

The Essence of Feeling a Sense of Community:  
A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry With Middle School Students and Teachers

Kate J. Cassidy, B.B.A., M.Ed.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate

Studies in Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies

Faculty of Education, Brock University

St. Catharines, Ontario

© Kate J. Cassidy 2013

## Abstract

In contemporary times, there is a compelling need to understand the nature of positive community relationships that value diverse others. This dissertation is a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into the essence of what it means to feel a sense of community. Specifically, I explored this phenomenon from the perspective of middle school teachers and students through the following questions: What meanings do students and teachers ascribe to feeling, experiencing, and developing a sense of community in their classes? To what extent do students' and teachers' ideas about feeling a sense of community include the acceptance of individual differences? Together these questions contributed to the overarching question, what is the essence of feeling a sense of community? As the data pool for the research, I used 192 essays and 218 posters from students who had been asked to write or draw about their visions of a positive classroom community where they felt a sense of community. I conducted 9 teacher interviews on the topic as well. My findings revealed one overarching ontology, *Being-in-Relation*, which outlined a full integration between individuality and community as a "way of being." I also found five attributes that are present when individuals feel a sense of community: *Supporting Others*, *Dialogue*, *An Ethic of Respect and Care*, *Safety*, and *Healthy Conflict*. Contributions from this research include extensions to the literature about community; clarity for those who wish to establish a strong foundation of community relationships within formal and non-formal educational programs; insight that may assist educators, leaders, and policy makers within formal educational systems; and an opportunity to consider the extent to which the findings may point toward broader implications.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation is truly a shared project. I want to thank everyone who has inspired and shaped my desire to more deeply understand the meaning of community relationships. A few people, however, warrant special acknowledgement.

First and foremost I would like to acknowledge Dr. Michelle McGinn, my supervisor, not only for her invaluable help with this dissertation, but for her commitment to me as an academic mentor for over ten years, which began with my master's research. I cannot thank you enough for your support, well-timed questions, and critical insights. You have helped shape my thinking and practice as a scholar-practitioner-leader in so many ways.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the members of my dissertation committee. Thank you, Dr. Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker and Dr. Seth Agbo for your time and support in serving on my committee. Sharing your different perspectives on my work helped to enrich my ideas. It was an honour to have Dr. Morgan Gardner as the external examiner for my defense. I greatly appreciate your encouragement and thoughtful insights. I would also like to express gratitude to my internal examiner, Dr. David Siegel. I appreciated your time and thoughtful questions. Finally, I want to acknowledge Ashley Johnson, who helped me with transcriptions and organization. I look forward to celebrating your Ph.D. when the day comes!

I am indebted to my friends and colleagues at Brock University for being so supportive every step of this journey. I welcomed your interest, words of encouragement, celebrations, and distractions! I want to extend special acknowledgement to my friends: Wendy, for your help professionally and your support; Norma, for your hospitality when

I needed a quiet place to work; Sharon, for our paddles; Jim, for your ability to commiserate on the challenges of writing; and Claudia, Kristen, and Carl for listening so supportively when, oddly enough, every topic of conversation seemed to relate back to some aspect of my dissertation. Thank you all for knowing just what I needed and when. Thanks for being you.

I want to acknowledge my parents for their support through my academic journey. You always expected me to do my best and see things through to the end—this outlook has served me well. Mom, thanks for going above and beyond the call of duty with the countless hours of editing my work for spelling and grammar. Thanks for your belief in me, and for your many offers of help with anything I needed. Dad, I appreciate your support in my academic pursuits, and most of all thanks for teaching me to search for answers to problems even when they seem impossible to find. I also want to acknowledge my brother Mike. You are one of the smartest people I know. I deeply value your honest feedback on my ideas, and for teaching me to always keep my end goal in mind. Finally, I want to express appreciation to all of the people, both personally and professionally, with whom I have had the pleasure of forming communities over the years. In particular, I want to acknowledge Maya and Dave Willis along with my dear summer camp friends who first showed me what it means to be part of a fully accepting community.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
List of Tables .....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Personal Significance .....	2
Educational Significance.....	8
The Research Problem .....	11
The Research Question.....	13
The Research Paradigm.....	14
Summary .....	17
Chapter Two: The Literature .....	19
Some Fundamental Beliefs That May Affect How Community is Understood .....	19
The Human Need to Belong.....	21
Sense of Community .....	24
Difference in Community.....	28
Sense of Community and Schools.....	33
Summary .....	40
Chapter Three: Description of the Research Process .....	41
Research Methodology.....	41
My Relationship to the Research .....	42
Data Sources.....	43
Ethics Clearance and Consent Procedures .....	46
Overview of the Data Analysis and Interpretation.....	47
Data Analysis Process in Detail to Support Authenticity .....	49
Connecting Across the Data Sources .....	61
The Final Themes Describing the Essence of Feeling a Sense of Community .....	65
Authenticity.....	67
Summary .....	71
Chapter Four: The Findings.....	72

Being-in-Relation .....	73
Supporting Others .....	77
Dialogue .....	81
An Ethic of Respect and Care .....	84
Safety.....	87
Healthy Conflict .....	90
Other Noteworthy Observations.....	96
Summary .....	98
Chapter Five: Findings Against The Literature.....	100
Comparing the Attributes of Sense of Community with the Literature .....	100
Comparing an Ontology of Relations to Additional Literature.....	109
Comparing the Findings to My Experience of Community .....	114
Summary .....	118
Chapter Six: Discussion and Contributions.....	119
Contributions.....	122
Limitations of the Study .....	130
Recommendations for Further Research.....	131
Epilogue: Post-Research Reflections and My Changing Practice .....	132
Conclusion.....	135
References .....	139
Appendix A: Essay and Poster Contest Invitation .....	153
Appendix B: Interview Guide for Teachers .....	158
Appendix C: Some Resources used to Support Community .....	159

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Key Concepts From Two Relevant Bodies of Literature .....	100
--	-----

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Increased migration, ease of travel, growing urbanization, and family structure changes are some of the developments of the last century that bring concerns for community, belonging, and social support to the forefront (Putnam, 2000; Shields, 2002). During this same time period, Western industrialized cultures have stressed the value of autonomy, independence, competition, freedom, and individual fulfillment; all of which encourage separation rather than connection (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Nisbet, 1969; Putnam, 2000). Some theorists have suggested that a sense of community has become an endangered part of modern society (Durkheim, 1933; Gardner, 1991; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Newbrough, 1995; Nisbet, 1969; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974). This is troubling given that humans are at heart social beings and a lack of belonging with others has been associated with many negative social and emotional outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Additionally, at this time in history when human's ability to connect may be at risk, people are more commonly called to interact with others who are quite different from themselves not only on a global scale but also locally. Individuals are being asked to move "beyond participation in their previously homogeneous groups, and to learn to live respectfully, justly, and peacefully together in a global environment" (Shields, 2002, p. 209). All of these issues suggest a compelling need to more deeply understand the meaning of positive community relationships in contemporary times.

The word community has been used to describe a geographical location, but it is also commonly used to describe a type of human relationship. For many people, this type of relationship resonates with ideals of unity, harmony, and safety (Bess et al., 2002). An expectation of similar background, needs, values, and purpose are often inherent in this

understanding as well. This brings to light the question of whether community relations that have traditionally been understood as rooted in similarity can truly embrace those who have different ways of being.

A shared understanding of exactly what community relationships means remains elusive in the literature and in common speech. Through this research, I explore the meaning of feeling a sense of community as interpreted by middle school students and teachers. I take a deep look at the attributes, characteristics, and feelings associated with community relationships. I also consider to what extent positive community relationships embrace individual difference. I address my interest as an exploration into the essence of feeling a sense of community in school settings, recognizing the role that education plays in preparing young people for life in an increasingly interdependent society.

### **Personal Significance**

Max van Manen (2007), a well-known scholar of phenomenological methodology, suggests “phenomenology is ... a project that is driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning” (p. 12). I have a long-standing interest in positive community relationships and what that means. In my teens, I had an experience that I felt exemplified positive community relations, and it inspired me to focus on group development as a career and consequent academic interest. In this section, I describe how my lived experience of positive group relationships led me to this inquiry.

My first experience of being part of a community that I would characterize as having positive group relationships took place at a small summer camp in Quebec where I was hired as a counselor. I arrived into the camp community with expectations of how I

would have to behave in order to belong. I thought that a good counselor needed to be funny and outgoing. This was not natural behaviour for me and I soon realized how difficult it was to act this way when I was surrounded by people 24 hours a day. I remember becoming increasingly exhausted as I analyzed everything I said in an attempt to choose just the right words to seem fun enough to fit in. I tried to think of a good excuse that would allow me to go home. After about two weeks of camp (I had not been able to come up with sufficient justification to leave), I realized I could not do it any longer. I was too tired to maintain an act in order to be accepted. I just resigned to be myself and ... nothing changed. I came to see that I did not need to be someone different; people cared about me just for being myself and in fact they really seemed to value the characteristics I brought to the group. They showed me that they valued my analytical skills and ability to be reflective, and often came to me when they needed to talk or figure out a problem. It felt good to be able to offer something that others seemed to appreciate. I felt people really understood me and that I mattered. I felt safe to take risks and even discover new sides to myself. I flourished in this context where I experienced relationships of total acceptance.

Through observations and discussions that summer, and since, I know that I was not the only one that experienced a strong sense of community. At camp that summer, everyone was cared for deeply and simply accepted for who they were. I have a particularly strong memory of seeing that care extended to one of the support staff members. She came from a different cultural and socioeconomic background than the majority of the staff and never attended social activities with us at camp. Her actions with the children showed that she had a big heart but she acted timid and shy around the rest of

the staff members. Every two weeks we would have a campfire night. At the second campfire of the summer, toward the end of the night, everyone was surprised when the host announced the support staff's name as the next to sing a solo. You could see expressions of reinforcement on everyone's faces as she walked uncertainly to the front of the circle. People called out words of encouragement. She began to sing, at first quietly, and then stronger until it echoed through the forest and across the lake. As she finished, everyone jumped up and cheered. Her smile that night is imprinted in my memory. From that day forward she was happier, more outgoing, and she allowed us to get to know her more deeply, fully revealing the big heart we always knew she had. I think that campfire night she too had the experience of realizing what it felt like to let down her guard, be herself, and be fully accepted, cared for, and celebrated within a supportive group relationship.

There was something very remarkable about that summer camp experience that has always stuck with me. Although we came from different cultural, religious, and language backgrounds (which were typically challenging issues in the province of Quebec), these surface categorizations were put aside and everyone was seen deeply for who they were as individuals. As people's characteristics and skills emerged, they were valued for what they contributed. As a group, we created something that was more than the sum of what we each brought to the context. Everyone was fully included, everyone belonged even though we were all very different, and everyone was simply cared for. We talked a lot and really listened to each other. We knew each other's strengths and weaknesses and accepted them non-judgmentally. Whenever anyone needed help or support, it was there for them. At the same time, not everything was always perfect of

course. We experienced challenges, disappointments, and arguments, but the care for each other was always there and from every struggle, people seemed to emerge stronger. It was a perfect social atmosphere for campers and staff alike to take risks, try new things, develop new skills, and learn more about ourselves. It has been almost 25 years since that summer but the bonds we created were very strong and many of the staff and campers are still friends today. Even if we do not see each other very often, we still celebrate each other's accomplishments and show support if we hear that one of us is in need of help.

As I have discussed and reflected on my camp experience over the years, I see that it had a profound effect on my goals, choice of career, and who I have become. For me, that experience exemplified positive community relationships. When I thinking about a sense of community I think of the connection staff and campers had that summer. With that understanding as my basis, I have been motivated to advocate for, and facilitate, positive group relationships in a variety of contexts over the years. I am particularly drawn to building strong relationships in learning environments because I think that a community connected with positive relationships is the foundation from which people are most open to take the risks needed to learn and to better come to know themselves, others, and the world around them.

After university my first full-time job was at an outdoor centre where I was a group facilitator, primarily for middle school students on "community-building" school trips. Drawing from my camp experience, I made it a priority to find a way to help each student feel cared for within appreciative and safe social relationships. Even though the students were only at the centre for two or three days, we were often able to build a

feeling of community where each student found his or her place within the group. Teachers expressed surprise over the way particular youth who did poorly in school really seemed to shine in this context. I went on to pursue this interest in my next job where I used experiential activities to help build meaningful relationships, and reconnect students who were struggling within the school system. My current position oversees programs that help adolescents find their passions, learn how to contribute their skills to others, and develop a curiosity about the world through cooperative, hands-on camps and educational school trips. I also oversee non-formal educational programs for adults where I am exploring how to create that same feeling of safety, belonging, and openness to take risks that I had the good fortune to experience at camp.

Throughout my career experiences, I have worked with corporate, educational, and other groups who have come to me seeking to “build community.” They use this phrase confidently assuming that we share an understanding of what community means, and it is rare that clients further describe what end-state they are hoping to reach. This suggests to me that positive community relationships must involve some characteristics that are shared across people and groups; however, I have found a lack of clarity within the literature on what those characteristics or attributes might be.

My interest in better understanding the meaning of group relationships led me to an academic interest in group development. I thought that the concept might provide me with some insight into how to best build community. I found that group development was often portrayed in terms of stages to be worked through to reach a desired end of harmony and shared productivity (Tuckman, 1965). Conflict was commonly listed as a stage in group development (Tuckman, 1965). It troubled me that harmony was an

implied goal and conflict was characterized as something to be overcome. Thinking of my own experiences with groups, harmony did not seem like an appropriate end-state toward which groups should strive. I felt that conflict should not necessarily be avoided or “overcome” because I found that great learning often came when people had different perspectives or needs. For my master’s thesis (Cassidy, 2001), I conducted a conceptual analysis of the stages of group development as they were described in educational, business, and therapeutic literature. My research suggested that developing group relationships might be better considered by addressing four main needs or concerns (individual, group, purpose, and work) rather than stages. The idea of concerns was more in line with what I was looking for but I still had questions.

My Ph.D. interests continued from this point and it was during these studies that I encountered the phenomenon *sense of community*. My interest in positive group relations seemed to connect well with this notion as representing the feelings people would have if they felt fully valued and accepted within a group. As my education and career progressed, I had also started to contemplate the meaning and role of *difference* in community relationships. This personal, work, and academic history led me finally to this study, as I now seek to discover more about the essence of feeling a sense of community, and the extent to which this phenomenon values individual differences. Inspired by a commitment to explore an enduring concern (as is typical of van Manen’s, 2007, hermeneutic phenomenology), the current study addresses my life-long desire to better understand the essence of group relationships where every individual, and the group itself, flourishes.

### **Educational Significance**

For this inquiry, I decided to ask middle school students and teachers about their lived experience of positive group relationships (or feeling a sense of community) because I wanted to know more about how to support them in developing a feeling of community within their classes. Over the years of my career helping to “build community” I have worked most commonly with middle school classes. I have seen and experienced the frustration of students who do not feel they are valued and accepted within their social contexts at school. I am concerned about how this affects young people’s self-worth and feelings about whether they belong with people who are comfortable in formal education settings (which consequently may affect their choices around post-secondary education and life-long learning). I also worry that a lack of community and belonging at school may affect students’ social development, leading them to lag in the skills, understandings, and motivation necessary for healthy interpersonal interactions throughout their lives.

My interest in the experience of feeling a sense of community at school also has empirical support. Over the past few decades, a growing body of research has shown that students’ feelings of belonging, acceptance, and connection at school are critical to positive school outcomes, as well as to student health and overall well-being (e.g., E. M. Anderman, 2002; Battistich & Hom, 1997; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997; Whitlock, 2006). Bullying, school drop-out rates, and school disengagement have also been associated with not feeling acceptance, belonging, or connection at school (Karcher, 2004; Kasen, Berenson, Cohen, & Johnson, 2004;

Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2004; Olthof & Gossens, 2008; Skiba, Simmons, Peterson, McKelvey, Forde, & Gallini, 2004). This suggests that positive social relationships are important in school settings.

Research also indicates adolescence is a peak time for young people in forming their identities as individuals, students, group members, and citizens (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). This implies that relationships may be particularly important during this time period. Every three years, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development Programme for International Assessment (PISA) measures the school-related feelings, skills, and knowledge of 15-year olds in over 30 countries. One of the areas being studied is feelings of belonging (Willms, 2003). In the research questionnaire, adolescents are asked to rate their feelings of belonging in the context of relationships at school with the following questions: school is a place where (a) I feel like an outsider (or left out of things), (b) I make friends easily, (c) I feel like I belong, (d) I feel awkward and out of place, (e) Other students seem to like me, (f) I feel lonely, (g) I do not want to go to school, and (h) I often feel bored. Students are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each item using a four-point scale (*strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree*). Despite the importance of experiencing a sense of community at school, PISA results consistently shows that a significant number of young people lack a feeling of belonging, particularly during the middle school years.

Using the 2000 data, Willms (2003) found one in four students across all participating countries experienced a low sense of belonging at school. Approximately 30,000 Canadian students from more than 1,000 schools completed the survey. Results from these Canadian students were marginally better than the international average, with

one in five experiencing low sense of belonging (Willms, 2003). To consider this in another way, this means that for every class of 30 Canadian students, on average at least 6 do not feel they belong. This large survey showed that students with low sense of belonging were both male and female and represented a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds, indicating that belonging is an issue that affects everyone.

Another large-scale research initiative, The Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) study, is conducted every four years in Canada. It began in 1990 and is aimed at understanding the health and well-being of adolescents aged 11- to 15-years old. The 2006 study was administered in 200 schools and included a national sample of 9,670 students. Whereas the PISA study focused on 15-year olds (high school Grade 9 and 10 in Canada) and hinted toward a trend in that age group, the HBSC study included data specific to the middle school years, Grades 6 and 8. (They also collected data from Grade 10, which I do not include here.) The 2006 Canadian study showed results compatible with PISA, but with an even higher rate of student alienation. Results showed that 71% of girls and 62% of boys in Grade 6 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel I belong at this school,” whereas by Grade 8 the results were 58% of girls and 48% of boys. These results indicate that a lack of belonging is a particular problem in middle school with an average of 12 to 15 children in every class of 30 reporting that they do not belong.

These large-scale studies suggest that almost half of all students may feel they do not belong in school by Grade 8. Results point to the fact that many classrooms are not providing students with what they need to feel included and accepted during these formative years when they are learning who they are and how they relate with others. The

current study addresses a compelling need to better understand more about the lived experience of feeling a sense of community in middle school settings.

### **The Research Problem**

Community is a word that is used in multiple contexts and for a variety of purposes. Due to this breadth of use, it can easily collapse “into a meaningless term evoked more for rhetorical or emotional reasons than for illumination or explanation” (Kirkpatrick, 1986, p. 2). Bess et al. (2002) wrote, “What is actually meant by community, how a community functions, and what ... the benefits and costs of community membership [are, have] not necessarily been well explored” (p. 3). In current times, humans do not need to share a common physical place in order to feel they are part of a community. This has led to growing interest in the type of group relationships associated with the concept (Dunham, 1986; Hillier, 2002; Pooley, Pike, Drew, & Breen, 2002). Sense of community has been described as including both the feelings of individuals and the characteristics of the groups to which they belong (Pretty, 2002). Royal and Rossi (1996) further describe the quality of relationships associated with feeling a sense of community: “Individuals might well be expected to feel a greater sense of community with a group if what is unique about them is accepted and valued by the group than if it is rejected or disparaged” (p. 401). This suggests that people feel a sense of community when what is unique or different about them is embraced. What the phenomenon means at a deeper level is unclear within the literature, however (Bess et al., 2002; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Hill, 1996).

I found that the ambiguity around community and sense of community extended to educational theory and research as well. Feelings of community within schools have

been defined and studied in a number of different ways using terms such as belonging (E. M. Anderman, 2002; Goodenow, 1993), connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997), relatedness (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), school bonding (Catalano et al., 2004), and psychological sense of community (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). (For a full review see Osterman, 2000.) Furrer and Skinner (2003), Libbey (2004), Osterman (2000), and others suggest that these terms have similar meaning and can be used interchangeably, which signals a lack of clarity. Research indicates that many youth do not feel a sense of community in middle school. It makes good sense that it must be difficult to value and pursue an idea that has multiple, ambiguous, and contested meanings. This may suggest that the phenomenon of experiencing positive group relationships is complex and not easily expressed within the limitations of everyday language.

With the above as my rationale, I selected to use the idea of *sense of community* to represent the phenomenon of interest in this inquiry. In this inquiry my focus is on the essence of the phenomenon and what it means to individuals. When I use this term, I understand it to capture the individual feelings and group characteristics associated with positive community relationships. Different authors and participants use a variety of terms to describe this type of relationship, but readers should focus on the underlying feeling not the terminology used. Throughout the dissertation, note that I use the terms sense of community and positive community relations depending upon the context of the sentence.

To date, the majority of research on sense of community has been quantitative, and focused on the effects of experiencing the phenomenon, rather than the meanings,

characteristics, and beliefs surrounding this important concept (Bateman, 2002; Hill, 1996). This lack of understanding inherently constrains thinking about community relationships, influences how research is framed, and affects the success of creating positive community relationships in practice (Gardner, 1991; Selznick, 1992; Shields, 2000; Weisenfeld, 1996). This suggests that increased understanding about communities where individuals feel a sense of community will bring benefit to theory, research, and practice. As outcomes from this study, I provide (a) clarity to, and extend, the literature on community; (b) additional clarity for those who design and facilitate community-building programs, or wish to establish a strong foundation of community relationships within non-formal educational programs; (c) insight that may assist educators, leaders, and policy makers within the formal educational system; and (d) opportunity to further my own reflection and understanding about positive community relationships. Together I hope these outcomes may bring some guidance for improved community relationships at a time in society when relationships seem to be both suffering and growing more complex in an interdependent and global society.

### **The Research Question**

The meaning of positive community relationships was the question that motivated this dissertation. I was also interested in understanding to what extent positive community relationships can embrace individual differences. The feeling of sense of community resonated with me as representing the group characteristics and individual feelings people would associate with positive social relationships in community. It also seemed likely that individuals would feel the greatest sense of community when what is unique or different about them was accepted. In this study, I explore the essence of

feeling a sense of community. Schools are one place where young people form expectations about how to be and interact with others in society. Feeling a sense of community has been tied to positive school outcomes as well as overall health and well-being. It has also been shown that many middle school students do not feel a sense of community. I felt that individuals associated with middle schools could provide a meaningful and information-rich context within which to explore this phenomenon.

Consequently, this hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry sought a deeper understanding of the essence of community relationships where middle school students and teachers feel a sense of community. Specifically this research was guided by the following questions: What meanings do students and teachers ascribe to feeling, experiencing, and developing a sense of community in their classes? To what extent do the students' and teachers' ideas about feeling a sense of community include the acceptance of individual differences? Together these questions lead to the overarching question, what is the essence of feeling a sense of community?

### **The Research Paradigm**

Every research study is approached from a particular perspective, or epistemological, ontological, and methodological lens that forms the research paradigm. The paradigm shapes the basic set of beliefs that guide the research design and consequent processes of analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I will outline the paradigm that I bring to my work in the section below and describe how it has guided my research.

Pragmatism is a belief that ideas or "truth" should be considered in terms of the success of its practical application with others in the world. In other words, meaning comes from how ideas function in human experience (James, 1907/1975). James

(1907/1975) describes a number of criteria for considering truth, including personal experience, social verification, and connections to previous knowledge and logic. He believed that knowledge is fluid and suggested that, “as knowers we help to shape the known, and we are in turn shaped by it—we do not merely passively reveal or uncover it” (James, 1912/1996, p. 251). Pragmatic research comes from life, is examined in life, and helps to improve life. It places the problem as central and, from that basis, research methods are chosen that will best provide insight into the question (Creswell, 2002).

What it means to feel a sense of community is a phenomenon that is lacking in clarity and understanding. I believe that this is constraining my ability to help others develop the skills and attributes needed for them to form positive social relationships where they may feel a sense of community. I want to better understand how feeling a sense of community is understood and facilitated in order to improve my practice as a non-formal educator. I also feel this may help others within the school system and possibly on a wider scale. As such, this research is influenced by pragmatic motivations and beliefs.

I also drew on the phenomenological tradition for this inquiry. The position held by phenomenological researchers is that aspects of experience can best be described as a relationship between a person and the world. Therefore phenomena are best understood through a study of beliefs and attitudes of groups of individuals revealing the shared structures of experience (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology falls under the phenomenological tradition. This position is concerned with the phenomenon itself, asking what makes up a thing that without which it could not be what it is. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to capture something that is both personal and universal in trying to get at a central essence. Of course it must be noted that any attempt to touch on the

universal is simply one interpretation and no one interpretation will exhaust the plausibility of another. Through this work I, offer my understanding of what I heard from the students and teachers, provide details about what these individuals reported, and encourage readers to draw their own interpretations.

Husserl (an early proponent of phenomenology) emphasized description of lived experience and felt that a person must put aside personal preconceptions in order to truly understand the phenomena or objects of lived experience (Lavery, 2003). This process of putting aside is known as bracketing. To bracket is to suspend judgment about the existence of things to best be able to see the world as it is presented. Martin Heidegger, a colleague of Husserl, brought hermeneutics to phenomenology. He emphasized the interpretation of phenomena rather than the description of them (Lavery, 2003). Heidegger suggested that understanding is derived from one's interpretations of life and that new things encountered in the life-world are consequently connected to earlier interpretations. For this reason, he did not accept that it was possible to bracket and to come to a phenomenon without prejudice (Lavery, 2003). In fact, Heidegger believed that pre-understandings should be embraced and acknowledged within the interpretive process. Bontekoe (1996) characterized Heidegger's view as follows:

To approach the phenomenon without presuppositions of any kind ... [is] in the first place inadvisable, and in the second impossible. Inadvisable because it would involve discarding not only the errors but the wisdom of our tradition. Impossible because without language, without the conceptual apparatus with which the tradition preserves its insights, there can be no genuine thinking about, and thus no serious approach to, the phenomenon in any event. (pp. 63–64)

Gadamer (1965/1982), another major scholar in hermeneutic phenomenology, built on Heidegger's ideas and emphasized that things reveal and define themselves through texts. In other words people have to interpret their activities together, and it is these shared interpretations, embedded in text, that make up social reality. Gadamer considered texts broadly to include the written word, conversation, and all other shared symbols (Cohen et al., 2000). He felt that the act of interpreting a text involves the fusion of horizons between the text's history and the readers' background. My research is formed from a belief that I inherently bring my lived experience to the research. The student essays and posters, and the teacher interviews form the data for this research but my preconceptions and evolving ideas also inherently play a role in my process of interpretation. For this reason my own ideas and experience with the phenomenon are shared as part of the reporting process and to help locate readers in their own processes of interpretation.

My study is built on a belief that understanding is interpretive; that meaning is fluid; that knowledge is constructed, maintained, and constrained in text; that it is possible to understand and convey a central underlying meaning of a particular phenomenon as experienced by a number of individuals; and that the researcher brings their own experience to the inquiry. This foundation also acknowledges that my study is rooted in practice and formed from an approach that best meets the needs of practical problems according to intended consequences.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have described my personal interest in community where both diverse individuals and the group itself thrive. I have shown why this may be a

particularly compelling issue in middle schools since a significant number of young people are reporting that they do not feel a sense of community. I indicated that there is a lack of clarity about the meaning of community where people feel a sense of community. I advanced an argument that a hermeneutic phenomenological exploratory study into the essence of the phenomenon would be valuable and I outlined the research questions. I concluded with the worldview and methodology that guide my research. In the next chapter, I outline how these ideas fit within the body of literature where I have selected to locate this problem.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will present a selection of literature that will provide context and stimulate thinking as a basis for this inquiry. Theories associated with community have been developed in many fields; hence a full survey lies beyond the scope and intent of this review. Instead the literature selected for this section includes that which can provoke thinking about the phenomenon of interest to become a dialogical partner from which new insights can emerge. This use of the literature is typical of hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). In the course of the chapter, I will first provide the context for how some Western societal beliefs may shape how community is understood. I will show how the human desire to belong is a fundamental need. I will explore community as it relates to literature on sense of community and difference in community. Finally, I will conclude with literature on feeling a sense of community in school settings. All of these aspects provide insight into the ways that community is currently understood, stimulates thinking into why the acceptance of individuality within community may be a challenging issue, prompts consideration about why building and maintaining a classroom as a community may be very critical to educational success, and offers space for new possibilities to emerge.

### **Some Fundamental Beliefs That May Affect How Community is Understood**

In order to fully understand what people mean when they talk about community, it is important to reflect upon the assumptions and histories that may be embedded, and thus invisible, within the concept. These underlying assumptions about reality, or ontological beliefs, from which a sense of community is understood affects how people think about and experience community relationships, and ultimately how these

relationships are modeled and fostered among students in educational settings (Noddings, 1996). In this section, I describe two different philosophical views about community relationships that represent opposite ends of the spectrum.

There are two competing philosophical assumptions that underlie some contemporary understandings of the meaning of relationships: individuals as ultimately separate or ultimately connected (Noddings, 1996). Within community theory, the difference between these ways of thinking is often explained using Ferdinand Tonnies' (1887/1957) conceptualization of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (commonly translated as Community and Society), or Frank Kirkpatrick's (1986) atomistic/contractarian and organic/functional models of community.

I will start first with the belief that the self, in its most natural state, is ultimately separate and independent. Here then, it is assumed that the reason a person would choose to form a relationship would be for personal benefit or gain while limiting obligations to others and maintaining individual freedom. Kirkpatrick (1986) outlines this in his atomistic/contractarian model where he takes up the metaphor of separate atoms (people) moving independently and occasionally bumping up against others. Here individuals begin as the same with every potential within themselves. It is believed that a sense of individual fulfillment and success is formed from the path a person chooses to take and what he or she can achieve or acquire (Kirkpatrick, 1986). For this purpose, individuals are willing to give up some personal freedom and enter "contractual-type" relations when their rights, goals, and property will be better served. Tonnies' (1887/1957) calls this type of relation "*Gesellschaft*," or society. Unfortunately this belief inherently supports actions that are self-interested and so may lead to a lack of deep

connection with others. Some argue that this is what Western society is experiencing today (see Bellah et al., 1985; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Nisbet, 1969; Noddings, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974; Shields, 2002).

The second philosophical worldview is based on the idea that humans are ultimately and essentially connected. Tonnies' (1887/1957) calls this "Gemeinschaft" or true community and Kirkpatrick (1986) describes it with his organic/functional model. Kirkpatrick uses the metaphor of organs that cannot live or function outside the organism. It is based on the notion that what makes someone essentially human is shared by everyone. In other words, sameness (i.e., common origin, belief, ways of being, etc.) unites people. If everyone is equally part of something bigger, than achieving what is best for all should be the ultimate goal. In this ontology, people's sense of fulfillment comes not from individual gain but rather from the degree to which they can contribute to the collective in pursuit of the common good (Kirkpatrick, 1986).

In this section, I have outlined two philosophical beliefs that influence how Western society may understand community: essentially separate or essentially united. An understanding of these two different outlooks is a useful foundation from which to think about how the purpose and meaning of relations has typically been constructed philosophically in the West over the course of the last few centuries (Noddings, 1996).

### **The Human Need to Belong**

In the paragraphs above, I outlined two different ontological views underlying relationships between people: individuals as ultimately separate or ultimately connected. These two different ways of thinking philosophically about what is the most natural state for humans consequently influences how community (or self/other) relationships are

understood and enacted. If humans are ultimately separate and are motivated to form relationships primarily to better serve personal purposes, it would suggest that belonging in and of itself is not an essential need. Half a century ago, social psychologist Abraham Maslow (1970) proposed, however, that the need to belong was not just a desire, but a deep-seeded and fundamental human need. He argued that the desire to belong—defined as the need for acceptance, love, and interpersonal relationships—is surpassed only by basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety. Maslow posited that people must be anchored in relations first before they can develop self-esteem and pursue self-actualization. This means that the desire for belonging must be fulfilled before the wish to learn and grow as a human can be addressed (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Maslow, 1970). Maslow, along with other early theorists, was criticized for not providing ample empirical evidence to support his assertion.

In 1995, Baumeister and Leary reviewed over 300 empirical investigations within social and personality psychology, sociology, and anthropology and concluded that the need for belonging is a basic human need that all people are deeply motivated to meet. They consequently defined the construct as a fundamental need for “frequent, affectively pleasant interactions in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern” (p. 497). In other words, they found that people prefer relationships that are positive, stable, and maintained over time. They also showed that relations marked by concern and caring are the most satisfying. Baumeister and Leary found that people generally want to belong and connect with others and will do so fairly easily and spontaneously. Contrary to the ontological position suggested in the earlier section, they did not find that people only form relations based on personal advantage. Baumeister and

Leary noted, “evidence of material advantage or inferred similarity” is not a necessary factor for connecting (p. 502).

Their review also established the significance of belonging. They found substantial research to indicate many of the strongest positive and negative emotions people experience are linked to the presence or absence of belonging. Happiness and contentment are associated with the construct, whereas the failure to have belongingness needs met can lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, loneliness, mental and physical illness, as well as behavioural problems (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A lack of belonging has also since been connected with negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, jealousy, shame, and aggression (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleiker, 2001; Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). With these negative outcomes, Baumeister and Leary noted, “it may be no accident that people seem most likely to be prejudiced against members of groups to which they have little or no opportunity to belong” (p. 521). They suggested that a great deal of “maladaptive and destructive behaviour seems to reflect either [a] desperate attempt to establish or maintain relationships with other people or sheer frustration and purposelessness when one’s need to belong goes unmet” (p. 521).

After reviewing such an extensive body of literature, Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded that the need to belong, “may well be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature” (p. 522). Relating back to the previous section, this suggests that humans do not wish to be isolated and separate. In fact, when they do feel alienated, it may lead to feelings of loneliness, poor health, as well as behavioural problems. Baumeister and Leary’s review of research

showed that people want and need to connect with other humans, that connection does not have to be based on sameness (rather care is the best reason for connection), and that connection does not need to involve personal gain. Baumeister and Leary provide the empirical evidence that Maslow and other early theorists were missing to show that belonging is a fundamental human need that ultimately brings people happiness and contentment.

### **Sense of Community**

Community is a word that is used in multiple contexts and for a variety of purposes. Over the years, “the significance of community as a territorial phenomenon has declined, while the significance of community as a relational phenomenon has grown” (Royal & Rossi, p. 395, 1996). This has led to growing interest in the nature of relations associated with the concept (Dunham, 1986; Hillier, 2002; Pooley, Pike, Drew, & Breen, 2002). Sense of community has been described as including both the feelings of individuals and the characteristics of the groups to which they belong (Pretty, 2002). Royal and Rossi (1996) further describe the quality of relationships associated with feeling a sense of community to include a recognition of individual uniqueness. They suggested “individuals might well be expected to feel a greater sense of community with a group if what is unique about them is accepted and valued by the group than if it is rejected or disparaged” (p. 401). This research is about the feelings students and teachers have about relationships within their class group and the characteristics of their interpersonal interactions. I felt that this body of literature might best capture the characteristics and feelings of positive community relationships as well as identify the type of community where individual difference is accepted and people most feel they

belong. Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined the construct of belonging as a fundamental need for “frequent, affectively pleasant interactions in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern” (p. 497). I turned to the psychological sense of community literature to provide insight into the nature of the social framework where individuals experience positive relationships.

In the early 1970s, Seymour Sarason proposed that sense of community was such an important concept for healthy people and societies that it deserved study as a separate discipline. Sense of community became the cornerstone of community psychology.

Sarason (1974) described the concept of sense of community as

the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to, or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. (p. 157)

In 1986, the *Journal of Community Psychology* dedicated two special editions to exploring sense of community. In these issues, Chavis and Newbrough (1986) described community as “any set of social relations that are bound together by a sense of community” (p. 335). They suggested that sense of community is “a concept that is primarily psychological: it refers to the personal knowing that one has about belonging to a collectivity” (p. 335). McMillan and Chavis (1986) added further detail to the concept, describing sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 4). These descriptions

suggest a certain type of group relationships that includes belonging, influence, as well as interdependence.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) also offered a detailed conceptual framework, based on a review of research, which has since become one of the most commonly cited theories of sense of community today. Their theory comprised four themes: membership, mutual influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. I will describe the four themes in more detail below.

The first theme, membership, is made up of five key attributes: emotional safety, boundaries, common symbol systems, personal investment, and sense of belonging. First, emotional safety is necessary for members to feel that they can share their needs and feelings with others. Second, boundaries mark who is in the group and who is outside the group, thus identifying who can be trusted. Boundaries, in part, allow emotional safety to develop. Third, common symbol systems such as language, dress, and ritual are used by groups to create a cohesive identity and establish those boundaries. Fourth, investment is deepening the connection between people through personal contribution. Fifth, a sense of belonging is described as “the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group” (p. 5). The authors suggest that these factors fit together in a “circular, self-reinforcing way, with all conditions having both causes and effects” (p. 15)

The next theme, influence, is described as the reciprocal and balanced power between the individual and the group to effect change. McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggest that influence must go both ways. “Members are more attracted to a community in which they feel they are influential” (p. 7). At the same time, a certain level of

conformity is needed for the group to function. As McMillan and Chavis explain, this conformity is obtained through group norms and values.

The third theme, integration and fulfillment of needs, describes a reciprocal exchange where each individual's needs are met. A successful community is able to fit people together so that they meet other members' needs while meeting their own.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) employ the word "needs" here to mean that which is desired and valued by the individual. Values help determine emotional and intellectual needs and the order in which they are addressed. McMillan and Chavis wrote, "The extent to which individual values are shared among community members will determine the ability of a community to organize and prioritize its need-fulfillment activities" (p. 8).

The final theme, shared emotional connection, refers to the emotional ties created from meaningful and positive interaction, as well as experiencing common struggles and successes. As members open themselves to emotional risk, they will develop a greater investment in the community. McMillan and Chavis maintain that a shared history fosters these emotional bonds.

Based on the principles listed above, McMillan and Chavis collaborated with Hogge and Wandersman to develop the Sense of Community Index research instrument (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986). This instrument was originally designed to be used in neighborhoods but has been adapted to study other communities as well, such as workplaces, religious communities, communities of interest, and schools. The instrument, and their description of the construct, has had wide usage and influence on consequent educational research related to this concept (Chipeur & Pretty, 1999). Other instruments have been developed to measure sense of community and have

generally supported the theory as it is described (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). This grounding helps provide a basis to better understand how ideas about sense of community have been shaped historically.

In this section, I have provided an overview of the history of sense of community and the conceptual framework that has had much influence on this body of literature. Overall, McMillan and Chavis's (1986) framework suggests that a sense of community is created from similarity and boundaries, and involves shared influence and a reciprocal meeting of needs. Although the history of the concept is rooted in this commonly referenced framework, it should be noted that there have been some other characteristics proposed. In particular some scholars have proposed the importance of diversity in feeling a sense of community (Sonn, Bishop & Drew, 1999; Weisenfeld, 1996), which provides an important connection between the two main bodies of literature that provide the backdrop for this inquiry.

### **Difference in Community**

Over the past century, there has been growing concern—particularly among philosophers, sociologists, and theologians—that Western society is putting too much emphasis on individualism (or individual needs, freedom, and achievement), which is resulting in alienation, loss of meaning, and self-centredness (Durkheim, 1933; Gardner, 1991; Newbrough, 1995; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974). It has been suggested that this modern Western view of self-contained individualism is harmful, narrow, and incomplete (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Nisbet, 1969). From this basis has grown a desire for deeper and more meaningful connection or *community*. Describing this line of thinking, Nel Noddings (1986) wrote,

one can see ... what it is people long for: to belong to a group from which one cannot be fired or laid off, to share feelings, be part of something larger than self, be treated as a person and not a case, be valued for oneself, and share in a variety of activities that are not all instrumental. (p. 248)

It has been reasoned that if contemporary times are becoming too saturated with independence and separation, then it is time to return to “Gemeinschaft” (community) where humans are seen as ultimately united (see Bellah et al., 1985; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Nisbet, 1969; Sarason, 1974).

Starting in the late 1980s however, scholars began to challenge the traditional ideals of community as ultimately united (Abowitz, 1999; Young, 1986). They pointed to the fact that community, as understood historically, also had negative aspects, or a “dark side” (Noddings, 1996). Giddens (1994) wrote, “Those who think of ‘community’ only in a positive sense should remember the intrinsic limitations of such an order. Traditional communities can be, and normally have been, oppressive” (p. 24). In other words, community traditionally rooted in unity, harmony, and similarity inherently rejected uniqueness or difference, leading ultimately to a choice between assimilation or exclusion (Abowitz, 1999; Furman, 1998; Noddings, 1996). There were many who suggested that community may be no better than the alienation of individualism if it is built upon an expectation for “sameness” that is not appropriate in a diverse population (Fendler, 2006; Greene, 1993; Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002; Weisenfeld, 1996).

A number of scholars, particularly those from feminist and pragmatic backgrounds (Abowitz, 1999; Fendler, 2006; Furman, 1998; Noddings, 1986; Shields, 2000) began arguing for a new understanding of community that embraced difference.

They spoke of reciprocal connection that included individual uniqueness in a way that was more than just a balance or compromise between commonality and individualism (Fendler, 2006). Fendler and others emphasized that, “community [should be] shown to be the required context for understanding human difference” (Abowitz, 1999, p. 146).

There are those who disagree that community can embrace difference, however. Young (1986) maintains that community can never include individual diversity. She argues that sharing between individuals can never have “complete mutual understanding and reciprocity” (p. 10). She also dismisses the idea of resolution in face-to-face interaction, writing there “is as much possibility of separation and violence as there is communication and consensus” (p. 16). Ultimately scholars such as Young (1990) argue that the term community holds such historical baggage that it can never truly accept difference. Fendler (2006), in a review of recent literature on community, also remained concerned about the ideals inherently associated with the concept of unity in community. She suggested that many of the re-conceptions of community still have the potential to exclude and cautioned that community is often constructed around people joining together on “the basis of what they oppose” (p. 319).

How community and difference might co-exist, and questions about whether the term community can be reclaimed have long been discussed and yet not been fully resolved (see Martin Buber’s, 1970, idea of being-in-relation; Kirkpatrick’s, 1996, mutual/personal model; or Emanuel Levinas’, 1969, ethics of face-to-face encounter). Looking to scholars from the educational field, a number of characteristics for community that includes difference have been suggested. Abowitz (1999) argues for “norms of organic consensus, conflict, and full participation among the members” (p.

146), and “communication between and among interdependent (yet never identical) individuals” (p. 156) as characteristics of community that welcome difference. Furman (1998) describes a similar notion:

Postmodern community ... is based on the ethics of acceptance of otherness with respect, justice, and appreciation and on peaceful cooperation within difference. It is inspired by the metaphor of an interconnected, interdependent web of persons engaged in global community. It is fostered by processes that promote among its members the feelings of belonging, trust of others, and safety. (p. 312)

Bettez (2011) further hints at the nature of community that embraces difference. She defines community as “continually shifting groups of people that dialogue with, actively listen to, and support each other, through reciprocal responsibility and accountability, regarding a common interest or concern” (p. 10). Beck (2002) conducted a qualitative analytical review of the metaphors used to describe community within educational research and theory published throughout the 1990s and found the elements described above, she also found flexible boundaries, and space for struggle as components of community that values difference. Noddings (1996) emphasized that a healthy community “must have built-in protections against the undesirable features” (p. 258), suggesting that this would be the qualities that ensure people respond to both inside and outside groups with care. She insisted that the most fundamental norm of the group should be “to respond to the needs of others and appreciate their differences” (p. 267). Even some of the ideas offered by Young (1986) who argued against community, can be taken to imagine a new idea of community that embraces diversity. In her alternative to community, which she named the “unoppressive city,” people do not necessarily know

each other directly but live peacefully together and appreciate differences when they are encountered. In the end, she suggested “whatever the label, the concept of social relations that embody openness to unassimilated otherness with justice and appreciation needs to be developed” (p. 23). These issues raise questions about the kind of community toward which groups or individuals should aim and suggests that diversity must be part of the answer however no clear understanding has emerged.

Some believe that education must play a significant role in developing the skills and knowledge to understand difference within community, as well as the forum to practice those skills (Shields, 2002). This is an important purpose because, as Shields (2000) suggests, if students are not helped “to understand the diversity of beliefs, cultures, and practices within and beyond their schools ... [there should be concern] about how well these students, as adults, will be equipped to handle a world of complexity and difference” (p. 290). Dewey (1915) suggested that the aim of education was to develop the skills and knowledge needed to participate in a caring and democratic society. He also emphasized the importance of human differences and advocated for teaching children to solve problems in non-violent ways. His work and ensuing decades of progressive educators have called for education focused on the development of the whole child that emphasizes caring and inclusive relationships (see also Noddings, 1992).

The understanding of essentially separate has proven to be unhealthy as it leans toward individualism, self-interest, and contractual relationships. In contrast, the understanding of essentially connected can inherently push toward sameness, which is unacceptable in a diverse and interdependent society. Some have argued that the expression of individual difference will always be constrained in community. Others

interested in the subject have pondered a new understanding of relations where individuality and relations are contingent. Communication, respect, organic consensus, belonging, safety, full participation, reciprocal responsibility, openness, and care for others both inside and outside communities are characteristics that have been suggested as representing a new idea of community. More detail on how this might actually look in practice has not been well theorized, however, and is needed to bring further clarity to the topic of positive relationships associated with community. Furman-Brown (1999) suggests, “Even if we could agree on what community really is—how to recognize it when we see it—we know very little about creating and sustaining it (p. 7).

### **Sense of Community and Schools**

Research has indicated that, especially during the middle school years, positive social relationships play a central role in students’ school success (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Supportive community relationships provide the foundation from which students are motivated to engage in activities, perform at their highest potential, and acts as a buffer in the face of obstacles (Cemalcilar, 2010). It has been shown that students’ feelings of belonging, acceptance, and connection at school are critical to positive school outcomes, as well as to student health and overall well-being. All young people need to feel a sense of connection and belonging with others in their community relationships in order to thrive personally and academically (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Osterman, 2000). A growing body of research is supporting this assertion, indicating that a caring and supportive school community is not only needed for students’ health and well-being but also for academic achievement (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000; Zins & Elias, 2007).

Osterman (2000) expresses concern over the importance that issues such as belonging and inclusion are currently given in schools, however. She suggests, there is little formal attention to the affective needs of students, and shaping the school culture are beliefs and practices that nurture individualism and competition, rather than community and collaboration. Integral to this culture are organizational policies and practices that systematically prevent and preclude the development of community among students and directly contribute to students' experience of isolation, alienation, and polarization. (p. 324)

Schools are very important environments for youth to establish friendships, share ideas, learn about difference, show support for each other, develop social skills, connect, and belong. Building strong relationships and a sense of community seems to be critical for the education of children and yet there is a lack of clarity about what that means.

### **The Meaning of a Sense of Community in School**

The ways in which sense of community and related constructs have been described in school provide some insight into what the phenomenon I am seeking to learn more about might entail. Sergiovanni (1994) is an educational scholar who is often cited with regards to community in school. He describes community as “a sense of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values that make our lives meaningful and significant” (p. xiii). In school communities, he writes, people connect “as a result of their mutual bindings to shared values, traditions, ideas, and ideals” (p. 61). Another perspective on educational sense of community comes from the Developmental Studies Center (DSC), which is well known with regard to developing, implementing, and researching classrooms and schools that emphasize caring communities (see

Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson, 1996; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). Researchers associated with this centre have defined a sense of community in school as “the student’s experience of being a valued, influential, contributing member of a group that is committed to everyone’s growth and welfare” (Schaps, 1998, p. 7). Carol Goodenow (1993) was one of the first researchers to empirically test students’ sense of school belonging, using her Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale in relation to important student outcomes. Scale items assess feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and respect; encouragement from students, teachers, and other adults in the school environment; and students’ sense of being an important part of their schools. Goodenow defined students’ sense of belonging as the “sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others” and “feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p. 25). Many other terms have been used interchangeably to consider feelings of community within schools such as belonging (E. M. Anderman, 2002; Goodenow, 1993), connectedness (McNeely, Nonemaker, & Blum, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997), relatedness (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), school bonding (Catalano et al., 2004), and sense of community (Battistich & Hom, 1997). Characteristics such as influence, meeting needs, inclusion, belonging, and shared values are seen throughout the descriptions of these terms, hinting to a shared phenomenon and reinforcing the importance of focusing on the underlying feeling not the terminology used.

### **The Importance of Sense of Community in Schools**

An understanding of the benefits of positive group relationships can also provide insight into the meaning of feeling a sense of community. Although there is a lack of

agreement on exactly what defines the phenomenon of positive group relationships at school, feelings of classroom and school community have generally been shown to be connected to students' emotional well-being and self-esteem (E. M. Anderman, 2002; L. H. Anderman, 1999; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). In a study of 606 middle school students, Ryan et al. (1994) found that feeling connected to peers was significantly related with positive self-esteem as well as identity integration. Using data from 13,751 Grade 6 and 8 students from 92 schools in New Brunswick, Ma (2003) found that self-esteem ratings were the most important predictor of sense of community across the grades. She stated that it was unclear as to which preceded the other, but hypothesized that the relationship between self-esteem and sense of community may be "circular, with each enhancing the other" (p. 347). Conversely, other research found that the absence of peer support was a significant predictor of emotional distress, and that this in turn was related to perceptions of social competence, engagement, and performance (Sletta, Valas, & Skaalvik, 1996; Wentzel, 1999). Wentzel (1998) also found a significant link between students' feeling they were not supported by their peers, and higher levels of stress. Sletta et al. (1996) found that not being accepted by peers was a direct and significant predictor of feeling lonely. In other words, feeling a sense of community at school helps support a healthy sense of emotional safety and self-worth in students, and a lack of community may contribute to stress, worry, and sadness.

While feeling a sense of community has been shown to result in a variety of positive results, feeling left out and alienated has been consistently shown to be associated with negative outcomes. Feeling excluded has been connected with absence

from school, violence, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviour (E. M. Anderman, 2002; Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000; Blum & Rinehart, 1996; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Nichols, 2006; Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994; Resnick, et al., 1997). For example, Battistich and Hom (1997) found that schools with higher than average sense of community scores had significantly lower than average delinquency rates (running away from home, skipping school, damaging property, stealing, carrying a weapon, threatening or causing harm, and being involved in gang fights). As another example, a recent study using the Canadian HBSC data that included 8,479 students in Grades 6–10 from 185 schools across Canada found that above individual risk factors, students in schools that were considered to have positive community relationships were less likely to report either bullying others or being victimized (Sutherland, 2010). Other research on bullying has drawn similar conclusions (Karcher, 2004; Kasen et al., 2004; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004; Olthof & Gossens, 2008). Again this reinforces the importance of feeling a sense of community in school, and suggests that behavioural problems such as violence and bullying may be prevented by concentrating on building a sense of community in classes.

Feeling a sense of community in school has also been shown to be associated with positive behaviour toward others. Positive social behaviour includes such things as helping, expressing care, and demonstrating support and empathy toward others (Osterman, 2000). Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) and Solomon et al. (2000) found significant connections between student ratings of their sense of community and their concern and respect for peers and teachers, altruistic behaviour, conflict management, and acceptance of people outside their direct social group.

Similarly, Watson, Battistich, and Solomon (1997) found that feeling a sense of community had significant positive effects on students' levels of showing care for others, helping others, and conflict resolution. This suggests that students' feelings of positive community relationships are related to their desire to help, support, and care for others.

When students feel a sense of community they are more likely to take the risk to share of themselves and participate. In a review of research, Osterman (2000) suggested that as students' sense of community rises, their sense of risk decreases, and in turn their willingness to participate increases. For example, Connell and Wellborn (1991) collected data from students and teachers in three different settings: 245 Grade 3–6 participants in a rural community; 542 Grade 4–6 participants in a working class suburban school district; and 700 Grade 7–10 participants in a diverse urban setting. They found that feeling emotional security with teachers and classmates across the grades was significantly associated with teacher ratings of student participation. Building on the findings above, research certainly suggests that feeling a sense of community relates to feeling emotionally safe at school, and is likely to increase a student's desire to participate.

There is only a small amount of evidence demonstrating that a sense of community is directly related to measurable academic achievement, however. Battistich et al. (1995) conducted one such study and found that students who felt a sense of community in school had higher academic achievement than students who did not experience their school as a community. More commonly, findings suggest that a sense of community is related to motivation, engagement, enjoyment of classroom activity, along with attendance, which in turn all have the potential to relate positively to achievement (E. M., Anderman, 2002; L. H. Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Battistich et

al., 1995; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Solomon et al., 2000; Wentzel, 1998). In fact, Goodenow (1993) found students' perceptions of their sense of belonging accounted for more than one third of the variance in the interest, importance, and value they had for their academic work, which was in turn strongly correlated with ultimate achievement. Overall, Roeser et al. (1996) suggest that "feeling positively about how teachers and students interact in school may provide a secure emotional basis from which students can both come to enjoy school and also develop their academic competence without feeling self-conscious or worried about failure" (p. 419). It makes good sense that if young people feel a sense of community they are more likely to want to go to school, feel they can contribute, and strive to do their best. It follows that this would be linked to students reaching their greatest academic potential.

Today many Western adolescents are immersed in a culture of competition and the pursuit of self-interest. Children spend much of their day in schools where they compete for grades and achievements that are believed to support personal success. The studies described above suggest that safety, support, and positive relationships have been shown to help create classroom community. Feeling a sense of community at school increases emotional well-being, and decreases such feelings as stress, worry, and sadness. It also decreases behavioural problems and increases students' desire to help and care for others (Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). When students feel safe within positive relationships they have less fear to participate, want to be at school, and can reach greater academic potential. Encouragement, respect, high expectations, caring, responsibility, and ownership have all been associated with creating these positive student outcomes

(Osterman, 2000). Given the strong argument for the need to belong and the noteworthy outcomes and benefits associated with good group relationships, it certainly seems that one of the most important roles of school may be to establish a climate where students can be immersed in genuine community. What is needed now is deeper insight into the essential nature of this relational phenomenon. There is still much to be learned about the meanings, characteristics, and beliefs surrounding this important phenomenon.

### **Summary**

In an increasingly diverse and interdependent world, it is important to realize that, although history may emphasize individual needs, freedom, and influence as well as connection, similarity, and community, other possibilities for positive group relationships may exist. A variety of scholars have begun to argue for the re-conception of community that includes difference. What exactly this notion would look like, or how that would be achieved remains unclear. Furthermore it may be difficult to appreciate the need to address this challenge without first becoming conscious of the internal tensions of modern individualism that influence Western beliefs and systems (including the educational system) as well as the blind spots inherent in a historical ideal of community built on sameness. In the following chapters, I describe my research process and results before returning to a discussion of the findings against the backdrop of this literature.

### **CHAPTER THREE: DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

In this research, I set out to explore the essence of feeling a sense of community as interpreted by middle school students and teachers. The study was guided by the following research questions: What meanings do students and teachers ascribe to feeling, experiencing, and developing a sense of community in their classes? To what extent do the students' and teachers' ideas about feeling a sense of community include the acceptance of individual differences? Together these questions lead to the overarching question, what is the essence of feeling a sense of community? It is these questions, my personal interest, and my beliefs about the world and knowing, that have determined the methodological design used in this inquiry. In this chapter, I will outline the methodology used for this hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into the essence of feeling a sense of community in middle school. I will then demonstrate how my research methods, along with the ways I generated and analyzed the data, build from this foundation.

#### **Research Methodology**

Qualitative research works within real-life settings and explores how people come to understand their world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as the qualitative approach for this inquiry. In this methodological tradition, the researcher captures and describes “how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The goal is to gain “a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). This methodology was an appropriate choice for my inquiry as I was seeking to

explore the essence of how students and teachers understand feeling a sense of community.

While there are many different perspectives on phenomenology and its methods, I drew in part from van Manen's (1990) six research activities to structure this study. These activities include (a) turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests me and commits me to the world; (b) investigating experiences as lived, rather than as conceptualized; (c) reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon; (d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (e) balancing the research context by considering parts and the whole; and (f) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon (pp. 30–31). Following these guidelines, I (a) was motivated by my life-long interest in positive group relationships; (b) sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of middle school teachers and students; (c) had a goal of better understanding the essence of sense of community; (d) engaged in an extensive process of reflecting, questioning, and rewriting; (e) used the hermeneutic circle of moving from part to whole; and (f) hoped to provide insight that would assist formal and non-formal educators in their day-to-day practice.

### **My Relationship to the Research**

Hermeneutic phenomenology values the history of the researcher, and encourages reflecting on interpretations and beliefs both before and during the research process (Gadamer, 1965/1982). While some research approaches attempt to set aside the preconceptions and biases of the researcher, hermeneutic phenomenology considers these understandings to be a prerequisite and point of entry for any act of interpretation. Reflection upon prior understandings within the research is common to enable the reader

to better know the place from which the researcher is interpreting and to help readers form their own interpretations (van Manen, 1990).

The process of reflecting on my relevant preconceptions began before the formal research itself. My experience of education, beyond my own schooling, has always been in non-formal settings. Therefore I felt that a good way to start thinking about my preconceptions of middle school was by volunteering in a classroom. I wanted to observe a current-day middle school classroom, and begin to consider my knowledge, beliefs, and biases around education and sense of community. I also went through a deep process of reflection, talking, and writing about my beliefs about positive group relationships, and my own experience of feeling a sense of community. I synthesized some of these reflections into the beginning of the first chapter to set the stage for my research, and to be transparent in helping readers to get a sense of the history, assumptions, motivations, and meanings that I brought to this inquiry. I continued my process of reflection throughout the research and brought to light meaningful interconnections between my life experiences and the data throughout the interpretation of the findings and conclusion.

### **Data Sources**

I wanted to gain an understanding of students' experiences, ideas, and desires for community as well as the ways teachers thought about the phenomenon and tried to create it. The organization where I am employed supports a number of initiatives that promote building character and community in school classes. One of our yearly projects is a "Community in the Classroom" essay and poster contest for students in Grades 5–8 (see Appendix A). Youth are asked to describe or portray a positive community with this opening statement: "Imagine a class where students feel like they belong, where everyone

is accepted, and everyone is committed to getting along and working well together.” The contest had a strong participation rate with entries received from across Southern Ontario. I felt that these essays and posters presented an intriguing opportunity, and as recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), would provide an information-rich context for considering my research problem. I appreciated the fact that student texts (essays and posters) were produced as part of a shared interaction between students and teachers within the context of everyday school life. This meant that through the contest entries I could gain access to the shared language and understandings of feeling a sense of community in middle school classes. By supplementing the essays and posters with interviews with some of the teachers who had submitted their students’ entries, I could have access to teachers’ perspectives on the topic as well.

Therefore, the sample pool for this research study was comprised of the essays and posters entered in the “Community in the Classroom” contest held in Fall 2008. Nine teachers who had entered their students in the contest also accepted an invitation to take part in semi-structured interviews.

### **Essay Sample Set**

My sample pool included 192 essays from Grades 6, 7, and 8 (33, 81, and 78 submissions, respectively) originating from 15 schools across Southern Ontario. The essays came from small and large schools associated with private, public, and Catholic school systems. I had access to the essays in the late fall of 2008 after student names had been removed, and for this reason neither student names nor pseudonyms were used to identify quotes in the research. All of the essays were converted to an electronic format

so that I could readily work with individual thoughts and phrases. Minor grammar and spelling errors that detracted from the message were edited.

### **Poster Sample Set**

The poster sample set included 218 posters from Grades 6, 7, and 8 (81, 84, and 53 submissions, respectively). The posters came from 13 schools from Southern Ontario. The private, public, and Catholic school systems were all represented. As with the essays, I had access to the posters in the late fall of 2008 after the student names had been removed.

### **Interview Sample Set**

The interview sample set was made up of semi-structured interviews with 9 teachers who enrolled their students in the essay or poster contest. The interviews were with 6 females and 3 males. Three interviews were with Grade 6 teachers, one was with a Grade 7 teacher, three teachers taught a Grade 7/8 split class, and the remaining two teachers taught Grade 8. Teachers represented a mix of private, public, and Catholic school systems within Southern Ontario. Interviews were conducted throughout the 2008–2009 school year. Each conversation was organized around a semi-structured interview guide made up of 19 questions, but interviews were free flowing (see Appendix B). One interview had to be conducted over the phone due to distance; the other eight were conducted in person. All interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. I used pseudonyms chosen by the teachers to identify quotes used in this dissertation. I also edited patterns of speech or fillers, such as “um,” “uh,” and “like,” that detracted from the message of the text.

### **Ethics Clearance and Consent Procedures**

In the summer before beginning my research I prepared and submitted appropriate paperwork to the university's Research Ethics Board (REB) as is required for all academic research involving humans. I proposed using the public entries to the contest for my research and to interview teachers who had submitted their students' efforts. My advisor and I received an official letter (file number 08-002 McGINN) granting clearance to begin data collection on August 1, 2008. After receiving university clearance I also applied for, and received, individual school board clearance to conduct interviews.

The Grade 5–8 poster and essay contest, *Creating a Positive Classroom Community* (see Appendix A), submission policy stated

All essays and drawings submitted become the property of [the organization] and may be displayed in any chosen venue. They may also be studied for research purposes (in this case, no identifying names will be used). Essays and drawings will not be returned. The author's name will not be published for publicity purposes if he or she wishes to remain anonymous. Essay and drawing entrants that comply with all official rules as set out will be judged by a panel of experts recruited by [the organization].

I felt that students and their guardians were made aware that their essays and drawings, once submitted, would be read and deeply considered by judges for the students' expression of their understanding of a sense of community. They also understood that their submissions became public documents that would belong to the organization. Under these conditions, students did not receive special consent forms for the use of their essays or drawings as data for this research study.

Once the contest had concluded, and after receiving university and individual school board ethics clearance, I contacted all of the applicable teachers whose students had entered the contest and asked if they were interested in receiving a letter of invitation to participate in an interview. I made it clear that they had no obligation to participate in the research, and that it was an initiative outside the organization where I worked. If they expressed an interest, I sent them a letter of invitation by mail that outlined the study and their rights and ability to withdraw. I received expressions of interest from 9 teachers who consequently took part in semi-structured interviews. The teachers who volunteered for the study signed informed consent statements, including a specific consent for tape-recorded interviews. Interviews were transcribed and the audiotapes were erased after analysis was complete. Participants were given the opportunity to read the transcription, and change or erase any words they felt did not reflect their intended meaning.

Throughout the process, I was very sensitive to keeping my role as researcher and my job as director separate. That contest year I did not take part in judging the submissions, and I only accessed the essays and posters once the contest had closed and prizes had been awarded. Additionally, I received the essays and posters only after the names had been stripped from the documents in the same format that any other researcher would have been given access.

### **Overview of the Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Once I received the essays and posters, and before I conducted the interviews, I did one full reading of the essays. I wanted to use my first reading to get a feel for the topic before I began conducting the teacher interviews in case I wanted to add to the questions I was going to ask. Once the interviews had been completed I again read and

looked through everything to get an initial sense of the whole (van Manen, 1990). I then turned to a detailed analysis of the essays, followed by the interviews, and finally the posters. To analyze my data I used a systematic method informed by hermeneutic phenomenology and other processes of interpretive data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). I went through each text line by line. I also went over each poster carefully, describing the concrete aspects that I saw on paper. Within each data set, I clustered similar thoughts and came up with themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I compared emerging themes and subcategories by re-reading the individual data units and the whole essays, posters, and interviews in a continuous movement. I remained open to questions that emerged from studying the phenomenon, and allowed the texts to provide answers. This process of back and forth is known as the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is a way of understanding and interpreting how the parts—or the data—fit with the whole, each giving meaning to the other so that understanding slowly emerges from the text (van Manen, 1990). Throughout the process I moved through ever-deepening layers of understanding. As the final step in the process to determine themes I reviewed the full essays, interviews, and posters once again and I thought about the overall feelings and ideas (and the weight I felt they were given) in the three data sources together. I then tried to capture what I felt was being described as the overall essence of feeling a sense of community. To re-present my findings, I described the major themes interspersed with participant quotes and dialogue to create a rich and coherent picture. Consistent with van Manen's (1990) emphasis on capturing textual expression of lived experience, the inclusion of words, thoughts, and phrases was crucial to identifying the meaning of themes. I have endeavoured to provide readers with good raw material from which they

can draw their own interpretations about the phenomenon of sense of community. I kept a file with notes, diagrams, and writings reflecting on my ongoing data interpretations throughout, which helped clarify and elaborate the larger conceptual themes and the final presentation.

### **Data Analysis Process in Detail to Support Authenticity**

In this section, I expand upon the process of my analysis as outlined above in greater detail to show how the essence of feeling a sense of community emerged. The great detail provided addresses the authenticity of the process and is often characteristic of qualitative research.

I began my process of inquiry by reading all of the essays. I wanted to do this before conducting the interviews in case I had any clarification or additional questions I wanted to ask the teachers (as I did not have the ability to ask the students themselves). In my first reading of the essays I was surprised to see the extent to which “being yourself” was emphasized, and how often students talked about conflict and bullying as the main thing that interfered with building classroom community. I was also intrigued that, after talking about broad concepts such as cooperating, sharing, and including others, the young writers specifically emphasized the logistics of communicating well in their class—particularly the rules for listening. I also looked for ideas that were different than those expressed by the majority of students as is typical of qualitative research. I noted that a very small number of students included interactions outside their class, such as sports teams or clubs, as supporting, or detracting from, classroom relationships. Some students also wrote about relationships in the playground. Some students talked about specific components of a community-building program called Tribes (Gibbs, 2006), and

some used the traits outlined in school board character education initiatives. Based upon this first reading of the essays, I added questions about bullying, communication, and useful resources and programs to the semi-structured interview guide for teachers (see Appendix B). Once the interviews had been completed I read through everything again. I next worked specifically with the essays, followed by the interviews, and finally the posters.

### **Essays**

I started by reading all 192 essays to obtain a sense of the whole, or the first essence of the essays. Overall, my first impression was that when there is a sense of community in the class, students feel safe to take risks, they have fun and are happy, and more work gets done. To create a community students said that it was important to respect everyone's uniqueness, to help and support each other, to listen and interact with everyone, and to work together. Conversely, they said when a class is not like a community there is conflict and bullying; students are fearful and do not share, help, or participate; fewer friends are made; and less work is accomplished.

After gaining an initial sense of the essays I realized that I would need to break them into smaller data sets for more manageable in-depth analysis. I divided each school by chance and evenly into three groups. Where there was only 1 submission from a school, it was included in sample A. This left the sample groups as:

- Sample A (67 submissions; Grade 6 = 12, Grade 7 = 28, Grade 8 = 27)
- Sample B (63 submissions; Grade 6 = 11, Grade 7 = 26, Grade 8 = 26)
- Sample C (62 submissions; Grade 6 = 10, Grade 7 = 27, Grade 8 = 25)

My plan was to use the first sample for analysis and then have two further samples with which to check my findings and ensure that no new information was emerging.

To begin I went through each of the 67 essays in sample A, and recorded the key words of every sentence that expressed an idea relating to a classroom community in a separate cell in a spreadsheet. In the case where multiple ideas were expressed in one sentence I broke them down to have one key idea per cell. For example, “A great class is when all the students are behaving, no student is getting left out, and they are all being nice to each other” was broken down into three different cells. When I thought the meaning might be lost by breaking a sentence down into separate cells, I also included the whole sentence such as in this example,

If the classroom is a community, students will feel more relaxed and comfortable in the classroom environment. If students are comfortable in the environment they are working in they will get more work done. It will be easier to try new things that they are not too sure on because there won't be any pressure.

As I was entering abbreviated sentences into the spreadsheet I also eliminated ones that were difficult to interpret or vague, (e.g., “to create a perfect classroom it depends a lot on each individual”) or did not seem relevant to the topic (e.g., “Parents should discipline their children in order to gain respect from them”). A total of 960 descriptive thoughts were recorded at this stage.

Although I was starting to make sense of the data, I found that 960 descriptive units were still too many to work with all at once. In general, I had found that the student essays outlined characteristics (e.g., students listen when others are talking), things that students can do to help a class feel more like a community (e.g., cheer people on), and the

benefits and outcomes (e.g., you are not afraid to take risks) of a positive classroom community. They also illustrated what happens when group relationships are contrary to those where people feel a sense of community or described actions that can prevent a class from feeling like a community (e.g., people are laughed at). I decided that my next step would be to divide the 960 descriptive units into the characteristics, causes, consequences, and challenges to, a classroom community. To do this I again paraphrased and reduced the sentence size. If I was unsure where something fit I recorded the data unit in multiple categories. Using the following example again,

If the classroom is a community, students will feel more relaxed and comfortable in the classroom environment. If students are comfortable in the environment they are working in they will get more work done. It will be easier to try new things that they are not too sure on because there won't be any pressure.

I recorded “relaxed and comfortable” under characteristic. Under consequence I put “more work done” and “take risks to try new things.” This process of further paraphrasing thoughts and moving them into the four categories resulted in characteristics (147 units), causes (66 units), consequences (32 units), and challenges (101 units).

The reduced data units then allowed me to begin working on subcategories. For example, “welcome the new person” was placed with other thoughts, such as “invite others to play,” and labeled under a subcategory temporarily called inclusion. I then worked with the subcategories and clustered similar ones together to begin to define themes. Accordingly, I decided to place “inclusion” with other subcategories that seemed to describe what type of group relationships the students associated with community, and

labeled the theme “community.” My set of seven preliminary themes and subcategories were as follows

- **Identity** (expressing uniqueness/differences, self-esteem)
- **Community** (belonging/acceptance, empathy/interested in others, honest, fairness, helping, care, inclusion, optimism, conflict resolution, working together, responsibilities, respect)
- **Communication** (listening, expression of ideas)
- **Outcomes** (participation, safety, risk taking, academic motivation, success)
- **Challenges** (bullying, conflict, disrespect)
- **Teacher** (leader, models interaction, fairness)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (rules, ordered, fun, feels like a home)

These seven preliminary themes had emerged from working with a smaller number of data units so from here I moved back to re-read the whole. I returned to the 960 units that had greater description and compared each to this early version of the themes. This helped me see new distinctions and where I could amalgamate ideas or break down larger themes or subcategories. For example, when I went back to further descriptive detail I felt that the subcategory expressing uniqueness/difference was really expressing two different thoughts and felt that it might be better represented as two separate subcategories. I consequently placed data units such as “Students should be able to appreciate and recognize individual values and uniqueness” under the subcategory individual difference and units such as, “Be true to yourself no matter what everyone else says” under the subcategory title expressing who you are. This back and forth between parts and whole allowed me to converge on the next level of preliminary themes and subcategories:

- **Identity** (individual difference, expressing who you are, developing self-esteem)
- **Relations** (being seen and accepted, being valued and needed)
- **Ethics** (respect, care, honesty, fairness, optimism, appreciation, best effort)
- **Communication** (listening, expression of ideas)
- **Interdependence** (working together, taking responsibility, helping others, sharing, supporting, including everyone, addressing conflict peacefully)
- **Outcomes** (feeling safe, feeling happy, having fun, making friends, taking risks, participating, meeting potential, learning skills for life)
- **Challenges** (conflict, bullying, difference, disrespect, exclusion)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (teacher as leader, rules, structure, positive classroom feeling, comfortable physical environment, fun and meaningful activities, sports and clubs, safe playground)

Finally I returned to my initial sample of 67 essays (Sample A) to test the themes and their properties against the whole. I found that all of the individual essays fit roughly within the themes. I did not have access to the students who had written the essays so I tested my findings against a new sample: sample B. I did this by reading through the sample looking for ideas that contradicted my findings and found that no new information was emerging. I did not continue to test against sample C.

### **Interviews**

I began by reading all nine interviews through to get a sense of the whole. I took notes on my first impressions. Overall, I noted that the teachers emphasized how much they wanted each student to feel comfortable expressing themselves. They also wanted

students to know that they had something to contribute to others, and were equally valued members of the community. I observed how helping others (in the class, school, community, or the world) was deemed very important by all teachers. The teachers told me that creating community in their class was more about how they think, show themselves to the students, teach, and role-model the ethics and behaviours of community rather than any particular program or resource. I also noted how teachers talked about the purpose and goals of school. Most of the teachers felt they would drop something from the curriculum rather than lose an opportunity to use a learning situation to help individuals better understand themselves, develop interpersonal skills, or build a sense of community.

To begin, I went through each of the interviews and recorded the key ideas from every thought into a separate cell in a spreadsheet in the same manner as the essays. The content of the cells tended to be larger than the essays because the teachers were verbalizing, and were more descriptive in their thoughts. When a key thought required that a few sentences be kept together, I did that. In the case where multiple ideas were expressed in one sentence I broke them down to have one key idea per cell. A total of 523 descriptive thoughts were recorded at this stage. An example of a teacher's partial response to the meaning of a classroom sense of community is as follows:

I think first and foremost, it is building inclusion and building a sense of belonging. So my students walk through the door and they feel safe in here and there aren't any put downs. They don't feel afraid to come to school. And I think even beyond that, that they feel good about being here. That's the biggest thing when I think of sense of community in my classroom—that every student wants

to be here, even if they don't like school work, they just like to be here. It's a good place to be, it's a safe place to be and they feel like they can all contribute, they are not afraid to talk to you about things or work out problems.

This thought was broken down into the following data units:

- It is inclusion
- It is belonging
- Safety
- No put downs
- Don't feel afraid to come to school
- Important to me that they feel good about being here
- Even if they don't like school work they still want to be here
- Feel like they can all contribute
- Not afraid to talk about things

Next I rearranged the units from the nine transcripts into the 19 questions that I had asked in the interviews, and started clustering similar ideas together. Thus, under the question on the meaning of classroom community, these two units, "Important to me that they feel good about being here" and "Even if they don't like school work they still want to be here" were combined with this unit from another teacher "[the classroom is] a place where you want to be" and titled *Want to Be Here*. This process of clustering helped me to see that a particular data unit might fit better with one of the other questions. For example, one question I had asked was if they could direct me to any resources they use to create community; one teacher answered, "resources are always great.... I just think that honestly building community comes from within ... acting the part and doing what

you are supposed to do and not just talking about it.” This was paraphrased as “role-model it,” and moved to the question in which I asked teachers what they do to create a class community. Under each question, the data slips ranged from 9 units (when I asked about bullying) to 112 units (when I asked teachers what a sense of community meant to them). The units were first clustered to form subcategories. For example, “role-model it” was combined with other thoughts such as “show yourself in your teaching” to become the subcategory “teaching practices.” The early overarching themes and subcategories were as follows:

- **Individuality** (self-awareness, self-expression, identify strengths and weaknesses, self-worth)
- **Relations** (acceptance, inclusion, care/respect, responsibility to others, discussion, ownership, common goals)
- **Social Skills** (communication, conflict resolution, listening, appreciation, helping, patience)
- **Outcomes** (safe, taking risks, meaningful, want to be here, feeling successful, preparing for life)
- **Challenges** (conflict, challenging interpersonal needs, lack of skills)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (teaching practices, teacher attitude, meaningful activity, group interaction, supportive school environment)

After establishing an initial set of themes I was ready to move back toward working with the whole. I returned to the 523 data units and read them individually again, as well as the nine transcripts as a whole, and adjusted the themes and subcategories. This helped me see where I could amalgamate ideas or break down larger themes or subcategories. To

illustrate, I felt that “identify strengths and weaknesses” could be amalgamated with “self-awareness.” I formed this next iteration of the themes from the interview data set:

- **Individuality** (self-expression, self-awareness, self-worth)
- **Relations** (acceptance, inclusion, responsibility to others, interpersonal awareness and value, building interpersonal skills)
- **Ethics** (care, respect, appreciation of others, patience, positive outlook)
- **Communication** (discussion, expression of ideas, listening)
- **Interactions** (working together, helping others, taking ownership, collaborative goals, conflict and difference resolution)
- **Outcomes** (safe, happy, risk taking, participating, comfortable, meaningful, successful, want to come to school, life preparation)
- **Challenges** (exclusion, challenging interpersonal needs, lack of skills, disrespectful language)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (teacher attitude, teaching practices, teaching goals, supportive school environment)

I did not have another sample of interviews against which I could check my findings, but did feel that I had reached data saturation as there was considerable overlap in content between interviews.

### **Posters**

I wanted to include art as a means of expression for young people. I chose to analyze this set last so that I would have already been immersed in the language of classroom community through the other datasets, which I thought would help to minimize the depth of inference. I used a very similar process of analysis as with the

texts, and reviewed each poster multiple times for subject matter. I did a literal and technical reading of the drawings. For example, I looked for such things as the physical features and the setting rather than trying to interpret the values portrayed (as suggested in Prosser, 1998). After the first examination I separated the 218 posters by chance into three smaller samples. Where there was only one submission from a school, it was included in sample A. This resulted in:

- Sample A (73 submissions; Grade 6 = 27, Grade 7 = 28, Grade 8 = 18)
- Sample B (73 submissions; Grade 6 = 27, Grade 7 = 28, Grade 8 = 18)
- Sample C (72 submissions; Grade 6 = 27, Grade 7 = 28, Grade 8 = 17)

I planned to use sample A for in-depth coding, sample B to check my findings, and sample C if it was needed for data saturation.

I began by carefully reviewing the 73 posters in sample A. Of the posters that portrayed scenes, most were drawings of outside, and some were of the classroom. Many of the posters showed children engaged in play or sports together. For example, one child drew a picture of someone pushing a person on a swing, and a number of posters showed children playing soccer or basketball together. In the classroom pictures, illustrations included a child picking up something someone had dropped, a child erasing the chalkboard, classmates helping to stack chairs, and children helping each other with school work. Other interactions included a child asking another to be his friend, a group of children sitting together and inviting another child to join them, a group talking together, and two people saying thank you to each other.

Most of the other posters either had words on them, or symbols such as hearts, stars, peace signs, globes, and people holding hands. When words were used as the focus,

they often described desirable characteristics of the class. For example, one picture was contained within a large heart; inside it dogs were playing ball, with a doghouse in the background. The doghouse had a sign on it that said school, and the words sharing, laughing, having fun, learning, helping, and playing were placed around the dogs. In another drawing, there were hands of all different colours piled on top of each other inside a star with the following words around the outside: share, kind, peace, love, please, friends, and attitude. Some posters listed the school board character traits with decorative lettering, for example, respect, courage, optimism, integrity, fairness, honesty, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, empathy, and leadership. A few others listed the Tribes program agreements: appreciations/no put downs, mutual respect, attentive listening, right to pass, or participate (Gibbs, 2006). Some of the most common words were care, love, friendship, fun, helping, respect, and sharing.

I noted everything I saw in the pictures, including words and sentences. As an example, one poster illustrated a drawing of a school, had a title of “Friends’ Belong” at the top and four words around the perimeter: family, accepting, community, and sports. From this poster I created 8 data slips: school with cross, two windows with people hanging out saying hi, family (written), accepting (written), community (written), sports (written), “Friends’ Belong” (written at the top). I created the following data slips for another similarly structured poster: a globe, helping (written), kindness (written), sharing (written), friends (written), listen (written), smile, (written), appreciation (written), being nice (written), “Around the World” (written at the top).

This process resulted in 399 data slips. Working with the 399 data units, I clustered the slips into the following initial subcategories and themes:

- **Relationships** (accept, include, belong, friendships)
- **Interactions** (play, help, share, talk, work, learn)
- **Expressions/Attitudes** (positive, fun, happy, care, respect)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (playground, sports, the classroom)

I then went back to consider each posters as a whole and refine these initial themes in light of the preliminary themes from the essays. After adjustments, I was left with the following six themes and subcategories:

- **Individuality** (difference)
- **Relationships** (accept, include)
- **Interactions** (work together, play together, learn together, cooperate, share, talk, help, listen, have fun)
- **Ethics** (care, respect, honest, fair, appreciation)
- **Challenges** (bullying, conflict)
- **Outcomes** (successes, friendship, happy, optimism)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (playground, sports, the classroom)

Finally, I tested the themes against sample B as well as sample C and I found that no new or contradictory information emerged.

### **Connecting Across the Data Sources**

The next step was to bring the different themes together. In this process, I deleted similar ones and changed some wording to have a parallel structure. This left me with the following interim themes:

- **Individuality** (individual difference, self-expression, self-awareness, self-worth)

- **Relations** (being seen and accepted, being valued and needed, belonging, building interpersonal awareness and appreciation, building interpersonal skills)
- **Ethics** (care, respect, patience, positive outlook, honesty, fairness, effort)
- **Communication** (discussion, expression of ideas, listening)
- **Interactions** (playing together, working together, learning together, helping others, sharing, supporting, cooperating, feeling responsibility to others, taking ownership, addressing conflict peacefully)
- **Outcomes** (feeling happy, feeling comfortable, having fun, feeling safe, risk taking, participating, building friendships, experiencing success, meeting potential, wanting to come to school, preparing for life)
- **Challenges** (exclusion, disrespect, bullying, difference, challenging needs, lack of personal and interpersonal skills)
- **Structural/Contextual Factors** (teacher attitude, teaching goals, teaching practices, teacher as community leader, a structured classroom, a comfortable physical environment, a positive classroom feeling, supportive school environment, fun and meaningful activities, sports and clubs, safe and inclusive playground)

As the last step in the process to determine the final themes that would describe the essence of a community where students feel a sense of community, I reviewed some full essays, interviews, and posters. I thought about the overall feelings and ideas and considered the weight I felt they were given in the three data sources together. As I moved to considering the parts within the context of the whole it became more difficult to

describe the process precisely in words. I documented the smaller leaps and revisions in my notes, but overall changes in the breadth and depth of the whole moved beyond words and can best be described as an intuitive process common within hermeneutic phenomenology. This final shifting and renaming led me to see one overarching ontology and five attributes: *Being-in-Relation*, *Supporting Others*, *Dialogue*, *an Ethic of Respect and Care*, *Safety*, and *Healthy Conflict*. The interim themes are similar to the ideas captured in this final set of themes, but this final intuitive process provided a structure for distinguishing the overall ontology as well as the specific attributes that students and teachers described as essential to feeling a sense of community.

The most significant shift for the final set of themes was the merging of individuality and relations. I felt these concepts were too interdependent in the data to stand alone; individuality is found in relations, and relations are enriched by individuality. For example, people cannot express their true individuality unless they are seen and accepted by others in relations. As another illustration, being valued, needed, and belonging in relationships with others helps build individual self-awareness and self-worth. This final theme became *Being-in-Relation* and represented the overarching ontology of the findings.

I changed Interactions for a final descriptive theme title of *Supporting Others* because most of the connections described within this theme (e.g., working together, learning together, sharing, and cooperating) expressed a variety of forms of support. I also felt that the subcategories *feeling responsibility* and *taking ownership* implied an orientation toward contributing to others.

I changed Communication to *Dialogue* for the final set of themes because I felt that it more descriptively expressed the combination of sharing and listening, and illustrated the intent to communicate for discovery and deep understanding as described by the students and teachers.

I changed Ethics to an *Ethic of Care and Respect* because I felt that it was more descriptive of showing care for unique individuals but also qualities such as honesty and fairness that students and teachers described at the group level.

I changed the theme called Outcomes to *Safety* because I felt it most descriptively captured what the outcomes represented. Feeling comfortable, taking risks, and participating are all important outcomes of feeling safe. The feeling of safety is also built as students increasingly take risks and participate successfully. Emotional safety is the result of positive community relationships. Safety is both an essential process and outcome of classroom community.

I changed the theme called Challenges to the more descriptive label, *Healthy Conflict* for the final version in order to better capture the meaning of this theme. Students described behaviours contrary to community as a way to describe what the phenomenon actually was. Teachers talked about the challenging behaviours they have faced in trying to build a sense of community. I felt that both the students and teachers were pointing to a state where relationships allow conflicts and challenges to be recognized and overcome in positive ways.

These final six themes described above became the overarching ontology and five attributes that capture how students and teachers interpreted feeling a sense of community in their classes.

Throughout the process of recording subcategories and themes I had included all of the data. For the final themes, I did not include Structural/Contextual Factors. Factors contributing to the social context of schools are often classified into the two categories, social relationships and structural/contextual characteristics (Cemalcilar, 2010; Wentzel & Looney 2007). In general, “school belonging has been operationalized in terms of satisfaction with social relations” (Cemalcilar, 2010, p. 250). As a non-formal educator engaged in designing programs for youth outside their particular context, my goal in this research was to better understand the shared feelings, attributes, and skills associated with positive social relationships rather than specific place-based understandings. As such, Structural/Contextual Factors did not fit directly with the scope of this research. I do attend to three aspects that initially connected to this interim theme (the teacher as leader, activities outside the classroom, and meaningful activity) under the title Other Noteworthy Aspects as I present the findings. These ideas could be worthy of further study related to sociological or ecological considerations of school community as “the social-ecological perspective places emphasis on individuals’ perceptions of the fit of their surroundings to their behaviors” (Cemalcilar, 2010, p. 251), but did not help directly illuminate students’ and teachers’ understandings about the essence of feeling a sense of community. I did feel it was important to make note of these ideas that contradicted or were outside the scope of this research in order to support research authenticity.

### **The Final Themes Describing the Essence of Feeling a Sense of Community**

My detailed process of analysis and interpretation led to these final themes:

- **Being-in-Relation:** Individuality is discovered and expressed in relations. Relations are nurtured with individuality.

- **Supporting Others:** A giving orientation provides students with a venue to express their individuality and feel they have something valuable to contribute. When everyone provides support, individuals know that help will be there if needed. Supporting others is a way to express an ethic of care, and learn further about one's individuality in action.
- **Dialogue:** Open communication that emphasizes listening is essential to both express individuality and to know that one is heard.
- **An Ethic of Respect and Care:** This ethic provides guidance for group norms as a whole, and at the same time, it also provides space to recognize the unique needs of each individual.
- **Safety:** Feeling emotional safety is an essential part of the process of community as well as the most significant outcome.
- **Healthy Conflict:** When unique individuals meet in relations, struggles are inevitable. Depending on where the conflict comes from and how it is addressed and understood, it can either build or destroy safety in a community.

In short, I interpreted the data to suggest people feel a sense of community when they can express themselves authentically and be accepted for who they are; they use their unique strengths, perspectives, and efforts to support and learn from others; and they experience social relationships of respect, care, dialogue, and safety (maintained even in conflict).

### **Authenticity**

My research findings are offered not to provide an objective description of reality but rather to evoke readers' thinking and reflecting in a way that prompts connections between the findings and the patterns they have observed in the world. Research authenticity should be judged along with the congruence between the research paradigm and the inquiry's methods, along with the reader's own personal resonance with the findings. Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability provide ways to consider the quality of research findings.

The credibility of qualitative research refers to how accurate the findings would be considered by those who it is supposed to represent (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A number of conditions within my research process contribute to the credibility of my findings. Before commencing my data collection, I volunteered in a middle school classroom to obtain a sense of the climate and the conditions experienced by students and teachers. I also brought my experience working with youth in non-traditional educational contexts to the research. This provided me with a better understanding of context when I read the data. My data came from multiple sources for triangulation (Creswell, 2002). Data triangulation can involve getting different slices of data or drawing upon data from different social situations or different people. In this research, the three data sources of posters, essays, and interviews helped provide insight into the discourses that would influence participants' understandings of their class from a variety of perspectives. The essay and poster contest allowed me to capture young people's ideas about sense of community after they had time to reflect and discuss it, and then share their ideas through writing and drawing. The process allowed the youth time to think about what they wanted

to say about this abstract concept. It also helped me see the inter-subjective meaning of community within authentic classroom work. For the drawings I also wanted to minimize in-depth interpretation. Prosser (1998) suggests that the credibility of an image-based analysis procedure can be assessed by considering what level of sense is made from the image from relatively low inference (e.g., describing what is in the image) to much higher inference (e.g., interpreting the values portrayed in a work of art). In this research, I did a literal reading of the drawings. I was not able to verify my findings with participants; instead I was able to divide the essays and posters into three groupings. I worked with the first grouping to come up with tentative findings and then checked my results against the second sample. If I found variation at that point I still had a final grouping to check against. For the interviews, I had the opportunity to send transcripts back to the 9 teachers who participated, thus ensuring they felt they had been represented accurately. All of these processes allowed me to strengthen my presentation of the participants' thoughts for a high degree of credibility. In the end, the credibility of a good phenomenological description is understood by van Manen (1990) to be inextricably linked to the entire research process. From start to finish, the ultimate goal of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is the production of a meaningful text, which describes a phenomenon to such a degree of evocative richness that it affirms the researcher's pre-understandings of that experience. "In other words, a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience—is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 27).

Transferability refers to the degree to which research findings can be utilized in other situations similar to the one in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, I used student essays and posters, and teacher interviews, representing a wide range of demographics, including schools in small, large, urban, rural, private, Catholic, and public boards. The task in thick description is both to capture the complexity of particular events and to indicate their more general significance (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In my representation of the data, I used rich description of particular accounts to support the themes. I also included stories that did not fit, or contradicted, the main findings in my points of note at the end of the findings chapter. I feel that the broad representation in my sample will help readers of this research to consider how my findings may apply to their own unique interpretations and settings. Ultimately, however, hermeneutic phenomenological descriptions of experience function much like cases, and the applicability of the findings fall to the hands of the readers to decide how broadly the findings can be applied.

Dependability is used to describe the stability, trackability, and logic of the research method used. In hermeneutic phenomenology, each case is an additional example of a phenomenon; therefore, the more relevant concept is that of saturation. Saturation refers to the point at which additional cases that are assessed add no new insight to the thematic description. There is an inverse relationship between the amount of data obtained from each participant and the number of participants. More exposures, and more in-depth encounters, reach saturation more quickly. This accounts for the stability of my findings. The logic and trackability of my inquiry is addressed through detailed accounts of my process in this report, the peer review process inherent in a

dissertation, and the critical reflection that I engaged. It is also addressed through the consistency between my approach and my research paradigm, and the ways that I used van Manen's (1990) six research activities to structure this study. I followed his guidelines by (a) turning to a phenomenon that seriously interested me and committed me to the world; (b) investigating experiences as lived, rather than as conceptualized; (c) reflecting on the essential themes that characterized the phenomenon; (d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (e) balancing the research context by considering parts and the whole; and (f) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon (pp. 30–31).

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the data can be traced back to the original sources, that is, the degree to which the researcher's judgment is minimized. According to hermeneutic phenomenology and my ontological beliefs, I suggest that all research involves interpretation by the researcher. To make my motivations and personal beliefs more transparent in this study, I included a description of the theoretical and personal lens through which I approached the study and described my own thoughts and experiences throughout the research report. I have also included a detailed description of my analysis process, and made analytical notes throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2002). For hermeneutic phenomenology, the issue is to provide evidence for the essence that emerges from the descriptions, and show how participants' accounts of their own life experiences fit within the essential attributes. In the next chapters, the major themes will be described with participant quotes to provide support for the themes through the participants' personal interpretations.

## Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used for this research study. I described how a hermeneutic phenomenological research design enhanced my ability to gain meaningful answers to my research questions, and guided my analysis and representation. Through the process of data collection and analysis I assembled themes that can be understood as the essence of the phenomenon of sense of community. These themes came from detailed descriptions of the ways middle school participants (students and teachers) interpret the phenomenon. The next step is to rebuild the participants' stories within the organizing structure of the final themes to form a final detailed interpretive picture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; van Manen, 1990) in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, I will combine the participant stories with the literature, not to explain them, but rather to use the rich description to expand possibilities surrounding the concept of sense of community against a backdrop of literature.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE FINDINGS

Feeling a sense of community is a phenomenon that is commonly referred to, but it is difficult to articulate exactly what this feeling is, and how it is formed. In this research, I was trying to get at an inter-subjective interpretation of feeling a sense of community for those sharing classrooms. For that reason, both student and teacher ideas were sought in this research and are presented together in the findings. In this chapter, I re-present the teachers' and students' interpretations within the themes that emerged from the data.

When I first started reading the student essays they appeared to be quite general, but as I read further, commonalities emerged from the volume of different ways the students described the phenomenon. The drawings provided me with a slightly different perspective on the topic. The teacher interviews provided yet a third view from which to glimpse the essence of feeling a sense of community. The students described the type of group relationships where they felt a sense of community, whereas the teachers talked primarily about what feeling a sense of community meant to them and how they worked to create that atmosphere. In this research, the student voices were strongly represented as they made up the majority of the data and the essays were analyzed first during the data analysis process. The different data sources, the process of moving from the particular to the whole, and the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in depth from the perspectives of students and their teachers helped me to capture the essence of feeling a sense of community through one ontology and five attributes:

- **Being-in-Relation:** Individuality is discovered and expressed in relations.  
Relations are nurtured with individuality.

- **Supporting Others:** A giving orientation provides students with a venue to express their individuality and feel they have something valuable to contribute. When everyone provides support, individuals know that help will be there if needed. Supporting others is a way to express an ethic of care, and learn further about one's individuality in action.
- **Dialogue:** Open communication that emphasizes listening is essential to both express individuality and to know that one is heard.
- **An Ethic of Respect and Care:** This ethic provides guidance for group norms as a whole, and at the same time, it also provides space to recognize the unique needs of each individual.
- **Safety:** Feeling emotional safety is an essential part of the process of community as well as the most significant outcome.
- **Healthy Conflict:** When unique individuals meet in relations, struggles are inevitable. Depending on where the conflict comes from and how it is addressed and understood, it can either build or destroy safety in a community.

In this chapter, I rebuild the participants' stories within the organizing structure of these themes and patch them together to form a detailed interpretive picture of a sense of community within middle school classes from the perspective of students and teachers.

### **Being-in-Relation**

The first theme, being-in-relation speaks to a philosophical way of being, or ontology, from which the students and teachers seemed to understand community where they experience positive relationships. In my early analysis, I noted that I was influenced

by the traditional Western dualist thinking and expected to see individuality and relationships as two separate themes. As I continued to work with the data, however, I realized that these notions could not be separated. The students and teachers explained that in a positive classroom community, people express themselves and learn about who they are as unique individuals through their interactions with others. At the same time, the community itself thrives best from the diversity of unique individuals, each seeing the world in a different way. The teacher and student data showed that individuality and relations could not be separated; both were intertwined and could not be accurately expressed or understood without the other. This first theme is important in that it serves as the ontological context or frame from which the other themes must be understood.

### **Students' Perspectives**

Many of the posters depicted human difference. In the essays, the students expressed how important it was to be able to truly be themselves. One individual wrote, *all the students should be comfortable being themselves 100% of the time*, another stated, *no one will have to be a different person at school than they are out of school*. They wanted their individuality to be noticed and valued, *students should be able to appreciate and recognize individual values and uniqueness*. One student described the perfect context to experience a sense of community

*imagine you are in a classroom where every student is accepted for who they are.*

*Not one student is afraid to show their true self; they are comfortable with who they are. The students' appearances and backgrounds do not matter.*

The students also emphasized how important it was for them to connect with others. The posters often depicted students including, and interacting with, each other.

“Belong” was a common word incorporated into the posters. Fitting in was a common concern in the essays. Such need is captured well in this student’s quote: *well let’s start with how nobody wants to be a lonely fly on the wall. Everybody wants to be noticed and everybody wants to fit in.* The students said that when this need to belong is not met, it could dominate their focus. *Approval is important because if you don’t [receive it] you will put all your focus and mind on getting those people’s approval. And then your mind will not be able to be on school.*

The students wrote about how this strong desire to belong could cause people to act in a certain way in order to fit in. One student wrote, *it’s that feeling that most kids crave, with wanting to be in the “popular kids group” and the “cool people.”* They said that in the perfect class, people who are different would not be excluded, and labels would not have meaning as a way to separate people. This same student also wrote

*With the perfect classroom, this can be achieved, with everybody being the “popular kids.” In my opinion, people who get shunted out of groups is the thing that holds back most classes of the title of the perfect learning community.*

Another student also emphasized how eliminating cliques ensures that everyone is included, *because our class doesn’t have rank (as in nerd, jock, cool kids) we think of each other as one big happy family.*

The students wrote that when they feared being themselves and felt they did not fit in, they did not want to share their thoughts and ideas out loud. They also stated that they felt lonely and had no one to count on for help and support when they did not belong. They worried about such things as finding partners, not being accepted in group work, and being alone at recess and lunch. Overall, the students felt that everyone wants

to belong, but they also want to be themselves. In a positive community, being accepted would not be conditional on acting a certain way. To create a class where students can be both unique and belong, the students suggested that it was important to be friendly to everyone, look for the good in others, talk to people they did not know very well, and accept people in their groups even if they were not friends. They said that when they could be themselves and be with others in the ways described in these paragraphs they felt both a sense of self-worth and belonging.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

Throughout their interviews the teachers emphasized how community provides a safe place for students to be, and learn more about, who they are. Jennifer explained, *it's just, you can be you, whether it's goofy, whether it's you're not understanding things, or that you're frustrated, whatever it is that you are, you can be.* Thomas emphasized that not only being accepted, but also being valued for one's individuality, is essential in a class that feels like a community. He said

*The biggest thing that I would think of right away would be that all the participants in the classroom are valued; each person's accepted, for who they are when they show up at school in the morning. It's probably important to me because of the diversity of my students' backgrounds, their family structures, their heritage, that kind of thing. By treating everybody as a valued member, students learn not just from me, but they can learn from each other.*

Students learn what they are good at, where they need help, and who they are as they interact with others in a supportive and safe community. Lynn said, *so I think within the community, I think kids realize who they are and become comfortable with who they are.*

*I don't think they can feel that way if they don't have the sense of community with them in the classroom.* As each unique student shares him or herself with the group, the others have an opportunity to learn and benefit from that different perspective and contribution.

These teachers provide students with as much opportunity as possible to work face to face in small groups, and they change these groups often. They felt this helped students come to know, learn from, and appreciate each other. They also stated that they felt it was an important priority to help students develop the personal and interpersonal skills needed to be able to engage in this type of mutual and appreciative interaction.

### **Supporting Others**

The themes, *Dialogue* and *Supporting Others*, spoke to the two primary ways in which people interact in a community. I used supporting to describe this theme rather than helping for a number of reasons. This theme included both active helping through assistance or volunteering, as well as emotional support such as offering encouragement or affirmation. It included the sharing of a skill or talent, as well as sharing personality characteristics or perspectives. The teachers and students described the many contexts where support can be given such as in work, learning, or play and both inside and outside classrooms. It was suggested that all people need support and all people also have something important to offer others. Through supporting others, individuals can come to learn more about themselves.

### **Students' Perspectives**

The students suggested they have responsibilities to each other, and indicated supporting others was an important part of being a community. A student said that, *every classmate is needed in order to succeed. When one of us falls, the rest is there to catch*

*them. In a community, nobody is alone. We work, make mistakes, teach, and learn together.* Another student wrote, *community means togetherness of people in a safe and fun environment where everyone is needed to make the community run smoothly. Classroom should mean the same thing.* Although some students wrote about how community helps them know they will have support when they need it, I found that the emphasis on supporting the other, rather than having one's own needs met, was noteworthy.

Support can happen in a variety of places. The young people drew pictures of students helping someone up who had fallen, sharing pencils, and assisting each other in the classroom. Support can come in a variety of forms such as sharing knowledge, attention, help, effort, perspectives, skills, and talents. One student wrote, *everyone should help each other because people are good at some things and not so good at other things.* Another student indicated that *if a student within the community is struggling in a certain subject, other members will help that student succeed in a subject they might be weak in.* Mobilizing strengths for the benefit of others was emphasized.

The student submissions suggested that support was essential to community for a number of reasons. It was a way for students to see they had something to contribute, and reinforced an ethic of care and respect for others. Giving to others helped students to learn more about themselves, and to develop self-worth.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

The teachers also emphasized the importance of supporting others in a community. Zara said, *there are so many areas that students need to be aware of others and to foster that sense of helping others and understanding to ... develop their own self-*

*awareness and self-worth.* Similar to the students, the teachers talked about the importance of peer teaching and support. Ann and Jennifer said:

*We do group work every day, we partner up and sometimes those groups are ability grouped or flexible groupings, so sometimes we work with others who have the same strengths, and sometimes it's working where everyone helps each other out with different strengths. –Ann*

*I can say “you know what, I don't think these people are understanding, can you take them out in the hallway and just make sure that they get it?” And just giving them that sense of empowerment. –Jennifer*

The teachers told me they try to create opportunities for helping and supportive interactions where students can learn more about what people see and appreciate in them, to help them discover new strengths as they work with others.

*We do a lot of activities getting to know about what the kids strengths are, and weaknesses are, and being able to celebrate these strengths with each other, they realize “I'm not that good at art, but I'm in a group where somebody is then we will use them for that.” So we do a lot of group work allowing them to realize who they are; what they are all about.... We talk about “what did you appreciate about that, about their strengths,” because some kids don't realize how much someone appreciates something they can do that someone else can't. –Ann*

Jennifer talked about helping in the school

*They help out with kindergartens. They help out with the lunch-room helpers. They do hotdog day. They do pizza day ... because each one of them has a strength, whether it is working with the little kids, whether it's helping our*

*caretaker clean up the storage area at lunch, whatever it is ... they can use those strengths within the school.*

The teachers also shared their thoughts on the value of helping outside the school, in the community.

*The “Who is Nobody” project is something we’re running and so each of the students chooses to help people, or the environment, or animals. And they do an outreach project. So weekly, there’s an activity that’s reinforcing that “we’re not here just for us, but we’re doing what we can to make the world a better place, and a happier place.” –Lynn*

They also told me that when students help outside the classroom it teaches them compassion, and an ethic of care and respect that they can then bring back to their class.

Sue explained further:

*We were just talking about this really neat idea today about taking a vow of silence and raising money for people in need. They were really excited. All our efforts to engage with others ... really brings them together. There doesn’t have to be a real reward, you just feel good about what you did. And I think all of that comes together to create sense of community.*

Lynn also reflected:

*I don’t think that it happens right away, but when you get them to do something and they see what a huge difference they can make—just by doing one project outside of the classroom—something clicks. They realize that “ok, this is a project that I did. What little things can I do every day to try and make a difference in the lives of people that I’m spending a lot of time with?”*

The teachers in this research suggested that although every student may not excel in academic subjects, every child has the ability to support others. Helping highlights strengths, and brings a sense of contribution, meaning, and self-worth. Many of the teachers also told me how issues of supporting and contributing to others have become the central aspect of their classes within which specific curriculum expectations are embedded. Being supportive to other individuals in the community, or in another country, provides students with real-life contexts that can be connected to most subject areas and teaches an ethic of care.

### **Dialogue**

Where supporting others is a way to learn about and show who you are, dialogue is an important means for expressing who you are. Communication that is not heard has no meaning. I chose *Dialogue* as the title for this theme to mean communication that involves caring what the other is saying and truly listening. Both the students and teachers expressed a value for dialogue. The students were generally concerned about being heard and the teachers emphasized how they try to constantly find ways for students to share their thoughts and perspectives. The data from students and teachers emphasized attentive listening as a crucial aspect of dialogue.

### **Students' Perspectives**

Throughout the essays the students wrote a lot about the importance of respectful communication, especially listening. Their detail around rules at first seemed out of place to me, as they wrote about raising hands, being quiet, and paying attention when someone else was talking. When I asked one of the teachers about it she pointed out that students cannot feel they have expressed themselves, if they are not heard. One student wrote that

*students need to pay close attention to other students' thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas.* Another emphasized that *it really feels good when you know somebody is listening to you.* A third captured the connection between listening and belonging this way: *when students listen and pay attention the speaker feels like they are being heard and understood, which gives them a sense of belonging.* The students wrote that whereas listening can facilitate communication, things such as negative comments and laughing at others can shut it down. Many wrote about how detrimental it was when someone laughed at what another student said. *Don't laugh at others if they get an answer wrong, because you would lower their self-esteem and they would be hurt, and they might not participate much in the future.* Individuality, care, respect, and safety were all connected to feeling heard. Dialogue is the means by which two unique individuals connect. The essays suggested that it was through good communication, particularly listening, that students knew that they were seen, valued, and heard. Dialogue helped build the safety needed for individuals to feel comfortable enough to share and participate. The posters illustrated pictures of students talking and listening, some also wrote the word listen as a highlighted characteristic on their posters.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

Throughout the interviews, the teachers spoke a great deal about the importance of group discussions. Whether it was a formal lesson, something meaningful the students had found online, a problem that a particular youth was experiencing, or just talking about the students' perspectives on things happening in life, all of the teachers stressed how vital group discussion was in their classes.

*A lot of times we'll do things like we'll go online and we'll pick a topic for the week that you think is important and we'll do a current event search for the topic and find an article and they'll pick it and I'll print it and we'll read through it and have a discussion, and have a meaningful talk with each other. –Jennifer*

They talked about how important it is to provide the space to hear each student's perspectives, opinions, and thoughts. Zara explained,

*Everyone wants their opinions heard, some people are more confident than others about expressing it but essentially everyone wants to be heard and wants to be given the right to talk without feeling as though they will be told it's not ok. We do a lot of activities where I ask them their opinions. I want them to know I want to know what's deep down inside them. I don't want them to think that they cannot or are not heard. Even if they say something that I don't agree with they still have a right to say it.*

They also told me how this provides them with the opportunity to teach important communication skills. Ann said,

*You spend a lot of your life as an adult using oral language and how you communicate, think, feel about, or understand something. So I think feeling comfortable in a group presenting something, or presenting to me, or in front of the room, or [considering] "how do you think about what you are saying," or being able to communicate your frustrations ... all those types of things are important.*

Teachers talked about providing a lot of opportunities for communication and open discussion on topics meaningful to their students' lives. This supported their beliefs

that a community is a place where students express themselves and learn about others.

The teachers told me that they must model positive dialogue and listening themselves, as well as assist the students in developing skills for dialogue that includes listening.

### **An Ethic of Respect and Care**

The fourth theme emphasizes the way people treat each other in a positive community. As I began my data analysis I thought that the students were using respect and care interchangeably but it became clear to me through the process of working with the data that they were speaking to two different levels of interaction. They used words such as care and love to describe how to treat specific individuals and used words such as respect and fairness to direct behaviour at the group level, or establish group rules and norms. For example, respect would designate that everyone has the right to speak during a group discussion, but care may determine that on a particular day one student is upset and needs to speak more than the others. This theme suggests a delicate and sometimes complicated balance; caring for the unique needs of every person yet being fair and respectful to the group as a whole. Having a positive and optimistic attitude also came up across the posters, essays, and interviews and also helped to support this theme.

### **Students' Perspectives**

The students emphasized the importance of caring for each other in the posters and essays. One student described it this way, *we need to help and care for our classmates to feel like we're living in a community*. Students' posters showed students helping each other, and the words love and care were often included in the drawings. Trying to understand others' feelings, appreciating and encouraging others, being forgiving, and showing kindness were some of the ways that students expressed showing

care to their classmates. One student wrote that *we help each other not only for work but also when someone is feeling blue or excluded*; another individual captured this as well, *comfort your class-mates when they're depressed, and feel happy for them when they accomplish something*. Another student wrote about the need to support peers when they faced challenges:

*Some people may not participate because they're shy, or they're not confident enough to speak out. Whatever the reason is, you should help them, such as starting to talk to them, tell them it's o.k. to say what they want to say.*

For the students, care was about showing others that they were understood and supported as unique individuals.

Students also explained the importance of respect. The data suggested they saw respect as distinct from care. This is captured well in one student's quote:

*Another vital part of having a positive learning community is showing mutual respect. That means respecting others so that they will respect you. A way you can do this is simply by listening to others and not interrupting when they speak. Also, you can respect others by respecting their property and their opinions. This way, there will be less fights and arguments.*

Demonstrating honesty, compromising, following through on commitments, being fair, putting in one's best effort, admitting mistakes, apologizing, waiting one's turn, and not laughing at others were some of the ways students said they would show respect to their fellow classmates in positive class relations. Respect was a word that was often written on the posters. Ultimately, an ethic of respect and care was considered key to creating positive community relationships where students could both be themselves and

belong. However, this did present some struggle for the students. They knew that they wanted equal fairness as a norm of the class, but at the same time they recognized that different people might need exceptions occasionally if they were to truly treat each other in a caring way. Some seemed unsure about how to handle this surface contradiction.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

Everything the teachers talked about in their interviews also spoke indirectly to an ethic of respect and care. They said that one can identify a class that feels like a community because an outsider would be able to easily see that students genuinely want to be with each other. They told me that in the type of community they strive for, arguments were most often solved internally among the students, there were no cliques, and students were generally helpful and inclusive with any one of their classmates. These examples all illustrate students' respect and care for each other. Lynn said, *you see kids helping each other, supporting each other, being respectful and using respectful language towards each other and the adults they encounter.*

They also talked about how these ethics guided their pedagogical approach. Two teachers described instilling an ethic of respect and care in everything they do:

*So more than any program I might do, I really try to model that myself. I don't put them down, I don't humiliate them, I don't embarrass them, I treat them like everyone is important and that they all have different perceptions and ideas and they are great. –Sue*

*So being very mindful of the students who are in your class. Making sure that you're modeling what you expect. Being flexible, being patient, because every individual is different ... and so not getting hung up on curriculum being*

*delivered in one particular way, making sure that you're teaching a whole child as opposed to teaching history, and teaching English and teaching math.* –Lynn

Sue highlighted the reciprocal nature of the caring relationship: *I really believe that if I care about my students they are going to care back—most of the time. And that's what I have found, that they really do.* The teachers talked about being flexible and patient, putting the youth first, and being mindful that youth are all different and learn in different ways. They stressed that it was important to remember to be sensitive to the ways different perspectives, methods, or words might make students more or less comfortable. They emphasized that this respect and care must be embedded in everything they did, including all pedagogical practices.

### **Safety**

Safety was heavily represented in both the student and teacher data, and was described as both an outcome, and part of the process, of community. The students and teachers were very clear that feeling comfortable, taking risks, and participating were all functions of feeling safe. They said that students must feel safe in order to participate. The teachers emphasized that when students feel safe and participate they want to be at school, are more likely to meet their potential, and are prepared to do well in life. The students said that if they felt safe enough to engage fully they were more likely to make friends, have fun, be happy, and do well. Taking small risks to establish safety was described as part of the process of community, and a strong sense of safety was said to lead to a number of positive outcomes.

## Students' Perspectives

The students talked about a positive classroom community as having relationships without fear. This statement from one of the essays captured the sentiment expressed within many of the essays: *Being safe in a classroom is the most important thing EVER.* Another student wrote, *school should feel like a second home, you feel safe there, and without a classroom community some people might fail or even drop out of school.*

The students suggested they could not be themselves unless they felt safe. Ultimately people needed to feel safe to reveal who they were, approach and include others, share their true thoughts, make mistakes, offer help, feel they had something to contribute, and cooperate with others. One student wrote,

*In a classroom that has positive classroom community you'll see a lot more students that are involved and engaged, who are willing to take a risk and try and answer questions or to offer ideas without fear of someone judging them.*

When students felt safe to take risks they could be themselves, and participate more authentically and meaningfully. A student described this more fully:

*If the classroom is a community, students will feel more relaxed and comfortable in the classroom environment. If students are comfortable in the environment they are working in they will get more work done. It will be easier to try new things that they are not too sure on because there won't be any pressure.*

Within the posters the students portrayed success, friendship, and happiness as aspects of community; however, they did not specifically connect these characteristics to safety. In the essays the students clearly wrote about how safety within a community contributed to their happiness, participation, and success both at school and in life. Both implicitly and

explicitly, and throughout the themes, the students suggested that a feeling of safety in a community meant they would make friends, develop personal and relational skills, feel belonging, build self-esteem, and have fun.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

The teachers described safety as a necessary foundation from which students could then be open to learning, and meeting their potential. Safety meant students could take risks and fully engage in the class. Sue described it this way,

*that's the biggest thing when I think of sense of community in my classroom. That it's a good place to be, it's a safe place to be and they feel like they can all contribute, they are not afraid to talk to you about things ... or work out problems.*

The teachers explained that a community provided a feeling of safety and consequent engagement that allowed students to develop, interact with others, and have a positive experience at school. Sue went on to suggest that in a class where students feel a sense of community, *they feel like they can contribute more than when they are sitting there not wanting to speak because they are worried that someone will pick on them or say something negative. So it is the most important thing.* The teachers emphasized that creating community in their classes was something ongoing throughout the year, and deeply embedded in their pedagogy. The teachers involved in this research described community as being the foundation of education, and in many ways, the goal as well.

*Sense of community within a classroom setting is students feeling a part of the group; an equal-valued part of the group. Students feeling safe, to be able to*

*share their ideas and answers ... and just a positive feeling within the classroom.*

–Lynn

The teachers told me that community relationships provide the cornerstone of safety and engagement that allowed students to develop, interact with others, and have a positive experience at school.

### **Healthy Conflict**

The final theme, *Healthy Conflict*, is somewhat different from the others. The first five describe the essence of feeling a sense of community as interpreted by teachers and students. This sixth theme represents the ultimate challenge, and paradox to community where respect and care, dialogue, and safety create a necessary foundation. The data, particularly those from the students, expressed confusion around the subject of conflict. Within their essays in particular, I noted that conflict was presented in two different ways. In one way it was articulated as action contrary to an ethic of care and respect. In this sense, conflict was unsafe and created a divide between people. A few students described conflict in another way, however. They realized that when people were different, and were expressing themselves as unique individuals, conflict or disagreement would at some point be inevitable and they identified this type of struggle as a necessary part of a community where individuality and diversity were valued. The students often described behaviours that would detract from a sense of community as part of their definitions of what constituted a sense of community. The teachers did not talk about the role of conflict in community to the same extent as the students and had to be prompted to share stories about behaviours that damaged relationships and led some of their classes to be unsuccessful in forming a sense of community.

## Students' Perspectives

The students indicated that negative social interactions and conflict were of significant concern to them. They spoke of disrespect, difference, rumours, gossip, exclusion, and bullying as interfering with a feeling of community. They described these behaviours as contrary to the key attributes of a community where they felt a sense of community. This was more often described in the essays than the posters. The two quotes below capture how easily conflict can occur in a class. It is interesting to note that together the two students allude to behaviour that is contrary to each of the five themes found in this research. The first student reflected,

*Some things can stand in the way of a classroom becoming a community. If students dislike each other, they won't get along. If we have no respect for each other, we won't get along. If we ignore or don't listen to each other, we'll never interact or co-operate with others.*

The second student wrote,

*Yet there is more than one classroom where [community] is non-existent. Kids dislike each other out of jealousy, beliefs, and many other factors. Arguments break out, rivalries begin, and people are shunned from groups. These classrooms become chaos.*

Rumours and gossip were described as being very damaging to a feeling of safety and community in the class. One student wrote this about rumours: *Rumors really hurt people's feelings. Don't start or pass on rumors. As rumors are spread, the people that the rumor is about might start to believe the things that people are saying about them.* Another student spoke similarly about gossip: *Gossiping makes a class split into groups*

*and when recess comes, the class doesn't play together.* Many of the student essays also emphasized bullying as a source of problems in creating a community: *Bullying happens everywhere, including inside classes.... It could be excluding, spreading rumours, gossiping, teasing, name calling, and more.* Bullying creates fear; there is no emotional safety in a context where bullying is possible. Youth indicated that the presence of just one bully could interfere with creating a community. One student described that *when you are in a class where everyone acts very nice and like a community and one big mean bully comes, your whole class changes. What I mean by changes is the change of attitude, respect and a community.*

Students also suggested that building a community could help prevent bullying. One student wrote that *having a community in your classroom is a great way to show students that they don't have to be afraid to be bullied or put down when they come to school. Everyone has the right to be themselves and not be afraid.* This quote provides an excellent illustration of the way a lack of safety prevents “being-in-relation.”

Some students believed that community meant harmony and consequently that conflict was negative. One student wrote, *to create a positive community classroom, I think that everyone should know that there isn't and will never be a perfect classroom, even if you think it, there is always a little scratch.* A number of students wondered how it would be possible to have a perfect community if not all people liked each other, and when everyone was so different. Some wondered if it meant that everyone had to be friends. One student articulated the struggle that was present in these students' descriptions:

*To create a good classroom where students feel like they belong we can't have separate groups where people are excluded. We would need everyone to be friends with everyone, but that probably won't happen because some people don't like other people.*

Others said that when everyone is different there is bound to be some conflict, and that is normal. They implied that some form of struggle could happen and still be safe and in line with an ethic of respect and care. One student wrote,

*a perfect classroom is something like an impossible dream where everyone gets along well and feels at home. Nobody could get along with everybody because we're all different. However, we could all try to make something close to a perfect classroom.*

Another insightful youth captured the complexity and difficult balance needed to live with both individual difference and community:

*Does such an environment exist, where everyone feels accepted and comfortable and confident with each other? It most definitely should, but is there actually something so perfect out there? I can truthfully answer 'no.' While there may be places where it is as good as it gets, nothing is perfect. Being a student myself, I know this to be true. We are the ones that see furthest past the surface of our classroom's community. We are the ones that may feel better by putting others down. We are the ones that may not show empathy to others. We are the ones that may lose our intrinsic qualities in order to please our friends and family. But who is to say that we cannot just get along? We don't need to be friends, but what stops us from just accepting and understanding each other for who we are? What*

*stops us from co-operating with real people, not the people they pretend to be? We stop ourselves and each other. If it were possible for us to let go of all of our prejudice, bad attitude, and pride, imagine how fine our classroom community could be. Of course, everyone knows that having a good classroom community is important. It will not always be perfect, but why not make it as good as possible? Maybe, it is because we do not know how. Maybe, we know all the qualities of a good classroom community; we just have no idea how to obtain them. What do we do now?*

Some students said that they wished they had more skills to understand and handle unique individuality, community, and the inherent challenges and struggle that came with balancing the two. There seemed to be confusion about the meanings and types of interpersonal tension, and the ways they affected sense of community. Embracing individuality seemed to create deeper relationships; however, it also could make interaction more difficult. The essays suggested that students wanted to be themselves, belong, and connect and that they had a sense of what was required to achieve this. However, they struggled with the process of interacting with different others, and recognized that they needed help. The students concluded that there needed to be a way to work through conflict or it could damage all that it touched.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

In general the teachers did not talk about a concern for conflict in the same way as the students. When prompted with the question they did tell me about some of the issues that led past classes to struggle with relationships in forming a community. The teachers

generally mentioned negative communication patterns, as well as self- and social-awareness problems, as being the cause.

*After the summer holidays ... they [had] a comfort level with each other ... I ... heard a lot of words that just are not acceptable, that would be offensive, in any context that they're being used. And [I just addressed] that right from the start, and making sure that students understood that this is not acceptable, and really setting, strict guidelines and limits, and consequences as well ... and once that positive language is set, and the positive attitudes are set it just ... it changed the class. –Lynn*

*I had one class that I had to work and work and work on to feel that we were coming together. The things one boy was saying was not appropriate, and he was distracting for the class, but I do feel that I got somewhere, maybe I didn't get as far as I wanted with him in this year but I really feel he made some headway.... I really think they need to be aware of themselves before they can be aware of each other and I don't think this child was. –Zara*

*Sometimes there are just groups of kids that get together and they have so many things going on in their lives that they can't feel that sense of belonging or it's just, I wouldn't say none, but less ... I wouldn't say it was just one or two kids though, I don't know ... they just didn't click, and end up seeing beyond themselves in a lot of ways. –Ann*

A few of the teachers touched on educating students about the role of conflict in relationships. Ann told me that she tried to demonstrate to her students that people do not always get along but it is important to handle it well:

*I explain to my kids, sometimes you know I don't always get along with people I work with. We don't always agree, but it's how you show that disagreement. "Is it worth it, can I just let it go or should I sleep on it?" Sometimes they are very shocked and they are like, "oh this isn't a community of people that get along and go skipping together at lunch?" I'm like, "no, we are all 20 different adults, with opinions that differ, but we respect each other and we figure out how to resolve or discuss it."*

The teachers talked about identity, communication, disrespect, and a lack of relational skills as some of the factors they found challenged in trying to create positive relationships in class communities. They did express overall optimism about figuring out ways to help students grow from their differences and challenges.

### **Other Noteworthy Observations**

The essays, posters, and interviews provided me with extensive and rich data. The themes I have described address the questions of this research, but there was much more woven throughout the words and pictures. I do want to make note of a few other aspects that relate to my findings to give the full sense of the data as "messy," personal, and imperfect.

Although not a theme in this research, both the students and teachers emphasized that the teacher plays a critical role in establishing the class as a community. Community was shown to be a "way of being" in the classroom more than a particular intervention. For that reason, teachers play an important role in creating the structure, facilitating, and modeling the process.

The second finding of note was that interaction outside the classroom (in sports, clubs, and the playground) can enhance or inhibit community relationships. Many students suggested that recess was a time when they feared being excluded. With less direct supervision, it was also a time when it was easier to be targeted by bullies or included in negative social interactions. The students said that one of the important benefits of the positive relationships associated with community was that people were invited to play at recess, and had someone to sit with at lunch. A number of students also suggested in both the essays and posters that sports provided an outlet for them to form relationships with others in activities outside school work. Some of the students expressed that although they did not quite relate to the academics of the classroom, they obtained their sense of belonging and connection to others from the ability to be needed and successful in sports.

The third point that I wanted to include was the importance of meaningful activity, fun, and friendships for students. It may become easy to get lost in academic expectations, but the students' data and pictures reminded me that they also want to engage in activity that is meaningful, engaging, and fun for them.

Finally, I was interested to observe that the teachers seemed to feel that the activities and skills that help create a sense of community were not just a foundation needed to teach the curriculum, but in effect should be the curriculum itself. A number of the teachers suggested that they would forgo a curriculum-based activity in order to address any need related to maintaining a sense of community or building the skills that support it. This also reinforces the idea of being-in-relation as an ontology or a way of being.

The teachers were clear that they addressed community all year long, adapted their approaches to each individual class, and saw it as more about relationships and identity-building than about any particular activities. However, some did provide me with resources and activities they used from time to time to support their community-building goals. I have listed these resources, with permission, in Appendix C for the interest of readers.

### **Summary**

Students and teachers described the essence of feeling a sense of community as when unique individuals can truly be accepted and appreciated for being themselves, and know that they have something to offer others. It is when people communicate honestly in dialogue, and focus on supporting others in relationships nurtured by an ethic of respect and care that includes learning from healthy conflict. All of this builds the feeling of safety that is necessary for happiness, participation, and successful education for life. One student summed up the positive relations and characteristics associated with feeling a sense of community in this way:

*Fun. Laughter. Happiness. Never feeling lonely. Wanting to go to school. A feeling of people caring for you. Where everyone feels like they belong and they help each other. When the bell rings you run for the school door. This happens when your classroom acts like a community. Then everyone's self-esteem rises, so they will be able to do things and have fun at the same time.*

The teachers suggested that community was a foundation for learning.

*Well it's before academic content for me. Because I think if I can have that, then everything else falls into place. So anything that I do, we pretty much do that first.*

*So, it is the most important thing. –Sue*

*If I had to put this all in a nutshell, I would say that building relationships is the number one way to teach our children. Our goal as educators is to create an environment for them that is conducive to learning, and you do that by building community. –John*

Many teachers also suggested that community was an important purpose of education as well.

*I think it is really important to prepare students for life in general not just for their elementary education but their high school education and for their life. By developing a sense of community you are also developing a sense of them and who they are and who they want to be in a world. –Zara*

In the next chapters, I consider these findings against the literature, and conclude with implications for theory, practice, and research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AGAINST THE LITERATURE**

In keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenological method, the overall purpose of this chapter is not to explain the findings but rather to consider them against a backdrop of meaningful text. In other words, in this methodology, the place of the literature is not to “tell” but to act as a partner in dialogue (van Manen, 1990). To this end, I first relate the findings back to the literature presented in Chapter Two, which provided an initial context for my exploratory study. It is common to engage in additional reading throughout the interpretive process in hermeneutic phenomenological research. As I considered the data in relation to the initial literature covered in my review, I found that two additional scholars had particular resonance and I have incorporated an overview of their perspectives in the second part of this chapter. In the third section, I explore the findings against my personal experience and understandings of sense of community, which is a common step in hermeneutic phenomenological research.

### **Comparing the Attributes of Sense of Community with the Literature**

Table 1 shows the central notions from the two main bodies of literature that I referred to in this inquiry: sense of community and difference in community. In comparison, the central notions from the current research are that people feel a sense of community when they can express themselves authentically and be accepted for who they are; they use their unique strengths, perspectives, and efforts to support and learn from others; and they experience relationships of respect, care, dialogue, and safety (maintained even in conflict).

Table 1

*Key Concepts From Two Relevant Bodies of Literature*

<b>Body of Literature</b>	<b>Sense of Community</b>	<b>Difference in Community</b>
Central Notions	A sense of community is felt when individuals meet their needs; when they feel they have influence on the group and contribute; and when they feel accepted, valued, and safe.	A sense of community happens when individuals are appreciated for their unique differences; when they feel they can participate fully and communicate openly (including disagreement) in an atmosphere of care, justice, and safety; and when they feel responsible and accountable to each other in interdependent, interconnected, and ever-changing relations.
Key Distinctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizes personal needs and influence</li> <li>• Acceptance or membership is based on alignment with shared goals, norms, values, etc.</li> <li>• Leans toward freedom, fairness, and justice</li> <li>• Safety comes from boundaries, exclusion, and shared expectations</li> <li>• Common values, goals, histories, beliefs, and symbol systems are generally assumed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizes the expression of each person's unique being</li> <li>• Membership is open to all</li> <li>• Leans toward care</li> <li>• Is unclear where safety comes from; perhaps care and communication?</li> <li>• Everything is thought to be negotiated organically and open to change</li> <li>• Communication is central</li> <li>• Conflict and struggle are natural parts of the process</li> </ul>
Major Scholars	McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974	Abowitz, 1999; Fendler, 2006; Furman, 1998; Noddings, 1986; Shields, 2000

The sense of community literature tends to emphasize individual influence and meeting personal needs whereas the difference in community literature emphasizes being able to express one's unique being. My findings in this regard are more similar to the difference in community literature. I suggest that the sense of community literature bases key distinctions on the conditions that most effectively meet needs. For example, similar values, goals, and norms allow alignment around activity, rules are based on fairness for all, and safety comes from excluding those who do not align. In other words, sharing similar values and goals, eliminating those who do not share the same outlook, and suggesting that everyone should have an equally fair say in what the group is doing is an efficient way to meet individual needs and goals. On the other hand, the difference in community literature is built around the best conditions to allow individuals to express their differences. Here it is suggested that everyone is welcomed, communication is central, struggle is inherent, and change is expected. The findings from the research include some aspects of both bodies of literature but describe a third way of being in relationships where both individual expression and relations are equally valued. These findings are built around expressing difference to identify strengths and weaknesses, engage in dialogue, support others to be their best selves and in the process gain further self-knowledge, follow norms of group respect and individual care, make space for healthy conflict, and attend to individual emotional safety. In the remainder of this section, I consider my findings in relation to these understandings of community.

### **An Ethic of Respect and Care**

Respect and care were themes shared by both bodies of literature and the current research. All three contexts used both words, but I felt these two values had different

meaning and weight depending on the underlying worldview. Respect and care as equal guiding ethics came across most strongly in the research and was illustrated both explicitly and implicitly by the students and teachers. The students emphasized their desire for respect, honesty, and fairness in group interactions, yet at the same time they wanted people to be able to express themselves, and have the support they uniquely might require. The idea of care was articulated in the difference in community literature as well. Much of the difference literature spawns from a feminist perspective that is rooted in care and affective means of interaction (Noddings, 1986). Although the words respect and care were used in the sense of community literature, I found that MacMillan and Chavis (1986), in particular, emphasized appreciation and value for others based on the respect of rules, norms, justice, and fairness more than care. Alone, respect and care would not clearly differentiate the research from the two bodies of literature as the distinctions are subtle but in combination with the other themes I felt that the research pointed uniquely to a balance of respect and care as a guiding ethic.

### **Safety**

Safety was also articulated within the current research and in both bodies of literature to some degree; however, again I felt that the theme was considered differently in the three contexts. The sense of community literature described safety as coming from relationships with those who are similar and either was explicit or implicit that this involved excluding others who are different. McMillan and Chavis (1986) were clear about exclusion. They suggested that boundaries are used to protect against perceived threat and make emotional safety possible. Interestingly, the difference in community literature describes safety and peaceful conflict as characteristics of a positive

community, but I felt that this body of literature does not adequately explain how safety is maintained in a community where struggle is welcomed and there are no boundaries. This may in part echo the concern laid out by Young (1990) who suggested that when difference is acknowledged in relations, there “is as much possibility of separation and violence as there is communication and consensus” (p. 16). In the current research, safety was emphasized as an outcome of community, but it was also described as a part of the process of community as well. When community is thought of as an ongoing process, the themes that I drew from the research offer specific guidance on how safety can be built and maintained.

### **Dialogue**

Dialogue is a theme that separates the research findings and the difference in community literature from the sense of community literature. Dialogue held a central role in the current research as well as the difference in community literature (Bettez, 2011; Greene, 1993; Noddings, 1996; Shields & Seltzer, 1997). In the difference literature, dialogue was highlighted as allowing people to speak deeply as “who, not what, they are” (Greene, 1993, p. 13). In the sense of community literature, communication was not highlighted at all. Language was simply referred to as part of a community’s common symbol system (MacMillan & Chavis, 1986). This assumes that anything that is spoken would be received and be identically understood by others within one’s community. The idea that communication is clear and easily shared implies “sameness.” In a context where individuals are trying to express their unique personalities, backgrounds, and perspectives while being open to those around them, it is clear that dialogue is critical but also likely to be challenging. Thus dialogue (a type of deep listening and sharing) plays

an essential role in the difference literature (Greene, 1993; Noddings, 1986; Shields, 2000). Shields (2000) explained

The ability to communicate openly and listen deeply when in dialogue with others is critical for existing as individuals within a community that avoids oppression and assimilation.... Without these dialogic processes, unexamined assumptions and differences may remain sources of conflict and tension. (p. 290)

This resonates with the research findings as well. The students and teachers emphasized how essential it is for people to have many opportunities to share their perspectives and feel heard and understood in order to know they were seen and accepted as unique beings. Dialogue is essential for community that includes difference. Historically it has been suggested that based on “sameness,” language was easily shared. This finding may signal an important shift in the understanding of positive community relationships. It raises the question of whether people have adequate understanding and the skills of dialogue to engage in relationships that welcome difference.

### **Supporting Others**

Supporting others is where the research findings begin to diverge quite significantly from both bodies of literature and in doing so bring further important issues to light relating to what positive relationships mean from the perspective of students and teachers and how they may differ from historical understandings. A supportive orientation was a finding in this inquiry but did not appear in either literature base. The difference in community literature does describe care as essential for difference to be seen and valued (Noddings, 1986) and the sense of community literature articulates a reciprocal meeting of needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); neither body of literature,

however, describes support as a primary means of interaction, and as mutually beneficial, in the same way as the teachers and students in the current research. The teachers emphasized that it is through helping others that students can best learn about their own individuality, discover ways they can make a difference with their actions as unique beings, and gain a sense of self-worth. In other words, when people are encouraged to be themselves, they can best use their unique location in the world to support others and in turn learn more about themselves, which helps them to learn and grow. This brings balance and interdependence between self and other. This is in contrast to the sense of community literature that suggests people “maintain a positive sense of togetherness” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12) when social relations are instrumental in meeting personal needs. The difference in community literature, on the other hand, argues all people should be able to express themselves but generally leaves the issue of “for what ends” to be decided by each group (Shields, 2002). The current research shifts away from meeting personal needs as a central purpose of community to using one’s authentic being to support others as a central purpose, suggesting not only a different overall intent for forming community but even a new “way of being” or ontology of relations.

### **Healthy Conflict**

The meaning and role of conflict in community is another finding that is significantly different from the sense of community and difference in community literature. The difference in community literature described conflict as positive, the sense of community literature implied that conflict was negative, and the research described it as both. In the difference literature, disagreement is to be expected and is considered positive when it is rooted in unique individuals expressing themselves (Abowitz, 1999;

Beck, 2002; Bettez, 2011; Fendler, 2006; Furman, 1998; Shields, 2000). Conflict was not fully discussed in the sense of community literature; however, it was implied that struggle is eliminated when membership is based on shared values and goals and those who are not deemed to align are excluded. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that excluding those who wish to be part of a community is problematic: “people seem most likely to be prejudiced against members of groups to which they have little or no opportunity to belong” (p. 521). If exclusion is truly embedded in typical Western understandings of relationships then this powerfully explains the source of much conflict. In the current research, I found students were confused by the role of struggle in community. For most students, conflict was negative. It was associated with such things as gossip, rumours, and bullying and represented a lack of safety. At the same time, some students also had a sense that certain struggles would be a result of expressing difference and might be necessary. Interestingly the teachers did not talk extensively about their thoughts on conflict within a community. It is difficult to know why this was the case; however, I wonder if it may be that they do not consciously identify struggle as an expected part of building community and are reluctant to describe classroom interactions that they may have perceived as negative or feared I would interpret them as such.

### **Summary**

If the sense of community literature speaks to the typical ontological beliefs about relationships in Western society today, and the difference in community literature represents the desire to re-conceptualize community, the research findings provide a different way to think about the lived experience of community that offers some additional insight that may assist change.

Over the last century, Western society has been increasingly operating under an embedded idea of relations as contractual, where obligation to others is minimized (to maintain individual freedom) and a focus on meeting individual needs is maximized (Kirkpatrick, 1986). In this dominant ideology, the purpose for relations seems framed with the question “how can we best organize ourselves to have our personal needs met?”

Over the years, some scholars suggested that the answer to social separation and exclusion would be to swing back to an orientation toward relations centered in unity with everyone working together with a common vision of the “greater good” (Kirkpatrick, 1986). Embedded in this perspective was an assumption of similar people working toward a single shared goal. This was argued as unrealistic and unjust given the diversity of an increasingly global society (Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002).

Strong argument emerged for a less dualistic way of thinking about the purpose of group relationships. Many, predominantly feminist and pragmatic scholars, began to explore how relationships could be formed to celebrate all difference (Abowitz, 1999; Furman, 1998; Fendler, 2006; Noddings, 1986; Shields, 2000). Here I suggest the emphasis was on creating the conditions and opportunity to turn to each other and ask, “who are you?” Dialogue, inclusion, struggle, care, and permeability are all suggested as important attributes in this type of relationship. The research findings allude to yet another deep purpose for relations: the opportunity to turn toward each other in reciprocal co-presence and ask, “who are you AND how can I support you?”

Overall, I was surprised to see that the current research findings were not just adding detail regarding the characteristics of community where individuals feel a sense of community but also bringing rich insight to a new ontology of relations. As I compared

the current research findings with the literature base, I felt that I needed to introduce additional material to explore these philosophical underpinnings. The research findings had a strong resonance with Martin Buber's I–Thou relations. Buber (1970) described a reality where interaction in the “between” was considered as the primary point of interpretation in the world. I found that Buber provided language to capture the challenges humans face in their desire to explore who they are, who others are, how they can matter to each other, and how they can belong.

### **Comparing an Ontology of Relations to Additional Literature**

Findings from the current research are grounded in a philosophical starting point indicating the primacy of relational encounters. A relational ontology suggests that people live, learn, develop, and experience the world in the process of being-in-relation to others (Buber, 1965). Buber is well known for his assertion that there are two ways that people relate to others in the world: I–It or I–Thou. I–It is a stance that one person takes towards another. In an I–It relationship the other person is simply an object to be interpreted; a person “lets the other exist only as [her or] his own experience” (Buber, 1965, pp. 23–24). This means that individuals use themselves as the point of reference to understand, analyze, and give value to the other's actions and words. I–It relations are easier and more common than I–Thou. I–It is not necessarily negative, as it helps people categorize, anticipate, and navigate through day-to-day living. I–It, however, can certainly be constraining.

Where individuals can be categorized in an I–It determination, people can also behave in a way that perpetuates their role as “It.” In this vein, Buber (1967) described “seeming,” which is to act in a way that one believes is desirable. This is in contrast to

“being,” which he described as acting in a way that is true to one’s authentic self. The seeming human, wrote Buber, “is primarily concerned with what the other thinks of him [or her], and produces a look calculated to ... appear ‘spontaneous’, ‘sincere’, or whatever [she or] he thinks will win the other’s approval” (p. 28) whereas “the [hu]man dominated by being gives [herself or] himself to the other spontaneously without thinking about the image ... awakened in the beholder” (p. 27). When people are driven by seeming, their interactions with others are not accurately connected to who they are and thus may distort or fragment their sense of self. In this way, seeming limits individual awareness and growth. Buber argued that people easily fall into the trap of seeming because of their deep desire to connect and belong with others. In other words, people prefer to be seen and accepted inaccurately than to not be seen at all.

The I–Thou relation is a subject-to-subject relationship, where the other person is not viewed as simply another similar member of a categorized group. Rather, the other person is seen as a unified and unique being that cannot be broken into attributes, or analyzed as an object. In an I–Thou relation a person is deeply acknowledged in an atmosphere of mutual “turning toward” or openness to reciprocal co-presence. In this way, individuality and relations (or community) become contingent. Buber (1967) captures this desire to be seen as a unique being: It is “the wish of every [hu]man to be confirmed as what [s]he is, even as what [s]he can become,” wrote Buber (p. 68).

When people are “being,” they are showing themselves authentically, which facilitates the potential for I–Thou relations. Buber (1967) suggested that individual development of the self is an ongoing process through life and that everyone is on a lifetime journey of “becoming.” As people have authentic I–Thou interactions with

others, they are given insight into themselves as unique beings, and new possibilities of themselves come to light. As people choose to fulfill those possibilities, relations evolve and new relations are made, which again uncovers new potentials. In Buber's ontology of relations, each unique person is joined, in a journey of becoming, to a network of others who have helped him or her further understand his or her purpose and potential. (This description resonates as a strong and meaningful way to think about education and life-long learning.)

Relationships exist in what Buber calls the "between," which is the region of human existence where self and others overlap. He believes that identity and language reside in the between. Buber describes three different types of communication. In the first—genuine dialogue—"each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (Buber, 1967, p. 69). This is in contrast to technical dialogue—communication that is simply based on a desire to transmit factual knowledge—and monologue, which entails speaking "at" someone rather than speaking "with" them. Buber suggests that monologue is an act of domination and silences the other by taking him or her to a place where submission is required. On the other end of the spectrum, the best communication for I–Thou relations—genuine dialogue—represents a true sharing between people and can be either spoken or silent. Buber also acknowledges that conflict can happen in I–Thou relations. According to Buber, dialogue inherently includes disagreement. He underlines that people will not always agree but they can still support and affirm each other. However, he acknowledges that it can be challenging to be supportive while disagreeing because this involves attempting to see the

other's point of view, even when it is opposed to one's own (Buber, 1965). Buber (1967) felt that there is a great opportunity for building new insight, understanding, and a path to more authentic relationships in experiencing tension or conflict with another.

It was interesting to see how closely Buber's ideas matched and extended those of the students and teachers. The students articulated that in a positive classroom community they would be seen and confirmed for who they were. This is similar to Buber's idea of I-Thou relations where "I" meeting with "I" inherently recognizes that all people are uniquely different. In the current research, students suggested they wanted to be themselves but they also wanted to belong. Because the need is so strong, there always exists a temptation to try to achieve that belonging at any cost (Buber, 1967). The students talked about their attempts to act a certain way in order to be accepted and the problems that superficial categorizations such as "the jocks" and "the cool kids" presented. They were concerned that these types of categorizations ultimately excluded people. In contrast to "seeming," Buber described "being" as when individuals are acting authentically. It seems easier to "be" in an emotionally safe environment where people care and respect one another, and engage in dialogue and support.

The teachers talked about providing many opportunities for students to share their thoughts and perspectives. The students also emphasized how very important it was to be heard. Being heard is necessary for an I-Thou encounter. Buber described different types of communication. Speaking "at" others (monologue) rather than with them would certainly seem to lean toward an I-It type of relation. This again brings to light whether it is common for students, and even perhaps some teachers, to necessarily have the skills

and knowledge necessary to minimize monologue and technical dialogue, and engage in true dialogue.

Buber (1967) described how I–Thou and “being” can lead to a cycle of increasing self-knowledge and growth. He also suggested that every I–Thou experience helps people learn more about themselves and opens up further possibilities. I felt his idea of people joining to a network of others in a lifetime journey of becoming is a powerful way to think about the importance of encouraging all humans to find their uniqueness and use it to support others.

Nel Noddings draws upon some of Buber’s ideas on relations. Her ethic of care in educational practice has resonance with how the teachers were trying to create community in their class. Noddings (1992) believes that teaching children to care—for themselves, others, and the world around them—should be a central component of education. She says that, “if we decide that the capacity to care is as much a mark of personhood as reason or rationality, then we will want to find ways to increase this capacity” (p. 24). Noddings proposed that education for care would have four components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. First, she argued that educators have to model what it means to care in their behaviour: “We do not merely tell them to care and give them texts to read on the subject, we demonstrate our caring in our relations with them” (Noddings, 1995, p. 190). Second, she advocated for engaging people in dialogue about caring. She believes dialogue is such an essential part of caring that it would be impossible to model caring without engaging in deep conversation (Noddings, 2002). Her third component is practice; students must have authentic experiences in which to practice care. Her fourth component, confirmation (taken from

Buber, 1970), is encouraging the best in others. Noddings (1986) described a caring encounter as including “non-selective attention or total presence” toward the other (p. 6), moving beyond one’s own interests to empathy with the perspectives of the other, and caring as being “completed in the other” (p. 4). These ideas are similar to Buber’s description of I–Thou relations where people are seen and confirmed for who they are. It is a deep level of relation that affirms the presence of a “best self” struggling to emerge in each person on a lifetime journey of becoming.

The research findings seem to incorporate Noddings’ suggestions for practice and extend them by articulating other essential aspects of community beyond care. The teachers talked at length about modeling the components of community in everything they did, they showed through their words (and apparent ontological commitment to relations) that discussions of community would be embedded throughout their school days, they emphasized how important it is to provide opportunities to support others inside and outside classrooms, and they provided the structure for “confirmation” in I–Thou relations not just in student–teacher interactions but in student–student interactions as well.

### **Comparing the Findings to My Experience of Community**

The hermeneutic approach values the personal history of the researcher and suggests that it cannot be separated from interpretations (Lavery, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology values the preconceptions of the researcher and encourages reflecting on beliefs before and throughout the research as an important part of the methodology (van Manen, 1990). In this section, I have documented how I processed the findings against

my camp experience to be more transparent and also to stimulate further thought and engage readers in the personal experiences they bring to the reading of this inquiry.

The current research brings rich detail to the idea that people can only discover their uniqueness in community, and that community needs the diversity of human difference in order to flourish. The idea of individual difference and relations as interdependent and mutually supporting resonates with the camp experience I described in Chapter One. I arrived that summer thinking I had to act in a certain way to fit in. I admired the staff who were funny and outgoing, and thought their behaviour defined the ideal camp staff member. I did my best to act accordingly, but it proved difficult to maintain 24 hours a day. I was “seeming” and it was a strain. I eventually resigned to be myself and was surprised to see that I was still fully accepted. I remember that a feeling of acceptance for being myself was different from the more limited sense of belonging I felt when I knew I was not being authentic. It was great to feel fully accepted, and perhaps this struck me so forcefully because I do not believe I had experienced this sense before outside my family. This was my first experience of fully “being” in community (*Being-in-Relation*). I had certainly been accepted before in different groups, but this was the first time I felt 100% known and accepted for who I was as a whole person. I was no longer preoccupied with guarding my actions, and it was liberating. Also, because I was finally showing completely who I was and sharing what I was good at, it allowed me to contribute the full extent of my best self to others. I think others experienced this as well.

Our camp community was guided by norms of care and respect (*An Ethic of Respect and Care*). We had rules and structure that allowed us to function together as a community of approximately 70 people. It was generally understood that breaking those

rules could have a negative effect on others. There were times that rules were broken, and the reasoning and consequences were always discussed. To some extent, the rules were also open to negotiation as well. There were times that it made sense for a child to stay up beyond their bedtime because they were homesick for example, or a special occasion warranted a different approach. We all cared for each other and we used this as guidance to follow or change rules and to make decisions.

People wanted to help each other, and because living there together was so multifaceted, support of some variety was constantly required (*Supporting Others*). I always knew I could turn to anyone if I needed something. In fact I often did not even have to ask for support, because people knew me well enough to know when I was having an off day or would appreciate assistance. People were constantly pushing their boundaries and trying things they never thought they could do. No matter what it was, I constantly witnessed campers and staff sharing skills, knowledge, and encouragement in ways that illustrated Noddings' (1986) idea of care.

At camp, only part of the day was programmed, and for the majority of the afternoon, campers could choose where they went and how long they stayed there. In retrospect I think this contributed to an environment where people had all the time in the world to talk, listen, and truly get to know one another in I–Thou relationships (*Dialogue*). I remember quiet afternoons at the water-ski dock spending a couple of hours with only three or four campers of different ages. Time seemed to slow down; we talked about all aspects of our lives, and people sincerely listened. Sharing fears, wondering about deeper meanings, and exploring different perspectives were all commonplace. I think this helped us come to appreciate the fact that although camp members looked

different on the surface (different religious, economic, and language backgrounds), everyone had commonalities and differences that ran deeper, and we were more unique than these surface categories. For people to feel they can be themselves, they must first know that the time and space is there for them to be deeply heard.

The way that conflict was handled at camp has also remained with me. I had grown up to understand conflict as a bad thing. I felt uncomfortable watching arguments, and had seen friendships end in disagreements. It was inevitable that conflict would arise at camp as we spent almost the entire summer together 24 hours a day. At the same time, we were all together at a small camp where it would be impossible to avoid someone you were angry with. I came to realize that conflicts were almost always talked through respectfully, and resolved. I saw this done regularly, even facilitated the process with campers, and usually saw both parties emerge with tighter bonds and a better understanding of each other (*Healthy Conflict*). Camp changed my idea that conflict was always a negative thing that should be avoided. I learned that when it happened in an atmosphere of care and respect, and people were open to talking about it, new insights and a deeper connection could result.

When I think about safety as it relates to my camp experience, I now consider how all of the themes that emerged in the findings combined in our community to create a deep feeling of safety (*Safety*). We were all very different but I believe we all cared for each other. We spent a lot of time talking and listening to create caring I–Thou relationships. We all tried to help and support each other in any way that we could and because of that, I knew that help and support were always there for me. As I interacted with others in this way, I learned more about myself and my potential, just as Buber

(1970) suggested. At camp there were disagreements and frustrations, but we also knew we still needed to get along, and that difficulties needed to be worked out in respectful ways. Together we built a safe community that felt like a family. Our bonds were forged so strongly that many of us are still friends 25 years later.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I explored the findings against a backdrop of the literature found in Chapter Two, the ideas of Martin Buber and Nel Noddings, and my personal experience of community. In the next, and final, chapter I first review the research findings and then discuss implications for research, theory, and practice.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

In this final chapter I begin by providing an overview of the research. I then discuss some of the ways that this inquiry has contributed to research, theory, and practice. Limitation of the study is discussed, followed by recommendations for future research. In keeping with the spirit of hermeneutic phenomenology I finish this chapter by touching on how this research has influenced my own educational practice.

Individuals are social beings with a strong need to belong (Maslow, 1970). Scholars have become increasingly concerned about the individualism, fragmentation, and social alienation characteristic of Western society (Bellah et al., 1985; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Nisbet, 1969; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974). It has been found that feeling disconnected and alienated from others is associated with many negative social and emotional outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this research, I inquired into the meaning of feeling a sense of community. I felt that this could bring important insight to the feelings, characteristics, and attributes associated with positive community relationships. I also wanted to better understand to what extent positive community relationships can embrace individual differences, particularly in light of the growing interdependence of diverse humans in a global society (Shields, 2002).

I have had an interest in positive group relationships since a formative experience of community at summer camp in my late teens. I went on to a career of community building, often with schools, but found there was a lack of clarity surrounding what people were seeking when they asked for improved relationships through community-building programs. When I turned to the literature I also found a lack of clarity. Research

acknowledges, that this concept would benefit from a deeper understanding (Bess et al., 2002; Dunham, 1986; Hillier, 2002; Pooley et al., 2002).

In this hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, I explored students' and teachers' ideas about feeling a sense of community in middle school classes. Schools play a crucial role in preparing young people for life in society (Shields, 2002). Relationships are an important aspect of school life. Students' feelings of belonging, acceptance, and connection at school have been shown to be critical to positive school outcomes, as well as to student health and overall well-being (e.g., E. M. Anderman, 2002; Battistich & Hom, 1997; Catalano et al., 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; McNeely et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997; Whitlock, 2006). I focused on middle schools in particular because it has been shown that a significant number of middle school students are reporting not feeling a sense of belonging in school (Wilms, 2003). I also felt that students and teachers would offer an information-rich perspective as relationships are so crucial during adolescence (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000).

In this inquiry, I wanted to know more about the ways middle school students and teachers interpret the phenomenon of feeling a sense of community. I wanted to explore individual meanings of feeling a sense of community and uncover how those subjective experiences might point to a common understanding or essence (Beck, 1999; van Manen, 1990). van Manen (1990) suggests that lived experience, despite being subjective, must share certain qualities in order for diverse people to recognize those qualities and identify a common phenomenon. Specifically this research was guided by the following questions: What meanings do students and teachers ascribe to feeling, experiencing, and

developing a sense of community in their classes? To what extent do students' and teachers' ideas about feeling a sense of community include the acceptance of individual differences? Together these questions contributed to the overarching question, what is the essence of feeling a sense of community?

As the data pool for my research I used 192 essays and 218 posters from students who had been asked to write or draw about their ideas on a class community where they felt a sense of community. I also interviewed 9 teachers and asked them about the sense of community in their classrooms, considering what it meant to them and what they do to try to create it. Participants came from communities across Southern Ontario including: small and large; urban and rural; private, public, and Catholic schools. I broke data down into thoughts, clustered similar thoughts into subcategories, and merged subcategories into themes. Throughout the process, I engaged in the hermeneutic circle as I moved back and forth between the parts and the whole. I answered questions that emerged from the texts themselves, and came to a final pattern of meaning, which I synthesized and described as the essence of feeling a sense of community through one overarching ontology *Being-in-Relation*, and five attributes: *Supporting Others*, *Dialogue*, *An Ethic of Respect and Care*, *Safety*, and *Healthy Conflict*. I describe the findings briefly below:

- **Being-in-Relation:** Individuality is discovered and expressed in relations. Relations are nurtured with individuality.
- **Supporting Others:** A giving orientation provides students with a venue to express their individuality and feel they have something valuable to contribute. When everyone provides support, individuals know help will be

there if needed. Supporting others is a way to express an ethic of care, and learn further about one's individuality in action.

- **Dialogue:** Open communication that emphasizes listening is essential to both express individuality and to know that one is heard.
- **An Ethic of Respect and Care:** This ethic provides guidance for group norms as a whole, and at the same time, it also provides space to recognize the unique needs of each individual.
- **Safety:** Feeling emotional safety is an essential part of the process of community as well as the most significant outcome.
- **Healthy Conflict:** When unique individuals meet in relations, struggles are inevitable. Depending on where the conflict comes from and how it is addressed and understood, it can either build or destroy safety in a community.

In short, through this research, I found that people feel a sense of community when they can express themselves authentically and be accepted for who they are; they use their unique strengths, perspectives, and efforts to support and learn from others; and they experience relationships of respect, care, dialogue, and safety (maintained even in conflict). These themes provide insight into the essence of feeling a sense of community and consequently contribute to theory, research, and practice related to the phenomenon.

### **Contributions**

Throughout this section it is important to note that hermeneutic phenomenological studies do not produce conclusions but rather rich descriptions for readers to draw their own final interpretations and actions (van Manen, 1990). For this reason, the

contributions that I offer are not the only results but rather one set of interpretations among many possibilities. My intent for this research study was to provide: (a) clarity to—and then extended—the literature on community; (b) insight into whether community characterized as feeling a sense of community includes difference; (c) clarity for those who design and facilitate community-building programs, or wish to establish a strong foundation of community relationships within educational programs; (d) insight that may assist educators, leaders, and policy makers within the formal educational system; (e) an opportunity to consider how the findings may have broader implications; and (f) an opportunity to further my own understanding of positive community relationships. I discuss my desired contributions below. The final recommendation is for readers themselves to engage in discovering their own interpretations and conclusions.

### **Extending the Literature**

Through this research I wished to bring clarity to, and extend the literature on, sense of community and difference in community. The findings offer one ontology and five attributes to describe the essence of the phenomenon of sense of community and show how an ontology of relations is being enacted in the practice of some middle school class communities. This extends the community literature in a number of ways.

I drew from literature that described the psychological sense of community to frame this study (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Overall, I found that the descriptions given by the students and teachers had rough similarity to those described in the sense of community literature. However, the current research emphasized the importance of individual uniqueness, which brought to light the attributes *Healthy*

*Conflict, Dialogue, and Supporting Others* that have not been previously emphasized with the same level of description.

These findings also extend the literature that explores the possibility of difference and community (Abowitz, 1999; Fendler, 2006; Furman, 1998; Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002). That literature base tends to highlight dialogue, respect, critique, and care but does not directly emphasize supporting others, healthy conflict, or safety as defined in this research. The current research provides rich text describing the essence of community where differences are valued and central to community flourishing.

The question remains as to whether to persevere with the term sense of community to capture the phenomenon of interest given its lack of clarity and historical foundation of sameness. No alternative was found in the words and ideas of this inquiry; however, the importance of calling not just for an abstract ideal of community but rather asking *what kind of community is desirable* has been shown to be essential to understanding the concept. This research contributes to the literature by illustrating the importance of this question and providing a glimpse into the ways a notable number of students and teachers have answered the question with respect to their middle school classes.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of feeling a sense of community in middle school, and perhaps beyond, through qualitative description and representing this essence using the experiences and voices of students and teachers. This is a valuable contribution particularly given that most research to date has been quantitative and focused on the outcomes of experiencing a sense of community rather than inquiring into the meaning of the phenomenon. Also, there have been few studies that have

incorporated the understandings of youth themselves when exploring sense of community and related concepts (e.g., Nichols, 2008). This research inquiry answers many calls to better understand community in schools including Furman-Brown's (1999) call to better understand the conditions that foster classroom community, the barriers to community building, as well as community as understood by students in particular.

### **Demonstrating that Community Needs Difference**

In this research, I was interested to know the extent to which students' and teachers' experiences of feeling a sense of community included an acceptance of individual differences. The literature pointed to the complexity of this issue. Community has historically been associated with sameness (Abowitz, 1999; Fendler, 2006; Furman, 1998; Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002). Scholars have argued that sameness silences difference and creates an inherent push toward conformity, surface agreement, or exclusion (Gardner, 1991; Greene, 1993; Noddings, 1996; Peck, 1990; Shields, 2000). This question may have been further problematized by Western Cartesian thinking that separates difference and sameness, individuality and community, and presents them as irreconcilable. Some scholars have theorized that difference and community should in fact be dependent on each other (Abowitz, 1999; Fendler, 2006; Furman, 1998; Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002), but there have been few studies on what that might look like in lived experience. In the current research, the students and teachers considered individual difference to be essential to community where people feel a sense of community. How this is experienced was described in detail through the words of students and teachers and adds important texture to the discourse on community that includes difference. The findings also describe the relationship between the ontology and

attributes of community where one feels a sense of community to provide further insight into the ways difference and community come together in experience.

### **Providing Insights for Building Community in Non-Formal Educational Programs**

Through this research I wanted to know more about how to support students and teachers, as well as others who attend community-building programs. The new insight provided by this research brings great value to programs that are aimed at supporting the development of individuals and communities.

The research provided five attributes that offer a broad framework for program design. I suggest that building an awareness and understanding of *Dialogue* and *Healthy Conflict* management, along with the skills needed to engage with them effectively are two important areas to highlight. The *Ethic of Respect and Care* indicates the importance of establishing these as conscious group norms and discussing how to balance group fairness with what may be needed to care for each individual. The attribute of *Supporting Others* highlights the fact that unique individuals can provide support to others in many ways beyond helping, and that supporting others is mutually beneficial and important for personal growth. Finally, *Safety* provides a critical focus for all interaction within community and points toward community as both a process and a product. The inquiry also reminds the reader to consider the overall ontology within which a program takes place. The five attributes may be less successful if considered in a prescriptive fashion without consideration for the overall relational philosophy.

The current research also indicates that it is important for programs to be attentive to avoiding the more assimilative characteristics of traditional community that can so easily lurk beneath the surface of many cooperative and participative designs. Educators

should be constantly asking themselves about the extent to which there is opportunity for those who see things differently to truly voice their perspectives, and whether differences are the grounds for understanding and learning or for assimilation.

Finally, this research highlights for teachers, parents, and students the value that programs designed to focus on the essential attributes of sense of community may bring in supporting students and teachers who wish to develop and maintain the feeling of a sense of community for their classes.

### **Providing Insights for School Policy Makers, Leaders, and Teachers**

I often work with teachers who want to build community in their classes. Inclusive community relationships are an important concern as they are tied to positive school outcomes as well as student overall health and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Osterman, 2000). Research has shown that relationships are particularly important in middle school where approximately half of the students report not feeling a sense of belonging (Wilms, 2003). It is my hope that these findings, which highlight the voices of middle school students and teachers, may provide useful insights to support policy makers, teacher-educators, school leaders, and teachers.

This research shows that community can be a way of being. As such it is important that teacher beliefs, educational methods, and curricular content are consistent in the goals, methods, and ethics they reflect. At the deepest level, teachers should be encouraged to ask themselves what ontologies or social ideologies they support through their pedagogical methods. The findings from this research also raise important questions for teachers to consider when aspiring to build community that values difference in their classes. Teachers should reflect upon how differences in values, goals, beliefs, and

interests can be made central to the educational approach, and how this may look different from year to year.

The results from this research offer five essential attributes that provide a framework for creating and reflecting upon positive relationships in classes. The identified attributes suggest ethics of respect and care, interactions that heavily emphasize dialogue and supporting others, building the skills needed to understand and manage conflict that may come from difference, and an overall focus on continued feelings of safety.

The descriptions and ideas provided by the teachers and the students in this research provide support for the idea that individuals who do not feel valued, connected, or cared for can become preoccupied with gaining a sense of emotional security and exhibit a reduced ability to be open to others as suggested by Baumeister and Leary, (1995). The findings from this research suggest that efforts to proactively build community may reduce or limit the need for a focus on bullying or violence prevention in school.

Finally, this research provides rich detail regarding the feelings, attributes, and importance of sense of community from the interpretations of students and teachers. The descriptive texture provided by a wide range of voices in this research may help support school leaders and policy makers in their work to advocate for the time and training needed to emphasize classroom relationships and create community as a “way of being” and important educational “end” for life in a global and interconnected society.

### **Contemplating Broader Implications**

In an interdependent global society, people need to be able to negotiate relationships with diverse others (Furman, 2002; O'Sullivan, 1999). At the same time scholars have become increasingly concerned about the individualism, fragmentation, and social alienation characteristic of Western society (Bellah et al., 1985; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Nisbet, 1969; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974; Shields, 2002). These final points are offered tentatively in light of the phenomenological possibility that shared understandings may hint at broader challenges and opportunities for improved relationships on a larger scale.

In the fast-paced Western world, this research emphasizes the value of dialogue—sharing deeply of oneself and being fully present when listening. I was left feeling that contemporary society may not be emphasizing the importance of, and the skills for, dialogue in present times. Conflict at all levels is ever present in society. This research led me to ponder whether the construction of conflict as negative has constrained possibilities for seeing struggle and conflict from difference as opportunities for learning and growth. This research hints at the complexity of balancing an ethic of respect and care at a group level while also remaining open and flexible enough to meet individual needs as they arise. This may be challenging within an individualistic ideology that emphasizes equality and fairness and so may give priority to respect rather than care. Safety was highlighted in the research as an important part of the process of building a sense of community. This led me to think about the complexity of ensuring that diverse people feel safe (as they uniquely interpret safety) in the company of others. Finally this research suggested that it is important to use one's uniqueness to support others, and

through supporting others, one's true self can be found. This provides another insightful thought to ponder at the current time in history when the West is characterized by individualism yet faced with growing global interdependence and the need for sustainability.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As in all research, there are some limitations to the findings of this study. Sense of community is a concept that lacks clarity. As such, the participants may not have fully understood the phenomenon I was inquiring about. I did not ask students to directly describe a class where they felt a sense of community because I thought the language would be unclear. I instead asked students to describe a class where people are accepted and work well together. Their answers generally resonated with the sense of community literature, but they may have been speaking about a different or new phenomenon that has no labels associated with it. It would have been helpful to be able to further discuss my findings with the students and teachers involved in the study. This was not possible, however, because of the nature of the data coming from contest entries, and the fact that the data analysis took place beyond the school year when the data were acquired.

My use of essays and posters in this research was both an asset and a limitation. The essays together gave a consistent essence of sense of community, but some individual essays did not leave me with rich and detailed stories and quotes that I could pass on to the reader. The posters added another perspective to the data, but I felt that I could not delve deeply into their meaning without being able to talk about them with their creators. I was also not able to re-present the posters in the same way that I was able to extract and share certain anonymous excerpts from the student essays.

I am not an educator within the formal school system. This undoubtedly influenced how I interpreted the data and limited my comfort in providing detailed connections and recommendations to the formal education system. While this may have represented limits, it may also have proven beneficial in that it allowed me to come to the phenomenon with fewer preconceptions (van Manen, 1990) about the day-to-day traditions of the class and so I may have better been able to move below the words to identify the essence of sense of community as expressed by the teachers and students. In the end, the method of hermeneutic phenomenology does suggest that final interpretations and transferability falls to the hands of the reader.

Finally, it should be noted that this research took place in Southern Ontario, Canada, where human diversity of all types is quite common and so these findings may not necessarily translate to other geographical locations.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The limitations, as well as the findings and recommendations, suggest a number of areas for future research.

Through this research, I sought to understand the essence of feeling a sense of community for middle school students and teachers. I suggest further phenomenological research on the essence of sense of community as understood by other educational communities, in other geographical locations, and within other types of groups outside the formal educational system.

This research focused on communities where individuals feel a sense of community. My interest was on the feelings and characteristics of communities associated with positive relationships. I suggest future research into the structural and

ecological systems surrounding these feelings as I did not delve into factors such as community leadership or the school culture, for example, in this research study.

Five attributes were suggested in this inquiry. I suggest further phenomenological research to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of each of these attributes. In particular, I suggest research is most needed regarding the three attributes that have not received much emphasis in the sense of community literature (i.e., *Dialogue*, *Supporting Others*, and *Healthy Conflict*). I also suggest research into the essence of *Safety* as it is understood in social relationships built on uniqueness.

Conflict was indicated as the biggest obstacle to feeling a sense of community. It was also the area where the students indicated greatest concern. At the same time, the teachers did not elaborate on the role that conflict plays in community. I suggest further research into the meaning of healthy conflict in classroom communities, other community contexts that are known to manage conflict coming from difference in positive ways, the lived experience of balancing conflict and safety in community, and the ways programs that build a sense of community may affect contexts of bullying and violence.

### **Epilogue: Post-Research Reflections and My Changing Practice**

In hermeneutic phenomenology, there is a constant back and forth movement, or “play” (Gadamer, 1965/1982), between literature, the research, and the experiencing, interpreting researcher. My present, past, and future have been constitutively involved in this process of building understanding through this research. I have immersed myself in a process of reading, intuiting, thinking, talking, writing, and also acting in my profession over the years since this research began. My process of interpreting included bringing

ideas from my research to my practice and watching how those ideas interacted with real-life experience.

My greatest professional growth from this research has been ontologically. I started off interested in the meaning and characteristics of community relationships that allow individuals to flourish. What I have come to see through this research is how much of a deeply ontological question this is. I now feel that the ability to express unique individuality within community is deeply tied to one's beliefs around individuals flourishing "for what ends"? It can be cogently argued that the West emphasizes individualism, contractual relations, competition, and individual development for personal gain (Nisbet, 1969; Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002). What this research says to me is that a positive community that allows each individual to be their "best self" cannot actually be found unless relations are sought with the intent of caring, listening, and supporting the other. This insight has helped bring words to my goals for the educational experiences I provide in my role as a director of informal and experiential education programs. I want to provide education for an "end" that allows individuals to turn toward one another and ask "who are you and how can I support you?"

Beyond this ontological understanding, I have added and reshaped the programs I oversee to emphasize three of the themes from this research: *Healthy Conflict*, *Dialogue*, and *Supporting Others*. First, through this research, I have come to see how confusing conflict can be for young people. I believe programs in the organization where I work embody a caring approach that values difference, but do young people understand this means struggle will still occur and can be safe? From this research, I decided that I would work with other staff to review our conflict management approach and consider how we

could take the opportunity to talk to young people about differences between conflict that arises from a lack of respect or care and conflict that arises from individual difference. When youth engage in conflict we have them step aside and take part in a conversation with an instructor, and then with each other (when appropriate) to discuss why each party acted as they did, how each felt about it, and what could be done differently in the future. As a starting point, we decided that we would use conflict from “difference or disrespect” as a catch phrase in these discussions to help the youth identify why they think the conflict occurred. We felt this would help raise awareness that sometimes conflict does not come from an intent to hurt but rather is simply a result of different interpretations of a situation. We are still exploring other ways to address healthy conflict in our programs.

Second, I wanted to bring the idea of dialogue into the adult programs that I oversee. I developed a community-based public conversation series where adults meet in cafes once a week and talk about issues that have multiple sides and no easy answers (e.g., Do small actions really make a global difference? What can adults really learn from children? How do we know what makes life worthwhile? What does ‘home’ mean? What makes a good parent? What is art? What does it mean to grow old? Can human differences peacefully co-exist?). The evenings begin with a guest providing a ten-minute introduction to the topic. A moderator then explains the ground rules, which emphasize that everyone’s perspective should be valued and then invites conversation. Throughout the dialogue, the moderator ensures people engage in caring, respectful, and safe interaction. We plan to initiate a conversation series for youth in the coming year.

Third, the lack of belonging in middle schools is a concern for me. If students do not feel as though they are accepted in school, why would they want to continue? This

research has shown how centering educational activity around supporting others can provide a way for everyone to feel they have something to offer. Since finding these results I have begun to develop a program directed at those who might typically not feel school belonging, and not continue on to post-secondary education. This program helps participants locate their interests, skills, and talents within six areas of purpose: Human Rights and Responsibilities, Animal Rights, Environmental Sustainability, Quality of Life and Education, Peace and Justice, and Community and Global Development. Once students find their passion and see that they can use their skills, talents, and perspectives to make a difference, we plan to use this way of thinking to help them identify post-secondary pathways. It is my hope that they will develop a renewed interest in learning as it may relate to their passion and purpose. I hope this increased engagement will help them reconnect with school and go on to consider post-secondary options.

This research has helped evolve the way I think about relations. It has brought to light that individual understanding and uniqueness are interdependent with community. It has reminded me of the value and complexity of conflict, brought clarity to the role and importance of support in relations, and refocused me on the need to move to deeper levels of respect, care, and dialogue. While moving these ideas to the world of practice, which can be complex and messy, it has reminded me that the ultimate goal is being yourself, supporting others, taking time for meaningful relations, knowing that everyone is on a life-long journey of becoming, and always ensuring that everyone feels emotionally safe.

### **Conclusion**

My first summer at a certain camp in Quebec, I had the experience of assuming I had to be a particular person to be accepted and finding out that I was not only accepted,

but needed, as the unique individual that I was. It was a striking experience and might be considered uncommon. What is interesting to me about this research is that students and teachers from different school boards and diverse locations described their visions of positive relationships similarly, and it was easy to compare the findings to my camp experience. Some might suggest that this type of open, caring, accepting, and supportive community could only happen at camp; that it would be more difficult to make it happen for every child in a classroom. But the students involved in this research seemed to believe it could happen, and had clear ideas about how community can be built and maintained as an essential foundation for education. I was interested to see how clearly the students captured the importance of accepting relationships, being there for each other, knowing they have something to offer others, and expressing who they are deep inside. They were also clear that when a context does not provide this type of relations for them, they do not want to be there. It could be said that the teachers I interviewed for this inquiry were unique; they had engaged their students in a contest about the importance of creating community in their class, and then responded to an invitation to be interviewed about this topic. It could be assumed they are quite passionate about the value of community and may not represent all teachers. But what is most interesting to me is that they are out there. In a society historically rooted in values of individualism, competition, freedom, and personal gain (Noddings, 1996; Shields, 2002) and within an educational system created from a paradigm that has traditionally separated and ranked children according to academic performance with less attention to relational needs (Cohen, 2006; Osterman, 2000), these teachers told me their classes were about something different. They told me they would forgo teaching a particular curriculum

component to work on the skills, ethics, motivations, and behaviours of community. They told me they believed an essential goal of education was to help students experience acceptance, learn who they are, value relationships with those who are different, and come to find meaning in caring and contributing to others. They explained that community was the foundation of their classrooms, and they were finding a multitude of ways for students to ask each other (and others outside the class) “who are you and how can I support you?”

I began this inquiry with an interest in the meaning of relationships, particularly in education. In this inquiry, I asked students and teachers to talk about positive community relationships in their middle school classes. The research findings pertain to the lived experiences of some students and teachers in Southern Ontario, Canada, and this defines the boundaries of the inquiry. For me, however, and perhaps for others, this inquiry speaks to something much larger. It hints at the universal importance of moving beyond seeming in order to be accepted, and it provides some insights about the ways people come to know themselves and be their best, the ways humans can be both different and accepting of others, and the deep necessity to see, care, support, and contribute to others. It also brings to the foreground questions such as: What are the ultimate purposes of forming relationships with others? In what ways is society constrained when relationships are seen as purely instrumental? What is the purpose of education? How do the answers to these questions have implications for peace, a prosperous interdependent world, and individual happiness and meaning?

Qualitative research transferability refers to the degree to which research findings can be utilized in other situations similar to the one in the study (Denzin & Lincoln,

2000). In this study, I used 192 essays, 218 posters, and 9 teacher interviews, representing a wide range of demographics including schools from small, large, urban, rural, private, Catholic, and public boards. The task in building thick description, particularly in hermeneutic phenomenology, is both to capture the complexity of particular events and to indicate their more general significance (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; van Manen, 1990). I feel that the broad representation in my sample will help readers of this research consider how my findings may apply to their own beliefs and unique contexts. However ultimately, my aim was to take readers on their own journey of seeing, exploring, revisiting, and having the opportunity to think anew. In the end, the applicability of the findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological description of positive relationships in middle school classroom communities is in the hands of you, the reader, and your unique needs, perspective, and interpretations.

## References

- Abowitz, K. K. (1999). Reclaiming community. *Educational Theory, 49*(2), 143–159.
- Anderman, E. M. (2002). School effects on psychological outcomes during adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 94*(4), 795–809.
- Anderman, L. H. (1999). Classroom goal orientation, school belonging, and social goals as predictors of students' positive and negative affect following the transition to middle school. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 32*(2), 89–103.
- Anderman, L. H., & Freeman, T. M. (2004). Students' sense of belonging in school. In P. R. Pintrich & M. L. Maehr (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement* (Vol. 13, pp. 27–63). Oxford, England: Elsevier.
- Bateman, H. V. (2002). Sense of community in the school: Listening to students' voices. In A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn, & B. J. Bishop (Eds.), *Psychological sense of community: Research, applications, and implications* (pp. 161–179). New York, NY: Plenum.
- Battistich, V., & Hom, A. (1997). The relationship between students' sense of their school as a community and their involvement in problem behaviours. *American Journal of Public Health, 87*(12), 1997–2001.
- Battistich, V., Schaps, E., Watson, M., Solomon, D., & Lewis, C. (2000). Effects of the Child Development Project on students' drug use and other problem behaviours. *The Journal of Primary Prevention, 21*(1), 75–99.

- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Kim, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1995). Schools as communities, poverty levels of student populations, and students' attitudes, motives, and performance: A multilevel analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 627–658.
- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, 32(3), 137–151.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.
- Beck, L. G. (1999). Metaphors of educational community: An analysis of the images that reflect and influence scholarship and practice. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35(1), 13–45.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen R., Sullivan, W. M., Swindler A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and communalism in American life*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Bess, K., Fisher, A., Sonn, C., & Bishop, B. (2002). Psychological sense of community: Theory, research, and application. In A. Fisher, C. Sonn, & B. Bishop (Eds.), *Psychological sense of community: Research, applications, and implications* (pp. 3–22). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Bettez, S. C. (2011). Critical community building: beyond belonging. *Educational Foundations*, 25(3–4), 3–19.

- Bishop, J. A., & Inderbitzen, H. M. (1995). Peer acceptance and friendship: An investigation of their relation to self-esteem. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 15*(4), 476–489.
- Blum, R. W., & Rinehart, P. M. (1996). *Reducing the risk: Connections that make a difference in the lives of youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota.
- Bontekoe, R. (1996). *Dimensions of the hermeneutic circle*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International.
- Buber, M. (1965). *Between man and man* (R. G. Smith, Trans.). London, UK: Collins.
- Buber, M. (1967). *The knowledge of man* (M. Friedman & R. G. Smith, Trans.). London, UK: George Allen & Unwin.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Charles Scribner & Sons.
- Buckley, K. E., Winkel, R. E., & Leary, M. R. (2004). Emotional and behavioral responses to interpersonal rejection: Anger, sadness, hurt, and aggression. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 40*, 14–28.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation.
- Cassidy, K. (2001). *Bringing clarity to group development: Synthesizing a meta-framework from practitioner-authored group-development models* (Unpublished master's project). Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada.

- Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*(1), 98–124.
- Cemalcilar, Z. (2010). Schools as socialisation contexts: Understanding the impact of school climate factors on students' sense of school belonging. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 59*(2), 243–272.
- Chavis, D. M., Hogge, J. H., McMillan, D.W., & Wandersman, A. (1986). Sense of community through Brunswick's lens: A first look. *Journal of Community Psychology, 14*(1), 24–40.
- Chavis, D. M., & Newbrough, J. R. (1986). The meaning of "community" in community psychology. *Journal of Community Psychology, 14*(4), 335–340.
- Chavis, D., & Pretty, G. (1999). Sense of community: Advances in measurement and application. *Journal of Community Psychology, 27*(6), 635–642.
- Chipuer, H., & Pretty, G. (1999). A review of the sense of community index: Current uses, factor structure, reliability and further development. *Journal of Community Psychology, 27*(6), 643–658.
- Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*(2), 201–237.
- Cohen, M., Kahn, D. L., & Steeves, R. H. (2000). *Hermeneutic phenomenological research: A practical guide for nurse researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Connell, J. P., & Wellborn, J. G. (1991). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness: A motivational analysis of self-system processes. In M. R. Gunnar & L. A. Sroufe (Eds.), *Self processes and development* (Vol. 23, pp. 43–77). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 1–28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dewey, J. (1915). *The school and society*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dunham, H. W. (1986). The community today: Place or process. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(4), 399–404.
- Durkheim, E. (1933). *The division of labor in society* (Simpson, G., Trans.). New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Fendler, L. (2006). Others and the problem of community. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 33(3), 303–326.
- Furman, G. C. (1998). Postmodernism and community in schools: Unraveling the paradox. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 34(3), 298–328.
- Furman, G. C. (Ed.). (2002). *School as community: From promise to practice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Furman-Brown G. (1999). Editor's foreword. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35(1), 6–12.

- Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(1), 148–162.
- Gadamer, H-G. (1982). *Truth and method* (G. Barden & J. Cumming, Ed. & Trans.). New York, NY: Crossroad. (Original work published in 1965)
- Gardner, J. W. (1991). *Building community*. Washington, DC: Independent Sector.
- Gibbs, J. (2006). *Reaching all by creating tribes learning communities*. Windsor, Canada: Center Source.
- Giddens, A. (1994). *Beyond left and right: The future of radical politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools, 30*(1), 79–90.
- Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education, 62*(1), 60–71.
- Greene, M. (1993). The passions of pluralism: Multiculturalism and the expanding community. *Educational Researcher, 22*(1), 13–18.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Guisinger, S., & Blatt, S. J. (1994). Individuality and relatedness: Evolution of a fundamental dialectic. *American Psychologist, 49*(2), 104–111.

- Hill, J. L. (1996). Psychological sense of community: Suggestions for future research. *Journal of Community Psychology, 24*(4), 431–438.
- Hillier, J. (2002). Presumptive planning. From urban design to community creation in one move? In A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn, & B. J. Bishop (Eds.), *Psychological sense of community: Research, applications and implications* (pp. 43–67). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic.
- James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1907)
- Juvonen, J. (2007). Reforming middle schools: Focus on continuity, social connectedness, and engagement. *Educational Psychologist, 42*(2), 197–208.
- Karcher, M. J. (2004). Connectedness and school violence: A framework for developmental interventions. In E. R. Gerler, Jr. (Ed.), *Handbook of school violence* (pp. 7–34). New York, NY: The Haworth Reference Press.
- Kasen, S., Berenson, K., Cohen, P., & Johnson, J. G. (2004). The effects of school climate on changes in aggressive and other behaviours related to bullying. In D. L. Espelage & S. M. Swearer (Eds.), *Bullying in American schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention* (pp. 187–210). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Khoury-Kassabri, M., Benbenishty, R., Astor, R. A., & Zeira, A. (2004). The contributions of community, family, and school variables to student victimization. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 34*(3-4), 187–204.
- Kirkpatrick, F. G. (1986). *Community: A trinity of models*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

- Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(3). Article 3. Retrieved from [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2\\_3final/html/laverty.html](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_3final/html/laverty.html)
- Leary, M. R., Koch, E. J., & Hechenbleikner, N. R. (2001). Emotional responses to interpersonal rejection. In M. R. Leary (Ed.), *Interpersonal rejection* (pp. 145–167). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Leary, M. R., Twenge, J. M., & Quinlivan, E. (2006). Interpersonal rejection as a determinant of anger and aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10, 111–132.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Libbey, H. P. (2004). Measuring student relationships to school: Attachment, bonding, connectedness and engagement. *Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 274–283.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 163–188). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ma, X. (2003). Sense of belonging to school: Can schools make a difference? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 96(6), 340–349.
- Maslow, A. (1970). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6–23.

- McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M., & Blum, R. W. (2002). Promoting school connectedness: Evidence from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health. *Journal of School Health, 72*(4), 138–146.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nichols, S. L. (2006). Teachers' and students' beliefs about student belonging in one middle school. *Elementary School Journal, 106*(3), 255–271.
- Newbrough, J. R. (1995). Toward community: A third position. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(1), 9–38.
- Nisbet, R. (1969). *Quest for community*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Noddings, N. (1986). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (1995) *Philosophy of education*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Noddings, N. (1996). On community. *Educational Theory, 46*(3), 245–267.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Starting at home: Caring and social policy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Olthof, T., & Goossens, F. A. (2008). Bullying and the need to belong: Early adolescents' bullying-related behaviour and the acceptance they desire and receive from particular classmates. *Social Development, 17*(1), 24–46.

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Realizing the promise of diversity: Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*. Toronto, CA: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf>
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323–367.
- O'Sullivan, B. (1999). Global change and educational reform in Ontario and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 24(3), 311–325.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peck, M. S. (1990). *The different drum: Community making and peace*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Pooley, J. A., Pike, L. T., Drew, N. M., & Breen, L. (2002). Inferring Australian children's sense of community: a critical exploration. *Community Work and Family*, 5(1), 5–22.
- Pretty, G. M. H. (2002). Young people's development of the community-minded self: Considering community identity, community attachment and sense of community. In A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn, & B. Bishop (Eds.), *Psychological sense of community: Research, applications, and implications* (pp. 183–203). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Pretty, G., Andrews, L., & Collett, C. (1994). Exploring adolescents' sense of community and its relationship to loneliness. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 22(4), 346–358.

- Prosser, J. (1998). *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers*. London, UK: The Falmer Press.
- Puddifoot, J. E. (1996). Some initial considerations in the measurement of community identity. *Journal of Community Psychology, 24*(4), 327–336.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Resnick, M., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., Jones, J., ... Udry, J. R. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm. *JAMA, 278*(10), 823–832.
- Roeser, R. W., Eccles, J. S., & Sameroff, A. J. (2000). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development: A summary of research findings. *Elementary School Journal, 100*(5), 443–471.
- Roeser, R. W., Midgley, C., & Urdan, T. C. (1996). Perceptions of the school psychological environment and early adolescents' psychological and behavioural functioning in school: The mediating role of goals and belonging. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 88*(3), 408–422.
- Royal, M. A., & Rossi, R. J. (1996). Individual-level correlates of sense of community: Findings from workplace and school. *Journal of Community Psychology, 24*(4), 395–416.
- Ryan, R. M., Stiller, J. D., & Lynch, J. H. (1994). Representations of relationships to teachers, parents, and friends as predictors of academic motivation and self esteem. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 14*(2), 226–249.
- Sarason, S. B. (1974). *The psychological sense of community: Prospects for a community psychology*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Schaps, E. (1998). Risks & rewards of community building. *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 28(1), 6–9.
- Selznick, P. (1992). *The moral commonwealth: Social theory and the promise of community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building communities in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Shields, C. M. (2000). Learning from difference: Considerations for schools as communities. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 30(3), 275–294.
- Shields, C. M. (2002). Cross-cultural leadership and communities of difference: Thinking about leadership in diverse schools. *Springer International Handbook of Education*, 8(2), 209–244.
- Shields, C. M., & Seltzer, P. A. (1997). Complexities and paradoxes of community: Toward a more useful conceptualization of community. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 33(4), 413–439.
- Skiba, R., Simmons, A. B., Peterson, R., McKelvey, J., Forde, S., & Gallini, S. (2004). Beyond guns, drugs and gangs: The structure of student perceptions of school safety. *Journal of School Violence*, 3(2–3), 149–171.
- Sletta, O., Valas, H., & Skaalvik, E. (1996). Peer relations, loneliness, and self-perceptions in school-aged children. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 66(4), 431–445.
- Solomon, D., Battistich, V., Kim, D. I., & Watson, M. (1996). Teacher practices associated with students' sense of the classroom as a community. *Social Psychology of Education*, 1(3), 235–267.

- Solomon, D., Battistich, V., Watson, M., Schaps, E., & Lewis, C. (2000). A six-district study of educational change: Direct and mediated effects of the Child Development Project. *Social Psychology of Education, 41*(1), 3–51.
- Sonn, C. C., Bishop, B. J., & Drew, N. M. (1999). Sense of community: Issues and considerations from a cross-cultural perspective. *Community, Work & Family, 2*(2), 205–218.
- Sutherland, A. (2010). *The roles of school climate and peers in bullying* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada.
- Tonnies, F. (1957). *Community and society* (C. P. Loomis, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1887)
- Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin, 63*, 384–399.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Canada: Althouse.
- van Manen, M. (2007). Phenomenology of practice. *Phenomenology & Practice, 1*(1), 11–30.
- Watson, M., Battistich, V., & Solomon, D. (1997). Enhancing students' social and ethical development in schools: An intervention program and its effects. *International Journal of Educational Research, 27*(7), 571–586
- Weisenfeld, E. (1996). The concept of “we”: A community social psychology myth? *Journal of Community Psychology, 24*(4), 337–346.

- Wentzel, K. R. (1998). Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(2), 202–209.
- Wentzel, K. R. (1999). Social-motivational processes and interpersonal relationships: Implications for understanding motivation at school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(1), 76–97.
- Wentzel, K. R., & Looney, L. (2007). Socialization in school settings. In J. E. Grusec & P. D. Hastings (Eds.), *Handbook of socialization: Theory and research* (pp. 382–403). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Whitlock, J. (2006). Youth perceptions of life at school: Contextual correlates of school connectedness in adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 10*(1), 13–29.
- Willms, J. D. (2003). *Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation. Results from PISA 2000*. Paris, France: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Young, I. M. (1986). The ideal of community and the politics of difference. *Social Theory and Practice, 12*(1), 1–25.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zins, J. E., & Elias, M. J. (2007). Social and emotional learning: Promoting the development of all students. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 17*(2–3), 233–255.

## Appendix A:

### Essay and Poster Contest Invitation

#### Grade 5–8 Essay Contest: Creating a Positive Classroom Community

##### CONTEST THEME

Imagine a class where students feel like they belong, where everyone is accepted, and everyone is committed to getting along and working well together.

Teachers may use some of the following ideas as a starting point to guide students (but are not restricted to these questions):

- What does it take to create a classroom environment where students feel like they belong, where everyone is accepted, and everyone is committed to getting along and working well together?
- Is it important to have a feeling of community in your class—why?
- If students don't feel like they are part of a community what would happen?
- Does anything stand in the way of your class being a community—if so could it change?
- What one thing could you do to help your class be more like a community?
- What could others do to help your class be more like a community?

##### PRIZES

We will be awarding a series of prizes in each of the two divisions: Junior (grades 5–6) and Intermediate (grades 7–8).

These prizes will consist of:

**GRAND PRIZE** winners will win a free Community Building Program\* at Youth University, as well as a \$60 gift certificate to Chapters for the teacher, and a \$60 gift certificate to Best Buy for the student.

**GOLD PRIZE** winners will receive a \$50 gift certificate to Chapters for the teacher, and \$50 gift certificate to Best Buy for the student.

**SILVER PRIZE** winners will receive a \$30 gift certificate to Chapters for the teacher, and \$30 gift certificate to Best Buy for the student.

Winning schools will be notified by telephone, mail, and/or e-mail and will have three (3) days to respond to such notification.

\*The Community Building Program must be booked for October 2007, November 2007, or April 2008. The prize includes program entry fees, and does not include food or transportation. The prize is valid only for the class from which the student entered. In the case of extreme weather, other activities may be substituted for the high ropes course portion of the program. If the winning school is not able to attend

because of distance to Youth University, a pizza party will be substituted. This prize cannot be substituted for its cash value.

### **ESSAY REQUIREMENTS**

- Essays must contain a minimum of 300 words and no more than 1,000 words.
- Essays must be typed.
- Essays must have a cover page with the information listed below.
- Entries must be received at Youth University by 5:00 pm October 5, 2008.
- All essays must be free of plagiarism and written in the students' own words
- Participants accept all responsibility for late, lost, misdirected, or illegible entries. Entries sent with insufficient postage will be disqualified. Youth University is not responsible for entries damaged, destroyed, or lost during the judging process. Entries cannot be acknowledged or returned.
- Entries become property of Youth University upon receipt and may be displayed in any chosen venue. They may also be studied for research purposes (in this case, no identifying names will be used). The author's name will not be published for publicity purposes if he or she wishes to remain anonymous.
- Limit of one entry per student.

### **SUBMISSION FORMAT**

All essays must have a cover page with the following information:

- Title of Essay
- Author of Essay
- Birth date and age of author
- Grade of author
- Name of contact person (e.g., science teacher, principal)
- School that the author attends, complete school address, and telephone number
- Certification by either author's teacher(s) or principal that the cover page is accurate in all details, including grade and birth date, and that the essay represents the independent work of the student Teachers and parents may assist the student to check his or her work, but the work must be in the child's own words.
- **ESSAYS WITHOUT A COMPLETE COVER PAGE WILL NOT BE ENTERED**

### **RULES**

**ELIGIBILITY** - Students who are currently enrolled in public, separate, or private elementary schools in Ontario, and are currently in grades 5, 6, 7, or 8 may submit entries.

**CATEGORIES** - The contest will be judged in two divisions, one set of prizes will be awarded per division. **JUNIOR:** Grades 5 & 6 **INTERMEDIATE:** Grades 7 & 8. Students enter by grade level, not by age.

**JUDGING** - Essay entrants that comply with all official rules as set out will be judged by a panel of experts recruited by Youth University.

**EVALUATION CRITERIA** - Papers will be judged on the basis of (1) rich description on the meaning of community, (2) use of critical and creative thinking skills, (3) expression and organization of ideas, and (4) use of writing conventions such as spelling and grammar, as well as the presence of a complete cover page.

**PREPARATION**

Teachers may help students with preparation activities such as asking students to brainstorm characteristics of groups they feel very connected to (family, sports teams, clubs, neighbours, etc.) and the characteristics of how these groups get along. Teachers may also wish to review the elements of writing an essay with students.

## Grade 5–8 Poster Contest: Creating a Positive Classroom Community

### CONTEST THEME

Imagine a classroom environment where students feel like they belong, where everyone is accepted, and everyone is committed to getting along and working well together? Create a poster that shows what it is like.

### PRIZES

We will be awarding a series of prizes in each of the two divisions, Junior (grades 5–6) and Intermediate (grades 7–8).

These prizes will consist of:

**GRAND PRIZE** winners will win a free Community Building Program\* at Youth University, as well as a \$60 gift certificate to Chapters for the teacher, and a \$60 gift certificate to Best Buy for the student.

**GOLD PRIZE** winners will receive a \$50 gift certificate to Chapters for the teacher, and \$50 gift certificate to Best Buy for the student.

**SILVER PRIZE** winners will receive a \$30 gift certificate to Chapters for the teacher, and \$30 gift certificate to Best Buy for the student.

Winning schools will be notified by telephone, mail, and/or e-mail and will have three (3) days to respond to such notification.

\*The Community Building Program must be booked for October 2007, November 2007, or April 2008. The prize includes program entry fees, and does not include food or transportation. The prize is valid only for the class from which the student entered. In the case of extreme weather, other activities may be substituted for the high ropes course portion of the program. If the winning school is not able to attend because of distance to Youth University, a pizza party will be substituted. This prize cannot be substituted for its cash value.

### SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

- Artwork must be no smaller than 8.5 inches by 11 inches and no larger than 11 inches by 17 inches. Do not mat or frame artwork.
- Only one entry per student, and each entry must be the work of only one student.
- All artwork must be the individual student's original creation. Duplications are not accepted.
- All media are accepted. Note: Chalk, charcoal, and pastel entries should be sealed with a fixative spray to prevent smearing. Do not laminate entries.
- Three-dimensional entries will not be accepted. Nothing may be glued, stapled or attached to the artwork in any way.
- The poster must **include the words My Class Is a Community** and the Youth University web site address: **www.youthuniversity.ca**. All artist signatures or initials should be written on the back of the poster.
- Artwork should be done on a flexible material, so it can be rolled for shipping in a mailing tube. Do not fold poster.

- Participants accept all responsibility for late, lost, misdirected, or illegible entries. Entries sent with insufficient postage will be disqualified. Youth University is not responsible for entries damaged, destroyed, or lost during the judging process. Entries cannot be acknowledged or returned.
- Entries become property of Youth University upon receipt and may be displayed in any chosen venue. They may also be studied for research purposes (in this case, no identifying names will be used). The artist's name will not be published for publicity purposes if he or she wishes to remain anonymous.
- Submissions must have a cover page with the information listed below.
- Entries must be received at Youth University by 5:00 p.m. October 5, 2008.

### **SUBMISSION FORMAT**

All posters must have a cover page with the following information:

- Poster Artist name
  - Birth date and age
  - Grade
  - Name of contact person (e.g., art teacher, principal)
  - School that the author attends, complete school address, and telephone number
  - Certification by either author's teacher(s) or principal that the cover page is accurate in all details, including grade and birth date, and that the work represents the independent work of the student
- SUBMISSIONS WITHOUT A COMPLETE COVER PAGE WILL NOT BE ENTERED**

### **RULES**

**ELIGIBILITY** - Students who are currently enrolled in public, separate, or private elementary schools in Ontario, and are currently in grades 5, 6, 7, or 8 may submit entries.

**CATEGORIES** - The contest will be judged in two divisions, one set of prizes will be awarded per division. **JUNIOR:** Grades 5 & 6 **INTERMEDIATE:** Grades 7 & 8. Students enter by grade level, not by age.

**JUDGING** - Essay entrants that comply with all official rules as set out will be judged by a panel of experts recruited by Youth University.

**EVALUATION CRITERIA** - Each poster is judged on originality, artistic merit, and expression of the theme as well as the presence of a complete cover page.

## **Appendix B:**

### **Interview Guide for Teachers**

1. What does sense of community mean to you?
2. Do you think it is important? Why or why not? How important?
3. What do you think sense of community means to your students?
4. What creates a sense of community in a classroom?
5. What do you do to build a sense of community in your class?
6. When do you do it? How does it fit (or not fit) into the curriculum? In the school year?
7. What have you found works best to create it?
8. Do you have to do anything to maintain it over the course of the year?
9. Do your class demographics affect how you think about building a sense of community? If so how?
10. What role, if any, do the students play in creating it?
11. What role, if any, do the students play in maintaining it?
12. How do students need to act to foster a sense of community?
13. How do teachers need to act to foster a sense of community?
14. How would you know when a class has a real sense of community?
15. What happens to students when they feel like they are part of a class that has a sense of community?
16. What happens to students when they do not feel like they are part of a class that has a sense of community?
17. Does it ever happen that there isn't a sense of community in a classroom?
18. What makes that happen?
19. Can you tell me about a specific class that had a great sense of community?

## Appendix C:

### Some Resources used to Support Community

Program Name	Description	Website
Tribes	A program that focuses on developing collective goal setting, communication, problem solving and other group dynamics in the classroom.	<a href="http://www.tribes.com/">http://www.tribes.com/</a>
Me to We	A philosophy of social awareness that encourages members to question their surroundings and live sustainable lifestyles. Me to We focuses on the impact of the individual's actions in making the global community a better place.	<a href="http://www.metowe.com">http://www.metowe.com</a>
Green Street	A program that links students and teachers to a learning community of people who are taking action for the environment and social justice, in and with schools across Canada.	<a href="http://www.green-street.ca/en">http://www.green-street.ca/en</a>
Freedom Writers	A multi-faceted Florida-based organization that provides resources to encourage students to take ownership of injustice and fight for equal rights, inclusion, and peace.	<a href="http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/">http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/</a>
Second Step Program (John Howard Society)	Antiviolence program based in research that suggests emotion management education, conflict resolution, and social education greatly improves academic experiences for students and enhances whole child development.	<a href="http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/overview/">http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/overview/</a>
Who is Nobody?	A character education program that incorporates important parts of the Ontario Curriculum into the activity of character and community building. Students conduct individual acts of global citizenship, focusing on social development and positive community building.	<a href="http://www.whoisnobody.com/">http://www.whoisnobody.com/</a>

Lions Quest	Programs produced by the Lions Club, which are school based and provide a comprehensive approach to positive youth development, through life skills, character education, Social Emotional Learning, civic values, drug prevention, and service-learning education.	<a href="http://www.lions-quest.Org">http://www.lions-quest.Org</a>
Dove UK	A variety of resources to help young people build positive self-esteem by understanding and dealing with feelings about physical appearance, in particular weight and shape.	<a href="http://www.dove.co.uk/">http://www.dove.co.uk/</a>
Second Step Program	A non-profit organization that creates research-based social-emotional learning materials to help children succeed in school and in life.	<a href="http://www.cfchildren.org/advocacy/about-us.aspx">http://www.cfchildren.org/advocacy/about-us.aspx</a>
Operation Respect	A non-profit organization founded by Peter Yarrow of the folk group Peter, Paul, & Mary. The organization disseminates educational resources designed to establish a climate that reduces bullying, ridicule, and violence.	<a href="http://www.operationrespect.org/about/mission.php">http://www.operationrespect.org/about/mission.php</a>