

**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING IN A MIDDLE
SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER CLASS**

by

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Abstract

This phenomenology study focuses on student perceptions of their sense of belonging in Middle School English Language Learner (ELL) classrooms. It investigates what may make ELL students feel a sense of belonging, community, and place as it can be more difficult for these students to develop such connections due to potential language and culture barriers. The main research question is: “What are student perceptions of their sense of belonging within a middle school English Language Learner classroom?” This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with five participants in a Canadian middle school in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The findings were organized into three themes describing the participants’ experiences (*safety*, *connection*, and *engagement*), as well as three themes describing the contextual factors related to the phenomenon itself (*familiarity*, *peer social interaction*, and *teacher-student rapport*). The themes of this study aim to help ELL educators better foster a sense of belonging in their students and include a discussion surrounding the participants’ experiences and contextual factors, as well as recommendations.

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Acronyms

- i. ELL English Language Learner
- ii. SEA Special Education Assistant

Introduction

During my time conducting this study, I believed all people were inherently social beings and that we all seek connection, one way or another. I believed that it was through these connections that we consolidated learning. Vygotsky (1978) argues that social interaction is the origin and engine of learning, and I agreed. I saw myself as relational. I believed that meaningful learning came from genuine connections. Relationships had been extremely important to me. From personal to professional, I had learned that it was imperative to experience connectedness and a sense of belonging to ground myself in what I was learning. My inquiry surrounded an English Language Learner (ELL) student population I believed to be marginalized. I perceived this student population as one that may have experienced barriers to the curriculum and their community. As a result, I was concerned about the sense of belonging these students experienced in the classroom. I wanted to determine how these ELL students felt about their belonging within the ELL classroom and what they perceived as helpful in encouraging this sense of community and connectedness.

Context

I was an ELL teacher in a middle school, and I worked with students who were navigating through life in a new school and a new country while trying to learn a new language. These students were trying to understand their peers and teachers while perhaps not fully understanding their need to be understood. Personality, humour, kindness, friendship, and so much more can be greatly dependant on language. I worked with these students in small groups

over three years in order to help them learn English by fostering relationships, connectedness, and a sense of belonging.

I was an early career teacher with three years of experience in the public school system. This meant that I found myself with a very specific lens. I had been recently trained in the current curriculum and was immersed in the newest values and ideas in education today. I was encouraged to promote learner-centred (McCombs et al., 2000) teaching and leadership through inquiry, project-based learning, and backwards design. This, along with my beliefs surrounding socialization and learning, contributed to my teaching style. I taught English to ELL students by emphasizing the functionality of language and communicative competencies (Hymes, 1971) utilizing Communicative Language Teaching (Spada, 2007; Savignon, 1987). This might have looked like spending the first hour of our Mondays talking about our weekends over tea or practicing role-plays.

I had experience as a Special Education Assistant (SEA), where I worked with small groups of students who needed extra support. This added to why I felt passionate about the myriad of benefits small group teaching had to offer, including more of an opportunity for socialization. Another aspect of this job I saw much merit in was the continued support given to the same students over multiple years. I worked with the same students as they grew and developed over the years and I adapted as their needs changed. This seemed like a unique advantage to the types of small group support SEAs provided as students became more comfortable and open to learning as relationships built over the years. I enjoyed my role as an SEA so much that I wanted to continue to teach students in a similar capacity, involving small groups over multiple years. This passion led me to become an ELL specialist.

Since I had strong beliefs regarding the ability of relationships and connectedness to lead to meaningful learning, I spent a lot of my time with ELL students talking and connecting, with the aim of building a sense of belonging in my students. They shared their successes and struggles, and I helped them navigate their school lives to the best of my ability. This was in line with Noddings' *Ethics of Care in Education* (2013). I found that my students were more motivated to engage in genuine English dialogue when they were sharing things that were important to them in their own lives. I tried to demonstrate Authentic Leadership (Gardner et al., 2011) as well as Ethical Leadership (Brown et al., 2018) as much as I could when interacting with my students. This meant that when a student came to me with questions and concerns, which were inevitable when they were learning the language of their school, I used these opportunities to genuinely connect, guide, and in turn, teach English for the functional purposes of thriving in a middle school. For example, a student might have come to me with a misunderstanding that led to conflict with a peer, or perhaps a question they were too self-conscious to ask their classroom teacher due to their limited English. It was my hope that by utilizing these teaching and leadership theories, I modelled responsible, ethical, and authentic problem-solving and decision-making while encouraging literacy development and a student sense of belonging at the same time.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand ELL student perceptions of their sense of belonging in their ELL classes. This research aimed to help the participants better understand their sense of belonging by providing a platform for them to meaningfully reflect on their learning experiences. In addition, this study aimed to broaden ELL teachers' understanding of how their students could feel a sense of belonging in their class. I wanted ELL students to feel

connected socially and emotionally to where they learned. I believed that doing so would lead to more meaningful learning and better language acquisition. The findings of this study were shared in order to foster more community and connection within ELL education.

Research Question

The research question was, “What are student perceptions of their sense of belonging within a middle school English Language Learner class?” The study investigated both the potential experience of feeling a sense of belonging for ELL students and the factors that may have led to those ELL students feeling a sense of belonging. This question was important because it could be more difficult for this student population to develop such connections due to linguistic and cultural barriers.

Scholarly Significance

This research was important in the field of ELL pedagogy because it looked at the perceptions of ELL students and added to the literature surrounding student sense of belonging and its relations to learning. This study addressed the problem identified by Osterman (2010) when she wrote that, students who are “disengaged and/or have difficulty learning” and are “different from their peers and have difficulty in establishing relationships,” are the students who struggle to develop a sense of belonging (p. 258). She goes on to explain that the students with the greatest unmet need for belonging are also less likely to do well academically and personally. This research aimed to help ELL students build a sense of belonging within their ELL classes when they might find themselves “different from their peers” and have “difficulty in establishing relationships” (p. 258). My research sought to learn more about their experiences and potentially extend my knowledge and practice in teaching ELL. This study drew upon literature surrounding

student sense of belonging, and more specifically, ELL student sense of belonging in order to better understand the phenomenon.

Literature Review

In order to determine what structures, routines, or rituals help foster student sense of belonging in the ELL classroom, the literature review is divided into four sections. First, it outlines how the literature defines student sense of belonging and why it is important. Second, the focus is narrowed to the literature surrounding specific strategies that influence student sense of belonging. Third, it reviews the literature on student sense of belonging in the ELL classroom. Lastly, the gaps in the existing literature are identified and opportunities for further research are suggested.

Sense of Belonging in the Classroom

There are many concepts and definitions pertaining to student sense of belonging. This study employs Goodenow's (1993) definition of sense of classroom belonging as a student's sense of being accepted, included, valued, and encouraged by others, while feeling as though oneself is an important part of the class community. This sense of belonging or connectedness is also referred to as a sense of school membership, school community, a sense of relatedness, or school attachment. Osterman (2000) defines a sense of belonging as, "the need to feel securely connected with others in the environment and to experience oneself as worthy of love and respect" (p. 324). Similarly, Goodenow (1993) reports that when children feel they belong, they are potentially more motivated, have higher expectations of success, and believe in the value of their academic work.

Glasser (1986) argues that the need for belonging is one of the five basic needs written into the human genetic structure. Beck (1998) states, “most children fail in school not because they lack the necessary cognitive skills, but because they feel detached, alienated, and isolated from others and from the educational process” (para. 2). There is a significant amount of research suggesting that student sense of belonging in a classroom or school contributes to their motivation to engage, emotional wellbeing, and many other favourable educational outcomes (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Hamm and Fairclough (2007) argue that a student’s sense of school belonging provides a sense of worth, and is an important source of positive feelings toward school. Osterman (2010) explains that the need for belonging, or relatedness, is a basic psychological need and that when students experience belonging in the school community, “their needs for relatedness are met in ways that affect their attitudes and their behaviour” (p. 239). Osterman continues to assert that the students who experience this sense of belonging are more engaged in learning and enjoy school more. They have more positive attitudes toward themselves and others and are more likely to interact with other students and their teachers in positive and supportive ways. The researchers and theorists in these studies suggest that student sense of belonging is something all educators should be striving towards as it has so many positive outcomes.

Factors that Influence Student Sense of Belonging

The following literature points to three factors that contribute to students developing a sense of belonging (social activities, physical environment, and the teacher). Among the factors that influence student sense of belonging, Osterman (2010) argues that teachers directly influence it by providing autonomy, interpersonal support, and methods of instruction that support positive interaction with peers. The physical environment plays a role as well.

Cemalcilar (2010) also argues that, “the structural/contextual environment (the physical environment and amenities of the school, presence of supporting resources, and safety of the educational environment) have positive consequences on their sense of school belonging” (p. 245). Cemalcilar’s research suggests that the safety students feel based on their surrounding environment is possibly a key factor in developing a sense of belonging.

Osterman (2010) argues that it is teachers who have the strongest and “most direct effect” on student sense of belonging and connectedness (p. 239). Osterman argues that student sense of belonging is directly linked to their actual experience in school. Therefore, it may be critical that educators understand how to set up their classes to create an environment, and participate in activities and rituals, that will foster a sense of belonging. She explains further that teachers can enhance student sense of belonging in the classroom by providing both personal and academic support. Cemalcilar (2010) writes about how students’ satisfaction with social relationships with teachers, administrators, and peers contributes to their sense of belonging. Osterman (2010) goes on to say that, “the quality of the relationship that teachers develop with their students has the most direct effect on student sense of belonging in the classroom and their subsequent engagement” (p. 240). Beck (1998) corroborates Osterman (2010) explaining that schools can increase the sense of belonging for all students by emphasizing the importance of teacher-student relationships. The literature points to the quality of teacher-student relationships as the strongest influence on student sense of belonging.

Teachers can foster a trusting and positive relationship with students in a variety of ways. In one action research study, LoVerde (2007) worked with two teachers in a science classroom. The researchers noted that specific behaviours seemed to lead to students feeling a strong sense of belonging. These included teachers expressing care for the students, showing respect,

interacting with the students often throughout the lesson, sharing messages of acceptance, encouraging interactions with peers, and disciplining proactively. In a similar study, Certo et al. (2003) interviewed 33 students from seven schools to identify factors that may have been contributing to student sense of belonging and connectedness. In this study, students described the teachers they connected with as relatable, encouraging, and helpful. The students shared that it was important that the teachers knew about the students' lives outside of school. Ozer et al. (2008) conducted a multimethod study and reported that the students described similar teacher characteristics and behaviours. The students shared that teachers knowing their names, being available to listen, being asked why they had been absent, and following up on students over time all led to a stronger sense of belonging. FitzSimmons (2006) interviewed 11 students during their transition to middle school after just graduating from grade five. From the students' perspectives, the teachers demonstrated care when they joked with students, used the students' first names, greeted them in the hallway, and encouraged discussions. These discussions were most fruitful when there was an exchange of "personal thoughts, beliefs, or interests" (p. 104). "When students felt acknowledged as individuals, they felt as if someone cared about them" (p. 105). All of these studies show that it may be this perception of care from the teacher that fosters a sense of belonging within students. This perceived care can be demonstrated in conversations, questions, jokes, and other personable routines and rituals.

Sense of Belonging in the ELL Classroom

It stands to reason then that ELL students would benefit the same way other students do from feeling a sense of belonging in the ELL classroom; however, they may have some unique barriers. According to Osterman (2010), the students with the greatest unmet need for belonging may also be less likely to do well academically and personally. Osterman goes onto say that

these students may be the children who are most challenging to teachers. She states:

“Academically, they are disengaged and/or have difficulty learning. Socially, they are different from their peers and have difficulty in establishing relationships” (p. 258). Although Osterman is discussing a phenomenon among the general student population, ELLs arguably may experience similar situations. Not being fluent in the language of the community they are trying to learn in and relate to may make it more difficult than a non-ELL student to build relationships and foster a sense of belonging.

Several studies in the literature go further in describing the nature of the potential barriers facing ELLs from enjoying a sense of belonging. Alm (2006) argues that, “language learners have basically two communities they need to relate to in order to develop a sense of belongingness, the learning community in the classroom and the community of the target language” (p. 32). While classroom teachers may be helping to build community and belonging in their classrooms with the ELL student’s community of target language, what can ELL teachers do to help foster this connectedness in the ELL classroom community? Shore (2001) suggests that teachers foster a sense of belonging by “help[ing] the newcomer feel welcome” (para. 4). Shore recommends learning to say the student’s name correctly and communicating patience and friendliness through relaxed body language and a warm smile. Nicholas et al. (2011) conducted a Canadian study to explore the ways in which learners’ stories are used in an ELL classroom in Edmonton. They worked with five ELL instructors and nine ELL learners. They were interviewed about the benefits of incorporating personal stories into the ELL classroom and reported that sharing personal narratives seemed to help promote a sense of belonging and that “all of the instructors identified community building as a key value in their classrooms. Instructor one, for instance, talked about creating a sense of community, a place to belong” (p.

259). In their study, GEnOVA and Stewart (2019) focussed on the power of sharing one's story by creating a new ELL curriculum titled: "My Life: My Stories" (p. 34). The aim of implementing this curriculum was to increase engagement and therefore language acquisition. However, GEnOVA and Stewart shared that they encountered a serendipitous yet more notable outcome. As students shared their experiences to improve their English skills, the classroom appeared to become a place of belonging. In sharing their stories, they appeared to accomplish higher language acquisition as well as foster a sense of belonging within the class of ELL students. These studies show that the act of sharing stories, taking the time to listen to one another, making students feel welcome, and connecting on a personal level may have fostered student sense of belonging in these ELL contexts.

Areas for further research

As evidenced in this review, there is ample research surrounding student sense of belonging in the classroom. However, there is room for more research involving ELL student sense of belonging in the ELL classroom, specifically in Canada. Another gap in the research seems to be literature sharing student perceptions, particularly for research that examines ELLs' own perceptions of their lived experiences surrounding their sense of belonging in ELL classrooms. There is also a need for more research identifying specific structures, routines, and rituals set by teachers in order to foster a sense of belonging for ELL students in the ELL classroom.

Methodology

In my work with ELL students, I took the perspective that an individual's reality, or perception of it, is shaped by political, social, economic, cultural, ethnic, and gender-based

forces. It is these forces that can be structurally and systemically oppressive in nature whether by design or unintentionally. As such, I saw the purpose of knowledge and education as a means to liberate the oppressed. These beliefs led me to agree that only when the oppressed and the oppressors are part of the research and discourse, can liberation be possible (Freire, 1996). This study was rooted in Critical Theory (Devetak, 2005) and aimed to address oppression and to move toward freedom. Due to the experiential nature of this inquiry, phenomenology, a qualitative research method, was determined to best suit the needs of this study.

Phenomenology is based within the “Humanistic research paradigm and follows a qualitative approach” (Mapp, 2008, p. 308). It started as a philosophical movement that focused on the nature of experience from the point of view of the person experiencing the phenomenon known as “lived experience” (Connelly, 2010, para. 1). Phenomenology emphasizes consciousness and the content of conscious experiences, such as perceptions, emotions, and judgments. Connelly (2010) explains that phenomenology also focuses on “humans as embodied beings, meaning they experience life through their physical bodies” (para. 2). This is an important distinction because phenomenologists want to know what the phenomenon was like to experience, not just the person’s response to the experience. Employing a phenomenological approach might reveal the perspectives of the students’ experiences of belonging. Critical theory places the experiences and voices of the oppressed as central to research. As phenomenology recognizes the uniqueness of individual experiences and perceptions, using the voices of those experiencing the phenomenon placed ELL students in the position of knowing. The research method of phenomenology was used to answer the question: What are student perceptions of their sense of belonging within a middle school English Language Learner class? This question

was explored by collecting data using semi-structured interviews with five participants who were students in a Canadian middle school in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Method

Phenomenology “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 57). Phenomenology seeks to understand the commonalities experienced by individuals surrounding a phenomenon. In the case of this study, the phenomenon being explored was student sense of belonging. Moustakas (1994) explains that the process of phenomenology involves the researcher collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and then analyzing this data to develop a “composite description of the essence of the experience” for all of the participants (p. 121). This description should explain what and how the participants experienced the phenomenon. An important step to this approach is bracketing. Creswell and Poth (2016) write, “to fully describe how participants view the phenomenon, researchers must bracket out, as much as possible, their own experiences” (p. 61). The steps of phenomenology this study followed are laid out by Creswell and Poth.

1. I determined that phenomenology was the best method to explore my inquiry.
2. I identified the phenomenon of interest as ELL sense of belonging.
3. I recognized the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology.
4. I bracketed myself by writing about my own experiences, context, and situations that had influenced my experiences.
5. I collected data from individuals who had experienced the phenomenon.
6. I analyzed the data using first and second-level coding. This involved highlighting “significant statements,” that provided an understanding of how the participants

experienced the phenomenon. Next, I developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes.

More detail as to how the data was collected and analyzed is explained in the “Data Tools” and “Data Analysis” sections of this study.

Bracketing

My experience with the phenomenon, student sense of belonging, was based on my perceptions of my ELL students. During my time teaching ELL students, I focused on building relationships and creating a safe and welcoming space to foster a sense of belonging amongst my students. We had many informal discussions about our day, hobbies, and interests over tea. We played games, decorated the room together, and students shared work they were proud of on the walls. I did my best to promote a sense of belonging with my students because I believed it to be a prerequisite to meaningful learning. I saw learning a new language, like learning anything, as involving a certain degree of vulnerability, and it was only when we felt safe that we could be truly vulnerable. I believed feeling a sense of belonging was a direct result of teacher-led group socialization activities. I was aware of my views surrounding student sense of belonging at the time of this study and reflected on them here to bracket myself and further manage my bias. My goal was to keep my participants’ perceptions as the focus of this research.

Data Sources

This study was conducted at a large middle school in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia. The participants were five students who experienced learning in a middle school ELL class the previous year. They were all proficient English speakers and so no longer participated in the ELL program. The participants listed and described here chose their preferred pseudonyms and personal pronouns:

“Seoyeon” was a grade seven student when he participated in this study. He moved to Canada with his family because his mother wanted him to learn English. Seoyeon moved from Korea when he was in kindergarten and had experienced five years of ELL support over two schools.

“Lihong” moved to the Lower Mainland from China and was a grade nine student during the time of this study. She had been living in Canada for three years and received ELL support for two of those years.

“Mustafa” moved to Canada from Turkey when he was in grade six. At the time of this research, he was in grade nine and had received four years of ELL support.

“Emma” moved to Canada in grade two. She received five years of ELL support and moved from Korea because her parents wanted her to learn English. At the time of this study, Emma was in grade seven.

“Rav” was born in Canada and grew up speaking Hindi at home. His parents moved to Canada from India to provide better opportunities for their children. At the time of this research, Rav was in grade seven and had received five years of ELL support.

Data Tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the ELL participants to ensure space for detailed, lengthy responses. See Appendix A to read the interview questions. Given that this is a phenomenological study aimed at understanding students’ experiences, semi-structured interviews were chosen because, as oral language is developed first, they may have felt more comfortable articulating their feelings and perspectives through speaking. In addition, semi-structured interviews allowed for the opportunity to prompt deeper reflections and more in-depth responses enabled by oral interviews. The interviews consisted of five questions and took

approximately 30 minutes to complete. The manner in which data were collected had to be adapted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the plan was to interview in person, the interviews had to take place online to follow Covid-19 safety protocols. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams software and were transcribed using software called Otter.

In the semi-structured interviews, it was important for me to bracket myself as a researcher to let the participants' voices emerge from the data. Hence, the data collection was done with a side-by-side double journal, tracking both the participants' perspectives and my thoughts and feelings throughout the process. Consent was obtained via forms sent and received over email. The parents/guardians signed a consent form while the participants signed an assent form both detailing the rights of the participants as well as the nature of the study (as per university ethics approval, see Appendix B). To further manage my own bias, member checks were completed by the participants. These checks took approximately 30 minutes to complete and involved the participants reading their interview transcripts to determine the accuracy of what was documented. To add to the strength of this study, it was important for the participants to agree to what was recorded and to feel that it accurately represented how they felt. If the participants felt that the transcriptions did not accurately represent how they felt, they edited them.

Data Analyses

The data collected was anonymized by using preferred pseudonyms as well as removing specific names of teachers, schools, and cities. The data analyses were guided by the steps laid out by Creswell and Poth (2016).

1. I reviewed the data (semi-structured interview transcriptions) and highlighted “significant statements,” (p. 61) sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon.
2. I developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes.
3. I wrote a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon.
4. I used these significant statements and themes to write a description of the phenomenon the participants experienced. (pp. 60-62)

Based on the work of Saldana (2009), I referred to the coding completed in step one as level one descriptive coding. The coding completed in step two was first called “horizontalization” (p. 61) by Moustakas (1994), however, I referred to this as level two coding for themes as per Saldana (2009).

The data were analyzed by first proofing the digitally translated interviews. While proofing, I kept a side-by-side double journal tracking the participants’ perspectives as well as my thoughts and biases. The transcripts were coded in two rounds using codes that emerged from my interpretation of the transcribed audio recordings. The first level of coding was used to identify how the participants’ experienced their sense of belonging in an ELL class. The second level of coding identified any contextual precursors to the participants feeling a sense of belonging. The themes were drawn out from the codes by combining similar experiential codes and similar contextual codes into groups. To ensure that the codes remained close to the data, in vivo coding (Saldana, 2009) was used to capture the participants’ words and phrases as much as possible.

Strength of Study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) highlight the importance of the “triple crisis” with regards to qualitative research (pp. 19-20). The first crisis (the problem of representation) is concerned with the idea that researchers can no longer directly capture the lived experience of their participants. The second crisis involves the legitimation through evaluating and interpreting of research texts. The third crisis (concerned with praxis) is looking to affect change in the world. I worked to authentically represent the participants’ voices by using quotes from the transcribed interviews to minimize paraphrasing. I gathered thick descriptions by asking open-ended, non-leading questions. To further legitimize the study, the anonymized data was reviewed by both a second reader as well as an expert reviewer to determine the accuracy of the themes coded. I have listed the limitations of this study outlined in the “Results and Discussion” section. In order to facilitate praxis, this study suggested recommendations for all educators to follow that might help foster a sense of belonging for the ELL students they work with.

Results and Discussion

Two distinct sets of themes emerged from the data: themes that described the nature of students’ experiences (*safety, connection, and engagement*) and themes that described the contextual factors which appeared to have influenced how students experienced a sense of belonging (*familiarity, peer social interaction, and teacher-student rapport*).

Experiencing a Sense of Belonging in ELL

All five participants described feeling a sense of belonging in their ELL classes. According to the five participants, feeling a sense of belonging in an ELL class was an experience of *safety, connection, and engagement*.

Safety

A feeling of safety was a major theme that emerged in the data set. Lihong described a sense of belonging in her ELL class as “a place where you feel safe and proud of yourself.” When asked, Rav stated that he knew he belonged in his ELL class because he felt “very safe.” He went on to say that it was like being in “a good atmosphere...where you feel a bit stronger.” Emma shared that experiencing a sense of belonging in her ELL class felt “like you are being treated right.” This safe and secure atmosphere made Rav feel as though “there is nothing to be scared of.” Emma said that a sense of belonging feels “like being warmed and welcomed.” For some participants, feeling a sense of belonging was “like a feeling of calm” (Seoyeon). Seoyeon said that a sense of belonging felt like “a happy calm” where you “feel relaxed and focused.” Rav shared that it felt easy and anxiety-free. For Emma this looked like “everyone being fair” and “kind to each other.” Rav shared that he felt safe in his ELL class because of the smaller number of students. When asked to explain why a smaller number of students felt safe, Rav explained that the smaller group felt safe because he could be heard by the teacher. He continued by explaining that, “in ELL there’s a very small amount of students” so “the teacher has more control.” And if the teacher has “more control” then “bad people” in the classroom cannot “ruin the good moments of the class.” It was the small group aspect of middle school ELL classes with fewer voices and more control that Rav felt led to a sense of community and belonging in ELL. “In ELL, students can do their own things without being disturbed by the other students, I guess, and then it like makes like a different atmosphere in that group” (Rav). Rav finished his interview by explaining that too many students or “voices” would destroy the energy in [ELL].

Experiencing a feeling of safety as part of a sense of belonging is consistent with the literature (Osterman, 2000; Cemalcilar, 2010; Shore, 2001). Similar to the participants’ remarks

on the physical ELL classroom feeling safe, Cemalcilar (2010) wrote about the safety of the educational environment being a factor in experiencing a sense of belonging. For Rav, it was the smaller number of students in the ELL environment that added to his feeling of safety. Multiple participants, including Emma, expressed this safety as a feeling of welcome. This is supported by Shore's (2001) work when they argue that teachers can help foster a sense of belonging by helping students feel "welcome" (para. 4). These results supported the previous literature and implied that a sense of security and safety was a major part of the experience of feeling a sense of belonging in an ELL class.

Connection

The second theme to materialize was a feeling of connection. Every participant described the phenomenon as having an element of feeling socially connected to their classmates. For Mustafa, it was "a feeling of connection." "You feel like you're part of the classroom community" (Rav). Seoyeon described his sense of belonging as "a place where you don't feel like a loner." Lihong explained that she felt like she was part of her ELL class community when she communicated well with other students and her classmates communicated with her. Seoyeon explained that when he "knows all the people" in his ELL class, he "can just relax." Lihong shared how important in-class relationships were to her by sharing that, "if your classmates don't care about you and you don't care about other people in the class, you won't even listen to them, and no one will listen to you." It was very important for Seoyeon to know "what kind of person someone is." For these participants, feeling connected with other students in the class was a part of their sense of belonging. Once Seoyeon knew "all the people" in his class, he felt a sense of belonging.

As previously stated, Beck (1998) argues that most students fail because they feel “isolated from others” (para. 2). The feeling of connection to others in the class is discussed in the literature (Beck, 1998; Osterman, 2010; GEnOVA & Stewart, 2019) as being a part of experiencing a sense of belonging and is further supported by the experiences of these participants. Taken together, the findings of this study, as well as the literature in this area, indicate that a feeling of connection may be an experiential element of a sense of belonging in an ELL classroom.

Engagement

The last theme that was persistent across the interviews was a feeling of engagement. The participants shared that when they felt a sense of belonging, they were open to asking questions. A sense of belonging involved experiencing concentration, higher energy, attention, and focus. Emma felt as though knowing the people in her class and feeling a sense of belonging felt like learning was easier. When asked why that was, she shared that, “if there’s things that you don’t know you could ask for help, always.” For Emma, feeling a sense of belonging meant she felt comfortable enough to ask for help when she needed it: getting help felt engaging. When Mustafa felt a sense of belonging, he wanted to share in class; he had the “energy” to engage in the learning. Later in his interview, Mustafa explained that if he felt bored in class, he did not get his “energy,” so he “can’t really understand anything and... just want[s] to go home.” When asked what it felt like to not belong, Lihong talked about a lack of concentration.

If the students don’t feel like they belong to the class, they will not concentrate in the class. And maybe when teachers say something, they will not listen to he or she, and then they’ll just don’t do the homework. And then they don’t know what they learn.

Seoyeon felt as though feeling a sense of belonging would stop students from feeling the need to “always look around themselves.” He said that when students “know what they know” they feel relaxed and feel as though they can work better. When looking back at his first moments in a new school, Seoyeon shared that because he did not feel like he belonged yet, he “started focusing on like, the details of the class or someplace else.” However, Seoyeon associated a sense of belonging with feeling relaxed, focused, and engaged. Seoyeon also explained that a sense of belonging felt like being engaged in learning rather than feeling as though they needed to “protect themselves.”

If they get work and come [to ELL], but they don’t feel like they belong, they can’t really start thinking. They don’t really focus, and they try to protect themselves from like, other things or people. So, they don’t feel calm and like they can’t really focus on their work.

This feeling of increased motivation and engagement as part of the experience of feeling a sense of belonging is not supported in the literature as it is in these results. Goodenow (1993) reports that an increase in student sense of belonging may *lead* to an increase in motivation. However, a sense of belonging as a precursor to engagement is different to what these participants described. They felt as though engagement was a part of experiencing the phenomenon. The literature suggests that students who felt a sense of belonging in their ELL classes were more motivated and engaged due to the social and emotional investment that came with connecting to a group to the point of belonging. Although the idea that student sense of belonging and engagement are closely linked in the literature, this study suggests that engagement is experiential rather than consequential. The experience of the participants was an aspect of the phenomenon this study investigated. The following themes were the contextual factors that set the stage for the participants to develop a sense of belonging in their ELL classes.

Contextual Factors

The participants spent part of their interviews explaining what led to them feeling a sense of belonging in class. These contextual factors and precursors to the phenomenon have been synthesized into three themes: *familiarity*, *peer social interaction*, and *teacher-student rapport*.

Familiarity

The first contextual factor described by the participants that led to a sense of belonging in their ELL classes was becoming familiar with the physical space of the class, as well as the routines. When Rav recalled his first few days at a new school, he shared that he “didn’t feel like [he] was that welcomed at this school because [he] had no idea about the school.” It was important for Rav to become familiar with the school before he could feel as though he belonged there. Similarly, Emma said that she felt a sense of belonging in her ELL class when she “got used to the stuff [she] need to do.” For her, it was understanding the routines or things she “needed to do” that made her feel part of the ELL class. Seoyeon shared that “knowing what’s around” him and “how it’s working” really helped him feel like he was part of the ELL class. He went on to explain that it was understanding these “structures” that made him able to relax and focus on other things like his classmates and the teacher. For Lihong, the only thing on her mind in her first moments in a new middle school was where her locker was and how the bell schedule worked; she did not have time to think about anything else. Feeling safe, connected, and belonging seemed to come after students understood the classroom structures, routines, and “where most stuff is” (Rav).

This theme emerged due to the volume of occurrences across the data set and while it is not paralleled by the previous research, Cemalcilar (2010) does discuss the role that the “structural/contextual environment” has on student sense of belonging; however, it is in the

context of being perceived as safe rather than the context of becoming familiar with it. These findings highlight the potential importance of being familiar with the physical environment of the class as well as class routines to develop a sense of belonging. The participants repeatedly expressed the importance of understanding where things were, and how they worked, in their ELL classrooms and linked this understanding to a feeling of belonging. This might be a new element of belonging that can be added to existing models to help build a better understanding of the contextual factors leading to ELL sense of belonging.

Peer Social Interaction

The second theme discussed in relation to how the participants could experience the phenomenon was *peer social interaction*. The participants explained that social activities with their classmates helped lead to a sense of community and belonging in their ELL classes. Seoyeon explained that, in order to feel a sense of belonging in his ELL class, he first needed to “know” his classmates. In Emma’s interview, she shared that having friends in her ELL class made her feel like she belonged. When asked about what sorts of activities fostered such relationships, the participants shared their experiences socializing with the students in their ELL classes. Emma said that it was really helpful to “talk to classmates about yourself and what you like.” Lihong built relationships by “making friends,” and then “hang[ing] out outside after school.” Seoyeon believed that playing games together was important because it was an opportunity to “share who they are” and learn “personalities and stuff.” Group projects were also a good chance to build relationships. “When you have group projects, you have to communicate with people, and you can know people better when you are in a group” (Lihong). Rav explained that knowing classmates well led to a sense of belonging because he could “ask a few questions

and they will be willing to answer. But when you are new, you have to get to know them a bit.”

Seoyeon thought similarly:

When I’m doing work by myself, I’m just doing it. But like if I have other people or friends, I just kind of chat with them at the same time. So, you get to share ideas and things. So, we get more used to like to people. So, I think that kind of makes me belong.

These results are supported by the previous literature in this area. Although Osterman’s (2010) research was not specific to ELL students, it supports these findings when it states that teachers directly influence student sense of belonging by supporting positive interactions with peers. These positive social interactions, according to the participants of this study, led to these ELL students feeling a sense of belonging. The studies that were specific to ELL sense of belonging discussed in the literature review are also consistent with this theme (Nicholas et al., 2011; GEnOVA & Stewart, 2019). In both studies, researchers report that sharing personal stories with each other add to the ELL students feeling a sense of belonging in their ELL classes.

Teacher-Student Rapport

The last contextual theme to emerge from the data was *teacher-student rapport*. Seoyeon said that belonging in an ELL class came from the feeling he got from a welcoming teacher. He went on to explain that knowing his teacher added to his sense of belonging in his ELL class. Rav believed that his sense of belonging was partially attributed to the teacher joining in some of the games because he “got to know more about the teacher.” Emma felt as though it helped build a sense of belonging when the teacher talked about who they were and what they liked. Emma continued by explaining that receiving help from her teacher helped make her feel welcome as well: “I got help from the teacher a lot and the teacher explain like everything that I didn’t know.” It was also important for Lihong’s sense of belonging that the teacher was likable and

that the class was interesting. “If people like the teacher’s class and it is interesting, and when we ask them question and the answer is really helpful, I think it’s good.” Lihong believed that it was important for student sense of belonging that the teacher connected with the quieter students in the class.

I think the teacher needs to like listen to the people that don’t really speak lots of stuff in class. They need to listen to people like that. Like, why they don’t speak in class? I think the teacher also needs to like, they need to have a really interesting class so that people get interested in the class, so they’ll listen and communicate with the teacher and the students.

The findings surrounding this theme implied that strong teacher-student relationships led to students feeling a sense of belonging in an ELL classroom. This idea is abundantly represented in the previous research with regards to all students, not necessarily ELL students. Both Cemalcilar (2010) and Beck (1998) emphasize the importance of teacher-student relationships in building student sense of belonging. Osterman (2010) takes it even further by arguing that “the quality of the relationship that teachers develop with their students has the most direct effect on student sense of belonging in the classroom” (p. 240). When Certo et al. (2003) interviewed 33 students about their sense of belonging, they reported that students felt it was important for teachers to connect with them on a personal level. The results surrounding this theme add to the existing body of research by hearing from ELL students specifically on the teacher-student relationship element of belonging.

The research concerning student sense of belonging attributes teachers’ involvement in another way. Osterman (2010) argues that teachers have the strongest influence on student sense of belonging because feeling belonging is a result of their experience in class. Therefore, it is the

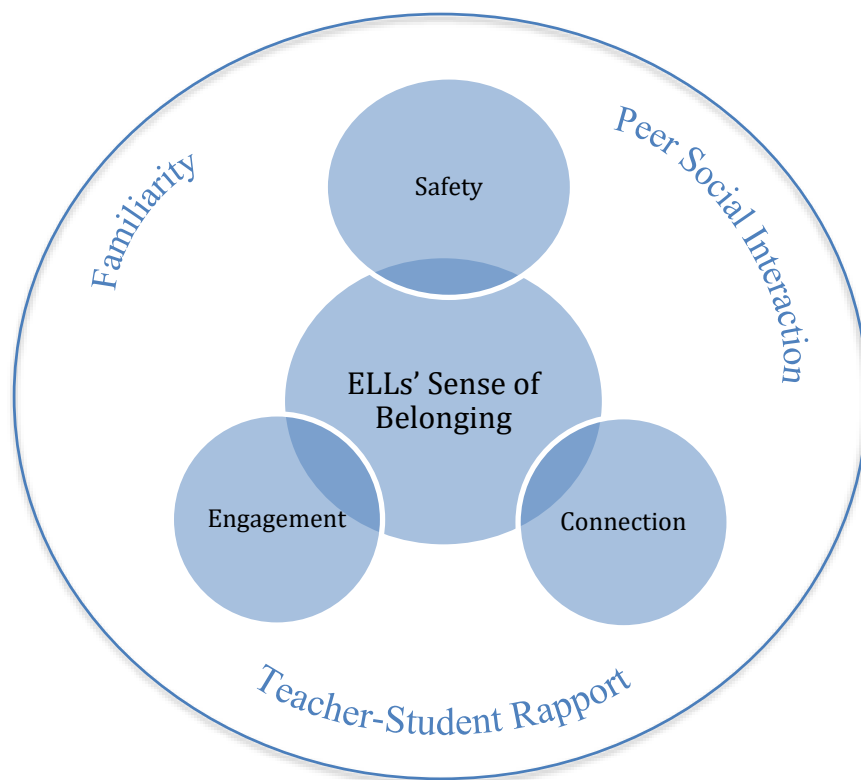
environment and activities designed by the teacher that enhance student sense of belonging. This idea that ELL teachers may affect student sense of belonging in the ELL classroom by facilitating activities came up in the data set. Rav shared about the involvement of his teacher when he said, “Our teacher was telling all of us to talk to each other, get to know each other, but before that we had to say all our names.” As previously shared, Lihong also spoke about the role the ELL teacher has in including all students and facilitating social activities such as group work.

Model of ELLs’ Sense of Belonging

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between the six themes and how they relate to the phenomenon itself. It shows ELL sense of belonging as an experience situated within contextual factors. *Familiarity* with the classroom and its routines along with *peer social interaction* and *teacher-student rapport* surrounds ELL sense of belonging which, according to the data, was an experience of *safety*, *connection*, and *engagement*.

Figure 1

ELLs’ Sense of Belonging



Conclusion

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider when looking back at this research. Due to my limitations in speaking the participants' home languages, I had to interview them in English. This resulted in participants having to reflect on an abstract topic and share their experiences and perspectives using the English vocabulary available to them. I would presume that their responses would have been more genuine to their lived experiences had they been given the opportunity to respond in a language of their choosing. Another limitation to consider was that the interviews took place online and 10 months after the participants had participated in ELL classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other limitations included the small sample size and the abstract nature of the phenomenon.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study are scholarly significant because they add to the existing body of research in a specific context where few studies exist. There is a lot of research surrounding student sense of belonging; however, this study is unique in that it investigated ELL middle school students' experiences in Canada. This contributed to the field of education by giving insight into how ELL teachers might foster a sense of belonging in their ELL students by facilitating certain types of activities.

The first recommendation based on this study is for ELL teachers to take the time to orient ELL students to their surroundings and explain how the rules and routines work in class. The second recommendation is to provide opportunities for ELL students to socialize with one another through activities such as games, sharing times, and group work. The last recommendation to come from this research is to build teacher-student rapport with ELL students through informal conversations about life outside of school and intentionally speaking to quieter students. Engaging in these types of activities may improve ELLs' feeling of belonging in any classroom, ELL or otherwise. These recommendations are in line with both Authentic (Gardner et al., 2011) and Ethical Leadership (Brown et al., 2018). Utilizing these leadership theories may help ELL teachers build honest relationships while acting as examples for ELL students by unconditionally respecting others.

Questions for Further Research

One possible area of further research is to investigate the theme of *familiarity*. As this was the only theme that seemed to be unique to this study, I wondered what other middle school students' perceptions would be on this point. Would they agree that becoming familiar with their surroundings adds to them feeling a sense of belonging, or is it unique to ELL students? And if it

is unique, why? Another area of further research is to investigate the correlation between ELL students feeling a sense of belonging and language acquisition. I am curious about the relationship between feeling like one belongs in the class and how quickly one can learn a new language. Based on my own experiences, there seems to be a connection between the two. Based on what I observed in my class, learning a new language required a certain degree of vulnerability and that came with trust and a feeling of safety. I am also curious to know how these results might be different with a larger sample size. Would I find similar themes? What about in a high school? As all research should, this study has left me with more questions than I started with.

This research provided a platform for participants to reflect and share their experiences while helping to illuminate the feelings ELL students experience when they feel as though they belong in an ELL classroom. With the exception of *familiarity*, all the themes of this study were corroborated by previous research in this area. Personally, this study was also an opportunity for me to hear genuine life experiences and meaningfully reflect on my practice. I felt honoured to have been given a glimpse into these ELL students' lives and perspectives on their education. Moving forward, I will shape my pedagogy based on what I have learned through implementing the listed recommendations above. I will do the best I can to foster a sense of belonging within all the students I work with while I continue to seek further understanding of the complex experiences of ELLs.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval

Research, Engagement, & Graduate Studies
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Human Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 100552

Principal Investigator: Mr. Adam Zonneveld

Team Members: Mr. Adam Zonneveld (Principal Investigator)

Dr. Chris Campbell (Supervisor)

Dr. Sheryl MacMath (Course Instructor)

Title: Student Sense of Belonging in an English language learner (ELL) Classroom

Department: Faculty of Professional Studies\Teacher Education

Effective: January 07, 2021

Expiry: January 06, 2022

The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) has reviewed and approved the ethics of the above research. The HREB is constituted and operated in accordance with the requirements of the UFV Policy on Human Research Ethics and the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

The approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
 2. Approval is for one year. A Request for Renewal must be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
 3. Modifications to the approved research must be submitted as an Amendment to be reviewed and approved by the HREB before the changes can be implemented. If the changes are substantial, a new request for approval must be sought. *An exception can be made where the change is necessary to eliminate an immediate risk to participant(s) (TPCS2 Article 6.15). Such changes may be implemented but must be reported to the HREB within 5 business days.
 4. If an adverse incident occurs, an Adverse Incident Event form must be completed and submitted.
 5. During the project period, the HREB must be notified of any issues that may have ethical implications.
- *NEW** 6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.

****Please submit your Research Continuity Plan to REGS@ufv.ca before beginning your research. The plan can be found here: <https://www.ufv.ca/research/>**

Thank you, and all the best with your research.

UFV Human Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Re-worded questions to aid understanding and clarifying questions are in italics

1. I'd like you to think about a classroom last year where you felt that you were welcome. What made you feel like you belonged there?
 - a. *What do you feel like it means to belong in a class?*
 - b. *Can you tell me more about that?*
2. Have you ever felt like you have belonged, in an ELL classroom?
3. (If the participant answered "yes" to question #2) Tell me about times when you felt like you belong in the ELL classroom.
 - a. *What was it about that experience that made you feel that way?*
 - b. *Why?*
4. (If the participant answered "no" to question #2) What did you want from the teacher that would have made you feel like you belonged there?"
 - a. *What could students and teachers do in and ELL class to have people feel like they belong?*
 - b. *Why do you think this would help?*
5. Do you think it is important for ELL students to feel like they belong in an ELL classroom?
 - a. *Why do you think that?*
 - b. *Can you explain that more please?*