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Tanisha Shantelle Westerfield

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THE EFFECT OF LOOPING AND TEAMING ON RURAL BLACK MIDDLE
SCHOOL STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

By

Tanisha Shantelle Westerfield

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum and Instruction
in the Department Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2009

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Pages in Study: 150

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The purpose of this study is to examine rural black middle school students' sense of belonging in looping and teaming settings. This research is based on prior research that school offers an essential source of support for adolescent students as they come to an important crossroad in their life journey: the merging of school culture, home culture, and the transition to adulthood. The literature on adolescent psychology confirms sense of belonging as important during adolescence. The importance of this study lies in its ability to examine how the constructs of teaming and looping contribute to rural black middle school students' feelings of belongingness. Data for this qualitative study were drawn from interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis of seven middle school students over an academic year. This study offers insight for educators and policymakers that make decisions for adolescents into how alternative school structures can affect rural black students.

DEDICATION

First, my heavenly Father for giving me the mind and strength to not only begin but to complete this process. This is one of many journeys that He has helped me through.

I truly dedicate this to my Guardian angels, my mother and father, Lillie and Nemiah Westerfield, who cannot celebrate with me physically, but I know are rejoicing in heaven.

To my siblings, Lakia and Greg, who are my biggest fans. Thank you for your love and unique ways of motivating me.

To my nieces, Gia and Payton, who inspire me to strive for excellence in order that I may exemplify to them that anything is possible.

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There are countless family and friends that I wish I could thank by name for sharing their hearts and minds with me throughout this journey, and although I did not call you by name, please know that I am eternally grateful.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Not everything that counts can be measured, and not everything that can be measured, counts.”

— Albert Einstein

Research on child development has shown how important supportive relationships are in children’s lives, especially as young people go through adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Spencer, 2000; Ward, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). Adolescence is a difficult time for young people because this is a time when they develop the ability to think abstractly about their place in the world and evaluate themselves on becoming young adults (Seaton, 2007). It is human nature to feel the need to be loved and accepted by others; everyone has a basic need for close, supportive relationships called “connectedness” (Resnick et al., 1997) or belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1999). The intrinsic need to belong is essential for growing adolescents. Sense of belonging is viewed to be an important phenomenon that is considered necessary to an individual’s overall well-being (Sanchez, Colon, & Esparaza, 2005).

Capps (2004) revealed that the foundation of American public schools was so children could possess the ideals of community that underlie democratic self-governance. Dewey (as cited in Capps) reiterated these ideals with two purposes for schools, to

serve the larger community by producing responsible, civic-minded citizens and to help children develop ethical, social, and moral reasoning skills so they can function as responsible members of communities. This feat was achieved when schools became authentic communities for students to flourish and accomplish these tasks. Capps found that students need mentoring through the development of caring relationships with adults and other students in the school which is the basis for sense of belonging. Since school is a reflection of society and the place where many students come in contact with some of their first and only experiences with how to become a productive citizen, it only seems plausible that schools would focus more on students being connected with their school and teachers.

One of the five major needs in Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs is sense of belonging. Maslow defines this level in his hierarchy as love and belonging. Many researchers interested in belonging look to the scholarly work of Maslow as a theoretical base for the notion of belonging. The premise of his theory is that a student could not progress to the various stages of growth and knowledge without first feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance from those in their immediate environment (Booker, 2006). Humans have a desire to belong to groups. This includes, but is not limited to, clubs, religious groups, families, sports groups, gangs, sororities/fraternities, and work groups. This is especially important for black students who may already feel a disconnect with school because of the differences in their culture and that of the school (Gay, 2000).

Education suffered the loss of many black educators after schools became integrated. In the historically segregated school system, black children attended schools

operated mostly by skilled black educators. These teachers and administrators were better credentialed and more experienced than their white counterparts (Southern Education Reporting Service as cited in Lynch, 2006). With integration came massive layoffs of black teachers (Holmes, 1990; King, 1993). Evidence indicates that little has changed and the number of black teachers in schools today is steadily decreasing. The school in this study is no exception with the percentage of the black staff being 25%, which includes the non-certified staff as well (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).

For many black children, black teachers represent surrogate parent figures, acting as disciplinarians, counselors, role models, and advocates. According to a study by King (as cited in Lynch, 2006), low-achieving black students benefit most from relationships with black teachers. The school in this study is comprised of 75% Caucasian teachers. With the aforementioned racial composition, it will be interesting to uncover how teaming and looping impact a sense of belonging for rural black students especially in a school where they may or may not have a teacher that shares the same cultural background.

As a result, minority students are most often taught information in a Eurocentric context and the presentation style is frequently incongruent to their cultural backgrounds, therefore, it is not surprising that there are apparent differences in achievement among minority and majority groups (Franklin, 1992). Not only is the style of teaching incongruent with that of black students, but the difference in the home cultures of the students and the culture of the teachers are often at odds in the schools (Patton & Day-Vines, 2004). Mainstream American cultural orientation endorses competition,

individualism, and nuclear family constellations, religion as separate from other aspects of life, and mastery over nature, whereas black cultural orientation promotes a collective orientation of an extended family network, religion as integral to other aspects of life, and harmony with nature (Gay, 2000). This applies to most, but not all black adolescents, but American schools are becoming increasingly more diverse forcing even conservative ideologists to acknowledge that a one-size fits all approach to schooling will not work with the current student population.

Black students' desire and need more than mere academic instruction from their teachers. These students long for a sense of community and bonding in the classroom (Phelan, Locke-Davidson, & Thanh-Cao, 1992). The need to improve the culture, climate, and interpersonal relationships in schools has received far too little attention in the past (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). Educators and researchers have not focused much attention to the quality of human interactions that occur between children and adults at school but rather the focus has been on academic achievement alone. Academic achievement *is* important, but first students must feel that they belong and are part of the school culture before learning can ever take place. When researchers have focused on relationships it is not often that the data have been disaggregated by the race of the teachers to see precisely how minority students fare.

Positioned in a rural school, the students in this study face situations unique from those of urban students where much of the research has a tendency to focus. Additionally, there are few studies relevant to rural education and its challenges (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Growing up in rural communities, students often face limited

social opportunities because of the geographic isolation with students living so far apart from their classmates and friends, in addition to financial hardships with few occasions for social connections. Many rural students have few adult role models; therefore, connections with teachers and the school environment play a crucial role in rural students' sense of themselves (Seaton, 2007). Rural areas also face the threat of the politically charged climate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), so the attention in rural schools is often focused on the lack of funding, raising test scores, and seeking highly qualified teachers (Casey, 2001; Reeves, 2003) as opposed to building community within the school. Rural students face many distinctive situations. Some research indicates that rural schools are smaller and are therefore able to forge a sense of community, but this is not always evident with black students that may not connect with the values and norms of European class values or the rural white Southern culture of their white classmates inflicted upon them at school.

This study examined black rural middle school students' sense of belonging in looping and teaming settings with a group of seventh- and eighth-grade students. The response of the students was the focus of the study, but teachers and administrators were examined as well and provided great insight. I was most interested in the responses to this practice through the lens of students to see how or if the configuration of staying with a group of teachers for two years in addition to having their core teachers work in concert with one another may be a factor in the sense of belonging of black students.

The data gathering methods of this study were based primarily upon in-depth interviews, observations, focus group interviews, and documents. This case study

involved two teams (Team C and Team N) of students, teachers, and an administrator within the same middle school.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the impact of looping and teaming on rural black middle school students' sense of belonging. By reviewing in-depth accounts of interviews, observations, and focus groups, I was able to gain a better understanding of what factors black students viewed as contributing to creating a sense of belonging for them within their school. As a distinct construct, students' sense of belonging in school was a critical research topic because it is distinctly different from other constructs such as school climate and social support, which are topics often discussed in educational research. By interviewing students, listening to them, and analyzing their responses, I was able to hear voices that have been silenced for far too long. My interest was in how the relationships were developed during the looping and teaming years and the students' responses to these practices.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do looping and teaming affect black students abilities to develop and sustain relationships with teachers and schools?
2. What do black middle school students perceive as belonging?
3. What are some normative qualities of black students who feel a sense of belonging?

Significance of Study

Osterman (2000) stated, “Students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school” (p. 359). Finding methods that work for aiding black students in feeling part of the school culture is an area in need of research. Osterman (2000) noted that many students fail to experience that sense of belonging that other researchers (Furman, 1998; McMillian & Chavis, 1986) identify as the essence of community. Black students feel a detachment from school (Siren & Siren, 2004). Black students may identify with the purpose of school but be educated in a specific school environment that is unwelcoming and unaccepting of their culture (Booker, 2006). For black students, affirmative interactions with teachers and other students are critical to their success (Ogbu, 2003). By simply being a minority, black students can be more sensitive to environmental incongruence i.e. uncaring schools (Booker, 2006). School belonging is directly linked to interpersonal interactions that children have in school (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Honora, 2003). Theorists suggest that addressing these needs may go a long way towards improving motivation, behavior, and learning (Osterman, 2000). Anderman (2002) reports that in recent years, a small but important literature on school belonging has emerged. There have been a variety of studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1999; Deci, Vallerland, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Goodenow, 1993b) that identified belonging as being an important variable in a student’s psyche.

This study will describe the experiences of seven black middle school students from a rural community in the northeastern portion of Mississippi over the course of an

academic year. Osterman (2000) noted that there has been far too little attention given to teaming and looping and its impact on students' sense of belonging. Looping is seemingly becoming a developing body of research. In the United States, looping has historically been a model primarily used in elementary grades (Lincoln, 1998; McCown & Sherman, 2002). There have been very limited studies conducted specifically on looping in the middle grades. A majority of the research has concentrated on the effects of looping at the elementary level where looping is more prevalent. However, middle school is a place of transition and these constructs may be the key for adolescents.

Examining black students' sense of belonging using qualitative research methods can explore how these students feel about their present situations and beliefs about their own competence and value with regard to school. While there is much theoretical literature around sense of belonging, often it is quantitative in nature (Anderman, 2002; Goodenow, 1993a; Hagborg, 1994; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994; Voelkl, 1995) and focused on middle class, Eurocentric populations and their achievement only. To date, little mixed methodology research has explored black adolescents' sense of belonging and those that have again focus on its connection with academic achievement (Osterman, 2000; Steele 1992). A recent review of the literature demonstrates scant qualitative research on school belonging in general, but even less conducted on this sample (Booker, 2006). Therefore, there is a need for more qualitative research that specifically addresses rural black middle school adolescents. Using qualitative methods will aid in gaining a deeper understanding about rural black middle

school students' relationships with teachers and peers and how these connections formed either by chance or design, impact their schooling experience.

Unfortunately, researchers as well as schools have not focused on how best to create that feeling of belongingness with black students. There are limited studies conducted around the concept of looping in the middle grades. The bulk of the research is around elementary grades where looping is more dominant. There is also a lack of research when studying rural school settings that are highly populated with black students. The combination of looping and teaming in rural settings in this study is one that can provide information about black students and perhaps indicate the first steps toward creating an atmosphere in a school setting where black students feel that sense of belonging. Additionally, with so much research on students in urban settings, exploring rural students' belongingness is an untested area of research. According to Anderman (2002) some researchers indicate that students in urban, rural, and suburban schools may have different types of educational experiences. A limited amount of research has specifically examined perceptions of belonging across these settings (Trickett as cited in Anderman, 2002) which suggests that students in urban schools reported a greater sense of belonging than students in rural schools. Therefore, a look from rural black students' perspectives warrants research.

Limitations

No study is without limitations. In this study, one limitation was that the data were gathered in a small rural community, which made the results generated from this study only generalizable to similar groups of middle school students. Another limitation

of this study could be described as *reflexivity* as noted by Glesne (2006) where the interviewee may give responses that the interviewer wants to hear. The interview questions were carefully constructed as to avoid “leading” the participants to particular convergent responses. Relying on participants’ self-reported beliefs about their belongingness in their respective schools made the quality of the data dependent on the accuracy and honesty of the participants. The researcher felt that the risk was minimal given that participants cannot pretend to feel they belong when they do not. That is, the students cannot pretend to belong more than they do. However, in an effort to improve response honesty, participants were assured anonymity. The researcher also believed that the observations aided in concerns around these issues as well.

Definitions of Key Terms

Sense of Belonging	Students’ feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school social environment (Goodenow, 1993a).
Looping	An instructional design or organizational pattern where students and teachers remain together for two or more years (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996).
Middle School	A school that houses adolescents and is designed to meet the developmental needs of this age group. Essential elements of middle school include interdisciplinary teaming and exploratory classes (National Middle School Association, 2003). The middle school in this study houses grades 7 and 8.

Teaming	<p>Interdisciplinary teams are comprised of groups of teachers from different subject areas who work together to coordinate instruction, communication, and assessment for a common group of students. They meet daily to provide for the educational needs of their students. The duties of a team may include developing interdisciplinary units, coordinating field trips, and providing consistent and developmentally appropriate team rules for academic and behavior standards (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000).</p>
Exploratory Classes	<p>These classes provide other academic experiences to develop and nurture the talents of middle school students. Classes may include art, foreign language, choir, band, physical education, or drama (George, 2000/2001).</p>
Case Study	<p>Employed to gain in-depth, longitudinal understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved, this process entails various methods of data collection (Merriam, 1998).</p>
Culture	<p>The integrated pattern of human behaviors that includes thoughts, communication, action, customs, beliefs, values, and instruction of racial, ethnic, religious, or social group (Leighton as cited in Patton & Day-Vines, 2004).</p>

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of the literature review is to examine the principle findings of the educational research and to provide historical perspective of previous research linked to the practice of looping and teaming in middle school education. Scholars alike stress the importance of acknowledging the past and its impact on the present. The review of literature reminds me of the term Sankofa, derived from the Akan language, which translates into English meaning “the past serves as a guide for planning the future,” or “the wisdom in learning from the past in building the future.” With this in mind, in this section I will begin by providing a basic understanding of rural education. I have also included a section about the inception of middle level education and why teaming was deemed necessary. Next, the stages of adolescence that correlate with the constructs of teaming and looping are explored. I define the rationale for looping and the benefits on adolescents. I conclude with research on sense of belonging and what has been learned thus far about its impact on black students.

Rural Education

The word *rural* brings on a barrage of images, both positive and negative for most people. For some, the term brings about visions of one-room schoolhouses, shanties, vast areas of farmland, uneducated people, red states, and the list goes on. These images are

sadly disharmonious with the current realities of rural life. It is unfortunate when people base their beliefs on stereotypes from the past, even Hollywood movies, and not the present. Sadly, some of these visions are still a reality in current day rural America but definitely not everywhere and not to the extent to which they are glorified in the media. Throughout my research, I have found the term *rural* difficult to define. “It can mean many different things depending on one’s purpose, but similar to terms such as *truth*, *justice*, or *beauty*, where everyone knows the term, but no one can define it precisely” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007, p. 2).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) acknowledges the difficulty in defining the term as well. USDA has remarked how there are many definitions for the term rural, but it is rare that the terms are alike (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007). Unfortunately, there is no single agreed upon definition for this term, even among researchers. According to USDA, there are more than two dozen rural definitions currently used by federal agencies. For some, rural is an objective quantitative measure. As a quantitative measure, I found rural defined often in my readings as what is not urban. So in essence rural America was often defined by saying anything other than urban, so it can be interpreted that in all its splendor mere words are not adequate enough to define rural America. For the purpose of this research, rural is defined as a school in a community whose population is less than 25,000 people (Mathis, 2003). Small (2000) states,

The term ‘rural culture’ often refers to the perceived contrasting lifestyles of people in rural areas. Whereas city dwellers are perceived to be fast-paced,

heterogeneous, and easily adjustable to change, rural residents are perceived to be slow-paced, homogenous, and reluctant to give up tradition. (p. 2)

Rural America is often seen as a largely homogenous place. However, in Davis and Marema's (2004) report they indicate that "the myth of rural homogeneity masks underlying diversity among the people who have historically lived in the American countryside." (p.1) Donehower et al. (2007) remark that:

Many ethnic groups' traditions are rooted in rural areas including music, food, visual arts, folk tales, crafts, and other cultural manifestations of distinct rural groups. The absence of these influences would not have just left a hole in American culture but would have resulted in an entirely different culture altogether. While at the same time, contemporary rural America is still thought of as largely white working and middle class when, in actuality, nearly half the non white population that lives in rural America is clustered in areas where minorities make up one-third or more of a county's population. People of color are 25% of the overall U.S. population and constitute 17% of people living in rural areas. (p. 3)

This continues to be the case and public schools in rural America are working towards meeting the needs of diverse student populations. A great deal of diversity among rural students indicates both a challenge and an opportunity for a state to contribute to closing the many national achievement gaps. Although sense of belonging is seen as important for the growth and development of adolescents, schools tend to pay less attention to the socioemotional needs of students and give priority to students'

performance on standardized tests (Osterman, 2000). This is particularly true for rural school systems that have many schools placed on probation because of their students' low test scores and thus the schools are on improvement plans because of NCLB passed in 2002. This is a possible cause for rural schools placing less emphasis on fulfilling a student's basic sense of belonging in school and focusing more on skills so students are able to "pass" the standardized test. NCLB's penalties rest more heavily on schools whose students fall below the socioeconomic norm, both rural and urban. When norm-referenced tests, reflect middle-class values and practices as the "norm" and upper-class values and practices as "above the norm," it is not surprising that rural schools fare worst in these assessments (Donehower et al., 2007).

Just like urban schools, rural schools face many pressures. Increasingly diverse student backgrounds, learning styles, and needs; new federal and state accountability requirements; and debates about the allocation and availability of education funding are challenges in every U.S. community (Arnold et al., 2005) especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, rural schools face a unique set of challenges, largely due to their geographic isolation, declining enrollment, small population, limited funding, and lack of access to services (Reeves, 2003). Although some rural schools have successfully met these challenges, many still struggle. One of the most prominent problems lies in rural schools ability to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. This was a problem before NCLB, but after this legislation, many lawmakers in states with large rural populations are finding that the mandates on teacher quality, which focuses almost solely on subject matter expertise, make it impossible to hire teachers in some subject areas for schools

that need teachers who can teach in multiple areas (Meier & Wood, 2004). The fact that rural schools face the challenge of obtaining highly qualified teachers is even more reason to research the impact of looping and teaming. These two constructs can add a level of consistency with students. With a team approach, although there may be one or two weak teachers, three or four others are strong and able to assist in closing the disparity.

Another important point is that in rural areas many face social inadequacies and capital resources with restricted opportunities for social connections and limited adult role models. Thereby, the connection with teachers plays a vital role in students' development (Seaton, 2007). There is no evidence that high scores on tests predict anything about a child's success in life after school. "As the country has completed its shift from rural to urban, rural students have continued to be unheard, unseen, and under-represented" (Donehower et al., 2007, p. 25). Since the U.S. has become so urbanized, it is unfortunate that now the U.S. has scarcely looked back at rural America, and the effects of this trend are significant to rural students.

Black students in rural schools have to deal with distance in both the literal and metaphorical sense. By understanding the background of rural education one can begin to surmise how to begin working with this population to seek ways for black students to feel a sense of belonging at school.

Middle Level Education

Aside from the focus on rural America, this study seeks to describe the concept of teaming and looping and its link to adolescents in middle level education. The

background of middle level education serves as a defining point in why the two constructs work in accordance with one another. According to Manning (2000) the first middle school was created in 1950. The intent was to serve as the bridge between elementary and high school. Before the creation of middle schools, there were junior high schools. Indianola Junior High School in Columbus, Ohio, was credited as authorizing the creation of the first junior high school in 1909. Prior to junior high, students remained in elementary school through eighth grade and then moved to the high school. The Board of Education found that only 7% of Columbus's students actually graduated from high school. Columbus school officials hoped that creating a junior high school with grades seven, eight, and nine would better prepare students for the rigors of high school and keep a larger portion of students from dropping out of school. As with anything in the realm of education, the trend of junior high schools was short-lived due to lack of vision. Some saw the junior high schools as mini-blueprints of high school programs because teachers had received little or no professional training in order to be responsive to the adolescents for which the schools were designed (Manning, 2000).

The concept of middle schools emerged in 1960 as junior high schools were seen as miniature high schools with little or no consideration for the developmental needs of their students. William M. Alexander was a leader in the movement to switch from conventional junior high schools to middle schools that provided young adolescents with a smaller and more intimate educational environment (Alexander & McEwin, 1998). Alexander was seen as one of the founders of middle school and he became convinced in the early 1960s that most conventional junior high schools had simply become rather

static, being modeled as programs at senior high schools. Middle schools evolved in response to the recognition that adolescents had unique characteristics and needs that could be better addressed in a teaming format. The teaming format creates smaller sections of students within large organizations working with a small group of teachers. Middle schools should also have a separate and distinctive delivery system of education based upon this adolescent transitional period. This belief has been the driving force that has prompted school districts to initiate middle level school programs including the construct of looping to better address the needs of their middle level students. Alexander and other advocates came up with specific programs geared towards students at the middle schools, and in decades since, thousands of middle schools have been established around the United States.

Eichhorn (1966) is another educator credited as being a founder of middle school; he also believed that junior high programs were not capable of meeting the needs of young adolescents, and he advocated for schools to be organized differently. In his book *The Middle School*, he reports that more professional literature is available offering evidence that the junior high concept has been challenged. He states that middle schools maximize academic growth through the efficiency of learning and minimize conditions that detract from learning. He also coined the term “transescence” as a label for this distinctive age group to describe the individual developmental characteristics of adolescents and the many transitions they experience (Eichhorn, 1977). His book, seen to be important in middle level education, was reissued in 1987 by the National Middle

School Association (NMSA) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

Lounsbury is also considered to be one of the founders of the middle school movement. His career began in the 1940s as a junior high school teacher. He later became one of the key leaders in the junior high reform movement and subsequently a leader in the middle school movement. His dissertation entitled “The Role and Status of the Junior High School” (Lounsbury, 1954) was later used as the basis for a book he co-authored (Van Til, Vars, & Lounsbury, 1961) centered around junior high schools and their purpose. Lounsbury was also involved in the reporting of five national shadow studies (Lounsbury & Clark, 1990) focused on secondary curriculum.

Since the 1960s, junior high school structures have given way to the establishment of middle schools across the country. According to NMSA, there are now over “twenty million diverse, rapidly changing 10 to 15 year olds enrolled in our nation’s middle level schools” (2003, p. 1). NMSA, organized in 1973, has become a voice for those committed to the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. This is the only national educational organization to date that is specifically for educators working with the middle level grades. In 1982, NMSA produced a position paper, *This We Believe*. This paper provided a vision and a direction for middle level education. The position paper is continuously being revised with the latest version released in 2003. All revisions are based on NMSA’s continued research, shared experiences of middle level practitioners, and the influence of societal change on middle school education. NMSA promotes dedication to the improvement of educational experiences of young adolescents

by providing vision, knowledge, and resources to all who serve them in order to develop healthy, productive, and ethical citizens.

In addition, NMSA has a network of 58 affiliate organizations that strengthens its outreach. There is an affiliate in Mississippi known as the Mississippi Association for Middle Level Education (MAMLE). MAMLE (2002) was founded in 1991 and is similar in structure to the NMSA in that it is also dedicated to those young adolescents in the middle level. MAMLE was originally called the Mississippi Middle School Association (MMSA) but this name left out many schools across the state of Mississippi that serve middle level students but may not exist in the traditional middle school framework having a building just for those grade levels. Through the years, MAMLE has grown and continues to model itself after NMSA by continuing to be a voice for those committed to this age group of students.

According to NMSA's vision for a successful middle school, there are 14 characteristics. These characteristics are revealed in two categories: culture and program characteristics. NMSA feels strongly that while these characteristics can be viewed as a list, they must be implemented in concert with one another. They have proven research and cumulative and empirical evidence that support the premise that when these characteristics are present over time they lead to higher levels of student achievement and overall development. The characteristics are the following:

- Educators value working with this age group and are prepared to do so—Effective middle level educators understand the developmental uniqueness of the age group, the curriculum they teach, and effective learning and assessment strategies.

They need specific teacher preparation before entering the classroom and continuous professional development as they pursue their careers.

- Courageous, collaborative leadership—Middle level leaders understand adolescents, the society and the theory of the practice of middle level education. As the prime determiner of the school culture, the principal influences student achievement and teacher effectiveness by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining an effective instructional program.
- A shared vision that guides decisions—All decisions made about the school should be guided by a shared vision and the mission statement derived from it.
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment—A successful school is an inviting, supportive, and safe place; a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In such a school, human relationships are paramount.
- High expectations for every member of the learning community—Educators and students hold themselves and each other to high expectations. Such confidence promotes positive attitudes and behaviors and motivates students to tackle challenging learning activities. Successful schools recognize that young adolescents are capable of far more than adults often assume.
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning—The most successful learning strategies are ones that involve each student personally. When students routinely assume the role of teacher, and teachers demonstrate that they are still learners, a genuine learning community is present.

- An adult advocate for every student—Academic success and personal growth increase markedly when young adolescents’ affective needs are met. All adults in successful middle level schools are advocates, advisor, and mentors.
- School-initiated family and community partnerships—Successful middle schools promote family involvement and take the initiative to develop needed home-school bonds. The involvement of family is linked to higher levels of student achievement and improved student behavior.
- Curriculum that is relevant, integrative, and exploratory—An effective curriculum is based on criteria of high quality and includes learning activities that create opportunities for students to pose and answer questions that are important to them. Such a curriculum provides direction for what young adolescents should know and be able to do and helps them achieve the attitudes and behaviors needed for a full, productive, satisfying life.
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity—Since young adolescents learn best through engagement and interaction, learning strategies involve students in dialogue with teachers and with one another. Teaching approaches should enhance and accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents, and draw upon students’ individual learning styles.
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning—Continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment and evaluation measures provide evidence

about every student's learning progress. Grades alone are inadequate expressions for assessing the many goals of middle level education.

- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning—The interdisciplinary team of two to four teachers working together with a common group of students is the building block for a strong learning community with its sense of family, where students and teachers know one another well, feel safe and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks.
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety—A school that fosters physical and psychological safety strives to build resiliency in young people by maintaining an environment in which peaceful and safe interactions are expected and supported by written policies, scheduled professional development, and student-focused activities.
- Multifaceted guidance and support services—Developmentally responsive middle level schools provide both teachers and specialized professionals who are readily available to offer the assistance many students need in negotiating their lives both in and out of school (NMSA, 2003).

There was a rekindled interest in middle level education in the 1980s with the National Commission on Excellence in Education preparing to release a document that would redefine education entitled *A Nation at Risk* (1983). This document chastised schools for not keeping up with what is going on in society and not holding high standards. Another reform document that would have an impact on middle schools across the country was Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's *Turning Points* –

Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (1989). A task force was created by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to strengthen the academic core of middle schools and establish caring, supportive environments that value adolescents and bring these needs to the attention of the public. This task force was comprised of political leaders, researchers, policy specialists, and other lay leaders. Who is missing from this force? Ironically, no middle level educators or specialists (Jackson & Davis, 2000) represented this group. The task force researched this area through interviews of experts in the field. They examined promising new approaches to place the transitional needs of adolescents higher on the nation's agenda for educating this age group of students. This report provided a model for how to design middle schools. In 2000, Carnegie Corporation issued an in-depth update of the 1989 report. *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* by Jackson and Davis was issued with the goal being to provide a research base that not only promotes all of the previous recommendations but includes practical application for educators, policymakers, parents, and community members to substantially improve teaching and learning at the middle level.

Throughout the history of education, it is clear that the focus shifted from students being productive citizens to curriculum. Little importance was placed on organizing relationships for learning. Teachers have a tremendous impact on students learning by way of developing those trusting relationships. *Turning Points* addressed the importance of these relationships and further promoted the continuity of learning, both of which are experienced through looping practices. To create a powerful teaching and learning community, teams of students and teachers should remain together for the entire middle

school experience (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Thus, looping and teaming provide time for teachers to intimately know both their students and parents.

The major recommendations of the first study were summarized into eight points:

- Large middle grade schools should be divided into smaller communities for learning so each student will receive sustained individual attention.
- Middle grades should transmit a core of common, substantial knowledge to all students in ways that foster curiosity, problem solving, and critical thinking.
- Middle grade schools should be organized to ensure success for virtually all students by utilizing cooperative learning and other techniques suitable for this developmental phase.
- Teachers and principals, not distant administrative or political organizations, should have major responsibility and authority to transform middle grade schools.
- Teachers for middle grades should be specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and be recognized distinctively for this accomplishment.
- Schools should be environments for health promotion, with particular emphasis on the life sciences and their applications; the education and health of young adolescents must be inextricably linked.
- Families should be allied with school staff in a spirit of mutual respect with ample opportunities for joint effort.
- Schools should be partners with various kinds of community organizations in educating young adolescents, including involving them in the experiences of carefully considered service learning. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 2)

In *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis revised the original eight recommendations and have new ones that reflect what they learned in the decade since the first report's publication. They now have seven new points:

- Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best.
- Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners.
- Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
- Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.
- Govern democratically through direct or representative participation by all students staff members and other adults who know the students best.
- Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.
- Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 23)

This brief history of middle schools is relevant as it portrays the patterns of educational change with teaming and middle schools and the impact these changes had over time on America's schools. Erickson, a researcher on adolescence believes that

middle school is a time period when adolescents “struggle to find out who they are and where they are going to be” (Erikson as cited in Knowles & Brown, 2000, p. 29). The focus of this research is adolescence as it delves a little deeper into the minds of this population of students.

The Stages of Adolescence

In addition to understanding the history of middle level education it is vital to the research to attempt to understand the stages of adolescence. Many researchers report how critical the stages of adolescence are. Knowing and understanding the needs of this age group can only benefit those connected to adolescents. Deepak Chopra, a philosopher and physician, reminds us that the cells of our human skin completely recycle every month, the liver, every six weeks, and the brain changes carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen every 12 months (as cited in Wormeli, 2003). The human body is fluid rather than remaining stagnant as we may sometimes think, just as adolescents are at a critical juncture of fluidness in their lives.

The transitional nature of young adolescents is a perfect example of this idea of fluidness because they are constantly changing. Students are in a state of unrest where they are beyond elementary school, but not quite ready for the practices of high school. The period of young adolescence is when growth and development are more rapid than during any other developmental stage except that of infancy (Jackson & Davis, 2000). They are unique in their transitional nature. They are embarking on something brand new. Any middle school teacher can tell you that what worked one week may not necessarily work the next, but you can try it again months later and it will work. This is

the same with their learning. What students learn one week can be clouded by new experiences. “Membership in formal and informal grouping at this age is dynamic, not static, and it can be based on interest, readiness, and/or personality” (Wormeli, 2003, p. 9).

According to brain research, young adolescents brains are at a critical point of development. Research has found that the brain continues to grow at a fast rate through age 15 (Wormeli, 2003) where it was once believed that brain growth stopped by birth and was followed by a lifetime of brain cell death (Willis, 2006). According to Wormeli adolescents are at their last point of successful intervention and are at their most receptive point for intellectual and moral reasoning.

Wormeli (2003) explains it by comparing the brain to a large sponge or amoeba. He notes how like a sponge the brain of adolescents is, constantly absorbing information and responding to experiences and environments, “stimulating dendrite development in some areas, retarding growth in others” (p. 9). The brain requires an interaction-rich learning environment for every area it develops. If an area is not stimulated regularly then it is lost, and efficiency increases in other areas. He uses the example of a student playing video games for hours and developing the skills associated with those games, which become permanent while other areas are deemed less important and fall to the wayside. Willis (2006) mentions this as well, but uses the analogy of pruning and how neurons are eliminated when they are not used. The brain prunes its own inactive cells. This gives way to the phrase “Use it or lose it.” Adolescents need to be in an environment with teachers that are understanding of this and can aid them with this growth. Teaming and

looping teachers are more knowledgeable of their students and able to meet their individual needs. Middle school teachers have the needed task of providing even more experiences involving “moral and abstract reasoning, planning, and awareness of consequences, and the effects of one’s words and actions on others, not fewer” (Wormeli, 2003, p. 9). Middle schools need to be organized so adolescents are able to receive these experiences.

Research into the minds of adolescents further supports why junior high schools were not sound practices for students ages 10 to 14. In addition to this age group undergoing such rapid changes and are being introduced to a range of social pressures, including sex, drugs, and violence, they are also trying to create a personal identity, acquire social skills, gain autonomy, develop character, and set values (Wormeli, 2003).

According to Wormeli young adolescents crave

- positive social interaction with adults and peers;
- structure and clear limits;
- physical activity;
- creative expression;
- competence and achievement;
- meaningful participation in families, school, and communities; and
- opportunities for self-definition. (p. 10)

He emphasizes that he used the word crave to exemplify just how important this is, because when one craves something, he notes little else will satisfy that craving. If adolescent’s needs are not met in the classrooms or schools it is found that they become

alienated from school, lack self-esteem and belonging, and choose destructive methods to cope with their struggles (Wormeli, 2003). Middle school is a much larger place for a child than being in a self-contained classroom. So many things can be seen as overwhelming for this inexperienced student. The structure of teaming and looping has been cited as a way to ease this transition for adolescents.

Rapp (1998) and Stevenson (1998) provide two different developmental models for the stages of adolescents. Rapp (1998) provides three stages of adolescence beginning with early adolescence, which encompasses the age of the traditional middle school students with an age range of 12 to 14. She describes the shifts and transitions of the child throughout the three stages (see Table 1). Stevenson (1998) identified five domains of the adolescent. The age range of this research covers ages 10 to 14. Table 2 outlines these five domains.

Table 1 Early Adolescence Stage

Stages of adolescence	Description
Early	<p>Focus is on peer groups</p> <p>Emotional distance from parents</p> <p>Rapid growth spurt, more prominent in girls</p> <p>An interest in sex</p>

Note. From *Young Adolescent Public Libraries* by M. Rapp, 1998

Table 2 Five Domains of Adolescence

Domain	Description of domain
Introspective domain	A reflective place where child is seeking identity
Somatic domain	The physical development of a child. Deals mainly with transition from childhood to adulthood
Intellectual domain	Concentrates on thinking and knowing.
Familial domain	Moving from the family to his peers during this period.
Communal domain	Trying to find his or her place and desperately wants to belong, which is similar to familial domain.

Note. From *Teaching ten to fourteen year olds (2nd ed.)*. by C. Stevenson, 1998

These models have three major similarities: adolescents wanting to find a place to belong, distancing themselves from parents, and rapid changes physically. Adolescence is the stage in a child's development where they struggle to figure out who they are. Not only are their bodies going through physical changes, but they are undergoing changes mentally as well. While they are going through these changes, they often shift from family and try to find a place to belong among peers. The literature on adolescence makes it clear that this is a time of major transition from childhood to adulthood. During this transfer from elementary to middle school, there are a lot of mental, physical, and emotional changes that a student is dealing with. Teaming and looping can provide that

needed stability and continuity in the lives of the children entering adolescence (Crosby, 1998).

The History of Looping

In order to get the entire picture of how looping is beneficial to black students one must understand the history of the construct. The history will show how schools across the United States have had success. Looping is simple and costs very little if anything for schools to implement. The concept is more common in Europe, where looping was endorsed by Rudolf Steiner, but it has been implemented successfully for years in Germany, most notably by Anne Ratzki of Köln-Holweide School. Looping is becoming more common in Japanese, Israeli, and Montessori schools (Grant et al., 1996).

The Austrian educator and philosopher, Rudolf Steiner founded the Waldorf Schools during the early 1900s in Germany. Lincoln (1998) believed that a long-term relationship with teachers was beneficial to students. At Waldorf, the teachers remained with their students from first to eighth grade. Even today in Germany, students remain with teachers from grades one to four. The practice of looping has been customary in European countries for the past 100 years (Wynne & Walberg, 1994) and was brought to the United States in 1928, as a similar concept (Barnes, 1980).

Steiner formed the school under the condition that it would be a unified 12-year school open to all children regardless of political affiliation or poverty level. Waldorf schools are designed to educate the whole child—head, heart, and hands. Waldorf elementary schools use the kinesthetic approach to learning (Ogletree, 1975). In the Waldorf school at the beginning of each day there is a two-hour period of study.

Textbooks are not used in the school. The students write and illustrate in color their own materials, which take the place of textbooks. Students also learn two foreign languages by immersion orally. The most noteworthy attribute is the long-term relationship developed with the student and the teacher for their entire school career. Barnes (1991) noted that today there are over 500 schools in 32 countries that work with the Waldorf principles and methods of teaching. There are over 130 schools in Germany, 260 in other European countries, 120 in the United States and Canada, and 17 in Australia.

Italian preschools, considered by some to be the best in the world, utilize a model of three-year assignments of students to teachers, and both parents and teachers as team members (Palestis, 1994). There are also some German schools that utilize multiyear teacher-student groupings for as long as six years, and credit the extended relationship time with assisting students in making the necessary brain connections learning requires (Burke, 1996; Oxley, 1994).

Headmistress Anne Ratzki of the Köln-Holweide School in Europe believes that looping creates a sense of community. Köln-Holweide is a secondary school that contains grades 5--10 and an upper school of grades 11--13 for college-bound students. The students remain with the same teachers for six years. Each team has six to eight teachers who plan and coordinate the instructional program. German teachers are trained to teach two subjects and team members plan their schedule to see who will teach what classes. These teachers believe that a close relationship is necessary for effective education (Oxley, 1994). In Germany, these comprehensive schools were due mainly to economics, but like the U.S. did in the 1980s, in the 1960s Germany found their schools in need of

reform. Therefore, initially, the schools in Europe were created to help their students reach high levels of academic achievement.

In some schools in China, the bonding of students to one another and their teacher is enhanced by the structure of the school. The students are divided into three groups: 1st through 6th grades, 7th through 9th grades, and 10th through 12th grades (Liu, 1997). The students stay in the same class with the same teacher through their years at each level. They use the same classroom all year long and change classrooms only from year to year. Students are responsible for keeping their classrooms neat and they are allowed to decorate them and make them their “home base” (Liu, 1997). Observations in the Chinese schools reveal that the students use their classroom as a gathering place before and after school because they feel the physical setting belongs to them. Having taught high school in the People’s Republic of China for nearly a decade, Liu experienced firsthand the effect of those multiyear relationships and the obvious benefits and is an advocate. She believes this method is worth trying in the U.S. where she is currently an assistant professor in the School of Education at Troy State University. She notes the importance of the teacher-student relationship and how crucial it is to students’ academic and psychological development (Jones & Jones, 1995). She contends that this arrangement also provides the teacher with a greater degree of autonomy. A key person to the multiyear structure in China is the homeroom teacher. While each teacher may have 50 students in a class, they teach only three or four classes a day. Similar to the middle school philosophy with advisory arrangements, in China each student is assigned to a homeroom teacher. The homeroom teacher plays many roles, from instructor to

counselor to friend. This teacher is an advocate for each of their students. Liu (1997) states that individualism is deeply embedded in American culture, and Americans fiercely guard their privacy. Thus American teachers generally do not get as involved with their students as Chinese teachers do in order to understand their problems which can impact the students' performance. American schools could benefit from adapting some of the constructs of the multiyear teaching in order to build those strong student/teacher relationships.

In Japan's middle schools, looping is prevalent as is teacher collaboration and team teaching. The curriculum includes requirements for music, art, and moral education while in America, as stated previously, the focus is on individualism with the concept of equal educational opportunity. In Japan, teachers and educational researchers are appointed to national curriculum committees that make decisions on what should be taught in schools. These groups also write the textbooks. The organization of the secondary schools in Japan is six primary grade, three middle grades, and three high school grades. Looping is a common practice in the middle grades in Japan where a group of students remains with the same teacher for grades 7--9. The teachers indicate that the first year is for getting to know students while the second year is for teaching (Wynne & Walberg, 1994).

Most educators have heard of looping, but perhaps under another name such as continuous learning, continuous progress, persisting groups, multiyear grouping, teacher/student progression, two-cycle teaching, or a number of other terms. Regardless of the term, looping has been around for years in various facets. The term *looping* was

coined by Grant, co-author of *The Looping Handbook* (Grant et al., 1996), which refers to the not new, but increasingly common practice of keeping groups of students together for two or more years with the same teacher. This practice has become more common in elementary schools in the United States than middle schools. Despite the successful experiences of European school systems, looping is still uncommon enough in the United States to be considered innovative.

Meier (1995), an award-winning New York City educator and the author of *The Power of Their Ideas*, began using multiyear assignments in her school in 1974. She considers looping essential because it allows the teachers and students to get to know one another well. Today, many teachers, administrators, and superintendents are “rediscovering” the logic behind multiyear placements.

Educator Darling-Hammond in her book *The Right to Learn* (1997) also emphasizes the need for teachers to have more time to work with students. She states that teachers need time to know the “hearts and minds” of students in order to develop a real expertise. Looping gives teachers this time with students and more control over their learning and overall school experience. Darling-Hammond believes that for teachers to create schools that work, they must be prepared to collaborate more often and spend more time teaching. This can be accomplished in looping and teaming settings.

Looping has existed for many centuries. In the days of the one-room schoolhouse, when only one teacher was available all students were taught by that teacher over a period of several years. More formally, looping has been working in German Waldorf Schools since the early part of the 19th century. The United States Department of

Education considered looping in 1913 under the name *teacher rotation* (Grant et al., 1996). As implemented by Meier (1995) in the 1970s and Anne Ratzki in the 1980s, there are now thousands of schools all over the country looping successfully.

Looping can be used from kindergarten through high school, but in the U.S. it is most common at the primary levels although more middle schools are catching on. Opinions differ when discussing the advantages. According to Grant et al. (1996) one primary teacher feels that single-year pattern is stressful for younger children and they benefit from looping, but Lincoln (as cited in Sherman, Fitz, & Hofman, 2002) argues that stability is probably more important in the middle school years than at any other time in a student's career. Looping provides the time needed to develop and nurture not only each student's intellect but their social and emotional needs as well.

In a qualitative study conducted by George, Spruek, and Morefield (1987), surveys were sent to students and teachers at 35 school districts in 14 states. Out of 1,100 schools, 800 middle school students responded that they strongly believed the process of looping helped them make stronger friendships. In addition, 750 teachers indicated that because of looping

- 84% believed they had better classroom discipline
- 95% believed they knew their students better
- 80% believed the students knew one another better
- 84% believed they had a more positive relationship with parents
- 80% believed that looping prevented unnecessary duplication of materials.

In a quantitative study conducted at the University of Miami in Oxford, Ohio, the researchers analyzed surveys received from seventh- and eighth-grade students that looped for a two-year period. From the surveys, the researchers concluded that overall students “seem to be most satisfied with the social aspects of their teams” (Sherman et al., 2002, p. 5). “Social aspects” is used to include friends, good people, and humor. The findings of this study are “fairly consistent with expectations for adolescents, given their inclination toward the social aspect of any event” (p. 5).

Rose (1989) said it best when he stated that he believed “a failed education is more social than intellectual in origin” (p. 225). This statement along with the research shows that middle schools need to focus more on the social aspect as well as begin to look at new school structures like looping that may address this. Psychologists have noted that black students are social and looping is a structure that aligns with this characteristic.

Sense of Belonging

Carnegie Council’s *Turning Points* (1989) called for school “communities for learning with stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers” (p.9) as its first major recommendation for improving early adolescent education. The Council stressed that by age 15, a substantial number of American youth are at risk of reaching adulthood unable to meet the requirements of the workplace, the commitments of relationships in families, with friends, and the responsibilities of participation in a multicultural society and of citizenship in a democratic society. Therefore, it can be seen that sense of belonging reaches far beyond “pass” or “failure” that standardized testing stresses but instead gets back to the core of why American public schools were founded

which is to create productive citizens that are able to function as responsible members of American society.

Several researchers (Goodenow, 1993a; Nichols, 2008; Osterman, 2000) have shed light on the importance of a sense of belonging in schools. There is emerging literature on belongingness that suggests a student's sense of belonging is correlated with social, psychological, and academic areas. In the area of belonging, Goodenow and Grady (1993) were some of the first researchers to emerge with research that examined the relationships of belonging. Much of the research around belonging is linked with academic achievement.

In a more recent study, Nichols (2008) used a mixed method study to explore students' sense of belonging in an urban middle school. Nichols used interview methods to obtain both closed- and open-ended student responses as well as surveys. These instruments were used to explore middle school students' conception of belongingness in a small charter middle school. The school served 150 students of whom 98% were Hispanic (there were 4 Caucasian, 3 black, and 2 Native American students) and all students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Participants in this study included 45 students representing 39% of the sixth-grade class, 26% of the seventh-grade class, and 18% of the eighth- grade class. A minority of the participants identified as white, black, or Native American, with a majority identifying as either Mexican American or Hispanic American. There were 23 boys and 22 girls. The students participated in one 30-35 minute interview where the researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data.

For the quantitative data, Nichols (2008) administered a slightly altered version of Goodenow's 18-item Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM). Nichols created a composite PSSM2 score for each study by summing their responses over all PSSM2 items that served as a general belongingness indicator in which a higher number meant a higher sense of belonging. Other quantitative data collected included absenteeism information and academic achievement. The qualitative data was gathered from open-ended, semistructured interview questions asking students to describe their experiences and level of belongingness to both past and present school settings.

The quantitative data revealed that girls felt more like they belonged than did boys and those belongingness beliefs were not related to student achievement. The qualitative data showed that many students liked their school for interpersonal reasons. Students expressed a range of reasons for why they belonged with primary reasons attributed to relationships with teachers and peers. When it came to teachers, positive relationships were often characterized by a sense of fairness and helping (i.e., teachers helped them when they struggled). When it came to peers, positive relationships were characterized by whether they were liked, got into fights, or were involved in romantic relationships that were met with peer approval.

One of the leading researchers in the area of sense of belonging is Goodenow (1993a). In the previous study by Nichols (2008) a version of Goodenow's PSSM test was used to gather quantitative data for the study. Again, this study by Goodenow (1993a) was to investigate the connection between students' sense of belonging and their academic motivation.

This study was conducted in a largely urban working-class city in the Northeast. The city has a large Hispanic and black population. Two of the six junior high schools in the city participated in the study. From the two schools the researcher used two different methods for collecting data. In the first school, half of the student body filled out a questionnaire that was administered in their homeroom and the other half of the students completed a different questionnaire that was focused on belonging and motivation in specific academic classes. There were 198 students in the first school with 104 boys and 87 girls (7 did not indicate gender). Forty-five percent (45%) of the students identified themselves as black, 16% as Hispanic, and 33% as white. Seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students completed questionnaires for school one.

In the second school, only seventh-grade students participated. There were 103 participants that included 53 boys and 43 girls (7 no answer). Again, the student population was largely Hispanic, with 16 of the 77 Hispanic students completing the survey, 7 black, 16 white, and 1 Asian American. Two students did not indicate ethnicity. In this school, half the participants completed the questionnaire that formed the basis of this study, while the other half completed an alternative survey.

The PSSM was the primary measure of the subjective sense of belonging in the school. This scale was developed specifically for use with early and mid-adolescent students. Items were included that tapped into students' sense of belonging or being a part of the school in general. The results from this study indicate that sense of belonging and academics present different pictures. When responding to questions about sense of school membership the students were less positive. The students were more inclined to

disagree than agree that they felt they belonged and were supported by others in the school. When the data were disaggregated by group differences, they revealed that girls expressed higher levels of school membership than boys.

This study also uncovered that early adolescence is a developmental period in which school belonging, psychological membership, and the socioemotional support of teachers and other students are likely to have an especially significant influence on students motivation and achievement. According to Goodenow (1993b) this suggests that programs that are explicit in their design to foster a sense of belonging at school may not be “misplaced warm fuzziness” but an integral part of keeping many students in school, thus promoting academic engagement, motivation, and achievement. She provides instructional methods that may aid in this such as cooperative learning or reciprocal teaching and she also mentions whole school efforts like interdisciplinary teaching teams and homeroom advisory systems.

Unfortunately, some evidence suggests that at the developmental stage (adolescence) when support may be most important it often decreases in school settings (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Many students in the transition to middle school become lost in the shuffle of departmentalization. It has been suggested that the effects of a weak sense of belonging may be especially troublesome for ethnic minority students (Steele, 1992). This is justifiable when one looks at how black students are more group oriented; therefore, this study is focused specifically on sense of belonging in looping and teaming settings.

Voelkl (1995) has suggested that the problem of belonging is most common among black students. Sense of belonging is important for all students, but it is especially important for black students, particularly males. One of the preceding studies found that girls have a greater sense of belonging than boys, so once the data is filtered by race, then gender, black boys are at an even greater risk of feeling a disconnect with school. Finn (1989) found that unless students identify well with their schools, their educational participation would always be limited. Many studies show that black males are achieving at a far lower rate than that of black females as well as other minority groups when looking at their feelings of belonging.

Taken together, data from these studies imply that students feel a part of school when they receive acceptance from both their teachers and peers. Both studies connected sense of belonging with academic achievement, but when belonging was isolated from achievement the results showed minority students did not connect with their schools. Minority students may do what it takes to excel academically and still not connect with their school. Consequently, these studies show the need for rural areas to investigate minority students' sense of belonging and ways for rural students to make the connection.

Sense of Belonging and Teaming

A developing body of research that may be helpful in the impact on black students' sense of belonging is in teaming (Osterman, 2000). Researchers have found that black students feel disconnected with school as compared to their counterparts. Possible reasons were stated by Gay (2000) when she noted that mainstream American cultural orientation endorses competition, individualism, and nuclear family constellation, and

religion as separate from other aspects of life, whereas black American cultural orientation promotes a collective orientation, an extended family network, and religion as integral to other aspects of life. This applies to most but not all black American adolescents. Hence, American schools are becomingly increasingly more diverse. All too often the culture of the home and the culture of the school remain at odds to cultural discontinuities between black students and the schools they attend (Patton & Day-Vines, 2004).

Many middle schools are organized into teams, but there are also middle schools and junior high schools that are departmentalized, which raises the question: How does teaming impact black students' sense of belonging in school? This question is of great importance because educators across the country continue to grapple with "to team or not to team?" The concept of teaming is where a small group of teachers take collective responsibility for planning, curriculum, and discipline for a small group of students (generally 100 to 120), and remain together for an academic year. Teaming is proposed as a means to reduce the alienation and anonymity that is so evident among young adolescents who are at risk of school failure and withdrawal from school (Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000) yet there are few studies about black students and the possible benefits of teaming.

Arhar and Kromery (1993) were among the few researchers that studied at-risk middle school students in both urban and suburban areas and their sense of belonging in middle school settings. Their purpose was to determine the extent to which particular

demographic and organizational characteristics of middle level students influence social bonding. The demographic characteristics of the students in this study were those associated with educational disadvantage. The researchers focused on racial make up, socioeconomic status (SES), and family composition in determining the study's population. They also took into account the SES of the school to determine the overall impact of the school's SES on the relationship between student's personal and social background and the organization of the school. Lastly, they examined the relationship of those teaming and not teaming on students' bonding to school.

An ex post facto design was used for this study, which used a subsample of schools from a larger study of social bonding. The original study from which this was derived took a sample of 11 teamed and 11 non-teamed middle level schools that were matched on variables of size of enrollment, percentage of minority students, percentage of students on free or reduced price lunch, geographic location, and rural/urban location. In the sample of schools, enrollment ranged from 230 to 1,160 students, minority percentage ranged from 3 to 64%, and percentage of students on free or reduced price lunch ranged from 1 to 55%. Six of the matched pairs were located in urban areas and five were in suburban areas.

With each sampled school, all seventh-grade students were provided with an opportunity to participate in the study. A total of 4,761 seventh graders responded. The participants completed a demographic questionnaire and the Social Bonding Scale from the Wisconsin Youth Survey. This scale consisted of 25 Likert response items. The

instrument yields 3 bonding scores reflecting students' bonding to peers, to teacher and to schools.

To determine the effect of school SES on the relationship between school organization, racial/ethnic group, socioeconomic status, gender, and family structure and student social bonding, a subsample of seven teamed and seven non-teamed middle schools were analyzed. The low SES schools had 25 to 55% of students receiving free and/or reduced price lunch; the high SES schools had only 1 to 10% of students that received free and/or reduced price lunch. If a school was missing data around demographic factors of gender, racial group, SES, and number of parents in the home, as well as responses to the social bonding scales, their response records were deleted and not used. For this subset, a total of 1,052 student responses were analyzed.

The researcher used a multivariate analysis of variance, with student responses as the dependent variable and the five independent variables being: gender, race, SES, family structure, and school organizational structure (teamed or non-teamed). The results indicated that middle school students, especially the economically disadvantaged, benefit more from teaming concepts in school than other students and that they experienced a greater sense of belonging when they were part of a group. The high SES schools showed no statistically significant difference. In contrast, the low SES schools showed a difference for the main effects of gender, race, and school organization as well as an interaction between race and gender.

The high SES schools were categorized as being mainly white, middle and upper class, two-parent families. They also had a higher availability of social, fiscal, and

material capital outside of school which provides for richer student growth than the low SES schools as reported by the researcher. The low SES schools have greater racial diversity and twice as many single-parent families, which the authors contend may attribute to the difference in the two. The researchers contend that the school itself may have a stronger influence on young adolescent bonding in low SES schools than on students in high SES schools through the kind of support provided by adults. They feel that adolescents will take nurturance where they can get it.

With the low and high SES schools there was a difference in gender with the social bonding of students to their teachers and their school. They found that females were more connected to their teachers and schools than were the males. The authors attribute this difference to the fact that in schools consisting of majority female teachers the male students are less likely to feel the need to connect with a female teacher and are more likely to separate themselves. The males in the low SES schools were the lowest of both groups and the authors suggest that these males may have fewer opportunities to participate in school activities. Overall the researchers felt that teachers in the low SES schools may make more of a concerted effort to bond with their female students.

When data were disaggregated by race, the researchers found there was a difference in low SES schools. Black students were more bonded to their school than were white students. The low SES schools have a larger number of black students than high SES schools, therefore the low schools may provide a culture closer to the experiences of the black students. However, black students in the high SES schools were

found to be less bonded to their schools than the blacks in the low SES schools which further supports the author's previously stated line of reasoning.

They found that creating a smaller, family-like structure within a larger organization had the potential for increasing these at-risk students' connections with their teachers and peers. Teams according to this study are definitely beneficial to black students. This finding suggests that a program based on a teaming model where a small group of teachers take collective responsibility for a cadre of students that stay together for at least one year has the potential to enhance student social bonding and membership. In the area of teaming and its impact on black middle school students the research is very limited. Although the few studies that have been conducted provide some insight, the fact still remains that this is an area worth more qualitative and quantitative research.

Sense of Belonging and Looping

Research investigating looping in middle schools is another slowly growing body of research. Much of the research that takes into account the structure of a school is with elementary schools. Looping in the U.S. is customarily a practice limited to elementary schools. However, research on adolescents provides evidence that this population of students can only benefit from the construct of looping. Kester (1994) conducted action research to examine whether black students in a multiage classroom with the same teacher for three years had a stronger connection to their school than other students. The researcher wanted to explore the connection between black students and their mostly white teachers. This research engaged sixth-grade students at Sennett Middle School that were assigned to a teacher with whom they would remain for all three of their middle

school years. In this school the class they enter comprises sixth, seventh, and eighth graders and is part of a house. Each house has four to five classes, and students attend academic classes only within their assigned house for the next 3 years.

Sennett Middle School has over 760 students in grades 6–8 in an urban area located in Madison, WI. Approximately 20% of the students are minority, and most of these are black. The school also serves students with learning and emotional disabilities as well as hearing impairment. A little over 22% of the student population is classified as economically disadvantaged.

To explore the house structure and the effects it has on black students, the researcher compared the feelings of belonging of students who had been with the same teacher for at least 2 years with those who had just started for the first year. To test whether the house structure affected black students' sense of belonging the researcher interviewed a small sample of students, parents, and teachers. All of the students and families were black and represented a variety of economic backgrounds. Ten seventh or eighth graders were interviewed in the fall. Half had been at Sennett for at least 2 years and had the same academic homeroom teacher every year, whereas the others had attended only 2--3 months. Nine teachers, seven white and two black were interviewed with experience ranging from 3--19 years. Each teacher also represented varying teaching styles in addition to four sets of parents from varying backgrounds where all but one couple of parents were from the population of students being interviewed.

The results of surveys and interviews with 10 students, 9 teachers, and 4 sets of parents from a middle school identified some of the dynamics involved in black students'

connection with school. The survey results from old and new students produced mixed results and did not show dramatic results according to the author. In general, she reported that all students felt they belonged at school. Both groups felt they could be themselves, although the average for old students was just a little higher but not enough to state a difference. The older students spoke of their close relationships with teachers while the newer students spoke on feelings of respect from classmates.

The parent interviews reported that the house structure provided a link between the student and the teacher as well as the parent and the teacher. Three of the four sets of parents felt the homeroom teachers were aware of parents' priorities. The researcher said that the students, teachers, and parents interviewed said a close relationship between teacher and student has to exist in order for the students to feel safe and accepted in a school. The parents felt the house system helped to establish a rapport with a teacher who might have a different ethnic or socioeconomic background than they.

The teachers in the study noted improved behavior from the students they knew well versus the ones they did not know as well. They also noted their ability to anticipate students' needs made them more effective teachers. Teachers noted the most significant result of the house system was the closer relationships with students and their parents, which led to higher academic and behavioral expectations.

During the student interviews, the students spoke of acceptance among their peers being a determining factor in their sense of belonging. The students emphasized that their classmates were factors in their academic achievement. Students' loyalty was divided between their teachers and peers causing somewhat of a conflict. The study suggests that

school structure and peer influence can interact to affect students' sense of belonging to school.

This study shows that varying structures give black students that needed sense of belonging even when teachers have backgrounds that are incongruent with their own. The parents and teachers felt a better connection which was all beneficial to the students in the school. The construct of looping and house structure used in the study are similar. The students and teachers remain together for two or more years, but the difference is in the aspect of multiage groupings.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes qualitative inquiry about the impact of looping and teaming on black middle school students' sense of belonging and the methods used in conducting research. The choice of a qualitative study is based on the ability of the researcher to generate a description of a certain event or an understanding of a definite setting or environment (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003). This study will attempt to gain an understanding of the story behind each student. Qualitative methods are appropriate for research that attempts to recognize and make meaning of specific experiences (Patton, 2002). Therefore, this methodology was utilized with the participants of this study.

Case Study

Qualitative methods can be utilized with any of five specific traditions: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, or case study (Creswell, 1998). The case study approach was chosen due to the purpose and goals of the research, to understand the impact of looping and teaming on rural black middle school students' belongingness. The case study tradition has been used in many similar settings, including education (Yin, 2003). As a result, it is suitable for a study dealing with the experiences of students. Additionally, this methodology allows for the study of a group of individuals (Creswell, 1998). The case study approach is fitting for the study of seven middle school

students because it focuses on how specific school structures impact rural black students' sense of belonging.

The case study approach is also appropriate because the subjects of this study have shared an experience that is unique to them. All of the students are members of teams and loop with their teachers. The challenge is to discover what factors these students identify as bringing about a sense of belonging. The case study tradition tries to make meaning of the actions or interactions that happen to people in certain situations and to look at the process in which these individuals assign meaning to their experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The attempt will be made to comprehend what transpired that enabled these students to connect or not connect to their school.

This approach is also suitable given the goals of this study. Case studies place importance on in-depth interviews with study participants (Creswell, 1998). These interviews give the researcher the ability to gain more in-depth details. The opportunity to follow up with participants in the midst of the study allows the researcher the opportunity to better determine what themes emerge as connectors. This permits the participants' experience to be divided into textural and structural categories so the researcher can examine both the *what* and *how* of the experience.

Case study is noteworthy in that it allows for methodological reduction to take place in the data analysis portion of the research (Creswell, 1998). The ability of the researcher to recognize themes or clusters of factors that attribute to the students' sense of belonging allows for further understanding of how to reach this population of students.

Researcher's Role

Qualitative research highlights the strengths of the researcher. To enhance credibility in qualitative research involves scrupulous field notes, the presentation of a credible researcher, and a fundamental belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). I will attempt to enhance the credibility of this study by addressing these elements.

Naysayers of qualitative findings buy into the belief that the researcher has shaped the results according to predispositions or biases (Patton, 2002). It is therefore imperative that the researcher be aware of such occurrences. The first step is for the researcher to clearly identify such prejudices, biases, viewpoints, and assumptions that may effect the research. The researcher must also begin with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomena being studied. An honest dissemination will lend final credibility to the study.

Researcher's Perspective

My interest in rural black middle school students stems from my passion as a seasoned middle school educator and my having witnessed the disconnect and anecdotal stories heard from my black students. I have conducted an extensive literature review and because of this and my personal experience I will enter this study with a certain amount of bias based on information received from previous research, and I state how I used procedures to limit this bias. I have already identified factors relevant to the connection of black students with regard to teaming and looping. Throughout this research, I will look into the specifics regarding how or if teaming and looping impact black middle school students' sense of belonging.

As a black female, I have lived some of the same experiences as some of the participants, reared by a single parent due to my father's unsuccessful battle with cancer. I also attended schools in rural settings with mainly middle class white female teachers, and struggled to find my place, which was complex in a sea of people who looked nothing like me and did not share similar experiences. There was one school in particular I attended where the mascot of the school was the Colonel and the Confederate flag was our symbol. It was during my years in high school that this flag became the cause of much debate and turmoil. It began when there was interest in removing the flag as the school symbol and allowing the student body to vote on a new one. What little connectedness I had to school was lost because of this controversy. The students and faculty became racially divided. I often think back on that experience and wonder whether or not my classmates felt a sense of belonging. The issue became a huge media frenzy and escalated beyond belief. Even as a doctoral student, I continued to face the issue of being a minority and trying to find a way to "fit in." I bring my personal experience and my educational experience to the table as a researcher. However, while sharing some similarities, my experience is different from some of the participants in this study. Identifying my own similarities to, and differences from, this cohort enhances my self-awareness and objectivity in approaching this study.

As a black female, I have always wanted to find a way to give back to my community. There has been much research and debate about black boys and their disinterest in school resulting in gaps in achievement and their eventually dropping out of school. The NCLB legislation has cast a broader light on the disparity in black students'

achievement in comparison to other races and genders and why they lag so far behind. My question has been and continues to be what educators can do. I feel there is research that continues to focus on achievement and none that investigates what adolescents need most, which is the need to belong. Throughout my career as an educator, I have found that the most successful teachers of those “hard to reach” students were the ones that made a connection with their students. As a middle school teacher I have seen many students do whatever it takes to belong to a certain group and how they can behave differently from one teacher to the next, depending upon their rapport with that teacher.

After having taught at the same middle school for six years, I moved to a new city and, in essence, a new school when I started teaching at Westlake Middle School; I saw students of different races, gender, and socioeconomic statuses interacting with one another and forming strong relationships. This piqued my interest and I wanted to know what made this school so different. I decided to delve a little deeper into this idea of sense of belonging. Initially, I looked at school culture, but I realized after much research that it was not necessarily the culture of the school, but the idea that students feel they belong and how this plays into the culture of the school.

I conducted pilot research during a qualitative course and focused on sense of belonging and its impact on middle school students. As I continued to work with belonging and creating a sense of community, I found that looping was the difference with the school I was researching.

My first year teaching at Westlake Middle School, the school was at the onset of implementing looping with a pilot group. The principal decided to implement looping

and use the research as part of his dissertation. For his research, he compared standardized test scores from sixth to eighth grade and compared one looping teams' standardized test scores with a non-looping teams' scores (Fuller, 2006). The principal found there was a significant difference. He found a difference by race and gender as well when disaggregating the data. This was yet another caveat in my research because from speaking with the principal, I knew there was limited research around looping in the middle grades and even less that focused on rural black middle school students.

At Westlake, I was able to witness the looping process. Now, I wanted to further explore and analyze the key factors associated with the concept of looping and teaming on sense of belonging. Therefore, it seemed logical to investigate further how these concepts together can bring about that needed interconnectedness for black students.

As a teacher, I have always formed a bond with my students. Some of them even refer to me as mom. I have always wondered if I could have had them for one more year what impact could I have made on their lives. Taking a deeper look at strong relationships created between teachers and students over the course of two years, referred to as looping in the educational world, is something that I deem worth exploring. The looping environment is seen to not only provide teachers with a better understanding of their students by being able to continuously monitor their progress, but it also provides the opportunity to develop sustained relationships. Teaming is the process where a group of interdisciplinary teachers teaches one select group of students. The teaming concept is a given within a "true" middle school setting. The need to belong to groups, I feel, will

directly correlate with how teaming and looping in schools can indeed have an impact on middle students and I decided to look at the benefits of them both.

Lastly, I feel that educators and politicians alike continue to look at achievement and have forgotten about what adolescents need most, the need to belong. The quote at the beginning of the introduction by Albert Einstein puts it best because something is simply unable to be measured does not mean it is not important. And in this era of high stakes testing this important quality seems have been forgotten.

Setting of the Study

The school in this study was situated in a rural county in east central Mississippi. The school was selected because it is the only middle school in this geographic region that loops. For the purposes of confidentiality, the school will be referred to as Westlake Middle School and the teams are Team N and Team C. Westlake Middle School houses both seventh- and eighth-grade students with six teams (three per grade level). Each team contains a teacher for each of the four core academic subjects—English, math, science, social studies and a technology teacher. Some teams also have an inclusion teacher. Team N is comprised of six teachers and Team C has five teachers.

In addition, a group of exploratory teachers focuses on art, drama, foreign languages, health, music, band, and physical education. Westlake Middle School has a population of approximately 650 students with 63% of students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch according to the administrator. Additionally, the district where the school is located has 65% of its students coming from homes that fall below the national poverty level (Fuller, 2006).

Because looping is traditionally used in elementary schools in the United States, Westlake Middle School may be considered one of the unique middle schools across the country. Most schools that loop in the United States are elementary schools. Elliot (1998) describes this concept as the teacher being “promoted” along with his or her students to the next grade level. The concept of looping is not uncommon in school systems, but it is uncommon for middle schools. Despite enthusiastic practitioners and favorable, yet limited, research, looping is still uncommon in the United States and considered innovative (Burke, 1996).

In addition, the teacher population at Westlake Middle School is like most across the United States where research shows that 90% of United States public school teachers are white and most grew up and attended college in middle-class, English-speaking, predominately white colleges and universities (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson as cited in Johnson, 2002). The school’s population is 66 % black, 29% white, 1% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. Westlake has a total teacher population of 75% white and 25% black. However, when looking at the percentage by content areas, 81% of the core content area teachers are white and only 19% are black.

Context

Other important factors to consider are how teams are composed. Teams are comprised of five teachers: math, science, English, social studies, and technology. Each team creates a team name, colors, logo, and t-shirts for its team. For instance, one team could be the Gators and use an alligator as their team logo with the colors of orange and blue. Each team has its own corner within the school where students report for all of their

core classes. Each team corner is equipped with the basic essentials such as lockers, restrooms, and water fountains.

Additionally, each team of teachers has two common planning times with one reserved for team planning and the other for personal planning. Twice a week, team planning is devoted to Teacher Study Groups (TSG) and Teacher Study Teams (TST). During TSG, teachers meet to discuss lessons and ways to improve classroom instruction. The purpose of TST is for the TST representative from the team to bring information to the other team members to discuss the tiering (special education services) of students and ways to support students.

A unique feature about Westlake Middle is the faculty coming together outside of faculty meetings to build relationships. Every month the faculty and staff gather outside of school one-week night for some function. The events range from bowling to visiting a nursing home to white water rafting. Before the first football game of each season the faculty and staff gather at the principal's home for food and fellowship. These events all forge a stronger relationship among the teachers. Another method used by the administrators to increase teacher morale is "plan week." Plan week is one week each semester when each department receives an entire day to meet with their departments in the library to plan.

Additionally, the school has several functions in place to interact with parents and the community. At Westlake Middle, each team has open house at the beginning of the year where parents come to meet their child's team of teachers and are able to ask any questions they may have for the faculty and staff. Each team on various nights also had

game night at the beginning of the year where they invite parents and their child(ren) to come to the school to play games, eat, and socialize. Five times a year, the school has “Movies on the Green” an event co-sponsored by the town’s Central Neighborhood Foundation. The event is where a large-screen projector is placed on the side of the school building and everyone is invited to bring chairs, blankets, and enjoy a free community movie.

Selection of Participants

The sampling procedure was purposeful (Firestone, 1993; Stake, 2000) to reflect varying backgrounds. “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select the participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Cresswell, 2003, p. 185). Participants in the study were seven rural black seventh- and eighth- grade middle school students over the course of an academic year. The selection process took into account the following criteria: gender, race, level of involvement in school activities and academic achievement (see Table 3). Before the study began I met the administrator and gave an overview of my study, and we decided on the teams that would be best suited. Next, I met the teachers from those teams; they compiled a list of students who fit into these categories, and then students were randomly selected from the teacher-generated list and contacted to elicit participation in the study. The teachers and administrator were selected to participate because of their day-to-day engagement with the students in the study.

Table 3 Student Demographics

Student	Grade	Race	Gender	Achievement	Activities
Jasmine	8	B	F	B/C	Track Softball
Ray	8	B	M	B/C	Football
Josh	8	B	M	C/D	Basketball
Keisha	8	B	F	B/C	None
Mike	7	B	M	C/D	None
Holmes	7	B	M	D/F	None
Dwayne	7	B	M	A/B	Basketball Student Council Builders Club

I obtained permission to conduct this study from the School Board of the school district where the middle school in the study is located in addition to receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mississippi State University. Research ethics were carefully observed and participants were assured of their ability to voluntarily withdraw at anytime from the study. They were assured of confidentiality and any risks associated with participation in this study. Parents and students received a letter outlining these factors and were asked to sign written consent in order for the student to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through four resources: (a) in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and administrators; (b) focus groups with students and teachers; (c) observations

of looping classrooms and various school functions; and (d) document analysis of field notes, progress reports, report cards, and reflective journals. In the process of collecting data, I immersed myself in the lives of the participants to learn about their behavior, language, and interactions. This enabled me to understand looping and teaming from their perspectives, uncover emergent themes, and analyze data about the looping practice at the middle school used for this study. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) cited triangulation as the use of multiple data collection methods, data sources, and theories that corroborate support for the strength of qualitative research discoveries. Erickson (2002) also noted that triangulating data makes the researcher's report more credible because a variety of sources are being used.

Interviews

Individual interviews were used as the primary method for collecting data. Again, having conducted a preliminary study and used the interview instruments as well as my background as a middle school teacher was useful. I am skilled at developing relationships with middle schoolers very quickly and soliciting even involuntary information from individuals.

To hear students' voices individually, I interviewed seven seventh- and eighth-grade students over an academic looping and teaming year. The interviews occurred during the fall and spring semesters for each group of students and ranged from 30 to 50 minutes in length. I conducted interviews at the school site after receiving parent permission forms in Appendix B. I visited the school two or three days a week throughout the school year as my schedule permitted in order to conduct interviews,

observe classrooms and other school activities. Students were asked 30 open-ended questions during the initial in-depth interview, and each interview was recorded and later transcribed, then coded to ascertain emergent themes and patterns associated with the looping and teaming process from the students' perspectives. A list of questions was generated by the researcher for each interview as evidenced by Appendix C. The student interviews were to seek information as to what made students feel a sense of belonging in school. Sample student questions were: Are there ways in which you feel similar to other students at Westlake? Are there ways in which you feel different? What makes you feel like you are part/not a part of Westlake Middle? Each in-depth interview was recorded and transcribed.

Individual interviews were conducted with two teachers. The interviews took place at the school. Interviews were audiotaped for transcription. I also took extensive notes during the interview. The teacher interviews took place in the spring with the interview lasting approximately 60 minutes and a second interview following transcription, if needed, to clarify meaning or explore areas with more depth. Participants were informed of that possibility. A list of questions was generated by the researcher for each interview as evidenced in Appendix D. Examples of questions for the teachers were: How do students get along at this school? What are some positives about looping? What are some negatives about looping? How do you feel about the teaming concept? By conducting the interviews myself, I was able to take a more semi-structured approach and redirect or add questions to the interviews as I felt necessary to elicit more information about the topic.

After reading each of the transcribed interviews, I reviewed each interview several times and highlighted commonalities that were specific to my professional experiences of looping and teaming practices as well as those connected to the research questions. The statements were circled and underlined in an effort to isolate different thematic statements. I followed the advice of Merriam (1998) and analyzed my transcriptions simultaneously as I continued to collect data.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to discover the emergent themes. Categories of coding emerged as the data were analyzed for common themes. Categories and other codes were classified into various subheadings of differing topics.

Focus Groups

All seven students participated in two focus group discussions during the fall and spring semester. The purpose of the focus groups was to take note of the dynamics of the students and examine if views changed collectively about belonging from the individual interviews. The 60-minute focus groups were held during the school day and recorded to audiotape. The focus group sessions were videotaped and analyzed.

As stated by Glesne (2006), videotaping can enhance observations as it allows for density and permanence. The videotape posed advantages in that a large amount of data recorded is greater than one could possibly observe and because it is permanent, the researcher was able to return and review the observation.

A total of 11 teachers were participants in each of the focus group interviews for this portion of the data collection during the spring semester. The purpose was to gain more insight about teachers' feelings about teaming and looping and their black students'

sense of belonging on their respective teams. The focus groups were held during the team's planning time and audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

Team N, the seventh-grade team, had a mixture of both seasoned and new professionals with experience ranging from 2 to 17 years of working with middle school students. This was Team N's first year of the looping cycle. They had three white female teachers, two black female teachers (one is the inclusion teacher), and one black male teacher.

Team C, the eighth-grade team, was comprised mainly of veteran teachers with only one new teacher. Team C's years of experience ranged from 1 to 14 years. There were four white females, one white male, and one black female teacher on this team. The entire team of teachers looped last year with the exception of the technology teacher.

Each team was responsible for working with their team of students. Both teams had approximately 120 students. All teachers had both individual and team planning times built into their daily schedules.

Observations

Observations were conducted for the purpose of recording interactions between teachers and students and teachers and their peers, and these took place throughout the school year. There were observations of teacher team meetings, pep rallies, parent-teacher conferences, student club meetings, and lunchtime social interaction, which covered the time span of the fall through spring semesters for gaining additional insights into teacher-student relationships. In all of these school-based observations, field notes

were taken. I also reviewed classroom observation notes and other artifacts pertaining to each individual student to gain a better understanding of each student.

Documents

Collection and analysis of handwritten field notes from classroom observations, teacher meetings, and school functions were used. I also kept a weekly journal of my thoughts and reflections over the course of the study.

Data Analysis

Good practice enhances the credibility. Qualitative inquiry produces massive amounts of data. An important focus is to reduce the data by developing codes or categories to discover common meanings, sift through trivia, and find significant patterns (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). Data analysis is the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations that are the foundations for published reports (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Analysis involves classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining material from the interviews to extract meaning and implications to reveal patterns, or to put together a description of events that is a clear narrative (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Data collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). The process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic (Merriam, 1998). Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of data to be processed.

Content analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and

meanings (Berg, 2007). Content analysis is chiefly a coding operation and data interpreting process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). There was an analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions, the researcher's observations, and collected documents that were collected to examine patterns and themes in the data and to ascertain students' sense of belonging in school. Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. The use of multiple data methods contributed to the trustworthiness of the data, also known as triangulation (see Table 4).

Table 4 Data Analysis

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Focus Group	Observation
How do looping and teaming impact black student's ability to develop and sustain relationships with teachers?	1. How often do you volunteer in class? 2. Who are your friends? 3. Do your teachers know when you are good at something?	1. Do you feel having the same teachers for two years has been good for you? 2. Describe what your friendships are like with your classmates on your team. 3. What are your thoughts about going to high school?	1. How often did student raise hand or was called on by the teacher. 2. With whom is the student interacting in class and in the halls? 3. What activities did team have in place for students outside of academia, i.e., field trips, game night, etc.?

Table 4 cont.

What do black middle school students perceive as belonging?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you define belonging? 2. Do students take your opinion seriously? 3. Do you feel others accept you for who you are? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What makes you feel welcome at school? If you do not feel welcome, what do you think would help? 2. What do you like about your middle school? 	1. When working in groups, what was the participant's role?
What are some normative qualities of black students who feel a sense of belonging?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How often do you miss school? Do you skip class? 2. What makes you feel you belong? 3. If you had a serious problem, to whom would you go? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you think has been most helpful in your success at school? 2. Describe your thoughts and feeling about starting 8th grade with the same group of teachers. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the student's body language? 2. Is the lesson of interest to the student?

The data were coded by transcripts of interviews and observations were read and broad codes were established for statements that addressed belongingness, looping, and teaming as well as statements that addressed alienation and any other negative factors. Codes were refined and narrowed with each subsequent interview. Interviews were read multiple times for additional information and resulting codes were cross-checked by a peer reviewer.

Through this the researcher was able to identify patterns and themes in the content of the participants' responses to the researcher's questions and/or observations. Responses were then grouped based on evolving themes and chain of evidence was

constructed allowing the researcher to trace the patterns and themes to the original document and participants.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established using the exploring procedures of Creswell (2003). One method of trustworthiness is prolonged engagement, closeness to participants, establishing relationships with all involved. Additionally, I worked in the school district two years prior to the study and continue to reside in the school community. A second form of trustworthiness is called persistent observation. This inquiry took place through audiotaped in-depth interviews of teachers and students over the course of a school year as well as focus groups with students. There were also multiple collection techniques by using in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, and field notes as the predominant qualitative methods employed to analyze and interpret data. Peer review and input were also used as another method when I shared my study with several of my colleagues who asked unbiased questions and discussed my research with me. They also received a copy of my drafts and offered much needed criticism and critique as well. In order to address subjectivity and bias, I wrote a reflection on my thoughts about the study weekly to ensure that I was being objective.

Pilot Study

Preliminary research was conducted. Within this research, there was an examination to determine factors contributing to rural middle school students' sense of belonging. The research was based on in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations,

and artifacts of nine middle school students. The racial make-up of the students was 4 black males, 2 black females, 2 white females, and 1 white male student. The students were both seventh and eighth graders from varying levels of socio economic status and academic achievement. The students were selected by their teacher because they could each bring a different perspective to the study. They represented various social groups in the school community as well as different perspectives in their status among their peer groups and relationships with teachers.

The teachers interviewed consisted of 2 white males and one white female. The teachers had varying years of experience ranging from 2 to 13 years. One of the teachers was a Nationally Board Certified Teacher (NBSTS) and one was in the midst of seeking NBSTS. The administrator interviewed was a black female who was in her first year at the middle school.

I conducted individual interviews with each of the participants. Student interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes in length. The student interviews were to seek information as to what made students feel a sense of belonging in school. The teacher and administrator interviews took place at the beginning of the year, lasting about 60 minutes in length and again at the end of the year, lasting about 40 minutes in length.

Qualitative data revealed three themes that emerged from the research: relationship with peers, relationships with teachers, and extracurricular involvement. Students placed a greater emphasis on establishing and maintaining relationships. They valued relationships with peers and relationships with teachers as important factors in feeling a sense of belonging. Relationships with peers were the most important factor

across all races and gender of students. The connection with teachers and peers on their respective teams overrode any other negative influences. This was evident in the findings. The following is an example of where Glen expressed his feelings.

I feel like people want to be around me. I feel like I come to school for people to see me. Like one day I was suspended last year and didn't come to school and everyone was asking where I was when I came back. If I don't go to lunch, I'll have like 10 people come up to me and ask me where was I and why I didn't come to lunch.

This made Glen feel that students wanted to be around him and that when he was not there he was missed. He stated that when he walks into school in the morning he feels the vibe of the students and the love, which make him feel welcome. In another example, Kyle's story spoke volumes about the importance of the relationships among the students. K.W. was new to the school and throughout his interviews and observations it was evident how he had become a part of his team. He stated, "When I first came to this school the students made me feel welcome." Being new to the school, and on a team that had looped, this statement by K.W. says a lot about the relationships on his team and how they were able to embrace a new student. Being able to make friends made K.W. feel that he belonged to the school. When asked how he felt about coming on a team that was together for two years he said, "I feel good. I feel like I belong."

It was also uncovered that having a connection with their teachers made students feel they belonged. One student explained:

When I walk in the room, my teacher can tell that I am having a bad day and knows exactly what to do. I don't have to explain it to her.

Another student stated that:

They [teachers] ask personal question to get to know me.

The teachers in the study feel strongly that having the same group of students and being so team oriented allowed them to form a close relationship with their students and bring about that sense of belonging. The teachers felt they got to know the students personally. Glen confirmed this when he said that one of this teachers makes it a point to keep in contact with his mom and seeks ways for him to stay on track both personally and academically. He noted that

She talks about me to my mom and she helps me to get my grades right and stuff like that and she helps me to do better things. Like if I have a problem I would go to her and she would fix it. One time I was about to fight and went to her and she helped me resolve it and I didn't fight. I can trust her.

Summer feels that her teachers show a personal interest, making her feel she belongs. She replied:

Like they ask about how our day is going and some teacher do not care if you do your homework or not but our teachers they ask why you don't have it and stuff like that. When they like talk to us, they talk how we are going to need this in the future.

This, to Summer, made her feel that the teachers care because they did not just reprimand students for not having an assignment. They took the time to find out why. She expressed really liking the teachers on her team and valuing their opinions

All of the students in the study participated in at least one school activity.

One student mentioned

Being involved in sports made me feel part of the school because I was new to the school and after I played in a few games and did well people knew my name and started talking to me more.

The results of this research provided evidence that students close relationships with teachers and peers in addition to participating in school activities were factors that caused them to feel they belonged to their school. This information was the springboard for the next questions of how much did the fact that this middle school was one that looped and teamed affect those middle school students' sense of belonging.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The data for this study of students, teachers, and administrators engaged in looping and teaming at the middle school level consisted of (a) in-depth interviews, (b) observations of students in looping and teaming classrooms and various school activities, (c) observations of teachers in looping and teaming classrooms and team meetings, (d) focus group interviews through videotaping, and (e) other documents collected in the research process.

I was most interested in the perspectives of the students in the looping and teaming process. Through this analysis and collection of data, I discovered the students', teachers', and administrators' feelings, ideas, and attitudes about this design. Since the focus of this research is the students, I organized the data beginning with the students, then teachers, and lastly the administrators. Emergent themes from each methodology are discussed in this chapter.

Students

Student voice was the most important aspect of this study. As stated earlier, I wanted to hear the voices of those that had been silenced far too long. Throughout this qualitative study, my goal was to learn more about the world of these middle school students, their sense of belonging, social identities, understanding, and values of school

within the school structure of teaming and looping. I share in this study what I have gleaned from student, teacher, and administrator responses, opinions, and observed behaviors from the various methods of triangulation used to collect data for this study.

In-depth Interviews

In general, the students were at ease during the interviews. It only took a couple of them some time to warm up to me but as the interview progressed, they relaxed and became more involved in the process. I developed a relationship with the students through my classroom visits and involvement in school activities. During the initial interview, I started with personal questions to allow the students time to get comfortable with answering questions by asking them about their age, hobbies outside of school, and where they saw themselves in 10 years.

The emergent themes (see Figure 2) from the interviews set the framework that I worked with as I reviewed the remaining data. The prevalent themes were identified as follows:

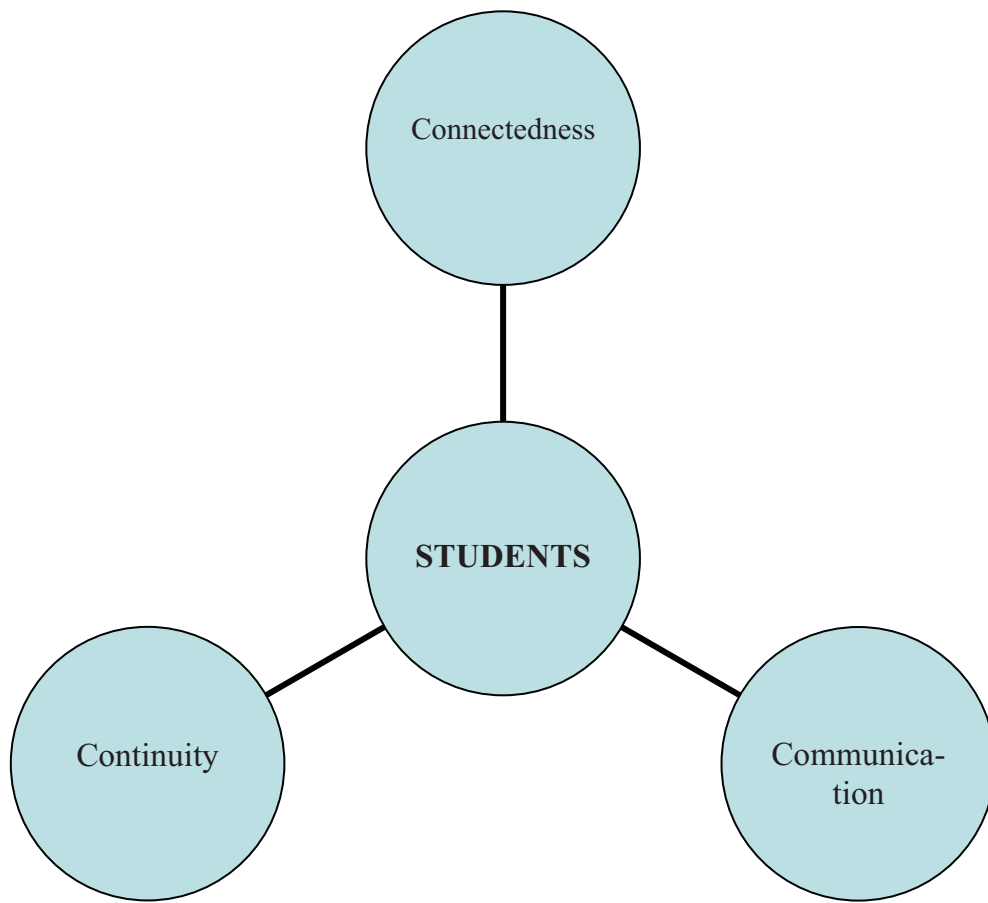


Figure 1 Student Emergent Themes—Rural Middle School Students' Sense of Belonging

1. Connectedness is the students' relationships with teachers and peers. Because of looping and teaming, eighth-grade students remained with the same group of teachers and students for both seventh and eighth grade. A majority of the students were favorable towards looping and saw the benefits. They all expressed feeling a connection with their current teams. The strong bond formed with teachers and peers was evident and noted by the students. They all felt connectedness was shown when their teachers were able to know they were having a bad day simply by their demeanor; the term they used was having the ability to "read them" and knew when they were exhibiting unusual behavior. Students felt connected when they realized their teachers pushed them by holding high expectations for them because they knew their ability. The eighth graders spoke of teachers being more rigorous during year 2. Students also spoke of having at least one teacher on their team that they could go to if they were in trouble. A majority of the students spoke about teachers knowing when they were good at something making them feel connected because their teachers would ask for their assistance when there was a project or assignment geared towards their area of specialty. All of the students felt connected because they felt comfortable being themselves at school.

2. Communication is where the students mentioned enjoying their ability to understand their individual teachers. They knew their teachers' teaching styles and they felt the teachers knew their learning styles. The students felt connected because they not only knew their teachers' and teams' expectations but they were

a part of the process. They felt because they had been with them on the team and looped that those expectations were clearly communicated. This is essential for black students that may have cultures that go against the cultural norms of school. Additionally, when they felt a strong connection with their teachers and peers they were more comfortable communicating in class. The eighth-grade students mentioned not having a problem seeking clarification if they did not understand something, but seventh graders were more apt to communicate initially in class when they were called on by the teacher or were confident they knew the answer. Most of the students felt they belonged because their teachers also took one-on-one time to assist them with assignments that could possibly help to assure their passing of classes or they pulled them aside to check on personal issues. Overall just having things clearly communicated to them so all involved had the same goal was essential in their feelings of belonging.

3. Continuity in having the same teachers and classmates gave the students a feeling of belonging in knowing that someone was there for them. Teaming gave them a feeling they were not alone and creating a sense of family. All of the students expressed they would go to one of the teachers on their team if they had a problem and felt confident that the teacher could help problem solve. Having an advocate for them within the building was essential. The eighth-graders also expressed starting the school year with less anxiety than the seventh-graders because of looping. But, because of teaming and having that consistency,

the seventh graders felt that it did not take long for them to ease into the norms of middle school life.

While it is not possible to include every spoken word or reply in this chapter, I have carefully reviewed the transcripts of the in-depth interviews, observations, and focus groups and coded patterns and differences in looping and teaming experiences to illuminate the students' lived meaning of looping and teaming settings. I quote specific interview responses to give authentic voice to the participants and in essence tell their story about looping and teaming at the middle school level. Finally, to ensure confidentiality and at the same time maintain a personal approach, I allowed the students to create pseudonyms for themselves. Allowing the students to create their pseudonyms gave them a sense of ownership in this research process as well as allowing them to feel they could speak freely under an alias. I feel that each participant's story is so unique and has merit that I have included a synopsis of each of the seven students in the study. The seven stories are as follows.

Keisha

Keisha was a 14-year-old girl with a very strong personality. She was being raised by a single mom and has an older brother. She sat down in the interview and immediately began talking; shy was apparently not a part of her vocabulary. She observed my bag and remarked that she too wanted to one day become a member of a sorority. Her demeanor was one that was very relaxed and honest and this was evident in her responses. Her teachers reported that she was a B/C student but capable of being an A student. One of her teachers remarked, "She is a very bright girl" and that her grades had improved

tremendously from the previous year. Her teachers noted a huge improvement in her behavior from seventh to eighth grade. Grade seven was very tumultuous for her as she was dealing with various situations both inside and outside of school that had an impact on her attitude as well as academic achievement. For Keisha, during her eighth-grade year she decided to make changes in her behavior for the better. She had performed better all around and expressed that she wanted to improve and did. Her teachers backed up this change in her behavior. The continuity of having the same teachers was key in Keisha making strides toward improvement. Her teachers met her during her seventh-grade year in several one-on-one teacher-student conferences to work with Keisha on taking responsibility for her actions. The teachers did not see any improvements in her behavior until the following year. Some of her change came from her conferences with her teachers and some from just her maturing and realizing that as an eighth grader, “We have to be role models now.” Keisha was one who spoke her mind and did not care what others thought. Concerning friendships, she did respond that her circle of friends were people she met in the seventh grade, “We just got to know one another last year.” She felt friendships were important in belonging. When asked if she could be herself at school she said with an attitude, “I ain’t trying to impress nobody really ‘cause they don’t do nothing for me.” This statement spoke volumes about Keisha’s personality. From my observations of her, she gave the impression that she was lackadaisical and did not get worried or anxious easily about anything. In her classes, she was always leaning back in her chair or propped up in some manner against a wall. She volunteered often in many of her classes but commented that it depends because “I have my moments.” Keisha’s

English teacher is her favorite because “she spoils me.” She noted that this English teacher is normally harsh with students and she knows that is how she is so they get along well. During my interviews, she was very outspoken and never hesitated to answer a question. The transition to eighth grade was smooth for her as she felt more comfortable with her teachers and made the decision to make some changes to improve. Being the social butterfly, Keisha expressed not having as much fun at school as she did last year because the eighth graders that were “crunk” were gone. Although she improved from her seventh-grade year, by the second nine weeks of school she reported having been suspended twice for fighting girls on another team. After this statement, she quickly responded that she was not going to get into anymore fights this year because she did not want to be sent to the alternative school. Keisha felt that she was more mature than a lot of her peers which was one of the reasons why she felt she had problems with the girls. According to Keisha, she liked looping because “You know your teachers more and what they are and are not picky about.” She felt looping gave her a sense of belonging because “They [teachers] like know my personality and I don’t know. I can be serious and then I can just joke around and not be serious but they know me and know that when it come down to it I am really trying.” Keisha made the statement that her computer teacher came off as mean, but Keisha understood that her teacher was not mean but “pushing me to work harder in her class because wants me to try because she knows I can do it.”

Ray

Ray, a 14-year-old, eighth-grade student, was small in stature but had a large personality. With his big personality and small frame he was well liked by his peers. Ray

came from a two-parent household with two younger siblings. He expressed that playing in the NFL was his main goal in life. Ray was the only eighth-grade student in this study that did not loop with his team. Ray was on another team for seventh grade and opted to loop off. He said there were personal reasons for this choice. He said “We [teachers] just didn’t get along” so he moved to Team C for his eighth-grade year. When asked about belonging to the new team that was together for the second year, he expressed how he did not feel like an outsider. Ray was a C student. Academically, he struggled with reading according to his teachers, but he did not go to learning lab for assistance with his reading because all of the students in the lab were black boys and he felt strongly that this was racial profiling. He came across as a bit militant in his thinking and not wanting to feel that his race was a factor for anything in which he was involved. However, he did attend tutoring twice a week after school for math so he was not opposed to seeking help when he felt it was justified. In the focus group interview, Ray was very vocal in his belief that the major reasons he felt that he belonged at Westlake Middle School were because he did fairly well academically, athletically, and socially. He was very active, being a member of both the track and football team, academically he maintained at least a C average in all of his classes, and socially he got along well with both his teachers and peers. He noted that his favorite teacher was his English teacher because “She babies me.” When asked how he defined belonging he said it was “fitting in.” Although Ray did not loop with this team, he still felt close to his teachers and teammates and had a sense of belonging. According to him, looping could be both good and bad. It was good because “Your teachers know you real good” and it was bad because “Your teachers

know you real good.” He liked that his teachers knew him and that he knew his teachers and felt that they pushed him to do well because they knew his ability. He jokingly talked about when teachers know you well they know what buttons to push and you cannot get away with anything and he noted “They know they can make a phone call.”

Jasmine

Jasmine was a 13-year-old adolescent who was a work in progress. She was not a huge behavior problem, but struggled with academics according to her teachers. She had a tendency to decide what she would and would not do regardless of the consequences, which typically resulted in her receiving a low grade on an assignment. Her teachers noted that they discovered that she had difficulty with managing her time and often allowed her work to pile up and then she became overwhelmed. The problem in school was when she went through these up and down periods and simply would not attempt to complete her assignments, she would then shut down and do nothing when it became too much for her to handle. Jasmine was a D student although she was capable of B’s and C’s, according to her teachers. Her teachers did not feel that she was one who made strides toward excellence. She was also very athletic, playing a variety of sports from softball to track. She tried out for the basketball team, but did not make the team because of her inability to follow directions. When she found out this was one of the reasons for her not making the team, her teachers spoke of what a change they saw in her for the better. Initially, she had problems adjusting in the seventh grade, but her teachers felt that she had shown progress by her eighth- grade year. Because seventh grade was such an adjustment, having that continuity of teachers in year 2 was essential in her sense of

belonging. According to her teachers, Jasmine was a leader in her own right but she was just coming to realize the power that she had and how it could be used for good. She noted, "I get along with everybody so I guess that is why they listen to me." When she spoke of her teachers and their interest in her, she said, "They all know you and motivate you to do good." She also said they take a personal interest in you and she gave the example of her English teacher when she noted, "Cause like I'm not normally quiet in her class and if I am she'll like take me out of class and talk to me to make sure everything is okay." Jasmine realized that her teachers knew she and classmates enough to know when they were exhibiting abnormal behavior from their students they took the time to make sure they were okay. She also felt that having the same teacher for two years brought some level of comfort with knowing their expectations. Jasmine mentioned that she actually looked forward to school her eighth-grade year. She expressed how she and that same English teacher did not get along when she was in the seventh-grade year but by the eighth-grade "I just know her better." This seems to be another positive for looping because adolescents change drastically from grade seven to eight, so for middle level teachers to have students during that transformative period is crucial. Just like Jasmine and her English teacher, a teacher and student that did not get along within the first year would be able to see the change the next year and both teacher and student would be able understand one another and therefore have a better relationship. Jasmine was an example of a student that realized how her behavior in the seventh grade was not beneficial to her and she made a choice to change. She also said she liked school "much better" her eighth-grade year, "Cause I'm much better (inflection in her voice is full of pride) in

school and I'm not in a lot of mess this year [with other students]." Looping and teaming was beneficial to her well-being because she stated that she was not nervous about starting school and liked having her team because "Well, you're not by yourself and you have people to help you out." Her remarks about looping were that "It's easier on me." When asked if she would loop again she said, "Yes, 'cause when you get a new teacher they probably do something different than your teacher did before and like you probably won't understand it that good."

Josh

Josh was an average 14-year-old student that enjoyed sports and dreamed of one day playing in the National Basketball Association (NBA). He played basketball and football for his school. He was one with whom the teachers reported seeing tremendous strides in his growth from seventh to eighth grade. Josh was large in stature but very mild mannered and quiet spoken. According to his teachers, he kept his head in his locker most of his seventh-grade year crying. Why was he crying? For no reason at all that his teachers could get out of him. To say that Josh was scared in the seventh grade would be an understatement. He was like an ostrich, only instead of the ground he used his locker. His size did not afford him the advantage of not being noticed. Josh was not very talkative throughout the interview process and getting answers from him proved to be challenging. He was very reserved. To give an example, when I asked him one question his response was "Um...(long pause)...I swear I don't know." Enough said. Most of what I learned about Josh was gleaned from observing him with his peers in his classes, other school activities, and simply asking his teachers. Josh's teachers stated that he was not a

behavior problem but they did indicate that he was lazy and would participate orally in class discussions and assignments but he would not follow through to complete the assignment at home if there was cause to do so. He had a very inert personality and did not seem to be rattled by much, but his seventh-grade behavior of sticking his head in his locker and crying did not match with the young man interviewed in the eighth grade. His teachers reported that he worked in cycles. He would do well in history and math for a week and allow his English and science grades to drop. Then he would do well in English and science and allow the other subjects to drop. There was no consistency with Josh. When asked about why he did not turn in all of his assignments he said, "I forget." And he left it at that. He was unassuming and when asked about his teachers said he had no clue if his teachers took a personal interest in him or not. He did say that he felt closer to his teachers this year because "They got nicer this year." One can assume this is because he felt he knew them and that may be why they seemed nicer to him, which directly links with continuity and connections. He also stated that if he had a serious problem at school he would go to his English teacher. When asked why her, he said, "Let me think...cause she'll try to stop me." This statement says a lot about what Josh thought because his English teacher was the toughest teacher on his team. She had a reputation for being tough on students and holding them to higher standards than most and being very firm in her methods of disciplining students. The fact that he would go to her said that he knew she would help him think through the situation and not make hasty decisions that he would later regret. Seeing how traumatic Josh's seventh-grade year was for him with his mimicking an ostrich, it was rather revealing that he said he was not nervous about

starting his eighth-grade year, but he said it was because “We had the same teachers and you know how they act.”

Mike

Mike was a typical seventh-grade boy who enjoyed playing sports for recreation. His favorite thing to do at school was go to physical education class. He said he enjoyed playing basketball and football although he did not play any organized sports, he simply enjoyed playing them at home with his friends and one day dreamed of being a basketball sensation. He was a very upbeat young man with a glowing personality. He had a beautiful smile that lit up the room. From the time he sat down for the interview, until he left, he never stopped smiling. Mike was a C/D student. His teachers stated that he could do the work but he did not and lacked the support at home with no one there to push him. Behaviorally he was a good student who, as his teachers reported, “has a conscience.” He would talk occasionally but once a teacher got on to him, he would stop immediately. The team was his continuity and stability because his teacher remarked that he did not have it at home. He was withdrawn from school to go live with a relative early in the school year but returned after only two days. He did admit that how well he performed in school was somewhat impacted by his friends and classmates. When I inquired how, he was unable to give a specific reason. He was a very social young man and remarked he liked to come to school “Because I get to see my friends every day.” One of his major focuses was his friendships and maintaining those. His need for social interaction spilled over into his classes because he noted that his favorite teacher was his science teacher because “She’s nice and she lets us do group activities.” I asked if she was the only

teacher on his team that allowed them to work in groups and he said no, but she allowed them to do it more often than the others. When asked about his team overall, he reported that he felt closer to a couple of his teachers more so this year because “They talk to me individually.” He gave the example of one teacher and stated, “She looks at our grades and will pull us aside and talk to us.” He also noted that if he had a serious problem he would talk to his English teacher. He could not come up with a reason why, he just felt that she would be a good person to help him with his problems. Starting seventh grade, Mike admitted to being a little nervous, but he felt good about school. He remarked that he felt he belonged “a little” last year at his old school but he felt he belonged more at Westlake Middle. He said he could not pinpoint an exact reason why, but it was just a feeling. As a seventh grader, I asked if he was going to loop with his teachers and he said yes because “My teachers are comfortable to be around and so next year will be good.”

Holmes

Holmes was a very big 14-year-old boy, one might say he resembled a teddy bear. He was tall and solid. He had a slow walk so it could be seen how this would transfer to the football field, which may be part of the reason he did not make the team. His not making the football team did not discourage him because he expressed trying out for the basketball team the next year and continuing to play sports for recreational purposes. He expressed wanting to one day become a college athlete at the local university. He had a radiant smile with a boyish grin, but socially he was a misfit. The young women consumed his thoughts and this often landed him in trouble because he would make inappropriate comments to them. In my interview with him, he was very respectful and

honest in his responses. His grandparents were raising him and I got the sense of an old soul, apparently too old. He was at an awkward stage in his adolescence where he did not know how to approach young women so he would say something out of line and get turned down cold, maybe even hit physically. Because of his raging hormones, he did not do well academically because his teachers said he could not stay focused in addition to not having support at home to assist him. If he was inattentive and missed understanding something in class, he had no one at home to help him. In his interview, he said that some of his work was hard and confusing and his mom and others did not know what to do with it, so they told him to try his best. His friends were often a distraction for him as well and he admitted that they sometimes “keep up noise and all that” which caused him to not pay attention and do his work. It was evident through his responses and those of his teachers that his peers easily influenced Holmes. He was harmless, but he was definitely a follower. Holmes was new to the school system so he was especially nervous at the onset of school. He feared that he would get lost and not have any friends. He quickly made friends and became comfortable. Teaming helped with forming those friendships quickly because they did so much together as a team. He felt that his teachers knew him and took a personal interest in him. When I asked how he knew he replied, “They just know me.” Holmes expressed feeling a sense of safety in knowing that next year he will have the same teachers and students on his team. He felt close to his team and his teachers helped him with assignments to make sure he did not fail and he equated their helping him with caring and getting to know him. The one thing that really stood out about Holmes was his response to the belonging questions. He stated that he felt as if he

was part of his school but he only made mention of his teachers caring about him and his education. He made no mention of peers, which is a first for this study and others as well. Being the social misfit that he was, I could see how his teachers would be that necessary support system for him. He loved the idea of staying with his teachers next year because as he said, “I feel drawn to this team.”

Dwayne

Dwayne was an above-average 12-year-old adolescent that was referred to as an all-around good student by his teachers. Although he was a good student, his teachers noted that his was still the typical sneaky little seventh-grade boy. He made excellent grades and was very active in his church and local community. When asked about his favorite things to do at school, his responses were reading stories and playing on the computer. Wow! This just confirmed the frame of mind of this adolescent young man. His teachers remarked that he was a joy to have in class. Dwayne was also involved in numerous school activities such as basketball, Builder’s Club, and student council. He reported to have many friends at school both on his team and on other teams and enjoyed the day to day of school. When asked about the importance of education, he stated that he felt school was important because “My momma and daddy always told me that education can take you far.” When asked the question about classmates affecting his academic performance, he responded to that question with a resounding, “No, Ma’am.” He did not allow others to deter him from his work and I observed this one day during his Advanced English class. When others around him were finishing their assignments and began talking and playing, he ignored them and continued to complete his assignment. As an

incoming seventh grader this school term, he did admit to being “kind of sort of” nervous about the school year. He pointed out that he was both excited and nervous about being in middle school, getting to change classes, meeting new teachers and students. Dwayne was a very intelligent young man and spoke of the beginning of his seventh-grade year being challenging at first because he started in a new program at Westlake where they placed him in Algebra 1 with eighth graders because of his high standardized test scores in math. Dwayne was one of 12 students in this class, but after the first semester, he opted out because he felt he was not ready for the work. He still said that math is favorite subject because he is good at it. Perhaps being a seventh grader and being placed off team in a class with eighth graders was probably a little intimidating for this young man. Dwayne had a very quiet confidence about him and the fact that he said his favorite teacher is one who is “calm and only gets mad if children act real bad and try to do it on purpose,” says that he seeks this same quality in others. He thought that looping with his teacher next year would be “fine.” He noted that he never had the same teachers for two years so he says he did not know how it will be and apparently did not want to speculate. His teachers stated that he is one who was probably not affected by looping because he was the type of student that would adapt to any situation and he had a very stable home life. Dwayne felt a part of his school and in his own words, “I feel comfortable here and I’m joining a lot of things that they have set up here.” If given the option of looping he said that would be a hard choice but he would loop because “It is something I have never done before.”

I found it interesting that the eighth-grade students all mentioned during their interviews one particular teacher as either their favorite teacher or the one that they would seek if they were in trouble. This English teacher had the reputation for being a strong disciplinarian. She had a love/hate relationship with most of her students until they got to know her and they all seemed to realize that she was hard on them but they respected that. The research about middle schools often alluded to adolescents “craving” structure and the fact that they all gravitated toward the same teacher speaks to this. She was definitely consistent and provided that structure within her classroom.

All students, except Keisha, said they felt they belonged, and her feelings were based on her relationships with the students and not teachers. She stated that she respected her teachers, but mentioned how she had conflicts with students, mainly girls. After observing Keisha and speaking with other teachers and peers, I came to discover that Keisha had difficulty establishing friendships with girls because of her promiscuous behavior during the last school term. Girls are not as forgiving as boys and they hold on to things, so from my observation, Keisha was struggling to come from under the reputation she created for herself in previous years.

For the in-depth interviews, I used primarily open-ended questions that revealed a lot about the students’ feelings of belongingness, with regards to looping and teaming from their perspective. The themes uncovered are these students’ experiences, not some computer-generated generalization. The themes from the student interviews became the framework for the analysis of the rest of the data as I looked for similarities among teachers and administrators.

Focus Group

Seven middle school students were present during the focus group interviews. This method was used to see the dynamics of students answering questions with their peers versus individually. During the focus group meeting the eighth-grade students tended to be more verbal than the seventh-grade students. The seventh graders would answer questions primarily when asked directly by the researcher or the eighth-grade students. The interview took place in the school library during their club meeting time so it did not disrupt their class time.

With focus groups the researcher is able to seek answers to questions in relation to the group dynamics. It can be ascertained that one would get different information as a result of having all students in one setting. The one theme that came out of the focus groups but not during the individual interviews was how sports made the students feel they belonged. Additionally, another new insight was the fact that the eighth-grade students stated how much harder their teachers were the second year. They felt that the workload during their second year of looping was much heavier and more intense than the first year. They said their teachers told them that they were “trying to get them prepared for high school.” Although they received more work and the difficulty level increased, they still felt the transition from seventh to eighth grade was smooth.

When the subject of relationships emerged, the students spoke of the benefits of having the same teachers:

“Know what they like.”

“Know what they are ‘ticky’ about.”

“Know how they want their work to be done.”

“Know what they get mad about.”

The seventh graders spoke about looking forward to knowing their teachers better like the eighth graders did. The middle schoolers also made mention of strong bonds formed because of looping and teaming, but the downside for two of the eighth graders was seeing the same group of students everyday could sometimes become “too much.” The girls were especially vocal about how “messy” other girls can be when confined to one space, like the way their school team corners were set up. The boys, as stated by the girls, do not have that problem because “they just ‘dap’ one another up and move on.” I must say they were insightful when stating that one cannot allow “everybody to be your friend.” The students learned that some people are “associates” and not “friends.” They in turn warned that one should not use the term friend too loosely. In previous sections, I mentioned how adolescents need to learn about life lessons and skills that would help them in the real world. How to determine the nature of relationships is an important lesson for adolescents to learn. There are many adults that still have yet to internalize this.

The conflicts the students felt with looping and teaming were all social. They wanted more of an opportunity to interact with students from other teams. One of the students alluded to feeling like a trapped rat having to stay in her team corner all day, every day but this was the same young lady that had issues with promiscuous behavior with the boys so her teachers felt teaming was most beneficial to her and them so they could “keep an eye on her.” A few also indicated that they would like to have more

freedom, but with adolescents and their raging hormones this is a plus that their teachers are able to know exactly where they are and what they are doing at all times. In essence, what the students see as a negative can oftentimes be a positive for teachers and the well-being of the students. Black students are social beings and teaming and looping settings for them can be viewed as limiting their ability to meet others, while these constructs are beneficial as they go through such a transitional period in their lives emotionally, physically, and mentally. Even with the few complaints they stated about the social aspect of their school, in the end they all felt an overall sense of belonging. So, the black students wanted the opportunity to be more social yet at the same time they expressed not wanting to go to another team permanently, just occasionally.

Observations

The third methodology used to gain access and learn more about sense of belonging was observing classrooms and school activities. I wanted to see what students experienced in the looping and teaming classrooms throughout the school year to gain a better understanding of their environment. I took detailed field notes from my observations in the classrooms from both teams (Team C and N).

The atmosphere in Team C's corner was completely different than that of Team N at the beginning of school. For Team C it was a day of reestablishing procedures and handing out the usual first week of school forms that must go home whereas Team N was filled with apprehension and nervousness with teachers trying to put faces with names and make certain all were accounted for and in the right place. Day two for Team C was business as usual with students beginning lessons. Team N was working with building

community by playing name games and establishing procedures. For Team C it was a reunion of sorts except for the few new students that were brought into the fold with ease.

As the school year progressed, I entered the classrooms and focused solely on the students participating in the study and their interactions with their peers and teachers. From the classroom observations, I could clearly see how the eighth-grade students volunteered at the beginning of the school year, but as the year progressed and the seventh-grade students became more comfortable with their teams, they too became verbal in class. All of the eighth-grade teachers noted how each of the participants volunteered in class and were willing participants.

Each of the students in this study is their own person and therefore observing them in classes with the same teacher showed how it was the relationships that students had formed with their teachers and peers that allowed them to thrive in a looping and teaming environment. Team C teachers have permanent tables for students except for the math teacher. During my observations, Jasmine and Ray volunteered the most in their classes. I could not keep up with how much they raised their hands or were called on by their teachers. They also interacted a lot with their peers around them. Josh was verbal from day to day. Some days he was more upbeat than others but when called on he would respond to the best of his ability. Keisha was verbal with her classmates more so than with her teachers. She would occasionally raise her hand for an answer but did not hesitate to seek clarification for something she did not understand. Before I began my observations, I wanted to see how much teacher-student interaction there was and how interested the students were by looking at their body language. The eighth graders

exhibited different body language in different classes. They all enjoyed math and sat up and were very participatory. In English, there was much of the same behavior. History and science varied depending on the lesson and activities. I read this to show that although the students may not have an interest in the subject, the relationship with the teacher made a difference. The math and English teachers on Team C are the favorites of most students on that team and the teachers are total opposites. The English teacher was firm and set boundaries. The math teacher, however, had a more relaxed classroom environment.

The seventh graders exhibited behavior similar to that of the eighth graders. Their body language exhibited that they were attentive with no heads on desk or hands under chins when they were in the classes. The difference in the two grades was in classroom participation. The seventh graders had to be called on and would respond to the teachers in class but they were slow to volunteer. They also expressed forming a stronger relationship with the teacher and making those connections. They all expressed enjoying math, English, and science on Team N with the difference being they expressed enjoying English and science because of the teacher and math because of the content. The science teacher is the one that does the most group work, which students stated was a plus. The teachers on this team, except for math, also have their desks arranged in permanent groups. The English teacher on Team N is one who is very firm yet makes class enjoyable for students.

The emergent themes from student interviews, focus groups, and observations were apparent. The students all appeared to accept the looping and teaming arrangement

although Josh mentioned wanting to get to know what other teachers were like and Keisha wanted to meet students on other teams, but at the end of the interview, they all saw the benefits of looping and teaming and enjoyed their experiences. In their classrooms and in interacting with their teammates none of them exhibited negative body language or showed any sign of disdain for their situation.

The transition from seventh to eighth grade was smooth for the students. The teachers were able to ease into the first days with little or no difficulty. Students were given a refresher of the rules and procedures and it was back to business as usual for the looped teams. For the looped students, there was a comfort in knowing what to expect from their teachers and a feeling of closeness. They felt that looping was easier on them.

In conclusion, all of the students saw the positive effects of looping and teaming on their schooling and because of these constructs it aided in their sense of belonging. According to student interviews, focus groups, and observations, the students sense of belonging was based on those close relationships with their teachers and the seventh graders were anticipating staying with their teachers and having this same feeling as the eighth graders. The students who looped enjoyed the fact that their teachers knew their individual personalities. These positive relationships were evident in classroom observations, with teachers joking with students while learning as well as students being actively engaged.

Teachers

Although the primary focus of this study was the students' perspectives, teacher interviews, both individual and in focus groups, were conducted. Both teams were

comprised of five interdisciplinary teachers. Team N had an inclusion teacher, while Team C did not because they had no inclusion students on their team. I conducted the focus group interview during the spring semester of school. In-depth interviews were also conducted with one teacher from each team in the fall and spring. On both teams, the math teacher was chosen for the individual interview. From my shadowing the administrator and informal observations, I found that the math teachers were the ones that had the most difficulty with looping. The teachers were asked a set of questions as outlined in Appendix E. The interviews were taped and transcribed to analyze the teachers' responses. I made an assumption that what I did not get from the individual interviews I could follow up with in the group setting where they may be a bit more forthcoming with responses. I also collected and reviewed artifacts such as email correspondence from teachers, personal commentary from informal interviews, field notes, and journals.

Interviews

The teachers were very responsive in working with me on this study. Six of the 11 taught at Westlake Middle when I was a member of the faculty. As stated previously, I already had a prior positive working relationship with the teams of teachers in addition to their being intrigued by my topic and the process as I shared my data with them throughout the course of the study.

Observations

I observed all of the teachers on the teams collectively and individually during their team meetings and class time. During the observations of the meetings I primarily wanted to see the focus of the meetings and if they handled institutional matters or the business of learning. The teams met daily. Team meeting time was used to meet with parents, conduct TST meetings, bring students in for individual conferences, and plan across-the-curriculum lessons, among other things that relate to their team. Each team in the building was allowed to be flexible with their scheduling as the school had no bells to dictate time for them. For example, they could rearrange their schedule occasionally for a child that did not do well with math in the morning, so they could reverse the schedule and it would not affect any other group in the building. This helped because as the teachers stated, “At the end of the day you do not see them at their best, and they don’t see you at yours.”

The themes that emerged from this particular aspect of the data collection closely resembled those identified for the students (see Figure 3). The themes of connectedness, communication, and continuity emerged just the same as students’ themes. I will describe each of the thematic insights gained from the teaming and looping teachers in this study.

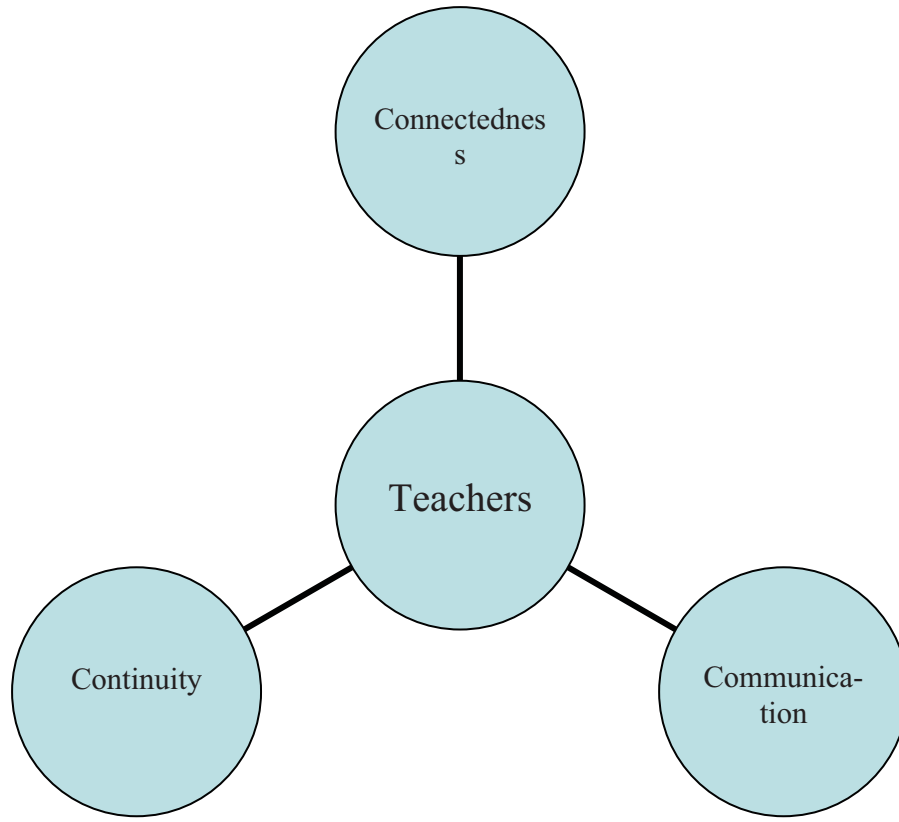


Figure 2 Teacher Themes—Rural Middle School Students' Sense of Belonging

1. Connectedness emerged in both focus group meetings and during individual interviews. The topic strong relationships surfaced. The teachers felt the students had a strong sense of belonging because of those relationships established. One teacher remarked that, "Each child has an advocate for them." Students knew they had someone they could go to if they needed and this not only gave them a sense of belonging but a feeling of safety as well. Both teams of teachers felt strongly that the structures of teaming and looping helped to forge these bonds. One teacher each on Team C and N talked about students feeling so close to them that they will start calling you "mom." It seems to be forgotten that a majority of the teachers on these teams are of a different race than the students. Team C gave the example of students in the first of year of looping being not as willing to share information but by year two they gave information freely and without inquiry from their teachers. The teachers saw students feeling that their team was a family and when someone did something or threatened to do something that could potentially harm that family structure, they felt compelled to let it be known and were comfortable doing so by year two in the looping process. The teachers stated that students formed such a unit that if you got onto one student about anything they would stick together to help the other out. This was seen as both a positive and a negative, but more often than not the teams of teachers saw it as a positive because the students needed that feeling of family at school. They felt it was like a school within a school. They also noted that the biggest difference was in the first and second days of school during the second

loop. The eighth-grade teachers said, “We aren’t like the seventh-grade group trying to get to know names. We know who struggled with reading and math and whose momma to call.”

2. Communication was crucial in the ability to know a student’s strengths and weakness, which helped both the teacher and the student. The students felt comfortable communicating ideas to their teachers and seeking assistance. The teachers were able to communicate to students their desire to push the students to work harder and set high expectations. The communication among the students, teachers, and parents is greater in this type of school structure. Teachers reported an increase in student participation. When students are comfortable communicating openly, then they are more engaged in learning. The educator James Britton said that the one doing the talking is the one doing the learning. In addition to speaking out in class, Team C remarked that, “Group work is a cinch; they will work together regardless of race, sex, or class. They are a cohesive group.” They did not have to worry about avoiding placing certain students in a group with one another. They felt the races mixed well and were able to have open and honest communication with one another about any topic. Communication was also beneficial for teachers in keeping hormones under control because the teachers felt that the students saw themselves so much as a family that it would be like dating a sibling when they thought about someone on the same team. Teams N and C also noted that for students like Holmes and Keisha who had issues with sexual misconduct that teaming was especially

helpful because, as Team N stated it, “There is always someone watching him; we work together as a team.” The teachers said that, “The first year you get used to them and they get use to you and you learn a lot about them, by year two it is like a whole new set of kids.” The teachers felt that year two they simply reminded students of the rules and procedures at the onset of the year and then they moved on and began with their lessons.

3. Continuity is something teachers felt looping and teaming helped with in relation to the students and parents. Team N noted that those students without a stable home environment benefitted most from this type of school structure mainly because of the collaboration among the teachers, which led to greater continuity for the students. Team N spoke about Mike and how the team was his continuity because he did not receive it at home. An example of this was when Mike was withdrawn from Westlake in order to go live with another relative only to return and re-enroll after two days. The teachers also saw an increase in parental involvement the second year of looping, which is usually declining by middle school. The teachers felt because they looped and parents knew what to expect they were able to have a positive relationship with parents. This continuity with the parents helped the teams collaborate with parents to seek solutions to best work with the students and when the students saw how well their parents and teachers interact that also gave them a greater sense of belonging at school. With curriculum, the teachers reported that teaming made continuity across subjects manageable. They were able to work with their colleagues and

find out what was working for them with students in their rooms and this helped them to meet the students' individual needs. They could learn strategies that worked in other subjects with specific students and try those same strategies in their classrooms. The teachers felt that because of looping they were better able to differentiate instruction, thus communicating better with students. One teacher indicated, "It makes differentiating instruction a breeze."

The teachers and students were alike. The teachers felt that having the students for more than one year allowed students to view the teachers as a third parent or significant adult that they could count on. This all enhances the student's sense of belonging. The teachers noted that their black students made no mention of their race and it simply was not an issue once the black students got to know them. They did say that as white teachers they have to work past the "race card" because that's the first thing students will throw out when they are angry, but if the teacher continues to work and build that trust, race becomes obsolete.

Administrator

The third participant in this study was the administrator. I did not intend to collect data originally from Principal Dewitt, but as I immersed myself in the school, I had several opportunities for both formal and informal meetings with him about looping and teaming and its impact on the black students in his building. As I reviewed my data, I realized that much of the information I gained from these formal and informal meetings could inform this study.

Principal Dewitt had been an administrator at Westlake Middle for over 16 years. He was committed to middle school education and served on the board for the Mississippi Association for Middle Level Education (MAMLE). In addition, he has been honored as principal of the year and Westlake Middle School had continuously been recognized as a model middle school in the state of Mississippi under his leadership. The teachers at his school constantly boasted to others about his strong leadership and his dedication to helping middle school students. From my years of teaching at Westlake Middle, I can say that he understands this age group of students and he made certain that the teachers in his school building were also knowledgeable enough to handle this delicate population well.

Interviews and Observations

There were three separate occasions where I either interviewed or purposefully observed the principal. I devoted an entire day to shadowing Principal Dewitt as he met with visitors from another middle school in the state with an interest in implementing looping at their school. I also attended a community forum where parents of Westlake Middle School students sent in questions or concerns prior to the forum for the administrators to answer.

Westlake Middle has become a model for many schools across the state. I was permitted to shadow Principal Dewitt when a faculty group from Randolph Middle School in a school district in the southeastern portion of Mississippi came to observe and ask questions about the process Westlake used when they started the looping process within their school. The principal started the meeting by giving the staff from Randolph

Middle background information about the history of looping and his thought process behind implementing this structure within his school. Teachers from various teams throughout the school also came to share testimonies and answer questions from a teacher's perspective for Randolph's faculty members present at the meeting. The Randolph team had a day of meeting with administrators and teachers in addition to touring the school grounds and observing the day-to-day routine of a looping middle school. The shadowing was beneficial as a researcher to listen to and observe what the teams of teachers and administrators from Westlake Middle would share with those interested in implementing this structure within their school. The Westlake faculty shared both the pros and cons of looping.

The next observation was the community forum. The community forum took place after school in the library at Westlake. Parents and concerned community members were present. Westlake's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) president presided over the forum. The administrators responded to questions sent ahead of time, as well as a few questions that came from the group in attendance. The questions ranged from concerns about the rigor of the school curriculum to the new state mandate that all students must have at least 30 minutes of physical activity each day to looping. Many of the parents present had seventh-grade students enrolled in the school and just wanted a clear understanding of the school and its policies and procedures.

The themes that emerged from this point in the data collection coincide with the themes identified from the students and teachers (see Figure 4). Surprisingly, the

administrator's perspective was not different from the students' and teachers'. The administrator showed themes of connectedness, communication, and continuity.

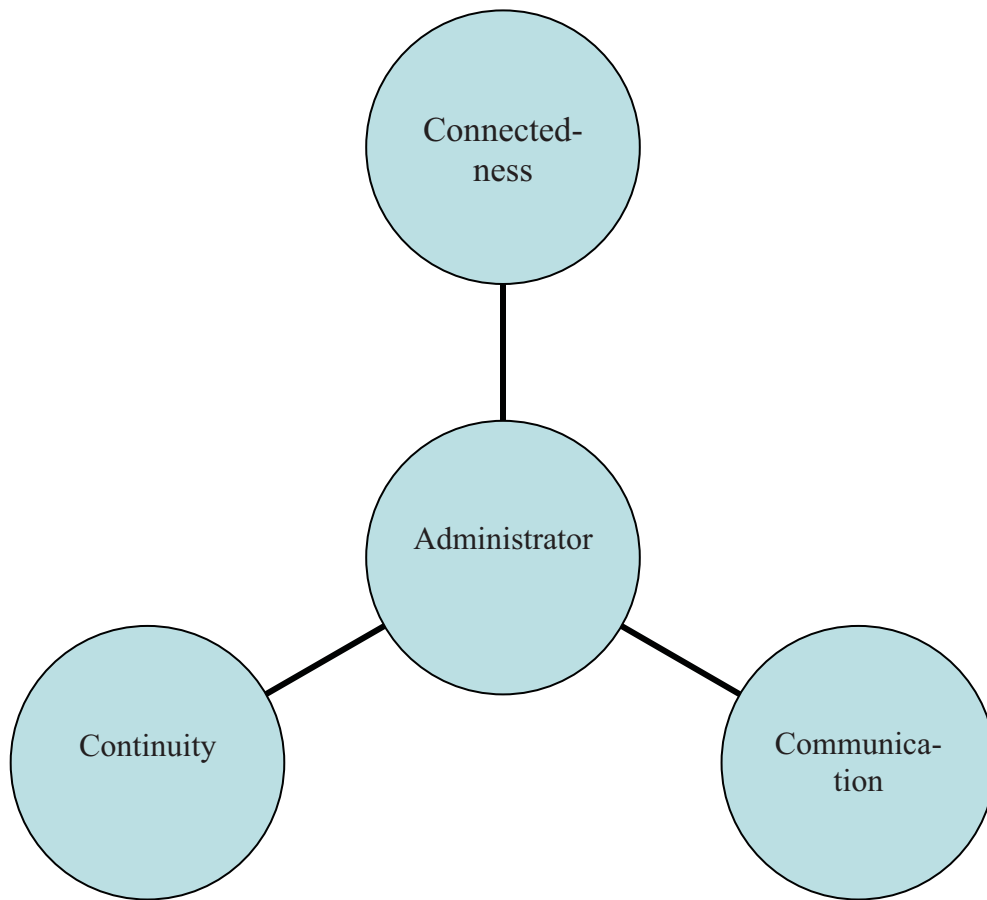


Figure 3 Administrator Themes—Rural Middle School Students' Sense of Belonging

1. Connectedness was one theme the administrator felt was important. In the discussion with Randolph Middle and the forum with parents, the administrator stressed that the relationships established among the students and teachers was the most important reason to team and loop. Principal Dewitt spoke about this to the Randolph faculty when he said, “Kids think it’s a big deal if the principal knows their name.” He went on to say that as adults we may think “What’s the big deal if I know their name?” but for a child that means a lot and they will go home and tell their parents, “Dr. Dewitt knows my name.” To have administrators in a school of approximately 650 students able to call a student by name means something. This adds to their feelings of belonging within the school. Dewitt felt that was a reason to loop, because they were a large school and students would not get lost in the crowd because looping and teaming made it smaller.

Connections with parents also improved with looping because he reported there is “No stress for parents between the seventh- and eighth-grade year. The parents like it.” Students that team are able to connect better with the school and have at least one adult in the building with whom they could feel comfortable. An added layer to the students having an adult model in the school is the Take a Kid On (TKO) project. Without allowing the students to know, the teachers as a team divided up students to make certain that at least one of them would check on the student once a week on an individual basis. Originally, the idea was for students labeled “at risk” but soon the teachers decided to make certain that every child on their team had at least one of the team members responsible for making certain

that student was accounted for. Lastly, Principal Dewitt found at the onset of implementing looping in his building the teachers that had issues about looping were the teachers that were “so subject mattered as opposed to seeing the need in building those relationships.” In essence, he found that looping deterred those types of teachers from applying for positions at Westlake Middle and caused the teachers with that mindset to seek other schools for employment.

2. Communication is essential for an administrator in a looping and teaming setting. The principal was aware that there would be personality conflicts between teachers and students so he set parameters in place so that looping within his school building is an option. However, he does not allow a student to transfer to another team until the second year. In the spring when progress reports are mailed home, there is a form for parents where they are asked to state whether or not they choose to remain with their current team or have their child placed on another team for their eighth-grade year. He adds, “We have had over 1,200 kids to loop over the years and less than 30 have asked to change. I think that is amazing.” He gave the example of a controversial parent that was unhappy with a teacher in September and was adamant that she wanted her child off that team. He reported that in the spring she did not fill out the form to have her child moved to another team for the following year. The next year he thought it may have been an oversight when he saw the child on the same team so he asked the counselor to change the child’s team. He said by the next week the parent came in without his knowledge and asked the counselor to move the child back to the original team,

that there was no oversight. He chuckled telling the story. This just goes to prove his theory that teachers and students need time and when given that time, things will work themselves out. As people adjust and grow to understand one another, what was once thought to be an issue will go away. This not only lends itself to communication but continuity as well. Dr. Dewitt also remarked that middle school is a unique period when students are not in elementary but not in high school and they did not want their parents around but they do need those adult relationships and this fact adds just another reason to loop and team.

3. Continuity was where the principal recalled that before looping was implemented he knew there were big differences between seventh and eighth grade. He said, "Seventh graders are all over the place, very playful during that first semester. But the eighth graders are more settled." The seventh-grade teachers had to start the year with more training for the students than the eighth-grade teachers who were "coasting" because the students had been trained by the seventh-grade teachers the year before so they were familiar with the rules and procedures of the school and just needed to learn the rules for their team. So with looping they are able to "share the load so to speak." The administrators make certain when scheduling not to place all advanced students on one team, so they divide students as evenly as possible by ability, as well as by race and gender. The administrator also saw the continuity within the teams where if there was a weak teacher on a team there were other strong teachers able to assist them.

Summary

In conclusion, data from the students, teachers, and administrator shows that looping and teaming were beneficial in black students' sense of belonging. The themes that emerged from each group intersected among one another. Figure 5 shows how the three groups coincide with one another are recursive in nature. As stated earlier, some themes were "crystal clear" yet others were a bit murky but all were important as I reflected on my findings from the participants. In Chapter V, I will analyze, interpret the emergent themes, and discuss my findings from the participants. Lastly, I will include generalizations of the study and recommendations for future studies.

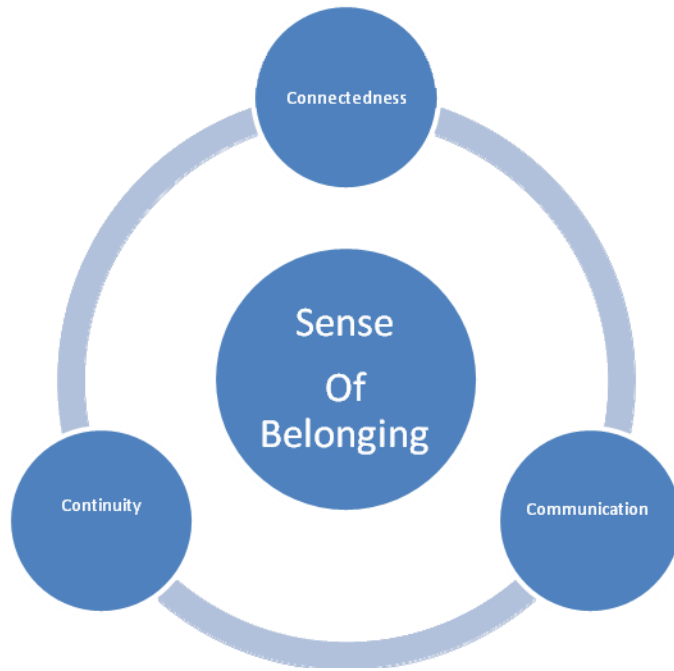


Figure 4 Emergent Themes of Participants—Sense of Belonging in Rural Black Students

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It was my challenge to make certain I clearly and honestly interpreted the voices of the students in their meanings of how looping and teaming impacted their sense of belonging. This qualitative journey took months of research to gather opinions, make insightful observations, and learn about the experiences of these students about looping and teaming and effectively convey that message through data analysis. Throughout this journey, I have come to see looping and teaming through the eyes of rural black middle school students in addition to what their teachers and administrators see as well.

The following questions were used to guide this study:

- 1) How do looping and teaming effect black students' abilities to develop and sustain relationships in school?
- 2) What do black middle school students perceive as belonging?
- 3) What are some normative qualities of black students who feel a sense of belonging?

The data collected in this research have been broken down into the three themes gleaned from the students that informed the study. Some themes that I put together to illuminate the looping and teaming concept were clearer than others. The research reveals information from the students' perspective. I list the themes in order of

importance according to how they were emphasized through the students' responses: 1. Connectedness, 2. Communication, 3. Continuity.

Connectedness

The students, teachers, and administrator reported that the most prominent theme that came from looping and teaming was the connections made. The theme of connections is directly linked to research question number one, which is how do looping and teaming effect black students' abilities to develop and sustain relationships in school. Students and teachers developing and sustaining these bonds was a vital part of black students expressing why they had such strong feelings of belonging. The teachers cultivated these relationships intentionally within their individual classrooms and on their teams by way of listening to their students and showing they cared. Some students felt the connections came through the students having a voice.

The connections formed with students and teachers because of looping and teaming are the core of two of the other themes. Because of the connections formed, communication was easier and openly receptive among students, teachers, and administrators. These connections were a direct result of the continuity. Having looped with their teams, the students felt they were set up for success.

The students felt strongly that having friends made them feel that they belonged at school. A few of the students verbalized that if they did not have friends, they would not feel the same way about school. Having friends was essential and the research from Rapp (1998) and Stevenson (1998) reiterated just how important those peer relationships are to adolescents. Because they were on teams and some of the friends they would normally

associate with were on another team, they were unable to interact with them. This forced them to make friends on their teams and communicate with others with whom they may not have otherwise forged a friendship. They created a school family with their classmates and teachers. Because of looping and teaming, students formed stronger friendships with one another and their teachers. Having students on teams and possibly being nudged to form relationships with people outside their circle is what takes place in the real world where adults have to learn to interact and work with people outside their normal social circle. Students are dealing with real life situations.

Students were also verbal about how having teachers that trusted them and got to know them was vital, which is linked to research question number 2. This was essential in feeling that they were a part of their school. Having teamed and looped with their teachers gave them much more insight into how to become successful at school by teachers knowing their learning styles as well as their knowing and understanding the teachers' teaching style. They enjoyed having someone know their personality and moods who was aware when something was wrong with them. They also noted that their teachers knew when they were good at something.

Because the connection and continuity became so strong, the students who now live in the era of the "no snitching law" found themselves reporting misconduct they witnessed to their teachers when asked or voluntarily. This shows how the community was more important than students merely thinking of themselves.

With teaming, the students were able to develop and sustain those connections with students and teachers because of how the teams were arranged. Each team in the

school has a name, color, and logo. The students as a team had input in designing the logo for their team shirts that were worn for various team activities throughout the school year. The teachers instilled team pride in the students and expressed to them the behaviors they are to exhibit. This mimics parenting when children are told that their behavior reflects on the family once they leave home. The students on each team came to realize that their behavior was reflective of their team. Teams competed against one another in pep rallies and other school activities where they took pride in their team. Because black students are group oriented (Gay, 2000) they thrived in this environment and made connections with their respective teams, thus contributing to their sense of belonging.

Communication

Being able to voice concerns and knowing they were heard was yet another important aspect for students. The students were able to communicate effectively with their teachers and peers and sometimes used nonverbal communication because they had come to know one another so well that they did not have to say anything. Their teachers or classmates knew from instinct, which again is linked to the first research question because when students talked about being able to walk into the classroom and have their teacher immediately know simply by their facial expression or demeanor that they had a problem was another way they were able to sustain those relationships.

Having teachers give them individual time was essential because it let them know the teacher cared. They felt the teachers knew their learning style and modeled classroom lessons for them. The teachers felt teaming and looping helped them to be able to

differentiate instruction and gear lessons toward students' strengths. Teachers realized that students were able to work in groups effectively with no regard of race, gender, SES, or academic achievement as a result of communication and continuity. Students would readily assist the members of their group in order to complete the task-at-hand.

According to the teachers and administrator, communication with parents increased and caused parents and students to feel a sense of belonging. In my career of teaming, occasionally I would hear that teams of teachers meeting with parents could be intimidating especially for those parents with low SES and little education. Through my observations of team conferences with parents, I saw how parents were comfortable with teachers. They seemed to forget about that feeling of uneasiness and saw the team of teachers as surrogate parents that had the same goals for their child as they did.

Continuity

Continuity aided in those transitions from elementary to middle school and from seventh to eighth grade. An abundance of research about adolescents alludes to what a transitional time this is for middle school students and having the structures of looping and teaming in schools are ways to make this transition smooth.

In regards to research question two, a majority of the students described belonging as something that is "yours" and if something is yours, you determine how it is handled. Because of the black students' continuity with their teachers and peers there was a greater sense of belonging. All of the students expressed that they were able to be themselves at school. None of them felt they had to change who they were in order to feel a sense of belonging when at school.

Students believed that their teachers cared for them and if they had a problem, they all expressed having at least one teacher on their team that they could confide in. One looping teacher indicated that, “sometimes they tell you things that you may not want to know but you are glad they trust you enough to share their most intimate thoughts.” I was surprised that the black students felt comfortable sharing personal information with teachers that were not of the same ethnic background as themselves. All the students noted that they had an adult in the building that they considered an advocate for them who would help them if they got into any kind of trouble. They spoke of both personal and school issues.

Westlake is very team oriented and all of the students expressed that they enjoyed their teams. Although they expressed a desire to associate with friends from other teams that did not sway them from all agreeing that they “loved” their team. The students admitted they had to get to know other students and associate with people they may normally not associate with, which is what happens in the real world. An added layer is that the students loop with their teams and spend two years with the same group of students and teachers and really form a connection and become a community.

Overview of Findings

In conclusion, the following outlines the overall finding of the study.

Students

- A majority of the students reported feeling a sense of belonging.
- Students developed strong relationships with teachers and peers.
- All of the students stated they could be themselves at school.

- All of the students indicated that school was important to them.
- A majority of the students said that their teachers know when they are good at something.
- Students felt their teachers took a personal interest in them because they took out individual time with them for both personal and academic problems.
- All of the eighth graders felt closer to their teachers during their second loop.
- All the eighth graders felt the teachers became more rigorous during the second loop.
- Five of the seven students reported feeling nervous about starting the seventh grade.

Teachers

- Ten of the 11 teachers enjoyed looping.
- All of the teachers enjoyed teaming.
- The most important reason to loop was the strong connections formed with students and parents.
- Teachers admitted to becoming protective of their students, even when it came to the administration.
- Teachers expressed that having students work in groups was easier because of looping and teaming.

- Teachers believed there was a stronger bond with parents as a result of looping.
- Teachers knew students' strengths and weaknesses.
- Teachers felt looping and teaming created stable environments for those students in need of that type of structure.

Administrator

- Felt strongly that forming strong relationships with students is the most important reason for looping.
- Administrator believed looping created a "school within a school."
- Administrator reported that teaming and looping help when weak teachers are on a team.
- Looping creates continuity among the faculty.

Generalization of the Study

Because rural communities and schools are all different and have various needs according to their populations, I feel that it is not appropriate for me to generalize to all rural black students. Nonetheless, the current findings, I believe, lay the groundwork for work in this much-needed area of research. I found that looping and teaming aid in black students' feelings of belonging. Black students are often outsiders in school, especially when the culture of the school is different from their home culture, so having a family structure within the school is crucial.

According to the emergent themes, all three groups of participants agreed that those strong positive connections aided in black students having a greater sense of belonging. Two years of teachers and students working together created lasting bonds. Black students felt their teachers knew them and understood them in all their complexities. The students felt confident they could go to one of their teachers if they were in trouble or simply needed someone to talk to.

The teachers were able to work closely with other content area teachers to assess and evaluate individual students' needs, which led to students feeling that teachers taught classes according to their strengths. Teams created a stable environment for those in need of that stability.

Finally, the parents of the black students, according to the teachers, became more involved in school during the looping process, which is important in the success of black students. Looping and teaming are both rooted in the philosophies of middle school education. Looping and teaming build those foundations that create positive experiences for black students that impact their sense of belonging.

Future Studies

- 1) Compare rural black middle school students that loop and team to non looping and teaming black students and see who has the greater sense of belonging.
- 2) Does the race of the teacher affect rural black middle school students' sense of belonging in looping and teaming settings?
- 3) What are black middle school students' parents feelings about what factors

create a sense of belonging with their children?

4) How is the transition from middle to high school when students have looped prior to entering high school?

5) Look at a looping school where black students are the minority and see if looping and teaming has an impact on their sense of belonging.

Conclusion

It is human nature to want to continue relationships with someone you trust. We go to the same physicians, mechanics, hair stylists, etc., so why in our educational systems do we not do the same? Long-term relationships are not allowed to form in schools where students are constantly rotating from class to class. Looping and teaming are school structures that go against the traditional arrangement of schools. With black students already facing the added pressure of trying to merge both home and school cultures, looping and teaming are structures that can make this possible for black students. These structures allow teachers to get to know their individual students beyond the surface level. The black culture differs in terms of dress, hair styles, speech patterns, food, music, playing the dozens, etc. Looping and teaming serve as the mediator for the cultural differences.

It has been stated that adolescence is a difficult time so there is clearly a need for these structures in middle schools where adolescents can benefit from the continuity of looping and teaming. This study provided me the opportunity to examine the area of rural black middle school students' sense of belonging and reflect on how the themes emerged through the data. The students in the study know, whether consciously or unconsciously,

the importance of relationships with peers, teachers, coaches, counselors, etc. Personal relationships are the fertile soil from which all advancement in real life grows. Is this not what we as educators want? We want to produce students that are able to go into the real world and function as productive citizens. Students can achieve this not through standardized testing alone but through the development of caring relationships with adults and other students within the school, the basis of which is a sense of belonging. For rural students in particular, it seems that school is a central source for student growth in all areas. With the challenges of standardized testing and school safety, I believe that a sense of belonging is a necessary factor in the contribution to rural adolescents' overall success. Students can reach their highest potential once educators focus on both their intellectual and socio-emotional needs. With the intensity of school violence, changing family situations, and changing demographics, students' developing relationships with schools is a critical factor in students' educational and life journeys.

Research states that black students are at a heightened risk, males in particular, of failing to connect with the academic community (Steele, 1992). Therefore, creating a sense of belonging is especially essential for this subgroup of students. In light of the No Child Left Behind legislation and other reports that cause red flags when discussing black children, the need for a sense of belonging is an essential element regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, so it is the task of educators to ensure that this is the case for *all* students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, one recommendation is that middle school administrators consider establishing structures within their schools such as teaming and looping that are explicit designs that may foster sense of belonging with black middle school students. With middle school being such a transitional period for adolescents as well as a place of disconnect for some black students, teaming and looping these structure can be an integral part in helping black students connect with school.

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APPENDIX A
TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR CONSENT FORM

Teacher and Administrator Consent Form

Dear Teacher,

Many educators are concerned about ensuring that all students feel as if they are part of the school culture. The purpose of this research is to identify the characteristics of rural black middle school students' sense of belonging.

If you participate in this study you (a) will be interviewed twice for about 60 minutes on topics pertaining to school climate (e.g., how you conduct your classroom, school functions, etc.), and (b) will be observed in one of the following (but not limited to) in your classroom, team meetings, PTA meetings, school assemblies, etc. Both interviews and observations will take place at school.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any specific question that you do not want to answer. The information you provide will be confidential.

If you should have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact Tanisha Westerfield at (662) 325-7777 or by email at twr19@msstate.edu. For more information about human participation in research, please feel free to contact the MSU Regulatory Compliance Office at (662) 325-3294.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Teacher's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B
PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Many parents are, of course, concerned about their child's academic achievement in school. Changing demographics in the U.S. have had a major impact on the nation's schools. During the last ten years, schools have experienced a rapid growth in ethnic and racial diversity. One researcher states that the dramatic shift in the demographic landscape of the U.S. is more pronounced in public schools. The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the impact of looping and teaming on rural black middle school students. If research can help us better understand the characteristics of inclusive schools this will benefit diverse students in rural settings.

If you and your child participate in this study, your child will be interviewed by the researcher individually as well as in a group setting with other students. The interviews for your child will take place at school and will take no longer than 60 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary; your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer specific questions that you and your child do not want to answer. The information you and your child provide will be confidential (i.e., you and your child will never be personally identified in the study).

If you should have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact Tanisha Westerfield at (662) 325-7777 or by e-mail at twr19@msstate.edu. For more information about human participation research, please feel free to contact the MSU Regulatory Compliance Office at (662) 325-3294.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Your Child's Name

Date

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Student Assent Form

APPENDIX C
STUDENT IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Student Interview Questions

Questions	Comments
<p>Background Information</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your age? 2. What grade are you in currently? 3. How long have you lived in Starkville? 4. Have you lived anywhere other than Starkville? 5. With whom do you live? 6. What are your hobbies? What activities do you participate in outside of school? 7. Where do you see yourself in ten years? 8. How would you define belonging? 	
<p>Student Engagement/Participation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are your favorite things (classes, activities, etc) to do at school? 2. How often do you answer questions in class? 3. In what class would you say you volunteer most? Why? 4. How often would you say that you miss school? 5. Have you ever skipped class? 6. Do you turn in all of your assignments? 	
<p>Peer Acceptance</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who are your friends? Are they on your team? 2. Is your academic performance 	

<p>effected by your relationships with your friends/classmates?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Do your friends think it is important to do well in school? 4. Is school important to you? Why? 5. Do students take your opinion seriously? 6. Do you feel like other students accept you for who you are? 7. Do you feel like you can be yourself at school? 8. Did you talk about the beginning of school with your friends? What kinds of things did you talk about? (clothes, supplies, boyfriend/girlfriend, etc) 	
<p>Teacher Perception</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your favorite subject? Why? 2. Who is your favorite teacher? Why? 3. Do you think your teachers show a personal interest in you? 4. How do they do this? Give an example. 5. Do teachers/staff know when you are good at something? Who knows? 6. Does your teacher know your family? Is this good or bad? 7. Do you think having the same teachers for two years has been good for you so far? Why or why not? (7th grade ask what have the heard or what they think). 8. Do you feel closer to your 	

<p>teachers this year? If yes how so if no, what has caused this not to happen?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">9. Do you like school better this year, the same, or less? Why?10. If you had a serious problem, is there a teacher that you could talk to? Who would that person be and why would you choose them?	
<p>School Community</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Were you nervous about starting the new school year? Why or why not?2. Try to think of what it was like coming to school as a ___ grader. Can you describe what it was like?3. Do you feel that you are a part of your school?4. What makes you feel that you are or are not a member of your school community?5. When are you allowed to express how you feel about things that go on at your school?6. Did you know what team you were going to be on before school started?7. Were you happy about that? Why or why not?8. If you had a choice to loop with your teachers how would you feel about that? Has looping been a good thing for you? Explain.	

APPENDIX D
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Interview

R: What do you like best about your middle school?

R: Describe your thoughts and feelings about starting 8th grade with the same team of teachers? What were those first couple of days like?

R: Any advice for the 7th graders?

R: If you could change one thing at school, what would that be and why?

R: Tell me about your strengths as a student or what your good points are. Do your teachers recognize this?

R: Do you feel that having the same teachers for two years has been good for you? Explain.

R: Describe what your friendships are like with your classmates on the looping team?

R: If you could change or make a suggestion about the looping program, what would that be?

R: If you could change or make a suggestion about teaming, what would that be?

R: What are your thoughts about moving on to high school?

R: What do you think has been most helpful in your success at school?

R: What makes you feel welcome at school? If you don't feel welcome, what do you think would help?

R: Friendships. Create a diagram of your circle of friends

APPENDIX E
TEACHER IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Teacher Interview Questions

<p>Background Questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me something about your background. 2. What made you decide to become a teacher? 3. When and where were you educated (teacher training)? Was that a good experience? 4. When and where did you begin teaching? 	
<p>Teacher perception</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you feel your student feels like he or she belongs at Westlake Middle? Any examples? 2. How often do you see ____ : ____ raise his or her hand? ____ volunteer in small groups? ____ turn in homework? ____ perform other activity? 3. How many times would you say that you have the opportunity to informally interact with student during the day? 4. Do you think there is a connection between students feeling like they belong and their achievement in school? 5. What do you think has the greatest influence on black students learning? (e.g.. content selection, skills, parents, peers, student-teacher relations) 	

<p>6. Which of the following do you think creates the most positive relation in black students?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> parent conferences</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> common background</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> student academic record</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> student behavior</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> student attitude</p> <p>7. What have you learned about black culture from your interaction with your students?</p> <p>8. Would you like to know more? If so, what?</p> <p>9. What would help you learn more?</p> <p>10. Describe, to the best of your ability:</p> <p>Your values:</p> <p>School's values:</p> <p>African American peer group values:</p> <p>African American individual values:</p>	
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<p>Policy/Procedures</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you handle discipline? 2. How does the school handle discipline? 3. What are some strategies you use in managing your classroom? 4. How do you handle the possible mismatch between what you want to teach and what the administration wants? (NCLB, curriculum mandates, etc.)? 5. Do you think your ideas about teaching are different from other educators around you? How so? And how do you adjust or do you conform? 	
<p>School Community</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are your feelings about teaming and its impact on black students? Or does race matter? 2. What are your feelings about looping and its impact on black students? Or does race matter? 3. What role do you expect parents to play in the success of diverse students? 4. How would you describe the relationships you've had with parents of students you teach or have taught in the past? 5. What strategies have you used in working with parents of diverse students? 	