The High Tide Raises All Ships: Middle Grades Teachers’ Perspectives on School Belonging in Early Adolescence

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ABSTRACT
Middle grades students have developmental needs that are unique from those of younger children and those in late adolescence. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how middle grades teachers create a sense of belonging with their students and the ways in which their knowledge of early adolescent development influences that process. Self-determination Theory, Stage-Environment Fit Theory, and the Model of Academic Engagement provided a framework for a qualitative investigation that involved interviews with five middle grades teachers. Participants emphasized four themes including the importance of an increased emphasis on community building activities, a need for modeling positive attitudes, the ability to encourage positive peer relationships, and making course content relevant to students’ lives. Implications for teachers of young adolescents are discussed.

Keywords: early adolescence, middle grades, school belonging, teacher attitudes

School belonging is defined as the interpersonal interactions that can facilitate a sense of psychological connection between students and their peers and teachers (Goodenow, 1993). Belongingness and classroom community are regarded as significant predictors of students’ psychological well-being and positive adjustment to school (Eccles & Roeser, 2003). The daily interactions students experience in the classroom shape their sense of connection and belonging to others in meaningful ways. Teachers and peer engagement are critical parts of students’ success and satisfaction with school (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015). Teachers, in particular, have a significant opportunity to create welcoming spaces for their students. The strategies, tools, and techniques they employ to build community within the classroom can either support students’ social and emotional well-being or erode feelings of trust, consideration, and mutual respect.

Student engagement goes beyond students’ physical presence in the classroom; it also encompasses their affective domain of functioning. How students feel about others in their school and how they perceive others feel about them are
important markers of school belonging (Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman, 2016; Wentzel, 2012). This project examined the perspectives of teachers and, in particular, their understanding of the unique need systems of younger adolescents and how that informed their ability to create positive learning environments for middle grades students. Whereas explorations of belongingness have typically focused on student perceptions (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Roeser, Midgley, & Urda, 1996; Schmakel, 2008), the current study sought to address the ways in which middle grades teachers manage to create positive learning environments with a keen eye to the developmental needs of young adolescents.

**Theoretical frameworks**

At the core of school belonging is a student’s need to be connected to others in the environment. Three models support this assertion and underscore how teachers and classmates influence the levels of community present in the classroom. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2013) provides a useful framework for exploring how teachers address the distinctive needs of their students. The theory of stage-environment fit is valuable for explaining how the developmental needs of teenagers require an ecological learning system that is supportive of positive peer relationships, freedom, and choice. Finally, the work of Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) is beneficial for examining how academic engagement is conceptualized in affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains.

According to self-determination theory, humans have three fundamental needs that must be fulfilled for them to reach their potential: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence is best defined as a student’s assessment of his or her learning and sense of ability in various subject matters. In the classroom setting, competence can be demonstrated by students exhibiting metacognition and reflecting on their learning. Autonomy is a function of how often students are allowed flexibility and choices in their learning. For most adolescents, perceived autonomy is an indication of how much choice they have in what they learn, how they are assessed, and the level of freedom adults give them to explore topics of interest. Relatedness refers to how involved students are in the life and activity of the class. At a basic level, humans are tribal (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and need to feel connected to others. The degree to which a student feels welcomed in their educational environment is a measure of the interpersonal relationships in that learning space (Niemiec, 2009).

For adolescent students, in particular, the nature of the learning environment must be congruent to their developmental needs (Akos, Lineberry, & Queen, 2013). Proponents of stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993) assert “teachers should provide the optimal level of structure for children’s current levels of maturity while providing a sufficiently challenging environment to pull the children along a developmental path toward higher levels of cognitive and social maturity” (p. 92). Young adolescents are exploring their various identities, turning to peers for increased approval and acceptance, and readjusting their place in the family structure. When there is a mismatch between the needs of the young adolescent and their environment, it can lead to tension and damaged relationships. Students can withdraw and begin to experience difficulties, both interpersonally and intrapersonally.

In light of these distinct developmental needs, the school setting takes on a different purpose for young adolescents. When there is congruence between their needs and the environment in which they are learning, adolescent students are more likely to flourish. As a result, middle grades teachers have to be sensitive to the physical, cognitive, and emotional changes their teen students are experiencing (Eccles & Roeser, 2003; Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2015) and adjust instruction accordingly. If a teacher demonstrates caring and shows warmth to a young adolescent student, it can positively influence the students’ sense of motivation and engagement. Teachers who provide ample opportunities for students to display independence, take ownership of their learning, and demonstrate decision-making skills show a willingness to mold the environment to the needs of the pupils. The relationships students build with their teachers and classmates must be supportive of these unique developmental needs. In short, the classroom is the backdrop for these adolescent experiences to play out in positive or detrimental ways (Booth & Gerard, 2012; Lipsitz, 1984; Vollet, Kindermann, & Skinner, 2017).

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) posited that students demonstrate academic engagement in three ways: in affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains. Higher levels of engagement can serve as a protective function by insulating students from school withdrawal, negative peer relationships, and poor self-
Esteem (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). In the affective and emotional domain, students display an interest in school, value being a member of the class community, and exhibit a sense of belonging. Students’ orientation to school, satisfaction with school, and the quality of their emotional relationships with others are significant parts of affective engagement. This domain is analogous to relatedness in self-determination theory. Adolescents need to feel connected to others and know that their presence is valued and welcomed (Rambaran et al., 2017). Teacher support and positive peer relationships can help students’ engagement within the affective domain. In particular, the “conflict and closeness” students experience with those in the classroom setting can either result in a positive outlook and valuing of school or feelings of disengagement (Okonofua, Pauneska, & Walton, 2016).

Student behavioral engagement refers to positive conduct, persistence, and showing effort. Students who are minimally disruptive and keep attentional focus during the lesson are said to display behavioral engagement according to Fredricks and associates (2004). These students demonstrate high levels of task persistence and other traditional forms of compliance such as high attendance and homework completion. Stage-environment fit theory stresses the need for teens to be challenged in their work, while self-determination theory highlights the importance of competence as a function of adolescent need systems.

Finally, the cognitive domain of engagement emphasizes self-regulation, motivation, planning, and connecting ideas. Students with high cognitive engagement will have a mastery goal orientation that focuses on learning for the sake of enrichment as opposed to solely for grades or other external rewards (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). This domain of engagement relates to self-determination theory and stage-environment fit theory. In self-determination theory, autonomy is often conceptualized as how much freedom students have in content and feel supported in their exploration of the subject matter. Eccles and associates (1993) noted that middle grades teachers often exhibit high levels of control over topical content and are less likely to provide latitude in how students are assessed. There is also less emphasis on peer collaboration and interaction, which is a developmental need during adolescence.

It is important to note that all of the aforementioned positive characteristics (e.g., connection, empathy, and focus) students may display are appropriate for teachers to emulate in their instruction. In the current study, I used these three definitions of engagement as a framework to explore teacher practices and perceptions of belongingness and the extent to which they fostered middle grades students’ learning environments that were congruent with the developmental needs of that age group (via stage-environment fit). Self-determination theory provided a lens through which teacher strategies for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were examined, and the literature on academic engagement offered a paradigm for studying the emotional and behavioral constructs of student participation.

The present study adds to the literature based on belongingness in adolescence by exploring the perspectives of middle grades teachers regarding how they approach community-building in the classroom. Previous research efforts have focused on student perspectives and their feelings of belongingness in the classroom. While it is important to understand how students experience the middle grades classroom in behavioral and affective ways, an analysis of the teacher’s role is also essential. As aforementioned, teachers’ instructional and relational habits can either promote or hinder healthy youth development. This study examined how middle grades teachers use their understanding of adolescent developmental needs to create learning environments that are supportive of competence, independence, connection, and cognitive maturity.

**Methodology**

The current study sought to address the ways in which middle grades teachers manage to create positive learning environments with a keen eye to the developmental needs of young adolescents. The majority of studies on this subject used survey methodology and other quantitative approaches to examine the question of students’ perceptions of relationships in the classroom setting (e.g., Wentzel, 2010). A qualitative research methodology was used to interview teachers about specific attitudes and practices they employ regarding the instruction of their adolescent students. Particular attention was paid to methods for establishing classroom community, supporting positive peer relationships, and enhancing the socio-emotional well-being of their students. The main research questions were (1) in what ways do middle grades teachers create a sense of belonging amongst their early adolescent students? and (2) in what ways does a middle school teacher’s understanding of adolescent development inform their approach to relationship-building?
**Context and participants**

A total of five middle grades teachers responded to my request to participate in a study about teachers’ views of young adolescent school belongingness. I used purposeful sampling to obtain information-rich data from the participants who had knowledge of the phenomenon described. I used maximum variation sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, to glean information from a wide range of participants. As I describe in the next section, each teacher had an educational, cultural, and relational background that provided a unique way of viewing their role and identity as a middle grades teacher. The benefit of incorporating this type of sampling approach is that I was able to obtain a deeper view of the phenomenon from multiple viewpoints (Patton, 2014). This sampling strategy supported the identification of common themes within the sample. In effect, because the individual cases were so different, any thematic commonalities among them were particularly salient and indicative of noteworthy shared experiences.

One participant taught at a majority white, socioeconomically homogeneous school. Three teachers worked at the same charter school that emphasized Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and had a diverse study body. This school had slightly more than 500 students in grades 6–12. Students had varying degrees of ability and were heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status and racial background. Another participant taught at a high-needs public middle level school with a significant percentage of African-American and Latinx students. There was also a large population of English language learners from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Each teacher’s years of experience, professional background, and educational qualifications are explained in greater detail. Pseudonyms are used to protect the teachers’ anonymity.

**Jason.** Jason, a veteran teacher of 10 years, was the most experienced teacher in the study. A native of California, Jason came to the field of education through an alternative certification program after obtaining a bachelor’s degree in political science. Inspired by his coursework in Chicano studies, he spent his first 2 years after college teaching in downtown Los Angeles at a private school. Seven years and a master’s degree later, Jason moved to the Southeast to pursue a doctorate in social foundations in education. At the time of the study, he taught sixth grade social studies at a majority white middle level school.

**Terri.** Terri was in her sixth year of teaching biomedical engineering courses at a diverse charter school with a wide range of socioeconomic and ability backgrounds. Originally from the mid-Atlantic, Terri obtained a bachelor’s degree in marine science before pursuing a Master of Arts in teaching in science inquiry. Terri decided to become a teacher after experiencing hardships in college and having an advisor who noticed her gift of “recruiting, speaking to people, and teaching them to broaden their horizons.”

**Eric.** Eric had completed two full years teaching at the aforementioned charter school. He began his postsecondary education at a community college and then transferred to a 4-year institution for a degree in biology. His Masters of Arts in teaching was conferred in 2015. He taught honors and college-prep biology classes as well as earth science. He completed his clinical experience internship at the same school where he was teaching. Many of the same students he taught as sixth graders while interning he taught as eighth graders during the study.

**Dana.** Dana was a first-year mathematics teacher of sixth and eighth grade students. Dana was a nontraditional student who attended her undergraduate institution in her late 30s. She had been a wife, mother, and school district central office employee for 10 years when she was “called to the classroom.” Dana’s school was very diverse with a high number of students of color from working class and lower income socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Stephanie.** Stephanie was in her third year teaching honors and college-prep English to eighth graders. She attended a community college due to a “bad GPA” and then transferred to a private 4-year university. Stephanie recalled “being miserable in the teaching program,” which prompted her to withdraw from the program. After a serious car accident, Stephanie left school for a while to recover and see the world. She took 5 years off before attending a public, 4-year college where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Bachelor of Science in education. At her charter school, Stephanie had been the chair of the English department for 2 years.

**Data collection**

This study was properly vetted and approved by the institutional review board, and it was conducted between August and December, 2017. Each participant was made aware of and agreed to all
consent procedures. One-time individual interviews were conducted with each teacher, ranging from 38 to 52 min in length. The interview questions were drafted, in part, from the literature based on teacher–student relationships in the middle grades as well as other pertinent areas of inquiry, such as teachers’ understanding of adolescent developmental needs.

I followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), but I allowed for flexibility as certain topics warranted a follow-up or additional prompts. Sample open-ended questions included how do you develop a sense of belonging/classroom community with your students? Can you name two or three specific activities you do to create a positive learning environment? What role does providing specific and actionable feedback have in promoting a safe space for learning? How does your understanding of adolescent developmental needs influence your ability to provide a socially positive environment for students? How do you encourage positive peer relationships among students? What role do parents play in school belongingness/community?

**Data analysis**

I audiotaped interviews with the teachers’ permission and transcribed them for analysis. I also drafted field notes to add more detail to the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). These notes included my initial impressions of the participants with memos about gestures and intonation which provided greater context for the analysis of the data (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). In an effort to provide a measure of trustworthiness, I incorporated member checking to allow participants to review the transcriptions for accuracy (Patton, 2014). While generalization was not a primary aim of this qualitative study, using a purposeful sample of those knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest allowed for the voice of the participants to answer the research questions presented.

To synthesize the interview data in a systematic way, I conducted a typological analysis (Hatch, 2002), in which I reduced the data based on existing categories drawn from my theoretical framework (i.e., self-determination theory, stage-environment fit, and academic engagement). While concepts in my theoretical framework guided my initial focus, my main goal was to condense the interview data into meaningful thematic categories based on regularities, relationships, and frequencies. If the data evidence did not fit those predetermined elements, I was open to amending the typology.

In the first stage of coding, I completed a cursory reading of the transcript to get a general sense of the participants’ expressions and feelings. I did not assign data points to formal categories at this juncture, but I did generate estimated parameters with respect to the data. I noted information that connected to the typology from the theories presented so I could return to those ideas for additional follow-up.

In the second phase of analysis, I created a group of categories based on relationships characterized in the data. More specifically, I began assigning codes to blocks of text that indicated an area of inquiry based on the theoretical perspectives aforementioned. I detected relevant domains, assigned them a name, and removed others. During this process, I constantly read and reviewed the transcript data and field notes while relationships materialized. It was important for me to record where categorical elements were located within the raw data. Memos were ordered to show associations between one another and the overarching research questions. Studying the data in a deeper way allowed for a greater organization of existing links and relationships.

In the last phase of the analysis, I reduced codes and analytical memos into large overarching thematic units that precisely described the participants’ views. To determine the final classification for findings, “themes were developed based on a given response’s frequency, extensiveness—the number of individuals who responded in a given way, and intensity—how strongly the response was communicated” (Case, 2013, p. 136). These interpretations communicated what I found within the context of the study and how the relationships between data points answered my research questions. I chose data excerpts, in the form of quotations, to emphasize relationships between concepts (Hatch, 2002). An example of this process is displayed in Appendix.

I employed triangulation in two ways. First, I triangulated sources (Maxwell, 2013) by recruiting multiple teacher participants who had different perspectives. During the recruitment process, I wanted to ensure a range of experience levels and educational backgrounds. Some teachers went through traditional teacher preparation programs and others completed an alternative credentialing process. One teacher worked in the school system in a clerical role for a decade before pursuing an education degree, while another suspended her college career to explore the world, which informed the viewpoint she brought to her adolescent students. Second, I
employed theoretical triangulation by incorporating three distinct, yet complimentary, theories to interpret the data (Patton, 2014). Using these theories as a basis for analyzing the data helped me explore different viewpoints of the phenomenon. While the theories were complimentary (i.e., a focus on student–teacher interactions), each theory individually allowed for a more contextualized view of the findings.

Findings

Two research questions guided this study. The first question was in what ways do middle grades teachers create a sense of belonging amongst their adolescent students? In response to this question, two themes emerged: increased emphasis on community building activities and modeling positive attitudes. The second question was in what ways does middle school teachers’ understanding of early adolescent development inform their approach to relationship-building? The second question resulted in two thematic categories: encouraging positive peer relationships and making course content relevant to students’ lives. I provided quotations from the interviews to illustrate these themes.

Increased emphasis on community building activities

All of the teachers discussed using specific strategies at the beginning of the year and throughout the semesters to improve students’ sense of connection to others in the classroom. Some of these actions were intentional and others were by-products of the community established by the teacher. Most of the teachers recalled having an overarching activity or idea that would characterize their expectations for student engagement.

This year, for the first time, I am using an Aztec word called Calpulli … which is an indigenous term for a collective community … everybody brings their own parts and talents to the whole offering … and I’ve tried these first three weeks of school to put that front and center … I have always been a project based learning guy … we all have different talents we bring to the project to incorporate … they contribute to the classroom … they belong … they can excel if they feel welcomed and safe. … (Jason)

At the beginning of the year, they make social contracts … they get to choose how they want to be treated, how they want their teachers to treat them, how they want each other to treat them … that’s something I refer to a lot throughout the year … so it can be something as simple as hey, we’re not being very respectful right now, we’re not being very collaborative right now. (Eric)

We do a call and response for each class … I let them select what their call and response will be … so we have a variety … we settled on: I say Listen, Linda and they say back Linda, Listen. We had other ones and there were things like I’ve got you … and then the kids say Bruh. Each class selected their own call and response … it was a way for them to know that we connect. If we get dispersed, we are going to connect back to this call and response. (Dana)

A significant part of establishing a sense of community relates to how the teacher builds rapport with the students. Many of the participants noted that trust and honesty were at the core of this experience, and they indicated teachers needed to be approachable with their students early and often.

You want them to own their space, learning, and relationships with others and the only way you can do that is by building trust and ownership. Students have to trust that you are there for them. They have to trust that they can trust you … that you are the person that you say you are. You care about them, you care about their learning. (Terri)

We do a lot of reflective work. I think it’s important for teenagers, especially, to understand and develop a more stable concept of self. Depending on their age, [their] needs are much different. A lot of them define themselves by other people. So, in a classroom setting if you can create a sense of inquiry, a sense of trust, of exploration … sometimes just asking them question they have never been asked before can change a student’s perspective. (Stephanie)

Stephanie also mentioned that she recognized the need to be caring, but she had to temper that warmth with the acknowledgment she and her students are not peers.

I try to connect with them individually by genuinely caring about them. Teenagers have an amazing barometer for [knowing] when you do not care, or honestly [are] not paying attention to them. It’s a superpower that they have! I do think that it’s important to care about them … to get to know them on a personal level … not so much that it crosses a boundary of professionalism … I am very emphatic with my students that we are not friends. I love laughing with them and having a good time, but it’s not required for their success. (Stephanie)
Teachers also sought out opportunities for bonding with students outside of the classroom. Several noted that those informal times of connecting can spill over into the traditional instructional setting. When teachers demonstrated care and warmth with their students, the ability to relate to each other in the classroom improved.

Having those one-on-one conversations that aren’t structured . . . go sit at a random table of kids at lunch . . . have a conversation with them . . . how is their day going . . . if they are on a sports team . . . that’s a big one . . . this year I try to make more of an effort. I go to the volleyball games . . . to the football games . . . to something . . . make your face present and show interest in who they are outside of your class . . . yes, they may be the next scientist or whatever . . . they may be really awesome at what’s going on in your class, they may not . . . but there is so much more to them than that . . . than your subject area . . . that’s not all they want to talk about. (Eric)

You have to create opportunities . . . so I go to my students’ basketball games, I go to all the football games, I support the band . . . anything I can do to show them I care about them and I’m in it to support them. Plus it’s fun . . . sports is fun . . . so that kind of thing we can talk about . . . with girls it’s way easier, we talk about hair and clothes and shoes . . . whenever we have spirit week, I am always participating and giving them something . . . just being silly . . . I think it starts with you being there from day one. (Terri)

**Modeling positive attitudes**

Every teacher I interviewed emphasized the importance of modeling a positive attitude and disposition with their students. This second theme centered on ensuring an atmosphere of affirmation and collegiality. As each teacher took care to facilitate community building activities during the school year, they also wanted to cultivate an environment in which students could express themselves with respect and consideration for each other.

As a class we developed our own standard operating procedures. The most important one that they came to is that everyone participates . . . we use positive language and I demonstrate it for them . . . so you’re not going to say to your colleague in the group *that’s a dumb idea* because that doesn’t feel good or make them want to help . . . but you might say, *okay let me tell you how I was thinking about it and see if we can come to agreement* . . . I don’t have to agree with you, but I do have to be polite. (Dana)

I have to earn respect just like they have to earn respect . . . so because of that I became a lot more delicate . . . a lot more thoughtful about words I was saying and how I responded to everything . . . just trying to be innately more positive at all times even when I am not feeling it . . . it is my job. With students who I know are coming in . . . you can tell . . . they want to test you . . . they are yelling at you for no reason, or they are yelling at someone else for no reason . . . those are the kids you have to pull aside and say *hey, I see that you are going through something right now . . . I don’t think you’re mad at me . . . you may be mad at that kid, but it’s something we can solve . . . let’s get down to the real issue here . . . I am here for you and let’s take it step by step. Trauma is real and I think middle school kids get hit hard* (Terri).

Teachers were adamant about the need to constantly review and reinforce these expectations and ideas with students. If (and when) conflicts or disagreements arose, participants relayed how they would revisit these standards of behavior the community agreed to uphold.

In the beginning it was just really open, honest conversation with the entire group about who I am and how I come to them and where I’m coming from . . . where I hope to see us go as a group . . . then very serious conversations about the things I expect from them around kindness and community . . . supporting each other and one of the things we talked about was this sort of colloquialism about *the high tide raises all ships* . . . I grew up knowing that when some of us do well, we should all do well . . . we should all be lifted up . . . we’ve talked about it in a lot of different ways . . . if there is a need for you to tear somebody down for you to feel good then we’re just doing it wrong . . . we need to re-approach it . . . look at it some way different (Dana).

I had a student with autism for whom it was difficult for her to be in the classroom. We all tried everything we could, including specialists, but it was a situation where for everyone involved it was very difficult for her to be in that classroom. For me, it was about having to learn how to have those conversations kindly and compassionately . . . and let kids know that we all have things that we bring to the table . . . and it’s not individuals trying to make it difficult for others. What I do is the marshmallow type challenge with kids . . . or build stacking cups as high as you can . . . allow them to work in teams . . . people that you would not usually think of as being high flyers, as they say
... they end up having great ideas that lead the team... so, that keeps them on their toes. (Jason)

The teachers talked at length about how parents and families can be supportive of the work they do in the classroom. Each teacher recounted how they intentionally connected with parents so they and the parents would have common academic and behavioral expectations. For many of the teachers, the willingness of the families to connect with them was a good indication of how the student would engage.

My big thing is parent contact... positive or negative. I try to make more positive contact than negative so if I do have to send that negative e-mail, I try to send two positive ones... and they [students] know that now. They'll ask... what do I need to do to get a positive e-mail? I'll have all of these little deals with them... if you have three good days, I'll talk to mom. By this point I've talked to pretty much everybody's mom or dad for some reason or the other and I can pull that name out... if they're being off one day, I can say, you know Sheila and I are best friends... she is on my speed dial. Just knowing that little bit about their lives helps. (Eric)

Working in lower income Latinx communities, I have a wide swath of experiences. My first couple of years teaching I also coached basketball and they [parents] would invite me into their homes after games to eat and all that good stuff. It was just amazing because all the parents knew each other, there wasn't division amongst themselves... they were all together... they would bring the class food and they watched each other's kids... they were a community... I felt that in the school, too. (Jason)

Teachers were very descriptive of how reaching out to parents in an effort to affect student behavior could result in a positive outcome.

Two Tuesdays ago I had the worst day of the semester... all the bad things are going at us... I wanted them to learn, they didn't want to learn that day. It was one of those days. I was frustrated with them because I care about them deeply... they know I care about them deeply... they were just saying no. I went and called 15 parents that evening and I had 10-minute conversations at least with each one talking about strengths and weaknesses and where there is opportunity for growth... hopefully connecting with these parents to be on the same page so we can reinforce the same things at home. The next day was brilliant! That Tuesday I was crying, on Wednesday we had the best day we've had so far. When the students came back, we got apologies and we moved forward and they were able to learn. (Terri)

They [parents] are on board. There are a couple of parents I will email in the middle of class if I need to... there are a couple of parents I will text them if I need to... they are engaged. My highest flyer is a hot mess... he lives with his great grandmother but we talk like twice a week. Just today a parent who I met one time before, but [did] not really have a deep conversation with, showed up to class and ate lunch with me during my planning and then stayed during class for a while because she just wanted to show up. (Dana)

The common thread in the teachers’ responses was how beneficial the home–school connection could be in establishing belongingness for students. Teachers also underscored that positivity cannot be relegated to just their classroom only. Every teacher mentioned that all teachers working with middle grades students have to be on the same page and willing to provide a safe space for exploration and growth. They have to be committed to working with students who are in an ambiguous space between childhood and young adulthood that is fraught with identity issues and the intense reality of possible selves.

Do not step foot into this school unless you are into really wanting to make change with people... little people who need you to help make change. Now, you may like content, that’s important... but you really need to like people to be a middle school teacher. My husband says I have a gift of just forgetting and I do. I can just delete it and move on to the next day. You have to understand, too, that they are just kids and they don’t mean it. They don’t want to actually hurt you they want to show you they are hurting. At this school you have to work 125%. (Terri)

I think the easiest thing is when you have all of your teachers working together toward that [a sense of community] but if you don’t, it makes it a lot harder to have them [students] invested in school. (Eric)

Middle school students need to know that you... as they put it... are coming 100. You need to bring it all and be real and they will see you if you’re real. I was very worried about being the old, white lady in a high-poverty, high African American school. I know who I am. I know how much love I have to give to them, but how am I going to get past whatever distrust or disconnect they may feel toward the old white lady? If I am real with my kids, they feel that. These kids at
I have an older boy in 6th grade and he is very much focused on how he appears to his peers . . . that is definitely his point of access. He came to class yesterday and he was great and he participated in a way he doesn’t normally participate . . . it was all good . . . we left off. Next day he wasn’t participating and I asked him to move to the back of the line. He fell apart and then he wouldn’t respond to any of the things I said to him. It was escalating and the manner in which he was behaving would have necessitated a referral. But knowing him I chose to go in a different direction. So instead of going the referral route we went right to guidance, we met with our guidance counselor for just ten minutes . . . and we de-escalated the whole situation. (Dana)

The first thing that pops in my head is knowing who the kingpins are . . . and going after that. Last year, without going into too much detail, classroom management was a little off because we had teachers that quit in 7th grade . . . it was a mess. This year they [students] came to us with very little background knowledge . . . very little expectation . . . kind of expecting they could do whatever they wanted. They hit a brick wall when they got to us. We knew ahead of time, instead of trying to win them all over, we just had to win these four or five over and then the others would follow. Knowing that they are so on this pack-oriented mentality, so social, was helpful because we went after those five and they turned their groups and now everybody is in a happy place. (Eric)

Teachers understood that publicly criticizing or correcting students would backfire as students would be more sensitive to disparagement in front of their peer group.

The first way I noticed I was doing this was when they weren’t meeting expectations or doing something ridiculous . . . if it was my own child I would look at him and say have you lost your mind? That’s when I first noticed it about myself. We are friends and colleagues at the same time . . . the familiarity might be to say, little boy . . . the worst thing you can say to these young men is little boy . . . because right away they are like [makes groaning noise]. I resisted that temptation to put them in check that way because I would be real with them. When it’s one-on-one, I might even say that but I would never do that in front of the others. Then I’ve also seen really awesome ways to build them up . . . so I might say, wow . . . that was really smart . . . I might not have ever thought of it that way . . . so they don’t feel like a nerd in front of their friends but it makes them feel like a leader. (Dana)

Other participants recounted ways they would praise students publicly, but correct privately, as young adolescents are still finding their way in the peer cluster. Experiences that are perceived as embarrassing could damage their sense of belongingness with the group.

Making course content relevant to students’ lives

The final theme involved how middle grades teachers made content relevant to students’ lives by emphasizing personal and cultural experiences. Authentic pedagogy presumes that teachers are able to emphasize the importance of content area knowledge in a way that makes it relatable (Saye, 2013). Every teacher communicated ways of making course topics pertinent to students.

When I had an all-girls crew last year for character education 30 minutes a day, our big focus was female empowerment. We took them to see the movie Hidden Figures. Our focus every day was what all of these amazing Black and Asian women are doing out in the world. Basically trying to show them it’s not just a White men’s world . . . there is so much out there for you. We talk about Barbara McClintock, the woman who discovered jumping genes and we talk about Rosalind Franklin who discovered DNA, but the men in her lab took credit for it. To show them there is more than what you might just see on TV, movies, or in the news. There is more in the world . . . you don’t have to be this stereotype picked up on from the media. (Eric)
What does this mean to me? Is this stuff that’s in a book that I’m never going to use in real life? How does this connect? These kids often, especially my boys, aspire to be basketball players or a high roller of some sort. They don’t even care how they are making their money . . . they just want to know they are making bank, they have a nice car, they have a house. So I was like, you want to be a basketball player, right? That’s your goal . . . Let’s talk about what that looks like, you got an agent, right? Is he going to run all of your money or are you going to need to know what your money looks like? They were like, okay, okay . . . I’m not going to trust everybody. I’m going to keep my bank close to my pocket . . . it was cool to see how the boys sort of lit up and responded to that method of applied mathematics. (Dana)

Several teachers spoke of how teaching students in this developmental stage required a thoughtful consideration of how expectations are communicated to students.

Prepare them for the realities of the world we live in but, at the same time, don’t push them into things they really shouldn’t be doing . . . they are kids . . . for me I think the hardest thing is I just need to step back and realize they are 11 and 12 . . . and these are kids . . . sometimes we need to stop. I know we want them to achieve [but] we have all of these [too] high expectations. (Jason)

In middle school they haven’t gotten to that point yet where they are thinkers and they see the light at the end of the tunnel. You still have to cultivate learning with them. In 6th grade all their light bulbs are still on. But in 7th and 8th grade you have some students who have shut down. Learning is not for them. You have to make a place that they want to be . . . and you have to be a person they want to be around. You have to make them want to come into your classroom. Show them your expectations are high for both their academics and behavior from day one. It’s okay to have an off day, but [I have] high expectations for every single student. Accommodations aside, I have high expectations for you . . . you are a learner, you are going to think . . . you’re going to show me that you can problem solve. (Terri)

Sometimes it does them a huge disservice to treat them as adults. They are not adults. They are absolutely not children. I feel that sometimes we forget as adults what it’s like to be a teenager. It’s important to live in that for at least the hours that you are here. Do I think that the majority of my students at a charter school [are going to] go off and be English majors and be dazzled by the words of the Western Canon? No, but I do think that almost all of them will gain research skills and be able to adequately express themselves to colleagues. That’s more important to me than the literature. I need them to have skills that are tradable . . . something that they can make money off of . . . which sounds sort of cold and post-capitalist . . . makes me sad in a way. (Stephanie)

A significant part of making content relatable to students was allowing them to have a say in what they study. Providing specific and actionable feedback was a strategy teachers used to support students’ progress in the class.

I give them quarterly surveys like how do you feel about this class? Do you feel you’re doing successful? What could I do better for you? What could you do better to help yourself? They’re telling me things that I can do to help them better and in the next quarter they see that piece has been put into place. This year I’ve really tried to focus on building their soft skills. They [employers] care that you can get up and give a presentation. They care that you can do research on things you may not necessarily be interested in at first. They care that you can talk to a room of people and convince them of your ideas and arguments. That’s what I want them to leave knowing. (Eric)

I think that to help them in terms of feedback, you have to figure out what you are looking for before you even assign it. When I first started out as a new teacher, I made assignments and I thought this is great and then I would grade it and I was like, nobody did what I wanted! Then I thought, nobody did what I wanted because I didn’t tell them what I wanted. You have to figure out what you’re looking for before you even assign it. (Stephanie)

Teachers also talked about how they used technology to provide feedback to students by using a platform accessible to most students outside of the classroom. They discussed how expedient it was in terms of not only offering “real-time” responses but also allowing students to associate with each other outside of traditional school hours.

They do feedback forms on Google. I compile them all into a giant spreadsheet and then just print them and cut them out. Each kid gets all of their feedback that other students have given them along with my feedback on the rubric. It’s the same rubric each time they do a presentation, so they are seeing their scores
go up with each presentation. I’ve started giving them goals that I’ve set for them and we talk about them. Then with our next presentation that’s what they work on. (Eric)

Once I got my Google classroom, the students are allowed to reach out to ask questions and respond to each other. A lot of times I found that’s the best way for me to give them feedback. It’s either personal notes or responding to questions they had or maybe posing a question that is a little deeper or is not necessarily “mathy.” (Dana)

Discussion

This study explored how middle grades teachers facilitated a sense of belonging with their students. A secondary focus was how teachers used their understanding of young adolescent developmental needs to support a positive classroom community. Interview data demonstrated how teachers were thoughtfully applying many of the tenets of self-determination theory, stage-environment fit, and academic engagement to cultivate an environment of respect and connection with their students. Each teacher expressed their philosophy on belongingness, relayed specific strategies they used, and reflected on how student needs were prioritized in the classroom.

Self-determination theory posits that humans need to feel a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Evidence of teachers’ use of techniques to increase student competence was apparent in the practice of giving specific and actionable feedback. All participants communicated how they would provide students with goals and objectives to underscore their work in the course. Some teachers promoted peer editing and review as a way to share some of the responsibility for evaluation with students. Autonomy was demonstrated by incorporating interests and backgrounds of students into lessons. Teachers were aware of the importance of providing authentic pedagogical experiences for students. Students needed to see themselves in the content and recognize the value of different perspectives. In terms of relatedness, this is the area where teachers were most vocal. They listed and described numerous ways they sought out warm and caring relationships with students. One teacher used a word of the year (Calpulli) to convey the primary theme of empathy for the year. They all incorporated social contracts with call and response chants to encourage connection and commitment amongst the class. All of these ideas had a similar purpose of bonding students to the teacher as well as to each other.

The theory of stage-environment fit (Eccles & Roeser, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993), as applied to middle grades education, emphasizes the congruence between the developmental needs of young adolescents and the educational environments in which they learn. Research has indicated that middle level schools have characteristics that may not always align with these needs (Brown, Kanny, & Johnson, 2014; García Bacete, Marande Perrin, Schneider, & Blanchard, 2014). In particular, an overreliance on individualized work and competition may affect some students’ sense of belongingness. Because preteens are exploring their social identities, it is important that teachers are aware of how sensitive students can be about criticism and correction in front of their peers. Every teacher I interviewed discussed how they had to adjust their way of speaking to students and maintain a positive perspective when interacting with students. Modeling the behavior they wished to see students emulate was a useful practice for each participant. Teachers also allowed for students to take ownership of their learning by practicing transferable skills such as making a persuasive argument, demonstrating strong presentation abilities, and working collaboratively within their peer group. Stage-environment fit stresses that middle grades teachers give young adolescents abundant opportunities to exercise these skills as they are experiencing a developmental need to acquire such aptitudes.

The model of Fredricks and associates (2004) for academic engagement provided a useful distinction to examine the cognitive, behavioral, and affective influences on teachers’ perceptions of student belongingness. Cognitive engagement was evident in how teachers provided feedback in order “to plan, monitor, and evaluate their cognition when accomplishing tasks” (p. 64). Goal setting, requiring reflective activities, and giving detailed assessment of performance were strategies teachers used to heighten cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement, conceptualized as active involvement in class activities, was not as clearly observed in my conversations with teachers. The affective domain of engagement, which is oftentimes a proxy for value and belonging, was distinctly illustrated in the words of all participants. Teachers were keenly aware of how important it was to reach students where they were and to reach out to them in directed ways to facilitate a positive connection. Teachers also leveraged their relationships with parents and families to reinforce the behavior they wanted to see students master. Every teacher mentioned the significance of interacting with families early and often, which is not always an easy task in the middle and
secondary grades (Robbins & Searby, 2013), but the teachers did suggest that it required persistence and a welcoming approach.

Teachers were highly sensitive to issues of race, class, and access which provided an additional context for their responses. In every school setting, teachers were aware of the familial and cultural experiences students brought into the classroom. While not all teachers claimed to be “culturally relevant teachers” (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), they were insightful about how the dynamics of certain demographic variables influence student behavior and academic performance. In particular, the older white teacher at a high-need, high minority school knew that she was going to have to work harder to overcome perceived obstacles to being relatable to her students. The teacher from the West Coast had what he called a “serious culture shock” when leaving the tight-knit community of Latinx students and families to relocate to a less diverse public school in the South. Teacher participants who took alternative routes to education also stressed the importance of being open-minded to how their privilege would be identified by others, and they were committed to reaching out to students and their families to bridge the gap.

**Limitations and areas for future research**

In this study, I interviewed five middle grades teachers about their experiences building a sense of community and belongingness with their students. Qualitative research is predicated on describing lived experiences of participants, which necessitates smaller samples. It was not my goal to generalize my findings, but increasing the number of teachers would have added to the confirmability of the results. Second, while interview data are a powerful data collection method, a formalized observational component would have been useful (Creswell & Poth, 2017). While I have no overt reason to doubt the practices teachers described implementing in their classrooms, having observations would have provided another layer of credibility to the findings. It would also have been informative to speak with these teachers’ students and investigate their perceptions of their teacher’s role as a facilitator of classroom community.

**Implications and conclusions**

In their study on teachers as “warm demanders,” Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, and Acosta (2013) stated “teachers [must] consider the difference between telling students you care and showing them that you care” (p. 36). In many ways, every teacher participant in this study took clear steps to show students they were serious about their progress and wanted them to succeed. Expectations were expressly stated, students were given opportunities to reflect on their behavior, and high value was placed on each member of the classroom community being an active participant. These teachers cultivated their students’ learning environments to be positive, supportive, and respectful (Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Trucano, & Fulmer, 2014). While teachers did recount instances when they struggled to connect with individual students, overall, they seemed to have experienced powerful bonds with students that speak to their commitment to deliver developmentally appropriate instruction.

School belongingness is a concept that has been studied in many different environments and with participants from kindergarten to college. Early adolescence is a time when young people are exploring their identities, seeking experiences to demonstrate competence, and are reflecting on their possible selves. It is critical for middle grades teachers to be aware of the developmental needs of their students and to promote safe psychological spaces for them to connect to others. Learning is a dynamic process that is predicated on feeling that others in the environment want and expect you to succeed. In the middle grades classroom, teachers have a unique opportunity to meet adolescents’ needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy by encouraging positive interactions that bolster students’ confidence in being a valued member of the school community.

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Appendix
Sample thematic codes in relation to theoretical framework

Self-Determination Theory

- Relatedness
  - Caring and Support
  - Modeling
  - Empathy

“We use positive language...I demonstrate it for them.”