's (2005) findings and provides further detail to the particular features within these provisions that may be critical to students' belonging needs. The students in our study contended that it was through trust and companionship that students felt particularly supported by peers. Trust involved aspects of self-disclosure and loyalty, articulated within previous work on friendship (Furman & Robbins, 1985; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005, 2011), and companionship speaks to the influential role of providing students with opportunities to engage in collaborative activities throughout the school day. The results from this study do suggest that the pleasure gained from sharing with friends in class and school activities is central to students' belonging development.

Research examining the link between school-based and extracurricular activities has continually asserted that student engagement in these activities promotes feelings of belonging (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Nichols 2006, 2008; Osterman, 2000; Wallace et al., 2012). In 2009, Johnson acknowledged the significance of school contextual variables in shaping student belonging, with a particular emphasis on the activities afforded by the school. She argued that school and extracurricular activities provide students with opportunities to collaborate and interact with teachers and peers, and that this further serves to strengthen personal relationships and feelings of belonging (Johnson, 2009). Notably, in this current study, students emphasized the value of having a voice in the creation and implementation of activities (e.g., when asked about what she would do if she were principal, Allie stated: "I would let the kids open a club of their choice"). Important work by Eccles et al. (1993) argued that providing the opportunity for students to contribute to their classrooms supports students' autonomy development, which becomes increasingly necessary as students progress into adolescence. Our study suggests that school activities could provide an avenue for students to build their autonomy, but that

this space for leadership needs to be offered by the teachers in the school. This could be accomplished by consulting students on their wishes for school and classroom activities and by encouraging students to undertake a larger role in the development and execution of these activities.

The discrepancies between the teacher and student responses from this elementary school, specifically their differing perspectives on the role of teacher affective support and the value of friendships over peer acceptance, speak to a body of research that articulates the importance of teacher attunement to and support for students' peer relationships. This research has indicated that students experience positive outcomes within their social networks when their teachers are highly attuned to the peer relationships in the classroom (Hoffman, Hamm, & Farmer, 2015). Attuned teachers are able to identify students' peer group affiliations, understand the underlying social dynamics operating within them, and provide adequate affective support to students experiencing peer group difficulties. This knowledge also permits teachers to leverage peer group dynamics to reduce aggression and promote more engaging learning environments. Attuned teachers are better able to provide more sensitive and responsive support to students, particularly in challenging social situations (e.g., peer aggression) that threaten students' sense of school belonging (Neal, Cappella, Wagner, & Atkins, 2011).

Teacher attunement to peer relationships should expand beyond acknowledging the number of friends or with whom a student interacts, to paying particular attention to how students interact with each other, as well as the qualities of their friendships. In the context of the present study, teachers may have focused on the two former criteria (number of friends and with whom the student interacts) when explaining belonging, whereas the students highlighted the interactions and qualities of their friendships. Although many teachers may be perceptive that their classrooms are complex social communities, Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, and Murray (2011) argued that grasping peer group affiliations and dynamics often requires teacher professional development in order to develop the skills of attunement. Our study points to the salience of friendship qualities in student belonging, signaling a potential avenue where teachers may direct their attunement and support to maximize student belonging in the classroom. To enhance teacher attunement to students' peer interactions, teachers can seek input from their students about the peer relationships in the classroom. Audley-Piotrowski, Singer, and Patterson (2015) also propose that to develop attunement, teachers should actively record and discuss with colleagues their observations of students' interactions.

Limitations

There are limitations to the present study that could be addressed in future research. Because the aim of our research was to generate an understanding of students' belonging experiences in a particular context from the perspectives of students and teachers, the results may not be generalizable to other school environments. However, given the pervasiveness of these general themes found in other studies on teacher–student relationships, peer relationships, school and extracurricular activities, and school belonging from a variety of school communities (e.g., Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005, 2011; Nichols, 2006, 2008), it is reasonable to assume that these are important considerations in many learning contexts. Throughout the student interviews, there were very few indications of negative schooling experiences, including negative features of teacher–student and student–student relationships. Similar to Hamm and Faircloth (2005), we did not explicitly ask participants to discuss their negative experiences at school and conflicts within their relationships. This may have contributed to our assessment of the students' generally positive experiences of school belonging. Furthermore, we speculate that the students who consented to participate in the study may already demonstrate increased engagement within the school. This may explain why there were few references made to negative schooling experiences or conflictual relationships and why students attested to feeling a strong sense of school belonging.

Conclusion

The strengths of this study include the juxtaposition of students' and teachers' perceptions of student belonging and the identification of school characteristics and relational processes that can be amended to meet students' belonging needs. The comparative findings between the student and teacher responses identified that, in this elementary (K–8) school context, teachers may overestimate the impact of peer acceptance in student belonging to school and may underestimate their influence in students' peer group development and maintenance. Although the number of students and teachers interviewed was small, this data is encouraging because it reiterates the important role of teachers in providing opportunities for students to discover or redirect their sense of belonging to the classroom and school. This study is particularly relevant in those elementary and middle schools located in low socioeconomic communities. These children may especially rely on their relationships with teachers and peers and the opportunities afforded by the school context in order to develop positive educational experiences.

Although there have been considerable advances in our understanding of the importance of student belonging, there are still many challenges that teachers may face when attempting to foster classrooms that prioritize students' affective experiences. In 2000, Osterman argued that school organizational policies and practices systematically prevent the development of close communities among teachers and students. Much could also be said of the priorities of our schools today. Teacher commitment to students' belonging needs must also be met by an institution that prioritizes the relational side of education. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belonging hypothesis asserted that people need interpersonal connections that are met with frequent interaction and persistent care. If education is "primarily about human beings who are in relation with one another" (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 5), then schools have a unique opportunity to fulfill this fundamental human motivation.

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions: Students

1. What does feeling like you belong mean to you?
2. Do you think it is important to feel like you belong to school? Why?
3. What is it about your school that makes you want to go to school every day? Or, what makes you not want to go to school?
4. Where else do you feel like you belong? Does this feel different from your feeling of belonging to school?
5. Is there a time in your life that you felt that you really belonged to school? Tell me about this time.
6. What are some of the things that a teacher can do to make you feel like you belong?
7. What are some of the things that your classmates can do to make you feel like you belong?
8. If you were in charge of your school, what would you do to make sure that everyone felt included in the school?
9. If you could make a suggestion to a new teacher about how to make a school where everyone felt like they belonged, what would you suggest?
10. If you could give advice to a new student trying to feel connected to the school, what would you suggest that they do?

Sample Interview Questions: Teachers

1. What does feeling a sense of belonging mean to you?
2. What do you think it means for your students?
3. Do you think feeling a sense of belonging is important for your students? Why?
4. Can you tell when your students have a low/high sense of belonging to school?
5. What are some of the characteristics or behaviors of students who you think have a low/high sense of belonging to school?
6. Tell me about a classroom that you have had where you believe that most students felt a strong sense of belonging to the classroom. Describe these students' senses of belonging to the school.
7. Tell me about a classroom that you have had where you believe that not all students felt a strong sense of belonging to the classroom. What about the school?
8. When students first arrive in September, what do you think they do to begin to develop a sense of belonging or connection to your classroom or school?
9. What do you perceive to be a challenge that your students have when developing their sense of belonging to the school?
10. What are some of your practices that you bring to your classroom to facilitate belonging?