

A Qualitative Inquiry: Factors That Promote Classroom Belonging and Engagement Among High School Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore, using the voices of diverse high school students, the classroom factors that are important for promoting classroom belonging and engagement. Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with tenth grade students about classroom belonging and behavioral engagement in their favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes. Using constructivist grounded theory, an analysis of the interviews points to several established instructional practices teachers utilized to help students perceive an increased sense of classroom belonging and engagement, with specific examples for how these teaching practices impacted high school students. Findings from this study revealed two teacher actions that built students' classroom belonging and behavioral engagement: (1) fostering relationships with and between students and (2) employing teaching practices that encouraged students to participate in the work for the class. These actions were accomplished when teachers worked to build teacher–student trust through honest feedback and listening to students, provided engaging and relevant lessons and activities, instilled classroom management practices that went beyond just dealing with disruptive behavior, created a seating arrangement to facilitate pair and group work, and supported students socially and academically.

Key Words: diverse high school students, belonging, behavioral engagement, teaching practices, teachers, relationships, trust, classroom management

Introduction

Educators, policymakers, and researchers continue to search for effective and sustainable ways to improve student academic engagement to increase high school graduation rates, decrease dropout rates, and prepare students for college or work. Research has sought to uncover ways to improve academic engagement as a means to improve student outcomes and has identified, variously, early childhood education, family involvement, schoolwide systemic approaches, and school–community collaboration (e.g., Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Fredricks et al. (2004) draw from other scholars to highlight the multifaceted nature of engagement and identify three ways student engagement occurs in learning environments: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional.

The first type of engagement is *behavioral* and pertains to how students participate and become involved in academic and social school activities; behavioral engagement is central for achieving positive student academic outcomes and preventing kids from dropping out of school (Finn, 1989, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997; Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Voelkl, 1997; Wehlage et al., 1989). Second, *cognitive engagement* relates to student motivation goals and self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman, Boekarts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000). It can range from simple memorization to exerting great effort to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills that promote deep understanding and expertise. Lastly, *emotional engagement* indicates how students, positively or negatively, react to teachers, classmates, academics, or school. Recent research related to emotional engagement has been conceptualized by some as how well a student identifies with his or her school, which would include belonging, feeling important, and identifying and valuing the successes associated with school-related outcomes (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012).

Literature Review

In recent years, researchers have been looking at how noncognitive factors impact student learning and engagement. Noncognitive factors comprise a set of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that help students to do well in class. In an educational setting, it is not uncommon for noncognitive factors to be misconstrued as behaviors that do not require cognitive thought, when in fact they do. Noncognitive factors are conceptualized differently from cognitive factors which are perceived as the academic knowledge and skills that are measured by standardized tests (Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & Ter Weel, 2008; Farrington et al., 2012). By contrast, noncognitive factors are perceived to

be those “soft skills” that matter for learning (Farrington et al., 2012). Noncognitive factors encompass things such as attending class, completing homework, study skills, goal setting, self-discipline, motivation, time management, academic mindsets, and other variables. In their critical review of the noncognitive literature, Farrington et al. (2012) argue that the interaction between cognitive and noncognitive factors is essential for learning to occur and that a change in cognition is unlikely to happen in the absence of this interaction.

Drawing upon existing research, Farrington et al. (2012) identify five noncognitive factors (i.e., academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies, social skills) which are thought to be malleable and crucial for students' academic performance, but questions remain about how to develop them in students. This article will focus on one noncognitive factor, the academic mindset to belong. Academic mindsets include four key beliefs that influence the behaviors, motivations, and strategies employed by students enabling their academic success (Farrington et al., 2012). The four academic mindsets from the perspective of a student are: (1) I belong in this learning community; (2) I can change my abilities through hard work and effort; (3) I can succeed at this work; and (4) This work has value and purpose for me (Farrington et al., 2012).

This study focuses on the academic mindset *the need to belong in a learning community* because, unlike any of the other mindsets, past research has identified the need to belong as a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1970). Past research identifies meaningful relationships and attachments as a primary motivating force that drives behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In Carol Goodenow's (1993b) seminal study, she defines classroom belonging to mean:

a sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (e.g., teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (p. 25)

This study also examines behavioral engagement, which is the outward and observable academic behaviors that shape students' academic performance (Farrington et al., 2012). These behaviors range from “regularly attending class, arriving ready to work (with the necessary supplies and materials), paying attention, participating in instructional activities and class discussions, [to] devoting out-of-school time to studying and completing homework” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 8). Lastly, Farrington et al. (2012) provide convincing evidence that all other noncognitive factors work through academic behaviors (i.e., behavioral engagement) to affect performance. Research indicates that

academic mindsets, along with other noncognitive factors, are malleable and therefore responsive to context. Osterman (2000) said that context matters when it comes to whether students have a perceived sense of belonging. Therefore, an important first step is to construct a learning environment designed to meet students' basic psychological needs (i.e., the need to belong) to motivate student engagement.

Students' sense of belonging has typically been studied using quantitative methodologies that examine instructional practices with outcomes using various student motivational and engagement variables. Additionally, many studies about school and classroom belonging focus on elementary, middle school, or college-aged students. Missing from previous belonging studies are the voices and perspectives of high school students. This study focuses on the ninth grade experience because the transition from middle school to high school is an important milestone that can impact students' educational trajectory. It is typical for entering ninth grade students to come from a small middle school into a larger, more impersonal high school (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). It is not uncommon during the high school transition for students to experience a decrease in their academic performance and increased absences, along with feelings of loneliness, detachment, and isolation (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Thus, this study was conceptualized through the desire to understand how adolescents experience belonging and their desire to engage in their high school classrooms.

The Present Study

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with 31 racially/ethnically and academically diverse tenth grade students. Student participants were asked to reflect on their ninth grade classroom experiences and answer questions about their favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes. Due to time constraints regarding when interviews could occur, this researcher recruited entering tenth grade students to participate in the study. The rationale for recruiting students at the start of their tenth grade school year was they were in a better position to reflect on their transition to high school and their ninth grade experiences. The entering ninth grade students were just beginning their high school transition when interviews were conducted and had not spent enough time in high school to reflect on their experiences. The type of questions student participants were asked concerned classroom contextual factors, such as the room arrangement, teaching style of the teacher, and how working with classmates affected their classroom relationships, as well as their classroom belonging and behavioral engagement. This study seeks to answer the research question: What classroom factors are important for promoting high school students' sense of classroom belonging and behavioral engagement?

Methods

Site Selection and Recruitment

The study site was a public high school in the northern part of Chicago with a racially and ethnically diverse student population comprised of primarily Latino and Black students (Illinois State Report Card, 2014–15). This high school was unique from many other Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high schools because it had three different academic programs housed in the same school, making it similar to having three separate schools housed in one building. The academic programs available were International Baccalaureate (IB), an Art Magnet program, and a Neighborhood program. The IB and Art programs were application based which means that students had to apply to enroll and meet test and grade requirements in order to gain admission into the respective programs. The Neighborhood program requirement was that you must live within the school boundaries. More specifically, the demographics for all programs within the entire school were 43% Latino, 30% Black, 13% Asian, 10% White, and 4% identified in another category. These demographics closely mirrored those of the larger district (CPS) which was 46% Latino, 40% Black, 4% Asian, and 10% White (Illinois State Report Card, 2014–15). Much (88%) of the high school student body reported living in low-income households (Illinois State Report Card, 2014–15).

Recruitment for the study began in Fall 2014 with approximately 313 tenth grade students enrolled in school when recruitment began. Recruitment presentations were given in every tenth grade PE or JROTC class, and students were invited to participate. Students who were interested in participating and returned a signed parental consent form received a \$10 iTunes gift card as a thank you for returning a signed parent consent form, per Institutional Review Board and CPS Research Review Board approval. Eighty students (25.5%) signed up to participate, and 36 students (11.5% of the student body; males = 17; females = 19) returned signed parental consent forms. Due to scheduling conflicts, interviews took place with only 31 of the 36 students who had obtained parental consent; individual interviews were conducted during each student's lunch period in a private room at the school. Of the 31 students interviewed, four requested that their interviews not be recorded, so handwritten notes were taken instead; 27 interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed.

Student Sample

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants were racial/ethnic minorities (Black = 5, Latino = 11, White = 7, South Asian = 3, Pacific Islander = 1, African = 2, Unknown Racial Background = 2). The racial/ethnic backgrounds

of two participants were not listed in the CPS school district administrative database.

Table 1. Student Sample by Gender and Race

Gender	Total	Black	Latino/ Latina	White*	South Asian	African	N/A**
Male	12	3	2	3	0	2	2
Female	19	2	9	5	3	0	0

*The high school study site has many first- or second-generation immigrants from Southwest Asia and Eastern Europe who identify as White. When school administrative data is examined for a student who identifies as White, it is not unusual to find that English is listed as a second language.

**Not Available: The racial background was not listed in the CPS administrative data.

Data Collection

Forty-five minute, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted during which students were asked to define classroom belonging and to describe both their favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes (Note: interview protocol is available upon request from the author). Sample questions from the interview protocol include: What does it mean to belong in a class? What things helped you to feel like you belonged in your ninth grade classes? What helped to motivate you to behaviorally engage in the course work [behavioral engagement was defined for students]? Describe how the classroom was arranged/organized in your favorite and least favorite class. How well did the teachers/students in your favorite/least favorite classes know you? How did you get to know other students in your classes?

It was hypothesized that students would have a higher sense of belonging and engagement in their favorite class when compared to their least favorite class. To check this assumption, a quantitative rating scale was used at the end of the qualitative interview. Most of the students answered these questions, but there were several who did not due to time constraints. Students were asked to rate their levels of belonging and behavioral engagement on a scale of 1 to 10. A 10 rating for belonging indicated that students experienced the highest feelings of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by both their teacher and classmates. A five rating of belonging demonstrated that students perceived they were accepted, valued, included, and encouraged in class part of the time. Lastly, a one rating of belonging revealed that students did not experience the feelings of being accepted, valued, included, or encouraged in class. To rate behavioral engagement on a 1 to 10 scale, students were instructed that 10 indicated they went to class every day, completed all their assignments,

participated in class, and engaged in class because they were interested in what they were learning and doing in class. A five rating meant that they were engaged in class part of the time. Finally, students were instructed that a one rating meant they never attended or engaged in class.

Data Analysis

The analysis for this paper utilizes a constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). This method rejects the notion of an objective reality but instead asserts “that realities are social constructions of the mind and that there exists as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared)” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). It is a method that encourages innovation while asking the researcher to examine (a) the relativity of their perspectives, positions, practices, and research situation; (b) the researcher’s reflexivity; and (c) depictions of social constructions in the studied world (Charmaz, 2008). This method allowed for addressing the complexity and social nature of learning and for understanding the abstract phenomena of classroom belonging and engagement by moving from a *what* question to subsequent *how* questions. In addition, this method required the researcher, who is the primary “instrument” of data collection and analysis, to be self-aware and to consider how one’s assumptions and behavior may be impacting the inquiry (Watt, 2007). Reflexivity is integral to the researcher situating herself/himself in the research process (Patnaik, 2013).

Researcher’s Reflexive Stance

Before I became a researcher, I was a school social worker. My professional background aided the design of this study, data collection, and analysis, as well as in interpreting research findings. My positionality as a researcher has been shaped by my work with students who needed social and emotional support to be able to engage in class and learn. I witnessed firsthand when the adults in the school worked collectively to help students feel a sense of belonging how it appeared to translate into how students engaged in class (i.e., attendance, homework completion, general interest in a subject). Despite this revelation, I had a difficult time articulating how, when students felt a sense of belonging, they seemed to present themselves in class as more attentive and engaged. It is from this perspective that I began this study with high school students with the hopes that students would help educators know how to better construct classrooms that promote their belonging and engagement.

My background as a school social worker was helpful because I worked closely with administration, teachers, students, and parents from an insider

vantage point which made me familiar with how schools operate and the various roles of those in the school building. I used this insider status to get the study set up and running. My experience working with students taught me that when students believe that you value them and their time, they are much more likely to engage with you, even when it is inconvenient. Therefore, providing students with a small incentive went a long way to encourage their participation in the study. However, during analysis of the data, my insider perspective at times limited my ability to see different perspectives. When this occurred, I had the help of committee members, colleagues, and research assistants who listened to my concerns and provided me with feedback pointing out my biases and blind spots. For instance, because my focus was on classroom belonging, it was difficult for me to see that some students in my sample had a need to feel competent in class that took precedence over their sense of belonging. In addition, when interviewing students, I would often ask for clarification if I was uncertain if I was interpreting a student's statement correctly. Lastly, as a school social worker it was my job to advocate for students. Therefore, when analyzing the data, it was natural for me to take on the role of student advocate.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Analysis began with writing a post-interview memo describing the interview and my impressions immediately after each interview ended. Each transcribed interview was read through multiple times with coding regimens. The first read-through was conducted to organize and become familiar with the interviews before coding began. The second time, Goodenow's (1993b) definition of classroom belonging was used as a "sensitizing concept," a tool for focusing on key concepts found in existing research and literature (Charmaz, 2006). In this case, I drew from this theory the ideas related to being/feeling *accepted*, *respected*, *included*, and *supported*. During the third read, I began organizing and analyzing the multiple themes that emerged when students discussed specific classroom factors in their favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes.

Based on the way the interview protocol was structured and my previous history in classrooms, I began by organizing the data using three primary categories: (1) teacher; (2) peers; and (3) course subject. As I developed my analysis, I began with open coding in which the data was examined line by line using sensitizing concepts to examine the primary categories that promoted students' classroom belonging and engagement. An example of a subcategory found under the category "teacher" was "teacher characteristics." I looked more closely at how students discussed specific teacher characteristics and the relationship to how they promoted or prohibited students' classroom belonging as they related to students' feelings of acceptance, respect, inclusion, and/or support.

For instance, students talked about teachers who were “good, nice, and caring” as important factors that helped them to feel acceptance, respect, inclusion, and/or support. Other students talked about having a teacher who was “like a friend” or who “looks out for me.” The primary categories and subcategories were used for the next step of axial coding that combined all the various categories to understand the conditions or what influenced the categories.

Next, I reviewed segments of the interviews and memos, looking for patterns of important classroom factors that promoted belonging and engagement in both students' favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes. During this process, I used the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016), which is an iterative process that identifies patterns across multiple participant perspectives. I discussed these patterns with others, received feedback, and then went back to transcripts to determine if codes fit the concepts suggested by the data. Codes were refined when new understandings or insights about the data occurred, and codes were subsequently changed, combined, or omitted altogether. Overarching major themes rooted in the data emerged by searching for exceptions and disconfirming evidence. The multiple passes through the data generated a final list of codes that were descriptive (e.g., academic support), process (e.g., step-by-step instruction), and in vivo (e.g., teacher doesn't skip over the easy steps) using the participants' own language. Lastly, school administrative data and student IDs were used to examine the course grades of students' favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes and to compare them to students' self-reported grades. I was also able to look at their free and reduced lunch status, their racial/ethnic background, and their academic history (GPA in the eighth grade). From this coding process, a framework and additional tables were created to understand the relationships between concepts.

Results

Student interviews revealed two teacher actions that build students' classroom belonging and desire to engage: (1) fostering relationships with and between students, and (2) employing teaching practices that encouraged students to participate in the work for the course (see Table 2). The analysis of students' classroom belonging definitions and their rating of their favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes demonstrated that these two actions give students an increased sense of classroom belonging and improved behavioral engagement. All student participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity (see Table 3).

Table 2. Teaching Practices that Promote or Prohibit Classroom Belonging and Behavioral Engagement

		Favorite Class		Least Favorite Class	
		Building Relationships	Constructing a Learning Environment	Building Relationships	Constructing a Learning Environment
Teacher Practices	Characteristics	Fun, good, honest, nice, caring, calm, cool.	Often has lots of experience teaching.	Too lenient or too strict.	Often is a new teacher.
	Teacher–Student Trust	<p>Teacher takes time to get to know his/her students.</p> <p>Teacher knows how to relate to students and likes kids.</p> <p>Teacher shows all students s/he respects and values them.</p> <p>Listens and incorporates students' ideas into class.</p>	Establishes a trusting classroom where all students feel valued and want to participate.	<p>Teacher does not develop strong relationships with students.</p> <p>Has difficulty relating to students.</p> <p>Students do not feel their teacher likes them.</p> <p>Teacher does not show s/he respects and values all students.</p> <p>Doesn't listen to students.</p>	Does not create a trusting classroom where students feel valued and want to participate.
	Classroom Management	Teacher classroom management style is inclusive.	<p>Clear, orderly and consistent class rules and routines about homework and participation which are adapted when needed.</p> <p>Frequent changes in seating arrangement to ensure students engage with a variety of students in the class.</p>	<p>Teacher has favorite students.</p> <p>Power struggles between teacher and student(s).</p>	<p>Class rules and routines are too lenient, too strict, inconsistent or nonexistent.</p> <p>When discipline problems arise, routines are altered to be punitive (i.e., change seating arrangement frequently).</p> <p>Teacher yells at minor stuff.</p>

Table 2 continued next page

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		Favorite Class		Least Favorite Class	
		Building Relationships	Constructing a Learning Environment	Building Relationships	Constructing a Learning Environment
Teaching Practices	Lesson Organization & Structure	Teacher understands students' developmental needs and incorporates them in lessons and activities.	<p>Teacher makes class interesting by connecting material to students' lives.</p> <p>Teacher provides honest feedback.</p> <p>Gives students opportunities to work in pairs or groups with clear instructions.</p> <p>Class discussions are an important part of lessons/activities.</p>	Teacher does not consider students' developmental stage in the life course and fails to incorporate their developmental needs into the classroom lessons and activities.	<p>Lesson were not relevant to students' lives.</p> <p>Lessons and/or assignments were boring.</p> <p>Students felt the teacher was too critical on grading assignments.</p> <p>No class discussion or peer work.</p> <p>Too much homework.</p> <p>Teacher was unfamiliar with class content.</p>
	Support	Teacher provides consistent social and academic support to all students.	<p>Establishes classroom norm that making mistakes is a part of learning and encourages students to keep trying.</p> <p>Teacher ensures everyone understands and doesn't continue until everyone does.</p> <p>Teacher provides step-by-step instructions and physically walks around the room to ensure understanding.</p> <p>Teacher makes him/herself available outside of class time.</p>	Teacher provides inconsistent academic support with little follow through.	<p>Teacher easily distracted with all that is going on in the classroom making it difficult to provide consistent support.</p> <p>Teacher would explain how to complete the assignment once but then wouldn't check back to ensure comprehension. No follow through with academic support.</p> <p>Teacher did not seem to be very excited about the course content.</p> <p>The teacher lacked passion and it was contagious to the rest of the class.</p>

Table 3. Student Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Favorite 9th Grade Class	Least Favorite 9th Grade Class
Alex	M	NA*	English	Spanish
Ally	F	Latina	Algebra	Spanish
Andrea	F	White	English	World History
Anika	F	White	French I	Biology
Beth	F	White	Theater	Reading
Billy	M	Black	English	World Studies
Brooke	F	Latina	World Studies	Algebra
Carmella	F	White	Biology	English
Charlie	M	White	Algebra	JROTC
Chloe	F	Latina	English	Algebra
David	M	NA*	World History	Music Theory
Dean	M	Latino	Literature	French
Dwayne	M	Black	College Prep English	Algebra
Emily	F	Latina	Literature	French
George	M	Black	History	French
Grace	F	Black	Debate	Biology
Jasmin	F	South Asian	World Studies	Literature
Jocelyn	F	Latina	Biology	Algebra
Jose	M	Latino	Algebra	French
Kalindi	F	South Asian	Algebra	Biology
Lucy	F	Latina	Algebra	Theater
Mark	M	African	JROTC	French
Mary	F	Latina	Biology	Music Theory
Megan	F	Latina	Literature	World Studies
Michael	M	African	Algebra	ESL
Mikah	M	White	English	JROTC
Nikki	F	White	World Studies	Music
Rico	M	White	History	Computer
Rita	F	Latina	Biology	World Studies
Sally	F	Black	Algebra	World Studies
Sondra	F	South Asian	World Studies	JROTC

*NA = Racial/ethnic background was not listed in the CPS administrative data and could not be determined from the transcribed interview.

Students' comments also revealed that students attributed certain characteristics to the teachers of their favorite ninth grade classes such as "fun," "good," "honest," "nice," "caring," "calm," and "cool." Sometimes they attributed some of these characteristics to teachers in their least favorite classes, but students added caveats such as saying those teachers were "too strict" or "too lenient." Students' description of their favorite and least favorite class revealed a mixture of impressions as well (see Table 2 for full teaching practice list). For instance, students mentioned liking aspects of their least favorite class, such as liking the course subject because they were "good at it"; or personally liking the teacher because he or she related well to kids, even if he or she was not a good instructor; or liking their classmates. However, it was not unusual for students to point to one main teaching practice that was missing in their least favorite class (e.g., teacher doesn't know how to talk to kids, the teacher is unable to manage the classroom, the teacher doesn't know how to teach in an interesting way, or the teacher just sits at [his or her] desk and doesn't help us learn).

The findings also suggested teachers play a particularly important role if students feel they have not succeeded in the subject matter in the past. While generally students were less likely to feel a sense of belonging and engagement in a class if they felt they had failed in their classes on the subject in the past, some distinguished teachers reversed this. A teacher who was effective in building relationships and constructing an engaging learning environment made students feel supported, thus boosting their belonging and engagement. A teacher's ability to build relationships and construct a positive learning environment overwhelmed the role of peers as well—students were pleased if they had friends or people they liked in their class but felt a sense of belonging and engagement without that if teachers were effective. By contrast, students were uncomfortable if their peers engaged in disruptive behavior and inappropriately challenged the teacher because teachers were ineffective in fostering relationships and constructing an engaging learning environment.

The main qualities students identified that fostered classroom relationships and constructed an engaging learning environment were teacher–student trust, classroom management, lesson organization and structure, and academic support. The subsections below analyze these practices in detail through the comments of students about them.

Building Teacher–Student Trust

Students identified three ways teachers developed teacher–student trust: (1) they spent time developing meaningful relationships with students ($n = 17$); (2) they listened to students and incorporated their ideas ($n = 10$); and (3) they showed students respect and support, helping students to feel valued ($n = 16$).

Teacher Established Meaningful Relationships

Creating a respectful classroom environment requires that teachers know their students on a personal level. Lucy said that in most classes she doesn't feel she "really belong[s]." She explained, "We have seven classes a day... You're just in a class, and you're just another student that the teacher is teaching." Yet her favorite ninth grade class was algebra, and she described a close relationship with her algebra teacher:

I just liked [algebra] 'cause [my algebra teacher] was nice. 'Cause when I would come after school for tutoring, and she would be there, and she was like, I guess, a mom figure or someone I could go to last year, because I told her a lot of things that I went through. I felt like she understood me, 'cause she didn't give me attitude like the rest of the teachers would. There were sometimes disagreements between us, because people have that, but I felt like she respected the class.

It's not entirely clear whether Lucy's algebra teacher established such a relationship with most of her students. Lucy said, "She didn't disrespect you if you didn't need to be disrespected," which seems to suggest that some students who Lucy felt "needed" to be looked down upon were. This may reflect the simple need to discipline students who are disruptive. Lucy felt that her teacher respected any student who treated her with respect. Lucy's description implies that her close relationship with her teacher was based at least in part in her own willingness to come after school for tutoring. At the same time, clearly the teacher was an excellent listener when Lucy confided in her.

Teacher Respects and Supports Learning, Helping Students Feel Valued

Jasmin describes herself as a writer and lover of literature. She worked hard in her literature class, and although reading and writing is something she enjoys doing, she did not list it as her favorite class. Instead, she selected World Studies as her favorite class because she felt her teacher saw her fully, and she was highly motivated to do well. She explained, "I actually wanted to do the best that I could, whereas in literature, I just did things to get them done." Jasmin describes her World Studies teacher as someone who was always present. She said, "A lot of teachers, they'll set up the classroom, they'll tell you what to do, and then they'll go work on something that they need to do. But he would stay there, amongst the students. He would listen to what kids are saying, and he would give his opinion." Jasmin found this teaching approach to be helpful because she felt her World Studies teacher valued students' ideas and wanted to help their learning process.

I felt like my opinions actually mattered. The teacher actually cared. If I didn't seem like I was especially happy that day, he would actually ask,

“Oh, are you all right? Is everything okay?” And even if there was really nothing wrong, I just wasn't that energized that day, I did feel better that at least he cares. So at least I'm not just one of the 90 faces he sees a day. I'm actually myself, an individual. The way I feel in class, that's the feeling I take home when I do my homework and my assignments. That feeling, that's how I feel when I do that class. If I don't care for a class, or if I feel like that class doesn't care for me, then I'm not gonna put as much effort into that class[']s homework or other things.

For Jasmin, the relationship and sense of being cared for made a big difference in her feelings about a class.

Teacher Listens and Incorporates Students' Ideas

Students also talked about teachers building trusting relationships with students by incorporating student input and listening. For instance, Anika, a gregarious and outspoken female student who speaks Romanian at home, explained that she was very excited to learn French, but she thought her French teacher's teaching style was boring. As she said, “He wasn't a lecturer; he tried. I'm not going to lie; in the beginning of the year it was kind of boring because he was just telling us all this ‘blah blah blah.’” But she described his reaction when she made suggestions:

For some reason he liked me. I was technically the teacher's pet, but it didn't bother me, and I would be like “Mr. C, why don't you try doing it like this?” and he would listen to the ways we thought was better, and it ended up going like that. In the beginning of the year he would basically have all these PowerPoints set up, and we just gotta sit there and take notes, and I'm thinking this is not how I imagined French. I always imagined French to be something engaging, like I can just get into it because I really wanted to learn French, and I still do! So, I kept telling him, “Mr. C, you should have like some of us say how we think we pronounce and then correct us. And you should have us give an answer whether it's right or wrong, you know almost like a math class, because in math they have students go up to the board whether you want to or not, and you have to give the answer.” So, I gave him that idea, and he just went with it, and after that everything was, like, we were involved even if we were in a bad mood. But it ended up helping us because, like, we know a bit of French now.

Anika explained further that other students had collaborated with her on the suggestions she made. Thus the teacher's creation of a classroom culture was in part based on students' interest in improving their French class and their interest in French as a subject, in spite of the fact that the early classes were dull;

it also drove the teacher's opportunity to create a sense of belonging. He also showed himself highly willing to take feedback. Anika felt that the classroom techniques the students devised had been effective. It also may be the case that having a teacher take feedback was exhilarating to students, who are likely not used to such treatment. Other students also reported that when teachers listen and incorporate students' ideas, it validates the importance of their thoughts and ideas.

Jasmin's, Lucy's, and Anika's experiences in their favorite classes were all exceptional. Teacher–student trust was often developed when a teacher acknowledged students as unique individuals and were willing to provide specialized support and help. When students had such relationships, they felt an increased sense of belonging and engagement.

Classroom Management

Students praised teachers with good classroom management skills as creating a learning environment where there are rules and routines that apply to all students. Classroom management themes that were consistent in interviews revealed teachers who: (1) maintained orderly classrooms while giving students some autonomy ($n = 6$); (2) the rules and routines applied to everyone in the class ($n = 12$); and (3) assigned seats were effective when a teacher used them to give students opportunities to work with and get to know different people in the class ($n = 16$).

Orderly Classroom But Not Too Strict

Jose described the calm and respectful classroom atmosphere that his favorite algebra teacher created to help him feel comfortable:

The teacher isn't, like, too strict. He's mostly calm. The students are not wild. There's not a lot of drama going on in the classroom. No one is standing up randomly and just walking around, like doing their own thing, dancing in the classroom, something like that, none of that is happening, but everything is so calm that I can talk to my friends, like if I don't get something or they need help, I could talk to them, and the teacher is fine with it.

Participating in class and the sense that his teacher and classmates respected and appreciated his contribution helped Jose feel like he belongs. The orderly but relaxed atmosphere also contributed to his naming algebra as his favorite class. The fact that he could ask for help from classmates gave him a valuable opportunity to learn.

Students' comments about their least favorite classes also draw attention to the fact that losing control of a classroom creates a problem from which it can

be hard to recover. Some students ($n = 3$) identified an authoritarian teaching style with teachers who engaged in power struggles with students. In such teachers' classes, students felt they could not openly express themselves, and they did not like to participate. Neither did students want a permissive teacher; Mary described her biology teacher thus:

He was too lenient with us, and although he was cool, he needed to know when he had to take control. I mean he did, but it wasn't as effective as he might think it was. Although he would not yell, he would talk in a very loud manner, you know, raise his voice. The students who usually weren't paying attention or focusing on their work, they would still continue to talk.

Mary's comment, "he was cool," suggested she liked her biology teacher; yet his failure to keep order led her to describe his class as the worst one on her schedule.

Classroom Rules and Routines Apply to the Whole Class

An aspect of classroom management involves how a teacher establishes and enforces classroom rules and routines. Grace's favorite ninth grade class was Argument and Debate, and she praised the teacher's classroom management skills generally as well her specific designation of 10 classroom rules that applied to all students. Grace said, "Usually there is a lot of working together, because her number nine rule is we are a team, so if one person does something, the whole class does it."

Classroom rules also promoted a "team" mentality. Equal enforcement of classroom rules created a sense of community. While there are signals (without certainty) that Lucy and Anika were their teachers' respective favorites in the classes they designated as their best class, favoritism may decrease engagement of the students who do not receive their teachers' favor. Various students expressed they felt less liked than other students, and therefore felt less interested in engaging. Lucy herself said that her theater teacher "favored the people that had talent before they came in." She had never had a conflict with her teacher, but she felt neglected by him. Other students reported a similar feeling. On the other hand, according to Anika's account, because she acted as a spokesperson in her French class, her teacher's favoring her fostered a sense of belonging and increased engagement among all of the students in her class. It is impossible to know whether this was actually the case, as comparing students' impression of particular classes was beyond the scope of this research, but Anika's opinion is suggestive.

Assigned Seats

Another classroom management component students mentioned is the use of assigned seating—a practice that might promote classroom belonging and engagement or undermine it, depending on how it is executed. Students praised a teacher who assigned seats so that students could sit by a variety of different classmates as a way to get to know one another and help one another with assignments. However, when a teacher used assigned seats to control or punish students, they did not see this as an effective way to manage the classroom, and they felt that they were unfairly punished by having to move if they had not been disruptive. Dwayne described such a situation:

People [in my class] don't give [my algebra teacher] respect, and people keep talking. So he's trying to figure out like who to sit next to each other, and like I'm getting kind of pissed off because either way it goes, I'm not the one that's talking. I'm just getting moved around like some clown. So, and I told him that, and he thinks I'm giving him disrespect. So, I just left it alone, 'cause I'm not gonna get sent to the office. I'm one of the best students in the class, and like, it's like I'm getting disrespected, but like I said, we go sit down in our assigned seats.

Jose, Grace, and Dwayne's comments call attention to the importance of classroom management in students' sense of belonging and engagement.

Lesson Organization and Structure

Student interviews revealed that how a teacher organized and structured class lessons was important for advancing classroom belonging and engagement. Students ($n = 17$) identified working in pairs or groups as an important teaching practice that allowed students to seek both social and academic support from their classmates. Also, many students discussed how teachers that were authentic and honest about their opinions and in their feedback helped students' classroom belonging and their desire to improve ($n = 10$).

Working in Pairs or Groups

Students attributed a sense of belonging and engagement to working in pairs or larger groups toward a similar goal. They said that working together in teams was especially useful when the teacher had organized the assignment by explaining it clearly and instructing students in their need to work together. Michael credited group work to addressing his need to connect in his high school. He immigrated from Ghana to the United States when he was in elementary school and speaks English as a second language. He had been more outgoing in Ghana, but he described himself as shy since he came to the U.S. and said that the transition to high school had made him more so. But he liked

working with a partner in algebra, which he named as his favorite class. He explained that his partner's help with his work was something he appreciated, but it also appeared that he was lonely and that group work had been valuable to him in a broader sense.

Dean was also a fan of working with a partner and especially liked classroom discussions:

Well, my literature teacher, she would always love it when we would get into detail on things. We would read passages, stories, and whenever we finished she would give us a worksheet to put our ideas on. Most of the time we'd work in pairs, and the seats would be paired up with people, and you would be able to think with a partner....So, you could share ideas, and at the end, all of us as a class would contribute to the topic. At times we had arguments. Some people would believe one thing, and others would believe something else, and she would enjoy having us speak that way, and she would also throw in her own ideas to show how we could react and what we could come up with in the class....If...we were sitting with the same person over and over, she would notice, and she would say, "I want you to sit over there."

Dean's comments suggest he found the interactions with partners and classroom discussions enriching. He also highlighted that his teacher appreciated these interactions. His teacher's appreciation of the disagreement between partners seems to have created a fertile atmosphere for intellectual exchange. Her technique of breaking partners up and forcing them to work with other students also likely fed this dynamism.

When teachers organized the lessons and activities to include group work, it was an effective way for some students to engage in the class work. It also allowed those same students and others who did not like group work as much to seek support, learn, and socialize simultaneously with their peers. Some students also remarked that group work was especially useful when the teacher explained how the pairs or groups needed to work together. Dwayne, a Black male, talked about group work in his favorite class:

That's one thing I like when she [Ms. S] put us in groups. I mean we got a person sitting next to me, and that's my partner, but when she put us in fours, everybody know[s] what they need to do. "Oh you got this?" "All right, what's the answer like to this?" "What's your answer?" Like everybody gets along, 'cause everybody is on the right track. Ms. S, she already went over that, and she already say you can do it whatever way you want. But everybody likes everybody's ideas, 'cause she explained it; it's how like everything adds up, that's what I'm saying.

Teacher Feedback

Interactions with teachers in the form of feedback also encouraged student belonging and engagement. George, who is Black, described his English teacher as being “very honest with her opinions; when she says something that she feels you need to know, she’ll say it, and I really like that she’ll get straight to the point.” George reported feeling a little out of place in his high school. He grew up on the south side of Chicago, which is characterized by high poverty rates, and most of his classmates on the north side came from higher income families. In this context, he felt that his teacher’s feedback was particularly valuable because it was both honest and encouraging. He felt she was interested in his success and that he could trust her.

Jasmin shared that her family immigrated from Pakistan. She talked about how her World Studies teacher gave useful feedback on her papers, which helped her to see a different perspective and motivated her to keep trying. She said:

If I had a conflicting opinion from what he would discuss, like if I was on the other side, he would actually look at my evidence and consider it, and then he would say something like, “Oh, I never thought of it that way,” or “That makes sense,” or “That’s a possibility as well.” It was in a sense more encouraging because it showed that you’re not completely wrong. You just have a different way of thinking, and I thought that was very useful. It really did motivate me to keep going in that class.

Although Jasmin loves reading and writing, her literature class was her least favorite because she felt the teacher’s feedback was very critical. She often felt discouraged:

My [literature] teacher and I, we were always on the opposite side of a coin on a lot of the essay prompts, and I think that’s what brought down my grade during grading. She would write on my paper, “No, I don’t agree.” So, I think that’s what brought down my grade, and that’s why I hated that class as well. Because I started [feeling] like I can’t say what I want to say because I’ll just get a bad grade for it....The way she graded, I actually watched her. She would read over it, and she wouldn’t read the whole paper. She would read part of it, and if it was just basic, like there wasn’t anything that made her say, “Oh, that’s interesting,” in the first few paragraphs that she read, she would just mark you down as average, and she made that very clear to us as well. So, I felt that the fact that she wasn’t intrigued by anything is because she didn’t agree with it.

When a teacher provides encouraging feedback, this enables the student to feel a sense of belonging and the desire to improve because the student feels his/her perspective has been heard and validated. However, when the feedback

is particularly critical and does not validate the student's perspective, whether it is right or wrong, it can frustrate the student. It also gives them a sense of not belonging in the class.

Academic Support

Students identified support as highly important. While those who received it appreciated social or personal support, students' comments addressed academic support the most often. For instance, students talked about establishing a classroom norm about the importance of making mistakes and taking risks as an important part of learning ($n = 10$). Students also praised teachers who would have a classroom rule that everyone needed to understand a concept or an assignment before moving on, so that no one would be left behind ($n = 5$). Another type of academic support students found to be helpful was when a teacher physically walked by each desk to ensure that students understood the assignment ($n = 8$).

Making Mistakes Is Part of Learning

Chloe commented that learning grammar has been somewhat of a struggle for her; English is her second language, and this may be part of the reason she lacks confidence. Chloe also praised her World Studies teacher who she felt wanted students to participate in class and who worked hard to minimize students' fear and apprehension about speaking up in class. Chloe said:

She would always tell us that we knew we were scared to say something because we thought that we were wrong. But when we would speak out, there was no right or wrong answer, and then after that, we all started feeling like...oh, we should not be scared if we are right or wrong.

Chloe was more engaged in her World Studies class because her teacher said there was not a right or wrong question and that mistakes were normal. Chloe said this decreased her anxieties about participating. She also felt that she was not the only student who engaged more in class discussions because of her teacher's openness.

Ensuring Everyone Understands

According to many students, when a teacher explained a lesson or concept until all students understood, this promoted their sense of classroom belonging and behavioral engagement. Rita, for example, said of her biology teacher:

Well, this class was honestly one of the most exciting classes that I've had. When it was time to do a different experiment or just different activities in class, our teacher really had us involve each other and talk to one another, and he would also come around, asking us were we to

need anything or if we understood it. He would make sure that we also understood the concept of it, and he wouldn't tend to leave anyone behind. If someone was stuck, he would stay on that topic until they finally understood....Once I started asking my classmates, and they started to slowly tell me about it, I understood it more, and it started to help me. And once I asked my teacher, and he went over it, I felt like I was back, in a way, back in the "zone" and understanding everything better!

Rita found biology "exciting" not because it was easy, but because when it was hard, she could rely on assistance so that she would understand.

Step-by-Step Instructions

Charlie praised his algebra teacher's step-by-step instructions:

She would give us worksheets. We'd do 'em, and she'd make us show our work. She'd go over and then she could see what we did wrong, and then a lot of the times, she'd write a problem on the board and make a student come up and write it and make sure he did all his work. And then if he got it right, then everyone's happy. But when they got it wrong and they'd need more help, she did the problem, but she did every single step. And she didn't just skip—even if it was the easiest thing, like two plus two was a step, she would write out two plus two equals, she wouldn't just skip it and write four.

Chloe also credited her teacher's step-by-step approach for her progress in English grammar:

[My teacher] broke everything down, step-by step....I used to have Ds and Fs in English. Since seventh and eighth grade I had Ds and Fs in writing and reading, but when I went to his English class, it's like, wow, this is the pace that I need to be at. This is how I'm learning, and to this day I still love English because of him.

Step-by-step instructions helped Chloe to want to try and engage in the class. It also impacted her sense of belonging because she felt successful in learning English which in the past had been challenging. To implement the right pace, her teacher needed to know the students' level of comprehension and only advance when everyone understood.

Chloe's comments and those of Rita suggest the importance of teaching in a way that emphasizes learning over knowing. They were more willing to take learning risks, especially when they knew their grade would not be adversely affected and that they would be treated as if their mistakes were normal. This helped them engage in and appreciate the course material. Students overcame their lack of understanding by acknowledging it in a supportive atmosphere.

Discussion

The students' comments about their favorite ninth grade classrooms and, to a lesser extent, their least favorite created a picture of how they conceptualized their classrooms and the teaching practices that advanced their classroom belonging and behavioral engagement. These findings align with the literature and provide high school students' voices and examples for how their belonging and engagement was fostered in some classes and not in others. Previous studies have concluded that students' sense of belonging in the classroom was the foundation of their engagement (Fitzsimons, 2006; LoVerde, 2007). Likewise, students' belonging and engagement increased when they had teachers who were able to combine good teaching practices and skills while demonstrating to students a commitment to their learning (Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008). Citing Elen and Lowyck (1999) and Vermetten, Vermunt, and Lodewijks (2002), Peterson and Irving (2008) summarized that students' perception of their classroom context can "influence the way they behave, study, learn, and ultimately their academic outcomes" (p. 238).

The findings of this study also align with existing research in that fostering relationships began when the teacher worked to build trusting relationships and exhibited characteristics that communicated to students that they cared about and respected them. Students' comments suggested that successful teachers take the time to get to know their students, have the skills to know how to relate to them, communicate to students that they like adolescents, and show respect to and for students by listening to them and implementing their ideas when appropriate. LoVerde's (2007) study of the teacher practices and behaviors that address students' psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness accords with these findings. The present study showed that treating students with fairness and respect and encouraging interaction with other students conveyed a message of acceptance to students.

Students discussed the important role honest feedback provided to increase their sense of classroom belonging and engagement. This supports research by Pajares and Graham (1998) and by Peterson and Irving (2008) which found that when a teacher provided honest and constructive feedback and guidance for how students could improve it was much more useful than empty praise. These studies also explained that teacher feedback mediates both a student's academic performance and internal processes such as the student's knowledge and beliefs, goal setting processes, strategy use, and self-regulated learning (Peterson & Irving, 2008). Thus the findings of Pajares and Graham (1998) and Peterson and Irving (2008) suggest that, depending on the type of feedback a teacher provides, which could range from honest and helpful to insincere and

unhelpful, could mediate students' belief they belong in the classroom or not. Similarly, this study found honest and helpful feedback from one's teacher not only helps to motivate students to strategize, set goals, and self-regulate their learning (which could lead to increased engagement), but, importantly, it also increases their sense of belonging.

Another finding that aligns with past research was that students felt cared for and respected when a teacher managed the classroom effectively. Effective classroom management is more than how a teacher handles disruptive behavior, but also includes the establishment of clear and consistent classroom rules, routines, and norms that apply to all students and are adapted when necessary, thus creating an inclusive learning environment. Emmer and Gerwels (2006) found that efficient classroom procedures and time management were particularly crucial in secondary school settings because of the many class sessions that fit into a single school day. Creating high school classroom management plans that address the developmental needs of adolescents and providing clear instructions about how the classroom operates is effective with students (Emmer & Gerwels, 2006). Effective classroom management also includes working to include the entire class through consistent classroom routines and structures that apply to all students. Therefore, when students perceive that their teacher has a favorite student, the effects may be varied. For the favored student, the extra attention may support their engagement and belonging; however, it may leave the majority of students who are not "favorites" disengaged. Constructing an inclusive, fair classroom facilitates both classroom belonging and behavioral engagement. Another important classroom management practice involves instructional practices and norms that emphasize effort, improvement, and challenge to enhance student motivation, also referred to as mastery-oriented instructional practices (Anderman et al., 2001). Interestingly, students also indicated teachers that promoted a mastery-oriented classroom also fostered their sense of belonging because they felt their learning needs were acknowledged and that it was important for the teacher to continue teaching until everyone understood.

An unexpected finding was the importance students placed on seating arrangements. The main reasons teachers utilize seating arrangements are to minimize disruptive behavior or increase on-task behavior, and research shows the most effective arrangement to meet these purposes is in rows (Pace & Price, 2005). With the exception of science classes, where students sat four to a science lab table, students reported sitting in pairs, side-by-side. When the teacher used assigned seats to build relationships and facilitate learning, students found this promoted their sense of belonging and behavioral engagement. Research shows that the configuration of the classroom seating arrangement promotes

an inclusive classroom for students with and without disabilities, while significantly impacting behavior, student interaction, as well as achievement (Pace & Price, 2005). Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick (2003) summarize the developmental differences between elementary and secondary school students, saying the latter are more likely to engage in peer interaction and work that requires the use of “cognitive skills, perspective taking, and particular conversational skills to compare other’s perspectives with one’s own” (p. 6).

In the current study, students described how the use of assigned seats in a punitive manner did not promote classroom belonging or behavioral engagement. Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (2002) have emphasized the importance of interaction between social, affective, and cognitive states in development and learning and have provided a theoretical rationale for the use of group work for instruction. This line of thinking has led to an emphasis on “cooperative group work” meaning students work together as a “group or team” that involves classroom peers to assist one another in co-learning (Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, & Galton, 2003, p. 2). This suggests that a teacher who supports the use of social learning as a practical pedagogy style and embraces group work as a way for students to be co-learners with one another can construct a learning environment that promotes belonging and engagement, but changing students’ seating as punishment may have the opposite effect. No research was found to explain students’ decrease in belonging and engagement when teachers used frequent changes in seating arrangements to minimize the disruptive behavior of a few, but this finding indicates it ultimately affected many.

Another finding from this study showed that when a teacher organizes and structures lessons and activities that are interesting and relevant to students’ lives it helps students to perceive that their teacher knows them and sees them. Allowing students to meaningfully engage with one another and support one another with completing assignments taps into high school students’ innate need to build relationships with others outside of their immediate families as they are at the height of identity development. This creates a developmentally appropriate classroom by addressing students’ psychosocial needs. This can entail incorporating lessons that are relevant, creating places where students feel competent, giving them autonomy to make choices and decisions for themselves, and letting them connect and relate to others (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

The value of consistent academic support to the entire class is an important finding from this study. Consistent academic support means that the teacher is available to help students learn; most teachers achieved this by walking around the classroom asking individual students about their understanding, making themselves available during and outside of the scheduled class period, ensuring they don’t leave some students behind even when most students understand

an idea or concept, and normalizing mistakes as part of the learning process. Research about academic support enhancing students' sense of belonging includes teaching practices that overlap with some of the findings in this study. This includes holding students to "high expectations; fostering a mastery orientation in the classroom; utilizing relevant and engaging instruction methods; [and] carefully monitoring students' learning, providing encouragement and opportunities to relearn" (Osterman, 2010, p. 242).

In alignment with past findings (Burden, 2016), this study shows that teachers can create successful classrooms that promote belonging and engagement when high school students feel their learning is supported and they are encouraged to take risks, challenged to interact and learn from others, and led to embrace new ideas and understandings. Building relationships with and between all students, while simultaneously constructing a learning environment where all students feel supported to learn, enhances both classroom belonging and behavioral engagement.

The students' ratings of belonging and engagement in both their favorite and least favorite ninth grade classes confirmed my assumption that overall belonging and engagement is higher in their favorite class than in their least favorite. However, students' ratings of belonging and engagement in their favorite and least favorite classes show variation: Not all students had a high sense of belonging or engagement in their favorite class, and some had an equal sense of belonging and engagement in their least favorite class as their favorite class.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, all of the participants attend one school, thus readers should exercise caution in generalizing the results to all high school teachers. Second, the study does not include the perspectives of others in the classroom, such as the teacher, and the methodology does not support checking the perceptions of a particular participant against those of other students in the same classroom. Future research might address these limitations by interviewing a wider range of actors and/or using classroom observations.

Another limitation is, due to time constraints, the current study only examines one point in time, and classroom belonging and behavioral engagement are dynamic processes. Future research might address this limitation through a longitudinal approach to investigate how belonging and engagement changes with time. Finally, this study set out to investigate the factors that promote classroom belonging and engagement. The interview protocol included questions which led to discussions with students about how the classroom was arranged and the importance peers had on classroom belonging and engagement, but the

interviews with students tended to focus mostly on how teaching practices impacted students' classroom belonging and engagement. A probable reason for this may be supported by previous research which emphasizes the crucial role teachers play for developing students' classroom belonging and engagement.

Future research is also needed to address the variation in how students rated their classroom belonging and behavioral engagement in their favorite and least favorite classes. One possible explanation for this is that their history of success or failure with the particular course subject may affect what they consider their favorite and least favorite. When conducting interviews and throughout the analysis, students' school identity, defined as their school and academic history, was often mentioned by students. Students would say things such as "I've never been good at math" or "school has never really been my thing." When they would expound on what this means, there was often a story of having a teacher or classmate who solidified this as affecting the way they engaged in their classes and felt a sense of belonging (for details on school identity, see Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2012, p. 91). A line of future inquiry comparing students' belonging and engagement and their positive or negative school and academic histories would be one way to address school identity.

It was common for students in separate interviews to mention the same teachers. For example, 10 separate students talked about having a teacher who had a rule that making mistakes was to be expected and who communicated that it is important to take risks in order to learn. Between the 10 students, five teachers were the same. We can reasonably conclude these students did not refer to 10 different teachers. Since students who named the same teacher often attended that class in a different class period, it can be concluded that teachers with good teaching practices carried them from class to class.

Lastly, many agree that research about belonging in educational contexts needs to consider the unique aspects of child and adolescent development when defining belonging, which affects how it is operationalized (Christenson et al., 2001; Finn, 1989; Newmann, 1992; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). To operationalize belonging using a developmental lens will require that future research focus on how school and academic histories and identities operate for children and adolescents within a school context.

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