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# Sense of belonging among middle school students

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Sense of Belonging Among Middle School Students

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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For the degree of

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School Psychology

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of school belonging among middle school students and contributing factors that may affect their perceptions of belonging. Specific contributing factors that were identified for this project include gender, grade level, GPA, education classification, and socioeconomic status. The participating students were 13 middle school students within a rural community.

A 21 item school membership questionnaire adapted from the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993) was used to assess the participant's perceptions of belonging, rejection and acceptance within their school, as well as their participation in school related extracurricular activities and their likelihood to graduate from high school and desire to further their education. Participants within this study reported having an overall belonging score of 3.22 ( $SD = .15$ ) on a scale ranging from "1 = not at all true" to "5 = completely true". These findings indicated that the participants had a neutral or moderate level of overall sense of school belonging. Survey responses also suggest that participants had moderate rejection and acceptance scores.

Responses to the two additional questions relating to the likelihood of completing high school and continuing on to further their education revealed consistent high level results. Responses to the third additional question suggested that many of the participants participate in at least one extracurricular activity at their school.

Due to so few participants, inferential statistical analyses including significance levels of the factors that were identified to be explored within this study could not be performed or reported.

The current study's findings can provide the participating middle school with a platform of information regarding school belong within their school. The tool developed

from the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale can be used on a much larger sample size within the school to obtain a more accurate representation of the students' sense of school belonging.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

Many educators and researchers agree that one of the most fundamental reforms needed in education is to make schools a better community, providing care and support for all young people (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). According to Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi (1996), the term “community” can be defined in different ways, but a commonality among all definitions includes the concept of belongingness. They go on to say that community is not present until its members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety. It is important that in a school community the students, teachers, administrators and all other members value their community and that everyone feels that their community values them. Students’ feeling of being accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in their school is described as their sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993). Goodenow tells us that school belonging refers to a student’s sense of belonging or psychological membership in the school or classroom. The concept of school belonging involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.

Maslow (1968) identified ‘belonging’ as a psychological concept. He suggested that human beings have a hierarchy of needs ranging from lower level needs for survival and safety to higher level needs for intellectual achievement and self - fulfillment. According to Maslow, each of the lower needs must be met before any of the higher needs can be addressed. Maslow (1970) called the four lower level needs (survival, safety, belonging, and self-esteem) deficiency needs. It was believed, that until these needs were met, individuals could not achieve the additional levels of Maslow’s

hierarchical needs. Today, Maslow's theory suggesting a sense of belonging is an important human need is generally accepted (Osterman, 2000).

Since the idea of having a sense of belonging is now widely recognized as a basic and important human need, there has been a recent focus on how an increased sense of school belonging can impact a child or adolescents achievement within school. Osterman (2000) tells us that despite research indicating the importance of a sense of school belonging, little attention is paid to the social and emotional needs of students, but rather, priority is given to their performance in national examinations. She goes on to say that indicated by the nation-wide emphasis on standardized achievement tests, academic accomplishment is the main priority while little formal attention is given to the affective needs of students. She further states that this leads to the shaping of school culture, beliefs, and practices that nurture individualism and competition, rather than community and collaboration (2000). Osterman indicates that central to this culture are organizational policies and practices that systematically prevent and impede the development of community among students and directly contribute to students' experience of isolation, alienation, and polarization.

In her review of school belonging, Osterman stated that students who have a sense of school belonging were more likely to show higher levels of interest in school, higher expectations of success and less anxiety. Further, children who have a sense of belonging perceived themselves to be more competent with higher levels of intrinsic motivation than their peers who do not have a strong sense of belonging. Being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to positive emotions, such as happiness, elation, contentment, and

calm. Conversely, being rejected, excluded, or ignored can often lead to intense negative feelings of anxiety, depression, grief jealousy, and loneliness (Osterman, 2000).

Current research shows that school belonging is an important construct that is closely related to school engagement and school performance in students. Given the amount of time children spend in educational settings and the societal importance attached to school-related activities, students' sense of belonging in those settings is particularly important for their healthy development (Goodenow, 1993). There is increasing evidence that students' experience of belonging to their school, including close relationships with school social groups, individuals within the school, and school based activities significantly facilitate motivation and academic achievement (Ryan & Stiller, 1994).

School belonging develops as the student experiences positive interactions with peers, teachers, and other members of their school community. Student teacher relationships, peer relationships, and involvement in school activities are key social experiences that tie students to their schools allowing enhancement of motivation and academic achievement (Osterman, 2000). Having a strong sense of belonging requires the students to establish a social bond among themselves, teachers, and the norms governing schooling institutions (Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A, 1989).

### **Gender**

Some researchers have reported differences in the sense of school belonging in terms of characteristics of the students themselves. For example, there is some evidence that, among adolescents; girls tend to report higher levels of school belonging than do boys (Anderman, 2002).

According to Goodenow (1993); girls report a greater sense of belonging in schools than boys. We also know that the relationship between expectancies for success and sense of belonging are stronger for female students than their male peers in middle school (Goodenow, 1993). In 2002, results from a longitudinal study by Smerdon showed that high school females have a greater sense of belonging than their male peers. Goodenow explained these gender differences by referring to the varying socialization processes of girls versus that of boys. Gilligan (1982) argued that relatedness and connection with others is more important for girls, whereas competition is a more central factor for boys. Given that female adolescents tend to report a greater sense of school belonging than male adolescents (Goodenow 1993 & Smerdon 2002), and that the relationship between sense of belonging and academic motivation is stronger for females (Goodenow), it might be that sense of belonging is more strongly related to academic outcomes for females than for males.

### **Grade Level**

Goodenow (1993) found that the beginning of secondary education is the most critical stage for the development of sense of belonging. She tells us that this is the stage when students are in transition from childhood to adolescence.

According to Rumberger & Thomas, people often predict that belonging increases as the student spends more time at their middle school getting to know the institution, teachers, and peers. They go on to say that alternatively, some data have suggested that many adolescent's sense of alienation may increase across middle school and early high school years (2000).

According to Baumeister and Leary, people have an innate need to belong to social groups and to form positive interpersonal relationships with others (1995). Given the range of positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes associated with students having a strong sense of school belonging, it is important to understand factors that support this perception.

### **Academic Achievement**

Academic underachievement of students in the United States is a major concern for many of the parents and educators of students today. In terms of individual characteristics, students' beliefs about the academic work presented in their classes and their self-concepts also are related to their sense of belonging. Similarly, adolescents with lower levels of academic achievement may be less likely to report a sense of belonging than their higher-achieving peers. According to Wigfield and Eccles (1994), a strong global self-concept and high perceived task values such as the students' perception that tasks are interesting, important, and useful, are strongly associated with higher levels of belonging.

According to Goodenow (1993) and Booker (2007), although feeling of school membership and belonging is important for all students, it may be an important factor in supporting academic achievement especially of disadvantaged students. Osterman's (2000) literature review indicated that a sense of school belonging can have positive impacts upon academic achievements for students. Further research demonstrates that a positive sense of school belonging predicts other academic outcomes in addition to academic performance. Roeser, Midgley, & Urda, (1996) write that a sense of belonging is found to be positively related to academic self-efficacy, positive school

affect, academic effort (Goodenow, 1993), educational expectations (Smerdon, 2002), and the amount of time spent on homework (Hagborg, 1998).

### **Educational Classification**

For students with disabilities, peer-related stressors such as exclusion by peers and a lack of peer and staff support can decrease the students' sense of school belonging (Doubt & McColl, 2003). Studies have found that teenagers with physical disabilities experience more loneliness and isolation in schools than their nondisabled peers (Armstrong, Rosenbaum, & King, 1992). According to Stevens, Steele, Jutai, Kalninsi, Borolussi, & Biggar. (1996), disabled adolescents reported having good relationships at school, but decreased contact with peers outside of school. Parmenter and Knox (1991), suggested that the school relationships reflected acquaintanceship rather than friendship. Sabornie (1994) found that middle school-age students with a learning disability received lower teacher rated social competence, higher self-reported levels of loneliness, anonymity, victimization, and lower levels of school participation. This tells us that school membership and a sense of belonging would have a special relevance for this group of vulnerable and at risk students.

One of the most vulnerable populations for school dropout consists of students with disabilities. According to Reschly and Christenson (2006), students with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral disorders are consistently found to have the highest dropout incidence among special education students and students in general. Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes, & Patton, G. (2007) found that adolescents who reported low school connectedness or sense of belonging in early secondary school were

more likely to have mental health problems such as depression, drop out of school and engage in substance misuse in later years.

Inclusive versus non-inclusive education is an important factor when considering the sense of school belonging for children with special needs. According to Frederickson, inclusive education can be defined at its most basic level as educating children with special educational needs in mainstream schools, alongside typically developing peers (2008). She goes on to say that a major drive towards educational inclusion has been the concern that children who were placed in special education classrooms were at a disadvantage to their mainstream peers, due to lack of contact with non-special education students, and restricted access to the mainstream curriculum and educational practices (2008). Warnock (2005) tells us that engendering a sense of community and belonging is an important aspect of inclusion due to its functional importance for successful learning and general well-being.

There have been few studies that have examined outcomes associated with school belonging among students with disabilities, suggesting that more research is needed to understand how school experiences influence outcomes for students with disabilities.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Trusty and Dooley-Dickey's (1993) study indicated that low socioeconomic status students reported lower levels of perceived membership (measured by both belonging and a commitment to work and school) than did their peers. Goodenow (1993) also found that students of low socioeconomic status reported lower levels of belonging.

A study by Smerdon (1999), found that socioeconomic status also plays a major role in a student's sense of school belonging. It was found that students from families of

higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have higher levels of school belonging. The study also showed that these students tend to be more engaged in school activities as well. According to Steinberg et al (1992), generally younger male students, adolescents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and adolescents with more authoritative parents reported attachment to their school and higher value of their education.

### **School Completion**

A students' lack of sense of belonging to their school can lead to negative social, emotional, and educational outcomes for that student. In a review of empirical studies on the growth and nature of juvenile gangs, Burnett and Walz (1994) conclude that gang-related problems increase when students do not have a sense of belonging to their school. Fine (1991) tells us that lacking a sense of belonging is a direct cause of dropping out of school. Finn (1989) described the process by which some students become alienated from, and eventually drop out of, school. He suggests that a sense of belonging combined with identification with your school leads to an increase in the quality, as well as the quantity, of students' participation in school activities. He goes on to say that such increased participation, combined with quality instruction, can lead to successful performance and achievement which, in turn, contributes to a greater sense of identification (1989).

More recently, school completion has become a high-stakes issue for schools and school districts. Factors that have been identified as contributing to early school exit; include below average family income, mental health problems, academic difficulties, and poor interpersonal relationships in school (Finn; & Voelkl, 1993). Researchers commonly have reported that dropping out is most likely to occur when a history of academic

failure, truancy, and misconduct are accompanied by environmental variables such as; low income, early parenthood, and substance abuse problems (Alexander, 2001).

Christenson (2001) defined drop-out as “a process of disengaging from school, not a discrete event or instantaneous student decision (pp. 472).” Many other researchers have agreed with Christenson stating that dropping out of school is a developmental process (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000).

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore contributing factors that may affect the perceptions of middle school students sense of school belonging. Factors identified for this study include gender, grade level, academic achievement measured by grade point average (GPA), education classification (regular education or special education), and socioeconomic status (SES) measured by free, reduced, or full price lunch eligibility.

### **Research Questions and Statement of Hypotheses**

The following questions and hypothesis were addressed in this study.

#### ***Research Question 1:***

Is gender a contributing factor when measuring the perceptions of school belonging among middle school students?

#### ***Research Question 2:***

Is a student's grade level a contributing factor when measuring the perceptions of school belonging among middle school students?

#### ***Research Question 3:***

Is academic achievement a contributing factor when measuring the perceptions of school belonging among middle school students?

#### ***Research Question 4:***

Is a student's educational classification a contributing factor when measuring the perceptions of school belonging among middle school students?

***Research Question 5:***

Is a student's socioeconomic status a contributing factor when measuring the perceptions of school belonging among middle school students?

I hypothesized that gender was a factor when measuring school belonging among middle school students. I believed that female middle school students are more likely to feel a stronger connection to their school than their male peers. I hypothesized that academic achievement was a factor when measuring school belonging, indicating that students with higher grade point averages had a stronger sense of belonging than their peers with lower academic success. I hypothesized that grade level also served as a factor in measuring school belonging at the middle school level, indicating that the higher the grade level, the more connected the student feels to their school. I also believed that a student's educational classification was a factor when measuring a sense of school belonging. I hypothesized that regular education students are likely to have a stronger sense of school belonging than their special education classification peers. A final factor contributing to school belonging is socioeconomic status. I hypothesized that students who are more affluent and pay full price for school lunch had a greater sense of belonging than their less affluent peers who receive free or reduced price lunch.

**Sample**

The sample was composed of students in a rural Southwest Virginia school system during the 2013-2014 school year. Voluntary student participants were recruited for this study once permission to conduct the research was received by James Madison University's Institutional Review Board.

Participants were a sample of convenience. Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students who attended a local middle school Southwest Virginia were asked to participate.

Students were invited to participate in the study. Parents of 13 students (6.70%) returned the signed informed parental consent forms to approve their children's participation in the study. Sixth grade ( $n = 9$ , 69.2%) and female students ( $n = 11$ , 84.6%) represented the characteristics of the majority of the study participants. Students with a 3.0 grade point average or higher represented the majority of participants ( $n = 12$ , 92.3%), while all participants were regular education students (non-special education students) ( $n = 13$ , 100%).

In addition, most of the study participants were from families with high socioeconomic status, with 69.2 % of the study participants ( $n = 9$ ) paying full price for school lunch.

The following tables and chart provide the participants description by gender and grade level, academic achievement and education classification, and socioeconomic status defined by free/reduced lunch eligibility.

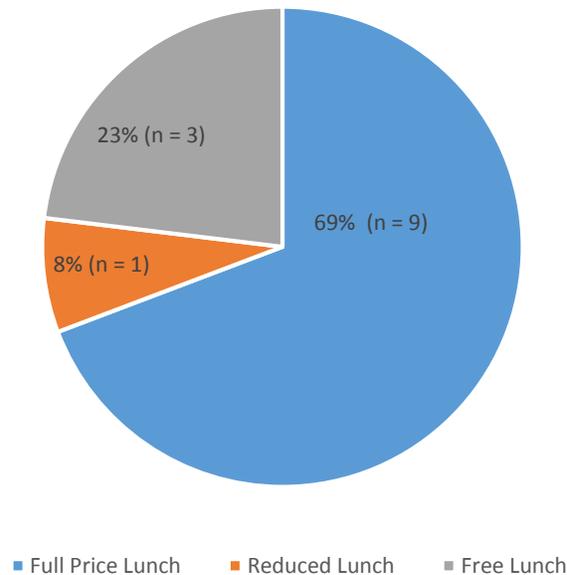
Table 1. *Subject Composition by Gender and Grade Level*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<b>Sixth</b>	2 (15.4)	7 (53.8)	9 (69.2)
<b>Seventh</b>	0 (0)	4 (30.8)	4 (30.8)
<b>Eighth</b>	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
<b>Total</b>	2 (15.4)	11 (84.6)	13 (100.0)

Table 2. *Subject Composition by Academic Achievement and Educational Classification*

<b>Education Classification</b>	<b>Regular Education</b>	<b>Special Education</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Grade Point Average</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<b>3.0-4.0</b>	12 (92.3)	0 (0)	12 (92.3)
<b>2.0-2.9</b>	1 (7.7)	0 (0)	0 (7.7)
<b>1.0-1.9</b>	0	0 (0)	0 (0)
<b>0.0-0.9</b>	0	0 (0)	0 (0)
<b>Total</b>	13 (100.0)	0 (0)	0 (100.0)

Chart 1. *Subject Description by Socioeconomic Status Defined by Lunch Eligibility*



The results of this project were coded in such a way that the respondent's identity was not attached to the final form of this study. All data was stored in a locked and secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matched up individual respondents with their answers was destroyed.

### **Setting**

This study took place in a middle school in a rural community in Southwest Virginia. In 2013, The Virginia Department of Education reported that participating school systems dropout rate was 12.4% for the 2012-2013 school year. Previous data from the Virginia Department of Education indicates that the systems dropout rate has decreased steadily over the past several years, but still greatly exceeds the Virginia state average of 5.9% (2013).

Although the participating school system is making gains in their overall graduation rate, there are discrepancies among student subgroups compared to the state

average (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). In particular, students in the 2013 graduating class identified as having a disability and students identified as being economically disadvantaged in the participating school system had higher dropout rates than the state average (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). The following table shows the participating school systems dropout rate compares to the state of Virginia's dropout rate by student gender, students identified with a disability, and students identified as economically disadvantaged within the 2013 graduating class.

*Table 3. 2013 Virginia and the participating school systems dropout rate by student gender, disability, and economically disadvantaged classification.*

<b>%</b>	<b>Virginia</b>	<b>Participating School System</b>
<b>All Students</b>	5.9	12.4
<b>Female</b>	4.6	13.2
<b>Male</b>	7.2	11.6
<b>Students with Disabilities</b>	10.5	16.3
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	11.2	17.9

*Source from Virginia Department of Education (Class of 2013 State Level and District Cohort Report, retrieved April, 2014).*

## Procedures

The study involved the following steps and related activities:

1. The student researcher obtained a site approval letter from participating school systems Superintendent and the school principal.
2. Prior to conducting the investigation, the student researcher obtained research approval through the James Madison University's Institutional Review Board application process.
3. After consent was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, a letter explaining the study was sent to 16 homeroom teachers at the middle school.
4. Since the participants in the study were minors, the student researcher and the guidance counselor distributed parent/guardian consent forms to 194 students. The parental consent form shown in Appendix A was sent home with each student.
5. Once parental consent was received, participating student records were reviewed by the student researcher using the online databases of *PowerSchool* and *IEP Online*.
6. A student survey enclosed with a student assent form was given to each student whose parents or guardians consented to their participation. Distribution of the survey was made by the student researcher and the guidance counselor. Students completed and returned the surveys in a sealed envelope to the guidance counselor.

7. Descriptive statistical analyses of collected data were completed. The initial identified research analyses required inferential statistical data analyses, but due to so few participants, descriptive statistical analyses were more appropriate.
8. Results from data analysis and discussions related to the study were reported.

### **Data Collection**

This study used quantitative and descriptive data to explore the participant's self-reported feelings of belonging, rejection, and acceptance in relation to identified independent variables. Participating students' demographic information was obtained from online record data base systems. Due to so few participants, the proposed research analyses were not conducted, but rather only descriptive analyses of the results were examined.

Students in selected homeroom classrooms were presented with an information sheet (parent/guardian consent form). Sixteen homeroom classrooms were chosen with a total of 194 students. Homeroom is a period of time in the morning before the school day begins that allows time for any non-academic activities or events to take place. This time was chosen so that the researcher would not take away from academic instruction of the students. After presenting students with the parent/guardian informed consent, the researcher reviewed information about the study and answered any present questions. After parent consent was obtained, the student assent form was given to those students who were granted parental permission to participate. Upon completion of student assent form, the questionnaire was then distributed to participating students. The participants were then notified that their participation was completely optional, but all were encouraged to participate.

Student participation in the study was encouraged by the researcher and the guidance counselor. The deadline for students to return parental/guardian consent forms was extended for 30 days. Multiple attempts were made to remind the homeroom teachers to encourage their classes to participate. Several teachers reported that the time of the school year and teacher “buy-in” was a concern for many teachers at the school.

### **Instrument**

For this study, the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale was used to measure the participating students’ sense of school belonging (Goodenow, 1993). This scale is a paper and pencil self-report survey. The original questionnaire consists of 18 questions. Responses to the questionnaire are in a 5-point Likert scale format, ranging from 1= Not at all true to 5 = Completely true.

The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale has been widely used to measure students’ school membership and sense of school belonging (Booker, 2007). The statistical reliability and validity of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale are supported by previous investigations (Goodenow, 1993; Hagborg, 1993 & 1994; and McKay, 2007).

Coefficient alphas of the total score of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale ranged from .77 (Goodenow, 1993) to .92 (McKay, 2007). According to Goodenow (1993), construct validity of the scale has been established through a series of 43 contrast-group comparisons and correlations involving recentness of student enrollment, school attendance, school location (urban versus suburban), and student social status, motivation, and grades. Evidence has been reported by Hagborg (1994), suggesting correlations found in the areas of self-concept, grades, homework time, social-

emotional distress, and student perceptions of school climate. His study indicated that overall, students with higher school membership were found to be more motivated, to have more positive self-concept, to experience greater school satisfaction, to have higher academic performance, and to report greater school commitment, more positive teacher-student relations, and lower social emotional distress (Hagborg, 1994).

The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale was designed to measure three specific factors including: belonging (e.g., “I am included in a lot of activities at this school.”), rejection (e.g., “It is hard for people like me to be accepted here.”), and acceptance (e.g., “I can really be myself at this school.”).

For the purpose of this study, 3 additional questions were added to the survey to gather further information about the participants. Additional questions included extent of participants’ participation in school related extracurricular activities, their desire to graduate from high school, and their higher education expectations.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analyses of data were conducted to address each research question and to explore the perceptions of school belonging among participating students. Due to the lack of participants, inferential statistical analyses of the data were not appropriate.

Means and standard deviations were reported to describe the overall degree of sense of school belonging, feelings of rejection, and feelings of acceptance reported by participating students who completed the Psychological Sense of School Membership Survey. Item level means and standard deviations were also reported for the three additional questions were added to the original survey. Means and standard deviations were also reported describing sense of belonging related to the independent variables of

gender, grade level, academic achievement, educational classification, and socioeconomic status.

## RESULTS

The overall degree of school belonging reported by middle school students was examined. The following table shows descriptive statistics for participating students' responses to the survey.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for Student Responses to Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale Items and Additional Questions*

<b>Question</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1</b>	13	3.23	.59
<b>2</b>	13	3.15	.69
<b>3</b>	13	3.54	.66
<b>4</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>5</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>6</b>	13	3.00	.82
<b>7</b>	13	3.54	.52
<b>8</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>9</b>	13	2.23	.83
<b>10</b>	13	3.54	.52
<b>11</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>12</b>	13	4.00	.82
<b>13</b>	13	2.54	.52
<b>14</b>	13	3.62	.51
<b>15</b>	13	3.31	.63
<b>16</b>	13	4.00	.71

<b>17</b>	13	4.00	.82
<b>19</b>	13	4.92	.28
<b>20</b>	13	4.92	.28
<b>21</b>	13	2.85	1.07

When looking at the belonging subscale of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale, students reported a mean of 3.22 (SD = .15). This scale ranges from “1 = not at all true” to “5 = completely true”. High scores on this scale represent a higher level of school belonging perceived by the students, while lower scores represent a lower level of school belonging. Students reported a mean score of 2.54 (SD = .52) on the item stating “I can really be myself at my school”. This score was an outlier on this subscale and was not in line with the consistently reported neutral or moderate responses of the participants’ feelings of belonging. The following table includes descriptive statistics for student responses to each item on the belonging scale.

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics for Student Responses to Belonging Subscale Items*

<b>Question</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1</b>	13	3.23	.59
<b>2</b>	13	3.15	.69
<b>4</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>5</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>7</b>	13	3.54	.52
<b>8</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>9</b>	13	2.23	.83
<b>10</b>	13	3.54	.52
<b>11</b>	13	3.15	.56
<b>13</b>	13	2.54	.52
<b>14</b>	13	3.62	.50
<b>15</b>	13	3.31	.63
<b>18</b>	13	4.15	.80

Participating students reported a mean of 3.51 (SD = 0.5) on the rejection subscale of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. This scale also ranges from “1 = not at all true” to “5 = completely true” with high scores indicating higher level

feelings of rejection by students, while lower scores represent lower level feelings of rejection. For this scale, all three items were reverse scored when performing the statistical analysis. Students reported a mean score of 4.00 (SD = .82) on the item stating “I feel very different from most other students at my school”. This score was an outlier on this subscale and was not consistent with other responses. The following table includes descriptive statistics for student responses to each item on the rejection scale.

Table 6. *Descriptive Statistics for Student Responses to Rejection Subscale Items*

<b>Question</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>3</b>	13	3.54	.66
<b>6</b>	13	3.00	.82
<b>12</b>	13	4.00	.82

Responses to the acceptance subscale revealed a mean of 3.71 (SD =0.38). This scale, like the previous scales also ranges from “1 = not at all true “to “5 = completely true” with high scores indicating higher level feelings of acceptance, while lower scores represent lower level feelings of acceptance. Students reported a mean score of 4.00 (SD = .71) on the item stating “I wish I were in a different school”. This score was an outlier on this subscale and was not consistent with other responses from the participants. The following table includes descriptive statistics for student responses to each item on the acceptance scale.

Table 7. *Descriptive Statistics for Student Responses to Acceptance Subscale Items*

<b>Question</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1</b>	13	3.23	.59
<b>14</b>	13	3.62	.50
<b>16</b>	13	4.00	.71
<b>17</b>	13	4.00	.82

Responses to the additional questions that were added to the original Psychological Sense of School Membership scale revealed that the students who participated in the study have a strong desire to complete high school and later attend college or another form of higher education after high school. Results also suggest that many of the participants of this study are participating in extracurricular activities at their school. The following table presents means and standard deviations for each additional question added to the original survey.

Table 8. *Mean and Standard Deviations of Additional Questions*

<b>Question</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>I am confident that I will graduate from high School.</b>	13	4.92	.27
<b>I have plans to attend college or any form of higher education after high school</b>	13	4.92	.27

<b>Question</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>How many extracurricular school activities do you participate in?</b>	13	2.85	1.07

Descriptive analyses of results by gender and the belonging subscale of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale revealed no differences between female and male students participating in the study. Perceptions of school belonging were nearly identical for male and female students. The following table presents the means and standard deviations for each gender.

Table 9. *Mean and Standard Deviations of School Belonging by Gender*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Male</b>	2	3.23	0
<b>Female</b>	11	3.22	0.17

Descriptive analyses of results by grade level and the belonging subscale revealed that there were slight differences in grade level and reported feelings of belonging of the participants in the study. Sixth grade students reported a slightly larger belonging average than their seventh grade peers. There were no eighth grade students who participated in this study. The following table presents the means and standard deviations for each of the grade levels.

Table 10. *School Belonging Mean Scores by Grade Level*

<b>Grade</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>6</b>	9	3.26	0.10
<b>7</b>	4	3.15	0.23
<b>8</b>	0	-	-

Descriptive analyses of results by grade point average and the belonging subscale were computed as well. These results revealed that there was minimal difference in responses from participants based on their grade point average. The majority of participants had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. The only participant with a GPA of 2.0-2.9 reported a slightly higher average sense of belonging score. The following table shows the means and standard deviations for the different grade point averages.

Table 11. *School Belonging Mean Scores by Grade Point Average*

<b>GPA</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>3.0-4.0</b>	12	3.18	0.56
<b>2.0-2.9</b>	1	3.38	0.22
<b>1.0-1.9</b>	0	-	-
<b>0.00-0.9</b>	0	-	-

No participants were identified as special education students during the time of this research, therefore a subscale comparison could not be made for this category.

Finally, descriptive analyses of results by socioeconomic status and the belonging subscale of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale were compared. These results revealed minimal differences between students who are eligible for free, reduced, or pay full price for lunch. The following table shows the means and standard deviations of the belonging subscale scores by student groups relative to their lunch assistance eligibility.

Table 12. *School Belonging Mean Scores by Lunch Eligibility*

<b>Lunch Status</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Free</b>	3	3.20	0.08
<b>Reduced Price</b>	1	3.23	-
<b>Full Price</b>	9	3.23	0.18

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore contributing factors that may affect the perceptions of middle school students sense of school belonging. Because of the very small response rate and the very limited range of participants, several variables of interest could not be adequately examined.

Results show that the participants reported having a moderate overall school belonging score 3.22 (SD = .15) on a scale ranging from “1 = not at all true” to “5 = completely true”. High scores on this scale represent a higher level of school belonging perceived by the students, while lower scores represent a lower level of school belonging.

Previous studies show that high achieving students and students with higher socioeconomic status demonstrate a greater sense of belonging to their school than their lower achieving and lower socioeconomic status peers. In the case of this current study, this difference could not be determined because of the low numbers of lower achieving students. Higher achieving students indicated that they have an overall moderate sense of belonging to their school. Research suggests that this score should be higher for these particular students. In response to a specific belonging subscale item on the survey stating, “I can really be myself at my school”, participants reported a mean score of 2.54 on a scale that ranged from “1 = not at all true “to “5 = completely true”. This suggests that higher achieving students do not feel that they can be themselves within this particular school. All other belonging sub-scale items mean scores suggest neutral sense of belonging among participants.

Previous studies show that special education students report experiencing more loneliness and isolation than regular education students (Armstrong, Rosenbaum, &

King, 1992). Due to all participants in this current study being regular education students, this information could not be supported by the current study. Sabornie (1994) also tells us that middle school-age students identified with a learning disability report having lower levels of school participation than their regular education peers. Lack of participation from special education students in this current study may be reflective of the lack of school participation from this population found in previous studies. Also, the two participating homeroom classrooms may not have included special education students.

Results from the current study also indicate that participating students reported a moderate score, with a mean of 3.51 ( $SD = 0.5$ ) on the rejection subscale of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. This scale also ranges from “1 = not at all true” to “5 = completely true” with high scores indicating higher level feelings of rejection by students, while lower scores represent lower level feelings of rejection.

Results from previous studies show that students with greater academic achievement report having more positive school affect (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). All participants in the current study were students who demonstrate moderate to high academic achievement. These students reporting a moderate rejection subscale score is not consistent with previous research indicating lower levels of rejection from this population. In response to a specific item on the survey stating, “I feel very different from most other students at my school”, participants reported a mean score of 4.00 on a scale that ranged from “1 = not at all true” to “5 = completely true”. With all current participants being higher academically achieving students, this indicates that students who make good grades feel different than others in their school. Being a high achieving

student at this particular school is not viewed as a rewarding quality and these students do not feel like they are like their peers.

Other items on the rejection sub-scale include “It’s hard for people like me to be accepted at my school” and “Sometimes I feel as if I don’t belong in my school. Mean item scores for the current study for these particular questions were 3.54 and 3.00, respectively. This suggests that the participants in this study, who are all moderate to high achieving students, feel that it is slightly harder for them to be accepted in their school than their peers.

Literature also tells us that belonging tends to increase as students spend more time at their middle school getting to know the institution, teachers, and peers (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). With nearly 70% of the participants in the current study being sixth grade students, reported moderately high levels of rejection are consistent with results found in previous studies, but there were not enough upper grade level participants in the current study to make this comparison.

We were also able to determine that responses to the acceptance subscale revealed a mean of 3.71 (SD =0.38). This scale, like the previous two scales also ranges from “1 = not at all true” to “5 = completely true” with high scores indicating higher level feelings of acceptance, while lower scores represent lower level feelings of acceptance. Results from this scale demonstrated moderate scores as well.

Current reported moderate feelings of acceptance from higher academically achieving students, as well as students who are from families with a higher socioeconomic status is not consistent with what has been reported in previous studies.

Previous studies indicate that these particular students tend to have high levels of acceptance within their schools, not only from their peers, but from their teachers as well.

On specific items on the survey that stated “I wish I were in a different school” and “I feel proud to belong to my school”, participants reported an mean score of 4.00 on a scale that ranged from “1 = not at all true “to “5 = completely true” on both items. This suggests that although they may feel proud to attend their school, high achieving students and students from families with higher socioeconomic status are not feeling accepted within this particular school.

Responses to the two additional questions added to the survey relating to the likelihood of completing high school and continuing on to further their education revealed the same results. The participants answers suggested a high mean of 4.92 (SD = .27) for both questions. Like the previous scales, these questions also ranged from “1 = not at all true “to “5 = completely true”. This suggests that these students do expect to graduate and intend to further their education beyond high school.

Previous studies indicate that a lack of sense of belonging is a direct cause of dropping out of school (Finn, 1991). High mean scores on these two questions are consistent with the literature that surrounds moderately high levels of reported belonging and acceptance among regular education students who are primarily exceeding academically. Research shows that regular education students as well as academically achieving students have a stronger sense of school belonging (Reschly & Christenson, 2006 and Smerdon, 2002).

The third additional question was added to gather information on the importance of students’ participation in school related extracurricular activities. Response from

participants resulted in a mean of 2.85 (SD = 1.07). This suggests that many of the participants participate in at least one extracurricular activity at their school.

Osterman tells us that involvement in school activities entail key social experiences that tie students to their schools. She goes on to say that this also enhances motivation and academic achievement in the classroom (2000). Results from this question are consistent with previous studies in that higher achieving students are likely to be involved in extracurricular activities within their school, as well as displaying a strong sense of belonging or acceptance.

This study was designed to investigate specific factors that may contribute to a student's sense of school belonging. Due to so few participants in the current study, it cannot be determined if there were statistically significant differences among students within the different groups that were selected as the independent variables for this study.

Being one of the primary feeder schools to the county's largest high school, the particular middle school that was selected for this study seemed to be the best location to obtain information. Although the school has been open for many years, after the start of the current school year, the school had a complete change in administration including a new principal, guidance counselor, several new teachers, as well as elimination of the assistant principal position due to consistent low state tests scores. It is felt by the researcher that the abrupt changes in administration and staff was a contributing factor in obtaining teacher investment or "buy in" for this study. The researcher also feels that the pressures placed on the current teachers due to such low state test scores served as an inhibiting factor as well. The only two participating homeroom teachers were teachers whom the researcher knew personally prior to conducting research within the school. The

researcher believes that this increased their likelihood to encourage students to participate in the study.

Participation in external research projects (from outside agencies, Universities etc) is uncommon for this particular school system. According to school officials, the middle school that was chosen for this study has never participated in any formal research projects before. Several teachers who did not have any participating students reported that they were not comfortable with certain items that were on the survey or with the research project. The researcher feels that the research process may have been intimidating to certain teachers, as well as parents who were not as familiar with research and data collection. The community the school serves, is a very small, rural community where it is not typical to share personal information or feelings with others who do not reside within the community. Although the researcher is a member of the greater community, she was likely seen by many as an “outsider” wanting to obtain personal information and/or feelings from the smaller community and its members. Thus, it is acknowledged that very limited information has been obtained in this study.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in many ways. The first limitation was sample size. The total number of participants for this study was very small (N=13). Also, participants were only chosen from one middle school. Therefore, specific statistical analyses could not be completed. With such a small sample size, the findings should not be generalized to all students within the school that participated in the study. In addition, disproportionate group sizes of the independent variables that were chosen resulted in inadequate representation of the students within the school that was chosen for this study.

The lack of teacher investment or “buy in” was likely a contributor to such low numbers of participants. Teachers at this particular school are under high levels of stress and pressure due to their students not achieving state standards. School and teacher morale were not considered when choosing a participating school for this study.

Another limitation of this study includes participant recruitment. Participants were minors whose parents voluntarily allowed them to participate. It is likely that the outcomes only represent students who have greater parental support and motivation to participate in school related activities that are not “required”.

Finally, this study did not account for transfer students or students who have been retained. Transfer students will likely have less sense of belonging than other students who have been at the school for a longer time. Also, students who have been retained may surprisingly have a stronger sense of belonging to their school since they have been there longer and have had a longer time to develop relationships with teachers and administrators in the building.

### **Implications for Future research and Educators**

A larger sample size will be necessary to determine if a students’ gender, grade level, GPA, education classification, or socioeconomic status contributes to their sense of school belonging. Also proportionate group sizes will also be necessary to generate generalizable results.

The participants in this study were all regular education students. Perceptions of school belonging from special education students within the school will be very important to obtain for a closer look at the students’ sense of belonging to this particular

school. This will also be very impotent for this school system in particular, due to its high dropout percentage for students identified as having a disability.

One important implication of research on school belonging for teachers is that teachers need to recognize the value of their students' sense of belonging. This includes their sense of belonging not only in their particular classroom, but in the entire school as well. Being aware of individual students' sense of belonging, acceptance, and inclusion, is an important first step in sustaining a students' academic and affective development and well-being.

School psychologists' are in schools to be of service to all children. It is important that school officials are aware that school psychologists are important members of school communities with advanced knowledge of how to support students' academic performance and emotional well-being and are capable to lead efforts to increase the sense of school belonging among all students. Some students are particularly vulnerable to experiencing challenges and disruptions in their social and academic functioning within their school. Unfortunately, barriers often exist that challenge teachers and school administrators to connect with certain students. These particular students often display an even greater need to feel included and connected to members in their school community.

School psychologists obtain a unique set of skills that can be utilized to assist teachers and school administrators in connecting with their students as well as helping to support their emotional well-being and increase their academic functioning. School psychologists should remain committed in their efforts to reach out to all children and to connect with disconnected students in hopes of increasing their sense of school belonging.

## **Appendix A.**

### **Parent/Guardian Informed Consent**

#### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Alexis Carson, M.A. from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to help identify factors that contribute to a student's sense of belonging to their school. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her Education Specialist (Ed.S.) Thesis.

#### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to allow your child to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of a survey that will be administered to individual participants in their homeroom class (this will not take away from academic time in the classroom). Your child will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to their sense of school belonging.

#### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require 15 minutes of your child's time.

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your child's involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life). If items on the survey generate any thoughts or concerns for participants, School Counselors are available for any necessary follow up.

#### **Benefits**

Potential benefits from participation in this study include gaining insight on how connected students at Jonesville Middle School feel to their school. There are no direct benefits to the child for participating in this study.

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented in a classroom setting at James Madison University. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's

identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. The researcher is currently serving as School Psychologist-Intern for Lee County Public Schools and has legal access to all student records and files. Information from participating student's files that will be accessed by the School Psychologist-Intern for this research project are the following, Gender, Grade Level, GPA, Lunch Classification (free, reduced, or full price), and Education Classification (Regular Education or Special Education). This information will be used to analyze information collected from the survey. All data will be stored in a locked and secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. He/she is free to choose not to participate. Should you and your child choose to participate, he/she can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your child's participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Alexis Carson, M.A.  
School Psychology  
James Madison University  
Lee County Public Schools, School Psychologist-Intern  
Telephone: (276) 346-2107  
[alexis.carson@leecountyschools.net](mailto:alexis.carson@leecountyschools.net)

Dr. Tammy Gilligan, Ph.D.  
School Psychology  
James Madison University  
Telephone: (540)-568-6564  
[gilligtd@jmu.edu](mailto:gilligtd@jmu.edu)

### **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. David Cockley  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
James Madison University  
(540) 568-2834  
[cocklede@jmu.edu](mailto:cocklede@jmu.edu)

**Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of my child as a participant in this study. I freely consent for my child to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

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Name of Child (Printed)

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Name of Parent/Guardian (Printed)

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Name of Parent/Guardian (Signed)

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Date

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Name of Researcher (Signed)

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Date

## **Appendix B.**

### **CHILD ASSENT FORM**

**IRB # 14-0116**

#### **ASSESSMENT OF SENSE OF SCHOOL BELONGING AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS**

I would like to invite you to take part in this study. I am asking you because you are a middle school student at Jonesville Middle School during the school year of 2013-2014.

In this study, I will try to learn more about middle school student's sense of belonging to their school. To do the study, I will ask you to complete a short survey about school belonging. Participating in this study will not hurt you in any way.

Your parents have been notified and have given permission for you to take part in this study.

#### **Confidentiality**

All collected information will be stored securely and destroyed upon completion of research.

If items on the survey generate any thoughts or concerns for you, School Counselors are available for any necessary follow up.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you decide to participate in the study, you can stop filling out the survey at any time.

If you have any questions at any time, please ask the researcher.

**IF YOU PRINT YOUR NAME ON THIS FORM IT MEANS THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE AND HAVE READ EVERYTHING THAT IS ON THIS FORM. YOU AND YOUR PARENTS WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP.**

---

Name of Child (printed)

---

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

Alexis Carson, M.A.  
School Psychology  
James Madison University  
Lee County Public Schools, School Psychologist-Intern  
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### Appendix C.

#### Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale with additional questions

Circle the answer for each statement that is most true for you.

1= *not at all true*, to 5= *completely true*.

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) I feel like a part of my school  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2) People at my school notice when I am good at something                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3) It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school?                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4) Other students in my school take my opinions seriously.                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5) Most teachers at my school are interested in me?                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6) Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school.                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7) There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8) People at my school are friendly to me.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9) Teachers here are not interested in people like me.                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10) I am included in lots of activities at my school.                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11) I am treated with as much respect as other students at my school.                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12) I feel very different from most other students at my school.                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13) I can really be myself at my school.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14) Teachers at my school respect me.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15) People at my school know that I can do good work.                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16) I wish I were in a different school.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
-

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17) I feel proud to belong to my school.	1	2	3	4	5
18) Other students at my school like me the way I am.	1	2	3	4	5
19) I am confident that I will graduate from High School	1	2	3	4	5
20) I have plans to attend college or any form of Higher Education after high school.	1	2	3	4	5
21) How many extracurricular school activities do you participate in?	1	2	3	4	5

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Items 3, 6, 9, 12, and 16 were reverse scored

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