

A HEURISTIC CASE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF
ADOLESCENTS SENSE OF BELONGING

A DISSERTATION IN
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by
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University of Missouri-Kansas City 2024

ABSTRACT

Across the United States students are reporting that they do not feel like they belong to their school. The implications of students not feeling a sense of belonging are significant and long-lasting, impacting many general well-being and academic outcomes. The heuristic case study was conducted in a Midwestern Urban Middle School utilizing three qualitative data sources to examine how adolescent students perceive their experiences with a sense of school belonging. The central questions were: (1) How do adolescent students experience school belonging? (2) How do adolescent students experience interventions implemented by the school related to school belonging? The findings supported reviewed literature on the importance of school culture, peer-to-peer relationships, and student-teacher relationships. Implications for practice and recommendations for further research are included.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, Social Work, and Psychological Sciences, have examined a dissertation titled “A Heuristic Case Study of the Experiences of Adolescents Sense of Belonging” presented by Ryan Blake, candidate for the Doctor of Education Degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	3
Purpose	7
Research Questions	9
Theoretical Framework	9
Overview of Methodology	18
Limitations, - Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations	21
Significance of the Study	24
Summary	27
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	29
Adolescent Development	32
Teacher-Student Relationships	53
School Culture	73
Transformational Leadership	93
Summary	111
3. METHODOLOGY	113
Rationale for Qualitative Research	115
Case Study	119

Heuristic Inquiry	121
Role of Researcher	122
Design of Study	124
Data Sources	127
Data Analysis	133
Limitations, Validity, and Reliability and Ethical Considerations	138
Summary	140
4. RESULTS	142
Overview of Study	142
Survey Findings	152
Findings of Case Studies	159
Cross-Case Analysis	184
Conclusion, Answering the Research Questions	188
Summary	191
5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	195
Recommendations	195
Future Research	199
Final Reflections	201
Appendix	
A. INTERVIEW GUIDE AND QUESTIONS	203
B. RESEARCH STUDY PARENTAL PERMISSION	205
C. RESEARCH ASSENT FORM	207
REFERENCES	209

VITA..... 244

TABLES

Table	Page
1. Achievement Data for 2022	126
2. Survey Data Questions 1-5	154
3. Survey Data Questions 6-12	155
4. Themes, Codes and Frequencies	161
5. Cross-Case Analysis	183

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DEDICATION

To my wife Sammy. Without your support, sacrifice and love I would never have been able to do this. To my kids, Oliver, Anna, and Owen. You are capable of anything. Never give up and never stop learning. To my mom, dad and brothers. Thank you for teaching me how to learn and how to persevere. Thank you for providing me a village of caring adults who saw potential in me.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The historical context of student's sense of belonging at schools is complex and multifaceted, shaped by various social, cultural, and educational factors taking place over hundreds of years. One key component of this historical context involves traditional teacher-centered educational methods and models that often focused on rote memorization, rigid discipline, and often neglected diverse students (Dewey, 1899; Cremin, 1964; Spring, 2008). Furthermore, authoritarian school structures, prevalent in various historical periods, limited student voice and autonomy. This lack of agency contributed to a sense of detachment and disengagement among students, impacting their overall sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). The teacher-centered, hierarchical classrooms of the past continue to impact more contemporary practices and ultimately impact perceptions and student outcomes (Brown, 2003; Kohn, 2003).

Despite the lasting impact of the traditional educational models, there has been a significant shift towards more student-focused approaches, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of personalized learning experiences. Dewey (1916) has long advocated for student-centered learning, emphasizing the role of students as active participants in their education. Furthermore, educator's adoption of constructivist theories, which highlight the significance of students constructing their knowledge has further pushed for student-focused models (Piaget, 1970). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of social interactions in the learning process. This shift emphasized collaborative and student-driven learning environments and focused on interactions between students and teachers. Contemporary research continues to

support these theories, with studies showing that student-focused educational models improve motivation, engagement, learning outcomes, and feelings of belonging (Allen et al., 2016; Hattie, 2010).

As part of the rise in student-centered learning, there has been a notable surge in the emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) and acknowledging the importance of nurturing the whole child as part of the educational process. This change highlights how intertwined social and emotional well-being of students is tied to their academic outcomes. Researchers and educators have increasingly turned their attention to SEL as a framework that cultivates interpersonal relationships (Durlak et al., 2011). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been at the forefront of advocating for SEL implementation in schools, providing research-based frameworks and resources to support educators and administrators (CASEL, 2023). The rise of SEL supports the foundation of educating the whole child by addressing both the social and emotional components along with the cognitive development of students.

An integral component of educators' understanding of the whole child is understanding a student's racial and ethnic background. Honoring the cultural context in which a student learns and grows allows educators to better understand and appreciate each student's unique strengths and perspectives. Focusing on this component of a student's identity helps create a supportive atmosphere that values cultural diversity and ultimately contributes to a sense of belonging and positive adolescent development (Cohen & Garcia 2008). Through understanding the ideals of the whole child and specifically the multifaceted aspects of a student's identity,

educators provide more equitable educational opportunities through culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching practices. (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In this section, I have discussed the background and context of the problem. In the following section, I will discuss a clear and explicit problem statement. I will examine empirical studies and existing theories that support the presence of the problem. Additionally, I will outline empirical studies and existing theories that address the impact and/or influence of the problem. Finally, I will delve into empirical studies and existing theories related to the cause of the problem.

The Problem Statement

Despite the evolution of educational theories and practices moving towards more student-centered approaches supported by an emphasis on the whole child, social-emotional learning, and culturally responsive teaching practices, students are still struggling in areas of student belonging and mental health. Unfortunately, the problem is many students do not feel like they belong at school. Research conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) using the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveyed 4,811 adolescent students from 76 different schools. The findings of the surveys indicated that 33% of students reported feeling like they did not belong in their schools. Comparing these statistics to the previous assessments conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development would indicate the number of students reporting they do not belong at their school is growing in comparison to previous years (Allen & Kern, 2020). Another national survey of 1,039 14–15-year-old students conducted by

Qualtrics (2022) reported that 49% of students reported not feeling like they belong at school. Even more concerning is the rates of mental health disorders among adolescents, which are the highest they have ever been (Shim et al., 2022). To support these statistics, it is estimated that half of all adolescents living in the United States currently have or have had a mental health disorder at some point in their lives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Based on the mental health statistics, it should not be surprising that suicide is the second-leading cause of death among youth, ages 15 to 24, in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Although mental health disorders and suicide are complex and multifaceted problems, there are strong connections to be made between adolescent mental health and school belonging (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Resnick et al., 1997). The prevalence and growth of students reporting low levels of school belonging and higher levels of mental health disorders further impact the well-being and educational outcomes of adolescents.

The impact of low student belonging is broad and long-lasting. Research indicates that student belonging is directly linked to an exhaustive list of general health and well-being as well as educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2016; Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, 1996). The impact of students not feeling belonging is detrimental to success inside and outside of school. Research has shown various negative impacts related to student's mental health and academic outcomes. First, school belonging has an impact on a student's mental health. Arslan (2019) surveyed 244 adolescents using the School Belongingness Scale (Arslan & Duru, 2017) aimed to investigate the connections between school belonging and loneliness, well-being, and mental health. The findings

indicated that a negative sense of school belongingness is connected to loneliness and has negative effects on adolescents' well-being and mental health. School belonging has been shown to be the largest known factor of depression among adolescents (Parr et al., 2020); associated with health and educational risk factors (Arslan, 2018; Demiroz, 2020); and linked to early substance use and poor school attendance (Demanet & Van Houtte 2012). Students who report not feeling they belong are more likely to experience fighting, bullying, absenteeism, school drop-out rates, and tobacco use. (Connell et al., 1995; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Further, limited feelings of school belonging have been shown to negatively impact student achievement on standardized test scores (Allen & Kern, 2020; Osterman, 2000; Roeser, 1996).

In comparison, a student belonging at school has widely been tied to positive learning outcomes and a sense of well-being in schools including improved educational attendance, school engagement, academic motivation, and ultimately academic performance (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Klem & Connell, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997; Shochet et al., 2011) Furthermore, it has been associated with life satisfaction, self-esteem, personal identity, feelings of acceptance, happiness, and positive relationships between teachers and students (Hamm & Faircloth, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997). These findings further support the notion that students' feelings of belonging to the school are directly related to various indicators of student academic achievement and well-being outcomes (Allen et al., 2016). A 2018 meta-analysis conducted by Korpershoek et al., (2019) analyzed 82 correlational studies, published between 2000 and 2018 researching the relationship

between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, health, and academic outcomes. The findings found small to moderate positive correlations in all areas.

The causes of this school problem are numerous and complex. Research suggests several reasons to explain the growing sense of not belonging in school (Allen et al., 2016; Goodenow, 1993; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Walton & Cohen, 2007). The causes most frequently cited are issues related to teacher and peer relationships, bullying, and school culture. (Slaten et. Al., 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that teachers' relationships with students directly could cause student's feelings of belonging at school to increase or decrease (Ibrahim & Zadari, 2020; Roorda et al., 2011). Additionally, the school environment or culture was found to also be a cause of students' positive or negative feelings of school belonging (Cemalcilar, 2019). McMahon et al. (2009) surveyed 149 fourth and fifth-grade students to identify correlations between school culture, school belonging, and academic self-efficacy. Among all the variables related to school culture, school belonging emerged as the largest contextual influence. The findings also suggest that students with higher levels of self-efficacy reported higher levels of student belonging and strong school cultures. Furthermore, students' perceptions of discrimination based on their gender, race, or ethnicity may feel a lack of belongingness (Fisher et al., 2000). Moreover, adolescent students' experiences of social isolation, peer rejection, or bullying can significantly impact a student's sense of belonging (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Juvonen & Graham, 2014). The previously stated reasons and supportive empirical studies all indicate different factors play a part in school belonging. These various factors often interact

and overlap, creating a complex combination of influences on students' perceptions of belongingness at school. This holds to my own experiences with school belonging as both a student at various levels of education, a teacher of adolescents, and a school principal of a middle school.

In this section, I discussed a clear and explicit problem statement. I examined empirical studies and existing theories that support the presence of the problem. Additionally, I outlined empirical studies and existing theories that address the impact and/or influence of the problem. Finally, I delved into empirical studies and existing theories related to the cause of the problem. In the following section I will state the purpose of this study, specify the unit of analysis, and define traditions with a rationale for each.

Purpose

The purpose of this single instrumental heuristic case study was to understand perspectives of school belongingness for students at a Midwestern urban middle school. For the purpose of this research project, the concept of school belongingness will generally be defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). The unit of analysis denotes the particular entity or phenomenon that serves as the central focus of the study, guiding both the data collection and analysis processes (Miles et al., 2020). The units of analysis are the perspectives of school belongingness of middle school-aged students. The goal of the study is to develop a thick description of student perceptions of their experiences with school belonging, described by Patton (2015) as the foundation for qualitative analysis

and reporting. Good description takes the reading into the setting being described.” (p. 533). Furthermore, the rationale for choosing a case study is directly linked to the goals of the study. The study focuses on a specific issue (student perceptions of student belonging) by using an individual case (a Midwestern urban middle school) to better understand the issue. A case study was chosen as the approach because I wanted to study the phenomenon in a real-life, contemporary context (Yin, 2018). A hallmark of case study research is that it is bounded, meaning it can be defined and described within particular parameters (Creswell and Poth, 2018). A bounded case is aligned most with the research questions as it allows for in-depth exploration and detailed analysis of a specific phenomenon. An instrumental case study was selected so I could focus on an issue and select one bounded case to illustrate the issue (Stake, 1995). Moustakas (1990) explains that heuristic inquiry involves the integration of the researcher into the study, intertwining the researcher's experiences with those of the participants. It requires that the researcher directly engages with the phenomenon under investigation to unveil its core essence and significance. Heuristics was chosen because of the deep connectedness I have to the topic being studied. As the researcher, I used my own experiences and insights into the phenomenon to help inform the methods and analysis which I will discuss in more detail in the overview of methodology and ultimately in the third chapter.

In this section, I stated the purpose of this study, specified the unit of analysis, and defined the tradition I used with a rationale for each. In the following section, I will include the central overarching questions of the study and sub-questions for each

central question. I will align them to the previously stated problem, purpose, and unit of analysis.

Research Questions

As previously stated, the purpose of this research study is to provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of adolescent students on the topic of school belonging. The study will seek to answer the following central sub-questions and questions related to the purpose of the study. The first central question and sub-questions include: How do adolescent students experience school belonging?

a) How do adolescent students define school belonging?

b) What do adolescent students say about a sense of belonging in their classrooms?

The second central question and sub questions include: how adolescent students experience interventions implemented by the school related to school belonging.

c. What interventions do adolescent students identify as important to a sense of belonging?

b. What do they have to say about a sense of belonging in their school's culture?

Theoretical Framework

In the Theoretical Framework section, I will provide a brief restatement of the problem and purpose outlined in the introduction. I will identify my personal assumptions and experience with the research topic. Additionally, I'll describe the rationale for the selection of topics and theories for review, explaining the reasoning

behind their inclusion. Last, I will incorporate a summary of foundation literature, integrating it with prior theory and existing theory.

The theoretical framework is referred to interchangeably with the term conceptual framework. Maxwell (2013) describes the conceptual framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p.39). In this section, I will introduce the theories, assumptions, and experiences that make up the foundation of this study. To reiterate the nature of the problem is essentially that a large number of students do not feel connected or a sense of belonging to their school. This has been shown to have deep and long-lasting effects on their health and well-being as well as their academic achievement. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of student’s perceptions of school belonging and the actions taken by schools to build school belonging.

I came to this inquiry with several assumptions. These assumptions are based on my own experiences with school belonging as a home-schooled student entering public schools during my early adolescence. Additionally, my professional experiences as a teacher and school leader experimenting with concepts related to school belonging have influenced my assumptions. My first assumption is that adolescents desperately want to feel a sense of belonging. I believe this is true with their families, peers, teachers, communities, churches, classrooms, and schools. My second assumption is that teacher-student relationships are the biggest factor for students to feel they belong in their school. I found this to be true in my experiences as a student at all levels of education. I also found this to be true in my experiences as a middle school and high

school teacher. My third assumption is that a school's culture is the second biggest factor for determining if a student feels belonging. This is based on my experiences as a school leader and the data I have collected over the last six years measuring student belonging and school culture. My fourth and last assumption is that actions taken by school leaders can impact both school culture and teacher-student relationships. This is based on my own experiences, mistakes, and successes in attempting to improve the experiences of my students.

After examining literature related to school belonging, I have identified four topics that directly relate to student school belonging that were investigated more through this research process. There is significant empirical work that highlights the importance of school belonging, the detrimental impact of students not feeling belonging, and many studies surrounding various school interventions. Furthermore, many empirical studies show a strong connection between school belonging and student well-being and achievement, however, there is a limited amount of research that utilizes student's perspectives to better understand it or improve it (Allen et al., 2020). Additionally, based on my experiences researching the topic, the majority of the research is quantitative in nature. Leaving a gap in the literature in terms of qualitative data examining student perspectives of school belonging. Based on my assumptions and literature review the following section discusses four topics that have become the basis for my theoretical framework for understanding students' perspectives of student belonging. The four topics have guided my understanding of the phenomena and how I want to approach the research study.

Maxwell (2013) describes the process of building a theoretical framework by examining existing research and theories stating, “These are often key sources for understanding what is going on with these phenomena” (p. 41). The guiding topics of my theoretical framework for this study consist of adolescent development as it relates to a sense of belonging, student-teacher relationships, school culture, and transformational leadership. Each of the topics offers a different perspective contributing to the research of the phenomenon.

The rationale for my selection of topics for review is centered on my assumptions regarding school belonging. Based on what I have read and my own experiences, the four topics I chose have strong connections with the research question. I believe each topic builds upon the previous topic. I also chose them because I believe each carries a tremendous weight in terms of supporting students. First, I chose adolescent development as a theoretical basis for its deep connection with belonging. Predominant psychological and sociological theories indicate the importance of a sense of belonging for all human beings. Allen & Kern (2017) contends that adolescents' sense of belonging to their parents, teachers, and peers is distinctively important to adolescent development. Additionally, I chose student-teacher relationships as a theoretical basis for their unique and critical impact on student lives. A meta-analysis of over 50 empirical studies found that teacher-student relationships with adolescents were the most powerful influencing factor on student belonging. Teacher-student relationships had a larger effect size than both parental support and peer relationships on student belonging (Allen et al., 2016). Furthermore, I chose school culture as a theoretical basis for its deep connection with many key factors impacting school

belonging. Hopkins et al. (1994) define school culture as “observable behavior patterns, norms, values, philosophy, unwritten policies, and procedures”. School culture is truly all-encompassing in terms of its impact on the practices of the school. Riley (2022) argues that schools that focus their culture on academic achievement over supporting the whole child and school belonging often have damaging impacts on the students who attend the school. Lastly, I chose transformational leadership as a theoretical basis because of its ability to impact school culture. The person-centered focus of transformational leadership naturally lends itself to creating a culture where teachers and students experience belonging. Each of the theoretical bases offers an individual feature to the topic of school belonging and also intertwines. Adolescent development is a part of teacher-student relationships, teacher-student relationships are a part of what makes a school culture, and school culture can be altered by transformational leadership. The next section will provide a preview of each topic before the in-depth look included in Chapter 2.

Adolescent Development

First, I chose adolescent development for a theoretical basis due to its unique impact and connection with students’ lives and school belonging. Wigfield et al. (2005) assert that dramatic physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes that happen during adolescence significantly alter the needs of students. A critical component of these dramatic changes is forming an adolescent’s identity. Wigfield et al. (2005) articulate this stating, “Identity formation involves the successful negotiation of a variety of activities and relationships during adolescence, including school achievement, and relationships with others” (p. 113). The authors continue by arguing

this identity-forming stage is specific to adolescent development. This highlights the unique role that schools offer students in navigating this unique and crucial time period. According to Armstrong (2007), “middle schools need to provide students in early adolescence with an environment that can help them negotiate the impact of puberty on their intellectual, social, and emotional lives” (p. 23). This underscores the unique role that adolescent development plays in relation to a variety of factors that impact student belonging. Additionally, a 2017 study that used a Self-Esteem Scale, Basic Psychological Needs Scale, and General Belongingness Scale to survey 273 adolescent students (location) found a strong connection between general belongingness, psychological needs, and self-esteem in adolescents (Demirtas et al., 2017). This research underscores the importance of adolescents' need for belonging and the predictive qualities it has on adolescent's self-esteem and overall psychological needs. In the next section, I will articulate the links between adolescent development and teacher-student relationships while viewed through the framework of the research topic.

Teacher-Student Relationships

As previously stated, I chose student-teacher relationships as a theoretical perspective based on this element's longstanding, unique, and critical impact on school belonging. Nieburhr and Nieburhr (1999) highlighted findings from a questionnaire and an examination of the grade point averages of 215 high school freshmen from a Midwestern high school. Student-teacher relationships were positively correlated to student academic achievement which supports the power of student-teacher relationships as a strategy to improve student outcomes. These findings were later

supported by Hattie's (2010) research that indicated student-teacher relationships as having an effect size of .72, well above the average intervention effect size. Although this effect size is in connection with academic performance, it is also strongly tied to students' overall feelings about school. Furthermore, Allen and Kern (2020) assert that teachers' relationships are a more powerful influencer on belonging than their relationships with their peers or parents. Allen and Kern argue that the foundation of school belonging is based on the belief that students believe their teachers are "caring, empathic, fair, and able to help them resolve personal problems" (p.15). Additionally, Cemalcilar (2019) found that teachers who respected and valued students offered social support, and developed good rapport with their students were able to fulfill an important social function for students in addition to simply delivering curriculum. In the next section, I will showcase the relationship between teacher-student relationships and school culture through the lens of the research topic.

School Culture

Additionally, a theoretical basis for this study is school culture. I chose school culture as a theoretical basis for its relationship with both teacher-student relationships and school belonging. A qualitative research study surveyed 1,100 grade nine students and examined the effect of school culture on adolescent behavioral problems, self-esteem, attachment to learning, and peer approval of deviance (DeWit et al., 2000). The findings suggest there are significant direct effects of school culture were found for almost all outcomes. This study illustrates how critical school culture is for supporting students with a whole student perspective. Allen and Kern (2020) support this notion arguing that school culture should be forced more on building teacher and student

relationships than increasing academic outcomes. Additionally, a longitudinal research study analyzing 1,046 adolescent students found students' perceptions of school culture and environment characteristics in seventh grade influenced their school participation, identification with school, and use of self-regulation strategies (Wang, 2010). This underscores the important link between school culture and students' identification with the school. Griffiths (2013) contends that school principals can influence the school culture most by growing inclusion with teachers and in turn with students. (p. 33). These perspectives further support the theoretical basis of the connection between school culture and school belonging and their important impact on adolescent students. In the next section, I will illustrate the connections between school culture and transformational leadership with an emphasis on their impact on the research topic.

Transformational Leadership

The last theoretical basis for this study is transformational leadership.

Leithwood et al., (1994) define transformational leadership as follows:

The term 'transform' implies major changes in the form, nature, function and/or potential of some phenomenon; applied to leadership, it specifies general ends to be pursued although it is largely mute with respect to means. From this beginning, we consider the central purpose of transformational leadership to be the enhancement of the individual and collective problem-solving capacities of organizational members; such capacities are exercised in the identification of goals to be achieved and practices to be used in their achievement (p. 7).

As previously stated, transformational leadership was chosen because the person-centered motivation naturally lends itself to creating a culture where teachers and

students experience belonging. A quantitative research study conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) involving 1,762 teachers and 9,941 students examined the effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions impacting student engagement. The findings indicated that transformational leadership demonstrated strong significant effects on organizational conditions, and ultimately effects on student engagement in school. Additionally, a 2022 study surveying two hundred and sixty-eight public school employees using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire found a significant relationship between transformational leadership and overall employee productivity (Naeem & Khanzada, 2018). Another 2022 study surveying 89 high school teachers spread over 39 schools found that transformational leadership positively correlated with teachers' trust in the leader (Tiwa, 2022). Furthermore, a 2021 study surveying 397 primary teachers found a strong link between transformational leadership and teacher motivation. The research accentuates the power of transformational leadership as a driving force to improve student engagement, teacher trust, motivation, and productivity.

In summary, the theoretical framework I bring to the study details the assumptions, theories, and empirical research related to the topics of adolescent development, teacher-student relationships, school culture, and transformational leadership. The four areas chosen will serve as the foundation for how I make meaning of the findings of this case study. In this section, I provided a brief restatement of the problem and purpose outlined in the introduction. I identified my personal assumptions and experience to provide context. Additionally, I described the rationale for the selection of topics and theories for review, explaining the reasoning behind their

inclusion. Last, I incorporated a summary of foundational literature surrounding the topics, integrating it with prior theory and existing theory. This theoretical framework will guide the design and methodology of the study described in the next section.

Overview of Methodology

In the following section, I will provide a brief rationale for qualitative research and traditions. Additionally, I will describe an overview of the site, participants, and sampling strategies. I will provide an overview of data collection procedures, including personal documents, survey data, and interviews. Last, I will preview the data analysis and the connections to the theoretical traditions chosen.

As stated in the purpose statement, I conducted a single instrumental heuristic case study to investigate student perceptions of the experience of belonging. Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from those living in it. I chose this approach because this research seeks to capture the perspectives of the students who are experiencing the phenomena being studied. Yin (2018) states “A case study is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be evident.” (p.15). The case study methodology was chosen as a tool or method to study the complex phenomena of school belonging within the context of the school from the student's perspective. Creswell & Poth (2018) state “In a single instrumental case study, the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue.” (p. 98). This type of case study felt like the best fit for the goals and purpose of the study. Additionally, Patton (2015) states “Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore

the personal experiences and insights of the researcher.” (p.118). This connected with me as I want to bring my own experiences with school belonging to the research. Moustakas (1990) builds on this description stating, “Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality, not quantity; with experience, not behavior” (p.42). This assertion connects with my motive for choosing a heuristic inquiry approach, which is to utilize my own experiences with the research questions and go deep into the understanding of the phenomenon through the eyes of the students who will participate in the study.

The setting of the study was a Midwestern urban public charter school serving grades sixth through eighth grade. This study is centered on adolescent students, selecting eight participants through purposeful sampling and a typical case sampling method. The criteria for participant inclusion involve adolescents aged twelve to thirteen, with a minimum of three years at the same school and active participation in school activities, sports, or clubs. To ensure confidentiality, each student was identified only by pseudonyms, and consent and assent forms were obtained from both students and their guardians. Students were assigned pseudonyms.

Data collection encompasses three distinct sources: personal documents, interviews, and survey data. Personal documents were collected from student responses to an English Language Arts assignment, providing valuable insights into their sense of belonging. Interviews, conducted in a semi-structured format, occurred in the school lobby after regular hours, lasting approximately 25 minutes per participant. The interviews were guided by a prepared interview guide containing open-ended questions linked to the central research questions and sub-questions. Each interview transcript

was meticulously recorded using the iPad dictation function on Google Documents. Survey data, the third data source, was gathered through the school's annual measurable results survey given to all students.

The order of data collection followed a structured plan, starting with document analysis, progressing to interviews, and concluding with survey data. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of adolescent students' experiences and perceptions of belonging within the school community. A more detailed description of the data collection process will be described in Chapter 3.

The data analysis process was guided by the six phases of heuristic research as outlined by Moustakas (1990). Furthermore, the cross-case analysis procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994) were used to compare and contrast data across multiple participants in order to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. Regarding data analysis, a combination of enumerative content analysis (Miles et al., 2020) and thematic analysis (Grbich, 2013) were employed. Enumerative content analysis involves developing a codebook with categories and rules, while thematic analysis is used to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset. The process involved cycles of coding, starting with highlighting quotes and words, developing descriptive codes, creating interpretive codes, and ultimately identifying themes. A more detailed description of the data analysis process will be covered in Chapter 3.

Data management was be organized and stored on a password-protected external hard drive owned by the researcher. The qualitative data was categorized into folders based on data sources and participants within the hard drive. Confidentiality of data was maintained through password protection. This comprehensive approach

ensured a rigorous exploration of students' sense of belonging, integrating reflective practices, theoretical frameworks, and robust data analysis techniques.

In the preceding section, I provided a brief rationale for qualitative research and traditions. Additionally, I described an overview of the site, participants, and sampling strategies. I provided an overview of data collection procedures, including personal documents, survey data, and interviews. Lastly, I previewed the data analysis plan and the connections to the theoretical traditions chosen. In the next section, I will discuss factors related to limitations and ethical considerations

Limitations - Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

In this section, I will discuss various aspects pertaining to the limitations and ethical considerations of the study. I will describe weaknesses and biases, addressing qualitative theory related to validity and reliability with strategies to mitigate each. Additionally, I will point out potential ethical problems, such as issues of power, privilege, and risk to participants. Moreover, I will provide a discussion of the university's ethical review protocol, which includes the Social Sciences Institutional Review Board, the Belmont Report, and the CITI Exam.

Cresswell (2003) describes limitations as “a potential weakness in the design of the study” (p.148). There are several potential limitations to this research study. First, there is no guarantee that the participants are completely truthful during their participation. Simply put, the honesty of participants is difficult to control. Additionally, the small number of participants planned for this study could be seen as a limitation. However, the study does not aim to make generalizations about the larger population of interest but rather to explore a phenomenon more deeply with a small

group of participants. For this reason, I used purposeful sampling. Patton (2015) describes the reasons for utilizing purposeful sampling stating, “Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations.” (p. 264). Furthermore, another limitation is the researcher's own biases regarding the participants and the research topic. Creswell & Poth (2018) state, “The researcher discloses their understanding about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to the research study so that the reader understands the position” (p. 261). By being aware of my biases, utilized specific strategies to minimize my biases in the analysis of the data. Specifically utilizing a critical friend to help guard against these potential threats. Despite the limitations, the study's findings have practical significance for school leaders and policymakers.

Validity and Reliability

In this section, I will address qualitative theory related to validity and reliability with strategies to address each. Maxwell (2013) describes the key concept of validity threat as “a way you might be wrong” (p. 123). In many ways, validity is concerning the credibility of the study. Maxwell argues the two major threats to research validity are researcher bias and reactivity (p.124). In addition to utilizing a critical friend to address researcher bias, I utilized reflective journaling to state and bracket my opinions, beliefs, and assumptions regarding the study. Yin (2018) notes that reliability is found in the researcher’s ability to reduce errors. The strategies I used revolve around the procedures and processes outlined in the methodology section. Again, to avoid potential errors, I utilized an external audit to examine my process, product, and accuracy. Additionally, I used member checking as a validity tool. Lincoln and Guba

(1985) cite member checking as the most critical technique for establishing credibility, a term used in qualitative research to ensure validity (p. 314). Essentially, I asked participants their perspectives on the credibility of the findings and interpretations. Lastly, analyzing the three forms of data will allow for crystallization. Ellingson, 2009 states “crystallization refers to the ongoing and dispensed process of making meaning through multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation” (p. 15). Visual thematic crystallizing (Ellingson, 2009) was used to help identify themes apparent across data sets utilizing tables and matrices. By utilizing a critical friend, reflective journaling, member checking and the process of crystallization yielded the most valid product from my research efforts. In the next section, I will discuss potential ethical problems, including issues of power, privilege, and risk to participants.

Ethical Considerations

The following section will highlight potential ethical problems, including issues of power, privilege, and risk to participants as they relate to this research project. Maxwell (2013) asserts that “ethical concerns should be involved in every aspect of the design”. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe how researchers should address ethical issues related to three principles: respect for persons, concerns for welfare, and justice. (p. 54). I addressed these principles through the following considerations. First, I familiarized myself with the principles of ethical research involving human participants outlined in The Belmont Report (1979). I will expand on how the principles of this report will guide my research in Chapter 3. Another ethical issue addressed was to seek permission and follow all guidelines provided by the University of Missouri Kansas City Institutional Review Board. Additionally, I participated in and completed the

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), which includes topics to guide me with the field research phase of the study: research with human subjects. I disclosed the purpose of the study, explained their participation is voluntary, obtained consent from each participant's parent or guardian, and explained that each participant could withdraw at any time. To protect the confidentiality of participants and secure the data that was collected, all written work was kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office and all electronic information was stored in a password-protected file on an external hard drive. Each participant was assigned a fictitious name. Last, I shared my findings with the participants, their parents or guardians, and the staff members who work at the case study site.

In that section, I discussed various aspects pertaining to the limitations and ethical considerations of the study. I described weaknesses and biases, addressing qualitative theory related to validity and reliability with strategies to mitigate each. Additionally, I pointed out potential ethical problems, such as issues of power, privilege, and risk to participants. Moreover, I provided a discussion of the university's ethical review protocol, which included the Social Sciences Institutional Review Board, the Belmont Report, and the CITI Exam. In the following section, I will describe the significance of the study.

Significance of the Study

In this section, I will discuss the significance of the study to the research topic. I will state the target audience of the study. Additionally, I will describe arguments for how the study will contribute to theory development, policy, and practice. Furthermore,

I will provide a critique of the literature with special attention to the gaps in the knowledge base, offering insights into areas that require further exploration.

The topic of school belonging and the problems schools face in developing school belonging should be significant to anyone who works in schools in the United States. The intended audience for this study was designed for teachers of all grade levels who want to improve the classroom community and relationships with their students. The specific grade levels that might find this information most helpful would be those serving adolescent students. The intended audience was also school leaders who are interested in improving their school's culture through fostering school belonging. Additionally, the intended audience was anyone involved in educational policy and school reform. The study contributes to the areas of educational policy, building-level practices, and classroom-level practices. Gaining a better understanding of a student's perspective on school belongingness has the potential to bring clarity and insights to this increasingly complex and important issue. This study gives teachers, school leaders, educational researchers, and policymakers insight into student understanding of school belonging which in turn could improve practices and shape policy. There is a fair amount of research to support the positive effects on student well-being and academic achievement in connection with school belonging. There is also some research on specific interventions to increase the amount of school belonging in classrooms and schools (Allen et al., 2016; Barber & Schluterman 2008; Brown & Evans 2002; Goodenow & Grady 1993; Hawkins and Weis 1985; Kuttner 2023, Libbey 2004; McNeely et al., 2002; Moody & Bearman, 2004; O'Brennan & Furlong 2010; Riley 2020; Townsend & McWhirter 2005. Riley (2020) expands on

these interventions and articulates what it would look like to have schools where all individuals felt like they belong and why it is important to all of us to be asking questions about student belonging by stating:

If schools were places of belonging, more young people would experience a sense of school connectedness, have friends and opportunities, perform better academically, and come to believe that their teachers care about them, their learning, and their future. They would find themselves in a space where they could develop their sense of self, identity, and agency. Their teachers would feel more professionally fulfilled, and their families accepted. Asking the “why” question about school belonging paves the way for a journey inspired by shared beliefs and a sense of possibilities. (p. 3)

Kuttner (2023) builds on the need to ask the “why” questions by describing the importance and need for additional research on the topic stating “Additional research will be needed to explore how these facets of belonging relate to one another and if some are more salient for some students than others. It also needs to be tested in real-life situations” (p.7). Allen et al., (2016) expand on this idea further by describing the importance of the research topic in connection with real-life interventions and solutions to support student belonging by stating:

The advancement of school belonging research is important for schools and policymakers that advocate for primary preventative measures to foster both academic and well-being outcomes in students. By understanding the factors that are most strongly related to school belonging, schools, and policymakers

can identify key places in the system to intervene, or that might be markers of poor school belonging. (p. 28)

Additionally, Booker (2006) describes the need for qualitative research in the areas of school belonging by stating:

In the case of students belonging and African American adolescents, qualitative research can explore how these students feel about their present situation and the beliefs they have about their competence and value in the school environment. Further research can shed light on contextual factors that fully describe the experiences of these students (p. 5-6)

However, based on my literature review there is a significant general gap in the knowledge base of students' perceptions of school belongingness and the actions taken by schools to improve it. This study has the potential to add practical school solutions from insight gathered from student voice that is currently lacking in school belonging research (Bouchard, and Berg (2017); Niemi and Hotulainen (2015).

Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the research project including a discussion of the problem, the purpose statement, research questions, my theoretical framework, an overview of the methodology, limitations including the validity, reliability, and ethical considerations, and lastly the significance of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the relevant literature, which addresses all four topics included in my theoretical framework. Chapter 3 contains a more in-depth discussion of the methodology, design, and data analysis. Chapter 4 will include a discussion of the synthesis of results and findings for the three data sources and a discussion of research questions and

implications of the findings. Chapter 5 will include my conclusions interpretations and recommendations for future research and practice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will again review the purpose of the research project introduced in Chapter 1. Additionally, I will discuss how I conducted my review by highlighting various databases and search terms. I will discuss each topic and subtopic area including a rationale for their inclusion as well as a cohesive review of each topic and subtopic. I will situate each topic into the broader field of knowledge and align each to the current field. I will highlight key terminologies and theories. Last, I will synthesize the literature with a focus on multiple perspectives through a critical analysis of empirical studies.

Understanding the experiences of adolescent students' perspectives of school belonging could not be possible without a comprehensive analysis of the existing published research surrounding the topic. This single instrumental heuristic case study aimed to understand perspectives of school belongingness for students at a Midwestern urban middle school. This literature review provides a synthesis of the empirical literature, relevant concepts, and theories from multiple academic disciplines that helped develop my theoretical framework as well as guide the study. I will focus on the historical context of adolescent development, teacher-student relationships, school culture, and transformational leadership. Creswell and Creswell (2017) highlight the importance of a comprehensive literature review that serves as the foundation for qualitative research by helping researchers:

- Identify the research gap.
- Conceptualize the study.

- Inform the research design.
- Provide a theoretical framework.
- Offer insights into methodology.
- Contextualize findings.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) argue the literature review is not done in isolation but has connections to the entire research study. In many ways, the literature review informs the entire qualitative research process.

To establish a contextual foundation for my study, I conducted a thorough review of empirical studies, professional journals, and books. This comprehensive examination of existing literature allowed me to gain insight into the broader areas that make up my theoretical framework. My primary emphasis was on locating research that aligns with my theoretical framework. Simultaneously, I also sought to pinpoint areas where my study could potentially address gaps in the existing body of knowledge. To complete this, I utilized databases including Google Scholar, Education Full Text, ERIC, and PsycINFO. Keywords used in the search of literature included “adolescent development”, “adolescent identity”, “attachment theory in adolescence”, “adolescent relationships in schools”, “teacher-student relationships”, “belonging”, “inclusivity and diversity in schools”, “relationship building in schools”, “school culture”, and “positive school culture”. Several challenges were presented while researching the adolescent development topic. For example, when searching for “adolescent development” in PsycINFO 64,118 results were produced. When “schools” or “education” was added to the search it produced only 7,742. Of the 7,742 studies only 350 were published in the last three years. The search yielded similar

findings when “history” was added to the search. This finding leads me to the conclusion that much research has been done to understand adolescent development while there is a significant need for more research in understanding the historical adolescent development within the school context. Likewise, when searching for “teacher-student relationships” in education full text 20,967 results were located. When “belonging” is added only 152 results are found. Of the 152 results, 127 were published in the last 10 years and 74 were published within the last three years. This highlights the growing area of research in student belonging in connection with teacher-student relationships. While there was a robust amount of research on the topic of school culture, teacher-student relationships, and adolescent development, there were only a handful of studies from the last 10 years that gave insight into student experiences and perceptions related to these topics. Student perceptions of these topics appear to be a significant gap. Furthermore, an obstacle that continually surfaced during the research searches was that the information tended to be specific to particular disciplines or industries. Although the studies were often outside the field of education, they were often still applicable to the work of educators. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of the research that was reviewed was quantitative in nature. Although there were several challenges and gaps in my literature review, the empirical studies, professional journals, and books offered a comprehensive and holistic view of the areas within the theoretical framework and their relationship with the research topic.

In this chapter, I begin with an introduction to the historical evolution of adolescent development. I will explore the importance of belonging and connection to

this unique identity-forming period in human development (Drolet et al., 2013; Raufelder et al., 2021). Then, I will examine the teacher-student relationship theory. I will investigate these crucial relationships through the lens of attachment theory to understand the critical role of teachers in student belonging (Riley, 2011; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Additionally, I will examine school culture. I will inspect the relationship between school culture and teacher-student relationships focusing on trust, respect, communication, and inclusivity. Lastly, I will study transformational leadership theory and its ability to promote healthy school cultures and foster positive teacher-student relationships. I will focus on how this leadership theory is well suited to positively impact student belonging.

Adolescent Development

To holistically understand adolescent student's perception of student belonging it is vital to understand how adolescent development shapes their experience. Adolescent development and the formation of one's identity are interconnected processes characterized by self-discovery, introspection, the impact of social influences, and cognitive and physical growth. Adolescents confront fundamental questions about who they are, what they believe, and if they belong. Successfully navigating this complex period leads to the development of a secure and authentic identity, which is a critical aspect of healthy adolescent development. While conducting this literature review, I aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the key terminology and definitions associated with the nature of adolescent development. Additionally, the aim is to understand the historical context of adolescent development. Lastly, to view the history of adolescent development in relation to identity

development and students' desires for a sense of belonging specific to a school setting. The topics of the history of adolescent development will consist of three distinct periods including the first half of the twentieth century, the second half of the twentieth century, and the twenty-first century. The rationale for the inclusion of the topic of the history of adolescent development and the subsequent subtopics from different time periods is understanding the complexity of adolescent development is essential for parents, educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and researchers to understand how to support them during this unique time-period in human development. Johnson et al., (2011) illustrate this connection by stating:

Our primary goal of understanding adolescence as a developmental period in its own right should come with a complementary goal of connecting insights about adolescence and its developmental processes to other life periods. These dual goals serve both our understanding of adolescence itself as well as the life course more generally (p.273).

Next, I will provide a literature review of the historical context of adolescent development.

Historical Context of Adolescent Development

The study of adolescent development has been defined, studied, and shaped by numerous scholars and researchers since the early twentieth century (Hall, 1904; Holmes, 1910; Mead, 1928). Adolescent development is characterized by the study of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that occur during adolescence. The World Health Organization (2019) defines adolescent development as a transitional phase of growth and development between childhood and adulthood. A synthesis of the

history of the literature on adolescent development focuses on several core themes or perspectives including adolescent biological changes (Forbes & Dalh 2010), cognitive changes (Luna & Wright 2016), and psychological changes (Steinberg, 2014). The study of adolescent development has and continues to remain focused on these core themes. However, within these core themes, the research is continually evolving in reaction to cultural and societal changes over time. The following section will detail three separate time periods in adolescent development including the early first half of the twentieth century, the second half of the twentieth century, and the twenty-first century. A critical analysis of theories and empirical studies from these time periods surrounding adolescent development offers diverse perspectives that both support and counter each other. The following section will discuss major theories and empirical studies and the rationale for their inclusion the relationship between the studies and my research area, and attention to how the field develops over time, and conclude with implications for future research. By examining the existing body of research, I hope to establish context and communicate the significance of the research. Next, I will discuss the first, sub-topic within this section, the study of adolescent development in the first half of the twentieth century.

First Half of the Twentieth Century

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed dramatic developments in the study of adolescent development, with theorists and researchers laying the foundation for our understanding of this important and dynamic life stage. Hall (1904) played a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of adolescent development as a distinct and important stage in human development. His groundbreaking work title, *Adolescence:*

Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education, studied the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood through psychological, physiological, sociological, and educational lenses. In this book, he presented the results of his many empirical studies that utilized questionnaire surveys and interviews with thousands of adolescents, as well as case studies and observations. Hall (1904) proposed the storm and stress theory describing that adolescence was a period characterized by the unique challenges faced by adolescents including emotional turmoil, conflict with parents, and rebellion. Hall's work with adolescents would lead to him being an early advocate for educational reform focusing on psychological foundations in education. He emphasized the importance of adapting educational methods to the developmental needs of adolescents in schools. Often referred to as the "father [a major theorist] of adolescence", his work would lay the groundwork for all subsequent research on adolescent development. The limitations of Hall's work are that it is almost entirely theoretical and lacks empirical research. Hall relied heavily on anecdotal evidence as opposed to systematic empirical research. Additionally, the research conducted was limited to White, middle-class American adolescents, and findings often reinforced traditional gender stereotypes of the period.

An early research study titled *An Educational Experiment with Troublesome Adolescent Boys* (Holmes, 1910) studied the power of meeting students' basic needs and providing them with a quality educational experience. The study was based on an educational experiment conducted by the Psychological Laboratory and Clinic of the University of Pennsylvania focusing on a group of troublesome adolescent boys. This

single case study aimed to determine whether 13 "moral delinquent adolescents" (p.3) could successfully complete a six-week educational program by addressing their fundamental human needs and offering classes tailored to their adolescent interests. These classes encompassed intellectual, physical, manual, and recreational studies, all led by experienced instructors. The findings of the study revealed that even boys considered "unmanageable" could excel academically when presented with challenging tasks that brought them a sense of joy and accomplishment. Importantly, this experiment underscored the idea that with personalized educational guidance, all students have the potential for progress, and moral conduct can be instilled in adolescents. However, it's worth noting that the study's limitation involved its small number of participants, making it challenging to generalize these findings to the broader population. This study is significant because it is one of the first studies focusing on adolescent participants.

The seminal book *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (Mead, 1928) examined the cultural differences in the experience of adolescence. She presented the results of many empirical studies that were qualitative in nature. Her ethnographic studies were based on extensive fieldwork in Samoa, involving participant observation and interviews with Samoan adolescents, to understand their experiences and cultural practices during the transition to adulthood. She found that cultural norms and expectations had a significant impact on how adolescents navigate the challenges of this period, including their roles, responsibilities, and social expectations. Mead's work challenged Hall's (1904) ideas of universal adolescent experiences and the storm and stress theory by depicting

Samoan adolescents as experiencing a relatively easy and stress-free transition from childhood to adulthood. This research greatly contributed to future researchers' and theorists' understanding of cultural relativism by stressing that there is no single or right way to experience adolescence (Desan, 2000; Newman & Newman, 2020). At the time, her work was criticized for promoting cultural relativism. Additionally, critics have pointed to the small sample size of her participants and the lack of longitudinal data.

Klein (1932) published a journal article titled *Psycho-Analytic Notes on Some Clinical Findings Regarding the Treatment of Disturbed Adolescents* that would become a groundbreaking development in adolescent development and psychoanalytic treatment. Klein conducted clinical observations of her psychoanalytic treatment sessions with disturbed adolescents. The goal of the research was to gain a deeper understanding of the unconscious conflicts and emotions of her adolescent patients. The findings indicated adolescents often go through inner conflicts and emotional turmoil related to their relationships with their primary caregivers and unresolved issues from earlier stages of development. Klein also suggested the conflicts and emotional turmoil experienced by adolescents were expressions of unconscious struggles to come to terms with their changing sense of identity. Klein argued that psychoanalytic therapy could be used to help guide adolescents to promote healthier development into adulthood. At the time, all of the psychoanalytic research was exclusive to adults. This work was influential because it laid the groundwork for the study of adolescent psychoanalysis for future researchers.

Sophie Freud (1936), daughter of Sigmund Freud, made significant contributions to the study of adolescent development by exploring the topic through the principles of psychoanalysis. Her work on ego development explored how adolescents navigate the process of developing a sense of self. Freud studied adolescent identity through the ways in which adolescents define themselves in relation to their family, peers, and society. Her work largely built on the ideas of Hall's (1904) storm and stress theory by arguing that adolescence was a time period of internal conflict where individuals struggle between the norms of society and their natural impulses. Through this process, adolescents would express rebellion as part of typical experiences in an adolescent's struggle for autonomy and identity. Although Freud published no empirical studies, her work was qualitative in nature focusing on individual case studies in clinical settings and theoretical explorations. Sophie Freud's work examining the psychological dynamics of adolescence impacted future researchers' and theorists' understanding of adolescent development from a psychoanalytic perspective. Critics have often cited the lack of empirical evidence to support Freud's research and questioned the authenticity of the authorship due to her writing being similar in style to her father's.

Although Piaget (1947) is best known for young children's cognitive development, he also made significant contributions to our understanding of the cognitive development of adolescents. In Piaget's *Psychology of Intelligence* (1947) adolescence experiences the final stage of cognitive development, the formal operations stage. During this stage, adolescents develop abstract thinking skills, critical reasoning, and the ability to think hypothetically and solve complex problems.

Although Piaget did not cite specific empirical research in the book, he did base his theoretical framework for cognitive development on observations, clinical interviews, and longitudinal studies. His research and writing impacted future theories and researchers' understanding of how cognitive abilities evolve from childhood to adolescence. Critics contend that the research lacked participant diversity and objectivity due to the majority of the observations involving his own children and their peers. Next, I will discuss the second, sub-topic within this section, the study of adolescent development in the second half of the twentieth century.

Second Half of Twentieth Century

The second half of the twentieth century saw significant advancements in the study of adolescent development, with the emergence of various theories, research methods, and key figures in the field. Erikson (1968) further developed the study of adolescent identity in the book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. The book is based on the psychosocial theory of the development stage called "Identity vs. Role Confusion" where adolescents face a crisis characterized by the need to establish a sense of identity. During this time, adolescents grapple with questions about who they are, what values define them, and where they fit in society. According to Erikson identity refers to one's sense of the person one genuinely is, including a subjective feeling of self-sameness and continuity over contexts and time (1968). Important to note was the focus on the role of relationships and peer groups in shaping identity and self-concept. Even though Erikson did not publish any empirical research, his theory is based on clinical work, observations, interviews, and cross-cultural studies. The cross-cultural studies built on the work of Mead (1928), Erikson's work continues to inform research

related to adolescent development and identity formation in the psychology and education fields. Like many of the previous theories, critics argue that Erikson's theories lack empirical evidence and reflect a middle-class, Western male perspective.

Kohlberg (1969) spent nearly four decades researching and publishing books on their theory of moral development. Kohlberg presents a comprehensive framework to explain how adolescents progress in their moral reasoning and decision-making as they mature. The theory is often presented in stages, with each stage representing a different level of moral development. Although the theory can be applied to any age in human development, it is primarily associated with early adolescence. Kohlberg believed moral development followed the cognitive development adolescents experience. This growth in abstract thinking would lead adolescents through stages sequentially, with each stage building on the previous stages. He believed moral development could be grown in adolescents if given moral education and opportunities to discuss moral dilemmas. The primary methods for their research included case studies, semi-structured interviews, and Longitudinal Studies. Kohlberg's theory has often been criticized due to the research limitations due to the research only being conducted with male participants from Western cultures. Despite his theories critiques, Kohlberg's theory still serves as a fundamental framework for comprehending how adolescents confront moral dilemmas and navigate ethical choices as they grow and mature into adulthood.

Although Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) can be applied to all stages of human development, it plays a crucial role in our understanding of adolescent development. The ecological systems theory is a conceptual framework that

focuses on understanding the complex connections between an individual and their environment. Bronfenbrenner used a synthesis of existing research and observations to develop the hierarchy of ecological systems that influence a person's development. The ecological systems theory illustrates the complexity of the nature of adolescent development. The theory also highlights the need for considering the connections between the different systems or levels and the context of an individual's life to understand how adolescents develop, learn, and adapt. This theory has been influential to researchers' and educators' understanding of the broader ecological context to understand the unique life stage of adolescents. In many ways, this theory is in contrast to the idea of universal adolescent experiences described by Hall (1904) and supports the findings of Mead (1928) on the importance of contextual factors.

In a seminal work titled *Identity in Adolescence: Process and Content*, Marcia (1980) expanded on Erikson's work by presenting their theory of the adolescent identity status model. This theory categorizes adolescents into identity groups based on their levels of exploration and commitment. Marcia discusses how adolescents navigate the process of identity formation through the four identity statuses: identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. Marcia's process-oriented approach shows how adolescent development is a nonlinear process and that adolescents move between identity statuses over time. Marcia conducted extensive empirical research over four decades to refine their identity status model. Marcia developed the Identity Status Interview (ISI), a semi-structured interview format used to assess adolescent's identity status. The interview protocol prompts adolescents to reflect on their identity-related experiences and choices through open-ended questions. Among Marcia's most

influential contributions was the development of the Identity Status Interview to gain insights into how individuals in different identity statuses approach important life decisions. This tool continues to be used both in research and in clinical settings to assess and understand adolescent development. Moreover, their theoretical contributions expanded the understanding of adolescent identity development and have had a significant impact on how researchers, mental health professionals, and educators understand and view adolescent development. Although Marcia's work has been widely accepted and considered influential in many fields it has faced criticism. As with several other theories noted in this literature review, their research subjects lack cultural and gender diversity. Additionally, there is a glaring lack of empirical research to support the predictive validity of the identity statuses in their identity status theory.

In the groundbreaking work, Gilligan (1982) challenged the widely accepted theories on moral development by arguing that women and men understand and approach moral dilemmas from distinct perspectives. The book was primarily focused on qualitative research including in-depth interviews, observations, and single case studies with women and girls from different age groups. The findings are in contrast to Kohlberg's (1969) comprehensive framework for understanding moral development by asserting that men often approach moral dilemmas with a focus on justice and fairness and women approach moral dilemmas with empathy and relationships. Gilligan argued that Kohlberg's findings failed to account for the moral reasoning of women because they were based only on male participants. Even though Gilligan's work was not specific to any age group it does provide an insightful lens to examine how socialization, gender, and relationships influence the moral development of

adolescents. This is particularly important to understanding how adolescents construct their identities, values, beliefs, and choices during this unique life stage. This work has been seen as transformative in researchers understanding of how gender is viewed during adolescence.

Jessor's (1991) problem behavior theory focuses on understanding and explaining why adolescents exhibit risky behaviors including substance abuse, delinquency, and early sexual experiences. Jessor's theory was developed over thirty years of observations, surveys, cross-cultural investigations, and longitudinal research. The theory asserts that adolescents often cluster risky behaviors together in adolescence which is defined as problem behavior syndrome. The theory also recognizes that risky behaviors may vary widely in length of time, and across different contextual settings. Additionally, the theory identifies protective factors such as family bonds, access to community resources, and positive peer relationships that can mitigate the likelihood of adolescents engaging in risky behaviors. The theory has been widely accepted for its significance in researchers' understanding of the complex environmental factors that can influence an adolescent's decision-making process and behavior. Critics have argued that the theory is too broad citing issues specifying causation due to the complexity of the contextual factors. Despite the limitations, Jessor's work has had significant contributions to researchers and practitioners understanding of adolescent development as well as intervention strategies to reduce the likelihood of risky behaviors in adolescent individuals.

In Pipher's (1994) highly influential book titled *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* Pipher examines the unique emotional and psychological

challenges faced by adolescent girls in contemporary society. Although not based on empirical research, her findings were based on years of experience as a clinical psychologist working with adolescent girls and their families. Despite not being empirically based, her book includes qualitative data including interviews and case studies to articulate the findings. The book's findings offer a unique insight into the challenges adolescent girls experience related to issues with self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and body image. Additionally, the book illustrates how contextual factors like media images, societal pressures, and cultural expectations often diminish adolescent girl's self-esteem and hinder the development of their own identity. Similar to Jessor (1991) Pipher highlights the importance of relationships with caregivers, friends, teachers, and mentors as mitigating factors to support healthy development of self-esteem and identity. Critics have argued the book lacks empirical research and reinforces gender stereotypes by oversimplifying the experiences of adolescent girls. Despite the limitations of the book, it has also widely been seen as an influential call to action to understand the unique challenges faced by adolescent girls and ways to provide guidance and support during this critical stage of adolescent development.

A study from this time period titled *Adolescent Identity Exploration: A Test of Erikson's Theory of Transitional Crisis* (Kidwell et al., 1995) aimed to empirically investigate Erikson's theory (1968). This theory states that adolescent identity exploration, or crisis, is linked to reduced ego strength. The study involved 83 adolescents who participated in a self-reported survey and interview. Researchers utilized tools like the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the Ego-Identity Interview (Grotevant and Cooper, 1981). The findings of the study

supported Erikson's notion that identity exploration plays a central role in the identity crisis experienced during adolescence. Adolescents reporting higher levels of identity exploration tended to exhibit self-doubt, confusion, disturbed thinking, impulsivity, and conflicts with parents and authority figures. However, it's important to acknowledge the study's limitations, notably the use of self-report data, which may be susceptible to issues like social desirability bias or inaccurate reporting. This study is significant because it supported a previous theorist's idea with empirical data.

During the end of the twentieth century, there began to be a growing amount of research regarding adolescent mental health and well-being. Lewinsohn et. al., (1998) conducted an epidemiologic study with a representative sample of 1,709 adolescent students who completed a diagnostic interview and questionnaire assessment measuring their behaviors and mental health. Approximately one year later the participants returned for a second diagnostic interview and questionnaire assessment. The findings suggest the prevalence of adolescent depression was significantly higher than previously thought. Additionally, the researchers found that half of the students who were clinically depressed also had an additional mental health disorder. Lastly, the research found that adolescents who experienced depression were more likely to attempt risky behavior including substance abuse. The researchers concluded with the need for universal screening for depression in schools and matching adolescents experiencing depression to appropriate levels of care. Research on adolescent mental health like the one previously described started to shift the thinking on how adolescent mental health was viewed. Specifically, the prevention and treatment for depression in adolescents need to be geared towards adolescent development as opposed to the

prevention and treatment options provided to adults. Next, I will discuss the last sub-topic within this section, the study of adolescent development in the twenty-first century.

Twenty-First Century

The study of adolescent development in the Twenty-first century has continued to evolve and expand on previous theories and research. Additionally, researchers continue to respond to emerging issues and adapt to the changing dynamics of contemporary society including rapid increases in human population, technological advancements, and globalization. Similar to the previous time periods, the twenty-first century continues to remain focused on adolescent biological changes, cognitive changes, and psychological changes that adolescents experience.

Harris (2013) conducted one of the most comprehensive adolescent development studies in the history of adolescent development. The study used a nationally representative, school-based sample of 20,000 adolescents using a combination of interviews, self-reporting surveys, and in-home visits to collect data on various aspects of adolescent health and well-being. The study's longitudinal design had three waves of data collection between 1994-1996, 2001-2002, and 2007-2008. The goals of the study were to address several different research questions from different disciplines including, public health, education, sociology, and psychology. The findings indicate a complex web of connections between social relationships, mental health, social and economic inequalities, health, and risky behaviors. The findings indicate the deep impact of peer influences and social support on various aspects of adolescent development. Additionally, the findings give insight into the risk

factors and prevention strategies for risky behaviors including substance abuse and early sexual experiences. Furthermore, the findings indicated the prevalence of mental health disorders and disparities in mental health care access. The findings gave insight into how contextual factors and disparities in healthcare access can influence adolescent health outcomes. The study's main limitations are participant attrition and the reliance on self-reported data. Despite the limitations, the study is widely accepted as a treasure of information related to all aspects of adolescent development. The findings continue to influence and inform public health policy to this day.

Luyckx et al., (2008) built on the work of Marcia (1980) by examining, adapting, and expanding on the previous Adolescent Identity Model. Luyckx et al., (2008) further developed the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS) as a way to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of adolescent identity development. The self-report questionnaire tool takes each stage or status from Marcia (1980) and adds identity formation outcomes based on their levels of exploration and commitment. Each outcome provides more detail than Marcia's status, allowing for a deeper understanding of an adolescent's identity. Empirical studies using U-MICS indicate that it is valid and reliable as a tool for assessing adolescent identity processes (Crocetti et al., 2008). This updated model has had a significant impact on how researchers and theorists understand adolescent identity development across different populations and contexts.

Twenge (2017) offered insight into the changing experiences and behavior of adolescents based on the changes in adolescent's access to digital technology and social media. Twenge used a variety of empirical studies and qualitative interviews to

support the findings of the book. Twenge argues there is a decline in rebellious or risk-taking behaviors including lower rates of substance abuse, less early sexual activity, and fewer instances of delinquency. Additionally, Twenge asserts the rate of adolescents experiencing mental health problems like anxiety and depression is skyrocketing. Furthermore, Twenge claims these changes in adolescent behavior and attitudes are due to the prevalence of digital technology and social media during adolescence. Critics have argued the book focuses too heavily on the impact of digital technology and social media and fails to take into account other contextual factors of this time period. Even with the limitations and criticisms, the book provides a compelling examination of adolescents' changing experiences in an ever-changing digital world.

Furthermore, the twenty-first century saw a growing recognition of the importance of cultural and ethnic identity in the field of adolescent development. In the past twenty years Umaña-Taylor has contributed a significant amount of research in the area of cultural and ethnic identity including ethnic identity and self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor, 2007) discrimination and ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor and Updegraff, 2006), and online racial discrimination and mental health (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2012). Their research is qualitative in nature consisting of interviews, focus groups, cross-cultural comparisons, and self-reported surveys. Specific to adolescent development, Umaña-Taylor et al., (2004) developed the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) as a tool for researchers to better understand an adolescent's ethnic-racial identity. The 17-item self-reported survey uses a four-point Likert scale to assess the degree to which an adolescent has explored their identity, the degree to which the adolescent understands what their

ethnic identity means to them, and their feelings about their ethnic group membership. Umaña-Taylor has made significant contributions to researchers' and educators' understanding of how adolescents navigate their cultural and ethnic identities as a part of their adolescent development.

Since the early 2000s, there has been growing interest in researching sexual and gender identity in the context of adolescent development. During this time period, Savin-Williams (2001) became a prominent researcher in the field of LGBTQ+ adolescent development researching experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents with their families (2003), suicide (2001) experiences of gay and lesbian adolescents including their relationships and identity development (2005), and stability and changes in sexual orientation in adolescents (2012). Savin-Williams utilized a variety of research methods including longitudinal studies, qualitative interviews, self-reported surveys, and community-based research. Savin-Williams's work has contributed significantly to the understanding of how sexual and gender identity develops as a part of an individual's adolescent development. The research continues to have practical implications for policymakers, researchers, educators, and mental health professionals. It also highlights the importance of providing safe and supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ adolescents in communities and schools.

Perhaps the most prominent author and research in the field of adolescent development in the twenty-first century has been Steinberg (2022). Over the last 20 years, Steinberg has conducted extensive research on adolescent development including parenting adolescents (Steinberg et al., 2002), cognitive development in relation to the justice system (Steinberg et al., 2003), developmental psychopathology

in adolescence risk (Steinberg et al., 2006), peer influence (Steinberg et al., 2007) adolescent risk-taking (Steinberg et al., 2010). Steinberg's research involved both qualitative and quantitative studies and a variety of methods throughout the twenty-first century including longitudinal studies, neuroimaging studies, experimental studies, self-reported surveys, and observational data. In the 13th edition of *Adolescence*, (2023) Steinberg provides some of the most up-to-date and comprehensive research on adolescent development including contemporary issues facing adolescents including technology use and social media. The book is currently widely used in undergraduate education and psychology courses covering adolescent development.

The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study (2015) is one of the most comprehensive longitudinal research projects focusing on the brain development and cognitive functioning of adolescents. A representative sample of over 11,000 children aged 9-10 years from throughout the United States are currently participating in this study. The study is collecting data from neuro-images, cognitive assessments, interviews, and questionnaires annually. The primary goal of the ABCD Study is to better understand how an adolescent's environment and behavior influence brain development during adolescence, specifically the prefrontal cortex and its role in decision-making and impulse control. The study aims to answer questions about how the relationship between adolescent brain development, mental health, substance use, and academic achievement. Although the study is ongoing, the findings based on the current data have shown a relationship between early substance use and changes in brain development and structure. The study is currently the largest long-term study of brain development and adolescent health in the United States.

Within these research areas, there is an emerging focus on the impact of digital and social media on adolescent development, identity formation within a diverse society, and the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent development. In the last twenty-three years, advancements in technology have grown exponentially. There has also been a dramatic increase in the amount of research studying how internet access, gaming, social media, screen time, and smartphones have impacted adolescent development. Social media has been shown to both help and hurt adolescents form their identities (Osit, 2008). Some research indicates that the effects of social media and internet use differ significantly from one adolescent to another (Beyens et al., 2020). While other studies show the adverse effects on various aspects of adolescent development (Pierce, 2009; Shyam and Bhorja 2011; Punamaki et al. 2009). Although there have been some mixed results and countering perspectives on the effects of social media, screen time, and smartphones on adolescent development, the overwhelming majority point to the negative effects.

Additionally, a quantitative cross-sectional, correlational study conducted by Cyr et al. (2015) surveyed 268 adolescents from three public schools in Central Florida us the Technology Usage Scale (TUS), The Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ), The Identity Distress Survey (IDS), and Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR), Peer Conflict Scale (PCS), Brief Symptom Inventory-18 (BSI-18). The purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between technology usage and various components of adolescent development including peer relationships, identity development, and psychological adjustment. The findings indicate that the amount of communication an adolescent has using technology was directly related to identity and

relationship problems, and maladjustment. The previous studies are especially relevant to the research topic as the number of adolescents using social media and their amount of time on social media and grown exponentially in recent years (Cataldo et al., 2021). The studies are significant to the understanding of adolescent development as it sheds light on the changing experiences of adolescents during the twenty-first century as well as the negative effects of technology on adolescent development.

In summary, the history of the study of adolescent development has been characterized by the study of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that occur during adolescence. The study of adolescent development has evolved over three time periods including the first half of the twentieth century, the second half of the twentieth century, and the 21st century. The evolution of the study of adolescent development has been shaped by various theorists, researchers, and changing societal contexts. Research continues to study new challenges and opportunities faced by adolescents. Currently, the United States is facing epidemic rates of adolescent mental health disorders and suicide attempts (Shim, 2023). Equally alarming is the incredibly low levels of access to mental health care and treatment adolescents experience (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Given the frightening trajectory of adolescent mental health over the last decade, future research highlighting the experiences of adolescents like the research topic of school belonging should be a top priority of researchers. The next topic will offer key insights into the critical role that teacher-student relationships play in supporting healthy adolescent development.

Teacher-Student Relationships

To gain a comprehensive understanding of adolescent student perceptions of student belonging it is crucial to have a deep understanding of the role of teacher-student relationships in education settings. In many ways, teacher-student relationships are a crucial component of education and adolescent development. The connections associated with teacher-student relationships extend far beyond the classroom, serving as a crucial support system for students as they navigate the complexities of school, adolescence, and life. Additionally, teacher-student relationships have far-reaching implications for academic achievement, student well-being, and development. To a great extent, teacher-student relationships are directly related to the purpose of this research, the problems it aims to answer, and the specific questions it seeks to address. While conducting this literature review, I aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the key terminology and definitions associated with teacher-student relationships. Additionally, the aim is to understand the historical context of teacher-student relationships. Last, is to view teacher-student relationships in relation to a student's experiences of a sense of belonging specific to a school setting. The subtopics included in this literature review include the history of the development of teacher-student relationships theory, the characteristics most commonly associated with teacher-student relationships, and the known associations between teacher-student relationships and student academic and general well-being outcomes. The rationale for the inclusion of the topic of teacher-student relationships and the subsequent subtopics is to underscore the pivotal role it plays in the experiences of adolescent students in relation to the research topic.

Historical Context

The history and definition of teacher-student relationships have been developed and continue to evolve within the fields of education, psychology, and sociology. For the purpose of this literature review, teacher-student relationships are defined as “teachers’ and students’ aggregated and ongoing perceptions of one another, affect toward each other, and interactions over time; these perceptions are stored in memory and guide future interactions with the other party” (Brinkworth et al. 2017, p. 2). The foundation of our understanding of teacher-student relationships can be traced back to ancient Greece with philosophers like Socrates who emphasized the importance of mentoring, questioning, and dialogue as necessary precedents for these crucial relationships (Plato and Allen, 1984). Throughout history, teacher-student relationships have been shaped by changes in cultural, societal, and educational landscapes. Contemporary researchers and educators have continued to explore the concept more deeply, highlighting the significance of one’s culture, inclusivity, and the role of technology in shaping these relationships. The following sections will detail three sub-topics of teacher-student relationships including the history of the development of teacher-student relationships theory, the characteristics most commonly associated with positive teacher-student relationships, and the known associations between teacher-student relationships and student outcomes. A critical analysis of theories and empirical studies from these subtopics surrounding teacher-student relationships offers diverse perspectives that both support and counter each other. The following section will discuss major theories and empirical studies, the relationship between the studies and this research study, and a rationale for the inclusion of the studies in this literature

review. By examining the existing literature, I hope to further establish my theoretical framework and provide a rationale for this research project. Next, I will discuss the first sub-topic within this section, the history of the development of teacher-student relationship theory.

History of the development of teacher-student relationship theory

The roots of our understanding of teacher-student relationships can be traced back to the philosophies of Socrates, Confucius, and Rousseau. Socrates, through his Socratic method, encouraged dialogue, mutual exploration of ideas, and critical thinking. This method fostered a teacher-student relationship based on intellectual engagement and knowledge-seeking. Confucius emphasized a reciprocal admiration and recognition where students respected and valued their mentors. Similarly, teachers guided and nurtured their students' moral and intellectual growth. Rousseau challenged traditional pedagogy and beliefs by advocating for a more natural, student-centered approach. He emphasized the importance of trust, hands-off laissez-faire teaching, and experiential learning. This method promoted a teacher-student relationship built on individualized guidance and respect for a student's natural gifts and development. These foundational perspectives continue to shape our understanding of teacher-student relationships, emphasizing respect, inquiry, and a partnership between teachers and students in educational settings.

In the early twentieth century, John Dewey emphasized the importance of the teacher's role in guiding students' learning through active engagement and experiences. His work laid the foundation for understanding a more interactive teacher-student relationship role. In one of his more influential works *Democracy and Education*

(1916) Dewey presented his ideas revolving around respecting the individuality of each student arguing that teachers should acknowledge and respect the unique interests and needs of each of their students. At the time the concept of student-centered learning was a groundbreaking paradigm shift that challenged traditional educational models that were teacher-focused. Dewey's writing on respect for individuality has had a lasting influence on the field of education and has contributed to the development of student-centered approaches to teaching and learning.

Balby's (1969) groundbreaking attachment theory describes the nature of attachments between children and their caregivers, the impact of attachment on emotional development, and the deep connection of attachment to later relationships and psychological well-being. Although Bowlby's attachment theory primarily focuses on parent-child relationships, it also has an indirect connection to understanding teacher-student relationships. The attachment theory framework highlights the relational and emotional aspects of teacher-student interactions and underscores the importance of creating a secure, consistent, and supportive classroom environment to foster positive student outcomes. Attachment theory has had a significant impact on how educators and researchers view how teacher-student relationships can contribute to student's emotional and psychological development.

Pianta's (1992) seminal work outlines the development of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) and its importance in measuring teacher-student relationships. The assessment is designed to evaluate the quality of teacher-student relationships, focusing on three main dimensions: Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency. Although the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale has primarily been

used as an assessment tool for younger children, Pianta et al., (1997) created several adaptations and iterations to be applied to different age groups including adolescents. The assessment tool is still widely used in educational research to this day. This assessment has had a significant impact on the study of teacher-student relationships because it has helped researchers and educators measure and understand the critical emotional bond between teachers and their students. His work surrounding STRS continues to underscore the importance of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support for students.

The 1990s and the 2000s saw the emergency of culturally relevant pedagogy which emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing students' diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities. The work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (1998) laid the foundation for understanding how culturally relevant pedagogy incorporates teacher-student relationships by emphasizing the need for educators to establish culturally responsive connections with their students. Culturally responsive pedagogy connects with teacher-student relationships by recognizing and respecting students' cultural backgrounds teachers can help build trusting relationships. When students feel seen, understood, and valued, they are more likely to develop positive relationships with their teachers. Additionally, a culturally relevant pedagogy encourages a sense of emotional safety for students. When students feel safe expressing their identities, beliefs, and experiences, teacher-student relationships are more likely to be positive and supportive. Culturally responsive pedagogy continues to impact educators and researchers' understanding of how valuing students' cultural backgrounds are crucial components of building these strong teacher-student relationships.

Ang (2005) developed and validated The Teacher-Student Relationship Inventory teacher version of the T-TSRI. This self-report inventory was the first assessment to be designed to assess teacher-student relationships in middle school settings. The 47-item assessment includes subscales like warmth, conflict, and degree of closeness. Additionally, Ang (2005) developed a student version of the Teacher-Student Relationship Inventory (S-TSRI), adapted from the T-TSRI. The purpose of the 40-item, 5-point Likert scale assessment was to examine teacher-student relationships from the perspective of adolescent students. Both assessments have been invaluable to researchers to assess and understand the complex intricacies of teacher-student relationships.

Contemporary research on the topic of teacher-student relationships continues to evolve. The seminal work Hattie (2008) *Visible Learning* highlighted the significance of teacher-student relationships in relation to student achievement. Using a comprehensive meta-analysis relating to student achievement found positive teacher-student interaction to have a .72 effect size which is significantly above the .4 cutoff for the zone of desired effects. He emphasizes that teacher-student interactions, characterized by communication, trust, and a supportive classroom environment, can have a profound impact on student achievement. Hattie's research illustrates the need for educators to prioritize building strong relationships with their students to foster an atmosphere where students are more engaged, motivated, and receptive to learning and receptive to learning Hattie's work has contributed to our understanding of the important impact of positive teacher-student interactions and relationships on student learning outcomes. Hattie's work has had a profound impact on researchers, educators,

and policymakers, who view effective teaching practices as positive teacher-student interactions.

The study of teacher-student relationships has evolved over time, reflecting a growing awareness of the profound impact of these interactions on individual student's development and the educational field. This history traces its roots to the early philosophical musings of educators like Confucius, Socrates, and Rousseau, who pondered the moral and pedagogical responsibilities of teachers and their relationship with their students. In many ways, the beliefs about teacher-student relationships have shifted from hierarchical and didactic to collaborative and inclusive. The research in this field continues to expand, incorporating elements from cognitive psychology, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed practices. More than ever the research highlights the critical role that teacher-student relationships play in shaping educational experiences and outcomes of students. Given the current mental health crisis students and teachers are experiencing it is of critical importance that future research continues to provide valuable insights for educators, emphasizing the importance of creating supportive, inclusive, and trust-based environments in which students and teachers can thrive emotionally. The following section will discuss the second sub-topic within this section, the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships.

Characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships

The development of a positive teacher-student relationship is a multifaceted and complex process, deeply influenced by a variety of contextual factors and behaviors or characteristics. The process involves not only the personal attributes of both the teacher and the student but is also impacted by the broader educational, school, and classroom

environment. There is not an exhaustive list of characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships. However, research does indicate associations between positive relationships and some key characteristics including mutual respect, trust, empathy, and open communication, where teachers create a safe and inclusive space for students to express themselves freely. Likewise, research also indicates specific teacher actions known to help support teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, the social, cultural, and emotional context plays a pivotal role in the development of these positive relationships. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of teachers and students, as well as the classroom atmosphere, curriculum, and teaching methods, can all impact the complex dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. Additionally, individual student learning styles and needs must be taken into account. In many ways, what encourages a positive relationship for one student may differ for another. Recognizing the complexity of these characteristics and contextual factors is essential for educators, policymakers, and researchers striving to understand teacher-student relationships. The following research synthesizes the findings from this literature review of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships.

McHugh (2013) conducted a study investigating adolescent perceptions of “bridges and barriers” to student-teacher relationships. A total of 78 adolescent students were selected from six schools and four different cities to participate in focus groups. The participants were led through a flexible protocol of hands-on activities and open-ended interview questions. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using descriptive coding and thematic analysis. The findings suggest the most commonly described “bridge” to building a strong relationship was effortful

engagement where the teacher deliberately tries to engage the student on an interpersonal level. Interpersonal interactions where the teacher provided support for the student were seen as a critical factor in the relationship. In contrast, the findings found inattention and stereotyping of students as the biggest barriers to forming a teacher-student relationship. Inattention was not only found to be a barrier but was also found to alienate the student from the classroom community. This study is significant to our understanding of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it articulates adolescent perceptions of both positive and negative actions of teachers in forming relationships.

A critical ethnographic narrative study conducted by Nelson (2016) investigated how a set of relational teaching strategies supported Black boy's participation and achievement in school, and contributed additional voices to a counter-narrative, which strives to dispel negative race and gender stereotypes associated with Black males in the United States. The study used a relational teaching framework to investigate relationships among teachers and 27 eighth-grade Black boys from a single-sex middle school in New York City. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over a two-year period. Several characteristics of relationally effective teachers emerged from the narratives. These teachers were characterized by reaching out to support students, personal advocacy, establishing common ground, and accommodating opposition. The findings also these relational characteristics were associated with school engagement and learning. The researcher noted that the strategies utilized by relationally effective teachers were rooted in asset-based conceptions of their students. This study is worthy of attention and deepens our

understanding of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it highlights the experiences and perceptions of adolescent students. On a deeply personal level, the quotes included in the study give a unique insight into the lived experiences of the students involved in the study.

A 2018 longitudinal study conducted by Yu et al. (2018) investigated adolescent perceptions of teacher-student relationships with the goal of identifying key interactions and characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships. Purposeful sampling was used to identify 41 adolescent students who participated in in-depth interviews twice a year. Data was collected over a three-year time period. The findings found two overarching themes that were associated with positive teacher-student relationships. First, was teacher noticing, which was defined as “noticing of students’ presence and needs in and outside of the classroom” (p.342). Within this theme free conversations were noted as especially important to adolescents where they discussed topics that were outside of school content. The second theme was teacher investment which was characterized by being cared for, offering extra help, accommodating to their needs, and listening to them. Within this theme, same-level conversations were shown as critical to developing this feeling of investment. Same-level conversations were defined as “exchanges where students play a more equal role to their teacher” (p. 247). The findings and perceptions of the participants support the findings of McHugh (2013). This study is significant to our understanding of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it sheds light on the perceptions of adolescents’ view of the characteristics required from teachers for positive relationships.

A 2014 mixed methods study conducted by Wilkins (2014) examined teachers understanding of teacher-student relationships based on their experiences. The study investigated how teachers defined good relationships with students, and what student behaviors contributed to good teacher-student relationships. Data were collected from 103 teachers from 8 urban schools utilizing online surveys and purposeful sampling was used to select five teachers for semi-structured interviews. The findings from the study found that teachers associated positive teacher-student relationships with students who tried hard at school tasks, were rule-abiding and cooperative, and demonstrated positive social behaviors with their peers. The findings also suggest that teachers seemed to prefer students who had a sense of humor, were respectful, and talked to teachers. Additionally, the study found that teachers utilized teacher-student relationships because they thought it would be beneficial instructional in their classrooms. Last, the study found that teachers struggled most to invest time in relationship-building with students who did not try at school. This study is significant to our understanding of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it highlights teacher perceptions of the role of student behavior in developing relationships. The study is also significant because it suggests that students who need positive teacher-student relationships most are the students whom teachers struggle to form relationships with.

A 2020 case study conducted by Ibrahim and Zaatari (2020) explored teacher-student relationship characteristics and adolescent's sense of school belonging. Purposeful sampling was used to select 11 adolescent female students to participate in semi-structured interviews. The findings found three main characteristics of positive

teacher-student relationships including positive affect described as love, care, respect, and positivity. Additionally, complete reciprocity is characterized by mutuality, sharing, and immediate responses. Last, was a power balance described as equal power and decision making given to students. The students from the case study reported low levels of these three characteristics which were associated with negative relationships and low levels of school belonging. This case study is significant to our understanding of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it illustrates the critical connection between student's perceptions of teacher-student relationships and the research topic of school belonging.

Marzano (2017) conducted a narrative and meta-analysis of the top 330 instructional strategies with the highest effect sizes in student outcomes. This method took a different approach to the question of what characteristics are associated with positive teacher-student relationships by looking at specific actions of the teacher as opposed to specific attributes of the teacher. The first finding identified through the study was using verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate affection for students. This finding included actions like greeting students at the classroom door by name, holding informal conferences, attending after-school functions, and giving students special responsibilities in the classroom. The findings indicate students will describe the teacher as someone who is friendly and cares for them based on the previously mentioned teacher's actions. The second finding of the study was understanding students' backgrounds and interests. This finding included teacher actions consisting of student background surveys, familiarity with student culture, informal student interviews, and student and parent conferences. The last finding of the study was

displaying objectivity and control as opposed to anger when students misbehave. This finding included teacher actions consisting of self-reflection, self-care, monitoring communication styles, and proactive steps with challenging students. This narrative and meta-analysis are significant to our understanding of the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it provides us with a lens of teacher actions as opposed to attributes. This study connects with the research topic because it shares specific research-based strategies teachers can use to build teacher-student relationships.

Likewise, Souers and Hall (2019) also identified specific actions by teachers to provide relationship-based interventions to foster connections between teachers and students with a trauma-informed lens in mind. The strategies listed included saying hello, smiling, asking questions to show interest, listening, using the person's name, and giving hugs, high-fives, and handshakes. The authors also give recommendations for educators to help them identify students who have unmet relationship needs. The authors continue by sharing the harmful and hurtful effects that past trauma can have on students and teacher's ability to form strong connections with each other. Although the authors cite no empirical evidence to support their claims, they do offer a unique perspective into the impact of trauma on relationship building and specific strategies to help build relationships designed for all ages of students.

Examining the research that explores the characteristics associated with positive teacher-student relationships is both straightforward and complicated. In many ways, the research is straightforward in that there are specific characteristics and actions associated with positive teacher-student relationships. The research is complicated in

that teachers and adolescent students have somewhat different perspectives on the topic. Additionally, appreciating the intricate nature of these attributes and the contextual factors is crucial for educators, policymakers, and researchers who aim to gain insight into teacher-student relationships. Future research should investigate how prepared new teachers feel they are to make positive relationships with their students. Additionally, future research should focus on what teacher preparation, “grow your own”, and alternative certification programs are doing to prepare future teachers in this critical area. The following section will address the last sub-topic, I will discuss the last, sub-topic within this section, the known positive and negative outcomes associated with positive teacher-student relationships.

Outcomes Associated With Positive Teacher-Student Relationships.

Research overwhelmingly paints a clear picture that positive teacher-student relationships yield a plethora of positive student outcomes. These outcomes encompass not only academic achievement but also social and emotional development critical to student’s adolescent development. Students who experience strong connections with their teachers are shown to exhibit higher levels of engagement, motivation, and a sense of belonging within the classroom and school. More importantly, these relationships serve as a pivotal support system, promoting emotional well-being, self-esteem, and resilience, while also serving as a protective factor against many negative student outcomes. In contrast, having negative teacher-student relationships has also been shown to be associated with negative student outcomes. The following research synthesizes the findings from this literature review of outcomes associated with positive teacher-student relationships.

A 2014 case study conducted by Ellerbrock et al. (2014) utilized semi-structured interviews of 18 students between the ages of 11 and 14, 5 teachers, and one administrator from an urban middle school. The purpose of the study was to analyze how interpersonal relationships an adolescent experiences in school set the foundation for a student's feeling of belonging. The findings suggest that both teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships play a significant role in how students experience school belonging. Responsive teacher-student relationships characterized by caring connections and responsiveness to student needs were found to be associated with student belonging. This research holds particular significance due to its alignment with this study. This study is significant to the understanding of the outcomes associated with positive teacher-student relationships because of the association with student feelings of school belonging.

A meta-analysis conducted by Roorda (2011) aimed an analyze the associations between positive and negative aspects of the teacher-student relationship and engagement in school. Additionally, a separate analysis was conducted with the goal of analyzing the positive and negative aspects of teacher-student relationships with student achievement. The analysis consisted of 92 research articles based on 99 studies from 1990 to 2011. The studies were based on all ages of students including an equal number of studies representing elementary, middle, and high school students. In all the analyses conducted, notable correlations were observed among the variables under investigation. These findings reinforce the existing body of research literature, which has consistently suggested that teacher-student relationships play a pivotal role in shaping students' school engagement and academic performance. Furthermore, the

analyses indicated adverse connections between unfavorable relationships and both student engagement and achievement. It is worth highlighting that the gender of the teacher was found to exert a significant impact on the associations with engagement, with more substantial effect sizes documented in samples featuring male teachers. This meta-analysis is significant to the understanding of the outcomes associated with teacher-student relationships because of the volume of studies analyzed and the strong connections between teacher-student relationships and school engagement and academic achievement.

Shores and Smith (2016) conducted a study investigating middle school teacher's communication behaviors that may contribute to more positive teacher-student relationships. In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 middle school teachers from a single urban middle school in New York. The findings from the teachers identified caring interactions as the most important component to building positive relationships with students. Additionally, teachers identified that communication between teachers and students was required inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers identified communication that was friendly, involved attentive listening, and gave opportunities for showing recognition and providing rewards as characteristics that helped build relationships with students. On the contrary, attitude towards authority was described as the biggest barrier to forming positive teacher-student relationships. This study is helpful in understanding teacher-student relationships as it provides insight into middle school teacher's perceptions of characteristics that build relationships and barriers they experience to building positive relationships.

Uslu and Gizir (2016) conducted a quantitative study exploring the role of teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and family involvement in an adolescent student's sense of belonging to their school. Cluster sampling was used to obtain 815 adolescent students from nine schools. Each student was surveyed using four different scales assessing the student's sense of belonging, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, parent involvement at school, and parent involvement at home. The results indicated that teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and family involvement at school were significant predictors of a sense of school belonging. The findings also revealed that teacher-student relationships were the highest correlated factor for a student reporting high levels of school belonging. This research study was significant because of its connections between both the literature review topic and this research topic. The research also supports the findings of Ellerbrock et al. (2014) connection between teacher-student relationships and school belonging.

Pimpalkhute et al., (2023) conducted a study investigating middle school teachers' perspectives on the costs and benefits of teacher-student relationships. The goal of the study was to understand why teachers pursue relationships with their students. Data were collected from 115 teachers participating in focus groups from what was described as three high-need, low-resource school districts in one state in the southeastern United States. Inductive-deductive data analyses were used to analyze the data from the focus groups. The data revealed six potential benefits of pursuing teacher-student relationships including improved trust and open communication, a sense of closeness between students and teachers, increased job satisfaction, provide

teachers with a sense of personal accomplishment, being appreciated by students, parents, and other school staff members, and improve teachers' professional and personal self-esteem. In contrast, five costs were identified with pursuing teacher-student relationships, including workload, time pressures, out-of-pocket expenses, and failure to show immediate benefits for teachers. This study is helpful in our understanding of teacher's perceptions of outcomes for themselves as opposed to the outcomes for students. This perspective provides insight into why teachers may pursue relationships with their students and reasons why they might not find it beneficial for them to pursue relationships.

A 2013 longitudinal study conducted by Wang et al. (2013) examined the moderating effects of positive teacher-student relationships who experienced ongoing parent-adolescent conflict, low effortful control, and depressive symptoms. Teacher-student relationship data and parent-adolescent data were collected through surveys on 1400 urban adolescents at age 13 and again at age 18. Positive teacher-student relationships were characterized by warmth and trust. The findings suggest that positive teacher-student relationships played a significant role in the trajectories of emotional and behavioral adjustment in adolescents. The findings showed that positive teacher-student relationships can help protect adolescents against depression and misconduct through their adolescence. This study is significant to our understanding of the outcomes associated with positive teacher-student relationships because it highlights the protective factors against negative adolescent health and well-being outcomes.

A 2016 study conducted by Raufelder et al. (2016) explored the relationship between adolescent's perception of teacher-student relationships and their academic motivation. 1088 7th and 8th-grade students from 23 public schools and middle schools completed a questionnaire measuring teacher-student relationships, student motivation, and intrinsic motivation academic self-regulation. The findings suggest that middle school students who identify one well-liked teacher were associated with higher levels of academic motivation. The findings also indicate that the negative effects on academic motivation associated with low-quality teacher-student relationships can be mitigated by one strong teacher-student relationship during middle school.

A 2021 longitudinal study conducted by Engles et al. (2021) investigated the role of teacher-student relationships in adolescent's school engagement and academic achievement trajectories. Data was collected from 5,382 adolescents annually between the 7th and 9th grades using surveys to measure school behavioral and emotional engagement, closeness to teachers, and conflict with teachers. Standardized math test scores were also gathered for each student. The data was analyzed using latent growth models. The results indicated that closeness to teachers was positively associated with higher engagement and achievement. In contrast, conflict with teachers was negatively associated with engagement and achievement. The findings also suggest that positive teacher-student relationships were only associated with achievement in the same school year. This is in contrast to the long-lasting effects of positive teacher-student relationships found by Wang et al. (2013). This study is significant to our understanding of the outcomes associated with positive teacher-student relationships

because it underscores the importance of teacher-student relationships in relation to student achievement.

A longitudinal mixed-method study conducted by Obsuth et al. (2017) explored the relationship between teacher-student relationships and adolescent problem behaviors. Five waves of data were collected annually from 1067 students, their parents, and their teachers through questionnaires and computer-assisted interviews. The findings suggest that students who reported better relationships with their teachers and whose teachers reported better relationships with them experienced fewer social behavioral problems at school and home. There was also an association between positive teacher-student relationships in earlier grades and fewer social behavioral problems up to four years after the student had the teacher. This study supports the findings of Wang et al. (2013) by illustrating the long-lasting effects of positive teacher-student on students.

According to a 2022 national survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) found that 55 percent of educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they had planned. Even more alarming the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that half of US public schools are unable to fill the current certified teaching positions and that the number of openings across the country has been steadily increasing since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Unfortunately, Kraft and Lyon (2022) estimate the number of new teachers entering the career field has decreased by one-third over the past ten years. The researchers found that the number of newly licensed teachers dropped from 320,000 in 2006 to 215,000 in 2020. Similarly, in 2006, the number of graduating teachers made up 22 percent of total

college graduates, compared to 2020, when they made up only 11 percent of all college graduates. Given the sobering statistics surrounding teachers exiting the career field and entering the workforce, future research should focus on the positive effects and protective factors of positive teacher-student relationships on teachers. Additionally, future research should also consider the impact of teacher shortages, class sizes, and substitute teachers on teacher-student relationships.

In summary, this literature review aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the second topic, the historical context, key terminology, and definitions associated with teacher-student relationships. A critical analysis of the empirical studies, professional journals, and books was conducted of each of the sub-topics including the history of the development of teacher-student relationships theory, the characteristics most commonly associated with positive teacher-student relationships, and the known associations between teacher-student relationships and student outcomes. Previously I reviewed adolescent development, in this current section, I reviewed teacher-student relationships. The next two topics will continue to broaden and deepen my theoretical framework by covering the role of school culture and the role of transformational leadership in schools.

School Culture

The study of school culture has been, defined, researched, and shaped by numerous cultural movements, scholars, and researchers since the early twentieth century. Deal and Peterson (1998) define school culture as “norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals built up over time” (p.2). Ideas about school culture have evolved from early organizational theories from the early twentieth century to the human

relations movement of the 1930's focusing less on the structural aspects of the organization and more on the social interactions and group dynamics. This was followed by sociological perspectives of the 1960s and 1970s which explore more cultural aspects of schools. The 1980s brought more anthropological influences to inform the study of school culture viewing schools as cultural systems. This was followed by research on effective schools which highlighted the importance of school leaders and positive school cultures. Contemporary school reform movements over the last thirty years have often seen school culture as a central focus in strategies to improve schools. Currently, within the educational landscape, researchers and educators have increasingly recognized the profound impact of school culture on both student and staff outcomes. Beyond the historical context, the next section will discuss a critical aspect of school culture that lies in understanding the complex relationship between individuals' personal cultures and the collective culture of a school. Every student, teacher, and staff member adds their distinct background, experiences, and values, collectively weaving the intricate fabric that shapes the school culture. This interaction between personal and collective cultures touches all aspects of the school's learning and work environment, influencing interpersonal relationships, communication, and ultimately outcomes. However, this interplay can bring challenges and negative consequences, specifically when deficit-thinking mindsets and actions are carried out. Deficit thinking, rooted in negative assumptions about students based on their cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, can hinder school cultures, perpetuate stereotypes, impact expectations, stifle student potential, and negatively impact student achievement. Recognizing and eradicating deficit thinking is critical for fostering a

positive school culture that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion for both those who work at and for students who attend. In many ways, developing a positive school culture lays the foundation for nurturing meaningful teacher-student relationships and cultivating a sense of belonging among students. When students feel valued, respected, and included within the school community, they are more likely to experience positive academic, health, and well-being outcomes. The pursuit of a positive school culture becomes not only an educational imperative but a moral and ethical commitment to providing all students with an environment conducive to their personal growth, development, and success which is critical during adolescence. Next, I will discuss the first sub-topic within this section, personal culture and its impact on school culture.

Personal Culture and the Impact on School Culture

Personal culture is defined as the declarative and non-declarative attitudes, worldviews, values, dispositions, and associations that manifest at the individual level (Lizardo, 2017). It encompasses aspects of religious beliefs, language, family practices, and social norms, shaping an individual's identity and ultimately their worldview. As individuals we all enter educational institutions, bringing with us our personal cultures, and influencing how we understand, perceive, engage with, and navigate the school environment. Houtte (2005) defines culture as “what members of an organization assume, believe, think, and so on” (p. 84). School culture encompasses aspects of school including traditions, beliefs, perceptions, and relationships, unwritten rules of schools (MacNeil et al., 2009). The relationship and interaction between personal culture and school culture is a dynamic process that significantly impacts the educational experience for students including their experiences with school belonging.

Teachers, staff members, students, and their families bring their diverse personal cultures to the broader school culture, influencing almost all aspects of school including learning preferences, communication styles, work, and social norms within the educational setting. School culture is never uniform or fixed; it is continually shaped by the diverse personal cultures of the individuals who interact with it. The inclusivity and openness of a school culture can impact how well it leverages diverse personal cultures. Understanding and leveraging this interaction is critical for creating inclusive and effective learning environments where school belonging and school culture can thrive.

The relationship between personal cultures and school cultures can lead to cultural dissonance when there is a significant mismatch between personal cultures between individuals and or school cultures. This cultural dissonance can impact an individual's sense of belonging and engagement in the educational setting. In contrast, when personal cultures between individuals and or the school culture align in a positive interaction cultural congruence can take place. This also has significant implications on how inclusive the school culture is and if students feel like they belong. Last, and I think most importantly, individuals and schools who are culturally responsive recognize and value the diversity of personal cultures within their community. When this happens, teachers acknowledge and incorporate students' personal cultures into their teaching practices allowing for a more effective and equitable learning environment.

A meta-analysis conducted by Redding (2019) reviewed empirical evidence related to the effect of student-teacher racial/ethnic matching with teacher perceptions

of student's abilities and student academic and behavioral outcomes. The author looked at quantitative research published between 1995 and 2018 specifically looking at K-12 settings. The findings indicated that Black teachers were less likely to describe Black students as likely to disrupt class in comparison to white teachers. This was also true with Latino/a teachers and students in comparison to White teachers with Black or Latino/a students. These findings were true in both elementary, middle, and high school settings with stronger relationships in upper grades. Similar findings were found regarding beliefs about students' academic abilities. Higher rates were assigned by teachers of the same race/ethnicity of the students. The findings would indicate the significance of student-teacher racial/ethnic matching and the impact on teacher perceptions of the students they serve. In terms of academic achievement, some studies showed higher levels of achievement specifically for Black students served by Black teachers. However, the authors noted the findings were generally less conclusive and mixed. Similarly, there was less overall evidence of an effect on Latino/a academic achievement when taught by Latino/a teachers in comparison to being taught by Black or White teachers. The authors note that moderating effects on student achievement could potentially be explained by regional differences. This study is significant to our understanding of school culture as it sheds light on how race and culture can both positively impact and negatively impact perceptions of students and in some cases lead to differences in student outcomes.

A nationally representative study of 15,362 10th graders conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and published by McGrady and Reynolds (2013) studied the effects of student and teacher racial/ethnic mismatches in

classrooms. Data was collected through student, teacher, and parent surveys and follow-up interviews. The analysis was limited to Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White students. Other groups of students were excluded due to the small number of respondents. The findings suggested that White teachers had more negative views of Black and Hispanic students compared to White students and more positive perceptions of Asian student's behaviors in class and academic ability. The findings also suggest that Black teachers had more positive perceptions of all non-white students with the exception of Asian students. This study supports the troubling racial findings of Redding (2019). These findings are also significant when you consider the racial makeup of American teachers. According to the Center for Educational Statistics (2017), 79% of public school teachers in America identify as White and non-Hispanic.

Given the large percentage of White teachers serving in public schools and the negative perceptions of Black and Hispanic students found in McGrady and Reynolds (2013), it becomes important to consider if individual personal cultures (and perceptions) change throughout their life and their careers. A longitudinal study conducted by Lersch (2023) utilized the findings of six independent longitudinal representative panel studies from five countries measuring personal culture utilizing various surveys. The findings support the life course adaption model of personal culture which predicts persistent change in personal culture throughout a human's lifespan in contrast to the stable disposition model which predicts little change after early imprinting of personal culture. The findings also found that higher levels of changes in personal culture were younger individuals, and lower levels of change in personal culture were associated with older individuals. The last finding was that the

changes in an individual's personal culture depended on their individual experiences. This study is significant to this literature review as it illustrates how malleable a person's understanding of their attitudes and values is and how their experiences can change their perspectives on life. I believe these findings could be used to include the changes in attitudes and values of white teachers who teach Black and Latino/a students.

A narrative case study conducted by Milner (2010) examined one teacher's journey to building cultural congruence with his diverse students by deepening his understanding of himself, as well as developing cultural competence. Data were collected through weekly classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with a white science teacher serving a highly diverse urban school classroom. The findings highlight the experiences of the teacher growing in the areas of cultural competence. Important to note were the experiences of the teacher in building cultural competence through developing and sustaining meaningful and authentic relationships with his students. Additionally, it was the teacher's decision to recognize his own and each of his students varied identities. Furthermore, the teacher's ability to develop culturally relevant pedagogy in science was tied to his ability to build cultural competence. Last, was that cultural convergence appeared to be a necessary step for academic success. This study is significant and relevant to this literature review because it deepens the knowledge of how individuals understand and develop their own personal culture and how building cultural competence can impact teacher practices.

An empirical literature review conducted by McAllister and Irvin (2000) examined three process-oriented models of racial identity development and cross-

cultural competence. The models include Helm's Model of Racial Identity Development, Bank's Typology of Ethnicity, and Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The purpose of the study was to detail the research surrounding process-oriented models used to structure cross-cultural learning and to understand how these models contribute to our understanding of multicultural professional development for teachers. The findings of the literature review give insight into how the process models can be used to understand how teachers can be more effective with their culturally diverse students. Another finding from the study suggests that for all of the models, individual learner readiness plays a huge role in their development. Individuals in the ethnocentric stage will be more hesitant and less open to growth. On the other hand, individuals in higher ethnorelative stages will be more open to change and willing to take risks. The findings also suggest that sequencing topics in the process framework provided more support for learners noting that an individual's self-awareness of their own culture is a first step in the sequence. The findings of this literature review are significant and relevant to this literature review because they give crucial insight into how individuals understand their own cultural identity and how they grow and develop into culturally competent educators. In the succeeding section, I will discuss the second sub-topic within this section, deficit thinking, and school culture.

Deficit Thinking and School Culture

Deficit-based thinking is a harmful mindset that permeates urban educational settings, influencing how educators perceive, interact with, and support students.

Valencia (2010) describes deficit thinking as the notion that low-income, racial/ethnic

minority students fail in school because they have internal deficits that thwart the learning process. Deficit-based beliefs emphasize students' perceived shortcomings and tend to focus on what students lack rather than recognizing and supporting their strengths and potential. This educational mindset often manifests in the form of biases related to socioeconomic status, language proficiency, race, or other factors to help explain why some students fail in school. Unfortunately, these beliefs have many negative impacts on student achievement and school culture, particularly in urban educational settings. The impact of deficit-based thinking on teacher perceptions shapes educators' views of students which influences their level of expectation and instructional practices. This can result in lower expectations for academic ability, limiting opportunities for students, and perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Valencia's (2010) concept of deficit thinking serves as a framework for examining educators' rationales behind the disproportionate academic struggles faced by Black, Brown, and economically disadvantaged students. Well-intentioned educators often attribute the poor academic outcomes of marginalized students to the students themselves, displaying a lack of confidence in their ability to assist them. Valencia terms this tendency with the "blame the victim" approach, coining it as "deficit thinking." Valencia synthesizes the efforts of scholars who deconstructed deficit thinking, identifying its attributes and illustrating how these features present themselves in the educational settings across different historical periods. Valencia theorizes that educators hold these deficit-oriented views of students that place blame for the student's lack of achievement on the students' "internal deficits"

(2010, p. 6), which may be cognitive, behavioral, motivational, or contextual in nature.

Valencia outlines six key characteristics of deficit thinking:

1. Victim-blaming asserts “person-centered” reasons for school failure; students’ personal characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language of origin) are assumed to be the basis for the student’s poor school performance
2. Oppression Provides evidence that those who are doing the victim-blaming (i.e., educators) will have undue power and authority over those who are blamed (i.e., at-risk students), which can result in an oppressive power hierarchy
3. Pseudoscience Occurs when deficit-oriented views are validated through researchers’ and educators’ inappropriate use of supposedly supporting evidence or data, which have been obtained or interpreted through a presumed deficit-oriented model
4. Temporal Ascribes students’ failure to a set of accumulated deficits that are environmental or cultural in nature and that change depending on the current discourse around inferiority (e.g., genetics, family structure, culture, class)
5. Educability Finds deficits in the ability of students to benefit from interventions; deficits are used to predict inadequate progress and as justification for the prescription of limiting remediation
6. Heterodoxy Challenges the presumed orthodoxy of deficit thinking and its entrenchment in society and education (p. 8-9)

Valencia critiques the social construction of deficit thinking theory by offering alternative explanations for the widespread academic failures observed among students

in American public schools. Additionally, Valencia outlines several proactive measures and anti-deficit thinking recommendations to dismantle the social construct of deficit thinking.

A seminal study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) investigated the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy in teacher mindsets, specifically, how teacher expectations could influence academic performance. Data was collected from students pre and post-assessments of students who were randomly selected were labeled “academic bloomers based on a fabricated test. The results indicated that students who were labeled as academic bloomers showed significantly higher gains than those compared to their peers. This finding supports the notion that teacher’s belief in their student’s capabilities impacted their instructional practices. Additionally, the study highlighted the powerful impact of teacher expectations in shaping student outcomes. The result of these expectations found that teachers provided students with more positive feedback, access to challenging tasks, and encouragement. The impact of this study was long-lasting in that the “bloomers” group continued to outperform their peers two years after the study. Unfortunately, the study also sheds light on the unintended consequences of labeling students because the students who did not receive the label of “academic bloomers” did not receive the same expectations from the teacher and showed lower levels of academic gains between the pre-test and post-test. This study pertains to the areas of deficit mindset because of the unique relationship between teacher mindsets, expectations, and achievement.

A meta-analysis conducted by Jussium and Harber (2005) examined empirical research conducted after Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) exploring six questions

pertaining to teacher expectations including differences in negative and positive teacher expectations, the accumulation of different teacher's effects over time, and the level of influence or impact from teacher expectations. The findings found that teacher's self-fulfilling prophecies in the classrooms happen, however, the effects are typically small with only a few studies reporting strong effects. Additionally, they do not accumulate over time between teachers. There were also some mixed findings on whether the teacher's self-fulfilling prophecies affect student outcomes. The findings of this meta-analysis illustrate how teacher expectations are a complicated and nuanced area of research. The study also highlights the importance of the contextual factors involved in each study and the need for more research in this area.

A qualitative study conducted by Kennedy and Soutullo (2018) examined the role of deficit thinking in shaping educational experiences for adolescent students. Data was gathered through 51 interviews with 29 educators and 9 students from one school district in the Southeast. The results indicated that all participants used deficit thinking when explaining students' difficulties in school. The findings showed that when participants explained the reasons for students' lack of success, they ascribed causes to both individual students and factors related to the school and society, aligning with Valencia's (2010) framework. The barriers to success attributed to individuals encompassed personal choices, dispositions, and negative influences from students' families and communities. Unfortunately, instead of trying to eliminate these barriers, the participants all viewed them as beyond their control to change.

Ladson-Billings' (2007) essay critiques misconceptions revolving around the "achievement gap" and discusses how it perpetuates deficit mindsets and language in

education. In this piece, Ladson-Billings challenges and critiques the discourse surrounding education, specifically focusing on what she terms the "language of deficit." The "language of deficit" refers to how educational discourse and narratives frame the challenges faced by marginalized students in terms of what they lack or their perceived deficits. Ladson-Billings states "Unfortunately, although the specific language of the cultural deficit is no longer used, the thinking behind such language continues to linger" (p 318). The deficit language involved in the discussion around the achievement gap perpetuates stereotypes and inequalities Ladson-Billings advocates for a shift in language and perspective, urging educators and policymakers to move beyond deficit-oriented frameworks. Instead, she encourages language that depicts "educational debt" stating "When we speak of an education debt we move to a discourse that holds us all accountable" (p. 321). This essay is significant to this literature review because it highlights the critical role that deficit mindsets and language play in understanding critical issues surrounding education. Additionally, the author offers readers a paradigm shifts to reframe educational discourse surrounding these topics.

A mixed methods study conducted by Endo (2015) examined the unconscious deficit views of White preservice teachers in the area of linguicism. Criterion sampling was used to identify 67 preservice teachers from the Midwest taking a diversity course. Data was collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, work samples from instructor-generated journal reflections, and demographic surveys. The primary aim of this study was to understand how the deficit mindsets of teachers change in regard to linguicism in school contexts. Linguicism is defined as "conscious or

unconscious biases directed toward speakers whose primary dialects or language are not aligned with Common American English. Nieto's (2006) model of multicultural support was used to assess the development of preservice teachers in the areas of deficit-based thinking. The findings found that all preservice teachers ranked themselves very low in terms of their understanding of language diversity. Additionally, the study found that all students were able to move at least one level within the framework. The authors also include several activities used in the course to better understand the racialized underpinning of linguicism. This study is significant to the literature review because it provides a critical insight into a framework that helps dismantle deficit views towards language diversity while building critical reflections and self-awareness among educators. The following section will discuss the last sub-topic within this section, building a positive school culture.

Building a Positive School Culture

In the current landscape of urban education, the role of school culture emerges as a pivotal force that significantly shapes the experiences and outcomes of students. Although difficult to define, school culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, traditions, and social dynamics within an educational institution. School cultures create a distinct environment that either improves or hinders student outcomes. The diversity within urban schools highlights the critical importance of cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture for all students and staff. To holistically understand adolescent student's perception of student belonging it is vital to understand how adolescent students experience and understand a positive school culture. In many ways, a positive school culture acts as a cornerstone for building a sense of community, belonging, and

shared purpose among students and staff. It contributes to an environment where students feel safe, supported, valued, and motivated to excel both academically but also in their personal and social development. Unfortunately, a negative school culture can hinder students' sense of connection, impede their motivation, and even contribute to issues such as bullying or disengagement. Understanding the profound influence of school culture underscores the responsibility of educators, administrators, and policymakers to intentionally shape environments that foster inclusivity, and equity, and allow all students and staff members to thrive. The following section provides a holistic overview of relevant empirical studies surrounding the topic of building a positive school culture.

The book *Shaping school culture: the heart of leadership* (Deal and Peterson, 1998) is widely viewed as a seminal work in the areas of school leadership and school culture. The core idea of the book revolves around the critical role that school leaders play in shaping and guiding the culture of their school. The authors argue that school culture is a central theme of effective leadership and a critical component of creating change and improvement in schools. The book offers case studies to illustrate practical leadership strategies for understanding, assessing, and influencing school culture. Additionally, the book gives insight into how school leaders can leverage the existing culture to create a more positive culture and how they can disrupt a toxic school culture by fostering a sense of shared values, beliefs, and purpose. The text is significant to this literature review because its legacy has contributed to our overall understanding of school culture. Although the book was first published 24 years ago, it remains incredibly relevant to current researchers and practitioners.

A longitudinal natural experimental study conducted by Wong et al., (2020) between 2013 to 2018 examined the relationship between school culture and adolescent social and emotional health. Data was collected annually using online surveys to measure 1,114 student's perceptions of school culture and various aspects related to their own social and emotional health including grit, self-efficacy, depression, hopelessness, and stress levels. The results found that an authoritative disciplinary style characterized by high levels of support, structure, order, and safety was most linked to all of the measured social-emotional health outcomes. Additionally, school cultures with higher levels of teacher relationships characterized by respect were also associated with higher levels of self-efficacy and lower levels of hopelessness and stress. The findings are significant because they indicate that specific aspects of school climate (disciplinary style and relationships with teachers) could be targeted to support adolescent social-emotional health. The authors of the study note the observational design of the study limited its ability to determine if the relationship between school culture and social-emotional outcomes was causal.

A qualitative phenomenological study conducted by Voight et al., (2023) aimed to explore middle and high school students' understanding of their lived experiences of school climate and their explanation of the association between different school climate components and their educational achievement. Purposeful sampling was used to identify 18 middle school and high school students from a Midwest urban school district. Data was collected from the students through a series of 8 focus groups using a semi-structured interview protocol. The findings suggest that students categorize a positive school culture into four themes including, teacher support, teacher

expectations, safety, and peer social and emotional competence. The subthemes consisted of helping disposition, encouraging perseverance, making instruction relevant, caring beyond the classroom, keeping students motivated and engaged, experiences with bullying, responses to classroom disruptions, and respect for diversity. The findings also found that students found a strong connection between positive school culture and student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. The findings also suggest that students can articulate specific interventions and actions that can positively and negatively impact their school culture. This study is significant because the findings give insight into our understanding of school climate in urban contexts through the eyes of the students who experience it.

A 2016 quantitative study conducted by Benbenishty et al., (2016) aimed to test the causal links between school culture, school violence, and school academic perseverance. Data was collected through three waves of data, representing six academic school years surveying 1,862 middle schools and 1,310 high schools in their 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th grades from public schools throughout California. Data was collected through the California Healthy Kids Survey and the school-level achievement data from the California Department of Education. The findings suggest that positive school culture paired with low levels of victimization were consistently associated with high levels of school academic performance. The results also suggest that enhancing a school's academic performance overall is the key contributing factor in diminishing violence and improving the overall climate of the school. On the contrary, the study found no evidence to suggest that improving school culture or reducing school violence would lead to improved academic performance over time. This study is significant

because it highlights the importance of a school's academic climate and instructional practices as a way to mitigate school safety issues and ultimately improve school climates.

A 2010 quantitative study conducted by Schneider and Duran (2010) explored how school culture was understood examining how school culture perceptions were experienced and understood based on grade, gender, race/ethnicity. Data was collected from 2,500 randomly sampled middle school students from across the nation. The findings suggest that student perceptions of school climate are directly linked to students' ethnic background, gender, and age. These research findings are significant to this study because they highlight the critical role that race/ethnicity plays as a predictor in explaining and understanding student perceptions of school climate. The results underscore the significance of school leaders and researchers cultivating a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a positive school climate, specifically tailored to the experiences of students identifying with specific races, ethnicities, or cultures. Such insights are essential for the enhancement of school climate in different contexts.

A meta-analysis conducted by Cohen, and Pickeral, (2005) examined the known empirical research on school culture. The analysis included 206 studies including experimental studies, correlational studies, literature reviews, and qualitative studies. The analysis focused on five key areas of school culture including safety, relationships, teaching and learning, school climate, and the school improvement process. The first major finding was that positive school culture was shown to be associated with students' mental and physical health. Additionally, the authors noted

the importance of school safety, effective and fair school discipline, positive peer and teacher relationships, and a focus on teaching and learning as a part of a positive school culture. This meta-analysis is noteworthy because it demonstrates how school culture touches on so many aspects of a school. It also shows the critical connections between teacher-student relationships, school leadership, and student belonging.

A 2020 mixed-method case study conducted by Morries et al., (2020) examined the role of leadership in establishing a positive staff culture in an urban secondary public school. Data was collected using the School Organizational Health Questionnaire, field notes from observations, and focus groups between 2015-2017. Important to note is the study took place during a transition in school principals. The following themes identified during the analysis included appraisal and recognition, curriculum coordination, goal congruence, participating decision-making, professional growth, and supportive leadership. These themes were found to have the highest effect size on contributing to the development of staff morale and the school climate. The findings indicate that the interventions made by the new principal had a significant impact on the school culture. This study highlights the importance of the role of school principals and the leadership style they use to impact school cultures.

In summary, within our current understanding of school culture, there is a recognition of the intricate interplay between the personal cultures of individuals and the collective culture of the school. Each individual brings their distinctive background, experiences, and values, contributing collectively to shape the intricate fabric that defines the school culture. This dynamic interaction permeates all aspects of student and staff experiences with teaching and learning. However, navigating this interplay

can present challenges, especially when deficit-thinking mindsets and actions come into play. Deficit thinking, originating from negative assumptions about students based on their cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, is detrimental to school cultures, perpetuates stereotypes, lowers expectations, and adversely impacts various student outcomes. Recognizing and eliminating deficit thinking is imperative for cultivating a positive school culture that champions diversity, equity, and inclusion for all.

Developing a positive school culture, in many ways, forms the foundation for fostering meaningful teacher-student relationships and instilling a sense of belonging among students. When students feel valued, respected, and included in the school community, they are more likely to experience positive academic, health, and well-being outcomes. The pursuit of a positive school culture transcends being merely an educational necessity; it represents a moral and ethical commitment to providing all students with an environment conducive to their personal growth, development, and success.

Over the last 40 years, student populations in the United States have become dramatically more diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). According to the most recent data this trend appears to be continuing especially in terms of students identifying as Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Given the previously stated statistics on teacher attrition, retention, and recruitment future research is needed to understand how new teachers in diverse classrooms impact school culture. Additionally, research is needed to better understand how various teacher preparation programs address deficit-based thinking. Last, additional research should be conducted to understand how contextual factors impact school culture interventions.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership plays an important role within the expansive field of educational leadership, offering a philosophy and framework that at its core, embodies a visionary approach that seeks to inspire and empower stakeholders towards shared goals. Transformational leadership goes beyond the administration of personnel in schools it encompasses a profound commitment to shaping school culture through empowerment, motivation, and meaningful engagement. While conducting this literature review, I aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the key terminology and definitions associated with transformational learning. Additionally, the goal is to understand how transformational leadership fits within a broader field of school leadership. Lastly, the purpose of this literature review was to make connections between transformational leadership and school culture, teacher-student relationships, and adolescent development in relation to student's sense of belonging within a school setting. The subtopics of transformational leadership will consist of the history of the development of transformational leadership, the impact of transformational leadership, and transformational leadership's connections with school culture. Transformational leadership was chosen as a theoretical topic because of its connections with the phenomena under study and its relationship with the three previous theoretical perspectives that make up my theoretical framework. Moreover, by exploring the intersection of transformational leadership and adolescents' experiences with school belonging, this literature review can illuminate the mechanisms through which leadership practices influence students' sense of belonging and how students perceive these leadership practices.

Transformational leadership is defined by Shatzer et., al. (2014) through the following characteristics: “Identify and articulate a school vision, b) motivate others through example, c) support a culture of intellectual stimulation, and d) provide support and development to individual staff members.” (p. 447). Transformational leadership fits into the theoretical framework because of its unique relationship with building school cultures that support student-teacher relationships within the context of adolescent development. The person-centered motivation combined with the focus on relationships naturally lends itself to creating a culture where teachers and students experience belonging in the workplace and the classroom. Next, I will discuss the history of the development of transformational leadership.

History of the Development of Transformational Leadership

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a foundational shift in leadership theories from transactional to transformative. Transactional leadership focuses on managers setting clear expectations and providing rewards or consequences based on the achievement of those expectations. Transactional leadership theories emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century and were influenced by early management and organizational theories. This style of leadership is often associated with Taylor's (1911) scientific management principles, which emphasized task completion through rewards and punishments. Whereas transformational leadership is characterized by leaders who inspire employees through promoting personal growth, fostering a shared vision, and working collaboratively to create a positive work culture.

The Hawthorne Studies (Mayo, 1933) diverged from this line of thinking developed by Taylor (1911) by highlighting the significance of social factors and the

impact of management's attitude on worker conditions. From these studies, (Mayo, 1933) first developed the philosophy for transformational leadership. The Hawthorne Studies were a series of workplace experiments conducted between 1924 and 1932 at the Western Electric Hawthorne Works in Chicago. The primary purpose of the Hawthorne Studies was to investigate the effects of different workplace conditions on employee productivity and morale. The primary purpose of the Hawthorne Studies was to investigate the effects of different workplace conditions on employee productivity and morale. The studies attempted to answer several research questions related to the role of the supervisor in improving employee productivity. The studies used a combination of field experiments and case studies which included interviews and observations. The results indicated that productivity and morale increased when workers felt valued and appreciated. The results also highlighted the crucial role of a healthy work environment based on positive interactions between employees and their supervisors, as well as their co-workers. These studies challenged the purely transactional approach to leadership, shifting the focus toward understanding human needs, motivations, and the importance of supportive management and relationships.

Bennis' (1959) seminal work on leadership theory expanded on Mayo's (1933) concepts of transactional and transformational leadership practices. Bennis emphasized the importance of aligning individual efforts to organizational goals. Additionally, Bennis cautioned against more punitive punishment approaches to leadership while advocating for leadership actions that support employees' efforts to meet the collective organizational goals. Bennis (1959) and Mayo (1933) laid the foundations for future

leadership theories including transformational leadership theory described by Burns (1978).

Burns (1978) first introduced the concept of transformational leadership in his book *Leadership*. This seminal work further contrasts the theory and practice of transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Although the basis of Burn's research surrounded political leaders, his beliefs on transformational leadership would go on to impact leaders in a variety of industries, including education. Despite the fact that Burns used the term transforming leadership as opposed to transformational leadership, the central tenets of his work continue to influence what we know as transformational leadership. Burns describes transforming leadership as leaders who motivate their followers to achieve great outcomes by focusing on their individual and collective needs and values. These leaders prioritize empowering and nurturing their followers by developing a shared vision and sense of purpose. Burns argued that transformational leadership contrasts with transactional interactions by emphasizing the role of moral and ethical leadership in transformational leadership. Although not based on any specific empirical studies, Burns presents his arguments based on an extensive literature review and historical analysis of leaders from various industries and disciplines. Burns argued that transformational leadership was essential for promoting innovation and organizational change. Burns's work surrounding transformational leadership has had a profound impact on both leadership theory and practice. It has influenced subsequent research on leadership, management, and organizational behavior. Burn's work also laid the foundation for understanding the

moral and ethical aspects of leadership by focusing on inspiring employees or followers to achieve the organizational collective goals.

Bass (1985) further developed the theory of transformational leadership and the work of Burns (1978) by incorporating a tool for measuring leadership behaviors called the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. From the tool, Bass (1985) identified four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Bass defines these key terms in the field of transformational leadership:

Idealized Influence (II): The charismatic and exemplary behavior of transformational leaders that inspires trust and admiration among their followers. Leaders with idealized influence serve as positive role models and gain the respect and loyalty of their team members. **Inspirational Motivation (IM):** The ability of transformational leaders to inspire and motivate their followers towards a shared vision and common goals. Through effective communication and storytelling, these leaders ignite passion and enthusiasm in their teams, encouraging them to work tirelessly to achieve the desired outcomes. **Intellectual Stimulation (IS):** Transformational leaders stimulate creativity and critical thinking among their followers. By encouraging open dialogue, questioning assumptions, and fostering an environment of curiosity, they promote innovative problem-solving and continuous learning. **Individualized Consideration (IC):** Personalized attention and support provided by transformational leaders to individual team members. Addressing the unique

needs, strengths, and development areas of each follower, fostering a sense of belonging and commitment (p. 46)

This framework provided a more comprehensive understanding of transformational leadership that could be grounded in empirical research. Bass and Avolio would go on to conduct extensive research to validate the effectiveness of transformational leadership behaviors identified in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire in different organizational contexts (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1997; Bass & Avolio, 1993). Although the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire has been revised several times, the central ideas behind the survey continue to be used in research measuring transformational leadership.

Bass and Avolio (1993) expanded on these ideas to develop a leadership model that includes leadership styles: transactional, transformational, or laissez-faire leadership. It recognized that leaders may exhibit different actions based on the context of the situation.

Bass and Avolio contended that the transactional aspects address the fundamental needs of the organization, while the transformative methods cultivate dedication and facilitate change. Despite Bass's assertion that transformational and transactional leadership lie at opposite poles of the leadership spectrum, he asserts that the two can complement each other. Bass and Avolio (1993) state “Transactional leaders work within their organizational cultures following existing rules, procedures, and norms; transformational leaders change their culture first understanding it and then realigning the organization's culture with a new vision” (p.112). This marked a significant change in transformational leadership theory as it focused on organizational change. Although

the majority of the research conducted by Bass and Avolio was based in the military and different business sectors, their findings have had a tremendous impact on educational leadership theory. Specifically focusing on the ideas of continual change was viewed as impactful to transformational leadership in educational settings as it lent itself to school reform movements. Furthermore, Bass (1998) asserted the need for leaders to enact a “Full Range of Leadership Model” (p. 7). This leadership model was based on the notion that the best leaders would utilize transformational leadership qualities more frequently and transactional leadership qualities less frequently.

Burns (2003) would continue to build on his previous work and the work of Bass and Avolio (1993) by viewing transformational leadership as an agent of change within an organization to also include societal changes. Burns (2003) argues the moral and ethical dimensions of transformational leadership can be used to unite followers in shared values to create a more just and equitable society. Additionally, Burns contends that transactional leaders can learn to become transformational leaders through development. This argument comes from extensive research on leadership development from historical leaders. Throughout the 2000s, transformational leadership evolved to include a strong focus on instructional leadership. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on transformational leadership for equity and social justice in education. Researchers and practitioners continue to explore how transformative leaders can address disparities in educational opportunities, advocate for marginalized students, and create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. Today, transformational leadership can be found in various organizational settings, including

business, education, healthcare, and government. Transformational leadership continues to evolve with the ever-changing educational landscape.

In summary, this subtopic has explored the history of the development of transformational leadership including the historical context it was born and its evolution throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The groundbreaking work of Burns, Bass, and Avolio has provided the foundation of our current understanding of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership, originally focused on aspects of business and military leadership, has become widely adopted in educational settings. Looking to the future, transformational leadership continues to evolve in response to the organizational changes of the last 20 years. In the next subtopic, I will discuss the impact of transformational leadership in a school setting.

Impact of Transformational Leadership on Schools

Effective school leadership is a critical component of fostering a learning environment that nurtures the growth and development of students and teachers (Leithwood & Jantzi 2005). Over the years, transformational leadership has emerged as a prominent leadership style in educational settings, offering a visionary approach that inspires and empowers stakeholders toward mutually shared goals. This leadership style has been extensively studied and practiced, continually evolving to meet the ever-changing educational landscape. Transformational leadership's influence extends beyond administrative tasks or communication styles to shaping the lived experiences of students and teachers, ultimately impacting their sense of belonging within the school community. This section will synthesize the multifaceted findings of the

empirical literature reviewed focusing on the impact of transformational learning in schools.

Sun and Leithwood (2012) conducted a literature review of transformational leadership's effects on student achievement. The review was comprised of 32 empirical studies published between 1996 and 2005. The empirical study participants consisted of students, teachers, and principals from a variety of educational settings. Although the literature review found some mixed results the overall findings found significant indirect effects of transformational leadership on student achievement and engagement in school. These indirect effects were mediated by factors such as school culture, teachers' commitment, and job satisfaction. The researchers note that the majority of the studies found significant relationships between transformational leadership and measures of student achievement. This literature review showcases the scope of evidence supporting the importance of this leadership style in educational settings and its impact on student achievement. This review also illustrates the many different ways transformational leadership has been defined and studied and that the results are sometimes mixed.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) conducted a longitudinal study aimed to investigate the effects on classroom practices and student outcomes of transformational school leadership. The study tested how transformational leadership impacted teachers' motivation, their classroom practices, and student achievement. Data was collected over four years from 2,290 teachers from 655 primary schools in England. Math and literacy student outcomes were also collected from each school. Path analytic methods were employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed substantial impacts of

transformational leadership on teachers' instructional practices. However, the findings suggest low to no effects were observed on student academic performance. This study further highlights that findings of empirical studies on transformational learning are heterogeneous and often there is variability within the results.

Harrison (2011) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the effects of teacher transformational behaviors on various student outcomes in a virtual education setting. The researchers aimed to examine how these leadership behaviors influence cognitive learning, affective learning, student perceptions of teacher credibility, and communication perceptions. The study utilized a correlational research design, with data collected through surveys administered to graduate students enrolled in online leadership programs at Gonzaga University and Regent University. Convenience sampling was utilized to identify 112 students. A variety of instruments were used to collect data including Bass and Avolio's (1995) Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to measure student perceptions of transformational and transactional leadership. Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the specified variables. The results indicated that teacher transformational leadership behaviors were significant predictors of cognitive learning, affective learning, perceptions of teacher credibility, and communication satisfaction compared to other leadership behaviors. The findings suggest that transformational leadership has a significant impact on student outcomes in distance education settings. This study is significant when you consider that enrollment in virtual schools among public school students in the United States has seen a significant rise in recent years (Molnar et al., 2023).

Shatzer et al., (2014) conducted a quantitative study to compare the effects of instructional leadership and transformational leadership on student achievement. The specific research question the study aimed to answer was: How do instructional leadership and transformational leadership impact student achievement in schools? 590 teachers from 37 elementary schools from across the United States using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Transformational Leadership) and the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (Instructional Leadership). The findings suggest that both leadership styles were positively correlated with higher student achievement scores. Contrary to transformational leadership, instructional leadership accounted for a greater proportion of the variation in student achievement. This study showcases the unique relationship between instructional leadership and transformational leadership and how they have the potential to complement each other in different contexts.

(Kwan, 2020) conducted a quantitative study examining how instructional leadership and transformational leadership complement or contradict each other. The research aimed to examine the moderating effect of transformational leadership on the impact of instructional leadership on student outcomes. Assistant principals from 177 schools were surveyed and various data points were collected on each school. The study's findings suggest that the positive effects of instructional leadership are contingent on the level of transformational leadership also being used by the school's leadership. This study further supports the findings of Shatzer et al., (2014) in highlighting a mutually beneficial relationship between instructional leadership and transformational leadership.

A quantitative study conducted by Gong et al., (2013) explored how school principal's transformational leadership impacted job burnout among special education teachers. 256 special education teachers completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory and assessed their supervisors using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. Results reveal a negative correlation between transformational leadership and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and a positive correlation with personal accomplishment. Furthermore, the study suggests that the relationship between transformational leadership and burnout is mediated by the supervisor helping the teachers develop a sense of calling. This implies that transformational leadership indirectly influences burnout by instilling a sense of calling in followers, or by helping them derive meaning and purpose through transformational leadership behaviors. This study is significant because it highlights the power of transformational leadership to impact teachers' mental health and retention. This is of critical importance given the staggering levels of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression among educators (Agyapong et al., 2022).

The findings of Gong et al., (2013) also support research conducted by Griffith (2004) who examined the direct and indirect effects of principal transformational leadership on school staff turnover and school performance. Survey data was collected from 117 elementary school staff and students from large metropolitan cities, and school-aggregated student achievement test scores were obtained from school archives. The results indicated that principal behaviors aligned with the three components of transformational leadership as defined by Bass (2003): inspiration or charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation were not associated with

either school staff turnover. The results also indicated higher levels of principal transformational leadership were linked to lower staff turnover and improved student achievement progress through enhanced staff job satisfaction. Additionally, schools with higher levels of principal transformational leadership showed a more significant reduction in achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students. These findings underscore the importance of transformational leadership in fostering staff well-being and retention.

In summary, the critical analysis of the research surrounding transformational leadership offers different perspectives on the impact of transformational leadership practices in school settings. The different perspectives offer both supportive strong evidence and inconsistent or contradictory findings. The review also shows the important relationships between transformational leadership and student perceptions, engagement, achievement, teacher perceptions, productivity, improvement and burnout, and lastly, school culture. Future research surrounding the impacts of transformational learning on schools should focus on two key areas. First, future research should focus on the impact of transformational leadership on staff well-being and staff retention. As previously noted, given the statistics regarding teachers entering and leaving the profession, this is of critical importance. Second, future research should focus on the impact of transformational leadership on the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives play a critical role in creating a school culture that promotes student belonging. Research in this area can help school leaders want to promote social justice, address educational

disparities, and promote inclusion for students and staff. The next subtopic will further dive into the relationship between transformational leadership and school culture.

Transformational Leadership and School Culture

School culture serves as the foundation of schools, shaping the environment in which students and teachers learn, teach, and interact with each other. School culture encompasses the shared norms, beliefs, values, and practices that define a school community's identity and shape its story. Understanding and cultivating school culture is vital for fostering a positive and safe learning and working environment where students and teachers can thrive. Transformational leadership, with its emphasis on vision, empowerment, and collaboration, plays a critical role in creating and sustaining a positive school culture. School leaders who utilize transformational leadership qualities inspire and motivate stakeholders to work toward shared goals, fostering a sense of belonging and commitment among students and teachers. A strong school culture, supported and led by transformational leadership, cultivates an inclusive and supportive school community where everyone feels included, accepted, and respected. This subtopic will further synthesize the empirical literature surrounding transformational leadership and school culture.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) conducted a qualitative research study exploring how school cultures develop and how school administrators can facilitate the process. The specific research questions were: the extent to which the schools had achieved collaborative cultures and reasons for variation in degrees to which that had been achieved. Second, what are the strategies used by school administrators to develop more collaborative school cultures? Teachers and administrators from 12 Ontario

schools were interviewed over a two-day period. The results suggest that developing a collaborative school culture can be achieved in a short period of time when school leaders used strategies associated with transformational leadership. This study highlights the connections between transformational leadership practices with both school culture and school change theory.

Engels et al., (2008) conducted a mixed-method study investigating the characteristics of principals who effectively shape school culture to promote teaching and learning. Data was collected from a representative sample of 46 primary schools and 700 teachers and principals. The data was gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The study examined various factors, including the functioning, well-being, and personal traits of the principal, as well as structural and cultural aspects of the school. The findings suggest that principals in schools fostering a culture supportive of professional development were found to possess transformational leadership qualities. This study highlights the importance of the teacher's perceptions of their principals and the critical role principals play in shaping the school culture. The study also provides additional insights into how principals can utilize transformational leadership skills to promote a healthy school culture focusing on change and improvement.

A quantitative study conducted by Moolenaar et al., (2010) investigated the relationship between principals' positions in their schools' social networks, transformational leadership, and schools' innovative culture. The research was conducted in 51 elementary schools within a large educational system in the Netherlands consisting of 702 teachers and 51 principals. The purpose of the study was

to address the gap in research regarding the link between transformational leadership and stimulating innovation. The researchers utilized the social network analysis and multilevel analysis, the researchers analyzed quantitative questionnaire data, including social network questions and Likert-type scales for transformational leadership and innovative climate. The results indicated a positive association between transformational leadership and schools' innovative culture. Furthermore, work-related closeness between the school principal and teachers was identified as a key indicator of transformational leadership and innovative culture. These findings support the findings of Engels et al., (2008) highlighting the connections between transformational leadership styles with change and improvement.

Minckler (2014) conducted a quantitative study to explore the relationship between school leadership and the development of teacher social capital. The first research question was what role does transformational leadership perform in the development of a system of teacher social capital? The second research question was does transformational leadership contribute to school performance? Convenience sampling was used to survey 465 teachers from 14 middle schools in Louisiana. The findings indicated a significant correlation between transformational leadership practices and environmental conditionals for growing teacher social capital. In the context of this study, social capital refers to the professional support and collaboration between teachers as well as their social and emotional well-being. The research also highlighted that school leaders play a crucial role in developing the structures and culture needed for teachers to work effectively together and support teacher well-being.

Allen et al., (2015) conducted a quantitative study examining the relationship between transformational leadership and school culture. Data was collected through surveys from elementary school principals and teachers in a small suburban school district in southeast Texas. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) assessed the degree of transformational leadership displayed by principals, as perceived by teachers and self-assessed by principals. Additionally, the School Climate Inventory-Revised (SCI-R) survey measured teacher perceptions of the school's culture. The results indicated a positive association between transformational leadership practices and positive school culture. However, highlights the complexity of transformational leadership because only two out of 25 correlations between principals' self-assessment of transformational leadership and teachers' perceptions were statistically significant. This finding would indicate that there is confusion about what transformational leadership is or a significant disparity between teacher's and principal's perceptions of transformational leadership practices. This study further showcases the disparities in understanding what transformational leadership is.

McCarley et al., (2016) conducted a qualitative research project aimed at understanding the relationship between school culture and the school principal's leadership style. The researchers surveyed 399 teachers from large urban school districts in southeast Texas using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire to measure their principal's ability to utilize transformational leadership skills and the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire to measure school climate and culture. The results indicated a strong relationship between principals who used a transformational leadership style with a positive supportive school culture with

engaged employees. In contrast, school administrators who failed to use transformational leadership were more likely to have a negative school culture and frustrated teacher behaviors. This study illustrates a clear connection between leadership style, teacher perceptions, and school culture.

The findings of McCarley et al., (2016) were supported by Atasoy, (2020) who conducted a quantitative study exploring the relationship between school principals' leadership styles and school culture and organizational change. The study aimed to determine the mediation effects of school culture on the relationship between leadership styles and teachers' perceptions of their school culture and organizational change. 382 teachers were randomly selected to participate in surveys measuring their school principals' leadership styles, school culture, and organizational change management. The findings indicated transformational leadership characteristics were associated with teachers' perceptions of feeling supported, having a positive school culture, and reducing negative behaviors of teachers regarding organizational change. Also noted in the findings was the strong connection between strengthening relationships with teachers with school culture. This study is significant because it highlights the unique role that relationships play in school culture which parallels the role of teacher-student relationships and school belonging.

In summary, this subtopics literature review has showcased the different ways school culture and transformational leadership are understood and measured. Although the empirical literature offered several different perspectives on the topic of transformational leadership through the lens of school culture, no studies could be found that had weak or mixed findings between the two. An additional theme that arose

from this subtopics literature review was the unique connection between school change and transformational leadership. This is of critical importance for schools that are continually striving to improve aspects of school culture and ultimately impacting a student's feelings of belonging. Future research surrounding the impacts of transformational leadership and school culture should continue to focus on areas of organizational change and improvement and leadership development.

Summary

In this chapter, I again reviewed the purpose of the research project introduced in Chapter 1. I discussed each topic and subtopic area, including a rationale for their inclusion, as well as a cohesive review of each topic and subtopic. I situated each topic into the broader field of past knowledge and aligned each with the current field. I highlighted key terminologies and theories. Lastly, I synthesized the literature with a focus on multiple perspectives through a critical analysis of empirical studies. I began with an introduction to the historical evolution of adolescent development. I explored the importance of belonging and connection to this unique identity-forming time period in human development. Then, I examined the teacher-student relationship theory, investigating these crucial relationships through the lens of attachment theory to understand the critical role of teachers in student belonging. Additionally, I examined school culture, inspecting the relationship between school culture and teacher-student relationships, focusing on trust, respect, communication, and inclusivity. Lastly, I studied transformational leadership theory and its ability to promote healthy school cultures and foster positive teacher-student relationships, focusing on how this

leadership theory was well-suited to positively impact student belonging. In chapter 3 I will provide an in-depth description of the methodology used in this research project.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As previously stated in Chapter 1 the problem is many students do not feel like they belong at school. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) reported one-third of American students experience a lack of belonging at their schools. A more recent Qualtrics study (2022) reported similar findings. Studies have shown a strong relationship between student belonging and student health and educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2016). Additionally, for adolescents, school belonging has also been shown to be the largest indicator to determine if a student will experience depression (Parr et al., 2020). Furthermore, low levels of student belonging have a direct relationship to early substance use and poor school attendance (Demantet & Van Houtte 2012). Furthermore, a review of educational research on school belonging found that students who feel a sense of belonging to their school community are more likely to be engaged in school, have positive attitudes toward learning, and achieve academic success (Osterman, 2000). These studies and reports strongly suggest that many students do not feel a sense of belonging which has been shown to be crucial for adolescent students' academic, psychological, and behavioral functioning.

As previously stated, the purpose of this single instrumental heuristic case study was to understand perspectives of school belongingness for students at a Midwestern urban middle school. The units of analysis are the perspectives of middle school-aged students' sense of belonging. The study sought to answer the following central and sub-questions related to the purpose of the study. The first central question and sub-questions include: How do adolescent students experience school belonging?

- a) How do adolescent students define school belonging?
- b) What do adolescent students say about a sense of belonging in their classrooms?

Secondly, I want to know how adolescent students experience interventions implemented by the school related to school belonging?

- c) What interventions do adolescent students identify as important to a sense of belonging?
- d) What do they have to say about a sense of belonging in their school's culture?

Although there has been significant research conducted detailing the positive and negative general health, well-being, and educational outcomes associated with school belonging, there is a notable gap in the knowledge base of students' perceptions of school belongingness and the actions taken by schools. This study's findings have the potential to give teachers, school leaders, educational researchers, and policymakers a crucial understanding of students' experiences of school belonging which, in turn, could improve practices, shape policy, and lead to better student outcomes

In addition to this brief introduction, this chapter will include a thorough description of the methodology. First, the chapter will articulate the rationale for the use of qualitative inquiry, including the integration of the major approach of case study followed by the design element of heuristic. Next, I will describe my role as the researcher as an instrument and address the design elements of the study including setting, participants, and sampling techniques. This section will also include the data

sources, their descriptions, the protocols for how they were collected, data analysis, and management. I will close the chapter with attention to the limitations of the study, checks for validity and reliability, and ethical considerations for working with human subjects.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an approach to exploring complex social phenomena and can provide rich, in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Different from quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, and convergent reasoning, qualitative research is concerned with the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Simply put, qualitative research's exploratory methods seek to explain 'how' and 'why' as opposed to comparative or causality-based research questions. This study aimed to make sense of the phenomena of school belonging in terms of the students who experience it. The aim of this study aligned with the qualitative research approach. The study used the strengths of qualitative research by using flexible and adaptive methods to collect and analyze multiple data points through interviews, documents, and survey data in the natural setting of a school to make sense of the phenomena of school belonging.

One of the key strengths of qualitative research utilized in this study was its ability to capture the complexity and nuance of human experience and social phenomena. By using a variety of data collection methods, researchers can gather detailed information about participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Patton, 2015). This allows for a more holistic research approach, which can help to capture the

full range of experiences and perspectives related to a phenomenon. This approach helps researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to a particular phenomenon and can provide insights into how individuals make sense of their experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Another unique strength of qualitative research is that it allows researchers to study participants in their natural setting. Natural settings provide an opportunity to explore social phenomena as they occur in real time. By studying behavior as it unfolds in natural settings, researchers can capture the nuances and subtleties of human behavior that might be missed in more controlled settings (Patton, 2015). Natural settings allow for a more authentic understanding of social phenomena. By studying behavior in real-world settings, researchers can observe the complex interactions between individuals and their environment and can better understand how social phenomena are shaped by contextual factors (Creswell, 2014). The natural setting for this study was the school and classrooms the students attend.

An additional key strength of qualitative research this study will utilize is the flexible and adaptable data collection and analysis methods. Qualitative research can be adapted to account methods and analytical techniques to capture different aspects of the phenomenon and can adjust their methods as they uncover new information (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research allows for a research design that can be customized to suit the specific needs and goals of the research project. The researcher can adapt the research questions, data collection methods, and analysis techniques based on the research context, the available resources, and the participants' preferences. I believe

being able to tailor the study to fit the unique needs of my research questions and the context of the case study yielded the most authentic and useful data and findings.

Based on the aims of the research question, the nature of the phenomena under study became clear to me that qualitative research would be a clear fit. Additionally, the strengths of qualitative research naturally lend themselves to this research topic and questions. The research questions are centered on “how” and “why” types of questions. Additionally, the holistic approach will help to make sense of the social phenomena. The study of natural settings will add to this holistic approach because it will allow for a more authentic understanding of social phenomena. Lastly, the flexibility of qualitative research will benefit this study by being able to customize the methods and analysis to fit the context of the case.

Qualitative research has proven to me to be an extremely expansive and complex form of research. To help guide me through this process I used the five central features of qualitative research as defined by Yin (2018):

- Studying the meaning of people’s lives, under real-world conditions;
- Representing the views and perspectives of the people (participants) in a study;
- Covering the contextual conditions within which people live;
- Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior; and
- Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone. (pp. 7-8)

The features outlined by Yin (2018) served as a checklist to understand student perceptions and experiences of school belonging. Particularly, focusing on the real-world conditions and representing the views and perspectives of the adolescents. So much of educational research is based on various data points revolving around student outcomes, instead of listening to the voices of students regarding the school's cultures. The purpose of this study is to represent the true views of students from a single case study.

This definition and the features outlined by Yin (2018) drive my pragmatic goal of the study. Specifically, to illuminate the voices of the participants, to be reflexive, and to develop a clear description and interpretation of the phenomena being studied. Clarity is enhanced through careful descriptions of the design elements of "theoretical traditions [that] provide the guiding principles and philosophical underpinnings for qualitative research, helping to frame research questions, interpret findings, and develop new theories" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 64). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) concur that theoretical traditions help the researcher frame the research with attention to assumptions and propositions that undergird the researcher's thinking. Throughout the study, I was mindful of my assumptions and beliefs that have the potential to overshadow students' voices regarding a sense of belonging. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) add the power of theoretical traditions to make meaning of social phenomena that will lead to data analysis for reporting on findings. For this study, a case study was used both as a major design element and method for understanding the social phenomena of school belonging through my experiences as a heuristic researcher.

Case Study

The origins of the case study can be traced back to Le Play's work with family budgets in the mid-nineteenth century. It is widely believed the methodology was greatly influenced by work done by the Sociology Department at The University of Chicago in the early part of the twentieth century. To this day, the case study method continues to be developed by ongoing research and discussion among scholars and practitioners. Stake (1995) describes this tradition as "the case study is a mode of inquiry in which an investigator seeks to understand complex phenomena within their real-life contexts" (p. xi). Yin's (2018) definition focuses on context, as depicted "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident" (p.18). I am clear about the boundaries of middle school adolescents, ages 12 to 14, within an urban charter school in a Midwest city. I aimed to do as Creswell (2013) suggests, provide "rich and detailed data about the experiences of individuals, groups, or organizations" (p. 97). It was important for me to capture the experiences of these students as well as how the school, as an organization, gives attention to interventions of belonging with the development of the real-life context of middle school students in mind. The complex phenomenon being studied is the experience of school belonging. The detailed data about the phenomena being collected from this study came from the individuals (students) who participate in the study. The study is then bound by defining the setting, participants, and questions (Creswell, 2013).

Stake (1995) classifies three categories of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic case study focuses on a particular case because it is of interest in and of itself. The case is studied for its own sake, rather than being used as a means to understand some broader phenomenon. An instrumental case study is used to gain insights into a particular issue or problem that extends beyond the case itself. Collective case study involves the study of multiple cases that are related to one another in some way. "The collective case study design is useful when the aim is to compare and contrast different cases to identify similarities and differences, patterns, and themes." (Merriam, 2009, p. 50). "Collective case studies are useful when the focus is on understanding the range of variation that exists within a particular phenomenon, rather than on a single instance of the phenomenon." (Stake, 1995, p. 5) "The collective case study design involves selecting cases that can provide diverse and rich data on a particular phenomenon, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon." (Yin, 2018, p. 38). For this research study, I elected to use the collective case study design to identify similarities and differences, patterns, and themes in ways students may experience school belonging. As the researcher my personal experiences are seen as an important component of this inquiry (Charmaz, 2014) which compels me to use my voice because of my position as a middle school administrator. It goes without saying that I too have been a middle school adolescent having to navigate belonging. Attending multiple schools and having a variety of school belonging experiences and feelings during my own adolescence has given me a unique insight into this topic.

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry is rooted in the tradition of phenomenology, developed by Husserl in the early twentieth century (Husserl, 1970). Moustakas, built on the ideas of Husserl and used his background in psychology and philosophy to develop the heuristic inquiry as a research method. Moustakas (1990) states “The heuristic approach is a research strategy that emphasizes the role of the researcher as a participant in the research process, drawing on personal experience, intuition, and creativity to uncover new insights and meanings” (p. 15). Moustakas found that by engaging in a process of self-discovery and reflection, researchers will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the human experience and develop new insights into their work. Moustakas is still considered to have created the foundational work of heuristic inquiry and is widely cited in qualitative research literature (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). Moustakas (1990) identifies six phases of heuristic research which were utilized in the data analysis process and further outlined. The six phases of heuristic research are:

- Initial engagement involves using my experiences to connect with the study long before becoming a middle school administrator.
- Immersion into the topic and question involves doing a deep dive into the research topic and question by reading, reflecting, and immersing myself in the data.
- Incubation involves me taking a step back from the data and reflecting on what has been gathered. I sit with the data and consider it from different angles.
- Illumination which involves experiencing a sudden insight, realization, or “aha” moment of the research topic.

- Explication involves the work of unpacking and articulating the insights and understandings that emerged in the illumination phase.
- Creative Synthesis involves the researcher integrating the insights and understandings generated from the previous phases into a cohesive whole (p. 27).

Additionally, Creswell (2013) describes this approach as "... particularly well-suited to investigating complex, multidimensional phenomena that are difficult to measure quantitatively, such as human experiences, emotions, and perceptions" (p. 13).

Although there are various scales that attempt to measure school belongingness, they are not capable of capturing the human experience of feeling belonging at school.

Patton (2015) explains the role of the heuristic inquirer as engagement in a process that "brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher" (Patton, p. 118). This idea was further described by Schwandt (2001), who stated, "The heuristic approach to qualitative research encourages the researcher to engage in a creative, exploratory process of inquiry, drawing on personal experiences, intuition, and imagination to uncover new insights and meanings" (p. 132). My own close personal experiences with this phenomenon have led to a unique insight that will shape my role as a researcher.

Role of Researcher

My role as the lead researcher was to gather rich and nuanced data that articulates the phenomena under study (Merriam, 2009). As a part of this qualitative research process, I acknowledge that I am an instrument which means claiming who I am, and positionality. "Positionality refers to the researcher's subjective position,

including their social identities, experiences, and perspectives, and how these shape their interpretation and understanding of the research phenomenon” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13). I am a White middle-aged man from a small Midwestern who grew up in a small Midwestern currently working with and researching students from a Midwestern urban school district. As a part of this process, I must be attuned to my subjectivity and the context of this research (Patton, 2015). I must be reflexive, in that, I critically examine my own biases, values, and assumptions. I also must acknowledge and recognize how this will impact my perspective on the research process. (Creswell & Poth, 2013). In many ways, this research process is challenging and changing me. The process of diving deeper into my own biases, values, and assumptions has led to growth and self-discovery. This process has also led me to a deeper understanding of the students I serve and their understanding of the world and the phenomena under study. This process also lent itself to the choice to utilize heuristic inquiry. The personal experiences and understanding of the phenomena coupled with the reflexive process helped me to go deeper into my own understanding of my adolescent experiences. In many ways, this process allows me to explore my past experiences and make sense of the many emotions I have tied to the research topic.

Another important component of my reflexivity as a researcher is my understanding of the issues of reactivity. I am aware that my presence can alter the behaviors and actions of the students I am studying and the influence this can have on the data I collected (Charmaz, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ultimately, I do not think this is something I could eliminate; however, I could work to minimize reactivity and influence through self-awareness and building trust with the students I researched.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) states “reactivity can be minimized in qualitative research by establishing trust with participants, being sensitive to cultural norms, and acknowledging the researcher's role in shaping the research process” (p. 344). To establish trust I was transparent with participants and showed respect their confidentiality and acknowledge various power dynamics. In addition to the reflexivity, using unobtrusive methods, building rapport with the participants, collecting data over a long period of time, crystallization, and member checking was used to address the reactivity (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Design of Study

The site selected for the case study was a Midwest, urban middle school in the United States. South Primary and Middle (pseudonym) has an overall enrollment of 728 students with an enrollment of 215 students in grades sixth through eighth grade. South Primary and Middle was built in 2012 and began operation in the 2013-2014 school year. The school is one of 24 public charter middle schools that operate in a Midwestern metropolitan area. Based on the 2022 school year South Middle students identified as 88% African American or Black, 5% Hispanic or Latinx, 4% Multi-Racial, and 3% White. Twenty-three percent of students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and 14% are identified as English language learners (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). All South Middle students are eligible for free breakfast and lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision program. The school district’s enrollment area is a large geographical area covering many neighborhoods and zip codes. According to the U.S. Census Bureau. (2020) The median household income for individuals living in the school district’s zip code is

\$37,824. The median household income for living in the school district boundary is \$60,042. Both of which are significantly lower in comparison to the national average of \$52,372 and \$70,784.

South Primary and Middle has experienced significant growth in both test scores and annual performance reports since 2015. Due to recent changes in the state accountability tests and reports, yearly comparisons are not accurate reflections of a school's performance. However, it is important to note the school district's Annual Performance Review (APR) in 2015 was 70% percent of the possible 100 points for improvement in student outcomes (Missouri Department of Education (2021). In 2016 it was 95% (Missouri Department of Education, (2021). In the following years, 2017 to 2020, the school district received an exceeding in all academic areas (Missouri Department of Education (2021). For the most recent annual performance report, the school district received a score of 82 which was the fourth highest among school districts in the metropolitan area (Missouri Department of Education (2021). A great point of pride for South Middle is the student attendance rates. The annual average daily attendance for the last five years is 91.5% (Missouri Department of Education (2021). The most recent student achievement data is listed below in comparison to the state averages. The data in Table 1 illustrates two key stories. First, In comparison to the state averages the school experiences higher numbers of below basic scoring students in math and English. Additionally, the school has a lower number of students who score proficient or advanced in comparison with state averages. The student group sections illustrate that in comparison to students with the same demographics from throughout the state, the student is comparable to or outscoring the state averages.

Table 1: Achievement Data for 2021.

			MPI	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
English Language Arts	All Students	LEA	354.8	25.9%	47.9%	19.3%	6.9%
		State	385.1	18.4%	38.4%	27.5%	15.8%
	Student Group	LEA	353.4	26.0%	48.5%	19.7%	5.9%
		State	350.1	31.1%	43.0%	18.9%	7.1%
			MPI	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Mathematics	All Students	LEA	338.9	32.6%	45.4%	16.1%	6.0%
		State	365.9	29.4%	31.4%	22.1%	17.1%
	Student Group	LEA	337.2	32.8%	45.9%	16.4%	4.9%
		State	321.2	46.9%	31.6%	14.4%	7.1%
			MPI	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Science	All Students	LEA	330.2	43.9%	36.0%	14.4%	5.8%
		State	371.4	25.1%	37.3%	24.2%	13.5%
	Student Group	LEA	328.8	44.1%	36.8%	14.0%	5.2%
		State	333.8	41.7%	37.4%	15.6%	5.3%

Source: Missouri State Department Achievement Data (2021)

Selection of Participants

To gain access to the participants of the study I began by seeking approval from the district superintendent. Adolescent students were chosen as the participants due to the purpose of the study and the goal of the research questions revolving around student experiences and perceptions. Purposeful sampling was used to select eight students by using typical case sampling method. Purposeful sampling should be used when the researcher has a clear understanding of the information needed and the experiences relevant to the research questions. The researcher's understanding of the phenomena can help the researcher choose participants who can provide the most relevant data to the research questions (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, Patton (2015)

states “Typical case sampling involves selecting cases that are representative of a larger group or population, and that are therefore likely to yield information that is transferable to other cases.” (p. 238). To utilize typical case sampling, I first defined the population and phenomenon of interest, then I identify typical characteristics of the population based on my own experiences working with adolescents. Last, I will use criterion sampling to develop selection criteria that would help identify cases that were representative of the larger group. According to Patton (2015), criterion sampling is a purposive sampling method that involves selecting participants based on specific criteria that are related to the research question. The criteria for the participants was adolescents between the ages of twelve and thirteen who have been at the same school for more than three years, and who participate in at least one school activity, sport, or club. For confidentiality purposes, each student was only identified by pseudonyms. Each student and student’s guardian will sign a consent and assent form attached in the appendix. Eight participants were selected to complete the open-ended reflection written responses, and interviews.

Data Sources

The three data sources used were personal documents, interviews, and survey data. The following sections will give a brief overview of their use in qualitative research highlighting their historical development and major theorists and how they are currently being used. Additionally, each section will also describe how they were used within the study. Specifically, how each source was collected, when they were collected, and where they were collected. The order of the sections will reflect the order used to collect the data from the study.

Documents

Documents have historically been used as a data source of social research since the early twentieth century. Park contributed to the development of document analysis as a method in the early twentieth century at the University of Chicago. Lasswell further developed the methods of document analysis in the 1940s and 1950s at the University of Chicago. Mishler and Snow further developed document analysis by focusing more on a systematic approach to improve issues of reliability and validity. Today document analysis is widely used across different research disciplines (Mason, 2018).

According to Mason (2018), Documents are a useful source of data in qualitative research, as they offer comprehensive and detailed information about the context, culture, and practices of the study's environment. Various types of documents, such as policy papers, reports, meeting minutes, diaries, and letters, can be collected and examined to enhance the understanding of the social phenomena under investigation. Documents can be utilized as an adjunct to other forms of data, such as interviews and observations, or they can be analyzed independently to gain insights into the study's research questions. Personal documents were used as the first data source. The documents were collected from the participants in the study. The documents will come from student responses to an English Language Arts class assignment. The names of the students were removed from the transcript and replaced with pseudonyms. The document, generated through Google Documents, and submitted through Google Classroom is planned for easy access. The purpose of the assignment was a part of a larger group of assignments developed to build community

within homeroom cohorts and the entire school community. The prompt students were asked to write about is “Describe a time when you felt like you belonged to your classroom or school community. Be as descriptive as possible”. The use of this assignment serves both as a request from the researcher and as a classroom community-building assignment.

Interviews

Interviews are commonly used in qualitative research to collect information about people's experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), interviews are a method that involves posing open-ended questions to individuals or groups to gather their perspectives on a particular phenomenon. Interviews can be conducted in various formats, such as face-to-face, telephone, or video conferencing, and their structure can vary from structured to semi-structured to unstructured, depending on the research question and the study's goals. Structured interviews utilize a predetermined set of questions and are often used in survey research, while semi-structured interviews have a general topic or set of questions but allow for flexibility and follow-up questions. Unstructured interviews have no predetermined questions, and the interviewer guides the conversation based on the participant's responses (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The second data source I used in this study was gathered through interviews. Interviews have been used by social researchers to gather data about social phenomena since the late 19th century. While working at Columbia University in the late 19th century, Boas utilized interviews to gather information about the beliefs, values, and behaviors of different cultural groups. In the mid-twentieth century, the role of interviews in social research was further developed

by Mead and Goffman who focused on the role of language and communication in social interaction. Cicourel and Becker further developed the use of interviews in research by developing new interview techniques, such as the "unstructured interview" and the "focused interview". Unstructured interviews are open-ended interviews that allow participants to speak freely about their experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Focused interviews are semi-structured interviews that are designed to explore specific themes or topics with a set of questions. Semi-structured interviews are a type of qualitative research interview that falls somewhere between unstructured and structured interviews. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a set of predetermined questions, but the specific questions asked and the direction of the conversation are largely determined by the participant's responses. The benefits of semi-structured interviews include increased participant engagement, rich data gathering, and overall flexibility. With the development of video and audio recording equipment, the use of interviews has grown significantly in qualitative research. Today, interviews are widely used in a range of research fields.

Each student who participated in the interviews and their parent will sign a consent and assent form. The location for the interviews was the lobby of the school. The interviews were conducted after school during the school's extended day program. The interviews will last approximately 25 minutes. The format of the interviews was semi-structured using an interview guide which is included in the appendix. The interview guide used contains a list of questions linked to the central research questions and sub-questions. The open-ended question format allowed for clarifying questions needed to deepen the conversation in specific areas of the interview. The guide was

provided to the individuals being interviewed before the interviews took place. An example of the type of questions included in the interview guide is “Can you describe school belonging in your own words?”. A complete version of the interview guide can be found in the appendix. Each interview transcript was recorded using the iPad dictation function on Google Documents. Member checking or respondent validation was used after each interview. Each participant was provided with the transcripts of their interview for review and feedback. This feedback allowed participants to provide further insights, changes, or clarifications to the data they provided in the interview.

Survey Data

Using survey data in qualitative research involves gathering and analyzing responses to questions to inform and complement the qualitative analysis process. The use of closed-ended likert scale questions for quantification provides a broader context that complements the in-depth insights gained from other qualitative data sets. Survey data can be used to elicit insights into participants' experiences, attitudes, feelings, and perspectives from a large and diverse group of participants.

The history of using quantitative data within qualitative research projects reflects an ongoing evolution of researchers' understandings of different methodological approaches and a movement toward methodological pluralism. The goal of these approaches is to utilize the strengths of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the research topic and questions. Historically, research has most often been divided between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Between the 1950s and 1960s researchers began to explore mixed-methods approaches in social sciences. Campbell and Fiske (1959)

coined the term “triangulation” to describe the use of multiple methods of data collection to study a single phenomenon or research question. Webb (1966) and Denzin (1970) further developed the use of triangulation to utilize multiple methods for a single study. Webb (1966) articulates the rationale for using this method by stating “every data-gathering class - interviews, questionnaires, observation performance records, physical evidence - is potentially biased and has specific to certain validity threats. Ideally, we should like to converge data of several data classes, as well as converge with multiple variants from within a single class”(p.450). The use of multiple methods continues to grow between the 1970’s through the 1990’s. Creswell (1994) further formalized research methods that utilized quantitative methods as part of qualitative research projects. Over the last 20 years’ advancements in technology have given researchers software tools that made the integration of quantitative data easier to collect, manage and interpret as a part of additional qualitative datasets. Researchers continue to find ways to combine quantitative data in qualitative research projects to utilize the strengths of both approaches, to attain more robust insights into the phenomena under study.

Survey data was used as the third data collection source. School-wide survey data surrounding school belonging was utilized with a component design where the survey data collected separately from the other data sources and combined to the data during the data analysis process. The survey data was collected in September of 2024 and consists of four school-belonging questions. The questions are: At school: Adults care about how I’m doing. Can you be yourself at your school? Do you feel cared for at school? Do you feel like a valuable part of your school? Do you feel like there are

other students at this school like you? At school: I am treated with respect by other students. At school: I can be myself. At school: I feel like I belong. At school: I feel understood. How many of the adults at school can you say "I can be myself around them" How many of the adults at school can you say "I can talk to them when I have a problem" How many of the adults at school can you say " They are easy to talk to" How many of the adults at school can you say " They understand me as a person" I can be myself around my teacher. I can talk to my teacher when I have a problem. My teacher is easy to talk to. My teacher understands me as a person. The possible responses to the four questions are 1) Yes, definitely, 2) Mostly, 3) Kind of, 4) Only a little, and 5) Not at all. The survey data was collected from 176 6th through 8th grade students.

Data Analysis

Heuristic Analysis

Moustakas (1990) describes heuristic inquiry as a qualitative research approach that emphasizes the researcher's self-reflection and personal experiences in gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach has been noted to be particularly useful in studying complex and sensitive topics, such as trauma, grief, and identity, where the researcher's own experiences and emotions may be relevant. School belonging is incredibly important to me as my experiences with belonging shaped my life during adolescence. To help me utilize this lens I utilized the identified six phases of heuristic research Moustakas (1990) in the data analysis process. In this section, I will provide more detail on how I utilized each phase.

Initial Engagement

In this phase, the researcher begins to engage with the research topic by exploring their own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes related to the topic. This can involve engaging in reflective writing, journaling, or other creative activities that allow the researcher to explore their own thoughts and feelings related to the topic.

Immersion

During the immersion phase, the researcher begins to deeply engage with the research topic by reading literature, reviewing case studies, and exploring other relevant materials. The goal of this phase is to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic and to begin to develop new insights and perspectives.

Incubation

In this phase, the researcher takes a step back from the research topic to allow for reflection and introspection. This can involve engaging in mindfulness practices, meditation, or other activities that allow for inner exploration and contemplation. The goal of this phase is to create space for new insights to emerge.

Illumination

The illumination phase involves a moment of insight or realization that emerges from the incubation phase. The researcher may have a sudden realization, a new perspective, or a deeper understanding of the research topic. This phase can be unpredictable and may require the researcher to be open to unexpected insights and experiences.

Explication

In this phase, the researcher works to clarify and articulate the insights gained during the illumination phase. This can involve writing, talking with others, or engaging in other forms of creative expression to make sense of the insights gained. The goal of this phase is to develop a clear and coherent understanding of the research topic and to articulate it in a way that can be shared with others.

Creative Synthesis

In the final phase of heuristic inquiry, the researcher synthesizes their insights and experiences into a coherent whole. This can involve creating new concepts or models, developing recommendations, or developing a deeper understanding of the research topic that can inform further inquiry or action. The goal of this phase is to create a final product that represents the researcher's insights and experiences related to the research topic.

The six phases of heuristic inquiry are designed to help researchers engage in a process of personal and introspective exploration that can lead to new insights and a deeper understanding of a research topic. By engaging in reflective practices, I was able to gain new perspectives and develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of student belonging.

Furthermore, I utilized the procedures for cross-case analysis in heuristic inquiry, developed by Moustakas (1990). Cross-case analysis is a method commonly used in qualitative research to compare and contrast data across multiple cases or participants to identify patterns and themes that may be relevant to the research question.

According to Miles and Huberman (2020), cross-case analysis involves "systematically

comparing and contrasting cases to identify common patterns or themes across cases or to highlight the unique features of each case." Yin (2018) describes cross-case analysis as a way to test the validity of a theory by examining how it applies to multiple cases. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss cross-case analysis as a way to identify common themes and patterns across cases, as well as to identify unique cases that may provide insights into the research question. Moustakas (1990) lists the procedures sequentially:

1. Develop a coding framework: Develop a coding framework that is applicable across all cases. This framework should be based on the research question and objectives and should identify key themes and sub-themes that are relevant to the study.
2. Code the data: Code the data from each case using the coding framework. This will help to identify common patterns and themes that are present across all cases.
3. Analyze the data: Analyze the coded data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships that are present across all cases. This can be done using a variety of techniques such as content analysis, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis.
4. Compare the findings: Compare the findings from each case to identify similarities and differences. This will help to identify common patterns and themes that are present across all cases, as well as any unique features of each case.
5. Develop a theoretical framework: Develop a theoretical framework that is grounded in the data and that explains the relationships between the key themes

and sub-themes. This framework should be based on the data from all cases and should be supported by evidence from the data.

6. Verify the findings: Verify the findings by triangulating the data from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents. This will help to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process largely consisted of organizing the data, coding, synthesizing, and ultimately looking for patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) To analyze and interpret the data from the personal documents and interviews a combination of enumerative content analysis (Miles et. al, 2020) and thematic analysis (Grbich, 2013). Miles et al., (2020) state "The process of developing a codebook for enumerative content analysis involves creating a list of categories, defining each category in operational terms, and establishing rules for assigning text units to each category" (p. 312). Additionally, Grbich (2013) states "Thematic analysis involves searching across a dataset to identify patterns of meaning, which are then sorted into themes" (p. 33). This process was followed for the personal documents, interview transcripts, and survey data. During the first cycle of coding, I highlighted quotes and words that stood out to me. I specifically, looked for information that connected to the research questions and sub-questions. Next, I developed descriptive codes by assigning labels to the general topics of the passage that were highlighted. I then created definitions for each of the descriptive codes. Last, I tallied each time I noted a descriptive code and came to the final frequencies. During the second cycle of coding the descriptive codes to develop interpretive code and ultimately the overall themes of the text. I grouped

descriptive codes and definitions into groups. I assigned each of these groups a descriptive code and descriptive code definition. Then I added each of the frequencies from the descriptive codes that fell into the category of each interpretive code. Miles et al., (2020) describe this process stating “Pattern coding, as a second cycle method, is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes or concepts” (p. 79). This process yielded descriptive codes, interpretive codes, and ultimately the final themes.

Miles et al., (2020) state "Data management involves organizing, storing, and preserving qualitative data in a way that facilitates analysis, retrieval, and sharing while maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of research participants" (Miles et al.,2020, p. 36). To help me achieve this, I used several different programs within Google Workspace. The majority of the transcripts, survey data and documents were collected using Google Docs. The coding process was done manually with paper and pencil and was later typed into a Google sheet. All of the documents being created by the researcher are created in Google Docs, then downloaded into Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel, and included in the appendix. All of the data is organized and managed through the researcher's own external hard drive. The drive was organized into folders based on the data source. The transcriptions of the interviews, survey data, documents, and their transcripts are all located in this drive. The drive is password-protected.

Limitations - Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

As previously noted in Chapter 1, limitations in research, as defined by Cresswell (2003), denote potential weaknesses in the study's design. One such

limitation in this research study is the challenge of ensuring participants' complete honesty, which is inherently difficult to control. Moreover, the small sample size may be perceived as a limitation; however, the study aimed for depth rather than breadth, utilizing purposeful sampling to explore the phenomenon deeply with a select group. Patton (2015) underscores the value of such an approach for yielding insights and understanding. Additionally, researchers' biases pose another limitation, as acknowledged by Creswell and Poth (2018), necessitating strategies to mitigate their influence. To address this, the researcher plans to employ a critical friend to provide oversight. Despite these limitations, the study holds practical significance for school leaders and policymakers.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are essential considerations in research methodology. Maxwell (2013) highlights validity as concerning the credibility of the study, with researcher bias and reactivity being significant threats. Reflective journaling and utilizing a critical friend are strategies to mitigate these threats. Similarly, reliability, as noted by Yin (2018), relies on minimizing errors through meticulous procedures outlined in the methodology. External audits and member checking served as additional validity tools, aligning with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) assertion on establishing credibility in qualitative research. Crystallization, as described by Ellingson (2009), facilitates meaning-making through multiple forms of analysis, further enhancing validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in research design, as emphasized by Maxwell (2013) and Creswell and Poth (2018). The researcher adhered to principles outlined in The Belmont Report (1979). The principles include respect for persons, specifically the autonomy of participants and their rights to make decisions about whether to participate in the research. The principle of beneficence requires that research minimize harm to participants and maximize benefits. Last, is the principle of justice which calls for fair and equitable treatment of research participants.

Additionally, institutional review board guidelines and CITI training guided the ethical conduct throughout the study. Measures such as informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, and participant feedback underscored my commitment as a researcher to ethical practices. Ultimately, transparency and participant involvement in the research process upheld the ethical standards previously mentioned and contribute to the study's integrity.

Summary

In summary, this chapter included a thorough description of the methodology. First, the chapter articulated the rationale for the use of qualitative inquiry, including the integration of the major approach of case study followed by the design element of heuristic. Next, I described my role as the researcher as an instrument and addressed the design elements of the study including setting, participants, and sampling techniques. This section also included the data sources, their descriptions, the protocols for how they were collected, organized, stored, and analyzed. The chapter closed with

attention to the limitations of the study, checks for validity and reliability, and ethical considerations for working with human subjects.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Overview of Study

In this Chapter I will discuss the major qualitative perspectives I have used, a definition of each and a rationale for my choice of including as part of my inquiry. I will outline the methodology used in the study, the setting, and the participants. I will describe who the participants were, how they were selected, and what data I collected from them. I will highlight the amount of time I spent with participants and over what time frame the study took place. I will summarize my relationship with participants and how I established rapport with them. I will then articulate my own frame of mind throughout this process and how it changed over time. Additionally, I addressed validity and reliability throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Furthermore, I will detail how reflexivity and voice were used in the process of engaging the data and extracting the findings. Last, I will report on the findings of the study by sources and by cases. The findings will include the themes, definitions, interpretive codes, relevant quotes from participants and integration to research literature. I will end the chapter by providing a cross-case analysis of each case and conclusions related to the research questions.

This single instrumental heuristic case study aimed to explore the perspectives of school belongingness among middle school students at a Midwestern urban school. The study employed a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and perceptions regarding their sense of belonging at school. The researcher utilized a combination of in-depth interviews, personal documents and

survey data, to gather rich, qualitative data, which helped crystalize and validate the findings. The study focused on middle school students, specifically those attending a school in a Midwestern urban area. For this research, "Urban" is defined as an area with a population with a minimum of 50,000 in densely settled surrounding territories (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2020).

The central research question was: How do adolescent students experience school belonging? The sub-questions were: a) How do adolescent students define school belonging? b) What do adolescent students say about their sense of belonging in their classrooms? c) What interventions do adolescent students identify as important to their sense of belonging? d) What are their views on the school's culture and its impact on their sense of belonging? This study aimed to provide a detailed description of students' perceptions of their experiences with school belonging, using heuristic inquiry to integrate the researcher's personal insights with the participants' experiences.

Methodology

In this study, I utilized the case study methodology to explore the phenomenon of school belonging among middle school adolescents (ages 12 to 14) within an urban public school. The case study approach allowed me to investigate this complex phenomenon within its real-life context, capturing the nuanced experiences of the students and the interventions of the school. According to Stake (1995), a case study is designed to understand complex phenomena in their natural settings, while Yin (2018) highlights the importance of examining contemporary issues within their actual context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred. This research employed an instrumental case study design, focusing on a specific case

to gain broader insights or to provide a deeper understanding of an issue beyond the individual case specifically relating to students' experiences of school belonging.

To gain a deeper understanding of students perspectives of school belonging, I applied heuristic inquiry, a qualitative method rooted in phenomenology. Heuristic inquiry emphasizes the role of the researcher's personal experiences and insights in the research process. As Moustakas (1990) describes, heuristic inquiry involves a combination of personal experience, intuition, and creativity to uncover new meanings and insights. This approach is particularly effective for exploring complex, multidimensional phenomena like school belonging. This approach allowed me to leverage my own experiences as a student and educator while also capturing the rich, detailed experiences of the students I serve, providing a comprehensive understanding of school belonging.

Data Collection

In conducting this research, I utilized various data sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions of school belonging. As previously outlined in Chapter 3, three data sources used were personal documents, interviews, and survey data. The following sections will give a brief overview how they were used within the study. Specifically, providing background on why the data was chosen, how each source was collected, when they were collected, and where they were collected. The order of the sections also reflects the order the data was collected in the study.

Documents have been used in social research to provide detailed insights into the context and culture of a study. They can include policy papers, reports, meeting

minutes, diaries, and letters. These documents can be analyzed on their own or combined with other data forms such as interviews and observations (Mason, 2018). Personal documents were collected from students' responses to an English Language Arts assignment where they described times they felt they belonged to their classroom or school community. The assignment, aimed to build community and was also used to gather data for the research. To ensure confidentiality, student names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Interviews are a common qualitative research method used to gather information on people's experiences, beliefs, and perspectives. They can be conducted in various formats, including face-to-face, telephone, or video conferencing, and can range from structured to semi-structured or unstructured formats (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For this study, semi-structured interviews were used as another data source. These interviews were conducted with students in the school lobby after school hours. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and followed a guide with open-ended questions linked to the research questions. Participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy and provided feedback.

Survey data is often used in qualitative research to provide broader context and complement other data sources. Closed-ended questions with Likert scales help quantify participants' experiences and perspectives, enhancing the overall analysis. In this study, survey data was collected as another data source. Conducted in September of 2024, the survey included questions about school belonging, such as feelings of care, respect, and understanding. Responses were gathered from 176 students in grades 6 through 8. Each of the 8 participants completed the survey The survey data was

combined with other data sources during analysis to provide a comprehensive view of the study's research questions.

The setting is a Midwestern urban public charter school serving grades six through eight. The focus is on eight adolescent participants from seventh and eighth grades, aged 12 to 14, all of whom were selected through purposeful and typical case sampling methods. The criteria for participant inclusion required students to be aged twelve to thirteen, have attended the same school for at least three years, and actively participate in school activities, sports, or clubs. This sampling method was influenced by theoretical considerations, as these students represented typical cases that could provide insight into the phenomenon being studied—adolescent experiences in a specific educational environment.

To understand the setting and participants, I leveraged my prior knowledge of the students, as I knew each participant before conducting the study. This familiarity provided a deeper insight into their school experiences, personal dynamics, and engagement in extracurricular activities, allowing me to approach the research well-informed of each participant. The study focused on a single school setting, emphasizing the experiences of students within the school context.

I conducted interviews with all eight participants and collected additional data through surveys and written assignments. In terms of data collection, each of the participants contributed to multiple forms of data: interview responses, survey data, and written reflections, creating a robust data set that could be analyzed for emerging themes. No additional observations were made beyond these direct interactions, but the diverse forms of data gathered provided a comprehensive view of the participants'

experiences. All data was collected with appropriate consent and assent from both the students and their guardians, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, no demographic or identifiable information was obtained or reported from the participants. I spent between 15 to 30 minutes interviewing each of the eight participants individually. All data collection activities, including the interviews, surveys, and written assignments, took place over two months from September to October of 2024.

Serving as the principal of the school the participants attended in this study, my relationship with the students began in a more professional capacity, where we knew surface-level information about each other but evolved throughout the research process. I established rapport with the students by engaging in conversations with them, which helped create a comfortable environment for the interviews. Initially, the students likely viewed me as their school principal, someone familiar but in a position of authority who needed assistance with a school project. However, this perception shifted over time as I spent one-on-one time with each student, listening to their thoughts and experiences about school belonging. My relationship with the participants deepened because I was able to focus solely on their individual experiences in a setting that allowed for personal reflection. By giving them the time and space to express their thoughts, I gained a more profound understanding of each student's unique perspective on their school life. This connection fostered trust and openness, changing the dynamic of our typical interactions. In terms of my mindset, I approached the research as an investigator, aiming to keep the data organized and to maintain objectivity throughout the process. My original purpose was to better understand the students I serve on a

deeper, more personal level. The only shift in my approach was recognizing the need to prioritize active listening—giving students the time to think deeply before responding—rather than probing too quickly. This adjustment allowed for richer, more thoughtful responses, which enhanced the overall quality of the data collected. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data in this study, I utilized several strategies, including a critical friend, reflective journaling, member checking, and the process of crystallization. These approaches allowed me to cross-check the data and ensure it accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

During member checking, the participants were given the opportunity to review their answers, and findings to confirm their accuracy. Many participants provided clarifications during this process, ensuring that their thoughts and experiences were represented accurately. In general, the students agreed with the findings and even cited specific ways in which the results aligned with their own experiences. This feedback was essential in verifying that the interpretations of the data were consistent with the participants' perspectives.

By using crystallization, I analyzed the data from multiple angles, incorporating various sources such as interviews, surveys, and written assignments. This helped ensure that the findings were well-rounded and not reliant on a single source of data. Reflective journaling also played a crucial role in maintaining self-awareness throughout the research process, allowing me to document my thoughts, biases, and reflections as I interacted with the data. This also allowed me to reflect on my interviewing processes. These strategies combined to create a valid and reliable

research process, ensuring that the findings were both accurate and representative of the participants' true experiences.

Data Analysis

Heuristic inquiry is a qualitative research method that emphasizes the researcher's personal reflection and experiences to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. This approach is particularly useful for exploring complex and sensitive topics, such as school belonging, which is personally significant to me due to its impact on my own adolescence. To apply this method effectively, I followed the six phases of heuristic research outlined by Moustakas (1990):

- **Initial Engagement:** In this phase, I explored my own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes related to the topic through reflective writing and journaling, allowing me to connect deeply with the research subject.
- **Immersion:** I engaged with the research topic by reviewing relevant literature and case studies. This phase aimed to enhance my understanding and develop new insights into the phenomenon of school belonging.
- **Incubation:** Taking a step back from the research allowed for introspection and reflection, facilitated by mindfulness and contemplation. This phase was intended to create space for new insights to emerge.
- **Illumination:** This phase involved moments of insight or realization gained from the incubation process. I remained open to unexpected insights and new perspectives that emerged during this phase.

- **Explication:** I clarified and articulated the insights gained, using writing and discussions to develop a clear understanding of the research topic. This phase aimed to communicate these insights effectively.
- **Creative Synthesis:** In the final phase, I synthesized my insights into a coherent whole, creating new concepts or recommendations that reflect my understanding of the research topic.

Additionally, I employed the procedures for cross-case analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1990), which involve:

- **Developing a Coding Framework:** Creating a framework for coding data based on key themes relevant to the research question.
- **Coding the Data:** Applying the coding framework to identify common patterns across cases.
- **Analyzing the Data:** Examining coded data to identify patterns and relationships using various analysis techniques.
- **Comparing Findings:** Identifying similarities and differences across cases to uncover common themes and unique features.
- **Developing a Theoretical Framework:** Constructing a framework grounded in data that explains the relationships between themes.
- **Verifying Findings:** Triangulating data from multiple sources to ensure validity and reliability.

The data analysis involved organizing, coding, and synthesizing data to identify patterns. I combined enumerative content analysis (Miles et al., 2020) and thematic analysis (Grbich, 2013). Enumerative content analysis involves developing a codebook

with categories and rules for coding, while thematic analysis involves identifying and sorting patterns into themes.

During the first coding cycle, I highlighted significant quotes and terms related to the research questions, developed descriptive codes, and counted their frequencies. In the second cycle, I refined these descriptive codes into interpretive codes and themes, grouping related codes and calculating frequencies for each theme.

In engaging with the data and extracting findings, reflexivity played a significant role in my approach. I consistently reflected on my position as both a researcher and the school principal, which helped me maintain awareness of potential biases. I was mindful of how my dual role could influence students' responses and worked to create a comfortable environment for them to express themselves openly. Voice was also important, as I prioritized the students' perspectives, giving them time to articulate their thoughts even when they struggled to find the words to describe their experiences. This focus on listening allowed me to ensure that their voices were central to the findings, despite the challenges they faced in expressing themselves clearly.

One of the biggest surprises was how skeptical parents were about involving their children in the research. I did not anticipate the number of questions they would have, as they seemed hesitant about the process. Additionally, I was surprised by how uncomfortable several of the students appeared during the interviews. Despite their ease or lack of ease, another unexpected challenge was how difficult it was for several students to articulate their experiences into words. Many seemed to struggle with finding the right words to express their thoughts and feelings, which required me to give them extra time and gently guide the conversation without leading their answers.

Last, I was surprised with how long the interview process took with some participants. These surprises highlighted the complexities of working with adolescent participants and the need for patience in allowing them to find their voice.

In this chapter, I have outlined the major qualitative perspectives I used in the study, including heuristic case study. I provided definitions of each perspective and explained the rationale for incorporating them into my inquiry. I described the methodology employed, the settings in which the research took place, and the participants involved. This included details about who the participants were, how they were selected through theoretical sampling, and what data I collected from them. I also highlighted the amount of time I spent with the participants and the timeframe over which the study occurred. I summarized my relationship with the participants, describing how I established rapport and how those relationships evolved throughout the study. I then articulated my own frame of mind during the research process and how my approach changed over time as I gained deeper insights into the participants' experiences. In addition, I addressed issues of validity and reliability in both data collection and analysis, ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Finally, I detailed how reflexivity and voice were incorporated into the analysis, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the data and the extraction of key findings. In the following section I will provide the findings followed by the conclusion.

Survey Findings

The survey was administered in participants' homeroom classes as part of The Leader in Me MRI (Measuring Results of Impact) survey. This survey is a tool used to assess the impact of the Leader in Me program on teachers, students, and school

culture. The survey is designed to provide insightful data on how effectively The Leader In Me program is being implemented and how it influences various aspects of school life, including school culture, student belonging, and teacher-student relationships. The survey was administered in September of 2024. The survey utilizes Likert scale responses including “Yes, definitely”, “Mostly”, “Kind of”, “Only a little”, and “Not at all”. Themes and patterns were obtained through quantitative cross-referencing by comparing the Likert scale responses across the 8 different participant responses. The Likert scale responses ("Yes, definitely," "Mostly," "Kind of," and "Only a little") were compared across different questions to identify trends. Additionally, grouped responses were identified through the responses to all participants and were reviewed to identify common patterns with multiple questions. Furthermore, qualitative thematic analysis was conducted by identifying recurring ideas and trends across students' responses, cross referencing themes, and grouped responses themes. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the survey data and revealed how different aspects of school experience were interconnected for each participant and the group as a whole. The following tables provide a summary of the responses from each of the 8 participants.

Table 2

Survey Data Questions 1-5

Participant in column 1. Questions in row 1.	At school adults care about how I'm doing.	Can you be yourself at your school?	Do you feel cared for at school?	Do you feel like a valuable part of your school?	At school I am treated with respect by other students.
Student A	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Kind of
Student B	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Mostly
Student C	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Mostly	Mostly	Kind of
Student D	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Mostly
Student E	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Kind of
Student F	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Kind of	Mostly	Yes, definitely
Student G	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Mostly
Student H	Kind of	Kind of	Mostly	Kind of	Mostly

Table 3

Survey Data Questions 6-12

Participant in column 1. Questions in row 1.	At school, I feel like I belong	At school, I feel understood	I can be myself around my teacher(s)	I can talk to my teacher(s) when I have a problem	My teacher(s) is easy to talk to	My teacher(s) understand me as a person
Student A	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Kind of	Kind of	Yes, defiantly
Student B	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Mostly	Mostly
Student C	Mostly	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Only a little	Mostly
Student D	Mostly	Kind of	Mostly	Mostly	Mostly	Mostly
Student E	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Mostly	Yes, definitely
Student F	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Yes, definitely	Kind of	Kind of	Mostly
Student G	Only a little	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Yes, definitely	Mostly	Yes, definitely
Student H	Kind of	Mostly	Kind of	Yes, definitely	Kind of	Mostly

Cross-Referencing Data

Cross-referencing was used to observe how responses from related questions interact with each other. Specifically, relationships with teachers and peers were compared with students' sense of belonging and feeling understood. For example, students were asked, "At school, I feel like I belong," and this was cross-referenced with "I can talk to my teacher(s) when I have a problem." Another comparison examined "At school, I feel understood" in relation to "I can be myself around my

teacher(s).” Additionally, “At school, I am treated with respect by other students” was cross-referenced with “I feel like a valuable part of my school.” From the cross-referencing, several trends emerged. Student A, for instance, reported that they felt they belonged and could talk to their teacher, but they did not feel fully respected by their peers and did not always feel understood. This may indicate a disconnect between peer relationships and adult support for Student A. This aligns with previous research which shows that supportive teacher-student relationships are uniquely crucial to fostering students' sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). In contrast, Student B, who felt comfortable being themselves and respected by their peers, also reported a high sense of belonging and understanding by teachers. This pattern suggests that positive peer respect and strong teacher relationships foster a stronger sense of belonging, consistent with findings from studies linking positive peer relationships to higher levels of belonging (Goodenow, 1993). Student C reported a lower score for peer respect, which correlated with their somewhat lower sense of belonging and difficulty feeling understood by teachers. Similarly, Student H experienced struggles in multiple areas including feeling unable to be themselves, with low peer and teacher respect leading to a diminished sense of belonging. These results reinforce the importance of peer respect and relationships in student well-being (Thapa et al., 2013).

Grouped Responses

Grouped responses were analyzed to identify patterns of similarities across participants in specific areas. These patterns revealed general trends in students' experiences. First, students with strong belonging and positive teacher relationships such as Students B, E, F, and G reported high levels of teacher support, with a strong

sense of being valued and respected by both peers and teachers. These students had high scores for being able to talk to their teachers and feeling understood, which corresponded with their strong sense of belonging and value as part of the school community. This further reinforces the idea that supportive teacher-student relationships are integral to fostering a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016).

Conversely, students with a lower sense of belonging and weaker teacher relationships, like Students A and H, showed more mixed or negative experiences. Student A felt more disconnected from peers, and their lower sense of being understood by teachers correlated with a diminished sense of belonging. Similarly, Student H reported difficulty being themselves at school and a lack of respect from both peers and teachers, which aligned with their lower feelings of belonging. These findings support previous research showing that feelings of exclusion from peers and lack of support from adults are linked to a lower sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993).

Lastly, students with mixed responses, such as Students C, D, and G, experienced moderate levels of belonging and teacher understanding, but with varied peer relationships. Student G felt that they belonged well but had some difficulty with peer respect, which might have impacted their overall school experience. This is consistent with studies that suggest peer respect can have a significant influence on school belonging, even when other factors, such as teacher relationships, are positive (Murray-Harvey et al., 2010). Student C had moderate relationships with teachers, but their lower peer respect scores reflected a weaker sense of belonging.

Thematic Analysis

Two key themes emerged from the thematic analysis, which provided a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' sense of belonging and their overall school experience. One significant theme is that teacher-student relationships are central to a student's sense of belonging. Students who felt understood by their teachers and who were able to talk to them about problems reported feeling more connected to the school community. Students B, E, F, and G demonstrated strong relationships with teachers and also felt that they belonged, were valued, and respected by their peers. This suggests that students' perceptions of teacher support and understanding play a key role in their school experience, which supports research indicating that positive teacher-student relationships are correlated with greater school engagement and belonging (Pianta et al., 2012).

The second emerging theme is the importance of peer respect in contributing to feelings of belonging. Students who reported being respected by peers, such as Students B, D, and E, also reported a strong sense of belonging. Conversely, students who felt disrespected by peers, such as Students A, C, and H, showed lower levels of belonging. This suggests that positive peer dynamics significantly influence how students perceive their school environment, echoing studies that link peer respect and inclusion with higher levels of school engagement, social adjustment and belonging (Juvonen et al., 2011).

Conclusion

In summary, the thematic analysis revealed that teacher-student relationships and peer respect are critical factors influencing students' sense of belonging at school.

Positive interactions with teachers foster a stronger sense of belonging, while a lack of peer respect and being understood are associated with lower levels of belonging and feelings of alienation. These findings suggest that fostering supportive teacher-student relationships and developing positive peer dynamics are essential to enhancing students' overall school experience. This supports previous research linking teacher-student relationships, peer-relationships with higher levels of school belonging and overall student well-being (Allen et al., 2016; Goodenow, 1993; Thapa et al., 2013).

In this section, I provided a description of the survey, what the survey measured, when it was administered, how the survey was analyzed, a comprehensive view of all student participants and themes gathered from the analysis. In the following section, I will present the findings from the case studies by first highlighting the overarching themes and interpretive codes identified across all cases. This will be followed by individual case reports for the six participants, focusing on a within-case analysis.

Findings of Case Studies: Within Case Analysis

In this research study focusing on student belonging, eight participants were involved, and their experiences were analyzed through personal documents and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being explored. As Stake (1995) emphasizes, a single case study can yield rich insights by focusing on the unique characteristics of each participant within the context of the study. This approach allows for an extensive examination of individual responses, revealing how each person's experiences contribute to the broader understanding of student belonging. Yin (2018) supports this notion by stating that single instrumental case studies are

particularly valuable when exploring complex issues, as they provide an in-depth view that is often lacking in broader studies. This study aims to illustrate the interplay between individual experiences and overarching themes related to identity and belonging by analyzing personal documents alongside interview data. The findings will ultimately highlight the significance of each participant's voice in understanding the broader context of adolescent development. Each of the eight case studies, represented by pseudonyms, will be examined through within-case analysis, followed by cross-case analysis to uncover shared themes within the data. The collective themes, interpretive codes, and descriptions for all cases are summarized in the following table. The collective themes are presented in the order of their frequency starting with the most frequent. The total frequencies are in parentheses under each theme and interpretive code.

Table 4

Themes, Codes and Frequencies

Theme	Interpretive Codes	Descriptive Codes	Definition of Descriptive Codes	Frequency	
Peer Support (50)		Friendship	A description of what a friend is, does, or their impact on a student	16	
		Peer Inclusion (37)	Peer Inclusion	A description of an action, feeling, or belief regarding the inclusion of peers within a group	12
			Helping Peers	A description of an action where peers help or support each other	9
			Emotional Check-in	The act of checking on another student's emotional well-being	10
			Team support	A description of feeling included by your peers by being on a team	3

Theme	Interpretive Codes	Descriptive Codes	Definition of Descriptive Codes	Frequency
School Culture (49)	Positive and Supportive Atmosphere (30)	Welcoming Environment	A description of a welcoming feeling, environment or experience	14
		Loving Community	A description of a loving community within a school context	9
	Engagement and Enjoyment (19)	Supportive Environment	A description of a supportive feeling or environment or experience	7
		First Day Interactions	A description of an experience of a student on their first day of school	6
		Fun/Positive Environment	A description of fun or positive feeling or environment or experience	13

Theme	Interpretive Codes	Descriptive Codes	Definition of Descriptive Codes	Frequency
Nurturing Adolescent Identity (41)	Supporting Identity and Fostering Respect (31)	Being Known	A description of a student being known or understood by individuals in the school community	14
		Positive/Affirming Identity	A description of an act or a feeling of affirming a student's identity development	17
	Trusting relationships and Developing empathy (10)	Being Respected	An action or belief that shows respect for individuals within the school community	5
		Empathy	A description of an experience or feeling depicting empathy for another student or teacher	5
		Trusting Relationships	A description of an experience or feeling regarding a trusting relationship with another person in the school environment	5

Theme	Interpretive Codes	Descriptive Codes	Definition of Descriptive Codes	Frequency
Teacher-Student Relationships (36)	Supportive Teacher Relationships (26)	Teacher Support	A description of a teacher showing support for students	18
		Teacher Care	A description of a teacher showing care or warmth for students	8
	Respectful and Welcoming Interactions (10)	Teacher Respect	A description of a teacher showing respect towards their students	6
		Teacher Greeting	A description of a teacher greeting one of their students	4

Theme	Interpretive Codes	Descriptive Codes	Definition of Descriptive Codes	Frequency
Barriers to Belonging (30)	Exclusion and Negative Experiences (20)	Feeling Excluded	A description of an experience or feeling of excluding a classmate from the rest of their peers	7
		Negative Teacher Interactions	A description of a negative teacher interaction with a student	8
		Negative School Experience	A description of a negative school experience from the point of view of a student	5
	Safety and Bullying Concerns (10)	Bullying	A description of an action or feeling involving a student deliberately hurting someone verbally, physically, or psychologically	7
		Safety	A description of physical or emotional safety within a school environment	3

Five themes emerged from the document and interview analysis. From most frequent to least frequent; Peer Support, School Culture, Nurturing Adolescent Identity, Teacher-Student Relationships, and Barriers to Belonging. The cases of each participant, Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D, Student E, Student F, Student G, and Student H are presented in the following sections. Due to the age of the

participants, all identifiable demographic information will be excluded and I will just present each case's findings.

Case Study 1: Student A

Student A's data covered topics from each of the five themes. The most referenced themes were Nurturing Adolescent Identity, specifically were being accepted for who they are being recognized when they are successful. The second theme was Peer Support and specifically having supportive friendships. Student A was excited about their interview and eager to respond to questions. Student A often gave quick answers and then stopped to think through what they wanted to say. It was clear to me throughout the interview that Student A desperately wants to be accepted by their peers and their teachers. Student A articulates these feelings stating "Like everyone accepts me, I'm welcome, I can be myself", "I can be myself in the classroom and still be my actual self, you know what I mean" "I could be myself in that class. And "My teacher was very funny and I'm funny and everyone around me knows how I act and they accepted me". These findings were also supported by their survey data as Student A reported highest to the question "You can be yourself around your teacher(s)". During the interview, I couldn't help but think of my own school experiences, and spaces where I felt like I had to act or present myself in a certain way and other spaces that I felt I could be my "actual" self. Student A's beliefs about being accepted for who they are were also echoed in their statements regarding what they saw as barriers to belonging. Student A spoke about how the actions of students could be isolating, excluding, and judgmental. This was also reflected in their survey data, which reported the lowest score on "I feel respected by other students". Furthermore,

Student A wanted to be accepted but on a deeper level, they wanted to be validated, embraced, and appreciated. Student A also wanted to be recognized and celebrated for their success in school and in sports. Student A stated “having an assembly makes me feel special and congratulating me makes me feel like I belong here because I have accomplished so much and my friends and teachers congratulating me on that and noticing my hard work feels great”. Student A even makes the connection that the recognition they receive can help motivate them to do positive things in school stating “The good things that happened would get recognized by the school to help them stay focused on the positive things”. Additionally, a theme from Student A’s data was having peer support. Student A spoke to how being on a sports team helps you make friends easily and how friends can lift you up when you are having a bad day. Student A stated “it’s just amazing how if you are having a rough start to your day how fast it can be brought up by just going to school and having friends who talk to you and brighten your day up by saying hi” and “Sports, being on a team. Having fun with their friends but as a group focusing on winning together and cheering each other on.” The impact on sports on an adolescent’s school outcomes and belonging is also supported by research. Fredrick & Eccles (2006) found that adolescents participating in extracurricular activities were associated with positive wellbeing and academic outcomes. Similarly, Slaten et al., (2023) found students who engage in extracurricular activities often report higher levels of school engagement and belonging. Reflecting on my own experiences as an adolescent student I was reminded of how impactful sports, and the friends I made through them were on my life. I have no doubt that sports had a positive impact on how I viewed school and the effort I put into learning. I am also

reminded that many of the individuals I played sports with during my adolescence are still friends today.

Case Study 2: Student B

Student B wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. However, Student B's answers always came back to one key theme which was teacher-student relationships. Student B appeared very nervous at the beginning of the interview process and became more comfortable throughout the interview. It was clear that Student B found the teacher-relationship with themselves and with other students to be a key indicator to student belonging. Student B spoke about how teachers can be a good role model, help students through difficult things, and prepare you for the future. Some key quotes that articulated Student B's feeling about teachers included, "He was being an example for us kids. Showing us what we need to do and keeping us away from bad problems". Additionally, Student B stated "I could talk to my teacher about my problems, I feel like I am needed there and that I can bring my problems to my teachers". Similarly, Student B stated "He was getting us prepared for middle school, he taught us to prepare us as Black men so he taught us right and he got us prepared so when I came to 6th grade I knew what was expected already." These examples highlight Student B's beliefs about teachers and the critical role they play in the lives of students. These beliefs were also congruent with Student B's survey responses where he had high responses for all questions related to their teachers. Reflecting on my own experiences as a teacher, I am regretful on how much I focused on the content and instruction components of teaching as compared to the relational components. I am also worried that my current pressures as a school principal regarding student

achievement are causing teachers to lose sight of the critical aspects of teacher-student relationships. The relationship between student belonging and teacher-student relationship is also supported in the literature. Uslu & Girzir (2017) found that teacher-student relationships to be a key predictive indicator to predict a sense of school belonging. I also believe it is important to note that research conducted by Anderman (2022) on the school effects on psychological outcomes in adolescence found that perceptions of belonging and perceptions of the quality of teacher-student relationships were higher among rural and suburban school's students as opposed to urban students. Reflecting on this, I am hopeful that the small size of the school I serve lends itself to both higher levels of teacher-student relationships and student belonging.

Case Study 3: Student C

Student C wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. In Student C's interview, they appeared quite, timid, even tens and required long think time for each question. It was clear to me they were calculating what they wanted to say before they said it. A major theme from Student C's interview and personal document was peer support and more specifically, experiences related to peer inclusion and peers supporting each other. Throughout the interview and while reading the student's document, it became clear to me this student values acceptance from their fellow classmates very highly. Some key quotes that articulate student C's feelings surrounding this topic were "You don't feel like you are left out. You feel included. Basically, you don't have to worry about people judging you, you can be yourself". Additionally, when asked about what types of school cultures create school belonging the student responded by speaking about the need to be able to make friends stating

“Maybe some kids have that personality that they can make friends easily. Some kids don’t. A place where it was easy to make friends”. Similarly, in Student C’s document they wrote about feeling acceptance and acknowledgement from their peers during a presentation stating “On this day when I presented the students were clapping for my pamphlet and to share out loud. This encouraged me to read out loud. No one was judging they were just encouraging and it made me feel good”. On the contrary, Student C also spoke about the **Barriers to Belonging** were negative peer interactions specifically students excluding them or judging them. Student C described a negative experience during a student presentation stated “like a presentation, people are laughing or not paying attention, their heads are down, or just not caring about what you had to say”. Based on the student’s responses it was not surprising to me the question from the survey that was marked lowest was “At school I am treated with respect by other students”. Student C’s responses highlight how difficult this stage can be. As noted in the literature review adolescence is a challenging time marked by rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, often leading to heightened sensitivity and self-consciousness. Peer relationships become a central focus for students, as adolescents seek acceptance and validation outside of their family unit. During these times friendships become crucial for developing a sense of identity, belonging, and self-esteem. Schools are naturally a place for these relationships to form as it is where they spend a lot of their time. In my own experiences as an educator when students feel included by their peers, they are more likely to engage positively in academics and have reduced feelings of isolation. Conversely, exclusion or difficulties in forming friendships can contribute to feelings of loneliness, insecurity, social anxiety, and even

depression, making this developmental stage even more crucial and complex. In my role as a school principal I am often telling students “everyone feels this way right now, you are not alone”. The importance of peer inclusion and friendship is also supported by research. Peer relationships within the school setting, including acceptance and friendships, play a crucial role in fostering students' sense of belonging in the school environment (Osterman, 2000). In Osterman's 2000 review, peer acceptance was found to have a greater influence on students' sense of school belonging compared to teacher-student relationships. Likewise, research indicates there is a tremendous negative impact from a lack of friendship and peer exclusion. Juvonen et al., (2000) found that adolescents facing loneliness and peer exclusion often experience emotional distress and lower school engagement. This sense of isolation negatively impacts various academic and well-being indicators including academic performance, mental health, and social adjustments. Changes in perceptions of victimization, self-worth, and loneliness were found to be a predictor for GPA, absenteeism, and teacher-rated behavior among adolescents (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Furthermore, during adolescence students grapple with identity and self-esteem, making them particularly vulnerable to external influences from their peers. Peer relationships play a crucial role in a young person’s developmental journey and development, as adolescents often seek validation, acceptance, and peer support. Positive peer interactions can foster a sense of belonging and enhance social skills, while negative relationships may lead to challenges such as peer pressure, bullying, or even feelings of isolation. Reflecting on my experiences as an adolescent student I

acutely remember the highs and lows that I experienced from peer inclusion and exclusion and how important peer support was to me developing my own identity.

Case Study 4: Student D

Student D also wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. In Student D's interview, they appeared very calm and at ease through the process. They also appeared the most confident with their answers. It became evident during the interview and even more so during the coding process that Student D valued school culture and specifically a welcoming school environment. The second theme that emerged was nurturing adolescent identity and more specifically being known by their peers and teachers. Some statements that help articulate their emphasis on a welcoming school environment include "what it feels like to belong to your school is you walk into the building and everybody's greeting you and they asked you how you doing and how's your day been, like the school really knows you." Additionally, when describing how a student can determine if the school culture supports them or not, student A described "You decide if it for you (the school) to feel, for kids to feel like they are welcome into my school community and that your people care about them." Furthermore, Student D also stated "the school is a very loving community and they going to make you feel welcome". Reflecting on the D's statements I think about how purposeful we are about how we greet students as they enter our building and our classrooms. Research conducted by Kalkan and Dağlı (2021) highlights the important relationships between school culture and school belonging in middle school aged students stating

The research findings show that there is a positive, moderate and significant relationship between school climate and school belonging. And there is a negative, moderate, and significant relationship between school belonging and school burnout; and a negative, moderate, and significant relationship between school climate and school burnout (p.71)

Another important theme from Student D was Nurturing Adolescent Identity and more specifically the notion of being known and seen by individuals in the school community. Student D highlights this central point stating “All the teachers understand you as a person and your body signals and like they can tell how you feel by the way you acting and how are you talking and stuff”. Additionally, student D highlighted this in their personal document writing “When they sang me happy birthday. I picked this time because it made me feel like everyone knew my name and everyone knew it was my birthday and they were all happy for me”. Reflecting on this I couldn’t help but think how critical it is for staff members to know student’s names in a school and for students to have a homeroom or advisement to feel like they have a place where the teacher and students know them deeply. Osterman (2000) also supports this notion based on his research review suggesting that

Other organizational options intended to increase the sense of community include smaller schools, block scheduling, departmental teaming, houses, inter-age grouping, and looping which is maintaining intact classes over several grade levels. All of these changes would extend the time that students remained with the same peers and teacher (p.359)

In summary, Student D's data highlight two critical topics, a welcoming school environment and being known by those in the school. Both topics are crucial in fostering a sense of belonging among middle school students. When teachers create an atmosphere of acceptance and make efforts to know students individually, it cultivates students feeling valued and connected within the school community. This recognition reduces feelings of isolation, which is of pivotal importance during the difficult middle school years when social dynamics and identity development are at their peak

Case Study 5: Student E

Student E also wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. In Student E's interview, they appeared extremely shy and even guarded. They also appeared the most unsure of their answers. This participant also gave the second least amount of data both in terms of the number of words used in their responses on their personal document and interview. However, it became clear to me during the coding process that Student E valued Teacher-student Relationships and specifically issued surrounding being respected. This was true for both relationships with teachers and with peers. These themes were also supported by the themes highlighted in the survey data from this study. Some key quotes that highlight these feelings regarding respect were "Students can feel welcome when the adults are nice and respectful". Furthermore, student E states "But I think the kids need to show respect even if they are not good friends and to the teachers". Similarly, Student E states "people talking to people nicely, not being rude or yelling at each other.". Student E also had the lowest rating for the survey question "At school I am treated with respect by other students.". These statements underscore a how critical the role of respect is to school belonging.

Reflecting on this student's statements I am reminded of the various times I have asked middle school aged students what the word respect means and the varying answers I receive from them. I find it interesting that students often associate it with being treated nicely or fairly. Additionally, when students talk about their friends the topic of respect often comes up. This is supported by Drolet et al., (2013) who conducted research on the relationship between school belonging and interpersonal relationships among early adolescents. Drolet et al., (2013) states: "adolescents insisted on the qualities they considered to be important in their peers, specifying repeatedly they sought friends who were of respectful character." Respect has also been shown to be critical in teacher-student relationships. Krane et al. (2017) found that students develop positive relationships with their teachers when respect is exchanged between teachers and students regularly. Student E also spoke and wrote about issues related to Nurturing Adolescent Identity and their need to be accepted for who they are. Student E stated "Just being able to be yourself and not having to be a fake person". Similarly, Student E describe friends who "they make me feel happy, like I can be myself". Furthermore, Student E also describes supportive teachers stating "if you like tell her something she won't judge you about it". Reflecting on this student's responses, I can't help but think about how school policies, rules, curriculum, interactions, and relationships can either affirm or destroy a student's developing identity. Although student D just wants to "be themselves at school" their answers also hit at a much deeper and impactful topic of identity safe classrooms. Hernández and Darling-Hammond (2022) describe the harmful impact of failing to provide these safe spaces for students by stating:

The negative societal or school-delivered messages that students receive not only compromise relationships and their sense of belonging in a school environment but can also translate into negative self-perceptions. Stereotype threat, the social identity threat that occurs when one fears being judged in terms of a group-based stereotype, induces stress and impedes working memory and focus, leading to impaired performance on tests and other school tasks (p. 2)

Respect from peers and adults plays a critical role in fostering a sense of school belonging for middle school students. When students feel respected and valued, they are more likely to develop strong connections with others in their school community, which in my experience boosts their self-esteem. Additionally, creating identity-safe classrooms where students' diverse backgrounds and identities are recognized and celebrated can help cultivate inclusive school and classroom environment. Again, in my experience, in these classrooms, students feel secure in expressing themselves, leading to a deeper sense of belonging and connection to their school community.

Case Study 6: Student F

Student F also wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. In Student F's interview, they appeared distracted and rushed. I got the sense they wanted to be somewhere else. The main two themes that emerged from student F's data from both their interview and their personal document was Peer Support and Barriers to Belonging. Specific to positive peer interactions were peer support. A quote from student F that articulated their feelings around peer support was "Someone is always there for you I guess, any problems they might have, they (peers) would find a way to

fix it or resolve it for the person. Like school and personal problems”. Additionally, student F stated “Like coming to you when they need help or something” and “like when you get a new student, you welcome them, show them around, be their friend, help them out”. These statements and experiences highlight Student F’s beliefs about being supported by their peers as well as being a support for other students. These beliefs about the importance of peers were also found in their survey responses. Student F reported their lowest rating for the question “I can talk to my teacher(s) when I have a problem” and their highest rating for “At school I am treated with respect by other students”. These findings paint a picture that Student F might have different experiences with positive relationships with teachers and peers. According to Blum (2022):

Factors that comprise positive peer connectedness include being able to count on friends, feeling accepted by peers, feeling good about friendships, having fun, spending time doing things, feeling peers want to talk and be with them, feeling friends are there to help one another out (p.1)

Reflecting on Student F’s statements and on the factors of positive peer connectedness, I am reminded of my own experiences in middle school and how crucial my peers were during times of distress. Research consistently shows that positive peer relationships during adolescence correlate with favorable mental health outcomes. Furthermore, these relationships may help mitigate the effects of negative experiences on mental health (Delgado et al., 2019). They also serve as a protective factor for managing challenges associated with the transitions between schools (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Nelemans et al., 2018). Conversely, another theme that emerged from student F’s data was Barriers

to Belonging, specifically, issues surrounding bullying and exclusion. Student F stated “Like if someone is bullying them every day like hitting on them every day, or just like when they walk through the hallway, like say someone just walk down the hallway and people don’t like them and just move out the way like ignore them or don’t want nothing to do with them”. Additionally, Student F also described how peers can help reduce bullying “Like if someone is being bullied you can tell your trusted adult and help them out so they don’t get bullied”. Reflecting on these statements, I am again reminded about the negative experiences at school during my adolescent years. I am also reminded of my school’s various bullying prevention programs and policies. In my experiences the impact of bullying on adolescents is incredibly far reaching. I have seen a clear relationship between bullying and lower level of belonging in schools. Victims of bullying often experience significant psychological distress, which can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection from their school community. Research also highlights the major impacts of bullying and lack of belonging can adversely affect their academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall school engagement (Halliday et al., 2021). However, research suggests that when peers intervene or support victims, it can lower the harmful impact of bullying (Cowie, 2014). Additionally, Bollmer et al. (2005) found that high-quality friendships during adolescence can significantly moderate the effects of bullying. Furthermore, the quality of friendships was found to be a critical mitigating factor on the effects of anxiety and depression associated with victimization. Student F’s responses highlight how critical peer support during adolescence is for a students' sense of belonging, especially as bullying can significantly diminish this feeling. Supportive friendships can help to

buffer the negative effects of bullying and ultimately foster stronger connections to their school community.

Case Study 7: Student G

Student G also wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. In Student D's interview, they appeared nervous but excited. There were multiple times when they appeared to search for the right word to describe how they were feeling. Overall, I found the responses from student G to be the most mature of all of the participants. Analyzing the data from both the documents and the interviews, two main themes emerged. The first theme was Teacher-student relationships and specifically teacher support. Some key quotes that showcased this theme were "We had our ups and downs but the teacher and the other students were supportive of me". Additionally, Student G stated, "They (teachers) could have group sessions to talk about what students are going through, how to express their feelings and talk about how they are dealing with them". Again, Student G described how teachers support students by saying "Adults can ask them about how they are doing, like checking in with them, if they need something, ask questions about what they are going through and be there for them". This theme was also present in the student's survey results rating "yes, definitely" to the following questions; "I can be myself around my teacher(s)", "I can talk to my teacher(s) when I have a problem" and "My teacher(s) understand me as a person". It became clear Student G valued teachers being able to provide emotional check-ins with students and supportive help during difficult times. Student G expanded on this topic to describe a school practice they find helpful by stating "The car as a check-in mentally and it helps to have an adult check in with us to get us through that.

The community circles helps with that to”. Reflecting on my own past, I can pinpoint specific coaches and teachers who served this role for me during middle school and how impactful the support was on my life. In my experience, when teachers provide warmth, affection, interest, and support, students demonstrate higher levels of engagement in school and school belonging. This underscores the significance of positive teacher-student relationships to student outcomes. Studies consistently indicate that such supportive interactions boost students' motivation and participation in educational activities (Allen & Bowles, 2021; Pianta et al., 2012; Wentzel, 2016). When examining the support systems of adolescents from guardians, peers, and educators, research some indicates that the support provided by teachers has the most significant impact on students' overall well-being (Danielsen et al., 2009). This highlights the critical role that teachers play in fostering a supportive learning environment that supports all phases of adolescent development.

The second theme was nurturing adolescent identity and specifically empathy. It became clear during the interview process that Student G understood and valued experiences surrounding having empathy for others. Student G stated “talk about how their dealing with the things they go through because of their challenges in life. This would show everyone that each person is going through something different. But they are not alone or excluded because we are all going through things.” Student G expanded on this topic to include teachers stating “This is true for the adults and the students. The teachers can share what they struggle with to. They just got to be restricted because they still a teacher and it’s a school so it has to be like appropriate.”. Furthermore, student G’s personal document also supported their value of empathy.

Student G described a time when a student was being excluded and picked on and how they intervened in the situation. Student G stated “So I had to tell them and point out the fact that they were wrong for being messy and they needed to put they self in his shoes and after that the teacher had told me I did the right thing”. Reflecting on Student G’s story and on my daily interactions with students, I am reminded about how important teaching this critical skill of empathy is during adolescence. Empathy and understanding is a cornerstone of many of our restorative practices and our peer conflict resolution practices at my school. As previously stated early adolescence is recognized as a central stage for the development of empathy, as this period involves significant changes in emotional regulation. This developmental phase is crucial for shaping how adolescent students understand and respond to their own emotions and of others, impacting their social interactions and relationships with peers and teachers (van Lissa et al., 2014). I believe student G bridges and important finding between the topics of teacher-student relationships and empathy. Specifically, that teachers can model empathy while they support students through difficult and confusing times. Student in turn can better understand and use this powerful skill to build deeper relationships with their peers.

Case Study 8: Student H

Student H wrote and spoke about topics from each of the five themes. In Student H’s interview, they appeared happy and confident. They answered questions quickly and efficiently. Student H’s responses provided the least amount of data of all of the participants. Analyzing the data from both the documents and the interviews, two central themes emerged. The first theme was barriers to belonging and specifically,

negative teacher interactions. Some key quotes that highlighted this theme was “Schools that have good teachers who don’t yell at kids.” Similarly, when speaking about teachers stating “They can help students and not just write referrals. They can care for them.” Adding to experiences of negative teacher interaction student H described feeling being treated unfair by the teacher stating. “When you get sent out or in trouble for stuff you didn’t do”. Student H also had the lowest rated responses of all of the participants for the questions “At school adults care about how I'm doing”, “Can you be yourself at your school?”, “Do you feel like a valuable part of your school?”, "At school, I feel like I belong", and “My teacher(s) is easy to talk to”. Reflecting on student H’s data, I can’t help but see the connection between their descriptions of negative teacher interactions and their lower levels of school belonging. Sadly, research indicates that student’s perceptions of unfairness in discipline are linked to adolescent peer aggression and lower school satisfaction (Gini et al., 2024). Even more disheartening is that the reprimands that students often encounter during class often hurt the relationship without being improving their engagement or improving students disruptive behaviors (Caldarella et al., 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that punitive disciplinary practices done by teachers can lead to feelings of alienation among students, lower levels of belonging, and even higher levels of bullying (Kovacevic et al., 2024). Student H’s experiences and the supporting research all point to the potential negative impact teachers can produce through their interactions, specifically through classroom management and student discipline.

The second theme that emerged was school culture and more specifically a fun school environment. It was apparent from Student H’s responses that they associated a

“fun” school with a “good” school. Student H stated “Like having time where you can just be with your friends and not have to always be doing work.”. Similarly, Student H stated “It feels like a place that you can relax and just be you. You don’t have to worry about things. You can just have fun with your friends and get your work done”.

Reflecting on the descriptions provided by the student I am curious how they would have further described a “fun” environment and wished I would have asked more probing questions. I am also left thinking about what type of experiences schools can provide that students would describe as fun. This also leads me to reflect on our current educational landscape that focuses so much attention and pressure and standardized tests and the amount of screen time students receive instruction and assessment on throughout their day. If I was a student, I would likely not describe school as “fun”.

Cross-Case Analysis

By conducting a cross-case analysis, I was able to identify both similarities and differences among individual cases, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of school belonging. According to Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008), this method of case analysis is effective in uncovering various factors associated with case outcomes. Additionally, this approach enhanced my insight into the distinct characteristics of each case. For instance, it became evident that Student B prioritized teacher relationships, whereas Student C placed greater importance on peer relationships. The table below visually illustrates the commonalities and differences across the eight cases, followed by a discussion of these findings. Important to note was that each participant had at least one descriptive code from each of the five themes from either their personal document or their interview. For the purposes of the graph

below, to further differentiate between the 8 cases, participants who had low levels of frequency meaning less than two will be left off the table. The cross-case analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the themes of peer support, school culture, nurturing adolescent identity, teacher-student relationships, and barriers to belonging. These themes are tied to the students' experiences and their overall sense of belonging within the school environment, revealing both commonalities and variations across the cases.

Table 5

Cross-Case Analysis

Case/Theme	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7	Case 8
Theme								
Peer Support								
Interpretive Codes								
<i>Peer Inclusion (37)</i>	X	X	X		X	X		
<i>Emotional Awareness and Connection (13)</i>						X	X	X
Theme								
School Culture								
Interpretive Code								
<i>Positive and Supportive Atmosphere (30)</i>		X	X	X	X		X	
<i>Engagement and Enjoyment (19)</i>	X							X

Case/Theme	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7	Case 8
Theme Nurturing Adolescent Identity								
Interpretive Code <i>Supporting Identity and Fostering Respect (31)</i>	X		X	X	X	X		
<i>Trusting relationships and Developing empathy (10)</i>							X	X
Theme Teacher-Student Relationships								
Interpretive Code <i>Supportive Teacher Relationships (26)</i>		X		X	X		X	
<i>Respectful and Welcoming Interactions(10)</i>		X						
Theme Barriers to Belonging.								
Interpretive Code <i>Exclusion and Negative Experiences (20)</i>						X	X	X
<i>Safety and Bullying Concerns (10)</i>						X		

Peer Support emerged as a major theme, particularly through the interpretive code of Peer Inclusion, which was noted across multiple cases. The strong emphasis on peer inclusion (37 instances) indicates that students generally find a sense of belonging through their interactions with peers. Cases 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 particularly showcased this inclusivity, illustrating that positive peer relationships are vital for fostering a supportive school culture. However, differences arise in the theme of Emotional Awareness and Connection, which was mentioned less frequently (13 instances) and appeared in cases 6, 7, and 8. This suggests that while some students experience strong emotional bonds with their peers, others may not feel as connected emotionally, indicating key differences in student experiences at school.

School culture emerged as the second highest frequency theme with high frequencies in multiple cases totally 39 instances. In examining School Culture, both similarities and differences are evident. The Positive and Supportive Atmosphere was frequently reported across several cases, notably in cases 2, 3, 4, and 6. This consistency highlights the importance of cultivating an environment where students feel safe and valued. In contrast, the theme of Engagement and Enjoyment (19 instances) was primarily observed in cases 1 and 8, suggesting that while some students find joy and engagement in school activities, others may not experience the same experiences. These findings could also suggest that students value different aspects of school culture more or less than their peers.

The theme of Nurturing Adolescent Identity further reflects both commonalities and variations. The emphasis on Supporting Identity and Fostering Respect was strong, particularly in cases 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 indicating a widespread recognition of the

importance of respecting students' identities. Conversely, the theme of Trusting Relationships and Developing Empathy emerged less frequently (10 instances) and was mainly noted in cases 7 and 8. This disparity suggests that while some students experience nurturing relationships that foster trust and empathy, others may lack these essential connections, highlighting a difference in experience and understanding and the complexity of the theme.

The analysis of Teacher-Student Relationships reveals both similarities and differences in how students perceive their interactions with teachers. The theme of Supportive Teacher Relationships was noted 26 times in various cases, demonstrating the positive impact of supportive teachers on students' experiences. Specifically, in cases 2, 4,5, and 7. However, the presence of Respectful and Welcoming Interactions (10 instances) was significantly less and was only represented in case 2. These differences potentially suggest the subtle differences in how students perceive what a positive supportive teacher-student relationship looks like.

Lastly, the theme of Barriers to Belonging highlights critical challenges faced by students. The presence of Exclusion and Negative School Experiences (20 instances) was particularly notable in cases 6, 7, and 8, indicating that some students encounter significant obstacles that hinder their sense of belonging. This highlights the importance of addressing exclusionary experiences proactively. Safety and Bullying Concerns were also identified in case 6, reflecting a pressing need for schools to confront these issues to create a safe and supportive environment. These findings highlight the differences in how various cases experience barriers to belonging including negative interactions with their teachers, isolation and bullying.

In conclusion, this cross-case analysis underscores the intricate interplay between peer relationships, school culture, identity development, teacher interactions, and barriers to belonging. While there are significant similarities throughout many of the cases, it is important to note the key differences to highlight the variability of student experiences and perceptions. I believe this is also significant to understanding the answers to the research questions as there are not one size fits all solutions to student belonging and that students understand and experience this phenomenon in different ways. In the following section, I present the findings from this heuristic case study, which focus on my inquiry into student belonging. The data sources utilized included survey responses, in-depth interviews, and personal documents, all of which contributed to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of student belonging. A summary of the findings is organized according to the research questions.

Conclusion, Answering the Research Questions

This study aimed to explore adolescent students' experiences of school belonging, emphasizing the importance of understanding their perspectives in shaping supportive educational environments. The central research question guiding this inquiry was: How do adolescent students experience school belonging? This exploration involved four sub-questions that further delineated the students' perceptions: (a) How do adolescent students define school belonging? (b) What do adolescent students say about their sense of belonging in their classrooms? The second central research question guiding this inquiry was: How do adolescent students experience interventions implemented by the school related to school belonging? The third and fourth sub questions were: (c) What interventions do adolescent students

identify as important to a sense of belonging? (d) What do they have to say about a sense of belonging in their school's culture? By employing heuristic inquiry, this study integrated the researcher's insights with the lived experiences of the participants, yielding rich qualitative data.

Central Research Question 1: How do adolescent students experience school belonging?

a) How do adolescent students define school belonging?

The cross-case analysis revealed that adolescent students define school belonging through a combination of peer support, teacher relationships, and a supportive school culture that nurtures adolescent students developing identity. The strongest emphasis from the participants was on peer inclusion which underscores the critical role of friendships and peer acceptance in shaping students' feelings of belonging. For instance, cases where students reported feeling included and respected by their peers corresponded with high levels of belonging. In contrast, some students expressed feelings of exclusion, particularly those who felt disconnected from their peers. This discrepancy suggests that while many students have a clear understanding of belonging rooted in positive interactions, others experience a more fragmented sense of belonging that can affect their overall school experience.

b) What do adolescent students say about a sense of belonging in their classrooms?

Students' responses regarding their classroom experiences highlight the significant impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on their sense of belonging. Those who reported positive interactions with teacher characterized by feeling understood and respected tended to feel a greater sense of belonging within the classroom. The theme

of supportive teacher relationships was prevalent, indicating that teachers play a crucial role in fostering students' feelings of inclusion within their classroom. However, the lesser presence of Respectful and Welcoming Interactions reveals that not all students experience this support uniformly. This inconsistency suggests that students experience a sense of belonging in their classroom in different ways placing value on different relational characteristics.

Central Research Question 2: How do adolescent students experience interventions implemented by the school related to school belonging?

c) What interventions do adolescent students identify as important to a sense of belonging?

While the survey did not specify particular interventions, the analysis indicates that initiatives fostering strong teacher-student relationships and positive peer interactions are vital. The findings suggest that students who feel understood by their teachers and included by their peers report higher levels of belonging. This reinforces the idea that any school-based interventions should aim to cultivate these relationships, as they are integral to students' experiences of belonging. While most student responses were based on relationships, some specific school initiatives were mentioned including community circles, homerooms, sports teams, and brain as a car emotional check-ins.

d) What do they have to say about a sense of belonging in their school's culture?

The analysis of school culture reveals both positive and negative experiences. Students who reported a Positive and Supportive Atmosphere generally felt a strong sense of belonging. In contrast, the presence of Exclusion and Negative Experiences among some students indicates significant challenges in the school culture. Cases

where students expressed feelings of bullying or isolation suggest that not all students feel safe or valued. This difference in experience underscores the complexity of school culture and its impact on students' feelings of belonging, highlighting the need for continuous evaluation and support to ensure that all students can thrive in a positive school culture.

Summary

The findings from the survey, interview, and personal document data and the cross-case analysis illuminate the intricate dynamics of peer support, school culture, nurturing adolescent identity, teacher-student relationships and barriers to belonging in shaping students' experiences of belonging. The next section will provide a brief discussion on each of the major themes.

Peer Support: Peer relationships emerged as a foundational element of belonging. Students who reported strong peer support indicated that feelings of inclusion greatly enhance their sense of belonging. For instance, Students B, E, and G, who expressed high levels of peer respect and inclusion, also reported a stronger connection to their school community. This correlation aligns with my own experiences that emphasizes the importance of peer networks in fostering a supportive school environment. However, students like A and H, who potentially felt more isolated from their peers, highlights the potential consequences of exclusion. I believe the findings suggest that schools should actively promote peer engagement through team-building activities and social-emotional learning programs to cultivate supportive friendships.

School Culture: The overall school culture significantly influences students' perceptions of belonging. Many students reported experiencing a Positive and Supportive Atmosphere, which contributed to their feelings of being valued and included. The data suggests that when students perceive their environment as welcoming, they are more likely to feel connected to their school. Conversely, the mixed responses regarding engagement and enjoyment underscore that not all students experience this positivity uniformly. Some students indicated a lack of connection to school extracurricular activities, suggesting a need for schools to continuously assess and enhance the culture to ensure it is inclusive and engaging for all students. In my experience there are many students who find limited opportunities for extracurricular activities if they do not participate in sports.

Nurturing Adolescent Identity: The importance of nurturing adolescent identity cannot be overstated. The study reveals that students who feel their identities are acknowledged and respected are more likely to experience a sense of belonging. This has also held true in my experiences both as a student and a school leader. This finding underscores the need for schools to create spaces where diverse identities are celebrated. Programs that promote cultural awareness and respect for differences can help foster an environment where all students feel seen and valued. By supporting the whole student, specifically through the various factors related to identity development, schools can enhance their overall sense of belonging.

Teacher-Student Relationships: The role of teacher-student relationships is crucial in shaping students' experiences of belonging. The data indicates that students who feel understood and respected by their teachers report a stronger connection to

their school. This finding aligns with my own experiences that suggests positive teacher interactions can significantly enhance student engagement and well-being. However, the varying experiences among students indicate that not all teachers are perceived as supportive. There is a need for ongoing professional development focused on relationship-building strategies for teachers to ensure they are equipped to engage with all students effectively.

Barriers to Belonging: The presence of barriers, such as exclusion and bullying, poses significant challenges to students' sense of belonging. The study highlights that students who experience negative interactions with peers or with teachers often struggle with feelings of isolation. This has often held true in my own experiences as a student and educator. Addressing these barriers is critical for fostering a supportive atmosphere. Schools must implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies and create safe spaces where students can express themselves without fear of exclusion or judgment. The findings suggest that proactive measures to diminish these issues will enhance the overall culture of belonging for all students.

In conclusion, the interplay of peer support, school culture, nurturing adolescent identity, teacher-student relationships, and barriers to belonging creates a multifaceted understanding of students experiences and perceptions of school belonging. Understanding and addressing these themes is essential for educators and school leaders aiming to create inclusive environments where all students can thrive and belong. By prioritizing these themes, schools can enhance students' feelings of belonging, ultimately contributing to a multitude of academic and wellbeing student outcomes.

In this chapter, I outlined the major qualitative perspectives I used, provided definitions of each, and explained the rationale for including them as part of my inquiry. I detailed the methodology employed in the study, including the setting and participants. I described who the participants were, how they were selected, and what data I collected from them. I highlighted the amount of time spent with participants and the timeframe of the study. I summarized my relationship with the participants, how rapport was established, and how those relationships evolved. I also articulated my own frame of mind throughout the process and how it changed over time.

Additionally, I addressed validity and reliability in data collection and analysis. I explained how reflexivity and voice were used in engaging with the data and extracting the findings. Finally, I reported on the study's findings by sources and cases, including themes, definitions, interpretive codes, relevant participant quotes, and connections to existing research literature. The chapter concluded individual case findings and a cross-case analysis and conclusions related to the research questions. Next, chapter five will focus on the recommendations and conclusions based on the findings of chapter four.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the concluding chapter I will synthesize the findings from this study and offer practical recommendations aimed at enhancing students' sense of belonging within school environments. Drawing from the five themes identified in the analysis including peer support, school culture, nurturing adolescent identity, teacher-student relationships, and barriers to belonging I make key recommendations surrounding this research. The recommendations provided inform teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in cultivating environments that foster school belonging, particularly during the critical time period of adolescence. Additionally, it reflects on the implications of these findings for future research and practice, emphasizing the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive school cultures for all students. Last, I will provide a final reflection on the research topic.

Recommendations

The findings of this study emphasize the critical role that teacher-student relationships, positive peer interactions, and a supportive school culture play in nurturing student's identity and fostering a sense of belonging in school. Specifically, the findings indicate that when teachers develop meaningful and trusting relationships with students, it significantly enhances students' feelings of being valued and supported within the educational environment. This conclusion aligns with previous research which highlights the importance of teacher-student relationships in promoting student engagement and emotional well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Roorda et al., 2011). Teachers who consistently demonstrate care, understanding, and support can create a

classroom environment where students feel connected and valued, which in turn strengthens their overall sense of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2020; Cornelius-White, 2007).

The first recommendation is that teachers must prioritize the development of meaningful and trusting relationships with their students. In my view, this is the most critical recommendation to be made from this study as I believe it is the easiest to implement. Teachers can create an environment that enhances students' sense of belonging by engaging in consistent, positive interactions, purposely building trust, and demonstrating a genuine interest in students' lives. (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Roorda et al., 2011). Such practices are particularly important for students who may be at risk of feeling alienated, isolated or disconnected from their peers or school environment (Osterman, 2000). To ensure that teachers are prepared with the skills necessary to foster these positive relationships, teacher preparation programs must emphasize the development of relational competencies specific to teacher-to-student interactions. This includes training on adolescent development, effective communication, listening, empathy, and strategies for cultivating trust with students. Teacher preparation programs should incorporate intentional, practical experiences with the goal of building these social and relational skills, recognizing them as essential components of effective teaching (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the role of culturally responsive teaching and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training in supporting relationship-building between teachers and students. Culturally responsive teaching involves understanding and valuing students' cultural backgrounds and incorporating these perspectives into the teaching practices and learning

environment (Gay, 2018). DEI training equips educators with the skills to create inclusive classrooms where all students feel respected and valued, regardless of their backgrounds. By fostering an understanding of diversity and equity, teachers can build stronger, more authentic relationships with students, in doing so enhancing students sense of belonging. Implementing culturally responsive practices and DEI initiatives is particularly important in diverse school settings, where students' experiences and identities may differ significantly from those of their peers and teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

The second recommendation is the need to support student social emotional learning part of teaching the whole child. Given the unique developmental changes happening during adolescence, it is also critical for school leaders and teachers to support students' social-emotional learning (SEL) as a means of nurturing adolescent identity, promoting positive peer interactions and ultimately promoting school belonging. The social and emotional development happening during adolescent students' identity development causes students to become particularly vulnerable to feelings of social isolation, disconnection, and low levels of school belonging. SEL programs that support students' skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution can significantly enhance their ability to form positive, healthy relationships with their peers and the adults in the school environment. Developing these SEL skills and promoting healthy relationships are deeply connected to creating school communities that promote a sense of belonging (Durlak et al., 2011; Brackett et al., 2019). By integrating SEL into the fabric of the school through professional development, school curriculum, and interventions, educators can help students

navigate the social complexities of adolescence, leading to improved student outcomes. (Zins et al., 2004). Additionally, teachers should integrate SEL practices into their daily interactions with students through modeling and coaching. Helping students develop the social and emotional skills necessary to build positive relationships and thrive in the school environment (Brackett et al., 2019). The skills learned through SEL are critical to promoting healthy peer relationships. When students experience supportive and affirming peer relationships with classmates, they are more likely to feel connected to their school and less likely to experience isolation and the negative implications that come with it. This sense of social belonging is particularly crucial during adolescence, as previously noted as a period marked by the increasing significance of peer relationships on academics (Ryan, 2001).

The third recommendation is for school leaders to implement practices that promote positive school cultures. This study uniquely highlights the influence of a positive school culture on students' experiences at school and their overall sense of belonging. A school culture that is caring, inclusive, respectful, and focused on student well-being provides a foundation for students to feel connected, respected and valued (Battistich et al., 1997; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). School leaders play an important role in developing such a culture by implementing policies and practices that shape behaviors that ultimately shapes the beliefs and attitudes of the students and staff. School leaders promote inclusivity and respect, ensuring that all students, feel a sense of belonging within their classroom and school community. As noted in previous chapters, research consistently suggests that schools should focus on creating safe and inclusive school cultures to promote student well-being (Thapa et al., 2013). The

school culture lays the foundation for all other school belonging interventions to become successful.

The last recommendation is for policymakers and reformers should mandate that school belonging be included as a metric in state accountability reporting. Given the strong link between school belonging and students' academic and emotional outcomes, schools must be held accountable for creating environments where all students feel a sense of belonging (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Osterman, 2000). By including school belonging as part of a robust accountability system, policymakers can ensure that schools prioritize the social and emotional aspects of education, alongside academic performance, thereby promoting a more holistic approach to student success (Carey et al., 2023). In my personal experience, state accountability measures have a tremendous impact on the actions of school leaders even when they consider the actions contrary to their beliefs about what is right for students and teachers.

Future Research

While this study provides unique insights into how students understand a sense of school belonging, there remain several unanswered questions and areas for future research that could further illuminate this complex phenomenon. One significant area that needs further exploration is the student perspective on school belonging. Future studies could delve deeper into how students define, experience and understand belonging within the school environment, particularly across different geographic areas, school settings as well as cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Understanding students' personal experiences in different settings could provide more nuanced

insights into the lives of adolescent students and the topic of belonging, thereby informing policies, practices and reforms.

Additionally, more research could explore the longitudinal effects of adolescent school belonging on adult life outcomes. While existing studies have established a correlation between belonging and various positive outcomes, more research is needed to understand how these short-term effects manifest over time and across different stages of development. These studies could offer new understanding into the long-term impacts of early experiences, perceptions and interventions, related to school belonging.

Another important area for future research is the role of digital technology in shaping students' sense of belonging. Adolescents today are experiencing a profound shift in how they experience life, driven largely by the extraordinary influence of technology and social media. For many adolescents, this environment is fundamentally altering how they develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally. These fundamental changes in technology have also impacted schools with the increasing prevalence of online learning, digital communication, and computer assisted learning. It has become crucial to understand how these technologies impact students' ability to connect with their classmates, teachers and the school community as a whole. Future research could investigate how digital platforms can be leveraged to enhance school belonging. Furthermore, additional research could further illuminate the potential risks they pose to belonging in terms of cyberbullying, social isolation, and mental health.

In conclusion, this section bridges the gap between theory and practice by providing specific, actionable recommendations based on the research findings of this

study. This section offers guidance that highlights the importance of fostering teacher-student relationships, social emotional learning as a way to nurture adolescent development, promote positive peer interactions, and cultivating a supportive school culture in enhancing students' sense of school belonging. Additionally, this section articulates the need for school belonging to be included as a metric in state accountability reporting systems. Last, this section also suggests areas where further research is needed. Through the process of identifying gaps and addressing emerging questions, this section provides a list of areas to further explore to contribute to our understanding of school belonging. This included research emphasizing the need for further exploration into student perspectives on belonging, the long-term effects of belonging on adult outcomes, and the role of digital technology in shaping these experiences. By exploring these areas, future research can contribute to a more holistic understanding of school belonging and inform practices that support all students in feeling included, valued, and respected in their school communities.

Final Reflections

This doctorate program and dissertation journey has evoked every emotion imaginable. The process was challenging, intoxicating, frustrating, joyful, and overwhelming all at the same time. This opportunity is something I will never forget or take for granted. As much as this research is to add to the academic world and our understanding of school belonging, it has also had a profound impact on my personal and professional growth. Through this process, I have learned that I still love to learn. I learned I am capable of incredibly difficult tasks. I learned that adolescents have a voice and we need to listen to them. Reflecting on this journey I am left better

understanding my experiences growing up and the adolescents I serve. Reflecting on this journey I am left feeling a profound sense of accomplishment to have finished, but also a profound sense of duty to serve. I am left with a deep conviction that all kids deserve to feel belonging.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE AND QUESTIONS

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to be a participant in this study. As you know I am conducting interviews as a part of a research project for my doctorate at UMKC. This study is designed to explore how adolescent students experience and perceptions of student belonging. Your thoughts and descriptions will help provide insight into how we understand student/school belonging to their school. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me what it feels like when you belong to your school.
2. Tell me what it feels like when you belong to a specific class.
3. Describe school belonging in your own words.
4. Tell me about a specific class where you felt school belonged?
 - a. Describe what you think made you feel this way in this class?
5. School culture is defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” Tell me about what types of school cultures create school belonging?
6. What sort of things can schools do to make a student feel like they belong to their school?
 - a. Tell me more.

7. Tell me about what types of experiences do you think cause a student to feel like they belong to a school?
8. Tell me about what types of experiences do you think cause a student to feel like they don't belong to a school?
9. Why do you think it's important for students to feel like they belong to their school community?

Closing: You have given me a lot of great information here. Is there anything else you would like me to know? Thank you for your time.

Appendix B

Research Study Parental Permission Form

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Ryan Blake. I am a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I am conducting research surrounding the topic of student perceptions of school belonging. The goal of the research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how students understand and experience school belonging. I am conducting this study because I believe the information could help improve schools. I would like your child to take part in my research. Throughout the summer, I will be interviewing seventh and eighth-grade students and if you agree that your child may participate in the study I will ask your child to participate in an interview, complete a routine written assignment surrounding the topic of school-belonging, and participate in a routine school culture survey. The written assignment and school culture survey are used for normal educational purposes at the school but will also be used as part of the research data. Completion of the interview, assignment, and survey is estimated to take no more than thirty minutes. The audio from the interview will be recorded and transcribed. The audio recordings will be destroyed directly following the interview after the interview has been transcribed.

Please note that I also serve as the principal of our school and I will be conducting the interviews and reviewing the data collected during this study. I understand that this may raise concerns about a potential conflict of interest. Therefore, I want to be explicit in stating that I will avoid using their participation (or declining participation) in any way either to support or penalize their standing in the school.

You or your child can choose to stop participating in the research at any time without penalty. You or your child can also choose to not be in this research for any reason. This will not affect your child's grades or standing at the school in any way.

All of the information I obtain from your child will be kept confidential. Your child's name will not be used on any of the forms they complete, and no information about your child will ever leave school premises with a name attached. The data from the assignment, survey, and interview that your child completes will be marked with a pseudonym I select but no one who works in the school will ever know the real identities that correspond with the responses of your child.

The information collected from this study will be compiled into a report that will be available for everyone to see at the Brookside Charter Middle School office. The report will not contain any INDIVIDUAL information about children. It will describe what groups of students said. For example, I might describe what "7th graders said" but I will NOT report what an individual student disclosed.

The school superintendent has approved this research. However, your child does not have to participate in the interview or written assignment, and participation or non-participation will not affect your child's grades or standing in the school. If your child does not want to do the interview or wants to quit after starting, other work will be given to do in the classroom.

There are no direct benefits to you or your child for participating in this study. Indirectly, however, students talking about their experiences may lead to a better understanding of how they experience school belonging. Other people may benefit in the future from the information about school belonging that comes from this study.

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information you complete and share, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help it carry out its function of developing knowledge through research. If you have any questions about the study that you are participating in you are encouraged to call Dr. McCarther, the lead investigator, at 816-235-2451

For questions about your rights as a research participant, or to discuss problems, concerns or suggestions related to your participation in the research, or to obtain information about research participant's rights, contact the UMKC Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office. Phone: (816) 235-5927 / Email: umkcirb@umkc.edu

If you and your child agree that your child may take part in the research please return a signed copy of this form to me in the enclosed envelope. You may keep the other copy for future reference.

If you have read this permission form and agree to have your child take part in the research, please sign below.

Name of Student

Printed Name of Parent

Signature of Parent

Date

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH ASSENT FORM

What is a research study?

Research studies help us learn new things. We can test new ideas. First, we ask a question. Then we try to find the answer.

This paper talks about our research and the choice that you have to take part in it. We want you to ask us any questions that you have. You can ask questions any time.

Important things to know...

- You get to decide if you want to take part in this research.
- You can say 'No' or you can say 'Yes'.
- No one will be upset if you say 'No'.
- If you say 'Yes', you can always say 'No' later.
- You can say 'No' at any time.

Why are we doing this research?

We are doing this research to learn more about student perceptions of student belonging at school. Student belonging is students feeling valued, respected, and included in their school community. We want to know about your experiences, opinions and ideas related to school belonging. We want to know this information so we can make schools better for students.

What would happen if I joined this research?

If you decide to be in the research, we would ask you to do the following:

- Written Answers: As part of a routine assignment, we would ask you to read questions on a piece of paper about your experiences with student belonging at school. Then you would write your answers on the paper. The answers you write down will be used in the research.
- Survey Answers: As part of the school's routine school culture survey, we would ask you to read questions and select answers about how you feel. The answers you select will be used in the research.
- Talking: A person on the research team would ask you questions about your experiences with student belonging at school. Then you would say your answers out loud. Your answers will be used in the research. The audio from the interview will be recorded and transcribed which means the recorded words will be written down. The audio recordings will be destroyed directly following the interview after the words from the interview have been written down on paper.

Could bad things happen if I join this research?

Some of the questions might make you uncomfortable or the questions might be hard to answer. We will try to make sure you feel comfortable answering the questions. You can say stop participating in the research at any time.

Could the research help me?

This research will not help you. We do hope to learn something from this research though. And someday we hope it will help other kids feel a stronger sense of belonging to their school community.

What else should I know about this research?

The principal of your school will be conducting the interviews and reviewing the data collected during this research study. If you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to be. If you do not participate in the research, it will not affect your relationships with anyone who works at the school. If you do not participate in the research, it will not change how anyone at the school feels about you. If you do not participate in the research, it will not affect your grades in any way.

It is also OK to say yes and change your mind later. You can stop being in the research at any time. If you want to stop, please tell the researchers.

You would not be paid to be in the study.

All information from the survey, the written assignment, and what we talk about will be kept safe/secure and will not be shared with other people.

You can talk with Ryan Blake at any time. Ask any questions you have. Take the time you need to make your choice.

Is there anything else?

If you want to be in the research after we talk, please write your name below. We will write our name too. This shows we talked about the research and that you want to take part.

Name of Participant _____

Printed Name of Researcher _____

Signature of Researcher _____

Date

Time

Interpreter Information

Date

Date

Original form to: Research Team File

Copies to: Parents/Guardians

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VITA

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