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Understanding A Sense of School Membership for Students with Disabilities in Two Middle Schools

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UNDERSTANDING A SENSE OF SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
IN TWO MIDDLE SCHOOLS

by

HEATHER HOLLAND

(Under the direction of Kymberly Harris)

ABSTRACT

In today's educational system, a conversation that is often deprioritized is the need to consider students' affective skills. One such aspect of this domain is how students feel as a member of their school environment. This need to belong is a basic psychological need (Goodenow, 1993); however, this is a critical component for students who may be marginalized, such as students with disabilities (Hagborg, 1998b). Hagborg (1998b) projected during his study that SWDs would have a lower sense of school membership than their non-disabled peers, but the results of his study found that SWDs had comparable rates. Hagborg concluded that it could be due to the small school size that led to these results; yet, no study since then has analyzed this scenario. Therefore, this mixed-method study aimed to uncover if students with disabilities would have a significantly different sense of membership rating as compared to their non-disabled peers in a small and average school settings. In addition, the second stage of research uncovered the variables or themes that impacted the sense of school membership for the bounded cases.

The results of this study showed that students with disabilities were able to achieve comparable sense of school membership ratings as their non-disabled peers in a small middle school and average sized middle school setting. In addition, all four bounded cases (SWDs in the average school, SWDs in a small school, non-disabled students in an average school, and non-disabled students in a small school) revealed common themes as influences to their sense of membership. These themes were: positive peer relationships, school personnel, school characteristics, and student involvement. Only minute differences in the frequency of categories within each theme occurred. Therefore, students with disabilities were able to feel connected in a small and average sized school at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. One of

the most notable aspects of the results includes the importance both SWDs and non-disabled students placed on engaging in meaningful course content and developing relationships with teachers and administrators. The results of this study are important for all stake-holders to consider when developing a learning environment that allows all students to feel connected to their environment.

INDEX WORDS: students with disabilities, sense of membership, sense of belonging, small schools, marginalized student, peer relationships, student involvement, school personnel, school characteristics

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by

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Chapter One

Introduction

The goal of the public education system is to provide a free and appropriate education to all students (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004); however, this is a complex task due the unique needs of each child. Teachers have the enormous responsibility of understanding their students in order to differentiate instruction to maximize the potential in each. These goals frequently involve more than academic expectations. Often, teachers are expected to provide both academic and behavioral interventions for students who do not meet expectations in regards to their academic and behavioral performance (Yell, 2007). Noddings (2005) advocated the need to consider the affective domain of student development as this addresses the entire well-being of the child, but the reality is that most schools list developing children's social-emotional skills as a low priority (Pickard & Toevs, 2006; Peleg, 2011). However, Johnson (2009) reported that schools which placed an emphasis on the affective domain of student development experienced increases in overall student motivation in the school environment. Furthermore, Becker and Luthar (2002) claimed that disadvantaged youth need instruction and guidance beyond the realm of academics in order to succeed in school. This leads to the conclusion that there is a need to conduct research on how schools can support the social-emotional needs of students.

Researchers have often considered that a student's sense of belonging is an important variable that increases when schools focus on the social-emotional development of students. This sense of belonging leads to more motivation and positive academic outcomes for all students (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Goodenow, 1993; Johnson, 2009; Juvonen, 2006). Sergiovanni (1994) advocated that schools often neglect to create a sense of connectedness, which increases a

sense of belonging, for their students, and reformers should focus on relationship-building within schools in order to improve student outcomes. The sense of belonging or connection that students develop with their school environment is a highly studied topic; however, researchers have used various names to describe the bond that students develop within their school (Libbey, 2004). Terms such as school attachment, school bonding, school connectedness, and school belonging have been reported; however, all these refer to a basic psychological need to belong. Researchers who use these terms to orient their research under a theoretical framework assume a sense of belonging or attachment is a basic psychological need (Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000).

One researcher who prioritized studying this basic psychological need was Carol Goodenow. Goodenow (1993) referred to a student's sense of school belonging as a psychological membership within in the school, and she described it as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). In her development of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale to measure the concept of school belonging, Goodenow (1993) used the terms school membership and school belonging interchangeably to refer to this feeling that students develop in the school environment. In her design of the PSSM, she assumed that there were latent components that comprised the variable of a sense of school membership. For example, she discussed that attachment was a construct within a sense of belonging, and subsequent tests to determine the latent variables of the PSSM proved in fact that attachment was one of the latent variables (Goodenow, 1993; Hagborg, 1998; Libbey, 2004; You, Ritchey, & Furlong, 2011). However, Goodenow designed the scale to represent the uni-dimensional variable of a sense of school membership.

As with other researchers who have completed work examining student attachment to the

school environment, this study will assume that a sense of school membership is a basic psychological need. Specifically, the term school belonging or school membership refers to the sense of psychological membership that students develop within their school environment. A referral to a sense of school belonging will be used interchangeably with the term sense of school membership. This construct is operationalized as a measurable variable that describes a basic need of for students. The goal of this study is to examine students' sense of school membership in order to produce recommendations for increasing this variable in order to yield positive outcomes for all students.

Significance of the Study

This study recognizes that focusing on the emotional state of students is important in order to increase academic and behavioral achievement (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Goodenow, 1993), and a student's sense of belonging is a great indicator of how students feel in the school environment (Feldman & O'Dwyer, 2010; Goodenow, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1994). Anderman and Freeman (2004) rationalized that one of greatest factors that impacted students' sense of belonging involved the policies and structure of the school environment. In addition, McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) conducted an analysis of the data gathered in the surveys administered during the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. These researchers focused on five questions from the survey in order to measure the construct of "school connectedness." It was determined that positive correlations existed between higher rates of school connectedness and positive classroom management climates, participation in extracurricular activities, and small school size. Thus, it can be concluded that if schools want to increase the sense of belonging or sense of school membership of students, then there are factors that can be controlled in order to optimize these.

The significance of the study can be framed within the context that many states have encouraged consolidation of schools and districts in the last decade. States such as Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio even offer incentives in the form of state funds when districts decide to rebuild in order to consolidate smaller schools. This initiative is led by research suggesting that larger schools and districts save money for taxpayers and lighten the curriculum load for teachers (Howley, Johnson, Petrie, 2011; Steiner, 2011). Often, research that supports the consolidation movement tends to focus on “input” variables related to teachers, money, and the curriculum (Howley, Johnson, Petrie, 2011; Howley, 1994). Studies that focus on variables related to student outcomes, such as achievement, student completion rates, and attendance recommend that small schools offer a method for increasing results (Howley, 1994).

Notably, school size has also been hypothesized to increase the outcomes of at-risk and marginalized populations. Howley (1994) concluded that economically disadvantaged students increased their school performance when served in a smaller school. In fact, Howley, Johnson, Petrie (2000) analyzed data gathered in the Matthew Project, a series of studies analyzing variables related to school size and outcomes, and concluded that school size should be contingent on the level of economic status of the individuals in a particular school zone; thus, more impoverished communities should have smaller schools. More recently, Brown, Finch, and MacGregor (2012) discovered that students favored smaller schools over larger schools, and the greatest variance occurred with minority and low socioeconomic status students. Thus, it appeared that minority and low socioeconomic status students benefited from small schools over larger environments.

Another researcher who studied marginalized students was Hagborg (1998b); he hypothesized that students identified as having a learning disability would report lower levels of

school membership scores than their non-disabled peers. His hypothesis was based on previous research that highlighted students with a learning disability experienced more social-emotional problems, displayed underdeveloped social skills, and had lower self-esteem due to poor academic achievement. Surprisingly, Hagborg's (1998b) hypothesis was proven false from the results of the study. He concluded that either the small school setting or the benefits of special education services allowed both groups of students to report comparable ratings of school membership.

Even though Hagborg's (1998b) study and Howley's (1994) is what many present day researchers would consider dated, few current studies exist on student perceptions regarding their connectedness to the environment. Furthermore, the need to tend to the social-emotional well-being is even greater for students who have been identified as at-risk (Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Brown, Finch, and MacGregor (2012) analyzed multiple groups to compare their sense of belonging to the school environment. This study documented that minority and low-socioeconomic students favored smaller schools, but the study did not examine students with disabilities. In particular, no research exists on students with disabilities, who are likely to experience stigma, develop a sense of belonging in their school environment. Hagborg (1998b) theorized that small schools may increase the membership ratings of students with disabilities; however, no research has been published that specifically analyzes if a small school environment increases the sense of belonging of students with disabilities.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the sense of belonging ratings from students with disabilities in a small middle school environment. Investigation of students' reports of a sense of belonging was conducted in small school environment and an average-sized, more

traditional school environment. In both settings, the sense of belonging for students with disabilities and typically developing students was investigated to determine if a difference exists between the two groups. Furthermore, this study investigated the reasons that students with disabilities report for having a high or low sense of membership within the specific school environment. The results provide insight on how these students, who have historically been marginalized, develop a sense of school membership in the school environment. The study is designed to provide information on how all students can be supported in order to achieve a high level of membership in a variety of school settings.

Conceptual Framework

Sociocultural theory. Different paradigms of thought exist describing how individuals gain and interpret knowledge. One prominent paradigm is called sociocultural theory, and theorists within this framework have espoused the idea that one's social environment plays a large role in individual development. These theorists claim that the social groups within which people converse are essential components in how individuals understand information (Wilson & Petterson, 1996). Further research suggests that higher-order mental thoughts rather than lower mental functions are influenced more heavily by an individual's social and cultural context (Gauvin, 2001).

Most researchers in this field trace some of its fundamental ideas to the work of Lev Vygotsky (Wilson & Petterson, 1996). Vygotsky was interested in how individuals develop ideas and a sense of self. He contended that individuals construct their own identities based on personal interpretations of the world. Sense of self is impacted by the collective actions of participants in one's social environment (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Thus, other people in the environment are integral in shaping one's identity. In addition, individuals construct knowledge

based on social and cultural influences. This construction of knowledge and identity is not immediate. Rather, Vygotsky believed that one's personality and mind developed over time (Vygotsky, 1993).

Another notable aspect of Vygotsky's work is that he spent time writing on the social context of students with disabilities. He concluded that peer interaction and social variables in the environment impacted the development of students with special needs (Vygotsky, 1993). Through his work, he developed the notion that students with special needs are a socially constructed phenomenon rather than simply a group with developmental irregularities. Even when the 'disability' is due to a developmental abnormality, the social consequences that the child experiences turn the abnormality into a socially constructed 'disability' (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007).

School is a critical social environment for children, and researchers devote time to the study of how variables in school impact learning and the identities of children with and without disabilities (Noddings, 2005; Rice, 2012). A main tenet of sociocultural theory is that children learn the values and social norms of a particular learning community (Gauvain, 2001). These values mediate how children shape their own behavior and interpretations of the world (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Therefore, individuals in the environments largely impact how students learn and feel about school.

Critical disability theory. Critical disability theory is a relatively new perspective recognizing that the notion of having a 'disability' is a socially constructed phenomenon (Taylor, 2006). This theory assumes that the concept of disability is mediated through society, which deems a set of characteristics as the 'norm.' All individuals who fall outside the parameters of these characteristics due to differences in academic, behavioral, social, and physical variables

experience marginalization (Frattura & Topinka, 2006). Conversations and research devoted to decreasing the disparity that society creates between groups are frequent; however, disability topics and agendas have lagged behind other more prominent marginalization debates such as gender, race, and socioeconomic inequality (Goodley, Hughes, & Davis, 2012).

With the influence of culture, the concept of disability is seen as the opposite of ‘ability.’ It is viewed as the antithesis of normal, and those identified as such are labeled as lacking the ability to be fully human (Hughes, 2012). Unfortunately, those who are ‘disabled’ perceive that their condition makes them less than what is considered normal, and this impacts their identity and sense of self. Too often, disabilities are thought of in terms of problems requiring solutions, and not simply accepted (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012).

The societal desire to remedy those with disabilities is a critical concept in education. At a very young age students begin to develop understandings of ability and non-ability. This dichotomy plays a large role in the development of students’ identities. Therefore, it becomes important to consider how the phenomenon of having a disability impacts students’ understanding and sense of self (Rice, 2012). This is why critical disability theory is an important framework to use when analyzing students with disabilities’ sense of belonging in a school environment. The social construct of being ‘disabled’ impacts those with a ‘disability’ every day. Undoubtedly, one’s sense of self impacts one’s sense of belonging in school and vice versa. Furthermore, the ways in which individuals in educational settings view and act toward those with a ‘disability’ also impacts the sense of belonging SWDs have within the school environment. This paradigm recognizes students with disabilities as a marginalized group in the school environment and society as a whole and offers avenues to counter these commonly held assumptions about individuals with disabilities.

Relational pedagogy. The majority of learning theories and strategies aim to increase student achievement; however, most of these lack specific characteristics that sufficiently recognize the unique relationship that exists between the teacher and student. Unlike traditional pedagogies, a pedagogy that centers on relationships allows one to consider how interactions between teacher and student play a significant role in the learning process (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Stengel (2004) argues that it is not simply the interactions between teacher and student that should be considered in the learning process; rather, he posits that student and teacher construct knowledge when interacting with an idea. The teacher and student must develop a relationship between themselves and the idea. Multiple factors in this process can impact the relationship. Thus, in order to understand how knowledge is constructed, one must examine the learning environment within this relational paradigm. Thayer-Bacon (2004) extended the relational paradigm to create a relational epistemology, recognizing that knowledge is socially constructed based on one's culture and contextual environment. She argued that individuals create knowledge as they share experiences with each other. Ultimately, it is the social practices embedded around an individual that allow one to experience the world in a particular way (Thayer-Bacon, 2003).

Regardless of how people draw conclusions about their beliefs and knowledge, they will always differ in their beliefs. The paradigm of relational pedagogy recognizes and welcomes the diversity that exists between individuals. Similarities and differences are what define human beings, and the process of understanding these and relating to each other is one way humans construct ideas (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). Hutchinson (2004) noted that by understanding diversity, individuals construct beliefs about themselves. Thayer-Bacon (2003) extended this thought in *Relational (E)πισtemologies*, and noted that relationships between individuals help one develop a

sense of self. Then, she explained that the reverse occurs when the notion of one's self also impacts the relationships between participants in a social context. The cyclical nature between the development of self and the relationship that exists between participants in a social context is a critical component in school. Bingham (2004) recognized that “[r]elational education [would] not provide the magic cure all that [would] solve all of the problems that plague the current educational system” (p. 23); however, relational pedagogy does provide a new and innovative way in which to address the issues that impact the current education system.

One of the main ways that relational pedagogy impacts education is that it recognizes the important relationship between teacher and student. Bingham (2004) noted that by valuing the importance of understanding how participants in an environment relate, then researchers can open new avenues of scholarship. Noddings (2005) agreed that researchers should analyze relationships within social contexts. She claimed that the current structure and beliefs of school do not support the endeavor of promoting caring relationships, and therefore focused on the need to find and nurture caring relationships. She reported that the aims and values of the educational system are misguided, and “...we have to set aside the deadly notion that schools' first priority should be intellectual development” (p.12). Instead, she claimed that intellectual development will occur in conjunction with the development of children's sense of self and understanding about how to care for the world. Therefore, teacher-student relationships can be a key aspect in students' conceptualizations of school. Since relational pedagogy requires researchers to examine relationships in school, this paradigm is essential in a study aiming to analyze students with disabilities' sense of belonging in a school environment.

Self-determination theory. It is important to recognize that a purpose when conducting a study involving students' sense of school belonging is to identify ways in which to increase

students' overall motivation and achievement levels in schools. Self-determination theory (SDT) plays a critical role in understanding how the environment and relationships in school can impact the motivation that students display (Deci & Ryan, 2012), and SDT affirms that environmental variables can promote either positive or negative development predispositions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). At SDT's fundamental levels, the theory provides a framework for understanding how students embrace their natural tendencies to learn, develop connections with individuals, and deepening one's knowledge of self-identity (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

In the school setting, teachers are often frustrated by students who are unmotivated and do not put forth effort in their academic endeavors (Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002). Research shows that motivation in students decreases with repeated failure (Stipek & MacIver, 1989), and it is often influenced by one's beliefs, interests, emotional stress, and goals (American Psychological Association, 1997). SDT recognizes that everyone has basic psychological needs that must be met, and individuals want to take an active role in his or her development (Gillard, 2010). This paradigm highlights that individuals must find competence, relatedness, and autonomy in the environment in order to experience healthy development and functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Therefore, in the school setting, educators must pay special attention to environmental factors that influence motivation for academic endeavors.

Combined theoretical frameworks. When combined, these theoretical frameworks offer an efficient way in which to analyze the problem of how students develop a sense of membership within their school. The theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural theory require the researcher to examine variables in the environment that influence one's understanding of knowledge and development of the self. These variables can involve the participants in one's environment and the cultural and social influences that are present in a particular setting. Relational pedagogy

extends the analysis of relationships in one's environment. This theory recognizes the importance of the relationship between student, teacher, and shared ideas within the classroom. It emphasizes the need to create caring and nurturing relationships within schools in order for students to develop a strong sense of self. This framework is excellent for examining relationships in schools when determining the factors that influence students' sense of membership. Next, critical disability theory is an essential paradigm because of its unique understanding of the process of being identified as a non-normative 'disabled' person. When analyzing how students with disabilities develop a sense of membership within a school environment, it is critical to consider the fact they these students have been labeled outside the majority population. Critical disability theory allows the researcher to consider the variables and relationships that develop in the school environment within the context of the student having a disability. Lastly, self-determination theory showcases how factors in the environment influence one's motivation in school. One of the benefits of increasing students' sense of belonging in school is that students will experience an increase in motivation as well. Therefore, students who demonstrate higher attainment levels for school membership are more likely to persevere and complete academic tasks. When all of these paradigms are used concurrently, it offers a way for the researcher to examine the factors that influence the development of school belonging for students.

Research Questions

This sequential mixed-method study was guided by the following questions. The first three questions relate to the quantitative portion of the study that determines if a difference in the sense of belonging exists between the noted student groups. Question Four provides an overarching question to guide the data collection process during the qualitative portion of the

research study. It is written so that students' perceptions on how their sense of membership in the school can be showcased.

1. What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a small school setting between those students with and without disabilities?
2. What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a traditional school setting between those students with and without disabilities?
3. What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership between those students with disabilities in a small school setting and students with disabilities in a traditional school setting?
4. How do students with disabilities differ from non-disabled students in their reports of belonging in a particular school setting?

Limitations and Assumptions

As with any study, a variety of limitations and assumptions occurred during research. During this sequential mixed method study, two schools were used as research sites. Thus, the sample of students served in a small school environment came from specific school in Georgia, and the sample of students who represented students served in an average school size came from one specific school. In addition, when discussing the criteria for determining a small school, it is important to note that Georgia has the second largest average school enrollments in the United States (United States Department of Education, 2012). Therefore, schools that are smaller in nature in Georgia may not be considered a small school in other states. These facts may reduce the overall generalizability of the results found within the study.

Another form of limitation in this study is the inconsistency in research in regards to the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale that is used in this study. Goodenow (1993) documented the validity and reliability of the instrument, but she considered one's sense

of belonging as a one-dimensional construct. Since these validation measures, Hagborg (1994) and You, Ritchey, and Furlong (2011) have conducted additional validation studies and determined that latent variables in the PSSM exist. The difficulty arises in the fact that these researchers disagree on the specific latent variables present. In regards to this research study, it is considered that the PSSM generates an overall one-dimensional score that represents one's sense of belonging. This is the method most researchers who used the PSSM implemented (You, Ritchey, & Furlong, 2011); however, it is important to note that the PSSM may have latent variables present.

During this research study, the researcher asked adolescence students to participate in an one on one interview where the student described their perceptions of being a student in a specific school setting. During this interview session, it was assumed that students answered honestly and completely. A second assumption with this research study deals with the concept of a sense of school belonging and motivation. Anderson and Freeman (2004) noted in their research that a stronger sense of school belonging increased students' motivation in school. It is naturally assumed that a greater level of motivation in school is beneficial to all students.

Definition of Key Terms

Adolescence - The time period when an individual undergoes puberty and transitions to adulthood. It is defined as that age span between 12 and 20 and encompasses a transitional period where an individual experiences both psychological and physiological changes (Columbia University, 2013).

Consolidation - Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2008) described consolidation as the process in which districts and schools undergo when they are combined in order to cut costs, provide broader academic courses, and increase other opportunities for students in rural

communities.

IDEA - Special education law in the United States is governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA is the acronym used to represent this piece of legislation that provides special education and related services to students with disabilities in the public school setting (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012).

Mixed-method Research - This is research that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to gain information about a particular phenomenon. In the case of this study, the data from the quantitative portion of the study will be used to select the participants who will be interviewed during the qualitative portion of the study (Creswell, 2009).

Motivation - Ryan and Deci (2000) considered motivation to be a highly valuable construct that “concerns energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality...” (p.69). In essence, motivation is a variable that produces a type of behavior. Internal and external types of motivation exist (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Sense of School Belonging - A sense of school belonging or psychological membership of a school setting was defined by Goodenow (1993) as “the extent in which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p.80).

Sequential explanatory strategy - Creswell (2009) identified this as a method for collecting data during a mixed-method study. This specific type of strategy allows the researcher to collect quantitative data during the initial stage of research. Then, the researcher collects qualitative information during the second stage. A third stage of research requires the investigator to synthesize both stages of data collection. In essence, the qualitative

information is used to help explain the results gained during the quantitative portion.

Small School - Barrow, Claessens, and Schanzenbach (2013) considered a small school as one that houses less than 600 students, but stated that a more ideal enrollment number was near 400. In addition, Leithwood and Jantzi's (2009) research demonstrated that student achievement outcomes were higher when students were in schools that held between 300-500 students. For the purpose of this study, a school is characterized as small if the enrollment is between 300-500.

Social-Emotional Development - Development in this domain includes how an individual identifies, maintains, and regulates one's own emotion. Social-emotional development also involves how an individual establishes and maintains relationships with others (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Stigma - Stigma is the result of prejudicial attitudes and unfair treatment of individuals who have a characteristic that is seen as objectionable (Thornicroft, Rose, Kassam, & Sartorius, 2007). These individuals have an undesirable characteristic that leads to forms of discrimination (Goffman, 1963).

Students with Disabilities - The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2012) noted that the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) specifies that in order for a student to be categorized as a student with a disability, the student must be a child with a disability whose educational performance is adversely affected due to the documented disability.

Chapter Summary

Research shows that there is a need to focus on the social-emotional development of all students (Anderson & Freeman, 2004; Johnson, 2009; Noddings, 2005). The need to focus on the

social-emotional development of students is heightened when students are in adolescence (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013), and when students are stigmatized, such as being identified as having a disability (Goffman, 1963; Rice, 2012). Social-emotional development involves helping students identify and regulate their emotions, and it also includes development in the area of creating and maintaining appropriate relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). In the school setting, a sense of school belonging is an aspect of social-emotional development. For this study, a sense of school belonging has been operationalized as a basic psychological need that pertains to the attachment or connection one develops to the individuals and variables within a particular environment (Goodenow, 1993; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). Research shows that a student who experiences a higher sense of belonging in the school environment is more likely to complete school (Bloom & Unterman, 2012) and experience fewer delinquency problems (Hawkins, 2004). Overall, Anderson and Freeman (2004) noted an increase in motivation occurs when students increase their sense of belonging to the school environment, and this sense of belonging is influenced by the peers, teachers, and structure of the school. Unexpectedly, Hagborg (1998b) discovered that students with disabilities had the same levels of school belonging when compared to non-disabled peers. He projected that a potential reason for this comparable ratings was due to the small school environment; however, no research to date has been implemented to examine this prediction. Therefore, this research study aims to determine if there is a difference between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers in a traditional and small school environment. Then, by gathering data through student perspectives, themes on how students develop a sense of belonging will be compared between groups and settings.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In order to fully understand how student self-reported sense of school membership scores are influenced by school size and disability classification, the problem must be framed within the context of several important concepts. First, a sufficient understanding of the stigma present in the school setting for SWDs provides background on the marginalization these students have experienced. Information of a sense of school belonging or school membership provides the foundation for understanding why it is pivotal concept to be studied, and the history of small school initiative is needed to understand trends in school organization. The importance of understanding the role of a student's sense of school membership is heighten when research shows that positive correlations exists between it and student outcomes (Anderson & Freeman, 2004; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Juvonen, 2006).

Few studies have examined how students with disabilities establish a sense of school membership in schools. Hagborg (1998b) hypothesized in his study that students with a learning disability (LD) would self-report a lower rating of a sense of school belonging compared to non-disabled peers due to the stigma of being identified as having an LD. When this hypothesis was proven false, Hagborg suggested that a possible reason for no difference was the size of the school; however, there is no research to support or refute this idea. Thus, to fill this research gap, research is needed on how students with disabilities develop a sense of school belonging. This type of research requires a thorough understanding of the marginalization and stigma that special education students have experienced in order to understand Hagborg's (1998b) hypothesis that students with disabilities would have lower self-reporting scores than non-disabled students.

In order to properly conduct a research study involving the construct of a sense of belonging or school membership, understanding the variable of school belonging is a must.

Research studies in schools that examine a sense of belonging or sense of school membership are frequent, and the researcher must understand the evidence-based data that already exists. In addition, Zins, Paton, Weissberg, and O'Brian (2007) argued that schools that use a curriculum focusing on the social-emotional development of students increase the sense of membership that students have within their environment. Therefore, understanding the role of students' social-emotional development and how the variable of "school membership" is operationalized and fits within this domain is essential. Lastly, this study will examine the school membership scores of students with and without disabilities in an average and small middle school setting. Since one of the independent variables in this study revolves around school size, a theoretical understanding of the small school movement and how the principles within this framework may increase one's sense of school membership is needed.

Stigma and Marginalization of Students

Stigma is a phenomenon that occurs when an individual has an attribute that is considered objectionable by the majority of society. Stigma is a process in which prejudicial attitudes and unfair treatment are shown to the person with the tainted characteristic (Goffman, 1963; Thornicroft, Rose, Kassam, & Sartorius, 2007). It is a social problem that impacts the perception of the individuals who are affected by stigma (Kazashka, 2013). In addition, stigma not only impacts those who are being inflicted, but close family members may also be impacted. Courtesy stigma is the term that is given to the phenomenon of when individuals close to a marginalized individual also notices the impact of stigma. An example is when mothers of disabled children are looked down upon by other mothers and society in general for raising "bad" or "unfit" children (Kayama & Haight, 2012).

Stigma can be displayed in terms of public stigma and self stigma (Corrigan, Larson, &

Rusch, 2009). Stigmatized individuals are not fully accepted socially, and they can experience discrimination that is displayed through loss of opportunities, coercion, and segregation from the majority (Corrigan et al, 2009; Goffman, 1963). When marginalized people experience unacceptance in society, this impacts their identity construction (Goffman, 1963). Kayama and Haight (2014) discussed that in some cultures parents are not easily willing to accept having a child with a disability. This hesitation and rejection can influence how a child comprehends and responds to having a disability. This can lead to self stigma where marginalized individuals begin to agree with the stereotyped beliefs (Cosden, Elliot, Noble, Keleman, 1999). Often, individuals begin to develop protective strategies due to the difference that they feel (Kazashka, 2013). Goffman (1963) noted that in order to compensate, stigmatized individuals will often make excuses for their lack of achievement, synthesize that the stigma is a learning experience, or use it as a way to criticize the majority of society. In some cases, individuals experiencing stigma will seek friendships and support from others identified as outside the normal population (Goffman, 1963; Kazaskka, 2013).

Students with disabilities. Historically, students with disabilities comprise a group that has experienced marginalization and stigma due to students' identification of having a deficit (Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Morgan, Frisco, Farka, & Hibel, 2010; Taylor, 2006). Under the paradigm of critical disability theory, it is recognized that the term 'disability' is a socially constructed phenomenon that represents the opposite of ability (Hughes, 2012; Taylor, 2006). In fact, individuals who do not meet the standards of 'normal' experience stigma and marginalization (Frattura & Topinka, 2006), and these individuals are seen as less than human who are in need of assistance (Kayama & Haight, 2014).

In school settings, stigma is evident when educators develop a different attitude about

certain populations of students (Kazaskka, 2013; Shifrer, 2013). Moses (2010) conducted a qualitative analysis involving adolescents who had been diagnosed with a mental illness and discovered that 35% of student participants reported experiencing stigma from school staff members due to the fear, avoidance, and under-estimation of their abilities. In contrast, this study also uncovered that 22% of the student participants voiced that they received increased positive and supportive interaction from school staff members. Other research has shown that educators perceive children who have been labeled as having more negative behaviors than children without labels who behave similarly (Allday, Duhan, Blackburn-Elis, & Van-Dyke, 2011). Even though the criteria for identifying students as having learning disabilities is inconsistent (Fletcher, Denton, & Francis, 2005), teachers and parents have more negative perceptions of children who have been labeled as having learning disabilities (Shifrer, 2013). Bianco (2005) found that even when students were described similarly, special education and general education teachers were less willing to refer children with a learning disability or emotional disturbance to a gifted program when compared to students without a label. Cline and Hedgeman (2001) attributed this occurrence to the low expectations held for students served in special education and the misconceptions that are held about gifted students. This trend highlights the marginalization that students with disabilities are likely to experience.

When students become labeled as being outside the norm, often the educational system begins providing separate, but not necessarily equal, educational programming to meet their identified needs (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000). Observational studies focusing on special education students with behavioral disorders have documented that separate education programs do not lessen the behavioral and psychological effects of their disabilities (Lane, Wehby, & Little, 2005; Levy & Vaughn 2002). In addition, based on a propensity score matching analysis

between students receiving and not receiving special education who had similar cognitive profiles and environmental influences, Morgan, Frisco, Fraka, and Hibel (2010) concluded that special education services had a non-significant effect on increasing students' achievement in math and reading. Furthermore, special education services were also unsuccessful in reducing the frequency of negative externalizing and internalizing behaviors in children. The only variable that demonstrated a positive correlation due to special education services was learning behaviors; however, for students placed into special education, who have background characteristics similar to students not placed in special education, their positive learning behaviors decreased. These students also experienced increased problem behaviors when compared to other students identified as having disabilities (Morgan et al., 2010). In addition, Cooney, Jahonda, Gumley and Knott (2006) analyzed the attitude and beliefs of students who were identified as mildly or moderately disabled and concluded that regardless if students were mainstreamed into traditional schools or educated in segregated classroom settings, both groups of students experienced stigmatism from peers and teachers; however, thematic analysis revealed that students were able to cope with the stigma and continued to have optimism and hope about their future plans.

Minority and low socioeconomic status SWDs. In a report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the US Department of Education (2000) documented that the majority of students who were placed in special education and at-risk programs were economically disadvantaged and non-White. Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, and Kohler (2006) noted in their research that socioeconomic status more fully explained the variance in student placement than race; however, the disproportionate representation of some minority groups is one of the most controversial topics in education (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Duron, 2008). IDEA required school systems to

put into place policies and procedures to prevent the misidentification of minority students as children with disabilities. Although the percentage of minority students in special education remains similar to the data set from ten years ago (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju & Roberts, 2014), the data has improved in some specific scenarios. Data reveals that the percentage of African Americans labeled as Intellectually Disabled has significantly decreased, but the number of African American students placed into special education overall has not decreased. This means that students are being placed into other eligibility categories besides Intellectually Disabled (Zhang et al., 2014). In 2009, the United States Commission on Civil Rights noted that African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, and Native Alaskan children were all minority groups who were disproportionate and overrepresented in special education. Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, and Osher (2010) documented that overrepresentation of minority students in special education was likely to continue due to differences in income, culture, and English proficiency between those who are and are not involved in the special education process. Others discussed that when evidence-based academic and behavioral interventions are provided to students, overrepresentation of minority students should decrease (Zhang et al, 2014).

Social-Emotional Development in Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act specifies that schools must provide strategies and interventions for students' academic and behavioral development (Yell, 2007). In terms of behavioral development, teachers across America recognize the importance of developing students' social-emotional skills during adolescence (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). In fact, the definition of adolescence showcases that this is the time period in life when individuals undergo physiological and psychological changes. The physiological changes involve sexual maturity that is often defined as puberty, and the psychological changes

involve individuals questioning their identity, questioning authority figures, and developing independence (Columbia University, 2013).

Therefore, there's a need to focus on the social-emotional development of students during this time period. Research shows that schools that place a greater emphasis on the developmental needs of students are able to foster a sense of belonging that increases students motivation in school (Johnson, 2009). However, schools often rank teaching social skills as a low priority goal (Peleg, 2011; Pickard & Toevs, 2006). This is typically attributed to the fact that the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and Common Core neglect to include requirements for rigorous researched-based interventions that focus on children's social development (Brysan, 2005; Fink & Geller, 2013). In 2003, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identified five core social-emotional areas essential for any young child's well-being: self-awareness, social awareness, self -management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Becker and Luthar (2002) warned that attempts to increase student achievement by raising academic standards alone will be unsuccessful, especially for disadvantaged students. Thus, there is a need to focus on the domains that CASEL recommends.

One of the essential components of critical disability theory is that it recognizes that being identified as having a disability can impact one's understanding of the sense of self; thus, impacting one's social-emotional development (Rice, 2012). Frequently, students with learning disabilities report higher rates of social-emotional problems than students without disabilities (Al-Yagon, 2012; Bryan, 2005). This puts them at risk for developing negative beliefs about the self, negative social perceptions, poor communication skills, and weak interpersonal skills (Bryan, 2005). When students with and without disabilities rate each other, students with learning disabilities are significantly rejected and neglected by their peers more often than

students without disabilities (Stone & La Greca, 1990). In the school where Stone and La Greca completed their study, 47% of the girls with learning disabilities fell within in the rejected category of peer groups. Al-Yagon (2012) conducted a similar comparison study that revealed that students with learning disabilities had higher levels of negative affect, expressed a lack of engagement, and displayed signs of loneliness.

Implementing classroom instruction focusing on social and emotional learning helps students participate in their schooling and develop an attachment to the setting. An increase in instruction focusing on social and emotional learning targets helps students develop satisfaction in being at school, increases their sense of belonging, and enhances their motivation to complete challenging tasks while at school (Zins et al., 2007). These factors ultimately lead to increasing students' achievement levels (Anderson & Freeman, 2004) and increasing their willingness to stay in school (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

Sense of School Membership

Researchers recognize the need to belong as a basic psychological need that occurs in a variety of environments and yields positive outcomes once met (Osterman, 2000). In education, this need to belong relates to the school environment, and one positive outcome is an increase in motivation for school (Anderson & Freeman, 2004). Deci and Ryan (1985) recognized that motivation to complete tasks can happen in numerous ways. When an individual wants to complete an activity for its own sake without earning something in return, it is said that individual is intrinsically motivated. In the case of belonging in the school environment, students become self-motivated and self-determined to work when it is higher. Variables that impact a sense belonging in the school in environment includes teachers, peers, and the organization of the school (Anderson & Freeman, 2004).

Researchers have noted that the term “belonging” may be hard to conceptualize in order to provide a concrete definition (Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). Therefore, Libbey (2004) conducted a meta-analysis that focused on studies examining how students felt connected to their school environment. She found that terms such as school connectedness, school attachment, school bonding, school membership, and school belonging were used across studies to represent the psychological need to belong to one’s school environment. There were minute differences in how researchers operationalized the variables, but all displayed theoretical assumptions that belonging to one’s school increased motivation and increased positive outcomes.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) rationalized that the need to feel connected or to belong was “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). In this sense, the needs to belong and feel connected were used interchangeably. Jose, Ryan, and Pryor (2012) used Baumeister and Leary’s work to study the construct that they called “school connectedness.” They concluded that a sense of connectedness was the same as a sense of belonging, both describing an inherent psychological need in humans. Osterman (2000) recognized that the need for relatedness was a basic psychological need that “involv[ed] the need to feel securely connected with others in the environment and to express oneself as worthy of love and respect” (p.325). Goodenow (1993) conceptualized the sense of school membership as a way that one feels respected and included in one’s environment (p. 80). Therefore, the terms membership, relatedness, connectedness, and belonging all represent the same basic psychological need. Throughout Goodenow’s (1993) research and development of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale, she used the terms school membership and school belonging alternatively. The PSSM is a scale that was created in order to measure the concept of one’s school belonging in the form of a

unidimensional variable. Since its creation, the scale has been adapted by researchers (Harborg, 1998a; Nichols, 2006), but the original scale consisted of eighteen statements. Students rate each item based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Goodenow (1993) found that a strong sense of attachment to the school environment was a factor that impacted one's sense of school membership. Harborg (1998) and You, Ritchey, and Furlong (2011) confirmed this conclusion when they determined that Attachment was a latent variable within the PSSM.

Besides Attachment, You, Ritchey, and Furlong (2011) also identified Caring Relations and Rejection as other latent variables within the PSSM scale. In 2011, Schochet, Smith, Furlong, and Homel used the PSSM scale with the latent variables identified to determine which factor or factors predicted the negative affect of students across a time period. They discovered that lower scores in Acceptance and Rejection contributed to the prediction of females having a negative affect, and that Acceptance was the only factor that significantly contributed to the prediction of a negative affect.

A strong sense of school belonging impacts students in numerous ways. Students who rated themselves as having a high sense of membership or attachment to school achieved higher on performance tasks, had more emotional stability, and lower delinquency rates (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Goodenow, 1993; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes et al. (2007) noted that increased school engagement negatively correlates to substance abuse and mental health issues in teenagers. In a similar study, Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) noted that a high sense of school connectedness through middle and high school not only negatively correlated to substance abuse, but also led to lower rates of academic problems, delinquency, gang membership, and sexual activity in late

adolescence. The opposite is also true in the fact that higher rates of academic problems, delinquency, gang membership, and sexual activity will lead to lower rates of school attachment. In addition, Van Ryzin, Gravely, and Roseth (2009) recognized the importance of examining how a sense of school belonging impacted students' psychological well-being, and through their study they concluded that a supportive environment, which is a factor influencing students' sense of belonging, led students to be more engaged in their learning, which promoted the psychological belief of hope.

Academic and social variables influence the ways in which students construct their sense of school belonging (Anderman, 2002; Goodnow, 1993). Cosden, Elliot, Noble, and Keleman (1999) noted that junior high school students had more negative self-perception scores than elementary school students in the areas of physical attractiveness and behavioral problems. Students constructed their beliefs around their own perceptions of the school context and their personal roles in the environment (Anderman, 2002). Therefore, membership and a sense of belonging can vary widely due to individual differences. Goodenow (1993) reported in her discussion of the implementation of the PSSM that a student's psychological membership was neither an internal construct nor a factor of the school environment, but was contingent on both the individual and the environment. Often, these variables are associated with peers, teachers, or school facilities (Anderman & Freeman, 2004).

Adult relationships and belonging. A primary way that supportive environments are developed in schools is through the relationships that teachers establish with their students (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Sidorkin (2004) noted that schools can facilitate the relationship between teacher and student by designing purposeful "events" or authentic learning tasks that students find useful. Relationships with teachers become even more

important during adolescence because students are trying to find support and guidance from adults outside the home (Murray, 2009). Relational pedagogy recognizes that how students learn is influenced by the relationships students have with teachers. As teachers teach information to the students, the students must interact with the ideas and the teachers in order to fully understand the information. Thus, knowledge is influenced by the type of relationship that exists in the classroom (Stengel, 2004). When students feel more supported by their teachers in school, they are more likely to enjoy school and have higher academic outcomes (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998). In 2009, Tillery found that adult relationships, either positive or negative, were the greatest factor that impacted students' sense of belonging when all other variables were controlled, and males were influenced to a greater extent than females. In addition, non-existent relationships with adults were potentially as equally important and destructive as poor relationships with adults in the school environment. Wang and Eccles (2012) found that students in grades 7 through 11 who received more social support from teachers and parents were more likely to comply with school rules than students who had lower levels of social support. Surprisingly, this study also revealed that teacher support had a greater impact than peer support in regards to students' emotional and academic engagement with school. Thus, it is important to recognize the potential for scholarship in the area of how individuals relate to each other in the context of schooling (Bingham, 2004).

Students identified as having a disability are also impacted by teacher-student relationships in school. Teachers show care through their ability to be self-aware and to recognize individual differences in learning that occur in the classroom, and they construct effective instruction and rapport with students by developing a constant awareness about how students differ in the learning process (Pickard & Toevs, 2006). Cook and Cameron (2010)

conducted a study analyzing special education teachers' beliefs about students and how students perceived their teachers' beliefs. Students who were identified as having either a learning or behavior disorder reported higher ratings of perceived teacher rejection than non-disabled peers. Students, especially those with emotional or behavioral difficulties, may be more affected by teachers' preconceived ideas about their performance and behavior, which would lead to the feelings of rejection that the students with behavior difficulties expressed. In 2009, Shaunessy and McHatton conducted an analysis of 577 high school students that included general education, special education, and honors students. Their analysis documented that students in special education encountered more frequent punitive feedback from their teachers, and themes of tension, disagreement, and frustration were common in special education students' descriptions of teacher-student relationships. When examining students served under the categories of learning disabled, emotional/behavioral disorder, or mild intellectual disabilities, students who claimed to have positive relationships with teachers had lower rates of delinquency compared to students served in these eligibility categories who reported poor teacher relationships (Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

Not only is it important to examine the caring relationships within schools, it is important to consider how adults can facilitate a sense of belonging. Noddings (2005) rationalized that intellectual development in students would not be cultivated unless educators took the time to develop students' sense of self, and Vygotsky (1993) claimed that the adults in an environment influence the identity construction of individuals. For example, Whitlock (2004) analyzed students' reports of school connectedness in grades 8, 10, and 12. These youth noted that their schools were safe and contained adults who established positive relationships; however, a majority of students reported that their schools did not provide them with power to participate in

school decisions. Often, these students wanted to be included in decision-making processes. Whitlock recommended that students would need to feel this sense of autonomy and power in order to feel connected to a school environment. Millei (2013) also noted that it is important for teachers to construct a democratic classroom that provides a balance of power between teacher and student.

Peer relationships and belonging. Acceptance by peers is a critical factor that impacts a student's sense of belonging in a school environment (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; You, Ritchey, & Furlong, 2011), and peers shape how students interpret information in the learning environment (Wilson & Petterson, 1996). Baumeister and Leary (1995) noted that the need to belong and achieve acceptance by peers is so great that individuals will seek and develop relationships at almost every opportunity. Adolescence is a critical period in social development when individuals need interpersonal connections, and friends become the central way to meet that need (Crosnoe, 2011). Students who have higher rates of peer problems report lower ratings of school belonging (Tilley, 2009). In contrast, students who report that they have supportive friends who engage in prosocial behavior have higher rates of emotional and behavioral engagement in school (Garcia-Reid, 2007). Even though positive friendships have a profound effect on students' actions, negative peer influences can have just as great an impact (Kurdek & Sinclair, 2000; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Kurdek and Sinclair's (2000) study found that students who had higher rates of friendships characterized by conflict and rivalry also had higher rates of disengagement from school. Students who develop negative associations with their peers often develop lower levels of school compliance (Wang & Eccles, 2012). It is important to note that gender can lead to differences in how boys and girls respond to exclusion from a peer network. Cheadle and Goosby (2012) concluded that distressed girls were more likely to face exclusion,

but distressed boys were more likely to seek out other excluded males and create friendships. Thus, differences in how students interact with their peers can greatly influence how they construct a sense of belonging.

Understanding students' social networks is important; however, when examining peer relationships, practitioners should be careful not to obscure students' perspectives. For example, Nichols (2006) discovered that teachers' ratings of students who felt rejected by their peers did not match the information provided by the students. In some cases, the students who voiced having solid friendships during the interview portion of the survey had been students that teachers had identified as at-risk for poor peer relations. It is also important to consider how gender differences may lead to variance in how boys and girls interpret and utilize peer support. Rueger, Malecki, and Demaray (2010) concluded from their research involving early adolescents that boys and girls are differently influenced by social supports, with females placing more value on the support they receive from their peers than males.

For students with disabilities, understanding the dynamics of how they interact with peers is especially important when trying to understand their sense of belonging. Under the tenets of sociocultural theory, students with disabilities develop their ideas on what it means to have a 'disability' from the peer interaction and social elements in the environment (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007). Estell et al. (2009) discovered that 5th grade students reported individuals who had a mild intellectual disability were most likely to be perceived as a bully in school; however, in contrast, teachers simultaneously rank these students as the most likely to be bullied. In 2013, Rose, Espelage, Monda-Amaya, Shogren, and Aragon analyzed bullying behaviors of middle school students with and without a specific learning disability. Between-group comparisons revealed that the groups did not differ in their victimization and involvement in bullying; however,

variables such as gender, race, and sense of school belonging were significant in the researchers' ability to predict who was involved in bullying activities regardless of disability classification. Thus, Rose et al. (2013) recommended that schools recognize the importance of providing interventions that increase social supports and peer acceptance.

School structure/policies and belonging. Osterman (2000) noted that the current structure of schools develops individualism and competitiveness rather than principles of community and collaboration. Large schools are seen as impersonal and lacking a community feel (Meier, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994). There is a growing awareness that these school policies that forgoes community for the sake of competitiveness may not fully benefit students (Noddings, 2005; Osterman, 2000). Sergiovanni (1994) noted in his text *Building Community in Schools* that schools do not fulfill students' need to feel connected to the school environment, and he theorized that school reformers should recognize that schools run like communities should be the norm where the focus on the relationships and shared ideas and visions are a priority.

There are several methods practiced in the educational system that do encourage a community-like atmosphere. Organizational methods that tend to increase both students' and staff members' sense of belonging include creating small schools, block scheduling, department teaming, and looping (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). These methods allow students and teachers to develop and maintain rapport by increasing the amount of time that the same peers and students spend with each other. This rapport will influence how students construct their sense of self and learn information in the school environment (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). In terms of school size, conflicting data exist as to the impact of the size of school environments (Feldman & O'Dwyer, 2010). A nationally representative data set showed that school size did not impact the

self-reporting of student belonging (Anderman, 2002); however, in another nationally representative sample of students, McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) documented that even though there was a small magnitude of difference in school membership between schools, school size explained the significant portion of the variance between school connectedness ratings.

School size influences the attitudes of teachers and parents as well. Walsh (2010) conducted a study that analyzed parental involvement in the high school setting and compared results based on school size; it was determined that larger schools in this study saw a decrease in parental involvement. In addition, size can influence parents' engagement and overall perception of the school. Goldkind and Farmer (2013) analyzed parent's sense of belonging, and they concluded that parents view larger schools as less safe and respectful. Then, when parents feel less safe and less respected, parents are unlikely to communicate with school and participate in activities. In the case with teachers' sense of belonging, Brown et al. (2012) found that teachers felt more supported by leadership and supported in their collaboration efforts in a small rather than large school; however, this study found no difference in collective learning and shared vision between a small or large school environment.

School size can also greatly influence students' involvement in extracurricular activities in the school environment. The work of Garcia (2012) suggested that smaller schools increased students' connectedness and willingness to participate in extracurricular sports. When compared to larger schools, students from small school settings felt more pressure to participate in after school activities, and this extracurricular involvement led to an increase in both their sense of attachment to the school environment (Jordan & Nettles, 1999) and their overall satisfaction with the school (Gilman, 2001). In addition, middle school students revealed in interviews that they

attributed some aspects of their belonging to extracurricular activities and the existence of facilities such as playgrounds (Nichols, 2006).

Even though schools' organizational methods and policies are the least researched topics related to how to increase student belonging (Osterman, 2000), research on school policies that increase student engagement showcases how students can be more connected to the school environment. Engagement is seen as a multidimensional construct that contains behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Understanding how students can become engaged with schooling can increase both a student's sense of belonging and motivation.

One strategy to increase student engagement is through the use of cooperative learning exercises (Osterman, 2000; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Cooperative learning allows students to work with peers in small groups, which is typically an activity that students want to do, and cooperative learning provides opportunities for students with low sense of belonging to work and gain the approval of more well-adjusted peers (Urdan & Maehr, 1995). These instructional methods also allowed students to take ownership in the group work and engage in purposeful dialogue. Students want to take part in collecting evidence and understanding their learning needs (Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, & Konrad, 2014).

Other strategies can also be used to increase the engagement of students. Faircloth's (2009) study reported that a high sense of belonging correlated with enjoyable instruction that was related to their real lives and that incorporated aspects of their own families, backgrounds, or communities. Sidorkin (2004) also contended that students experience a lack of motivation and disengagement from school because they did not produce purposeful products. He recommended that schools design activities or "events" that were purposeful and gave students the opportunity

to connect their products to meaning. Parsons and Taylor (2011) used the term “relevancy” to denote lessons that are authentic problems or based around community issues. These authors discussed how all students want to be held to high expectations and be taught to understand how they personally learn information.

Achievement and belonging. The most noted outcome for students who have high sense of belonging in school is increased motivation and achievement (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Goodenow, 1993; Juvonen, 2006), and this correlation is evident across ethnic groups (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). In 2004, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris conducted a meta-analysis of research studies that focused on school engagement and concluded that higher engagement led to increased motivation and achievement. Frericks et al. (2004) recognized engagement as a multidimensional variable that included behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. One of the essential variables that impacted the overall engagement of students was the need for relatedness, which is term used as a synonym for school belongingness or school connectedness. Similarly, Furrer and Skinner (2003) concluded that relatedness, belonging, and connectedness were homogenous and impacted a student’s interpretation and exchanges in social situations. They noted that in school settings these variables not only impacted students’ motivation immediately, but a higher sense of attachment to school allowed students to experience more motivation over time.

Understanding students’ sense of school belonging has implications for their academic achievement, but understanding how certain marginalized students develop a sense of belonging may be even more critical (Anderson & Freeman, 2004; Goodenow, 1993). In Goodenow’s (1993) discussion for future research, she mentioned that “extensive investigations of the effects of the psychological membership with students whose commitment to education and whose

social integration in the school setting placed them at risk” (p. 89) were needed. In their study of belonging across ethnic groups, Faircloth and Hamm (2005) highlighted that individuals of different ethnicities varied in how they constructed a sense of membership. For European American and Latino students, relationships with teachers, peer support, participation in extracurricular activities, and perceived ethnic discrimination were factors that impacted sense of belonging. African-American and Asian students did not require positive peer support in order to develop a strong sense of belonging. In addition, Gillen-O’Neal and Fuligini (2013) determined that when examining high school students of various ethnicities, overall females reported a high sense of belonging at the start of high school; however, by the time the students graduated, males and females, regardless of ethnicity, had no significant differences in their ratings of school belonging. When focusing specifically on African American adolescents’ sense of belonging, students who are oriented toward devising and planning future goals often earn higher grades and have a higher sense of belonging than students who focus on present goals. Overall, African American students who are more future-oriented, have a high sense of school belonging, and self-report a high sense of school acceptance outperform African American students who rate lower on the same measures (Adelabu, 2007).

Besides racial differences, one way in which students can differ in the school environment is based on identification of having a disability. William Hagborg is a school psychologist who has completed multiple research studies analyzing the sense of belonging students with disabilities develop in their school setting. In a study analyzing school membership among rural high school students with and without learning disabilities, results indicated that students with learning disabilities did not differ in their sense of school membership when compared to non-learning disabled students (1998b). This is in light of the fact that other studies

have shown that students with learning disabilities more frequently report social-emotional problems, higher rates of negative affect, lack of engagement with school, and loneliness within their peer groups (Al-Yagon, 2012). Hagborg (1998b) concluded that it was the supports of special education or the small school environment that allowed both groups to achieve comparable rates of self-reported school membership scores. In 2003, Hagborg compared 52 middle school students with learning disabilities to an equal set of non-disabled peers to examine how students' perceived social support and self perception influenced school belonging. Data analysis revealed that students with learning disabilities were more greatly influenced by peers and parental support when developing a sense of school belonging. In contrast, students without learning disabilities relied more on support from their teachers when developing their attachment with the school. Further support of the differences in how students with and without learning disabilities develop a sense of competence is provided in Hagborg's (1999) study, which revealed that high school students with learning disabilities relied more heavily on success in non-academic areas, such as athletics, for their sense of competence than students who did not have a disability.

In some cases, schools can create a strong sense of school membership within the majority of students, even those who may be marginalized; however, in these environments, it is critical to provide support for students who do not have a high level of belonging. Anderman (2002) found that students who felt unsupported in school reported higher rates of negative psychological outcomes despite being in schools where students had an overall higher sense of school belonging. Thus, in environments where a majority of students feel well connected, there is a great need to focus on interventions and supports for the few students who are experiencing a negative sense of connectedness.

Small Schools Literature

It has been recognized that social and cultural factors in a school environment play a large role in how students learn (Gauvin, 2001; Wilson & Petterson, 1996). The increased focus on the creation of small schools has developed in response to the need to create personalized learning environments that attempt to close the achievement gap between students (Feldman & O'Dwyer, 2010; Gates Foundation, 2008). Different models, under numerous names, have emerged as schools try to create these environments conducive for building relationships. By definition, small schools are traditionally smaller than traditional sized schools. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2012) calculated that the average enrollment for Georgia elementary schools, which included schools with grades six through eight, was 652 students. The average enrollment for Georgia secondary schools was 1,112. It is important to consider how schools are classified as either small or traditional. Howley (n.d.) argued that in some cases schools are classified as small because districts purposefully designed them to be small. When "small schools" are compared across states, small school size can vary tremendously. Howley used the benchmark of an enrollment of 400 for secondary schools to categorize a school as being small, and noted that elementary and middle schools should be half the size of high schools, meaning an enrollment of 200. Other researchers provide a range of enrollment to identify small schools, which have been identified as having 200-700 students (Johnson, 2002).

Small learning communities. One method of creating a small school atmosphere is to develop small learning communities (SLCs). SLCs are generated from large, comprehensive high schools (French, Atkinson, Rugen, 2007). Often, large schools are broken up into SLCs that are autonomous and have a certain theme (Levine, 2010). When converting a large school to one

composed of SLCs, leadership must gain buy-in from staff, parents, students, and the community. Once buy-in occurs, leadership must decide if the conversion will occur all at once, in phases by establishing a new small school each year, or slowly convert new incoming students each year to the small school format. After deciding the format of the conversion, then money to meet these objectives must be secured (French, Atkinson, Rugen, 2007). In the past, money for converting traditional large schools into SLCs came from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie, and Annenberg foundations. Combined donations for the effort exceeded over a billion dollars (Gates Foundation, 2008; Levine, 2010; Mathews, Pace, Brillman, & Tyre, 2008). With so much money directed toward this movement, the impact on student achievement became a research focus.

Structuring small schools. In some cases, rather than breaking up large schools into smaller units, school facilities were designed to hold a fewer number of students. Barrow, Claessens, and Schanzenbach (2013) characterized a small school as having an enrollment under 600 students, but ideally the number was closer to 400. In contrast to small learning communities, small schools have one administration per school that governs all policies and budgeting within that one building, and the small school has the flexibility to create its own vision to represent the students and staff (French, Atkinson, Rugen, 2007). In addition, small schools may have flexibility in district or state policies, assessment practices for students, and the type of curriculum that is taught to students (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2008). Raywid and Schmerler (2003) argued that small schools that dare to revamp instructional design, teachers' work, and the overall school climate are the ones that become successful. Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) used the term "reculture" as a way to describe to school leaders how schools must reorganize, and Barrow et al. (2013) agreed that it was the overhaul of the complete school

climate that make small schools a beneficial place for students. Conchas and Rodriguez (2008) showed that the outcomes of restructuring four large, urban high schools varied based on the school cultures that were created after the reorganization. All four settings had higher ratings for community building than before reorganization, but the sites differed in their abilities for increasing student engagement.

Consolidation of small schools. Even though there has been an initiative supported by funding to create small schools (Gates Foundation, 2008; Levine, 2010), a countermovement to this initiative involved states providing money to districts who consolidated and created larger schools (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie, 2011). Consolidation requires that either two or more schools or districts combine due to economic and educational reasons (Steiner, 2011). Historically, the United States has experienced a 90% decline in the number of schools since 1938 (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). Many states and districts consider consolidation as a way to decrease overall costs in facility management, increase the curriculum programs and options to students, and increase teacher quality by providing flexibility in curriculum and more training (Howley, Johnson, Petrie, 2011; Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008). Opponents to the consolidation movement cite much of the research that that has been used to support the increase of small schools. Those against the consolidation movement stated that larger schools led to poorer relationships between teachers and students, longer bus commutes, a decrease in parental involvement, and a loss of the community (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; Nitta, Holley, Wrobel, 2008; Surface, 2011). Those who are most concerned with the loss of community in schools recommend small schools over other strategies (Howley, 1994).

In all, the research varies on the outcomes of consolidation with results showing that consolidation impacts groups differently. This means that some students, teachers, and parents

are influenced positively by consolidation efforts while others in the educational environment experience negative effects (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008). For example, Howley, Strange, and Bickel (2000) reviewed studies within the Matthew Project, a project that focused on studies involving correlating school size to school achievement, and concluded that larger schools in affluent communities are beneficial; however, larger schools in poorer communities have a negative impact on student outcomes. In addition, Self (2001) conducted a qualitative study that uncovered information on the phenomenon of being a teacher during a consolidation process. Nine out of thirteen teachers in the study voiced that they enjoyed the change and felt that their careers benefited. In contrast, parents in a Nebraska community felt that their children enjoyed the social benefits of the consolidation process; however, the parents voiced concerns about the loss of community that was experienced. The parents who participated in the study did not have an alternative to losing their community school (Surface, 2011).

Howley et al. (2011) recommended that states should carefully consider the consequences of consolidation before asking districts and schools to consolidate. Research is inconsistent on if consolidation provides fiscal efficiency (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008; Zimmer, DeBoer, & Hirth, 2009). Howley et al. (2011) recommend strategies such as cooperative purchasing agreements, review state guidelines on financial management of small schools or districts, and distance learning options in order to gain the benefits of consolidation before reducing the numbers of schools. In fact, these authors cite that states should even consider deconsolidation as a way to decrease costs.

Student outcomes in a small school environment. Research studies demonstrate that there is academic benefit for students who learn in a small school. When conducting a meta-analysis on school size, Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) concluded that schools housing between

300-500 students or less were the most effective at increasing student achievement scores. In addition, Lee and Burkam (2003) conducted a study that used a sample of 3,840 urban and suburban students in high schools. Their results indicated that students were less likely to drop out when school size was less than 1,500 students. In terms of overall student engagement, Weiss et al. (2010) found that 10th grade math students who were in schools or small learning communities under 400 students experienced the highest levels of engagement.

Weiss et al. (2010) also noted that a limitation to small school research is that all students are different, and one particular school environment cannot meet the needs of all students. For example, Watt (2003) examined depression, suicidality, and violent behavior of students in grades 7-12 who completed the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Project. His results revealed that small private schools did not have an impact on the depression of males, and males who attended a small school reported higher levels of depression. Depression levels in females were not impacted by either the private or small school setting. Overall, Watt (2003) concluded that small schools did not hold an advantage for students. One explanation for the higher rates of depression in males in a small school setting can be found in Schussler and Collins's (2009) qualitative research involving how care was provided to students in a small alternative school setting. Themes emerged revealing that diverse individual attributes were more likely to stand out in a small school environment; however, the small school setting allowed teachers and students to build strong, positive relationships with each other.

Other advocates for the small school movement conclude that smallness alone does not benefit students; rather, these individuals argue that small schools provide a personalized environment for students (Feldman & O'Dwyer, 2010). Large schools require teachers to interact with large numbers of students, which makes it difficult to differentiate instruction to meet the

wide range of needs. In small schools, teachers are able to build better rapport with all students in order to develop relationships with them (Levine, 2010). The paradigm of relational pedagogy recognizes that better rapport between teachers and students plays a beneficial role in the learning process (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). For example, Crosnoe, Riegler-Crumb, Fields, Frank, and Muller (2008) concluded in their study with high school students that school size was negatively correlated to the sense of attachment students had for their school. Similarly, Murray and Pianta (2007) reviewed research on teacher-student relationships and concluded that organizing schools into small schools or small learning communities can contribute to the creation of positive teacher-student relationships for students with high-incidence disabilities. Overall, small schools perform better than larger schools on almost all indicators involving student performance and student engagement (French, Atkinson & Rugen, 2007).

The ability to create opportunities for teachers to build rapport with students is an essential characteristic of the small school agenda (Feldman & O'Dwyer, 2010; Levine, 2010), and building connecting relationships is essential at the middle school level (Murray, 2009). Teachers who are able to build supportive classroom environments that foster development in both the academic and affective domains have the highest rates of engagement in their middle school classrooms, and these teachers recognize the importance of developing relationships with all students (Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan, 2008).

The benefits of a small school go beyond the ability to develop caring and supportive relationships between teachers and students. Research has also shown that small schools and SLCs increase graduation rates (Barrow et al. 2013; Levine, 2010). In his review, Levine (2010) reported that SLCs had not produced any substantial data to indicate that these environments increased overall student achievement; however, participation in SLCs did increase graduation

rates, attendance rates, and achievement for certain students. Levine suggested that overall achievement may not have increased due to lower-achieving students staying in school. This implies that those who may typically score lower on assessments are more likely to drop out in non-SLC environments. Barrow et al.'s (2013) research produced similar results when they analyzed the small school initiative in Chicago. Students in Chicago were more likely to persist and eventually graduate, but students in these small schools did not earn high scores on achievement metrics when compared to students from larger environments. Spote and de la Torre (2010) discussed that schools in the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI) created environments that motivated students to persist in school; however, many of the graduates were not college ready.

The CHSRI initiative showcases how small schools may benefit marginalized youth. Even though the results about whether or not small schools improve average test scores for the overall student population have discrepancies, the small school environment allows minority and low socioeconomic students to outperform students with similar characteristics who attend schools that are larger and have large class sizes (Brown, Finch, & MacGregor, 2012; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulous, 2001).

Chapter Summary

This review of literatures shows that students who are identified as having a 'disability' can experience adverse consequences due to the stigma present in schools (Kazashka, 2013). This stigma and marginalization greatly influences how one constructs their identity in the school environment (Goffman, 1963; Kazashka, 2013), and a negative view of the self and poor relationships with the school environment leads to a lack of motivation in school (Anderson & Freeman, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Helping students develop a strong sense of belonging with

the school environment is a critical factor for improving a wide range of student outcomes (Anderson & Freeman, 2004; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Goodenow, 1994; Osterman, 2000). Furthermore, understanding the sense of belonging for marginalized youth, such as students with disabilities, leads to higher graduation rates (Bloom & Unterman, 2012) and lower rates of delinquent behavior (Hawkins, 2004). Hagborg (1998b) noted in his research that compared the sense of belonging for disabled and non-disabled youth, that students with disabilities had an unexpected rate of sense of belonging that was comparable to students without a disability. Hagborg hypothesized that it was potentially the small school environment that benefited the students, and small school research highlights that this organizational features does lead to positive student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Lee & Burkam, 2003). However, little research to date has been conducted to examine if a small school environment can influence the sense of belonging ratings of students identified with disabilities. Therefore, there is a need to examine if and how a small school setting can influence the sense of belonging for students with disabilities.

Chapter Three

Methods

This chapter is intended to provide information regarding the research design, data collection procedures, and participants of the study. This research study was conducted in order to investigate the sense of belonging or sense school membership ratings of students with disabilities in two middle school settings. This study determined if a difference of reported sense of school membership differs for students based on school size and classification of having a disability. In addition, this study examined factors that impacted students' sense of school membership to determine if there was a difference based on the independent variables of the study. The aim of this current chapter is to provide a framework and rationale for how data on students' sense of school membership in both an average and small school environment were collected. The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a small school setting between those students with and without disabilities?
2. What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a traditional school setting between those students with and without disabilities?
3. What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership between those students with disabilities in a small school setting and students with disabilities in a traditional school setting?
4. How do students with disabilities differ from non-disabled students in their reports of membership in a particular school setting?

Research Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-method methodology. Mixed-method research is a relatively new phenomenon; however, it is a research paradigm that is growing in popularity due to its

ability to use the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research designs (Creswell, 2009; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The quantitative data that is produced in the study provides precise information that is clear to readers, researchers, and policy makers (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Then, the qualitative portion of the research study allows for the participants to express their unique thoughts and perception of the phenomenon being studied (Lyons et al., 2013). Often, mixed-method researchers use this approach in order to deepen and broaden the understanding of a phenomenon or to use one method to build upon the results of another method (Creswell, 2009). Simpson (2011) proclaimed that this is not a research method that should be used without regard; rather, researchers should employ mixed-method research designs when the research questions require both methodologies, which is required for the proposed study. In addition, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) contended that when quantitative and qualitative methods are combined in a research study, implications for future research are better articulated than when a single method of research is used.

Research Design

When using mixed-methods, the researcher can collect data using quantitative and qualitative methods concurrently or in a sequential manner. Concurrent data collection requires the researcher to conduct quantitative and qualitative information simultaneously during one phase of research, and then data sets are compared for similarities and differences. Sequential data collection requires the researcher to collect one type of data initially, and then use the information gained to guide the data collection process in the second phase (Creswell, 2009). A third and final phase of research requires the researcher to integrate information gathered in both the qualitative and quantitative portion of the study. Therefore, sequential data collection can be timely due to the multiple phases of data collection.

For this research study, a sequential mixed-methods was employed that utilized the sequential explanatory strategy as the research design. A sequential explanatory strategy requires the researcher to collect quantitative data first and then use qualitative data collection methods to provide a more detailed explanation of the statistical results. A third phase of research requires the researcher to mix and integrate the data collected from both data sets in order to draw implications and conclusions of the study. By mixing the data, the researcher is able to yield a superior level of inferences than what would be generated from using quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Ivankova, 2006; Creswell, 2009). The strength of the sequential explanatory research design strategy is that the quantitative data set is gathered first, which provides a general knowledge of the research problem. Then, the qualitative segment of research gives more in-depth understanding of the statistical analysis by examining the participants' perspectives more closely (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

The central premise of the current study was to collect quantitative data regarding the overall sense of school membership scores for students with and without disabilities in two distinct school settings. Equally important as the overall results of the surveys are the themes that emerged on how students develop a sense of school membership. The first stage, or quantitative portion of research, involved the administration of the PSSM scale to all consenting students at both school sites. Then, qualitative data were generated through student interviews and field notes taken by the researcher. Mixing of the data occurred in the final stage as the researcher drew conclusions and inferences from both data sets.

Participants

The participants of this study included students from a traditional, average middle school setting and students served in a small middle school setting. The students in this study are in the

time period of life known as adolescence. The specific transition phase of adolescence can vary from person to person, but it is generally thought that adolescence is a time period when one enters puberty and ends with full adulthood. This occurs typically between the ages of 12-20 (Columbia University, 2013). Adolescence is a critical time period for individuals to undergo social-emotional development and physio-psychological changes (Bridgeland, 2013; Columbia University, 2013). It becomes a critical time to examine students' feelings because students are greatly influenced by peers and teachers (Crosnoe, 2011; Murray, 2009). Osterman (2000) discussed that students in adolescence, especially boys, are impacted and influenced by their sense of attachment to a school and the individuals that they encounter.

Since the current study was completed in two phases, participation must be generated for each phase. During the initial, or quantitative, portion of the study, all students served in general education for both schools were given parental consent forms in order to solicit participation in the first portion of the study. In the small school setting, all students identified as having a disability were given parental consent forms to participate in the survey. In the average school, students with disabilities who fell within the Moderate, Severe, or Profound Disabled eligibility category were not given the opportunity to participate. This was due to the nature of their disability and complexity of the PSSM. Students who fall within these eligibility categories have intellectual and adaptive function three or more standard deviations below the mean (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). Furthermore, students under these eligibility categories often have deficits with communication and language. Thus, these students were not given the opportunity to participate due to the complexity of language present on the scale. No student with disability at the small school setting was eligible under these categories or presented significant communicate/language delays that would impact their ability to understand the scale.

Consequently, all students with disabilities at the small school setting had the opportunity to gain parental consent to participate in the first portion of the study.

This study specified that the participants belong to either a small middle school or a traditional, average middle school. Thus, it is important to understand the context of the school classifications. Howley et al. (2011) noted that school size varies considerably between states. In some instances, a school that is considered small in one state may not be considered small in another state. Therefore, it is important to specify that both schools are located in Georgia. Next, it is important to clearly define the parameters of a small and average school. The US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012) identified that in 2010-2011 elementary schools in Georgia had an average enrollment of 652 students, which was second only to Florida with an average school size of 661. Schools included started at grade six and ended with grade eight. For this study, an average school is defined as one that is near 652 for its enrollment numbers.

In terms of how to classify a school as being small, researchers have varied in their definitions and number of students. Barrow, Claessens, and Schanzenbach (2013) considered a small school as one that houses less than 600 students; however, they noted that a more ideal number of students was approximately 400. In research about student achievement outcomes, Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) noted that student outcomes were highest in schools that housed between 300-500 students, and they considered a school small if its enrollment was within these parameters. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a school is characterized as small if the enrollment is between 300 and 500 students.

In this study, the average middle school recorded an enrollment number of 662 during the October FTE count of the 2014-2015 year. Of these students, 307 were female and 357 were

male. Roughly 76% of the students were White, 19% were Hispanic and 1.3% were African American (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b). The school meets Title I criteria by serving 418 students free lunch and 78 with a reduced lunch price. Therefore, 74.92% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch services (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). At the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, the total enrollment of students with disabilities was 94 students with 9 students being found eligible under categories that were excluded from this study; however, it was noted that the SWD population at the school was very transitional and many students left, entered, and in some cases returned monthly (S.W. Wyatt, personal communication, August 30, 2014). It was concluded that the average middle school consisted of 85 students with disabilities who met criteria for this study and the general education students totaled 568.

This school is organized in a traditional middle school fashion by teaching students in grades sixth through eighth. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that during the 2013-2014 school year, this average sized middle school funded 48.50 teachers, which calculated to a 14.33 student to teacher ratio. The school had three administrators, a counselor, a media specialist, and a family engagement specialist on duty. In addition, this school offered extracurricular activities that include both sports and clubs. Examples of these after school activities included: tennis, basketball, football, cross country, baking club, academic team, robotics club, and Future Farmers of America.

The small middle school contained 446 students during the October FTE count in 2014. Of these students, 215 were female and 231 were male. The racial and ethnic distribution of the school is as follows: 50% White, 44% Hispanic, and 1.5% African-American (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b). A total of 79.37% of the student population qualifies for free

or reduced lunch, with 293 students eligible for free lunch and 61 are eligible for a reduced price (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). Thus, the small middle school is comparable to the average middle school due to the free and reduced lunch rate and that students from Hispanic ethnicity are the largest minority group in the school. In terms of special education students, the small school had 76 students who qualified for special education services (R. Baggett, personal communication, August 15, 2015), and all of these students met the criteria to be included in this study. The number of students who were considered students without special education services totaled 370.

Not only are the schools relatable in terms of student demographic information, but the schools are both located within mid-sized districts in rural, northwest Georgia. In addition, the small middle school setting is traditional in the fact that it holds grades sixth through eighth. In the 2013-2014 school year, the school employed 29 teachers which created a 15.45 student to teacher ratio (National Center of Education Statistics, 2015). The school housed two administrators, a counselor, and a media specialist. Extracurricular activities included: basketball, football, wrestling, and other sports. In addition, clubs and organizations were available such as chorus, band, and academic team.

Another important factor to consider in a study that centers on the idea that special education students experience stigma and marginalization due to being identified as having a disability is the rate of inclusion that SWDs experience at the school. In fact, this is such an important concept that schools in Georgia are measured on their rate of students who are served in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and this information is calculated in a school's performance indicator score. This score is what is used to assess the overall school's performance against other schools in the state. For the average middle school setting, the percent

of students who are served 80% or more a day with their non-disabled peers is 61.4%. This fell below the 65% rate that the state sets as the benchmark. In the small middle school setting, 86.5% of SWDs are with their non-disabled peers 80% or more in a school day (Georgia Department of Education, 2014). These data show that the small middle school has a higher rate of SWD participation in the general education environment; however, it must be kept in mind that the average middle school housed a self-contained classroom of students who did not meet the criteria for this study.

Obtaining Consent

Before collecting any data, the researcher gained permission to conduct the study from superintendents and building principals at each of the school sites. The researcher met with the principals from both schools separately and reviewed the procedures and forms for obtaining consent, collecting data, and reviewing results with the school. This meeting allowed the researcher and building level principals to establish a time in the school day in which to administer the surveys and conduct the student interviews that did not interfere with core classes. Prior to any formal collection of data, the researcher submitted a research proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia Southern University. Data collection did not begin until permission was granted through the IRB. Students and parents were provided informed consent at the start of stage one and stage two of the researcher (Appendix E). Informed consent requires the researcher to explain to the participants the features of the study, possible risks, and the benefits of participating in the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

During the first stage, all students who met the criteria to complete the study at both schools had parent consent letters sent home. In the average middle school setting, the researcher met with parents at a Parent Teacher Organization meeting to explain the research before letters

were sent home. This was in attempt to increase the participation rate. In the small school setting, two separate rounds of consents were sent home. The first round of consents were given to all students. Then, the second round had consents resent for homerooms where low or no participation was recorded. Key stakeholders such as the classroom teacher and the principal announced in these homerooms for the students to remember to bring back the forms.

Parent consent was not the only form of consent granted. Students whose parents had agreed to allow them to participate in the survey were given the opportunity to decline participation as well. The consent statement for students was read aloud before they answered the survey, and the statement gave them the option to refrain from completing the survey if they did not want to participate.

The participant pool for student interview was generated from the students who completed the survey during the first stage of research. Participants were selected at random, and parents once again received a letter asking for consent for their child to participate in the study. For those students who were selected to participate in the interview, they were read a statement to affirm their willingness to participate before recording of their interview began.

Quantitative Research Procedures

The first stage of research involved quantitative data collection procedures utilizing the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale created and validated by Goodenow in 1993. The PSSM is an 18 item questionnaire that uses a Likert scale ranging from one to five with five representing a strong agreement to the statement (Goodenow, 1993). Students who demonstrate reading difficulties had items read aloud in order to alleviate misinterpretations. In addition, in order to help middle school students understand the Likert system, Nichols (2006) provided bar graphs to represent each number. A taller bar graph represents more agreement with

a statement. This same practice was implemented in this survey in order to provide a pictorial representation of the numbers.

The PSSM was administered to the consenting students at each school location. In the average middle school setting, the principal requested that the PSSM administration occur during homeroom. Therefore, the researcher divided the surveys based on homeroom and prepared information for the teachers on how to administer the survey. Students completed the survey and sealed it in an envelope before returning it to the teacher. This process ensured confidentiality among the teachers and students. In the small middle school setting, the researcher called students out from non-core academic classes to complete the survey in the library.

Data analysis. In both settings, all students were assigned a code to note if the survey represented a student in a small or average middle school setting and if the child was eligible for special education services. Names were erased, and the codes ensured individual student scores were not known. This coding process occurred before tabulating the average score for each survey. Therefore, student scores could not be linked to a particular student. Students earned an overall sense of belonging score on the PSSM by averaging the results of each question. Five items on the PSSM were reversed questions, and therefore required the researcher to reverse the numeric order to properly obtain the student's sense of belonging score (Goodenow, 1993). Point values were reassigned in order to remain aligned with a lower score representing a lower sense of membership in the school environment.

Analysis of the PSSM scores involved both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques in order to answer research questions 1-3 during this portion of the study. Descriptive statistics allowed the data to become visual by displaying the frequency distribution on a graph (Creswell, 2009). This method allowed the researcher to determine if the data were skewed or

had extreme values. Goodenow (1993) stated that an individual having a total average on the scale below 3.00 had a low sense of school membership. Therefore, these frequency distributions allowed the researcher to determine when and how often a low sense of membership occurred based on the independent variables.

Afterwards, inferential statistical analysis was employed through the use of a two way variance analysis (ANOVA) test to investigate if a statistical difference existed between students' sense of school membership based on the variables of school type and eligibility status. Significance level was set at .05 to determine if the difference in findings were significant. SPSS 23 statistical software was used to generate the graphs and compute the findings of the ANOVA test.

Before analyzing the data using descriptive and inferential data techniques, it was hypothesized that students in the small middle school who were served in special education and those served in general education would have comparable sense of school membership results. Therefore, it was anticipated that the null hypothesis would be accepted for research question one, which stated: *What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a small middle school setting between those students with and without disabilities?*

Research question two states: What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a traditional school setting between those students with and without disabilities? The hypothesis is that SWDs will have a statistically significant different mean than non-disabled students. It is projected that SWDs will have a statistically significant lower sense of belonging score than non-SWDs in the larger school environment. This prediction is based on the review of literature that documents SWDs experience marginalization based on the identification of having a 'disability' and larger schools lack a community feel due to the poorer

relationships between students and peers (Goffman, 1963; Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Howley, Johnson, Petrie, 2011; Nitta, Holley, Wrobel, 2008).

Research question three is also similar in nature to question one and question two. It states: *What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership between those students with disabilities in a small school setting and students with disabilities in a traditional school setting?*

It is hypothesized that the group means will be statistically different. Based on the literature surrounding small schools, it is projected that SWDs in a small school environment will have a higher sense of school membership than SWDs in the average middle school setting.

Qualitative Research Procedures

Throughout the second phase of research, the researcher took field notes of the experience in order to bracket judgments and begin preliminary analysis (Merriam, 2009). Anderson and Freeman (2004) noted that teachers, peers, and the policies and structure of the school are the three main variables that influence a student's sense of belonging. As a participant observer, the researcher was able to gain information about the relationships of the people under study in the natural setting (Kawulich, 2005). These observations allowed the researcher to note information regarding nonverbal communication, the length of time activities took place, and the overall way in which participants communicated with each other (Schmuck, 1997). These observations also allowed the researcher to take notes in regards to the overall climate and interactions found within each school setting. In essence, information was gathered as it occurred (Creswell, 2009). During these observations, a field notes protocol (See Appendix C) was used in order for the researcher to record descriptive notes and personal thoughts about the environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

The personal thoughts about the environment were a type of reflective journal embedded

into the field notes. A reflective journal provided a space for the researcher to record thoughts and feelings during the course of research. It allowed the researcher to process information, reflect on information learned from the participants, and reflect on the role of the researcher (Slotnick & Janesick, 2011). It is a tool that provided data during the data collection process and helped the researcher to connect and clarify ideas (Lamb, 2013). In addition, the reflective journal provided an audit trail that can be used to review the steps of research that have been conducted (Jasper, 2005). Within qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to know his or her own thinking patterns. By requiring that reflections to be written down as field notes are taken, a space for the researcher to recognize herself as an instrument for data collection was created (Slotnick & Janesick, 2011).

Even though the field notes were an important piece of information during the qualitative data collection, the largest source of information was the student interviews.

The sample of students interviewed included students with and without disabilities in both types of school settings. Simple random sampling techniques allowed all students within the specified group boundaries an equal chance of being selected (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). The goal was to interview eight students at each school site. Then, in each setting, four students with disabilities and four students without disabilities were interviewed. In actuality, two students at the small middle school setting had parents who declined their participation in the interviews. Therefore, three SWDs and three non-SWDs were interviewed at the small middle school setting.

The interview questions were designed in order for themes and patterns to emerge on how students with and without disabilities develop a sense of school membership. It is shown that children are able to express their viewpoint of experiences comparably to adults (Spartling,

Coke, &Minick, 2012). Therefore, these interviews enabled the researcher to gain insight on the individual experience of each case within the cultural context of having or not having a disability and the type of school setting (Lyons et al, 2013). Kvale (1996) claimed that interviewing during qualitative research provides a space for the interviewee to describe his or her beliefs and interpretations of the world around them. Thus, during the interview portion of this study, students with and without disabilities were interviewed in order to describe their experiences of being a student with or without a disability in their school setting. An interview guide was used to provide partial structure to the order of the open-ended questions that were asked to each student (Creswell, 2009).

At the start of the interview, the researcher built rapport with the student participant by explaining the intent of the research. The researcher explained that the purpose of the interview is to uncover the experiences of being a middle school student at that school. Whitlock (2004) noted that students felt empowered in the school when they had the opportunity to voice an opinion about their school; therefore, the aim of the introduction of the interview was to make the student participant feel comfortable and empowered in order to share his or her perception of the school environment. Grant and Sugarman (2004) noted that the use of incentives to retain participants is not harmful as long as the subject is not dependent on the researcher and the risk to do the research is not high, and Singer and Couper (2008) discussed that an incentive is an excellent tool of motivation for the student to complete the task. For this reason, the researcher rewarded the student participants with non-candy food items for participating.

Data analysis. During the data analysis of the qualitative research, the researcher read and reread the transcriptions of student interviews and the field notes taken. The interviews of the students were grouped to represent a multiple-case study design. Case study in qualitative

research is when the researcher intends to focus on a single, encompassing unit of information (Merriam, 2009). The cases for this research study consisted of: non-SWDs in the average middle school, SWDs in the average middle school, non-SWDS in the small middle school, and SWDs in the small middle school. The multi-case design required the researcher to first examine the data gained within each case, and then the researcher took all the information and completed a cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009).

During the initial or first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2009), chunks of information were grouped into relevant pieces of information and coded with the use of notations (Merriam, 2009). A running list of these notations were kept and reused when necessary. In some cases, the researcher wrote a narrative description of the code to ensure consistency of its use. Saldaña (2009) described a method of coding, named provisional coding, which allowed the researcher to generate a predetermined set of codes before the process began. Furthermore, Creswell (2009) noted that this method could be combined with the method of opening coding where the researcher created new codes based on the data gathered in the interviews and field notes. For this research study, the researcher used a predetermined list of codes revolving around the work of Anderson and Freeman (2004) that stated that a student's sense of belonging or sense of school membership is influenced by the peers, teachers, and policies of the school in a particular setting. Therefore, the categories of peers, teachers, and school existed before data analysis started. Codes within these included positive and negative teacher traits, positive and negative school policies, and positive and negative peer qualities.

It is important to note that assigning positive and negative characteristics to coding goes beyond simple descriptive coding. When a researcher begins to supplement the descriptive codes with the use of symbols to represent intensity, frequency, or directionality, the researcher is

employing a coding technique called magnitude coding (Saldaña, 2009). For the case of this research study, understanding the frequency of positive and negative traits are especially important when completing the cross-case analysis.

Even though the list of pre-determined codes organized into categories was helpful, the researcher allowed other codes to be generated. After reading and rereading the sources of qualitative data, the researcher began to isolate and rewrite the datum that was coded the same into a separate document. This practice allowed the researcher to ensure the validity of the code as it represented data throughout the interviews from multiple cases and field notes (Merriam, 2009). In some cases, two or three codes were grouped into a broader category and renamed to represent the true meaning of the data. In other cases, the code itself was unique and remained the same.

As the researcher combined the codes into categories, the previous pre-determined categories from Anderson and Freeman's (2004) work of school, teachers, peers became broader themes that encompassed the newly created categories. However, these themes still remained open and malleable to rewording and reorganization based on the data. After the researcher composed a comprehensive, yet reduced list of the categories, the researcher reread the qualitative data to ensure that all chunks of relevant information from both the interviews and the field notes could in fact fit into the categories generated. This process increased the credibility of the results since the categories produced had to cover both sources of information (Merriam, 2009).

Once the list of categories organized into themes was comprehensive enough to represent all the data but yet short enough to be manageable, the researcher examined the categories present within each case. The interviews that were transcribed were easily sorted into the

identified cases; however, the field notes could not be broken into observations made when interacting with students with or without disabilities in each setting. Therefore, the field notes were organized based on the setting of either the average sized or small sized middle school. During the within in case analysis, the researcher kept a tally of the number of times a category appeared. Then, the researcher went back and noted the categories that were not present within the case. This process continued for each of the four cases identified in the study. After each of the cases had been analyzed, the next step was to complete a cross-case analysis where information was compared across the cases (Saldaña, 2009).

It was after this holistic examination of the qualitative data collected that the researcher completed the final reflection and reworking of the themes that were present. Saldaña (2009) noted that a theme is produced as an outcome of the categorization and coding process. Therefore, the goal for this stage of the research to is draw conclusions on how students with and without disabilities in both settings construct a sense of belonging. This information was used to answer research question four which states: *How do students with disabilities differ from non-disabled students in their reports of belonging in a particular school setting?* The researcher used the themes that emerged to determine how and if students construct a sense of belonging differently based on school setting and disability status.

Even though the emergence of themes is the outcome desired in the qualitative research, this mixed-method study requires one final round of conclusions. After the themes were generated, these results were compared to the information gathered in the first stage of research. All of the information was used to determine if a difference existed between how students with disabilities construct a sense of school membership in a small middle school setting than other students in middle school. These results showcase how students with disabilities, who have

historically faced stigmatization and marginalization, develop a sense of school membership in a particular school environment. The conclusions of this study generated considerations for school officials and policy makers to ensure that marginalized students are supported in all types of middle school environments. In addition, the results provided implications for future research.

Instrumentation

This study utilized three types of instruments to aid in data collection. The first instrument used in the quantitative portion of the study is the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (Appendix A). This survey is designed to provide numerical data that are clear and measurable (Creswell et al., 2011; Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). The second instrument is an open-ended questionnaire during the qualitative portion of the mixed-method research design (Appendix B). The open-ended questionnaire is intended to provide students the opportunity to share their experiences and empower them by giving them an opportunity to voice their opinions (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). The third type of instrument used to collect data was a field notes protocol that kept descriptive field notes and the researcher's reflection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Psychological sense of school membership (PSSM). In order for a sense of school membership to be assessed, the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale created and validated by Carol Goodenow (1993) was used (see Appendix A). This is an eighteen item questionnaire that requires students to indicate if they agree or disagree to each statement on a five point Likert scale with five points representing strongly agree and one point representing strongly disagree. Initially, the scale consisted of 28 items; however, through its validation procedures, items were eliminated that impacted internal consistency and items with low response variance (Goodenow, 1993; You, Ritchey, & Furlong, 2011). Construct validation was

achieved by Goodenow (1993) by contrasting the means of groups and subgroups differences in students' sense of psychological membership in the school environment. As predicted, grade-level did not impact students' sense of school membership. In addition, as predicted based on previous research, girls reported a higher rate of school belonging in both the suburban and urban settings. Goodenow (1993) cited that the most important indicator of the construct validity of the scale came with the ratings of students who should logically be different in terms of their subjective belonging. In the suburban sample, students who were rated by their teachers as having lower social standings had significantly lower PSSM scores, and students in the urban sample who had elected to transfer schools in a system-wide restructuring process had significantly lower PSSM scores than students who elected to stay. In terms of internal reliability, Goodenow (1993) reported acceptable measures of internal consistency with scores that ranged from .77 to .88 for different samples. Hagborg (1994) conducted two studies using a middle school and a high school setting. In both environments, a strong internal consistency rating of a school-wide alpha of .88 was achieved. In addition, Hagborg (1994) retested fifty eighth graders after a four week interval had passed. Results of a Pearson r of .78 documented the test-retest reliability of the scale.

The PSSM scale has been used widely across research studies involving understanding students' sense of school membership in a school environment. Goodenow (1993) investigated and validated the results of the PSSM in four samples of middle school students; however, Hagborg (1994) conducted further investigations of the scale in middle and high school students. The results of Hagborg's (1994) research concluded that the scale is suitable for students in either middle or high school. In 2011, You, Ritchey, and Furlong identified 41 studies that used the PSSM scale. Twenty-six of these studies utilized the full 18-item questionnaire, and in fifteen

studies, the researchers abbreviated the scale in order to adapt it to meet their research needs. Goodenow (1993) originally published the scale as a way to measure the one-dimensional construct of psychological membership in a school setting. After Goodenow (1993) produced and validated the PSSM, Hagborg (1994) analyzed the scale to determine if latent variables were present. He identified the primary factor of the scale as belonging while acceptance and rejection were secondary factors. You, Ritchey, and Furlong (2011) conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the PSSM and then a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the results of the EFA. Their results were similar to Hagborg's (2004) results in that they determined the PSSM had three latent traits. In contrast to Hagborg's conclusions, these researchers identified and named the primary trait as caring relationships while the secondary traits were labeled acceptance and rejection. You et al. (2011) concluded that future researchers using the PSSM should use it as multidimensional instrument due to the nuances in data that may be missed when using it to measure on school belonging; however, no substantial work has been done to modify the PSSM to be a multidimensional scale. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the PSSM was used as a one-dimensional scale, and subsequently, the mixed-method research design of this study allowed the researcher to use qualitative data to uncover further information on how students' develop a sense of membership in a school setting that may be missed in a study that solely relied on quantitative data collection methods using the PSSM scale alone.

Purpose of the PSSM. Research indicates that students who report a higher sense of psychological school membership report a higher overall emotional well-being (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum 2002), report more motivation for completing academic tasks (Anderman & Freeman 2004), and have higher attendance (Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005). Goodenow (1993) provided an instrument for determining if a difference in a sense of belonging or school

membership exists for students with disabilities compared to students in the general population in both an average and small school setting. Furthermore, the PSSM identified students who have developed a high or low sense of membership. Goodenow (1993) used 3.00 as a benchmark score for overall average of the PSSM to identify students who have a low sense of membership in a particular school setting. For this research, the PSSM provides a method of determining if a statistically significant difference exists for students' sense of school membership based on the independent variables of student classification and school setting. In addition, it helped the researcher to identify outliers who have a low sense of school membership. A frequency count was conducted to determine if any of the cases examined have higher rates of students with a low sense of school membership.

Open-ended interview guide. The interview questions were semi-structured in nature. The interview guide (Attachment B) was used to gain insight on the phenomenon of one's sense of school membership based on having or not having a disability in a particular environment. This semi-structured interview took place face to face and offered flexibility for the researcher. A list of open-ended questions was used; however, due to the nature of a semi-structured interview, the researcher flexed the order of questions or asked probing questions in order for the interviewee to clarify or provide more detail on a particular answer (Merriam, 2009).

The validity of the information in the interview was strengthened by conducting pilot interviews to ensure that interviewees understood the wording of questions. Participants in the pilot interview provided feedback on the wording of questions and were given the opportunity to explain how they interpreted the questions. The participants in the pilot study were SWDs and non-SWDS from a separate middle school setting. In addition, validation of the findings from the interviews was increased through cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2009).

Reliability of the interviews occurred during the interview itself and the transcription process. During the interview, the researcher employed the strategy of member checking, where the researcher participants were allowed to verify the clarity and completeness of their statements during the interview (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Then, during the transcription of the interviews, the researcher checked and rechecked the accuracy of transcription. Furthermore, before coding of the information occurred, the researcher created a codebook to define a pre-determined list of codes. This codebook was malleable and constantly changed during the coding process. This process allowed the researcher to establish clear definitions for each code.

Purpose of the interview guide. The purpose of the interview guide was to give the researcher an outline of the questions that should be used in the interview. Since the interview was semi-structured in nature, the interview guide provided the backbone of the questions to ask; however, the researcher had flexibility in the order of questions and asked probing questions when needed. The face to face interview technique was useful because it allowed the participants to explain the phenomenon from their point of view and provided insight on how an individual experiences the phenomenon within a cultural context (Creswell, 2009; Lyons, et al, 2013).

Field notes protocol. A field notes protocol allowed the researcher to record events in a descriptive format and prompted the researcher to consider specific characteristics about the setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Information regarding the physical setting, participants, activities, conversations, and behavior were recorded (Creswell, 2009). The field notes protocol required the researcher to record descriptive information on one-half of the form and note reflections on the other half of the sheet. This provided the researcher with an opportunity to record personal thoughts and reflect on information that is being seen in the environment. These notes were the first opportunity for the researcher to analyze the phenomenon being studied

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 2009).

Purpose of the field notes protocol. Analyzing the data in qualitative research is best done while the researcher is simultaneously studying the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). One of the most beneficial aspects of the field notes protocol is that it required the researcher to write both descriptive and reflective notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Thus, the researcher began the process of synthesizing the information that is being observed (Merriam, 2009). As an observer in the environment, the researcher took notes in the natural setting. Information was recorded soon after it was observed, and uncharacteristically events were recorded that might have been neglected from the data if interviewing alone was the sole data collection procedure (Creswell, 2009). The field notes were used as a data source for strengthening the themes and patterns noted in the interviews, and the reliability of the results were strengthened by the additional data gathered through the use of the field notes protocol (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

Ethical Considerations and Challenges

As with any research study, considerations for proper ethic and trustworthiness procedures must be employed. One of the first considerations included the internal validity, or if the research measures what is intended, during this study. Internal validity also refers to the process of ensuring that it is the independent variables impacting the dependent variable of the study rather than another outside force (Merriam, 2009). In the first stage of research, the PSSM was utilized, and the validity of this scale was proven during its development (Goodenow, 1993). For the qualitative procedures, the process of member checking, where the researcher asked the participants of the interview to clarify and check the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations, was implemented (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2009).

Another concern for both stages of the research study involved assuming that the

participants accurately and truthfully answered the questions of the study. This concern involved students answering the PSSM scale accurately and students being truthful and thorough during the interview portion of the study. In order to overcome this challenge and increase the validity of the results, participation was voluntary for both stages. The process of providing informed consent allowed students to have an option to complete the survey and answer the questions in the interview. Providing this option of participation increased students' honesty and validity of the results (Shenton, 2004). In this research study, a group of 4 students at the average middle school setting elected to not complete the PSSM. All students agreed to participate in the small school setting. During the interview process, two parents at the small school setting declined to give their child permission to participate; however, for all students who returned forms, parents at the average middle school setting agreed for their child to participate. All students were willing to participate in the interviews at both settings. Furthermore, for ethical consideration, no names were used in this study. Throughout all stages, participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Another challenge of any research study is to discuss and limit biases as much as possible. Throughout the study, the researcher was reflective in order to reduce researcher bias where student answers were influenced based on elements such as the researcher's age, gender, an attitude (Shenton, 2004).

Overall, one of the main strategies implemented in this study to increase the trustworthiness of the results is the triangulation of data. The sequential explanatory research design of this study required the researcher to collect data into two stages, with the qualitative portion being used to help explain the results obtained during the first stage. A third stage of research, where all the results were looked at holistically so conclusions could be drawn, utilized the PSSM, interviews, and the researcher's field notes. By requiring results be apparent in three

sources rather than just one, the overall validity of the research study was increased (Merriam, 2009).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this sequential mixed method research study is to gain adolescent perceptions on how a sense of belonging or sense of school membership develops for students with disabilities who have been stigmatized by their disability label. The first portion of the study determined if a difference in the overall sense of belonging rating between students with and without disabilities occurred in each of the school sites. In addition, the data collected determined if a difference exists between the overall sense of school membership scores of SWDs based on school setting. Through this portion of data collection and analysis, research questions 1-3 were answered.

The second phase of research was used to provide the collection and analysis procedures needed to answer research question 4. This portion of the research study revealed student perceptions on how a sense of belonging is constructed in each of the school environments. Differences between how students with disabilities and students without disabilities develop a sense of school membership based on school environment were uncovered. This information was used to determine if a small school environment plays a role in how middle school students perceive their membership in a particular school setting. Overall, this analysis provided insight into how all students, but especially those who have historically been marginalized, can be supported in the school setting in order to achieve a high level of school membership.

Chapter Four

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine if a difference exists between students' sense of school belonging or school membership based on the size of their school or their disability status. Furthermore, this study examined how and by what factors students developed a sense of school membership. The aim of this study is to provide information on how students with disabilities, who have historically been marginalized, can be supported in their learning environment.

The current research analyzed the learning environments of students with and without disabilities in two middle schools in rural, northwest Georgia. One setting for research was conducted in an average middle setting while the other setting was a small middle school. The study utilized a sequential explanatory research design, and results were gathered during both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study. The sample size for the quantitative portion of study involved 156 participants at the average middle school, which is 23.5% of the overall student population. This sample can be broken into 133 students without disabilities, which is again 23.4% of the overall students without disabilities. This sample also included 23 SWDs who represented 27% of the overall SWD population at this school. In the small school setting, 108 students participated in the PSSM, which is 24.2% of the entire student population at the school. This sample can be broken down into 89 students without disabilities and 19 SWDs. This represented 24% of students without disabilities at the school and 25% of SWDs at the school.

For the qualitative portion of the study, students were selected at random from the pool of students who had completed the PSSM. The goal of participation for this stage of research was to select four students with and four students without disabilities at each school site; however, only three students with and three students without disabilities consented to the interview in the small

group site. This means that a total of fourteen students were interviewed in both middle schools.

The research findings for the study are reported based on the quantitative and then qualitative phases of this study. A discussion follows about the overall conclusions gathered when the results of the quantitative and qualitative were combined.

Quantitative Results

Quantitative results were gathered by conducting descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Students who had both parental and individual consent participated in the PSSM survey at both school locations. The only exception of students who were not given the opportunity to complete the survey were students who were found eligible for special education services under the eligibilities of Moderately, Severely, or Profoundly Intellectually Disabled categories due to the complexity of their disabilities. Nine students from the average middle school setting and zero students from the small middle school setting fell into these special education eligibility categories, and therefore were ineligible to participate in the survey.

The PSSM is a survey in which students rate 18 statements about their school on a scale from one to five. Five questions on the scale are reversed, which required the researcher to reverse calculate those statements in order to get a proper representation of the question. The answers for the 18 scale's items were averaged, yielding an overall sense of school membership score. The scale is designed to where lower numbers represent a lower sense of school membership or sense of school belonging. Therefore, the total sense of school membership score can range between 1.00 to 5.00. Table 1 shows the mean score and standard deviation for each bounded case.

Table 1*Mean and Standard Deviations for Each Bounded Case*

<u>Bounded Case</u>	<u>Sample Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Avg. School - GE	133	4.0329	.57790
Avg. School - SWD	23	4.0626	.57493
Small School - GE	89	4.1351	.51956
Small School - SWD	19	4.0663	.54098

The average PSSM score for each bounded case is relatively high; however, Goodenow (1993) discussed the importance of analyzing the distribution of scores to identify students who may have a low sense of school membership. She claimed that students with a PSSM score of 3.00 or under have a low sense of school membership. It is these students who may need additional social-emotional interventions to address their sense of belonging needs. Figure 1 provides a frequency distribution of the scores.

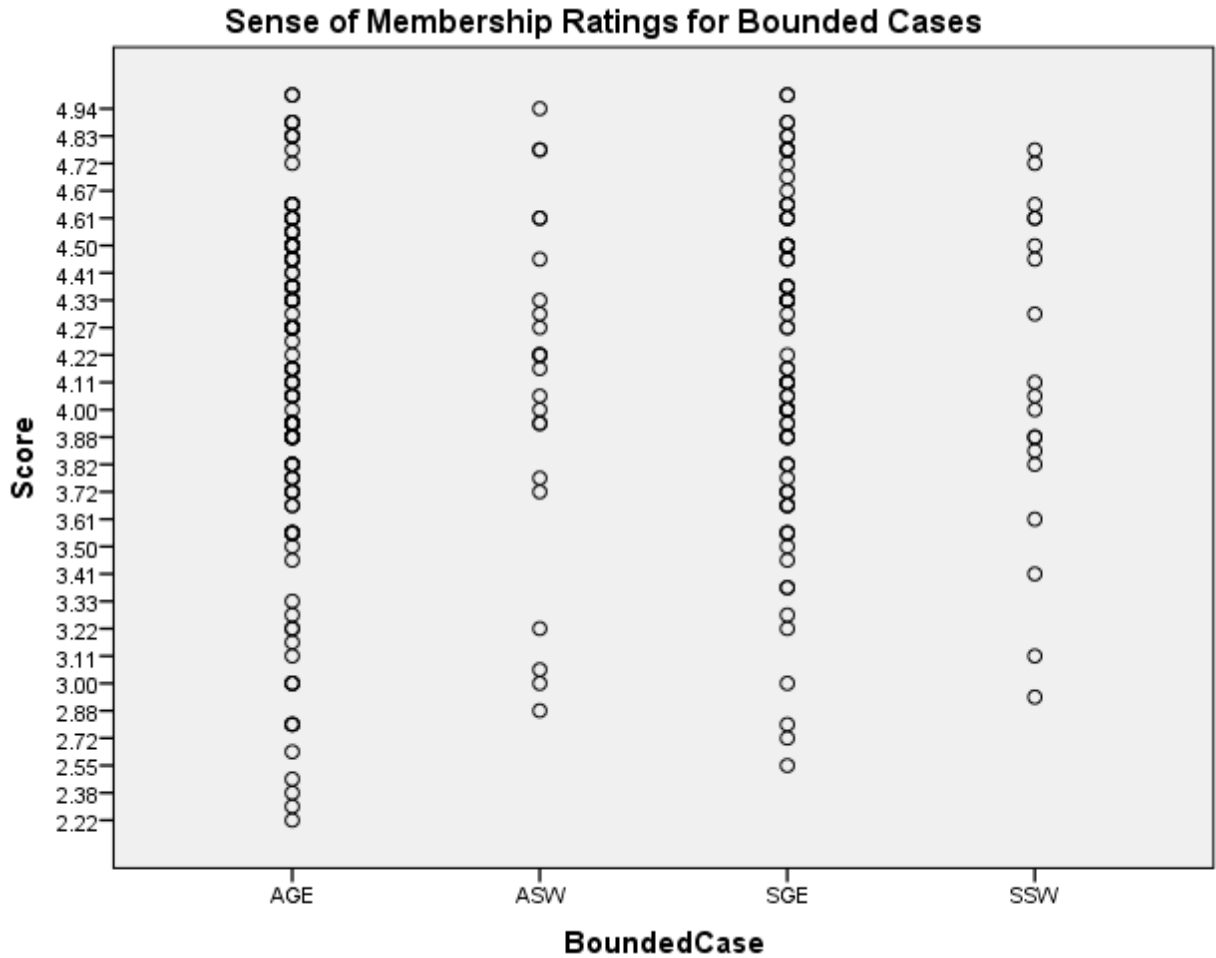


Figure 1: Frequency distributions of scores for each bounded case

This frequency distribution shows the range of student scores in the average school setting for general education students, in the average school setting for SWDs, in the small school for general education students, and in the small school setting for SWDs. Students scored at or under the 3.00 benchmark for sense of school membership for each case. Specifically, 7 general education students in the average middle school setting (5.2%), 2 SWDs in the average middle school setting (8.6%), 4 general education students in the small school setting (4.5%), and 1 SWD in the small school setting (5.2%). It is notable that the lowest three scores all came from the general education students at the average sized school.

After employing these descriptive statistics, t-tests were utilized to address the following research questions: *1) What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a small school setting between those students with and without disabilities? 2) What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership in a traditional school setting between those students with and without disabilities?, and 3) What difference, if any, exists in reported school membership between those students with disabilities in a small school setting and students with disabilities in a traditional school setting?* Based on their wording, each question required a different t-test based on the population. A t-test is used because it compares the averages of two groups. Therefore, this test allowed the researcher to examine the sense of school membership differences for each bounded case as indicated by the research question. The goal of these research questions was to determine if either the average or small middle school created a significantly different sense of membership rating for the students within the particular school. Significant level was set at .05 to determine if the difference in findings were significant. SPSS statistical software was used to generate the graphs and generate findings from the data.

The first research question seeks to determine if the sense of school membership ratings from students served in general education are significantly different than those of students with disabilities in the same environment. An independent samples t-test was conducted in order to compare the sense of school membership ratings between SWDs and non-disabled students in the small school environment. There was not a significant difference between SWDs ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .54$) and non-SWDs ($M=4.14$, $SD = .52$) in this environment; $t(26) = .51$, $p = .62$. These results suggest that both groups have very similar sense of membership ratings in the small school environment, with non-disabled students having a slightly higher sense of membership on average.

For research question two, the means of SWDs and non-disabled students were compared in the average middle school setting to determine if a statistically significant difference existed. A second independent samples t-test was conducted using these two designated groups. For this test, there was not a significant difference between SWDs ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .58$) and non-disabled students ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .58$) in this environment; $t(30) = .22$, $p = .82$. These results suggest that these two groups have a similar sense of belonging in the average school setting, with SWDs having a slightly higher sense of school membership on average. Both of these averages are slightly lower than the averages computed in the small school settings.

For the last research question, the means of the SWD groups at each school site was compared. An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine if a statistically significant difference existed; however, no difference appeared. In fact, the two groups were almost equal in means (small school $M = 4.07$, average school $M = 4.06$). Standard deviation for the students with disabilities were as follows: small middle school $SD = .54$, average middle school $SD = .57$; $t(39) = .075$, $p = .94$. These results suggest that students with disabilities in both school settings have very similar scores for their overall sense of school membership.

Even though it did not directly answer a research question, a two-way analysis of variance test, or ANOVA, was conducted to determine if the means of students' sense of school membership differed based on the size of the school or the classification of a student having a disability. An ANOVA test is similar to a t-test; however, it allows the means of multiple groups to be compared. Therefore, the means of each school based on size, students' disability status, and the cross-section of these can be analyzed at the same time. Reporting t-tests under each research question allowed for easier synthesis of information, but running multiple t-tests can create a potential for a Type I error. A solution to this problem was to conduct the ANOVA test

to reduce this chance.

Ultimately, the ANOVA results supported the findings of the t-tests. The two-way ANOVA test failed to reveal a main effect based on school size, $F(1, 260) = .316, p = .575, \alpha = .05$. The ANOVA test also failed to reveal a main effect based on student disability classification, $F(1, 260) = .043, p = .836$. When analyzing the interaction of school size and student disability classification, no main effect was revealed, $F(1, 260) = .273, p = .602$. These results show that neither school size nor student disability classification had an impact on students' school membership ratings.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data collection strategies employed during this study included interviews and field notes. The goal of this portion of the research was to answer the follow question: *4) How do students with disabilities differ from non-disabled students in their reports of belonging in a particular school setting?*

A multi-case study design was utilized for this stage of research. The bounded cases were as follows: general education students in the average school, SWDs in the average school, general education students in the small school, and SWDs in the small school. Four students were interviewed for each case at the average school, which yielded eight students in total, and three students were interviewed for each case at the small school, which yielded six students total. Field notes were also taken at each school setting.

When starting the data analysis phase, the researcher utilized Anderson and Freeman's (2004) results which concluded that a sense of school belonging was impacted by peers, teachers, and school policies. These data were used to construct a predetermined set of categories with codes that included: positive and negative teacher traits, positive and negative school policies,

and positive and negative peer qualities. These categories and codes were flexible and were regrouped to become the themes and categories produced with the open coding.

After the completion of the within case and cross-case analysis, four overarching themes emerged as factors that impact students' sense of school membership. These were POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS, SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS, STUDENT INVOLVEMENT, and SCHOOL PERSONNEL. Notably, all four bounded cases displayed similar categories within these themes with some relative differences noted. These relative differences emerged due to the frequency or lack of appearance of some categories under an over-arching theme. The following table shows these differences.

Table 2

Frequency Count of Categories for Each Bounded Case

Frequency Count of Categories for Each Bounded Case			
General Education Students – Average MS		General Education Students – Small MS	
<u>Positive Peer Relationships</u> Supportive Friendships (4) Peer Positive Trait (6) Peer Negative Trait (0) Friendship Influence (1)	<u>School Characteristics</u> School Positive Trait (1) School Negative Trait (2) School Facility Negative Trait (2) School Facility Positive Trait (2) Safety/No Bullying (1) Bullying Present (1) No Recess/Free Time (1)	<u>Positive Peer Relationships</u> Supportive Friendships (7) Peer Positive Trait (5) Peer Negative Trait (0) Friendship Influence (0)	<u>School Characteristics</u> School Positive Trait (5) School Negative Trait (1) School Facility Negative Trait (1) School Facility Positive Trait (5) Safety/No Bullying (3) Bullying Present (0) No Recess/Free Time (1)
<u>School Personnel</u> Teacher Positive Trait (7) Teacher Negative Trait (1) Principal Positive Trait (2) Teacher Rapport (6) Teacher Ensures Understanding (7)	<u>Student Involvement</u> Student Engagement (7) Student Misbehavior (1) Student Ownership (3) Sports/Activities Positive (4) Sports/Activities Negative (1)	<u>School Personnel</u> Teacher Positive Trait (5) Teacher Negative Trait (0) Principal Positive Trait (1) Teacher Rapport (4) Teacher Ensures Understanding (4)	<u>Student Involvement</u> Student Engagement (6) Student Misbehavior (2) Student Ownership (2) Sports/Activities Positive (0) Sports/Activities Negative (0)
SWDs – Average MS		SWDs – Small MS	
<u>Positive Peer Relationships</u> Supportive Friendships (9) Peer Positive Trait (5) Peer Negative Trait (0) Friendship Influence (1)	<u>School Characteristics</u> School Positive Trait (3) School Negative Trait (4) School Facility Negative Trait (1) School Facility Positive Trait (3)	<u>Positive Peer Relationships</u> Supportive Friendships (3) Peer Positive Trait (4) Peer Negative Trait (1) Friendship Influence (1)	<u>School Characteristics</u> School Positive Trait (3) School Negative Trait (2) School Facility Negative Trait (0) School Facility Positive Trait (0)

	Safety/No Bullying (0) Bullying Present (2) No Recess/Free Time (3)		Safety/No Bullying (1) Bullying Present (1) No Recess/Free Time (1)
School Personnel Teacher Positive Trait (4) Teacher Negative Trait (1) Principal Positive Trait (2) Teacher Rapport (5) Teacher Ensures Understanding (6)	Student Involvement Student Engagement (3) Student Misbehavior (4) Student Ownership (3) Sports/Activities Positive (5) Sports/Activities Negative (1)	School Personnel Teacher Positive Trait (5) Teacher Negative Trait (5) Principal Positive Trait (0) Teacher Rapport (1) Teacher Ensures Understanding (5)	Student Involvement Student Engagement (3) Student Misbehavior (4) Student Ownership (2) Sports/Activities Positive (4) Sports/Activities Negative (0)

Positive Peer Relationships

Students from all four bounded cases discussed the influence that peers had on their sense of membership within the school. As students discussed their classmates and peers in the building, an overwhelming majority of interviewees commented on the support system provided by their peers and on the positive influence their peers had over them. A general education student in the average middle school was the only interviewee out of the fourteen interviews who made comments that represented negative peer relationships. Cross-case analysis revealed that regardless of being identified as having a disability or not, students made positive remarks about their friendships. For example, a general education student in the average middle school described his friends as “fun and nice. And they’re always understanding. They always support me.” In the small middle school setting, an SWD described the ceremony that she and her best friend share each year to commemorate the day they became friends. She stated that it was for “the day we met. We bring stuff from home, to celebrate it or something.”

In addition to the positive remarks students made about their friends, some interviewees directly connected their sense of school belonging to their friends. A non-disabled student in the average middle school setting claimed that a strong sense of school belonging “feels like I’m not alone. I have other students that are there to help me up if I fall down in some way.” Furthermore, an SWD at this same school described her friends as the item that she liked best

about the school. An SWD at the small middle school reported a similar reason for feeling a sense of belonging at the school. “I have a lot of good friends here and there’s not very many people here I don’t like.”

These comments highlight the importance these middle school students placed on positive peer relationships. Case within case and cross-case analysis revealed that each case displayed the categories of supportive friendships, positive friendship traits, and positive friendship influence. Furthermore, when considering that one less student was interviewed for each of the cases at the small school setting, the frequency that these categories emerged within in case was relatively the same.

School Characteristics

The middle school students were asked to discuss characteristics of their school and how these relate to their overall sense of school membership or attachment. All cases revealed both positive and negative categories about their school. Positive categories included: “no bullying/safety” and “positive school trait.” Negative categories included: “bullying” and “negative school trait.” These categories were coded throughout the interview transcripts, not only during targeted questions about school characteristics; therefore, it can be concluded that SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS emerged as a core theme during interviews.

When analyzing how the categories emerged among cases beneath this over-arching theme, one relative, but notable, difference was the frequency of positive and negative school traits. In the small middle school setting, both non-SWDs and SWDs reported a higher frequency of “positive school traits” when compared to “negative school traits.” In the average middle school setting, a higher frequency of “negative school trait” over “positive school trait” emerged for both cases. Overall, both SWDs and non-SWDs at the average middle school expressed a

more negative tone about school structures.

When analyzing the “negative school traits” category within the average middle school setting, the most frequent complaint made by over half of students interviewed was the taste and amount of food they were given during lunch. One student with a disability stated, “It doesn’t taste right. I, like, bring a home lunch, and everybody will come running to me and say, ‘Ooh can I have that? Can I have that?’ because the school lunch doesn’t taste good, and it doesn’t give you enough food.” Even though the overall average of sense of school membership scores for this school are relatively high and “positive school traits” occurred more often, this is still an important consideration for school officials due to the frequency of comments.

When students from all cases discussed positive traits of the school, the statements highlighted the strong sense of belonging they felt for their environment. For example, at the small school setting, a student who was not served in special education thought “...this school has a lot of spirit and its fun here. Our teachers don’t make everything boring. They try to make it interesting and fun.” Similarly, a student with a disability at the small middle school discussed how he would be “sad to move away from this school and miss all the teachers.” This specific statement was dually coded to represent a positive trait about the school and the student’s rapport with the teachers. In the average middle school setting, a student with a disability remarked that “there’s a lot of stuff here that’s really good. It’s hard for this school not to be liked.” Another student with disability at this school stated that he felt connected to the school “because this school is like a home to me. It’s where I get my education.”

Other important categories besides “positive and negative school traits” emerged during the data analysis phase. Categories involving the “positive and negative characteristics of the school building,” “bullies,” and “no bullying/safety” were revealed. When looking at the

frequencies of these categories, “bullying” emerged more clearly for SWDs at the average middle school setting than any other case. The highest frequency of no bullying/safety occurred in the small school general education population, even though this case involved one less interviewee than the average middle school setting.

During the data analysis phase, it is important to not only examine the themes that appear, but to also count the frequencies of answers. This study had interview questions that allowed for these descriptive statistics. Specifically, when students were asked to discuss the size of the student body, answers were recorded in order to complete the within case and cross-case analyses. In the small middle school setting, all students described the school size positively, with one SWD going as far as saying, “Perfect.” In the average middle school setting, most of the students stated the student body count was a good number; however, an SWD claimed that “it can get crowded.” Furthermore, a non-SWD in average middle school setting stated that the overall number was appropriate, but the advance classes could “get crowded at times.”

School Personnel

Anderson and Freeman (2004) uncovered in their study three main variables that impacted a student’s sense of belonging: peers, teachers, and school characteristics. In this study, the data revealed that it is more than teachers who impact a student’s sense of belonging, and therefore the theme of SCHOOL PERSONNEL appeared. Both field notes and interviews showcased positive relationships between students and a wide range of school officials. These officials included staff, coaches, and a special emphasis on the role of the principal.

The “positive impact of the principal” category appeared within the interviews in the average middle school setting and in the field notes for the small school setting. When being interviewed, one SWD at the average middle school stated that “Feeling connected is whenever I

go to the principal. He smiles at me and gives me a firm handshake and says, ‘Great job.’ That makes my day.” A non-SWD in this setting reported that “We have principals [who] actually care about us and stuff...” During a data collection day at the small middle school setting, observations included students stopping by the principal’s office and asking to chat. These discussions involved very difficult personal situations, and the principal devoted time and attention to the students’ needs. The field notes also revealed the positive impact of other school officials. For example, snacks were kept behind the media specialist’s desk. If a student became hungry during the day, students were allowed to ask permission to get an item and then take it with them to class.

Even though categories involving other school personnel emerged in the data, the most frequent categories in all cases involved when students worked with teachers: “teacher positive traits”, “teacher negative traits”, “teacher rapport,” and “teacher ensuring instructional understanding.” In the small middle school, teacher positive traits and teacher negative traits were equal, and in all other cases, either one or zero negative teacher traits were recorded.

Overall, the most frequently coded category was “teacher ensuring instructional understanding.” In all cases, students highlighted the fact that they enjoyed it when teachers took time to explain new information to them. For example, a non-SWD in the average middle school setting stated that he felt connected to the school because “if you need help on something, [teachers will] help you out and give you a chance to pass or exceed the subject that you’re working on.” An SWD at this same school reported that a general education teacher supported students by having “tutoring for us. I think that’s really helpful of her to stay after school and help us get the work that we haven’t finished, homework, and stuff like that.” In the small middle school setting, a non-SWD reported that teachers care for her by “when I’m confused they’ll

come over there and explain what I need to do and all that.”

Besides ensuring instructional understanding, data from all cases revealed that students felt a strong sense of school membership when they had rapport with the teachers. A non-SWD in the small school setting reported that he liked the school because he “can be confident around here. [I] can tell the teachers anything I want.” In the average middle school setting, a non-SWD reported that she “gets off the bus and Ms. TEACHER, she’s always out there waiting for me. I always say ‘hey’ because I just like saying ‘hey’ to her.” A SWD at the average school setting reported that she liked the school because “we have our freedom. Whenever we were in [elementary school] we really didn’t get a lot of freedom, but now we have a lot of freedom, and we have friendships with our teachers.”

Student Involvement

The fourth theme to emerge in the data from all cases was STUDENT INVOLVEMENT. Categories within this theme includes “sports/activities positive,” “sport/activities negative,” “student engagement,” “negative student engagement/misbehavior,” and “student ownership.” One of the most surprising results within this theme is that SWDs in both schools reported more frequently “positive sports/activities” than their non-disabled peers. In fact, in both cases, this was the most highly reported category for the SWDs under this theme.

The data gathered in the interviews with SWDs in both settings showed that their involvement in the school was important to their sense of school membership or belonging. A SWD at the average middle school setting said he liked the school because “I get to be involved in sports here and after school activities.” Another SWD at this same school reported that one thing she would change about the school is to add more sports. She reported, “I do not think that they have some sports that I would join. If they had swimming I would join because that’s me

and my brother's favorite sport, when we do it during the summer time." In the small middle school setting, a SWD reported that he felt connected to the school environment because he "was included in the activities." He continued by stating that the small middle school had more activities that he liked compared to a previous school.

Besides involvement with sports and activities, another important concept to appear from the interviews and field notes was that students from all cases wanted to be engaged with the course content. Often, they discussed their engagement as a way that they felt connected to the school, and they discussed misbehavior or negative engagement of other students as an impediment to their own education. For example, a non-SWD in the small middle school setting reported that her favorite teacher was her social studies teacher because "he's really funny, and he makes things really fun. We will do projects with cake over the regions in social studies. It is fun." A non-SWD in the average middle school setting claimed, "it may be weird, but I like learning. I like this school because I learn a lot." One notable comment from a SWD in the average middle school setting described being a student as "it feels great because to be a **typical** student in class and stuff like that. I feel great about it because when I'm unfocused and stuff like that I get help in school to really pay attention. When I'm not focused in class I don't get stuff done." These student quotes reveal that they were often in engaged with course content due to the positive interactions they had with school personnel or the school itself. Many of these statements were dually coded to represent the "positive school traits" and "student engagement" that emerged.

Complementary to the category of "student engagement," many students described activities that allowed them to take ownership of their work and school. This ownership is shown by the students' desire to help out peers and make a positive impact on their school's

environment. All cases reported this with relatively the same frequency. A SWD at the small middle school setting stated that he had a sense of belonging at the school by knowing that “it feels like you are needed and you are not just there to be there. When you are there, you have something to do. You are not just listening and you can actually help out with other people.”

Another example occurred in the case a SWD at the small middle school setting. He reported that he felt a part of the school by stating, “I help out with the teachers and I’m nice to pretty much everybody.” A non-SWD student in this same setting reported that he felt like a part of the school environment because “I help people. I help them with their problems and stuff.”

Other statements demonstrated that students took ownership in keeping a positive school environment. A SWD at the average middle school stated that he had a sense of belonging, and it “feels like whatever happens to the school, it is because of me. I don’t want it to go down. I really want it to be up and never go down, no matter what happens, because really, if this place goes down, I don’t know what I would do.” In addition, a non-SWD at the average middle school setting described her sense of school belonging as “you feel like you are a part of it. You actually mean something.”

Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

This research was a sequential mixed-methods study that employed a sequential explanatory research design. This required the researcher to collect data involving quantitative statistics first, and then to gather qualitative data to provide a more in depth explanation of the results. In order to fully understand all data gathered during this study, a third step in the analysis phase required the researcher to synthesize the information gathered in both stages of research and draw conclusions. A higher level of understanding is achieved when both quantitative and qualitative results are analyzed together.

In the first stage of this research, quantitative results showed that there were no significant differences in students' reported sense of school membership ratings based on school size, student disability classification, and the interaction of these two independent variables. Furthermore, when analyzing if a significant difference existed between students with and without disabilities in the average school, no difference was reported. This same result occurred in the small middle school setting and when comparing the means of students with disabilities at both locations. Overall, all bounded cases reported a high sense of school membership or belonging.

The second stage of research uncovered patterns of common themes that all students reported as impacting their sense of school membership, which helped the researcher understand students' high sense of reported school membership. Four themes emerged throughout the bounded cases. These included: POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS, SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS, STUDENT INVOLVEMENT, and SCHOOL PERSONNEL. Within these themes, categories showed minute differences in frequency and appearances of categories exist.

The greatest variance in all categories occurred within the SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS theme between the average and small middle school setting. The average middle school students reported a higher frequency of negative school traits than those in the small middle school. In addition, when students were questioned about school size, a SWD and non-SWD at the average middle school referenced that it could get crowded at times. Even though is only a small complaint, no negative feedback about school size was given by students at the small middle school when asked this same question. The descriptive statistics revealed that the average middle school setting had a slightly lower sense of school membership ($M = 4.048$,

$SD = .063$) than the small school ($M = 4.101$, $SD = .070$); however, when examining the two-way ANOVA to compare the main effect of school size, no significant difference existed, $p = .575$, $\alpha = .05$. Thus, differences in school characteristics had a relatively small impact on the student's sense of school membership. When this information is combined with the knowledge that some of the greatest variance in categories and frequency of category coding occurred within this theme, it can be concluded that SCHOOL CHARACTERISTIC, such as school size, had very little impact on the students' overall sense of school membership in these two schools.

Another important characteristic to consider is that the theme POSITIVE PEER RELATIONS emerged from two schools where students had relatively high sense of school membership. As discussed above, no significant difference existed between the two environments based on school size. Goodenow (1993) stated students who got an average PSSM rating of 3.00 have a low sense of school membership. It is these students who may need targeted interventions to address their attachment with the school. When looking at the distribution of scores from both settings, a small percentage of students from either environments fell within this category. The average school setting had ten respondents (6.4%) and the small school had five respondents (4.6%) with a PSSM score of 3.00 or below. Therefore, it can be concluded that the theme of positive peer relationships was shaped because these school environments promote an overall high sense of school membership. If these schools had students who got PSSM averages that were lower or under the 3.00 benchmark more frequently, then potentially the directionality component of POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS would have been removed to yield simply the theme of peer relationships.

Chapter Summary

Overall, data collected from the average-sized middle school and the small middle school

showed that students had high sense of school membership. The results of this research extends the findings from Anderson's and Freeman's (2004) qualitative study which claimed a student's sense of school belonging or membership was mainly impacted by teachers, peers, and school characteristics. Students' sense of school membership was not only affected by teachers, but was also directly impacted by various school officials, in particular the principal. Therefore, the theme of teachers was expanded to school personnel.

Similar to Anderson's and Freeman's (2004) study which found that peers and school characteristics impacted school environment, this present study discussed POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS and SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS as the themes. Evidence supports the claim that peer relationships impact a student's sense of membership. Positive peer relationships were found to occur at these two middle schools, both of which have a relatively high sense of school belonging. In contrast, even though SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS appeared as a theme, analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative results revealed that variability within this theme had little impact on differences in sense of school membership between the independent variables of school size and student disability classification. Thus, SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS seem to have very little impact on a student's sense of school membership.

One theme that did not exist in the literature is that of STUDENT INVOLVEMENT. Students revealed that they had a high sense of school membership when they participated in activities/sports, were engaged with lessons, and had ownership over their school. Surprisingly, SWDs in both settings reported a higher frequency of positive sports/activities involvement than non-SWDs in each environment. Furthermore, all cases revealed satisfaction when students displayed ownership in the school environment by helping out the teachers, students, and the

school in general.

Understanding the significance of this last theme is heightened when reconsidering that the main aim of this study is to provide information on how students with disabilities, who have historically been marginalized, can be supported in their learning environment. Results from this study show that students, both those with and without disabilities, feel more connected and have a stronger sense of membership when they are involved at school. This involvement can range from participating in sports and activities to taking ownership in the learning going on in class. Students across the four bounded cases expressed a desire of wanting to help out their peers, teachers, and the overall school environment.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

Students with disabilities have historically experienced stigma and marginalization due to being identified as having a “disability” (Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Morgan, Frisco, Farka & Hibel, 2010), and this labeling can have negative effects on one’s identity construction (Goffman, 1963; Kazashka, 2013). Researchers have found that a poor view of self can lead to a lack of motivation in school and lower academic achievement (Anderson & Freeman, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligini, 2013); however, Bergin and Bergin (2009) uncovered that students with a high sense of school membership were able to achieve higher on performance tasks, had increased emotional stability, and fewer episodes of delinquency. Therefore, one way to overcome stigma and marginalization that SWDs may experience is to have a strong sense of school belonging or sense of school membership for the environment.

Many variables and interventions can be implemented to address increasing the sense of school membership for students. Anderson and Freeman (2004) documented in their research that peers, teachers, and school factors such school size were variables that impacted a sense of school membership in students. For Hagborg (1998b), he conjectured that a small school size allowed students with disabilities to have similar ratings of a sense of school membership as non-disabled peers; however, little research has been implemented to further explore this claim. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if students’ self-reported ratings of a sense of school membership were influenced by school size or classification of having a disability. In addition, this study aimed to uncover factors that may impact the construction of a sense of belonging on school membership for the identified cases. As discussed, variables in the learning environment help shape one’s identity construction and understanding of knowledge (Holland &

Lachicotte, 2007; Wilson & Petterson, 1996); therefore, it is important to understand how marginalized students, such as students with disabilities, can be supported to decrease the stigmatizing effects of being marginalized (Goffman, 1963; Kazashka, 2013). The goal of this study is to identify information on how to these students, or any students who experience marginalized, by increasing their sense of school membership.

Results and Implications

The results of this study revealed that students' sense of school membership ratings were not significantly influenced by the variables of school size and classification of having a disability. This means that all student groups: non-SWD in the average setting, SWD in the average setting, non-SWD in the small setting, and SWD in the small setting all experienced comparable sense of school membership results. These results were in contrast to the expectations of the current and previous researchers (Hagborg, 1998b). Since research has shown that school organizational features, such as school size, have been proven to increase a wide range of student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Lee & Burkam, 2003), it was expected that the students with disabilities in the small school environment would have a higher sense of school membership than SWDs in the average middle school setting. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that significant difference between SWDs and non-SWDs would occur in the average middle school setting with SWDs having an overall lower score. Both of these hypotheses were proven false.

Disproving the projected hypotheses is significant because it provides the foundation that small schools may not be as beneficial as once claimed. Feldman & O'Dwyer (2010) were small schools proponents who advocated that smallness alone is not the beneficial factor in the small schools movement; rather, the main tenant of the argument was that small schools allowed for a

more personalized learning environment. This study did not support this notion due to the fact that sense of school membership scores did not differ significantly based on the results of the ANOVA test. No significant difference in means suggest that a personalized environment can also be created in more average sized schools.

On the other hand, even though the results suggest that an average school setting can promote a more personalized environment, it is important to consider that there was not a great variation between the small and average sized schools. Specifically, the average sized school was only one-third larger than small sized environment. Thus, there is a need to consider if a much larger school would produce the same results as the average sized school. In addition, these similar results also raise critique of the PSSM. Even though Carol Goodenow created and validated the scale, the high ratings by all bounded cases raises concern that the scale may not adequately measure a sense of school membership. Therefore, further validation measures on the instrument are warranted.

Another significant result that occurred in the quantitative portion of the study is that the lowest PSSM scores were obtained from non-disabled students in the average middle school setting. These results reveal that in these locations, SWDs are not the highest at risk for being disconnected from the school environment. This goes against predictions that SWDs experience marginalization and stigma due to the process of being identified as having a disability (Frattura & Topinka, 2006). Furthermore, it was revealed that the sense of school membership ratings for SWDs in the two environments were almost equal. Consequently, there is a need to reflect on the qualitative results that emerged to determine what factors students, both those with and without disabilities, reveal as impacting how they feel about the school environment.

In the qualitative portion of the study, student interviews and field notes revealed themes

of variables that impacted students' sense of school membership. These themes included POSTIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS, SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS, SCHOOL PERSONNEL, and STUDENT INVOLVEMENT. As discussed in Chapter Four, minute differences in the frequency and appearance of categories within these themes appeared within the four bounded cases.

The theme of SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS had the greatest variance of categories with students, both SWDs and non-SWDs, reporting higher rates of negative school characteristics than the other bounded cases at the average school setting. When questioned about school size and facility, students at the average school setting referred to classes or the building as being crowded. Despite these results, the sense of school membership scores did not significantly differ between the small and average middle setting. Therefore, it can be concluded that the variable of school size or school characteristics had little impact on the overall sense of school membership for SWDs and non-SWDs in either of these settings. This conclusion is especially important in light of the research that French, Atkinson, and Rugen (2001) completed that stated small schools performed better than large schools on a wide range of school achievement and engagement variables. It may be that other variables in the learning environment are more influential than simply school size.

It is important for school personnel, school officials, and policy makers to understand how other variables in the learning environment may impact the sense of school membership for all students, but especially those who have experienced stigma and marginalization (Goeffman, 1963; Kazashka, 2013). One variable that this current study revealed as being impactful is the role of SCHOOL PERSONNEL in the learning environment. Previous research and discussions have concluded that students who have greater rapport with their teachers have sense of

belonging or school membership scores and academic outcomes (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). In fact, relational pedagogy understands that students' identity construction and understanding of knowledge is directly impacted one's relationships with the teacher (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). However, this study revealed that *a variety* of school personnel play a role in the sense of school membership score. For example, both SWDs and non-SWDs in the average middle school setting discussed the impact the teachers and principal had on them. In the small school setting, field notes revealed the personal interactions and rapport the teachers, media specialist, and principal had with students. The implications of these results are that it should be recognized that all school personnel, especially individuals in leadership roles, play a pivotal role in student development. In terms of the focus of this study, these results show that all personnel can have a role in the development and de-stigmatizing of students with disabilities. This conclusion can be extended to any student who is disengaged or who may be marginalized due to other factors such as race and social economic status.

Not only did this current research study reveal a slight twist in the theme of SCHOOL PERSONNEL, but this study also uncovered a theme that has not been previously discussed. The present study concluded that STUDENT INVOLVEMENT can be a major role in one's sense of school membership. Categories under this theme included: positive comments about sports/activities, negative comments about sports/activities, student ownership in work, and positive and negative categories involving student engagement or misbehavior.

One important category that emerged was the students' involvement in extracurricular activities. This study found that similar to Nichols' (2006) study, the students interviewed linked their sense of school membership to participation in extracurricular sports. This may be an important reason why SWDs and non-SWDs had similar self-reports on a sense of school

membership. The SWDs who were interviewed in this present study had higher rates of reported involvement in extracurricular activities than their non-SWDs peers. Therefore, one potential area for future research involves examining if a difference in a sense of school membership exists for students based on their level of involvement with the school. If so, school officials can help students who may be marginalized due to such conditions as disability status with specialized programming and an emphasis on belonging to sport or student organization.

Another important category that emerged within this theme involves student ownership in their work. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) claimed that engagement is a multidimensional variable which has behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components. Students from all cases connected a sense of school membership with a personal ownership in this school environment. Students from all bounded cases verbalized this ownership as the ability to help peers or teachers and taking care of the overall school. Therefore, in order to overcome the challenges of being marginalized in the school environment, a strategy that can be implemented is to assign students a special role in the school environment.

A complementary category to student ownership in this theme is STUDENT ENGAGEMENT with work. During this current study, students from all bounded cases voiced a desire for content that was relevant and meaningful. This finding is in align with Sidorkin's (2003) work which stated that students had increased motivation when the work was purposeful and authentic. These students who were interviewed wanted teachers who took time to answer their questions and helped them master the content. This finding is in align with Parsons' and Taylor's (2011) research that claimed students wanted to be held to high expectations with learning tasks that were meaningful and relevant. Furthermore, these researchers voiced that students wanted to understand not only the content but how they learn the information. With this

finding, there is an implication for teachers and school officials to design school programs that give marginalized students, such as those with a disability, additional time and opportunities to master the content. These strategies do not require that the expectations be lowered or curriculum modified; rather, it ensures additional ways for students to master the learning objectives.

In addition, these statements showed that when students enjoyed being with a teacher, that these students also showed engagement with the course content. Thus, another important implication for this finding is that teachers can decrease the marginalization of students, especially those who are not connected with the learning environment, by building rapport with the student. Considering the fact that students from both settings made statements that were dually coded, it shows that teachers can build these relationships in both a small school and average school setting.

When discussing the importance of teachers developing rapport with students, it is important to consider the teacher/student ratio at both locations. For the average middle school setting, the teacher/student ratio was 14.33, which is significantly below the 16.0 national average for school years between 2010 and 2012. This result is even lower than the all-time low for teacher/student ratio which occurred in 2009 at 15.4 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015b). The small middle school setting had a teacher/student ratio of 15.45, which again is below the national average. It should be noted that one possibility for the average middle school setting achieving a personalized learning environment, which allows students who have historically been marginalized to achieve comparable sense of school membership ratings, is the fact the school has a low teacher/student ratio.

Recommendations for Future Research Studies

The present study provided insight on the issue of how students construct a sense of

school membership based on school size and disability status. The main aim of this study was to determine strategies for overcoming the marginalization and stigma that students with disabilities face (Goffman, 1963; Rice, 2012) by increasing their personal motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) through obtaining a higher sense of school membership. Besides meeting that aim, this study also provided a foundation for future studies involving how students who experience marginalization connect to their learning environment.

One topic for future research involves an extension of this present study. These studies may have a similar research design, but it can extend to schools that fall within the small, average, and large size categories. The goal of these future studies would be to determine if results can be replicated, and if a large school size changes the outcome of a reported sense of school membership for general education and SWD students.

Not only can this study be replicated in other settings, future studies can involve analyzing the results of other students who may experience marginalization. Students who may experience this due to social economic status, race, religion, and sexual orientation can be analyzed for a difference between them and general education students based on their self-reported sense of school membership scores. These studies can help shed light on how these students feel within a particular school setting. In addition, through qualitative research involving student interviews, results can be revealed on how these students, who experience marginalization, develop a sense of school membership within each setting.

Other opportunities for future research exist with continuing to examine the best strategies for teaching students with disabilities. The quantitative results of the study revealed that SWDs in both settings have very similar sense of membership averages, and these averages were not significantly different from their non-disabled peers. These results are far different than

what was predicted. Thus, there is need to consider that special education services, which provide a more personalized approach to teaching, may decrease the marginalization and disconnection some students experience. In addition, the qualitative portion of this research study revealed the importance the principal played in developing students' sense of belonging. Students articulated that they felt more connected to the school because of the relationship they had with the principal. Therefore, future research studies should involve a more in depth analysis of how different leadership styles can impact student development.

Furthermore, this study uncovered that SWDs attributed a sense of school membership due to the OWNERSHIP and ENGAGEMENT with the curriculum. As one SWD stated, he enjoyed being treated as a typical peer. This statement shows that SWDs want to be treated the same as their non-disabled peers. This uncovering is especially insightful when framed within the literary work of Vygotsky who theorized that 'disability' is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than simply children with developmental abnormalities (1993). Kozulin and Gindis (2007) extended this thought by framing that a 'disability' that a child experiences is due to the social consequences that occur when one is identified as having an abnormality. Therefore, in order to limit the negative consequences of being identified as SWD, schools should focus on strategies that increase SWDs involvement with all students. Future research should revolve around determining optimal strategies to use with SWDs to increase inclusive practices.

Overall the results of this study showcase that there is importance and relevancy in the school setting for discussing students' sense of school membership. School administrators, teachers, and all stake holders can use this information to establish a positive school culture that motivates and encourages students, regardless of disability status, for success. Furthermore, this research highlights avenues where further discussions can occur on how to best ensure that all

students feel that they can belong within our school walls.

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Appendix A

Name: _____

Grade: _____

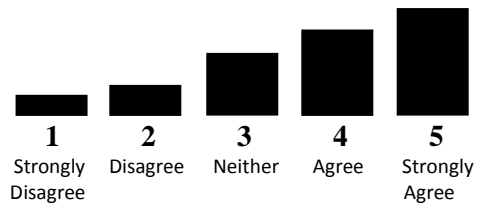
Gender: Circle One - Male or Female

Psychological Sense of School Membership

Instructions: [Examiner will read the questions and instructions out loud.] Today you will participate in a short questionnaire on how you feel about this school. These results will only be shared with the person who wants to learn what it is like to be a student in this school. Your teachers, friends, and principal will not know the answers that you provide. Each of these statements describes how you feel about learning and the people at this school.

First, I want to explain how to answer each statement. As you can see, each sentence has the option to circle a number 1-5. You will circle the number that best represents the amount you agree with the statement. For example, if the statement read “I like summer,” you would circle a 5 if you like summer all the time. On the other hand, if you don’t like many days in the summer, you may circle a 1 because summer is your least favorite season. It may also be appropriate for you to select the numbers 2-4 if you only like some summer days. This might be better if you feel like you don’t always like all days in the summer due to things such as storms or high temperatures.

You will also notice that bar graphs are at the top of the page above each number column. These graphs help to show how much of the statement is like you. Choose only one number for each sentence. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers as you answer each statement.



- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel like a real part of (name of school)..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. People here notice when I’m good at something..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Sometimes I feel as if I don’t belong here..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. There’s at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. People at this school are friendly to me..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

9. Teachers here are not interested in people like me.....	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am included in lots of activities at (name of school).....	1	2	3	4	5
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.....	1	2	3	4	5
12. I feel very different from most other students here.....	1	2	3	4	5
13. I can really be myself at this school.....	1	2	3	4	5
14. The teachers here respect me.....	1	2	3	4	5
15. People here know I can do good work.....	1	2	3	4	5
16. I wish I were in a different school.....	1	2	3	4	5
17. I feel proud of belonging to (name of school).....	1	2	3	4	5
18. Other students here like me the way I am.....	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix B Interview Guide

Researcher: Hello, my name is _____. Thank you for working with me today. I want to start by explaining who I am and what we are going to do today. I am a teacher who is trying to understand what it is like to be a middle school student in your school. I am trying to learn strategies that will help teachers work with middle school students.

I plan to record our conversation so I can go back and listen to the information. I will be talking to a lot of students and need to remember what you said. The information you share is very important to me. This conversation will be anonymous. This means that no one else will know what you said. This includes your teacher, principal, and friends. Everything you say is confidential and will not be shared. Do you have any questions? [Researcher will obtain Consent from the student.]

Now we will begin by turning on the recording device.

1. Tell me about a typical day for you in this school.

PROBE: Do you think most students would describe it in this way? How might other students describe a typical day?

2. What do you like about this school?

PROBE: Tell me why this is something you like about this school.

4. What do you not like about this school?

PROBE: Tell me why this is something you do not like about this school.

5. Describe how you feel about the size of this school. Do you think it has too many students, too few students, or is it a good number?

PROBE: Why do you think it has too many/too few/etc?

6. What do you think of when I say “school environment?” Do you think you are a part of the school environment?

7. How connected are you to this school? What makes you feel connected/unconnected?

8. Do the teachers and adults help or support? Tell me ways that they show their support.

9. What do teachers do to show that they care about you?

10. Describe the people you spend the most time with here at this school.

11. Describe your peers at this school. How would you describe friendships at this school?

12. If you were in charge of the school, what would you do differently?

13. Do you feel a sense of belonging at this school? What does that feel like?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share about being a student at this school?

Appendix C

Field Notes Protocol

Date/Time: _____

Location: _____

Description of Environment:

Field Notes

Personal Reflections

Appendix D
Informed Consents

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM, FOUNDATIONS, & READING

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT-PSSM Scale

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Heather Holland, and I am a current doctoral candidate in the Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern University. A research study entitled, “Understanding Students’ Sense of Belonging at Two Middle Schools that Vary in Size” will be conducted at your child’s school in the next few weeks. Its purpose is to determine how students feel about their school. In particular, the students will complete an 18 questions survey which asks them to report on their sense of belonging or connectedness to the school environment. Specifically, I am trying to determine if there is any difference between students with and without disabilities in their feelings about their school environment

If you give permission, your child will have the opportunity to participate in this survey during a principal approved time segment of the day. The survey is expected to take no more than 10 minutes. This survey will ask students to rate a series of statements 1-5 to document their level of agreement. The results of this survey will be computed in order to determine the level of school belonging students have for their school. The benefit of the research for students is that it will showcase how students feel about their school environment. If you agree to allow your child to participate, a notation will be made on the survey indicating whether or not your child receives services from the special education department. This would indicate that your child has an individualized education plan (IEP).

Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. The risks from participating in this study are no more than would be encountered in everyday life; however, your child will be told that he or she may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Before the survey is administered, a verbal description will be read explaining how students can choose to participate. Your child may choose to not answer any question(s) he/she does not wish to for any reason. Your child may refuse to participate even if you agree to her/his participation.

In order to protect the confidentiality of your child, names will be removed from the survey before scores are computed. In addition, the scored surveys will be kept locked in a cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher. No one at the school will see the individual results of the survey. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study at any time, please feel free to contact Heather Holland, doctoral candidate, at 770-548-3217, or Dr. Kymberly Drawdy, dissertation chair, at 912.478.5041. To contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs for answers to questions about the rights of research participants please email IRB@georgiasouthern.edu or call (912) 478-0843.

If you are giving permission for your child to participate in the study, please sign the form below and return it to your child's teacher as soon as possible.
Thank you very much for your time.

Heather Holland
Curriculum Studies Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Kimberly Drawdy
Department of Teaching & Learning

Child's Name: _____

Parent or Guardian's Signature: _____ *Date:* _____

COLEGIO DE EDUCACIÓN

DEPARTAMENTO DE CURRÍCULO, FUNDACIONES, Y LECTURA

Informado de los padres Escala CONSENTIMIENTO-PSSM

Estimado padre o tutor:

Mi nombre es Heather Holland, y soy un estudiante de doctorado en curso en el programa de Estudios Plan de Estudios en Georgia Southern University. Un estudio de investigación titulado, "La comprensión de sentido de pertenencia a dos escuelas medias de los alumnos que varían en tamaño" se llevará a cabo en la escuela de su hijo en las próximas semanas. Su propósito es determinar cómo los estudiantes se sienten acerca de su escuela. En particular, los estudiantes completarán una encuesta en 18 preguntas que les pide que informen sobre su sentido de pertenencia o de conexión con el entorno escolar. Específicamente, estoy tratando de determinar si existe alguna diferencia entre los estudiantes con y sin discapacidad en sus sentimientos acerca de su entorno escolar

Si usted le da permiso, su hijo tendrá la oportunidad de participar en esta encuesta durante un principal segmento de tiempo aprobado de la jornada. Se espera que el estudio para tener no más de 10 minutos. Esta encuesta se pregunta a los alumnos para evaluar una serie de declaraciones 1-5 para documentar su nivel de acuerdo. Los resultados de esta encuesta se computarán para determinar el nivel de la escuela perteneciente estudiantes tienen para su escuela. El beneficio de la investigación para los estudiantes es que será un escaparate de cómo los estudiantes se sienten acerca de su entorno escolar. Si está de acuerdo para permitir que su hijo participe, una anotación se hará en la encuesta que indique si su hijo recibe servicios del departamento de educación especial. Esto indicaría que su hijo tiene un plan de educación individualizado (IEP).

La participación de su hijo en este estudio es completamente voluntaria. Los riesgos derivados de la participación en este estudio no son más que la que se encontró en la vida cotidiana; Sin embargo, su hijo se le dirá que él o ella puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento sin penalización alguna. Antes de administrar la encuesta, una descripción verbal será leído explicando cómo los estudiantes pueden optar por participar. Su hijo puede optar por no contestar a cualquier pregunta (s) que él / ella no desea por cualquier razón. Su niño puede negarse a participar, incluso si usted está de acuerdo a su / su participación.

Con el fin de proteger la confidencialidad de su hijo, los nombres serán eliminados de la encuesta antes de que se calculan las puntuaciones. Además, las encuestas obtenidos serán guardados bajo llave en un armario que sólo es accesible para el investigador. Nadie en la escuela va a ver los resultados individuales de la encuesta. Si usted tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud con respecto a este estudio en cualquier momento, no dude en ponerse en contacto con Heather Holland, doctorando, al 770-548-3217, o al Dr. Kymberly Drawdy, silla disertación, en 912.478.5041. Para ponerse en contacto con la Oficina de Servicios de Investigación y

Programas Patrocinados por respuestas a preguntas acerca de los derechos de los participantes en la investigación por favor escriba a IRB@georgiasouthern.edu o llame al (912) 478-0843.

Si le está dando ssion permi para que su hijo comió particip en el studyo, por favor firme el formulario y devuélvalo a la maestra de su hijo tan pronto como sea posible.

Muchas gracias por su tiempo.

Heather Holanda
Estudios Curriculares Candidato Doctoral
Aprendizaje

Dr. Kymberly Drawdy
Departamento de Enseñanza y

Nombre del niño: _____

Firma del padre o tutor: _____

Fecha: _____

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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MINOR'S ASSENT- PSSM Scale (To Be Read Aloud)

Hello,

You are being asked to participate in a project designed to study how students feel in their school environment. If you agree to be part of the project, you will rate how much you agree with 18 statements that discuss your school.

You do not have to do this project. You can stop whenever you want. If you do not want to answer some of the questions, you do not have to answer them.

None of the teachers or other people at your school will see the answers to the questions. Your name will be removed from the form before any scoring is completed. All scored surveys will be kept in a locked cabinet that only the researcher is able to access.

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DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM, FOUNDATIONS, & READING

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT-Interview

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Heather Holland, and I am a current doctoral candidate in the Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern University. Several weeks ago, your child participated in a survey that was part of a research study involving how students feel connected to a school environment. The purpose of the research is to determine how students feel about their school. The second part of the study involves interviewing students in order for them to have a voice in describing their sense of belonging to the school environment. If you give permission, your child will have the opportunity to participate in this interview during a non-instructional time period. The interview is expected to take no more than 20 minutes. During the interview, your child will be asked questions about the school environment. A copy of the interview questions is attached. In addition, questions related to the overall structure and policies of the school will be asked. The interview will be recorded, and these will only be accessible by the researcher. In order to protect the confidentiality of the child, all records related to the interview will be kept in a locked office. No one at the school will see your child's responses to the questions. Once this project is complete, the recordings and transcriptions of the interview will be destroyed.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. The risks from participating in this study are no more than would be encountered in everyday life; however, your child will be told that he or she may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Your child may choose to not answer any question(s) he/she does not wish to for any reason. Your child may refuse to participate even if you agree to her/his participation.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study at any time, please feel free to contact Heather Holland, doctoral candidate, at 770-548-3217, or Dr. Kymberly Drawdy, dissertation chair, at 912.478.5041. To contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs for answers to questions about the rights of research participants please email IRB@georgiasouthern.edu or call (912) 478-0843.

If you are giving permission for your child to participate in the study, please sign the form below and return it to your child's teacher as soon as possible. If you agree for the interview to occur, your child will sign an agreement letter to participate before the start of the interview.

Thank you very much for your time.
Heather Holland
Curriculum Studies Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Kymberly Drawdy
Department of Teaching & Learning

Child's Name: _____

Parent or Guardian's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

COLEGIO DE EDUCACIÓN

DEPARTAMENTO DE CURRÍCULO, FUNDACIONES, Y LECTURA

PARENTAL CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO-Entrevista

Estimado padre o tutor:

Mi nombre es Heather Holland, y soy un estudiante de doctorado en curso en el programa de Estudios Plan de Estudios en Georgia Southern University. Hace varias semanas, su hijo participó en una encuesta que fue parte de un estudio de investigación que implica cómo los estudiantes se sienten conectados a un ambiente escolar. El propósito de la investigación es determinar cómo los estudiantes se sienten acerca de su escuela. La segunda parte del estudio consiste en entrevistar a un pequeño grupo de estudiantes con el fin de que tengan una voz en la descripción de su sentido de pertenencia al ámbito escolar. Si usted le da permiso, su hijo tendrá la oportunidad de participar en esta entrevista durante un período de tiempo no-docente. Se espera que la entrevista de tomar no más de 20 minutos. Durante la entrevista, su hijo se le harán preguntas sobre el ambiente escolar. Se adjunta una copia de las preguntas de la entrevista. Además, se le harán preguntas relacionadas con la estructura general y las políticas de la escuela. La entrevista será grabada, y éstos sólo se podrá acceder por el investigador. Con el fin de proteger la confidencialidad de los niños, todos los registros relacionados con la entrevista se mantendrán en una oficina cerrada. Nadie en la escuela va a ver respuestas de su hijo a las preguntas. Una vez que este proyecto se haya completado, se destruirán las grabaciones y transcripciones de la entrevista.

La participación de su hijo en este estudio es completamente voluntaria. Los riesgos derivados de la participación en este estudio no son más que la que se encontró en la vida cotidiana; Sin embargo, su hijo se le dirá que él o ella puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento sin penalización alguna. Su hijo puede optar por no contestar a cualquier pregunta (s) que él / ella no desea por cualquier razón. Su niño puede negarse a participar, incluso si usted está de acuerdo a su / su participación.

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud con respecto a este estudio en cualquier momento, no dude en ponerse en contacto con Heather Holland, doctorando, al 770-548-3217, o al Dr. Kymberly Drawdy, silla disertación, en 912.478.5041. Para ponerse en contacto con la Oficina de Servicios de Investigación y Programas Patrocinados por respuestas a preguntas acerca de los derechos de los participantes en la investigación por favor escriba a IRB@georgiasouthern.edu o llame al (912) 478-0843.

Si le está dando permiso para que su hijo participe en el studyo, por favor firme el formulario y devuélvalo a la maestra de su hijo tan pronto como sea posible. Si está de acuerdo a la entrevista que ocurra, su hijo va a firmar una carta de acuerdo para participar antes del comienzo de la entrevista.

Muchas gracias por su tiempo.
 Heather Holland
 Estudios Curriculares Candidato Doctoral
 Aprendizaje

Dr. Kymberly Drawdy
 Departamento de Enseñanza y

Nombre del niño: _____

Firma del padre o tutor: _____

Fecha:

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM, FOUNDATIONS, & READING

MINOR'S ASSENT-Interview

Hello,

My name is Heather Holland, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. You are being asked to participate in a project that will be used to learn about how students feel in their school environment. If you agree to be part of the project, you will answer a few questions about what it is like to be a student at this school.

You do not have to do this interview. You can stop whenever you want. If you do not want to answer some of the questions, you do not have to answer them. You can refuse to do the interview even if your parents have said you can. None of the teachers or other people at your school will see the answers to the questions. All of the answers that you give me will be kept in a locked cabinet.

If you or your parent/guardian has any questions about this form or the project, please call Heather Holland at 770-548-3217 or my advisor, Dr. Drawdy at 912.478.5041. Thank you!

If you understand the information above and want to do the project, please sign your name on the line below:

Yes, I will participate in this project: _____

Child's Name: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____