A Qualitative Study of Changes to Student Sense of Belonging Following Participation in a Peer Mentoring Program

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Abstract

The transition from middle school to high school is a significant milestone in the educational journey of students, and developing a sense of school belonging is a key component necessary to adjust well to the high school environment (Kiefer et al., 2015). However, limited research appears to be available to explain how schools can effectively foster school belonging for students, especially within the high school setting (Slaten et al., 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore potential changes to students' sense of school belonging after their participation in a peer mentoring program. The researcher sought to understand changes in school belonging for both sophomore students who received mentoring during their freshman year of high school and for senior students who served as mentors during both their junior and senior years of high school. The researcher explored these changes in school belonging through four perspectives which included changes to students' general sense of school belonging, their feelings of connection to their school, their feelings of connection to their peers, and their feelings of connection to their teachers.

This qualitative study used a phenomenological research design, and the researcher utilized interviews to collect data. This study will contribute to the literature and local practice by analyzing perspectives on school belonging of fourteen high school students within a suburban Kansas City school district. During the data analysis process, the interview data of each participant was studied. This data revealed the majority of students in both study groups experienced positive changes to all four components of their sense of school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Nora and Samantha. When you look back on my three years of doctoral work, I want you to know that you were my main motivation in getting this degree finished. I was determined to show you that you can chase a full-time career, be a mom, and still continue to learn and grow as an individual. It is my hope you will value your own education and future opportunities to learn and grow and that I might have had a role in inspiring a passion for learning within each of you. I also hope you might one day benefit from this research as you make your own transition into high school. I want you to know your grandfather predicted my transition to school leadership well before I ever did, and I hope you will see that as a great reason to explore new opportunities and expand your own life experiences even if they are different from your original plan – you never know where life may take you. Your dad, Grandma, Aunt Beth, and Uncle Brian were key figures in helping me reach this goal as well. They managed Wednesday bedtimes for two years so I could attend classes, and they have been tremendous cheerleaders for me throughout the process. I could not have done this without our family. Finally, I hope you one day know the value of good friends as I have learned in this process. I had two amazing classmates who kept me accountable for my progress, encouraged me when I was frustrated, and celebrated successes with me along the way. May you find friends who do the same for you throughout your years, as when I am gone, they might be able to continue in my stead. I love you girls – "to the moon and back!"

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The transition from middle school to high school is one of the most critical periods of time in the educational career of young adolescents, as it marks "the beginning of a new, high-stakes period of their lives" (Cushman, 2006, p. 47). This transition process is especially difficult when high schools bring together students from a variety of elementary and middle school buildings (Butts & Cruziero, 2005). High schools function in a different manner than middle schools do; for this reason, students are usually adjusting to increased academic and social pressures while simultaneously navigating a larger educational setting with greater distractions or temptations that could lead them to getting in trouble (Wilson, 2021; Lampert 2005; Cushman 2006; Fryatt 2022). Coursework at the high school level is often the most challenging many students have experienced to date, and some students find themselves unprepared and not ready for the level of rigor that comes with the transition (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Wilson (2021) indicated even those who have previously been academically successful can struggle in the high school transition. Additionally, many students find the transition to high school disorienting because they are experiencing a more complex organizational structure. Exposure to a variety of teachers with different expectations can lead to students feeling isolated and anonymous within the high school environment (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009).

When considering the most effective method to help students acclimate to high school, Kiefer et al. (2015) insisted developing school belonging was the most "important aspect of students' overall adjustment in school" (p. 1). Goodenow and Grady (1993) connected school belonging to feelings of personal acceptance, respect, and support.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Hagerty et al. (1996) suggested belonging in general was a fundamental and innate human need grounded in evolution. Students must have this sense of belonging established in school for optimum achievement to take place.

These facts seem straightforward, yet, the educational trends of the last twenty years seem to have ignored them. Movements such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and Common Core Standards focused heavily on academic achievement (Fryatt, 2022). Today, the need to conquer learning loss resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has elevated student achievement to an even higher priority in schools (Baker, et al., 2020). This focus on academic outcomes has abandoned most schools' efforts to develop personhood, quality relationships, and a sense of community and belonging for every student (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). The consequence of this shift is that students are unable to reach their full potential as a result.

Developing school belonging is critically important, because it has many implications for the success of students as they transition into high school. Most importantly, school belonging is "an essential need which must be satisfied in order to self-actualize as individuals" (St-Amand et al., 2017, p. 108). Students cannot reach their full potential without a sense of school belonging. Research has indicated student achievement is strongly influenced by a student's feelings of connectedness and school belonging, as those feelings cultivate academic motivation, classroom engagement and participation, and a student's overall effort (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Bowles, 2012; Goodenow, 1993; St-Amand et al., 2017). Finally, studies have indicated a strong sense of school belonging leads to positive psychological development including positive emotions like happiness and calm, feelings of positive self-identity, and an ability to

manage stress (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Bowles, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; St-Amand et al., 2017).

According to Cobb and Krownapple (2019), achievement is built on belonging, and it is more important than ever for school districts to put resources toward building a sense of belonging for every student. Furthermore, as schools face increased costs associated with general operation and the need to address learning loss following the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker et al., 2020), the stakes are even higher to determine what resources are most worth their investment. In this qualitative study, the researcher sought to examine whether participation in a peer mentoring program resulted in a change of students' sense of school belonging in order to draw conclusions about whether peer mentoring could serve as a reasonable strategy for school leaders to employ when seeking to increase school belonging for their students.

Background

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), school belonging data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 reflected a decline in school belonging for students around the world (OECD, 2019). This trend aligned with a consistent gradual decline in global school belonging in the fifteen years prior (OECD, 2019). Within the United States, the 2018 PISA reported 67% of students experienced a sense of school belonging, and 31% of students indicated they perceived themselves as outsiders in their own schools (OECD, 2019). In a high school survey sponsored by the America's Promise Alliance (2020), school belonging was measured at a lower rate with only 39% of students indicating they experienced a sense of school belonging.

In the XYZ School District, school administrators measured school belonging by distributing the Panorama student feedback survey each semester. In the survey, students read statements about school belonging and provided feedback using a five-point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Table 1 details the high school student survey results for both the XYZ School District and XYZ High School from Fall 2018 through Spring 2023:

Table 1

Building and District School Belonging Percentages by Semester

Semester	XYZ High School Affirmative Response Percentages	XYZ School District Affirmative Response Percentages
Fall 2018	38%	43%
Spring 2019	38%	42%
Fall 2019	41%	46%
Spring 2020	---	---
Fall 2020	36%	45%
Spring 2021	36%	45%
Fall 2021	40%	43%
Spring 2022	44%	45%
Fall 2022	41%	42%
Spring 2023	42%	43%

Note. Affirmative responses reflected the percentage of students who answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to statements related to school belonging on the Panorama Student Feedback Survey (Panorama, 2023). No responses were collected in Spring 2020 due the decision to forego survey administration during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data revealed the school district and the high school made small gains in school belonging leading up to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the onset of

the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, rates of school belonging dropped. Although the district decline in school belonging was a singular percentage point lower, the building level decline totaled five percentage points lower. As of Spring 2023, XYZ High School had regained and increased its school belonging rate by one point when compared with its highest point prior to the pandemic, yet, the building level of belonging remained below that of the school district.

Further analysis of this school belonging data revealed discrepancies between the building level belonging data and the data associated with 9th grade students. Table 2 displays these differences:

Table 2

Building and 9th Grade School Belonging Percentages by Semester

Semester	XYZ High School Affirmative Response Percentages	9th Grade Affirmative Response Percentages
Fall 2018	38%	43%
Spring 2019	38%	47%
Fall 2019	41%	39%
Spring 2020	---	---
Fall 2020	36%	40%
Spring 2021	36%	40%
Fall 2021	40%	41%
Spring 2022	44%	40%
Fall 2022	41%	41%
Spring 2023	42%	40%

Note. Affirmative responses reflected the percentage of students who answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to statements related to school belonging on the Panorama Student Feedback Survey (Panorama, 2023). No responses were collected in Spring 2020 due the decision to forego survey administration during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data indicated 9th grade students reported higher school belonging than the overall building in the 2018-2019 school year, however, this number dropped in the 2019-2020 school year in conjunction with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. This number remained below its highest value prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data outlined in both tables is compelling because both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic school belonging levels for the XYZ School District, XYZ High School, and the 9th grade students at XYZ High School indicated less than half of the students felt a sense of school belonging. The hierarchy of needs outlined by Maslow identified belonging as one of five fundamental needs innate to all human beings (Slaten et al., 2016), while Lam et al. (2015) connected belonging to psychological processing and personal inner strength. Within the educational setting, school belonging in high school can reduce negative internalizing and externalizing behavior while cultivating positive self-worth (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Finally, school belonging can promote greater overall academic success for students (Allen & Bowles, 2012; St-Amand et al., 2017) while simultaneously cultivating positive academic emotions (Lam et al., 2015). For these reasons, the lack of school belonging in the XYZ School District and at XYZ High School should be considered a major concern for school leaders and establishes the need for a solution to be found.

Statement of the Problem

School belonging has been established to have a significant impact on the overall wellbeing and educational trajectory of students (Longaretti, 2020). As schools transition into operations in a post-COVID-19 era, it has become clear the pandemic directly impacted the way students interacted with their peers resulting in a negative effect upon

cognitive, emotional, and social development (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). Furthermore, students' perceptions of school belonging and how school belonging can be developed during an educational transition was also disrupted (Potts, 2021). For these reasons, there is a need to explore ways to promote the development of school belonging for students. However, limited research appears to be available to explain how high schools could effectively foster this sense of school belonging for its students (Slaten et al., 2016).

One solution to cultivating school belonging has been the implementation of school-based mentoring programs. Such mentoring programs have been widely utilized as an approach to nurture students within the school setting (Lyons & McQuillin, 2018). Multiple studies focused on school-based mentoring programs that employed adults as student mentors have produced conflicting mentoring outcomes related to the development of school belonging (Gordon et al., 2013; Herrera & Karcher, 2013; Laco & Johnson, 2019; Wheeler, 2010). Herrera and Karcher (2013) found school belonging could be positively impacted by an adult-student mentoring relationship of any length, whereas Gordon et al. (2013) suggested school-based mentoring program participation only influenced development of school belonging if the mentoring relationship lasted longer than one year. Laco and Johnson (2019) found the development of school belonging had the potential both to grow and to decline, and the outcome was primarily dependent upon the quality of the mentoring relationship between the adult mentor and the student.

With these mixed results, school leaders have started to shift away from school-based mentoring programs involving adults as the mentors in favor of peer mentoring

programs (Fryatt, 2022; Karcher et al., 2010; Stoltz, 2005; Weatherman, 2013). In making this shift, school leaders have indicated they believe the freshman transition process will especially benefit from the introduction of a peer mentoring program because incoming ninth graders would be supported by their older peers in building their sense of school belonging as they transition into high school (Stoltz, 2005).

Although studies showed that peer relationships would have an influence upon the development of school belonging during the high school transition (Stoltz, 2005), it remains unclear whether freshmen participation in a peer mentoring program contributes to their feelings of school belonging. Scholars have suggested that access to high quality peer support through a mentoring relationship within the school community was the key to developing a strong sense of school belonging (Lampert, 2005; McBeath et al., 2018; Roybal, 2011). However, not all mentees benefit equally from peer mentoring because not all high school age mentors have the necessary skills to make strong connections with younger students (Karcher et al., 2010). Mentees consequently develop different levels of school belonging, and in some cases, none at all (Karcher et al., 2010).

In their shift to peer mentoring, school leaders also suggested the upperclassmen students serving as mentors and enjoying a positive experience with the mentoring program would also form a greater sense of school belonging (Stoltz, 2005). Examination of the literature supported this claim at the university level. For example, Gunn et al. (2017) noted peer mentoring was critical to the acquisition of social skills and forming a sense of belonging during first year university-level coursework. Stockkamp and Godschalk (2022) highlighted the reciprocal relationship between upperclassmen mentors and mentees at the university level and emphasized the mutual advantage of the

relationship for both mentors and mentees in their development of school belonging at the university level. However, limited research was conducted to examine the potential impact of participating in a peer mentoring program on students' sense of school belonging at the high school level.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, a heightened urgency to determine the best strategies for promoting school belonging has emerged (Collier, 2022). This need is especially true for students entering high school for the very first time, as the middle school to high school transition is a major shift in academic and social structures for freshmen students which can subsequently influence their sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Cushman, 2006; Kiefer et al., 2015; Lampert, 2005). With increasingly more schools turning to school-based peer mentoring programs to support students' development of school belonging (Newman et al., 2007), the question remains whether participating in a peer mentoring program could have an influence on both mentee's and mentor's sense of school belonging at the high school level.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore if high school students' sense of school belonging changed following their participation in a peer mentoring program. The researcher focused specifically on the school belonging of freshman students who received peer mentorship and the junior and senior students who provided the peer mentorship in a post-COVID timeframe. In doing so, the researcher sought to fill a gap in the research about the potential impact of participation in a peer mentoring program on high school students' development of school belonging.

Significance of the Study

The constructs of school belonging have been studied in a limited fashion, and there is a lack of understanding about how schools should operate to support the development of school belonging for all students (Allen et al., 2018; Slaten, 2016). Knowing school belonging influences the formation of identity for many students as well as the impact on their ability to navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood during their high school years (Allen et al., 2018), the need to understand how school belonging can be cultivated is increasingly more urgent. Many schools are turning to peer mentoring programs as the "magic pill" for supporting students in their high school transition and educational journeys (Laco & Johnson, 2019, p. 936), yet the implementation of school-based peer mentoring programs has far outpaced the existing research tying those peer mentoring programs to the academic and social-emotional outcomes they may produce (West et al., 2010). Among those social-emotional outcomes, it is unclear how a mentee's participation in a school-based peer mentoring program changes that student's sense of school belonging, and the research also lacks clarity on how participation in a peer mentoring program could impact the school belonging of those providing the mentoring as well (Karcher et al., 2010). The findings of this current study may contribute to the literature by providing more information on the potential impact of a peer mentoring program on students' sense of school belonging in a high school setting. The findings of the study may also provide more information to local school leaders about the potential changes in school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program from both a mentor's and a mentee's perspective. Furthermore, the study may provide more information about whether or not peer mentoring could be

viewed as a successful strategy for cultivating school belonging in this specific research setting.

Delimitations

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) defined delimitations as "self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (p. 134). The delimitations for this study were determined to be:

- The setting of the study was limited to one large high school in a suburban school district.
- The participants were limited to freshmen students receiving mentoring and the junior and senior students providing the mentoring due to the organization of the peer mentoring program at this specific research setting.
- The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview as the only data collection method for the study.

Assumptions

Assumptions are "postulates, premises and propositions that are accepted as operational for purposes of research" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 135). The following assumptions were made concerning this qualitative study of how school belonging may or may not have changed following student participation in a peer mentoring program:

- The peer mentoring program curriculum was implemented with fidelity.
- To the best of their ability, participants responded honestly and accurately to the interview questions.

Research Questions

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), research questions serve to narrow the purpose statement of a qualitative study while focusing on one central phenomenon or interest. The researcher based the study on the following research questions:

RQ1

What are the changes, if any, in high school freshmen students' sense of school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program?

RQ2

What are the changes, if any, in high school junior and senior students' sense of school belonging after serving as a mentor in a peer mentoring program?

Definition of Terms

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), definitions of terms are utilized to provide depth of understanding to the reader about the proposed research project. The terms defined for the purpose of this study include:

Baumeister and Leary's Belongingness Hypothesis. Human beings are naturally driven toward relationships and efforts to sustain a sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Bronfenbrenner Ecological System Theory. The belief that students or adolescents were part of a broader system that worked together to impact the physical and psychosocial development of a child (Allen et al., 2018)

High School Transition. The process of settling into the high school educational setting amidst increased social and academic pressures and issues of identity and

increased personal autonomy (Abele Mac Iver, et al., 2017; Gowing, 2019; Herrera et al., 2011; Lampert, 2005).

Maslow's Theory of Motivation. Indicates there are five fundamental human needs (food, hunger, safety, love, and belongingness) which are arranged hierarchically and drive individual behavior (Slaten et al., 2016).

Panther Mentor. The name given to junior and senior students serving as peer mentors at XYZ High School.

Peer Mentoring. A structured process where students provide support for other students by serving as a role-model and providing assistance, communication, and encouragement to their peers (Stoltz, 2005).

School-Based Mentoring (SBM) Model. Adult to student mentorship that took place during the school day and in the school setting with the goal of creating a supportive and trusting environment to promote student confidence and risk-taking in the school setting (Irby, 2013).

School Belonging. A need for students to feel respected and personally accepted, connected to and cared for by others, and supported and recognized as valuable members of the school community (Allen, et al., 2018; Arslan & Duru, 2017; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Kiefer et al., 2015; Lam et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2012)

Tutorial. The daily period at XYZ High School where students can seek academic support in each of their classes; also serves as the time period in which peer mentoring occurs in all freshmen sections of the period.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter one started with an introduction to the study, background information regarding national school belonging statistics and that of the school district and high school being studied, and the purpose and significance of the study. From there, the delimitations, assumptions, definitions of terms associated with the literature review, and research questions are also included in chapter one. Chapter two encompassed a literature review which included information about the middle school to high school transition, descriptions of general belonging, school belonging, and the influence of the two on overall student success, and finally, information about school-based mentoring and peer mentoring programming. Chapter three described the methodology of the study including the research design and data collection instrument, selection procedures for participants, and data analysis procedures. Additionally, the reliability and trustworthiness of the study, the role of the researcher, and the study limitations were included in chapter three. Chapter four outlined the qualitative analysis of the study results. Finally, chapter five discussed the significant findings of the study as well as the implications for action and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

High School Transition

The high school transition is a critical point in the educational journey of American youth with significant implications for the immediate and future success of every student (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012). This transition period is marked by increased social and academic pressures accompanied by issues of identity and increased personal autonomy. These factors make it difficult for many students to remain on the path to high school graduation and eventually college enrollment. Furthermore, students are more vulnerable to academic, social, and behavioral problems (Abele Mac Iver, et al., 2017; Gowing, 2019; Herrera et al., 2011; Lampert, 2005). The push for more rigorous coursework and higher graduation requirements often results in increasingly more students entering high school poorly prepared for the level of rigor they will encounter (Lampert, 2005). These factors are critically important, because "the level of success experienced in 9th grade is crucial to retention of high school students" across their educational careers (Roybal et al., 2014).

There are multiple signs of struggle during the high school transition process, and those signs are typically categorized into two groups - academic and social pressures (Fryatt, 2022; Lampert, 2005; West et al., 2010). Fryatt (2022) emphasized students are expected to perform academically at higher levels and to perform more independently than ever before while simultaneously navigating a larger social structure for the first time. Academic warning signs during the high school transition include attendance concerns, behavior problems, and declining grades or course failures (Abele Mac Iver et

al., 2017; Newman et al., 2007). In support of these claims, Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) warned that students often lack the skills to complete homework and to meet the rigorous expectations of the high school learning environment. Booker (2006) suggested increased autonomy leads to less structure and more hurdles for students to overcome. Clearly, the academic hurdles of the freshmen year are higher than many students have encountered before.

From a social perspective, Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) identified the interruption of peer relationships as a major factor during the high school transition because many students are experiencing a shift within their social relationships. This disconnection was attributed to high schools being more anonymous settings than middle schools with more students in every class, a larger physical building to navigate, and an overall extended social environment (Newman et al., 2007, West et al., 2010). Research also showed freshmen students are adjusting to older students and a wider array of teachers which can be disorienting to their social network and cause feelings of self-doubt and concern about being able to fit in (Cushman, 2006; Lampert, 2005).

Butts and Cruziero (2005) indicated the social framework of the high school transition is even more challenging when a high school brings together students from a variety of elementary and middle schools. These social challenges can be further amplified with the addition of students from private or choice schools within the community. Disruption of social belonging during the high school transition should be especially concerning for educators, as the higher the number of stressors a student experiences, the less successful they are; furthermore, the disruption has implications for

mental and physical health as well as the academic concerns outlined above (Newman, et al., 2007; Roybal, et al., 2014).

Since freshmen students are especially vulnerable during the high school transition phase, proactive and preventative efforts are required to develop the necessary conditions for students to adapt and feel supported as they enter high school (Chan et al., 2020; Roybal et al., 2014; Vural et al., 2020). Stoltz (2005) and Benner et al. (2017) agreed with this position and advocated for schools to assign resources and support activities to freshmen students during their high school transition. Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) suggested the tensions caused by the high school transition could be reduced with sufficient support in place, and Newman et al. (2007) placed the responsibility on the school system to sustain students' sense of well-being during the transition phase. Finally, it was Benner et al. (2017) who insisted that in planning these supports, "efforts should strive to acclimate new high school students by providing inclusive, caring environments and positive connections with educators and peers" (p. 2129).

For high school age adolescents, it has been suggested a key component of this caring and inclusive school environment should be the establishment of a sense of school belonging (Allen e. al., 2018; Benner et al., 2017; Butts & Cruziero, 2005; Gowing, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2007; Roybal et al., 2014). Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) highlighted school belonging as a predictor of students dropping out prior to graduation. These researchers simultaneously suggested there is not yet enough research on school belonging conducted at the age level of late adolescence. Until now, the primary focus of school belonging research has been on children and early adolescents.

Pittman and Richmond (2007) conducted a university level study regarding the freshman transition, and they discovered the impact of developing a sense of school belonging in high school was notable a year later. Additionally, these researchers determined “feelings of connectedness to one’s school are likely to lead to a more positive attitude toward achievement and positive expectations of belonging in future school settings” (p. 273-4). Clearly, the development of school belonging in high school has implications for long-term educational impacts, and it is worth exploring the concept and how it can be developed in high school further.

Definition of School Belonging

Within the research, school belonging is often considered synonymous with school connectedness, school membership, or school identity, however, each term has been defined differently. Despite these varied definitions, common themes connected to school belonging have emerged (Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013). For the context of this study, school belonging was defined as a need for students to feel respected and personally accepted, connected to and cared for by others, and supported and recognized as valuable members of the school community (Allen, et al., 2018; Arslan & Duru, 2017; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Kiefer et al., 2015; Lam et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2012). Libbey (2007) and Allen and Bowles (2012) suggested school belonging was a fundamental requirement for students to feel safe in their school environments, while Cobb and Krownapple (2019) insisted school belonging was a fundamental need innate to students like the need for food or water. These researchers also indicated failing to meet this need was the equivalent of starving the human soul and can prove to be lethal to the academic career of a student (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019).

Although these common definitions emerged, it is important to note that Shaw (2019) emphasized school belonging was subjective and can mean different things to different people. Shaw further asserted school belonging is especially complex and multifaceted. This perspective was shared by O'Brien and Bowles (2013) who subsequently emphasized the need to study school belonging further due to the major gap between theory and actual practice and the lack of understanding about how to best foster belonging in school.

Theoretical Concepts of Belonging

Maslow's Theory of Motivation

According to Maslow's theory of motivation, there are five fundamental human needs arranged hierarchically that drive individual behavior (Slaten et al., 2016). At the base of the hierarchy are foundational needs like food, hunger, and safety. These needs must be satisfied first in order to transition within the hierarchy. Those needs are then immediately followed by love and belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Slaten et al., 2016). The premise of Maslow's theory was that students cannot progress to subsequent stages of growth and knowledge without first finding belonging (Booker, 2006). It was only after belongingness was achieved that high self-esteem and self-actualization could occur (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Slaten et al., 2016). Goodenow and Grady (1993) emphasized belongingness as a prerequisite for higher needs such as a desire for knowledge, and Cobb and Krownapple (2019) agreed belonging establishes the requisite conditions for individuals to achieve and fulfill their own unique potential. Truly, achievement is a product of belonging, and membership in a group is a

determinant factor for an individual to reach his or her full potential (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; St-Amand, et al., 2017)

Cobb and Krownapple (2019) indicated educational leaders and decision makers have ignored the concepts outlined in Maslow's theory of motivation by neglecting to foster school belonging in favor of focusing on test scores and school rankings. Their concerns were echoed by Fryatt (2020) who suggested academic accountability for schools was considered the sole measure of success with no consideration for the development of the whole child. When the concepts of Maslow's theory of motivation were considered, it appeared school leaders have been operating contrary to the concepts of the theory.

Baumeister & Leary's Belongingness Hypothesis

Baumeister and Leary (1995) depicted human beings as being naturally driven toward relationships and efforts to sustain a sense of belonging. This basic idea formed the foundation for their belongingness hypothesis in which the "need for belonging is not only innate but based in evolution" (Slaten et al., 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, "the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation that promotes one's mental health and wellbeing" (Arslan, 2017, p. 23).

Within the hypothesis, Baumeister and Leary (1995) insisted people needed frequent interactions with others, and evidence of genuine bonds included stability, affectionate care for one another, and a continuation of the relationship into the foreseeable future. Slaten et al. (2016) echoed these sentiments and focused on the human need for frequent personal contact and the desire to pursue what is perceived to be a stable relationship with others. Finally, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested change in

the status of belongingness can produce an emotional response that can be either positive or negative. Osterman (2000) supported this perspective and indicated a failure to satisfy the need to belong produced long-lasting consequences; it is for this reason people develop social attachments and try to maintain them even under the most difficult circumstances.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

O'Brien and Bowles (2013) identified Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as particularly applicable to the school community as an organizational system. Within the theory, Bronfenbrenner stated the student or adolescent was part of a broader system that worked together to impact the physical and psychosocial development of the child (Allen et al., 2018). In other words, children were at the center of multiple levels of influence, and the school system played a significant role in their development; within any school setting, students were "part of a greater whole influenced by formal and informal groupings and overarching systems" common to the school setting (Allen et al., 2016, p. 99).

Within Bronfenbrenner's theoretical system, there were five layers. The individual layer referred to the academic motivation, emotional stability, and personal competencies socially and emotionally of the student. The next layer involved the interpersonal relationships of the student with an emphasis on peer relationships. In this layer, Bronfenbrenner addressed the levels of acceptance, trust, and overall presence of the student in the social and academic environments. From there, the third layer of the system referred to the mesosystem which included school practices, pedagogy, and policies. This layer included the vision and mission of the school, discipline practices,

and the extracurricular activities available to students. From there, the theory progressed to the fourth level, the exosystem layer, which highlighted opportunities the school provided to bring together the neighborhood, parents and guardians, extended families, and so on. Finally, the fifth layer referred to the macrosystem and to broader legislation and public policies at the state and federal levels of government (Allen et al., 2016).

Impact of School Belonging

Benefits of School Belonging

There are two key student outcomes tied directly to school belonging. The first is the positive contribution school belonging has upon the psychological development of students (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2018; Arlsan, 2018; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ma, 2003; McBeath et al., 2018; St-Amand et al., 2017). In Baumeister and Leary's (1995) study, the researchers identified student feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and welcoming as being associated with positive emotions like happiness, elation, contentment or calm. Conversely, student feelings of rejection, exclusion, or being ignored were strongly correlated to feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness. Osterman's (2000) work was based on the Baumeister and Leary (1995) study and specifically tied a student's experience of acceptance to feelings of positive orientation toward school, classwork, and individual teachers. Further studies based on Baumeister and Leary's work showed school belonging fostered increased self-esteem and positive self-identity and promoted attitudes of conscientiousness and optimism (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2018; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Additionally, school belonging was said to be directly connected to overall student wellbeing (Allen & Bowles, 2012).

Ma (2003) attempted to establish that school belonging develops within the school social environment more than anywhere else. Ma identified self-esteem as a primary predictor of school belonging and established a circular relationship between the two factors in which self-esteem and school belonging enhance one another. Arslan (2018) expanded the work of both Ma (2003) and Allen and Bowles (2012) and attempted to establish a positive relationship between school belonging and variables of student emotional wellbeing. Within this study, school belonging was determined to be an influential component on student emotional health status and the capacity to interact with the surrounding social environment identified by Ma (Arslan, 2018).

McBeath, Drysdale, and Bohn (2018) determined peer support and school belonging in late adolescence and early adulthood were key protective factors for positive mental health outcomes and lowered the rate of risk-related behaviors. Furthermore, the researchers established school belonging as a determinant for stress levels and the potential of psychological problems. The results of the study also echoed the influence of the social circle in school, as this social circle can provide students with "the perception one is cared for, has assistance from others, and is part of a larger supportive social network" (p. 41). Vargas-Madriz and Konishi (2021) also studied the influence of the social circle on school belonging and determined peer support was a significant predictor of school belonging. They suggested that as a peer, parental, and teacher network grew for a student, his or her sense of school belonging followed.

Riley (2019), Gowing (2019), and Newman et al. (2007) conducted research into the key components contributing to school belonging. They found emotional and physical safety were most important for the psychological health of all students. Additionally,

these researchers indicated students sought positive relationships with their teachers and their peers due to a need to feel they were known and supported. The recommended application which resulted from these studies was the need for schools to draw upon the strengths of its students by giving them voice and agency into the operation of the school. In doing so, the school would embed a sense of place and feelings of belonging for a greater number of students. Finally, Gowing (2019) specifically mentioned the power of taking preventive and preemptive measures to promote a positive social environment for the benefit of the psychological health of students. Newman (2007) echoed these sentiments and advocated for student voice in school policies and class material selections.

Beyond the promotion of positive psychological development in students, school belonging was believed to cultivate positive academic outcomes for students as well. Direct ties have been established between school belonging and student motivation. Furthermore, school belonging has influenced overall student effort in the classroom and the willingness of students to participate in learning activities and engage with other scholars (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow, 1993; St-Amand et al., 2017).

Lam (2015) argued school belonging served as a key source of academic emotions for students and directly influenced their academic engagement and their academic performance. Students with higher school belonging were less likely to experience fatigue, boredom, or helplessness in the classroom which prepared them to tackle more challenging coursework and the ability to stay engaged in the learning process. Although they did not find a direct correlation to academic achievement, Gillen-

O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) shared Lam's findings regarding classroom motivation and stated school belonging may "indirectly support achievement by helping students maintain engagement with the academic enterprise" (p. 680). Osterman (2000) agreed there was minimal evidence showing school belonging was directly related to achievement, however, there was substantial evidence suggesting school belonging influenced academic achievement through its influence upon school engagement. Although school belonging and academic achievement could not be directly connected to academic achievement in these studies, the impact of school belonging on student motivation and classroom engagement was notable.

Keyes (2019) studied the need for belonging within individual classrooms or learning communities. The study focused on freshmen level students and concluded school belonging and teacher support played an especially important role in the educational trajectory for a student especially if the student had not found success in a specific subject previously. Additionally, the study showed school belonging encouraged students to take intellectual risks, to interact with and learn from others, and to embrace ideas or perspectives they may not have previously considered. As a result, the researcher recommended opportunities for students to collaborate and work collectively to cultivate school belonging within individual classroom spaces. This study showed the value of peer-to-peer collaboration under the direction of a supervising adult.

Disadvantages of Not Belonging

The stakes are high for students who do not develop a sense of belonging at school. Those who fail to develop school belonging are at a higher risk for experiencing loneliness and anxiety associated with school (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). This sense of loneliness and anxiety can quickly lead to feelings of emotional distress such as jealousy or depression, and those feelings can influence a student's overall physical wellbeing and immune system (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Benner et al. (2017) suggested a lack of school belonging can be especially detrimental to students as they transition from middle school to high school. Students in this age group were even more likely to report depressive symptoms and signs of withdrawal from school. In addition to health and psychological impacts, a failure to belong at school led to estrangement from the school system, and students engaged in maladaptive behaviors such as higher absenteeism, vandalism, alcohol and drug addiction, or other areas of disciplinary concern (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2018; Demiroz, 2020). Finally, students who lacked belonging in school were less likely to engage fully in the academic process which resulted in a disruption to grades and overall GPA, and ultimately, lower academic achievement (Benner et al., 2017; Booker, 2006).

Research further indicated the need to belong was so strong students would go anywhere to find it. Riley (2019) shared "young people who experience a feeling of exclusion from school or society seek belongingness elsewhere" often through "forms of extremism, self-harming, or gang membership" (p. 92). Wallace et al. (2012) insisted the urge to fit in with a peer crowd far outweighed any distinctions between good peer groups versus bad peer groups, and students would seek belonging anywhere. Their conclusions further emphasized the need to make school a place for all. This work reiterated Osterman's (2000) assertion that little attention was being given to enhancing

peer relationships among students themselves to develop a sense of school belonging and community within their schools.

Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) conducted a study which produced mixed conclusions when examining the impact of school belonging on academic outcomes. The study was one of the largest in terms of size and scope, as it included 572 participants from three large public high schools in Los Angeles, and the study focused on school belonging from a longitudinal perspective. This meant the study followed a single graduating class of students through their entire high school experience and examined school belonging data and academic performance data each year. Contradictory to previous studies mentioned, this study showed school belonging for students within a particular year had no association with their respective GPAs for the same year. Simultaneously, the researchers found a relationship between the years students felt a strong connection to their school and their feelings about the enjoyment and usefulness of school. The researchers suggested school belonging may subsequently help reduce school dropout rates at the high school level by keeping students more connected to their institution of learning. This study was especially important because high school students eventually reached an age where school was no longer compulsory, and the usefulness of school strongly influenced their continued participation (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Gowing, 2019).

Identity and School Belonging

According to Allen et al. (2018), demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity may have contributed to a student's sense of school belonging over time. They argued students experience the world based upon how they identify

themselves socially, culturally, and historically, and their school belonging was influenced by it as a result. Goodenow and Grady (1993) provided evidence in support of this position, as their study revealed girls were more likely than boys to express high school belonging and general motivation in school. Demiroz (2020) and Vural et al. (2020) replicated these results in their studies of school belonging as did Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) when reviewing their data from an entire year for the freshman class. However, the longitudinal nature of the Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) study eventually revealed a decline in female school belonging whereas male belonging remained consistent. Consequently, the two genders shared similar levels of school belonging by the end of their high school experience. The leveling of school belonging appeared to be a continued trend in the university setting, as Pittman and Richmond (2007) found minimal gender differences in their study of university belonging.

The research examining race and school belonging was clearly split as well. Goodenow (1993), Ma (2003), Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013), and Pittman and Richmond (2007) agreed ethnic backgrounds or native status produced no statistically significant impact upon school belonging. Ma (2003) argued that the impact of race on students' school belonging was a huge misconception and should be dismissed entirely.

Other researchers disagreed with this position. Roybal et al. (2014) stated "for minority students, the extent to which a student feels connected can have an even greater impact than it does for majority learners, possibly because majority students have relationships that are more emotionally supportive" (p. 477). Booker (2006) said minority students can hold strong beliefs about the value of education, but negative interactions or experiences with members of the majority group prevent these students from developing

a true sense of school belonging. Gray et al. (2018) argued the frameworks of educational psychology are deeply rooted and normed around notions of Whiteness, and for this reason, educators are limited in their capacities to address issues of school belonging for Black students adequately. Both King and Swartz (2015) and Gray et al. (2018) advocated for developing school belonging through academic experiences which allow students of color to explore their own cultural backgrounds and perspectives and introduce them to a wider audience. As education becomes increasingly more polarized along political lines, these perspectives are especially relevant to school leaders today.

The research exploring the relationship between socioeconomic status and school belonging was divided but frequently favored a connection between the two. While Ma (2003) found socioeconomic status to have a trivial effect upon school belonging, Goodenow (1993) indicated school belonging was actually a "critical factor in the school retention and participation of at-risk students" (p. 65). Riley (2019) echoed Goodenow's (1993) perspective and concluded youth from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are twice as likely not to experience feelings of safety, being valued, or comfort at school thus undermining their overall school belonging. Vural et al. (2020) replicated these results and reported "students' sense of belonging to school differed significantly according to their socioeconomic status levels. Students with high and medium socioeconomic status had higher levels of sense of belonging to school than those with low socioeconomic status" (p. 110).

The concept of belonging and its benefits have been widely accepted, as general belonging is a fundamental human need (Newman et al., 2017; Slaten et al., 2016). Despite this wide acceptance of the general principles around belonging, Slaten et al.

(2016) indicated the research around school belonging was still limited. The research outlined in this chapter is primarily theoretical in nature and has only emerged over the last 30 years (Allen et al., 2016). Researchers successfully established common themes to define school belonging, and they clearly outlined the benefits of belonging and the dangers of not belonging. Yet, the research was limited by a lack of discussion about the best interventions schools should utilize to develop school belonging. According to Allen et al. (2018), "there appears to be a gap between understanding the importance of this construct from research and how it is transferred into day-to-day practice within schools" (p. 1). Clearer perspectives are still needed to determine which preventative measures truly increase school belonging and are worth the time and investment of educators and school systems alike (Allen & Bowles, 2012; O'Brien and Bowles, 2013; Slaten et al., 2016). Recommended interventions varied within the research; however, student mentorship became a recurring theme (Benner et al., 2017; Cushman, 2006; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Kiefer et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Weatherman, 2013).

Mentoring

According to Weatherman (2013), mentor programs have been implemented across school systems nationwide in a variety of ways – taking place before school, after school, or during the school day, involving adult mentorship or peer mentorship, providing instructional mentorship and remedial mentorship, and finally, supporting relational or emotional mentorship. Komosa-Hawkins (2012) recommended mentoring as a layer of social and emotional support during transition periods taking place at various points in the mentee's lifetime. Specific implications for schools included helping

students to make a smoother transition between grade levels or buildings, to stay in school, and to seek potentially higher levels of education long term.

Mentoring programs have impacted students across the United States for over 100 years. Angus & Hughes (2017) identified the non-profit organization Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) as the oldest and largest focused mentoring organization in the United States. BBBS has served 5,000 communities over 50 states and sought to bring out the potential in every child the program served. Within the program, adult volunteers (known as “Bigs”) were matched to students (“Littles”) ages five through young adulthood. In each partnership, the adult mentor worked to “create and support one-to-one mentoring relationships that ignite the power and promise of youth” (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2022). Outcomes of the BBBS program included increasing student confidence in their schoolwork and developing overall positive perceptions about their own academic abilities. The program also reduced the number of individual classes or full school days students were truant from school. Furthermore, mentees exhibited fewer problem behaviors such as drug or alcohol usage and incidents in school resulting in discipline (Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City, 2015; Herrera et al., 2011). Finally, students were more likely to report having a trusted adult in their lives (Herrera et al., 2011).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention first funded a mentoring program titled Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP) through the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974, however, Congress waited to appropriate funding to the program until 1996 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2022). The purpose of JUMP was to provide one-to-one

mentoring programs for students at risk of educational failure or dropping out of school. Program organizers hoped to increase academic performance of the mentees while simultaneously reducing their involvement in juvenile delinquency activities such as gang membership (Angus & Hughes, 2017). JUMP programs required the participation of adult mentors only, and those mentors were partnered with at-risk youth who were recruited to the program. These students were drawn from areas with high crime and 60 percent or more of their youth eligible to receive Chapter 1 funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2022). Over 200 programs sites applied for JUMP funding between 1996 and 2017, and participants received extensive tutoring, academic assistance, and vocational counseling and training (Angus & Hughes, 2017).

Gordon et al. (2013) studied the impact of the mentoring program developed in 1989 by THRIVE, a non-profit community focused on encouraging healthy family development. This mentoring program operated at both the community and school level and provided school-age children and adolescents with a caring adult who was entrusted to provide academic, social, and emotional support or encouragement. Students who participated in the program recorded fewer unexcused absences and fewer discipline referrals than those who did not participate in the program. Additionally, those who participated in the program reported a higher sense of self and improved self-esteem as well as a higher sense of purpose and development of personal ambition therefore suggesting an emotional impact from participation in the mentoring program. Finally, tenth grade participants performed at significantly higher levels on local reading assessments which the researcher interpreted as potential for increasing student ability to

access academic content and experience academic success due to participation in the mentoring program.

School-Based Mentoring

In addition to the large, well-known mentoring programs like those outlined above, schools across the country have also adopted school-based mentoring (SBM) programs as a means of supporting students academically and socially at school. Lyons and McQuillin (2018) and Schenk et al. (2020) both contended SBM programs have functioned as the most widely funded and fastest growing forms of youth mentoring in the United States.

In the SBM model, mentoring takes place during the school day and in the school setting. According to Jucovy (2000), school personnel frequently referred students for mentoring, and mentors and mentees engaged in both academic and social activities together during the school day for an hour or more per week throughout the school year. Often, mentors possessed no personal training in education or other related fields, rather, mentors were from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences and served in the mentor role. In the SBM model, the mentor's role was to "befriend proteges and create environments that offer support, trust, confidence, risk-taking, and visible positive transformation through dialogue" (Irby, 2013, p. 333).

Herrera and Karcher (2013) suggested more volunteers serve as mentors in SBM programs than in programs associated with their religious institutions, workplaces, or local sports programs. These authors believed one possible reason for this higher level of involvement in SBM programs was easier access to training, support, and mentoring supervision. Additionally, SBM programs typically involved only one meeting per week

with the mentor's student mentee. This scheduling contributed to a drawback of the SBM model, as mentor and mentee relationships were limited to the length of the school year and interrupted by school breaks and vacations and student mobility (Abele Mac Iver et al., 2017; Herrera & Karcher, 2013). Consequently, mentors often struggled to maintain long-term relationships with their mentees over multiple school years (Herrera & Karcher, 2013).

When establishing a SBM program, Herrera and Karcher (2013) insisted schools must consider who will do the mentoring, how those mentors will be trained, and how the program will be supported throughout the course of the school year. Karcher et al. (2010) and Jucovy (2000) suggested creating parameters to ensure sufficient quality and duration of mentoring in order to achieve desired outcomes. At a minimum, students needed to participate in mentoring at least one hour per week for their time together to be productive (Jucovy, 2000). Weatherman (2013) advocated for schools to designate a time for mentorship within the master schedule of the building. Furthermore, schools had to take into consideration the scheduling limitations presented by structural barriers in the academic calendar (Herrera & Karcher, 2013). Gordon et al. (2013) emphasized SBM programs were only effective when the mentoring relationship lasted for more than a year. Finally, Herrera and Karcher (2013) indicated expectations tied to the SBM experience were said to dictate outcomes. More recently, Laco and Johnson (2019) contradicted this claim and suggested expectations of the experience do not influence the effectiveness of the mentoring or its final outcome. The important understanding from these researchers was the need to be well-planned, organized, and structured when considering the implementation of a SBM program.

Positive Impacts of School-Based Mentoring

The impact of SBM programs differed and showed considerable variation (Abele Mac Iver et al., 2017; Chan et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2013; Herrera & Karcher, 2013; Laco & Johnson, 2019; Lyons & McQuillin, 2018; Wheeler et al., 2010). One perspective asserted SBM programs have profound and positive effects on students both academically and socially. Herrera et al. (2011) conducted a study involving the BBBS organization, and their research revealed students in the study experienced small academic gains over the course of the study along with improved perceptions of their own personal academic abilities. Laco and Johnson (2019) and Lyons and McQuillin (2018) indicated students who reported a high quality mentoring environment also reported higher school engagement, however, it must be noted this higher level of engagement did not necessarily produce higher academic outcomes for these students. Finally, Charlton (1998) conducted a study of SBM programs in which mentees received tutoring in specific areas of academic struggle. These students responded well to the personal attention they received and made academic gains in the areas where they were tutored and in academic areas beyond.

In regard to social impact, Gordon et al. (2013) championed SBM programs as the key to reducing unexcused absences and discipline referrals, increasing scores on multiple measures of school connectedness, and reducing substance abuse. Abele Mac Iver, et al. (2017) affirmed “nearly all students said they have learned a lot from their mentor, and almost 90% believed their mentor was helping them make better decisions” (p. 665). Chan et al. (2020) indicated SBM programs benefitted students because relationships with caring adults and positive peer influences established higher levels of

school engagement, increased resilience, and additional emotional support in the school setting. Herrera & Karcher (2013) showed that student-adult relationships allowed for frequent contact and enabled mentors to monitor youth behavior and provide intervention and protection as needed. Furthermore, students felt incentivized to go to school due to the positive nature of their relationships with their mentors. Finally, Herrera et al. (2011) also suggested SBM programs can help youth realign their attitudes and improve relationships with their teachers.

Komosa-Hawkins (2012) conducted a SBM program study focused on the high school transition and helping students complete high school and prepare for their future studies or employment. The study involved 25 9th and 10th grade students from a school with 80% low socioeconomic status and a 28% dropout rate. All of the student participants were classified as ethnic minorities. The mentors for the program were student volunteers from the local university's School of Education who ranged in age from 22 to 53. Each mentor was pursuing a master's degree in education or counseling. The mentors met with their mentees on various days throughout the week at the high school. The outcomes of the study showed students who were mentored made gains in their interpersonal relationships, school functioning, affective strength, and career development whereas their non-mentored peers declined in these areas. Additionally, the study showed a slower tendency for families to become less involved in the schooling of their students as they aged, and in some cases, that tendency was halted completely as a result of adult mentorship outside of the family unit.

May et al. (2021) explored the impact of a low-budget secondary school mentoring initiative on a Title 1 urban school district in the midwestern United States.

Community volunteers worked with middle school and high school students who scored below grade level on annual state assessments in reading and math. 187 students participated in the study, and mentors were charged with providing behavioral and emotional support to their mentees. Mentoring pairs met a minimum of two days per week and a maximum of five days per week. In this causal-comparative study, the researchers reviewed absences and GPAs. In addition, the researchers monitored time spent mentoring, and activity logs were coded for analysis. Ultimately, they found productive outcomes from the SBM program. First, the students who participated in the SBM program in both middle school and high school demonstrated significantly fewer absences than those who were participants in middle school only. Furthermore, as absences decreased, the average student GPA increased. According to the researchers, the results suggested "an association between mentoring and achievement" and should "advance critical conversations for instructional development for students at risk" (p. 129). Additionally, the researchers insisted "the positive correlation between attendance and grade point average in the current study offers empirical evidence that factors increasing attendance matter" (p. 130), and in this example, the factor they believed to make that influence was the SBM mentoring program.

Lack of Impact from School-Based Mentoring

From the alternative point of view, the impact or effect size of SBM programs was small, and in some cases, SBM programs were even detrimental and made a negative impact upon the mentor's protégé (Abele Mac Iver et al., 2017; Chan et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2013; Laco & Johnson, 2019; Lyons and McQuillin, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2011; Wheeler et al., 2010). According to Schwartz et al. (2011), students from lower social

and academic backgrounds benefitted least from a SBM program, therefore, those who needed the most support actually benefitted the least. In the study conducted by Abele Mac Iver et al., (2017), "comparison students did as well as or better than mentoring program students on nearly as many outcome measures" (p. 664), and the team went further and argued "even a carefully designed and relatively well-implemented mentoring program may not have the expected impact on student academic outcomes in the short run" (p. 670). This statement was made after two years of data review, and the SBM program failed to have any positive effect on student attendance, behavior, or course passing rates.

Laco and Johnson (2019) and Chan et al. (2020) shared the sentiments of Abele Mac Iver, as they found no associations between the SBM program and grades or overall GPA. Lyons and McQuillin (2018) confirmed mentors, on average, had small or null effects on student academic outcomes. They believed this was connected to the lack of quality in mentoring relationships and feared the risks far outweighed the rewards of establishing a SBM program. Building upon this, Herrera and Karcher (2013) argued male students were at a particular disadvantage when it came to cultivating ties with mentors in schools, and their outcomes were even less productive. Finally, Weatherman (2013) compared the achievement levels of various mentor groups (a peer mentor group, an adult mentor group, and a control group which received no mentoring), and no statistically significant relationships were observed in the pre-survey and post-survey results of the students' academic outcomes.

Marino et al. (2020) administered an international SBM program study in northern Italy involving community volunteers. Referred to as the Mentor-UP program,

the program lasted for seven months and involved children between the ages of 11 and 13 from three different schools. Mentors and mentees were matched based upon collective interests, and families of students were heavily involved as a part of the mentoring process. The purpose of the study was to measure the impact of mentoring on the mentees' self-esteem and school connectedness compared to those not involved in the program. Upon conclusion of the study, researchers discovered a significant increase in the mentees' self-esteem compared to that of the control group which actually decreased over time. There were no statistically significant differences in the school connectedness of the mentees and those not mentored. Although there was some gain in self-esteem for these mentees, their school connectedness did not change. For this reason, it is important to note this study is unique in that families were directly involved, and while the program was considered a SBM program, significant additional mentoring took place within family unit community events. Researchers acknowledged the positive outcomes of this study did not necessarily attribute themselves solely to the SBM program.

Peer Mentoring

Whereas the SBM programs and studies outlined above connected student mentees with adult mentors, another form of SBM is peer mentoring. Defined by Stoltz (2005) as a "structured process whereby a student of similar age provides support, assistance, and encouragement to a fellow student through role modeling and direct communication" (p. 16), peer mentoring has been a debated intervention in many schools. Peer mentoring was first promoted in the 1960s and has historically focused on both academic and social behaviors of students (Angus & Hughes, 2017).

According to Karcher et al. (2010), peer mentoring programs have “proliferated in recent years, yet there is disagreement about the effectiveness of such programs” (p. 212). The researchers indicated growth of peer mentoring programs has outpaced the research behind such programs, and it is unknown at this time how to best pair mentors with mentees or what outcomes are truly associated with peer mentoring practices. Additionally, the researchers emphasized previous studies suggested not all students benefitted equally from peer mentoring and not all high school mentors are equally adept to connect with their peers. Too often, these peer mentors lack awareness of their own biases and do not have the cognitive capacity to regulate their emotions or responses when triggered by their mentees. Furthermore, many teenagers do not yet have the reflection, empathy, or concern for others that would be necessary for a positive mentoring experience.

Despite the objections of Karcher et al. (2010), Fryatt (2022) conducted a qualitative study about students’ transition from middle school to high school, and Fryatt found students sought peer mentoring as a part of their transition experience. In this study, peer mentors worked to teach new freshmen the norms and organization of high school. Freshman students reported looking to upperclassmen classmates as trusted resources and safe people to approach with questions as needed. Fryatt interviewed freshman level parents as a part of his study as well; those parents indicated their students needed help creating a positive peer group during the middle school to high school transition, and peer mentoring helped their children create an organized social and emotional support system during the high school transition period and beyond. It is important to note the peer mentors highlighted in Fryatt’s study were not part of a formal

program sponsored by the school or the school district, rather, freshmen students self-selected their way into peer mentoring relationships of their own.

McBeath et al. (2018) conducted research about the development of school belonging in the university setting and found access to high-quality peer support within the context of the school community was a critical factor for student mental health and well-being. They found peer support and the subsequently developing sense of school belonging were "crucial components for making successful transitions" and strengthened the mentees' confidence in school-to-work transitions (p. 47). Although this study took place at the university level, key components aligned with the focus of this study including students in an educational transition working with their peers to develop school belonging in an educational setting.

Roybal (2011) conducted a mixed methods study focused on a 9th grade transition program at a Western high school where the student population consisted of 57% minority students, primarily Latino, and the building as a whole was struggling academically. Included within the transition program was a peer mentoring component, and Roybal found the study showed mixed results in regard to this peer mentoring component. In this particular study, four to five upperclassmen mentors were assigned to each homeroom setting consisting of approximately 25 9th grade students. Mentors were required to have a minimum GPA and a recommendation from a faculty member in order to serve as a mentor. The mentors worked with their mentees individually or in small groups and assisted with social, academic, and other school related issues.

Through interviews, Roybal (2011) learned adjustments had to be made to the peer mentoring program throughout the course of the study due to struggles with program

logistics and fidelity of implementation. Mentees indicated their mentors lacked training, and those supporting the program acknowledged it was difficult to get all of the mentors together for the purpose of training. The majority of the mentors were some of the most active students within the school, and the demands on their schedules prevented them from being fully invested in the mentoring program. Although the peer mentors were not connected to any substantive changes in freshmen student behavioral or academic outcomes, they were determined to be part of the influential factors that led to a change in the school's overall climate and culture. Relationship building became a priority of the institution.

Lampert (2005) conducted research into peer mentoring at a Chicago high school where failure rates of the freshman class were of high concern to the building administration. Freshmen students were divided into advisory classes consisting of 30 students, five mentors, and one teacher. Mentors taught a curriculum consisting of three overarching topics – attachment, achievement, and awareness. Within the attachment lessons, mentors supported their freshmen mentees with adjusting to the social environment of high school and getting involved in the high school. During achievement lessons, mentors provided support in study skills, test taking skills, note taking skills, reading strategies, and stress management. Finally, during awareness lessons, mentors focused on increasing their freshmen students' self-perception and healthy decision making. In the end, the failure rate of the freshman class dropped by 14% and participation in extracurricular activities increased by 6%. Based upon these academic and extracurricular involvement measures, the peer mentoring program was deemed a success.

Hall et al. (2020) studied a peer mentoring program implemented during the 2017-2018 academic year at St. John's University. The program targeted at-risk first year students who were having difficulty making the transition to college. At-risk students were assigned a mentor in their major discipline, and mentors worked with up to three mentees within the entire school year. Mentors and mentees were required to create a plan for their work together and submit the plan to the peer mentoring program sponsors. Overarching goals of the program included increasing school belonging for university students, increased GPAs of those students, and showing improved retention of these first-year students into their second year at the university. Peer mentors were utilized as a part of the program to foster more student-to-student engagement in the college transition process. Those mentors participated in extensive training leading up to their involvement in the program, and they were expected to be knowledgeable in their major discipline, academically engaged on campus, and mature with good interpersonal skills as well. Upon examining pre-test and post-test results of an affective survey conducted by the researcher, the mentees were deemed to feel "an increased sense of belonging at the university over the course of the program, and they were retained at a higher rate than were students who qualified for the program and chose not to participate" (p. 195). This study is significant, as it directly ties the development of school belonging to peer mentoring at the university level.

Richardson (2011) and Lifsey (2010) both studied the impacts of the popular high school transition program Link Crew and uncovered contradictory outcomes. Founded by the Boomerang Project, the primary purpose of Link Crew was to provide positive role models for freshmen students and to help those students feel comfortable and find

success at the high school level. Mentors were drawn from the junior and senior classes at the respective high schools where the program was implemented, and mentors provided support for the freshmen students throughout their first year of high school (Boomerang Project, 2023). Richardson (2011) found freshmen students struggled most with evolving social and academic demands of high school as well as the procedural differences between middle school and high school, yet freshmen student participation in the Link Crew mentoring program did not alleviate any of these concerns. Lifsey (2010) also identified social, academic, and procedural concerns as the primary challenges for freshmen students, however, Lifsey found participation in the Link Crew aligned with increased GPA and fewer failed courses during the freshman year.

Another important consideration of peer mentoring is the impact the program had on the mentors themselves. In multiple cases, peer mentoring provided opportunities to develop competencies of the mentors by expanding and refining their own listening skills, increasing their self-esteem, and strengthening their responsibility with their own schoolwork and academic efforts. Additionally, mentors reported adopting a new understanding of their teachers as well as a greater appreciation of diversity within their schools (Charlton, 1998; Karcher et al., 2010; Lampert, 2005). Stoltz (2005) highlighted the value of a positive experience in the mentoring role, as mentors who reported positive interactions with their mentee also reported a more favorable connection of their own to school. Karcher (2008) and Curran and Wexler (2017) conducted research into peer mentoring and determined the mentors' own social needs were met by serving as mentors in their schools. Finally, Hall et al. (2020) determined serving as a mentor at the university level led to increased aptitude for service among student mentors as well as an

increased identification with the university's mission. Clearly, these studies are important considerations because they showed the reciprocal impact a peer mentoring program can have on both mentees and their mentors.

Karcher (2009) conducted another study into peer mentoring in which he examined the work of 46 high school mentors and their work with 4th and 5th grade students. The mentors were students in grades 10 and 11, and each mentor received eight hours of initial training and two hours of monthly supervision. Karcher reported students who participated as cross-age peer mentors sustained larger fall-to-spring gains in school belonging and self-esteem than their comparison group of non-participating peers. Additionally, by assisting in the delivery of the mentoring lessons and learning experiences for the younger students, Karcher showed the number of students impacted by the developmental guidance program could be magnified or even doubled. The implications of this study suggested students serving as mentors "can acquire knowledge, attitudes, and social skills that may help them better understand and respect self and others" (p. 297).

Summary

The transition from middle school to high school is a tumultuous time in the academic trajectory of secondary students. A key component to ensure this transition is as seamless as possible is to support students in developing school belonging. Without school belonging, students are more likely to fail academically or make social decisions that may impact them negatively long-term. Currently, there is limited research about how to best cultivate school belonging in high school. For years, schools have established partnerships with school-based mentoring programs to support students, and many of

those programs have been shown to influence school belonging. The question which remained unanswered in the current research is whether peer mentoring programs make the same impact.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how feelings of school belonging of high school students may have changed following their participation in a peer mentoring program. This chapter describes the structure of the study and provides a description of the population involved in the study. This chapter also outlines the data collection procedures and instrument utilized for the study as well as the process for analyzing the data collected. Finally, this chapter highlights the reliability and limitations of the study along with an explanation of the researcher's role in the study.

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative approach with phenomenological research design. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research "describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants" (p. 13). This approach was appropriate for this study because the study investigated both mentees' and mentors' perceived impact on how participation in the peer mentoring program influenced their respective sense of school belonging.

Setting

This study was conducted at one of three high schools in the XYZ School District. Located in Kansas City, Missouri, the XYZ School District served almost 12,000 students and their families at the time of this study. Students and families lived in nine different municipalities, and students were drawn together at the high school level from six different elementaries, two different middle schools, and surrounding tuition-based programs ranging in age from kindergarten through eighth grade. The district was the 16th

largest school district in the state of Missouri based on enrollment data from the 2022-2023 school year (XYZ School District, 2022b).

The research setting, XYZ High School, was located on the south side of the school district. During the 2022-2023 school year, XYZ High School was the largest high school in the district and served 1,589 students. Of these 1,589 students, 24% of them received free and reduced lunch. During the 2022-2023 school year, the demographic make-up of students at XYZ High School included 64.1% White students and 35.9% students of color. Additionally, mobility within the school district was dramatically increasing, and 16.6% of the student population was new to XYZ High School since the start of the 2020-2021 school year (XYZ School District, 2023).

Sampling Procedures

The population for the study included two groups, sophomore and senior students who participated in the peer mentoring program at XYZ High School. The sophomore students received peer mentoring during their freshman year of high school, and the senior students participated in the peer mentoring program as mentors during both their junior and senior years of high school. The researcher utilized simple random sampling to select samples for the study. According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), simple random sampling is “the process of selecting a sample in such a way that all individuals in the defined population have an equal chance of being selected for the sample” (p. 170). A total of seven students from each representative group were selected to participate in the study for a total of 14 participants.

Instruments

The primary data collection instrument for this study was an interview protocol which consisted of 13 interview questions for each group (see Appendix G). According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), an interview protocol is the most formal type of conversation guide a researcher can utilize in a qualitative research interview. The interview protocol started with basic information about the interview process and an introduction to the study. From there, the interview protocol included semi-structured, open-ended interview questions in which the researcher's initial questions were formulated in a broad format to give the interviewees flexibility in what and how to answer. Follow-up questions were used to obtain additional depth and details (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Finally, the closing statement of the interview protocol provided follow-up instructions for the participant at the end of the interview process. By applying this protocol, the interviews were customized to the interviewees, and the researcher was able to build a solid understanding of the perspectives of each interviewee based upon their own unique experiences.

The interview questions for both groups of participants were based upon the review of school belonging literature and the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale (Goodenow, 1993). The PSSM scale was developed at Tufts University in Boston through testing with both urban and suburban school systems (Goodenow, 1993). The PSSM scale included various features of students' relationships with their schools (e.g., acceptance and inclusion, respect and encouragement, and peers' reactions toward students).

After the initial draft of interview questions was developed, a team of four educators reviewed the interview questions independently and provided feedback regarding the clarity and relevance of the interview questions. This group of educators included the Director of Assessment in the XYZ School District and three other administrators on the administrative team at XYZ High School. The interview questions were revised based upon suggestions from these educators. Following these revisions, the interview questions were tested in a mock interview with a sophomore student who received peer mentoring during the 2022-2023 school year and a Class of 2023 graduate who served as a mentor in the peer mentoring program during the same year. No additional interview revisions were recommended.

For each group, there were a total of 13 interview questions in the interview protocol. The interview questions for the participants who received peer mentoring started with two introduction questions about their general feeling about school and their sense of school belonging. These two initial questions were followed by three questions intended to explore the sense of school belonging each participant felt prior to the start of high school even further. To do this, additional questions focused on how connected these participants felt to their school, to their peers, and to their teachers prior to the start of high school. Next, the focus of the interview questions shifted to any changes in the sense of school belonging these participants experienced following their participation in the school peer mentoring program. Participants were asked to report changes that they experienced in each of the previously identified components of school belonging. If changes were reported in any of the three components, participants were asked to describe what they attributed those changes to.

The interview questions for the participants who provided peer mentoring were similar to the interview questions for the mentee group. The interview questions started with similar introductory questions to the mentee group. These initial questions were immediately followed by the same three questions asked of the mentee group. Then the focus of the interview questions shifted to changes that the mentors experienced in their sense of school belonging following their service as a Panther Mentor in the peer mentoring program. If changes were reported, mentors were asked to describe what they attributed those changes to.

Data Collection Procedures

To initiate the research process, the researcher submitted an application to conduct research in the XYZ School District to the Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment on September 12, 2023 (see Appendix A). The researcher received approval to conduct the research on September 13, 2023 (see Appendix B). The researcher submitted the IRB form to Baker University on September 13, 2023 (see Appendix C). The IRB committee approved the IRB request on October 04, 2023 (see Appendix D).

After permission to conduct the research was granted, the researcher compiled a list of potential study participants. To identify sophomore participants who received mentoring during their freshman year, the researcher acquired class rosters via Infinite Campus – the student information system utilized by the school district. The researcher used Infinite Campus to verify the enrollment of each student at XYZ High School and to confirm their participation in the mentoring program for the entirety of the 2022-2023 school year. To identify senior participants who provided mentoring during their junior

and senior year, the researcher acquired a list of mentors from the program sponsors and verified their participation in the peer mentoring program.

Once this list of potential participants was created for each group, the researcher assigned every participant a number and then utilized a random number generator to identify seven potential participants from each group for the study. The researcher used Infinite Campus to access phone numbers and email addresses for the parents or guardians of each potential participant as well as the school email address for each potential participant. The researcher made initial contact with the parents or guardians of each potential participant by telephone. In those phone calls, the researcher provided general information about the study which included the purpose of the study, the structure of the study, and why their student was identified as a potential participant. If the parents or guardians indicated they were interested in learning more about the study, the researcher emailed the study consent form to those families (see Appendix E). If the parents or guardians indicated they were not interested in learning more about the study, the researcher returned to the random number generator to select a replacement student from the list of eligible participants and repeated the process.

Once the researcher received a signed consent form from the parent or guardian of a potential participant, the researcher contacted the student in-person during the school day. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and outlined the interview process and what would be involved in participating. The researcher also provided the student with information about student confidentiality and how it would be maintained throughout the process (see Appendix F). After answering any questions the student had, the researcher asked the student to provide verbal assent to participate in the study. If the

student agreed, the researcher moved forward with interview scheduling. If the student did not agree, the researcher returned to the potential participant list and once again utilized the random number generator to choose a new study participant.

When scheduling interviews for participants, the researcher contacted the parents or guardians of the participant by phone and set an agreed upon date and time for the interview. The researcher used the school email address of the participant to send a calendar invite for the interview via Microsoft Outlook. Within that calendar invite, the researcher included a Microsoft Teams link to be utilized for the interview. A week prior to each interview, an email confirmation of the date and time was sent to the parent or guardian of the participant as well as the participant utilizing the previously accessed student and family contact information.

All interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, and participants completed the interview from the location of their choice. The researcher utilized Microsoft Teams because each participant had access to a district laptop where the software was already loaded. Each interview was allotted an interview window of 30-45 minutes.

In every interview, the researcher followed the interview protocol intended to maintain consistent interview procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; see Appendix G). Additionally, the researcher recorded each interview in two ways. The first method utilized the video recording tool available on the Microsoft Teams platform. The second method involved using the audio recorder on the Android cell phone of the researcher as a back-up device. Additionally, a transcription of each interview was also created during the interview using the live transcription tool available in the Microsoft Teams platform.

At the conclusion of each interview, the recordings and transcriptions were saved to a password protected folder on the laptop of the researcher. The researcher maintained the data from the study on a password protected laptop, and all data will be deleted from the laptop five years following the completion of the study.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described qualitative data analysis as "a process that requires sequential steps to be followed, from the specific to the general, and involving multiple levels of analysis" (p. 193). In this study, the researcher applied a qualitative data analysis process that involved analyzing participant interview transcripts by coding and categorizing those transcripts (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008).

Following the collection of data, the researcher checked the interview transcript against the interview recording to ensure the transcript captured the interview accurately. From there, the researcher sent the interview transcripts to each participant for their review. After completing these member checks, the researcher read the transcripts. The researcher identified key themes or major ideas related to the two research questions. Next, the researcher uploaded these interview transcripts into a software program called Quirkos. The use of the software was intended to help the researcher systematically code, sort, and analyze the data in an electronic manner.

According to Saldaña (2016), coding is a cyclical process, and each cycle of coding enhances the depth of understanding the researcher built about the topic being studied. To begin, the researcher utilized an emotion coding approach. Saldaña (2016) indicated emotion coding is appropriate for studies "that explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions" (p. 105), and the researcher analyzed

the interview transcripts for any emotions the participants shared related to their sense of school belonging.

After the initial cycle of data coding, the researcher engaged in second cycle coding. According to Saldaña (2016), the purpose of second cycle coding is "to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual and or theoretical organization from initial codes" (p. 207). More simply, second cycle coding allowed the researcher to reorganize and reconfigure the initial coding of the transcripts to generate smaller and more select themes and concepts.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Stahl and King (2020) explained qualitative researchers must aim for a goal of trustworthiness in the research process. Because qualitative data is closely tied to the human experience, Stahl and King insisted trustworthiness can only exist when readers can review the researcher's work and "have a sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported" (p. 26). Guba (1981) proposed four criteria for the researcher to consider when establishing trustworthiness, and those criteria included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, the researcher mainly focused on establishing credibility.

Shenton (2004) stated a qualitative study demonstrates credibility if the "study measures or tests what is actually intended" (p. 64). In this study, the researcher established credibility through the process of member checking. Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined member checking as the involvement of the interview participants throughout the data analysis process. To accomplish this, the researcher sent a completed transcript of each interview to the appropriate participant and requested the participant

make any changes necessary to ensure the transcript was as clear and truthful as possible. Additionally, the researcher established reliability within the study by following the interview protocol during every interview to ensure the interview process was consistent throughout.

Researcher's Role

The researcher of the study was an educator with 12 years of combined teaching and administrative experience at XYZ High School. The researcher started their career as a traveling orchestra teacher where the researcher directed not only the high school orchestra program but also the orchestra program at the feeder middle school as well. In that role, the researcher observed the academic progress and motivation the middle school students achieved when working under the mentorship of the high school students. The researcher employed peer mentorship opportunities in the high school orchestra classroom in a variety of ways as well. Those methods included appointing student section leaders to support skill development and instruction within each instrument section, and those section leaders also worked with individual students who were struggling with the transition to high school orchestra from the middle school. These experiences first influenced the researcher's interests in the impact of peer mentoring at the high school level.

The researcher transitioned into the role of assistant principal in July 2020 shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In that role, the researcher oversaw attendance and discipline for half of the students enrolled in the high school. The researcher observed how student behavior and mental health were dramatically changing during and after the pandemic. Simultaneously, the researcher watched the previously

existing peer mentoring program fold under the stress and scheduling parameters of high school operations during the pandemic. The researcher worked alongside the administrative team to brainstorm solutions to the rising number of students struggling with behavior, mental health, and school belonging. Subsequently, this was when the administrative team decided to revive the peer mentoring program at the high school with the researcher serving as the administrative liaison to the program. The researcher decided to pursue this study to provide insight into whether the intervention of peer mentoring impacted school belonging. Due to the affiliation of the researcher with the peer mentoring program, the researcher had to be especially aware of the potential to look for evidence which specifically supported a positive impact of the peer mentoring program on school belonging and the desire to find the intervention efforts of the building effective.

Limitations

According to Lunenberg and Irby (2008), limitations are "factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings" of a study (p. 133).

The following limitations were utilized in this study:

1. The sample size for this research was small and only included 14 students. Other students at XYZ High School may have had very different experiences than those involved in the study.
2. A proven third party transition program was not utilized as the foundation of this peer mentoring program. The program curriculum was generated from the specific needs of the school at the time and may limit the transferability of the findings of the study.

3. The study did not account for the role gender, race, or socioeconomic status may have had in students' sense of school belonging.

Summary

The perceptions of students who engaged in the peer mentoring program at XYZ High School were explored in this study. The participants included both students who received peer mentoring as well as those who provided it. Participants from each group were chosen randomly. Data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews, and each interview was transcribed for analysis and synthesis. The researcher applied a cyclical coding process to interpret the interview transcripts.

Chapter 4

Results

The results of the study are provided in this chapter. The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore if high school students' sense of school belonging changed following their participation in a peer mentoring program. The researcher utilized a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design and conducted interviews to collect data. The two central research questions addressed in the study were, "What are the changes, if any, in high school freshmen students' sense of school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program?" and "What are the changes, if any, in high school junior and senior students' sense of school belonging after serving as a mentor in a peer mentoring program?" This chapter presents key findings related to these two research questions.

Seven high school sophomore students who received peer mentoring during their freshmen year of high school and seven high school senior students who provided peer mentoring during both their junior and senior years of high school were interviewed for this study. Each participant engaged in an interview via Microsoft Teams, and the transcript for each participant was coded and analyzed for this study. Chapter 4 contains an analysis of the changes, if any, of the students' sense of school belonging following

their participation in the peer mentoring program at XYZ High School and an explanation of the themes that emerged from the coding and analysis of the interviews.

Participant Information

Fourteen students agreed to serve as participants for this study. Table 3 outlines the key demographic information of these study participants:

Table 3

Demographic Make-Up of Study Participants

Demographic Component	No. Sophomore Participants	No. Senior Participants
Gender		
Female	3	1
Male	4	6
Race		
White	4	6
Black	0	1
Hispanic	1	0
Mixed Race	2	0
Education		
IEP	0	0
504 Plan	1	0
Regular Ed.	6	7
SES		
Full Pay	7	7

Note. Demographic data was obtained from Infinite Campus – the student information system utilized by the XYZ School District. The term IEP refers to an individualized education plan. The term SES refers to socio-economic status. The term Regular Ed. refers to regular education students with no accommodations or modifications to their daily learning environment.

The sophomore study participants attended XYZ High School as ninth graders and received peer mentoring from junior and senior students participating in the school's peer mentoring program which was known as the Panther Mentors. Of the participants in this group, four were male and three were female. Sophomore participants represented a diverse racial background, as two participants were Multi-Racial, one participant was Hispanic, and four participants were White. The sophomore participants were either 15 or 16 years of age, and each attended school in the XYZ School District for at least one year prior to their participation in the peer mentoring program. None of the sophomore participants received free or reduced price school lunch, and only one of the participants had an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 education plan.

Each of the sophomore participants indicated they held a favorable perception of school at the time of their interviews. Each participant provided their rationale for what they liked about going to school, and two major themes emerged. The first theme highlighted their desire for social interaction with fellow students and teachers, and the second theme revealed a desire to learn new academic content while developing skills for their futures after high school. When asked to describe the factors most influencing these perceptions, these participants identified their social interactions with students, teachers or counselors, and administrators as being most influential. One participant also highlighted the importance of the curriculum and the content being presented as an influential factor for their perceptions about school. Finally, only half of these participants held a consistently positive perception of school. Two participants indicated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was a negative influence on their previous school experiences whereas one participant indicated that awkward social interactions in middle

school prevented them from enjoying school. A fourth participant noted a lack of personalized educational opportunities as their reason for previously disliking school.

The senior participants served as Panther Mentors at XYZ High School during both their junior year and their senior year of high school. This group of participants included six females and one male. Six of the senior participants were White and one was Black, and the senior participants were either 17 or 18 years of age. Each senior participant attended at least one year of middle school and all four years of high school within the XYZ School District. None of the senior participants received free or reduced price school lunch, and none of the senior participants had an IEP or 504 education plan.

Each of the senior participants also indicated they held a favorable perception of school at the time of their interviews. The seniors unanimously agreed the best part of school was the opportunity to socialize and interact with their respective peer groups while simultaneously engaging in a variety of school activities and student organizations. Additionally, three of these participants indicated their love for learning contributed to their positive perceptions of school. When asked to describe the contributing factors that influenced their positive perceptions of school, five of the participants highlighted their interactions with their teachers and the expectations those teachers held for them whereas the remaining participants identified their peer friendships as the primary reason they viewed school positively. While two of these participants have loved school since they were young, the remaining participants indicated their enjoyment of school primarily applied to their secondary learning experiences only.

The senior study participants were also asked what motivated them to become Panther Mentors in their school. They all responded by emphasizing a desire to give the

freshman class something they did not have themselves during their own transition to high school. Furthermore, three participants indicated they were already heavily involved in school activities, and the Panther Mentor program seemed like an important addition to their current level of involvement. Two other participants described being naturally helpful and saw the program as an opportunity to apply those skillsets, and the remaining two participants reflected on the encouragement they received from parents and siblings to get involved. Additionally, three senior participants reflected on their desire to close the relationship gap between upperclassmen and freshman students they had experienced throughout high school. The other four participants viewed their roles as Panther Mentors as an opportunity to promote school belonging for someone besides themselves.

Study Outcome 1: General Changes in Sense of School Belonging

Six of the sophomore study participants described an initial struggle to fit into the school setting at the start of their high school experiences. Participant 13 indicated they were "nervous about meeting everybody…and just trying to figure out the whole vibe of the school." Participant 11 mentioned the transition to high school was overwhelming because students were coming together from two separate middle schools, and in the best of circumstances, they only knew half of their classmates. Additionally, two sophomore participants were not only new to the high school but new to the school district within the two years prior to high school as well. Participant 9 reflected they "just went from being a new student to being a new student in an even bigger high school." The one sophomore participant who did describe having a general sense of school belonging at the start of high school was a student athlete. As a volleyball player, Participant 14 had participated

in summer training camps and activities prior to the first day of high school, and they indicated, “it helped – everyone really knew me.”

When asked if there were changes to their general sense of school belonging after participating in the Panther Mentor program, five of the sophomore participants replied affirmatively and indicated their sense of school belonging had increased. The dominant theme that emerged from their responses was that participation in the peer mentoring program increased their comfort around older students which consequently resulted in feeling more comfortable at school as a whole. A second theme that emerged was the ability of the sophomore participants to share common experiences with their mentors. Participant 8 emphasized that when something bad was happening or school was especially stressful, they realized their Panther Mentors “had the same experiences that we could both connect over.” Participant 10 described the tours their Panther Mentors provided in the early days of school, and how their Panther Mentors helped them get to know their teachers at deeper levels. Furthermore, Participant 10 said the Panther Mentors “knew the in’s and out’s and tips to help with school,” and they were “just there throughout the school year if you had any questions about school.”

The remaining two sophomore participants indicated their sense of school belonging had increased somewhat following their participation in the Panther Mentor program. These two interviewees also described an increase in their confidence around upperclassmen and emphasized the role of the Panther Mentors in teaching them the traditions of the school. Participant 9 indicated that certain traditions within the building had to be learned from their peers rather than the adults in the school, and this is why having upperclassmen in their freshman tutorial class was so important. Participant 11

was less impressed with the Panther Mentor lessons and activities focusing on the traditions of the school, and instead, they focused on the social access their Panther Mentors established for them as a freshman. Participant 11 stated, “knowing somebody older who already has friends at school and is more confident at school helps with my sense of belonging.”

When asked about their sense of school belonging prior to becoming Panther Mentors, the senior participants provided a wide variety of responses without a singular theme. The two participants who described the strongest sense of school belonging each highlighted their involvement in school clubs and organizations as promoting that sense of belonging. A third participant indicated they felt a fairly strong sense of school belonging as an individual, but it was without a strong sense of how they related to the wider school community. Two participants focused on the negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their sense of school belonging prior to becoming a Panther Mentor. Specifically, Participant 3 focused on their feelings of isolation during their high school years prior to becoming a mentor, whereas Participant 6 talked about the hybrid school schedule and its impact on their ability to get to know their teachers. Participant 6 stated, “I barely can remember my teachers, so there was a big disconnect there…it made my heart hurt.” Finally, the remaining two participants described a mediocre sense of belonging prior to becoming a Panther Mentor. Participant 7 said,

> “I don’t think anything makes me feel out of place at school, but also high schoolers – they don’t really care about that many people. They’re not really there to make you feel good about yourself. They’re not the nicest…I had some close friends, but I don’t think overly there was a super strong sense of belonging.”

When asked about any changes to their sense of school belonging following their work as Panther Mentors, all seven senior participants indicated their sense of school belonging increased due to their participation in the peer mentoring program. Within their descriptions of how their sense of school belonging changed, two primary themes emerged. First, these participants highlighted how serving as Panther Mentors allowed them to know a larger number of people within the school setting itself, and much like the sophomore participants, they placed an emphasis on the bonds that were created between grade levels. Participant 1 reminisced,

> "A lot of the kids who I mentored last year still keep in touch with me and will still talk to me once in a while, and at the very least, they'll wave to me in the hallway, which is really awesome."

In addition to knowing the younger students better, these participants also highlighted how their participation in the peer mentoring program allowed them to build relationships with other mentors. Participant 7 described getting to work alongside people who were also in their classes and emphasized that getting to know them better through mentoring made their classes more enjoyable too. Participant 5 indicated that meeting so many new people (both freshmen and fellow mentors) made them feel "more included and like I belong at school."

The second theme which emerged was that when the Panther Mentors helped the younger students cultivate their sense of school belonging, it subsequently expanded their own feelings of school belonging as well. Participant 5 said they were "happy to know that the things that I'm involved in and the things that I did can help other people feel a sense of belonging at school." Simultaneously, Participant 2 reflected, "I have been able

to help other people feel like they belong, which just made me feel like I belong even more." Finally, Participant 4 shared,

> "I tried to get them to go to different clubs that I was involved in…getting them to be more involved or talking to them about different school events definitely increased the inclusivity that I see today and made me feel more comfortable in the building too."

It is also important to note that three of the senior participants highlighted how their participation in the Panther Mentor program increased their own confidence. Participant 6 described their regular interactions with the students they were mentoring. They indicated that when those students initiated conversations or greeted them outside of the mentoring space, they realized their impact as a mentor and felt more confident as a result. Furthermore, two of these participants indicated that their increase in confidence meant they also experienced an increase in their leadership capacity. These two participants subsequently challenged themselves with new leadership opportunities at the school. Participant 4 described how they "grew in confidence and grew into myself and my spot at school." Participant 1 talked about how the connections they created during their first year of mentoring allowed them to provide guidance and direction in Student Council more effectively, because many of the students they met through the first year of mentoring later joined the Student Council organization.

Clearly, both the sophomore and the senior study participants experienced an overall increase in their general sense of belonging after their participation in the Panther Mentor program. All but one of the sophomore participants expressed an overall low sense of school belonging at the start of their high school experience which increased

after participating in the peer mentoring program during their first year of high school. Senior participants outlined various levels of school belonging prior to becoming Panther Mentors, and that school belonging was influenced by a variety of past experiences – COVID-19, previous school activity involvement, and a lack of positive peer interactions. The extent to which each participant group experienced a change in their school belonging varied due to the individual experiences of each participant, however, both groups highlighted a greater connection between grade levels as a key outcome which increased their overall sense of school belonging. Additionally, the sophomore participants highlighted the comfort that their interactions with their Panther Mentors provided while the senior participants emphasized that promoting school belonging for other students increased their own sense of school belonging as well. Furthermore, some of the senior participants experienced growth in their personal confidence and leadership capacities which increased their sense of school belonging too.

After describing general changes to their sense of school belonging, study participants were asked to discuss changes to specific components of their school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program. The first component of school belonging that participants were asked to discuss was any potential changes to their connection with their school. From there, participants were asked to address any potential changes to their connection with their peers. Finally, participants were asked to share any potential changes to their connection with their teachers.

Study Outcome 2: Changes in Connection to School

Prior to participating in a peer mentoring program, the sophomore study participants described their connection to school in three main ways – they felt highly

connected, somewhat connected, or not at all connected. Those who reported feeling highly connected indicated they felt generally happy, and their school environment was mostly friendly and courteous. These students attributed their connection to school to their involvement in school activities, their interactions with adults in the building, and opportunities for student leadership. Participant 10 indicated,

> "I always wanted to be at school to learn because teachers were welcoming, and I always felt connected. I was always a leader that teachers picked to help other kids…and I felt like kids looked up to me to help them."

The participants who indicated they felt a partial sense of connection to school identified a change in their connection to school over time. One participant experienced a decrease in connection whereas another participant experienced an increase in connection. Participant 9 noted how students would be kind to one another in the beginning of the school year and eventually trail off into individual social groups. Participant 13 noted the opposite. Initially, Participant 13 indicated a low sense of connection to their school that improved over time as they found their friend group and got more comfortable in the school environment.

The participants who indicated they felt no connection to their school referenced a sense of anonymity within the larger school system. Participant 12 described feeling like "just another one of the students going through the system and getting taught." Participant 9 reflected on the lack of continuity in their school setting by stating, "I've never felt connected to school ever because I would be in one and then just move right out of it in a couple of years."

When asked about changes in their sense of school belonging specifically related to their connection to school, all of the sophomore participants indicated that participation in the peer mentoring program increased their connection to school. Two participants related their increased connection to school with their development of school spirit and greater involvement in school activities. Two other sophomore participants described feeling more connected to school because their Panther Mentors helped them learn how to study and find success in school. Participant 12 remembered their Panther Mentors coming together to support their learning of a monologue for drama class. They reflected,

> "We had to do this monologue, memorize it, and it had to be three minutes. I picked one that was way too short. I just remember all the Panther Mentors coming together and trying to find a way for me to make it longer…they were trying so hard to help me…you just never forget the amount of effort they were using to try to help me."

The remaining sophomore participants talked about sharing common experiences with their Panther Mentors including similar club or activity involvement, participation in common performing arts groups, or personal growth through student leadership opportunities. Finally, each of the sophomore participants alluded to an expansion of their personal engagement with peers in other grades after working with their Panther Mentors. Participant 9 indicated their mentors "were able to get a lot more personal information out of me and just make more openings for conversations that helped me open up my shell as an introvert." Participant 8 stated, "not only were there people in my class, but

there were people outside of that who cared and actually knew me…I could relate to the Panther Mentors and overall be more connected."

When the senior study participants were asked to outline their feelings of connection to school prior to their involvement in the peer mentoring program, they responded with two descriptors for their feelings – they were either very connected or somewhat connected. Like the sophomores, those who felt very connected to the school attributed their connection to their involvement in student organizations. They specifically mentioned their involvement in co-curricular activities such as marching band or student leadership, and they also talked about participating in extra-curricular activities like volleyball, cross country, or student clubs. Although these students reported feeling very connected, it is important to note they did not indicate their connection applied to the building as a whole. Rather, their feelings of connection were isolated to the groups they were a part of. Participant 3 stated, "I would say that I felt pretty connected to the people that I was in activities with...but outside of that, I didn't feel as connected to the student body as a whole."

The senior participants who reported feeling somewhat connected to school reflected on how COVID-19 precautions impacted their connection to school. Participant 7 recalled the hybrid schedule utilized during their freshman year which resulted in attending school in-person only two days per week and never on consecutive days. Additionally, Participant 7 said, "I didn't talk a lot freshman or sophomore year in any class" which meant "no one really knew me…and no one really pushed me…I was scared to be involved." Participant 4 shared somewhat similar experiences and indicated they felt "like I was kind of a freshman for two years instead of one" because they "didn't

have a lot of social things" their freshman year. Participant 6 highlighted that "seniors didn't really feel the need to interact with me" in their early years of high school, and they did not find their people right away.

When asked to describe changes in their feelings of connection to their school after participating in the Panther Mentor program, the senior participants unanimously agreed they experienced an increase in their feeling of connection to school. Each participant described a newfound connection between the grade levels which resulted in feeling a higher level of connection to the school as a whole. Participant 3 specifically cited increased social interactions between upperclassmen and underclassmen as the driver behind their increased connection to school. Participant 4 and Participant 5 highlighted those same social interactions; however, they placed an emphasis on how their out-of-school engagement with the students they mentored was just as important as their in-school mentoring. Participant 4 said,

> "Being able to go to games and to see the kids I was mentoring at those games definitely helped that connection to school and reinforced to the kids that I would see them out in the [real world]…being able to really connect to them both in school and out of school definitely helped."

In addition to the increased interactions between students, several senior participants highlighted a greater sense of connection to the school through their involvement in new activities. Some of those opportunities were specifically associated with the peer mentoring program itself and others related to their newfound involvement in other student organizations within the building. Participant 6 indicated, "I got to know my school as a whole more" including "our foundations and our morals." Participant 5

emphasized the importance of the new student tours completed in the early stages of the Panther Mentor program. They felt those tours were as equally as important for the freshman as they were for the Panther Mentors because the tours provided the Panther Mentors with the opportunity to have ownership in their school. Participant 3 indicated that working other events like new student orientation or open house helped them "feel like I'm more connected to things going on in the school…not just the freshmen and students I'm mentoring, but also just events that are happening in the school." It was Participant 2 who reminisced that "mentoring got me out of my comfort zone even more…I met other people with other activities in mind that I was like oh – I could join that too!"

Prior to participating in a peer mentoring program, the study participants experienced a variety of feelings about how connected they felt to their school. Both sophomore and senior student participants credited their initial feelings of connection to their school to their involvement with student organizations and school activities, and those feelings were only reinforced by their participation in the peer mentoring program. Indeed, participants in both groups indicated that participation in the peer mentoring program helped them to expand their school involvement which consequently helped them feel more connected to school. Increased connection to school was also stimulated by social interactions between grade levels in both interview groups. Sophomore participants reflected on how caring their Panther Mentors were about them as individuals, and senior participants highlighted how their engagement with the younger students both inside and outside of school made a big difference in their feelings of connection. Finally, senior participants emphasized how specific activities associated

with the Panther Mentor program provided them with greater ownership of their school environment and simultaneously pushed them out of their comfort zones and encouraged their exploration of new opportunities. For these reasons, it was clear that participation in the peer mentoring program increased feelings of connection to school for both the sophomore and senior study participants.

Study Outcome 3: Changes in Connection to Peers

The second specific component of school belonging study participants were asked to evaluate was their connection to their peers before and after participating in a peer mentoring program. Five of the sophomore study participants indicated they felt connected to their peers prior to their participation in a peer mentoring program. Participant 8 specifically described feeling "a lot of common ground" with their peers which was echoed by Participant 11 who indicated they coexisted with their peers in a positive manner and with minimal conflict. Furthermore, Participant 9 reflected on how they would aim to treat others as well as they could, and those efforts were usually reciprocated.

These same five participants confirmed that their peers showed an interest in them and they felt accepted by those peers which cultivated their sense of community. The interest they reported showing in one another was connected to common hobbies or out-of-school activities. Additionally, Participant 10 indicated they felt interest was shown in them when peers asked for help or support. Specifically, Participant 10 stated, "we built off of each other with schoolwork and just building friendships and partnerships with them." In regard to acceptance, this group highlighted being able to be themselves and never needing to hide aspects of their personality to fit in. Participant 8 said, "I realized I

could still find community in my personality and things like our daily situations." This type of connection was mentioned by Participant 14 as well, as they felt included and never left out of activities or events with their peers.

The two sophomore participants who reported not feeling especially connected to their peers shared common reasons for those feelings. Both Participant 12 and Participant 13 described having a small, inner circle of friends with limited connections outside of their group. Participant 12 reported finding comfort in their inner circle which resulted in not really "branching out or talking to anyone else." Furthermore, Participant 12 mentioned students were divided into two separate teams in middle school, and those teams did not often interact. Consequently, Participant 12 "did not know them at all" and "would never talk to them." This also meant that as Participant 12 entered high school, not only were two middle schools converging together, but two teams from each middle school were also mixing and intermingling for the first time.

Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, all of the sophomore participants reported some type of increase in their connection to their peers. The primary theme that emerged from the sophomore participant responses was that the presence of the Panther Mentors in their tutorial classes cultivated a greater sense of community in those specific classrooms. Participant 12 credited their Panther Mentors with establishing an environment that was fun and playful. Participant 13 indicated their Panther Mentors became the reason they stopped hiding in the shadows and actually interacted with other freshman classmates; while the tutorial class did not know each other and struggled to find things to talk about in the beginning of the year, Participant 13 said, "we are all really connected now…we all get along, we all know each other…we're all willing to

help each other now." Finally, Participant 9 remembered their Panther Mentors bringing out "more of my achievements and my hobbies" which resulted in kids "taking an interest and talking to me more."

A second theme that emerged from the sophomore participant interviews was an increase in their feelings of connection to their peers in other grade levels as well as those with differing viewpoints from their own. Participant 12 recalled their Panther Mentors treated them like an equal, specifically, "they talked to me like I was their friend…like they weren't in charge of me…like I had equal values and everything." Participant 9 described how their Panther Mentors helped them realize their sense of urgency to fit in would matter less as they got older, and as a result, they could "connect to people just by being you." Participant 13 expressed gratefulness for their Panther Mentors who helped them find comfort in talking with their immediate peers in tutorial, because doing so also helped them feel more comfortable talking with others around the school. Participant 8 described how their Panther Mentors introduced them to other communities within the building including the theater program and the Writing Center. Participant 8 also indicated their friendship with their Panther Mentors instilled confidence and comfort which led to them trying new things. In doing so, Participant 8 expanded their friend group and widened their involvement in the school community. Finally, Participant 14 described how their Panther Mentors increased their ability to be reflective. For example, "if there was a heated moment or situation, everyone would stop, reflect…and get their thoughts together," and Participant 14 indicated this influenced how they interacted and "changed a lot of people."

When asked to describe their feelings of connection to their peers prior to participating in a peer mentoring program, the senior participants responded with a wider variety of answers than the sophomore participants. One senior participant reported feeling greatly connected to their peers, two senior participants reported feeling mostly connected, three senior participants reported feeling somewhat connected, and one senior participant reported feeling no connection to their peers at all. Participant 1 stated, "even though it was an age of COVID, I think people were just more excited to interact with one another," and this is why they felt such a close connection to their peers. Participant 2 and Participant 5 credited feeling mostly connected to their peers to their interactions with other students in the hallways, their classrooms, and various club activities. Participant 5 said,

> "I like knowing a lot of people in the school, and I like it when people are friendly to me. I like being friendly to people. I just think it makes the school feel more welcoming the more people you know."

Participant 3 and Participant 4 reported feeling only somewhat connected to their peers because they experienced isolation from the other grade levels. Participant 6 appeared to agree, and blamed feeling only somewhat connected to their peers on the COVID precautions in place within the school and the intentional distance those precautions produced. Finally, Participant 7 indicated they felt no connection to their peers prior to their participation in the peer mentoring program. Participant 7 recalled, "there were times where freshman year, I sat alone at lunch every single day…I don't think it was ever purposeful…I just think everyone was kind of in their own space."

Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, six of the seven senior participants indicated their connection to their peers increased. The dominant reason for the increase was participation in the peer mentoring program allowed the participants to develop new friendships and partnerships within their respective mentor teams. While many of the mentors had previously attended classes together, they did not necessarily know one another. Participant 5 indicated it made them "happy to have friends that are now who I normally hang out with every day." Participant 2 indicated they were partnered with three other mentors they "never really talked to before" and that they were "actually really cool." Additionally, when asked if there were any specific events or activities that helped support this increase in their connection to their peers, these participants identified their mentor training as being the key component that started the bonding process for their mentor teams.

Another primary reason for the increase in their feelings of connection to their peers was the relationships the senior participants built with the students they mentored. Participant 4 indicated,

> "Increasing my pool of underclassmen that I do know and being able to acknowledge them when I see them at school events or seeing them around the building… definitely connected me to those younger kids more. It makes my day when I see them utilizing those resources that I kind of point them towards."

Participant 5 suggested their participation in the peer mentoring program allowed them to meet people outside of those who are enrolled in their regular classes which resulted in a greater sense of school belonging for the participant. Participant 2 described the freshmen they mentored as their "buddies" and how they would "come to me with their

problems…and it just makes me feel good." Finally, each of these Panther Mentors talked about how the freshmen they have mentored continue to follow-up with them now and how this continuation of their relationships further supported their newfound feelings of connection to their peers.

Participant 1 was the only senior participant who felt their overall connection to their peers failed to increase following their participation in the peer mentoring program. Participant 1 felt the hallway travel policies instituted within the building made it harder for students to interact with one another, particularly during Tutorial. They described not having the same connection with their peers anymore due to their newly limited interactions, and they did not feel participation in the peer mentoring program helped resolve the issue. While Participant 1 did agree that spending time with the freshmen through the Panther Mentor program meant the freshmen became more likely to express themselves in vulnerable ways, their relationships with their own grade level suffered which meant their connection to their peers decreased rather than increased.

In summary, when asked to describe their feelings of connection to their peers prior to participating in a peer mentoring program, both the sophomore and senior participants reported feeling various levels of connection. In both grade levels, much of this connection was attributed to common interests, hobbies, or activities that the respective participants shared in common. Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, 13 of 14 participants reported an increase in their connection to their peers. At the sophomore level, this increase was reflected in the relationships the participants built within their tutorial classes as well as the relationships they built with students in older grade levels. The senior participants echoed this sentiment and indicated

a stronger connection with the younger grade levels. While the senior participants did not necessarily increase their feelings of connection within their own tutorial classrooms, they did increase their feelings of connection within their respective Panther Mentor teams. The only participant who felt the peer mentoring program had no effect on their connection to their peers believed there was a disruption in their relationships with peers of their own age due to new regulations instituted by the school itself. Despite the one outlier, it can be said that participation in the peer mentoring program appeared to increase participants' connection to their peers.

Study Outcome 4: Changes in Connection to Teachers

The last specific component of school belonging the study participants addressed was their feelings of connection to their teachers. When asked to describe their feelings of connection with their teachers prior to participating in the peer mentoring program, all of the sophomore participants spoke positively about their teachers and communicated a sense of connection with them. The sophomore participants described their teachers as "easy to talk to" (Participant 9), "there to help" (Participant 10), and "really fun…they wanted the best education for me" (Participant 14). The sophomore participants unanimously agreed their teachers prior to high school made an effort to show an interest in them and this helped support their feelings of connection. Participant 10 and Participant 11 both described the ongoing efforts of their teachers to get to know them as being especially meaningful, because they started the process on the very first day of school and continued it throughout the school year. Participant 14 emphasized those get-to-know-you efforts were not limited to school-related topics but also to the personal hobbies or interests of the participants and their families. Despite these strong feelings of

connection to their teachers, it is important to note that only five of the sophomore participants felt comfortable talking to their teachers about their problems at this stage of their education. Both Participant 9 and Participant 11 specifically stated they were better off turning to a close family member or friend to resolve any problems they may have had.

Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, five of the sophomore participants indicated their established feelings of connection to their teachers increased even more. The dominant theme that emerged from these participant responses was that the Panther Mentors helped the sophomore participants build a deeper connection with their assigned tutorial teachers. Participant 12 remembered, "the Panther Mentors got more conversation out of us [and asked questions] maybe teachers wouldn't have asked." Those memories were echoed by Participant 10 who stated, "I think they helped my tutorial teacher when she was struggling to get to know kids…all four of them tried to approach kids and get to know kids throughout the year which helped her." Finally, Participant 14 recalled the Panther Mentors "got our tutorial teacher involved with the things we were doing," and "it got us to know her better."

Another key theme mentioned by the sophomore participants was an increase in their willingness to share their problems with a teacher at school. Participant 8 indicated their mentors helped them learn how to express their feelings to their teachers which broadened their ability to relay troubling or concerning information. Participant 13 described a lesson the Panther Mentors taught in which they outlined their own experiences in approaching teachers for help. According to Participant 13, the lesson "validated that you can ask for help." Although Participant 11 did not identify a specific

teacher they would take their problems to, they did indicate, “I’m more likely to talk to somebody.”

The two sophomore participants who reported no increase in their connection to their teachers indicated they felt connected to their teachers all along. For this reason, working with their Panther Mentors had very little impact upon their feelings of connection to their teachers because those feelings previously existed at a high level.

The senior participants were also asked to describe their feelings of connection to their teachers prior to participating in the peer mentoring program, and they reported feeling mostly connected, somewhat connected, or minimally connected. Those who felt mostly connected once again attributed their feelings of connection to the student organizations they were a part of. By being more involved, Participant 1 said the teachers sponsoring those activities were “more willing to open up and start a nice connection.” Those who felt some connection to their teachers again focused their reasoning on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 4 and Participant 5 both mentioned the hybrid scheduling from their freshman year and described how attending school only two days a week made it extremely difficult to get to know their teachers. Participant 6 said they had a few teachers who “saw the gravity” of building relationships with their students during the COVID-19 timeframe while other teachers “were just like…it’s my job…and I’m just going to teach you the things you need to know.” Finally, those who felt minimal connection with their teachers prior to participating in a peer mentoring program provided two primary reasons for their feelings – a dislike of the subject matter being taught by the teacher or their own self-identified shyness. In both cases, the participants indicated a higher level of comfort with either the subject matter or the

individuals with whom they were working would be required to increase their connections with the teacher.

Following their participation in a peer mentoring program, all of the senior participants shared they felt an increase in their connection to their teachers. A primary theme from their responses was that participation in the peer mentoring program meant they got the chance to work with teachers in the building who they would not have otherwise engaged with in their own classes. Participant 5 recalled the role they played in leading the new staff through tours of the building at the start of the school year and how interacting with those teachers in a less formal way was a unique opportunity to build positive relationships with new teachers to the building. Participant 3 remembered hosting Minute-to-Win-It games with the full returning staff at the start of the school year and how this allowed the mentors to see their teachers in a different context. Finally, multiple senior participants reported that participation in the peer mentoring program helped to expand their relationship with the freshman tutorial teachers they supported. Participant 2 indicated their work in their freshman tutorial humanized the teacher and made the teacher more relatable to them.

Another theme that emerged from the senior participant interviews was they felt teachers showed a greater interest in them because they were participants in the Panther Mentor program. Participant 5 recalled how teachers frequently asked about their role as a Panther Mentor and would initiate conversations about their work in the program. Participant 2 indicated the freshman tutorial teacher they worked with would talk to them about less formal topics and often treated them as more of a peer than a student. Participant 2 said they wanted to become a teacher someday as well and that the

relationship with their freshman tutorial teacher gave them a glimpse into the life of a first year teacher – a perspective they found to be especially valuable. Finally, Participant 7 noted how "when you are a mentor, teachers trust you a lot more and are more willing to see if you can help them with something." Participant 1 echoed these sentiments and indicated they felt they were "viewed as a role model and more respectfully by their teachers" because they were a Panther Mentor.

Similar to the responses from the sophomore participants, the senior participants also indicated their increased connection with their teachers meant they were more willing to approach a teacher with a problem or concern. For Participant 2, their role as a Panther Mentor meant they evolved from being scared to ask questions to feeling "like I can talk to all of my teachers I've come in contact with" and knowing "they'll be there to help me or talk me through anything." Participant 7 said their involvement in the Panther Mentors expanded their ability to make positive connections, therefore they felt "there's a lot of teachers that I'd be comfortable to talk to if needed." Finally, Participant 5 compared the freshmen coming to the mentors for support with their own willingness to go to their teachers for help and support. Participant 5 indicated their interactions with the freshmen "reminded me it's okay for me to ask for help too."

Prior to participating in the Panther Mentor program, all of the sophomore interview participants and some of the senior interview participants described feelings of connection to their teachers. The senior participants who felt only somewhat connected to their teachers attributed the disconnect to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while those who felt minimally connected indicated their feelings were influenced by their own personality or their dislike of a particular subject in school. Following their participation

in the peer mentoring program, five of seven sophomore participants and all of the senior participants reported an increase in their feelings of connection to the teachers in their school. Both the sophomore participants and the senior participants indicated they felt a closer connection to the tutorial teachers they were working with. For the sophomore participants, their tutorial teacher was the one teacher they would have for all four years of high school, and for the senior participants, the tutorial teachers were frequently new faces they would not have otherwise encountered in their regular classes. Additionally, the majority of study participants from both grade levels indicated their participation in the Panther Mentor program increased their willingness to share a personal problem with a teacher and to seek advice and support from that teacher. The two sophomores who reported no increase of connection with their teachers indicated they felt connected prior to participating in the Panther Mentor program, therefore, they did not feel the program changed those feelings.

Summary

Prior to their participation in a peer mentoring program, general school belonging was relatively low for nearly all fourteen of the study participants. Most sophomore participants highlighted the transition to high school as being particularly difficult, and they described feeling tremendous pressure to find a way to fit in within the existing school community. Additionally, the senior study participants had all been impacted by COVID-19 regulations and precautions during their early years of high school. Consequently, only a few indicated they had really found their places and their true sense of school belonging in high school prior to their participation in the Panther Mentor program.

Table 4 summarizes the changes in school belonging described by the study participants following their participation in the peer mentoring program.

Table 4

Summary of Study Results

Belonging Type	No. Sophomore Participants	No. Senior Participants
Increase in General Belonging	5	7
Increase in Connection to School	7	7
Increase in Connection to Peers	7	6
Increase in Connection to Teachers	5	7

Note. The abbreviation "No." means number. The numbers displayed in this table are to be interpreted out of seven participants surveyed in each group.

Following their participation in the Panther Mentor program, the majority of both sophomore and senior study participants experienced increases in their general sense of belonging, their connection to school, their connection to peers, and their connection to teachers. The specific component of school belonging where growth was universal for all fourteen participants was in their feelings of connection to school. Both age groups reflected on how the Panther Mentor program expanded their relationships with students outside of their own grade levels and how those relationships were pivotal components that contributed to their feelings of connection to school. Thirteen of the fourteen study

participants also experienced an increase in their connection to their peers. Their feedback reiterated how important relationships with peers outside of their grade level proved to be. Additionally, sophomore participants emphasized the importance of the relationships they built in their own tutorial classes as a result of working with their Panther Mentors, while senior participants highlighted the relationships they cultivated within their various Panther Mentor teams. Finally, five sophomore participants and seven senior participants reported an increase in their feelings of connection to their teachers following their participation in the Panther Mentor program. As the senior participants supported the sophomore participants in building strong relationships with their assigned tutorial teachers, the senior participants simultaneously established relationships with those same tutorial teachers, many of whom they might not have otherwise encountered within their own course schedules or school experiences. Only two study participants did not report an increase in connection with their teachers following their participation in the peer mentoring program, and each attributed this to feeling a high level of connection prior to their participation.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and Recommendations

The transition to high school has been identified as an especially vulnerable time in the lives of young students, and proactive efforts are necessary to develop the ideal conditions in which these students can feel supported and cared for as they progress through high school (Chan et al., 2020; Roybal et al., 2014; Vural et al., 2020). One key component of this ideal environment is the establishment of a sense of school belonging (Allen e. al., 2018; Benner et al., 2017; Butts & Cruziero, 2005; Gowing, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2007; Roybal et al., 2014).

Existing school belonging research has primarily focused on children and early adolescents (Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni, 2013). Additionally, wide acceptance of general principles around school belonging exists, however, it is still unclear what strategies best cultivate school belonging (Slaten et al., 2016). This study was conducted to explore what changes, if any, occurred in high school students' sense of school belonging following their participation in a peer mentoring program. The study explored these potential changes from the perspectives of both those who received peer mentoring and those who provided school mentoring. Chapter 5 begins with a study summary, an overview of the problem, a reiteration of the purpose statement and research questions, a review of the methodology, and the study findings. The chapter concludes with the study findings related to the literature, recommendations for the future, and closing remarks.

Study Summary

This study was conducted to explore what changes, if any, occurred in high school students' sense of school belonging following their participation in a peer

mentoring program. This section includes the purpose of the study, the research questions, the study methodology, and major findings of the study.

Overview of the Problem

School belonging has been established to have a significant impact on the overall wellbeing and educational trajectory of students (Longaretti, 2020), yet limited research appears to be available to explain how schools can more effectively foster students' school belonging, especially within the high school setting (Slaten et al., 2016). One solution to cultivating school belonging has been the implementation of school-based mentoring programs. Such mentoring programs have been widely utilized as a method to nurture students within the school setting (Lyons & McQuillin, 2018). Multiple studies focused on school-based mentoring programs that employed adults as mentors have produced conflicting mentoring outcomes related to the development of school belonging (Gordon et al., 2013; Herrera & Karcher, 2013; Laco & Johnson, 2019; Wheeler, 2010). Consequently, school leaders have started to shift away from school-based mentoring programs involving adults as the mentors in favor of peer mentoring programs (Fryatt, 2022; Karcher et al., 2010; Stoltz, 2005; Weatherman, 2013).

In making this shift, school leaders have indicated they believe the freshmen transition process will especially benefit from the introduction of a peer mentoring program because incoming ninth graders would be supported by their older peers in building their sense of school belonging (Stoltz, 2005; McBeath et al., 2018). Yet, it remains unclear whether freshmen participation in a peer mentoring program actually contributes to their feelings of school belonging. Additionally, school leaders have also suggested the upperclassmen students who serve as mentors and enjoy a positive

experience with the mentoring program can also form a greater sense of school belonging (Stoltz, 2005). Although this claim has been supported at the university level (Gunn et al., 2017), research was limited in regard to examining the potential impact of participation as a mentor in a peer mentoring program on students' sense of school belonging at the high school level (Karcher et al., 2010).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, a heightened urgency to determine the best strategies for promoting school belonging emerged (Collier, 2022), particularly for students entering high school for the first time. With increasingly more schools turning to school-based peer mentoring programs to support students' development of school belonging (Newman et al., 2007), the question remained whether participating in a peer mentoring program could have an influence on both a mentee's and a mentor's sense of school belonging at the high school level.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore if high school students' sense of school belonging changed following their participation in a peer mentoring program. The researcher focused specifically on the school belonging of freshmen students who received peer mentorship and the junior and senior students who provided the peer mentorship in a post-COVID timeframe. In doing so, the researcher sought to fill a gap in the research about the potential impact of participation in a peer mentoring program on high school students' development of school belonging.

There were two primary research questions for this study.

RQ1. What are the changes, if any, in high school freshmen students' sense of school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program?

RQ2. What are the changes, if any, in high school junior and senior students' sense of school belonging after serving as a mentor in a peer mentoring program?

Review of the Methodology

The researcher utilized a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research design. The population for the study included two groups consisting of sophomore and senior high school students. The sophomore students were recipients of peer mentoring during their freshman year of high school, and the senior students provided peer mentoring during both their junior and senior years of high school. The study participants were selected utilizing simple random sampling and resulted in a total sample size of fourteen students. The researcher collected data through interviews. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions, and responses were collected via Microsoft Teams, an online video-conferencing software available to both the researcher and the students interviewed. The Microsoft Teams software allowed the researcher to record each interview and produce an interview transcript for each participant. The researcher edited those transcripts for accuracy. Study participants were sent a copy of their interview transcripts for member checking and subsequently confirmed their review of their respective transcripts. Once the transcripts were reviewed and finalized, the researcher uploaded them to the online edition of Quirkos, a data analysis software. Each transcript was analyzed and coded for major themes and study outcomes.

Major Findings

During the interview process, study participants were asked to reflect upon and describe their sense of school belonging prior to and after their participation in a peer mentoring program. Interview questions focused on changes to each participant's general

sense of school belonging as well as changes in their feelings of connection to three specific aspects of school belonging – connection to school, connection to peers, and connection to teachers.

Prior to participating in a peer mentoring program, six of the seven sophomore study participants reported a low general sense of school belonging. Participants described the transition to high school as overwhelming with a high level of stress and urgency to fit into an existing social structure. Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, five sophomore participants indicated their general sense of school belonging increased while two sophomore participants reported their general sense of school belonging somewhat increased. These changes were attributed to positive interactions with the sophomores' peer mentors which increased their confidence around older students. Sophomore participants also reported they discovered they shared common experiences with their peer mentors and that common ground also contributed to higher levels of confidence. Finally, the sophomores indicated there were certain building traditions that only peers could teach them, and they expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to learn from their peer mentors.

Prior to their participation in the peer mentoring program, sophomore participants reported three different levels of connection to their school – highly connected, somewhat connected, and not at all connected. Those who expressed feeling highly connected were involved in school activities and associated with student organizations within their school setting while those who reported feeling somewhat connected described feelings that evolved and changed over time. Those who said they had no connection to their school indicated they felt anonymous in their school setting. Following their participation in the

peer mentoring program, all seven sophomore participants reported an increase in their connection to their school. The sophomore participants reported developing a higher sense of school spirit while also expanding their understanding of how to be a successful high school student. Additionally, the sophomore participants attributed their increased connection to their school to their involvement in new activities such as student clubs or organizations, performing arts groups, and student leadership councils.

Before participating in the peer mentoring program, five of the seven sophomore participants reported already feeling connected to their peers. These five sophomore participants attributed these initial connections to sharing common interests and hobbies with their peers and feeling accepted by their peers in the school setting. The two sophomore participants who did not feel connected to their peers credited a small inner circle of friends with providing them a sense of comfort which deterred them from expanding their social circle. Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, all seven of the sophomore participants indicated their connection with their peers increased. The sophomore participants explained the changes in their connection with their peers resulted from the sense of community they established within their tutorial classrooms through their interactions with one another which stemmed from the lessons and activities taught by their peer mentors. Sophomore participants also described an ability to interact in a more positive manner with students who held an opposing viewpoint or with students in a different grade level with different life experiences after working with their peer mentors.

The final portion of the interview process asked the sophomore participants to describe their feelings of connection to their teachers before and after their participation

in the peer mentoring program. Prior to participation, all of the sophomore participants indicated they felt well connected to their teachers. The sophomore participants described their teachers making efforts to get to know them while simultaneously creating a fun and positive learning environment. Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, five of the sophomore study participants indicated their feelings of connection to their teachers increased. All five of these sophomore study participants highlighted the bond they established with their tutorial teachers through the activities led by their peer mentors, and each also indicated a new willingness to share personal problems with a teacher at their school. Two of the sophomore study participants did not report an increase in their feelings of connection to their teachers, however, the explanation they provided indicated their feelings of connection were already high and there was not a need for an increase in their feelings of connection to their teachers.

Senior study participants were asked very similar questions to the sophomore study participants. Prior to participating in the peer mentoring program, the seven senior participants reported four varying levels of school belonging. Those who experienced a higher sense of belonging attributed those feelings to participation in school activities and student organizations whereas those who did not share those sentiments reminisced about the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their high school experiences. Additionally, one participant highlighted a generally negative attitude they felt was held by most high school students in which there was minimal desire to make real connections with one another. Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, all seven senior participants reported an increase in their general sense of school belonging. The primary theme the senior participants highlighted was the opportunities the peer

mentoring program provided to meet new people and build bonds with students in other grades. Additionally, the senior participants reflected on how promoting school belonging for others increased their own sense of belonging in the process.

When asked to describe their feelings of connection to their school prior to participating in the peer mentoring program, all seven of the senior participants indicated they felt connected or somewhat connected to their school. Those who reported feeling connected to their school indicated the connection existed within individual activities or organizations and did not necessarily apply to the school as a whole. Those who felt somewhat connected to the school once again attributed their feelings to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for social distancing and other prevention measures implemented by the school. Following their participation in the peer mentoring program, all seven senior participants indicated their feelings of connection to their school increased. They described the social connections they made with students in the younger grade levels and how interacting with them in the hallways and at school games or events created a higher sense of connection for the school as a whole. Furthermore, the senior participants indicated they became more involved in their school as well. Some of their new school involvement included activities like giving building tours at back-to-school registration or hosting new student orientation as a part of the peer mentor program while other mentors got involved in additional student organizations or leadership opportunities within the school.

Prior to their participation in the peer mentoring program, the senior participants reported four varying levels of connection with their peers which were explained by a wide variety of reasons with no universal theme. After their participation in the peer

mentoring program, six of the seven senior participants indicated their feelings of connection to their peers increased. The dominant theme that emerged from this portion of the interview was that positive partnerships and increased camaraderie emerged within each of the participants' mentor teams. While the senior participants were all in the same grade level, they found themselves working in teams with peers they did not necessarily know well, and serving together as peer mentors allowed them to expand those relationships. The senior participants also reflected on the long-term relationships they built with the students whom they mentored. They provided personal stories about how they've continued to interact with the students they mentored their first year in the program and how those extended relationships have contributed to their increased feelings of connection with their peers. The only senior participant who did not report an increase in their feelings of connection to their peers blamed hallway travel restrictions for students and other building procedures instituted during the school's tutorial time as a deterrent to social interaction. This senior participant believed their social interactions within their own grade level were negatively impacted as a result, and their feelings of connection to their peers actually decreased over the course of time they served in the peer mentoring program.

Finally, the senior study participants were also asked to describe changes in their feelings of connection to their teachers following their participation in the peer mentoring program. Initially, senior participants reported three levels of connection with their teachers – mostly connected, somewhat connected, and minimally connected. Those who felt mostly connected once again associated their feelings with their participation in student organizations, clubs, or activities, while those who felt somewhat connected

attributed their feelings to the pandemic yet again. Those who felt minimal connection to their teachers highlighted how their dislike of a specific subject matter impacted their feelings about the teacher providing instruction in that subject matter. They also identified themselves as being especially shy. After their participation in the peer mentoring program, all seven senior participants reported an increase in their feelings of connection to their teachers. Each senior participant described how serving as a mentor allowed them to establish relationships with teachers they would not have otherwise encountered in their own class schedules. The collaboration between the senior participants as mentors and the freshman tutorial teachers allowed the mentors to develop an appreciation for those teachers, and those teachers became more humanized and relatable as a result. Additionally, the senior participants described how teachers unaffiliated with the peer mentoring program took an interest in their mentoring efforts and often provided them with higher levels of trust or responsibility due to their mentor status.

Findings Related to the Literature

Kiefer et al. (2015) insisted that developing school belonging is the most "important aspect of students' overall adjustment in school" (p. 1), and Cobb and Krownapple (2019) asserted academic achievement is built upon students' sense of school belonging. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, students' perceptions of school belonging and how school belonging can be developed during an educational transition such as moving from middle school to high school was significantly disrupted (Potts, 2021). For these reasons, it was important determine the best way to cultivate school belonging for every student within their respective school systems. This study focused on

peer mentoring as one specific strategy to promote school belonging. The researcher aimed to explore what changes, if any, occurred in students' sense of school belonging after their participation in a peer mentoring program.

Fryatt (2022) conducted a study focused on the student transition from middle school to high school. In his research, Fryatt learned freshman students looked to the upperclassmen in their schools as role models. Although no formal mentoring system was in place during Fryatt's study, the freshman students indicated they still relied upon upperclassmen as trusted resources and safe people to approach with questions when necessary. The current study affirmed these findings. Participant 10 described being able to ask their peer mentors anything and also highlighted how their peer mentors "helped me learn how to approach and be more helpful to kids at my school." Participant 9 discussed how difficult it would have been to learn "the ropes and traditions" of the school without their peer mentors and stated having access to "someone closer to your age really helped you feel more belonging."

In the study conducted by Hall et al. in 2020, peer mentors were utilized as part of a program to foster more student-to-student engagement in the transition to college process. The researchers conducted an affective survey, and mentees were deemed to feel a higher sense of belonging in their first year at the university. The current study was set-up similarly to this university study. In the current study, junior and senior mentors were placed into the tutorial classrooms of all freshman students at the high school, and opportunities for the mentors to interact with the freshman students at least twice per week were created. After a full year of mentoring, all of the sophomore participants who received peer mentoring for the current study echoed the university students' results by

indicating they felt an increase in their sense of general school belonging after participating in the peer mentoring program.

Within the current study, six of the seven sophomore study participants credited their peer mentors with encouraging their involvement in school activities and indicated they got involved in new activities as a result. Furthermore, three of those same study participants reported spending significant time with their peer mentors studying or working to improve their academic outcomes. While academic outcomes were not the primary outcome measured as a part of the current study, the sophomore participants' involvement in new activities and desire to pursue higher academic outcomes still aligns with the study conducted by Lampert (2005). In his study, the failure rate of the freshman class dropped by 14% and freshman participation in extracurricular activities increased by 6%. Indeed, from the perspective of increasing freshman student involvement in school activities, the current study supported the previous study.

The outcomes of the study conducted by Richardson (2011) suggested that participation in a peer mentoring program would not alleviate freshmen students' struggle with the social demands of high school whereas Roybal (2011) found peer mentors were one of the most influential factors contributing to a positive social climate and culture in the school. The current study aligned with the claims outlined by Roybal (2011), as all seven sophomore study participants reported increased levels of connection with their peers following their participation in the peer mentoring program. Participant 11 indicated the peer mentors were able to spark conversations amongst peers that their tutorial teacher could not, and Participant 8 echoed the fact that the peer mentors helped the freshmen build connections amongst themselves as well as with their peer mentors.

Participant 13 emphasized the role their peer mentors played in opening their minds to other perspectives and stated, “they made us more open minded to how people feel, why they might act the way they do, and to not take anything out on people.” Finally, it was Participant 9 who credited their peer mentors with impressing upon their freshman tutorial the need to be themselves rather than force themselves to fit into a specific social standard.

Stoltz (2005) conducted a study and revealed that peer mentors who reported positive interactions with their mentees also reported a more favorable connection with their school. The current study affirmed this prior study, as all seven senior study participants indicated their feelings of connection to their school increased after their participation in the peer mentoring program. Participant 2 credited the peer mentoring program with “stretching them beyond their comfort zone” and stimulating interest in new ways to be involved in school. Participant 6 reported feeling a sense of responsibility to know and teach the school traditions and foundations. They described how teaching the school’s history to their freshmen through building tours and tutorial activities produced a greater sense of school belonging for them as well. Finally, Participant 3 was one of several senior study participants who indicated that the grade levels were all more connected with one another during the peer mentoring program which promoted a greater connection between students and their school as a whole.

Karcher (2008) and Curran and Wexler (2017) conducted research into peer mentoring and determined the mentors’ own social needs were met by serving as mentors in their schools. These study results were also affirmed by the current study. Multiple senior study participants emphasized how fulfilling it was to interact with their freshmen

mentees in the hallways, at lunch, or outside of the school day at events like football games or dances. Participant 4 described intentionally involving freshmen mentees in the activities they were already involved with and how it "made their day" to know that the freshmen were finding support in the resources they had directed them to. Additionally, the senior study participants highlighted how their roles as mentors increased their social interactions with other mentors. Many of the study participants were partnered with other mentors who they didn't know well at the start of the school year, and by working in a team with one another, their respective social circles expanded. Participant 5 specifically emphasized how the mentors within the peer mentor program grew to know one another especially well.

Within the current study, a majority of the senior study participants reported an increase in their ability to relate to one another. Participant 7 indicated the lessons they taught as a peer mentor helped them learn to acknowledge "the fact that people have very different experiences and very different lives and very different things they're going through" and that they needed "to keep that in the forefront of their brain." Other senior study participants described developing higher levels of empathy toward other students through their peer mentoring experiences. A specific example of that learning was the mentors recognized they should not assume their freshman year experiences are the only experiences students can have as freshmen, and as mentors, they must treat each mentee as individuals during the mentoring process. These findings correlated with the work of Karcher (2009) who suggested students serving as peer mentors can acquire new skills or mindsets that would allow them to better understand themselves or their peers.

Conclusions

This study explored potential changes in high school students' sense of school belonging following their participation in a peer mentoring program. The study focused on the perspectives of both those receiving peer mentoring as well as those providing peer mentoring. Study participants answered questions about changes in their general sense of school belonging as well as changes in their feelings of connection to their school, to their peers, and to their teachers. The majority of study participants agreed their sense of school belonging increased in all aspects of the study. Consequently, this study could be utilized as a foundational step for establishing an effective method of peer mentoring at the high school level.

Implications for Action

This study highlights the challenges students face in their transition to high school and specifically addresses peer mentoring as one intervention strategy that schools can use to support students in their development of a sense of school belonging during such a pivotal time in their secondary school experience. The XYZ School District should consider replicating the current study in three ways. First, the current study should be conducted at the second traditional high school within the XYZ School District to generate comparable results between the two buildings. Additionally, the study should be replicated at both high schools with the condition that study participants do not hold a positive perception of school. All participants in the current study held a favorable perception of school prior to participating in the study, and it will be important to determine if the results of the current study can be replicated with students who do not like school. Finally, the study should be replicated with a focus on specific demographic

groups. The XYZ School District should investigate if outcomes are different between gender groups, racial groups, students with varying socioeconomic status, and students receiving special education services.

The XYZ School District should consider forming a team to compare the outcomes of the respective studies and utilize those results to create a systematic approach to peer mentoring at the high school level for their school district. This step would align directly with the culture objectives of the existing comprehensive school improvement plan (CSIP) within the school district (XYZ School District, 2023) and will contribute to ensuring every student in the XYZ School District has access to a positive peer mentoring experience during their transition to high school. In addition, the XYZ School District should consider sharing their peer mentoring plan and outcomes with neighboring districts in the Kansas City area and with nationwide audiences attending both educational or leadership conferences if those opportunities become available.

Outside of the XYZ School District, school districts of different sizes and demographics should also consider replicating this study. This recommendation applies to faith-based institutions, preparatory schools, schools with both large and small student enrollment sizes, and schools in urban, suburban, and rural locations. Outcomes should be compared between these various entities to determine if any of the variables listed above potentially generate different results. School districts may also want to consider replicating this study with different grade levels. Where this study focused on the freshman transition and peer mentors supporting students in their first year of school, further research could be conducted to examine the experiences of both sophomore and junior students at the same high school and how peer mentoring may impact sense of

school belonging during each year of the secondary high school experience. Finally, school districts could consider replicating this study by contacting alumni one year after their graduation after many have transitioned into the university setting. Doing so would allow school districts to determine if their perceptions of the peer mentoring program and their sense of school belonging remain the same or have changed since attending higher education outside of high school.

Recommendations for Future Research

In determining recommendations for future research, it is important to acknowledge the sample size utilized in this study was small. Participants were selected from a single high school within a single school district in Kansas City, Missouri. Similar research should be conducted to examine changes to school belonging associated with peer mentoring programs outside of the XYZ School District. Furthermore, the peer mentoring program utilized in this study was only operating in its second year at the time of the study. A longitudinal study of the peer mentoring program at XYZ High School may be beneficial to determine if the outcomes from this study remain consistent over an extended period of time. Furthermore, research should be conducted to examine potential changes to school belonging associated with peer mentoring programs that have operated for longer lengths of time. Finally, study participants frequently referenced COVID-19 in their interview responses. It is recommended this study be repeated in the future with students whose secondary school experiences were not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to be able to compare study outcomes and results.

It is also important to note the majority of participants in this study were White and female, only one participant in this study had a 504 or individualized education plan

(IEP), and no participants received free or reduced lunch prices. Clearly, the diversity of the sample group did not parallel that of the full student body at XYZ High School. Current research is divided regarding whether this discrepancy matters. According to Allen et al. (2018), demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity influenced how a student's sense of school develops whereas Ma (2003) argued that the impact of race on students' school belonging was a huge misconception and should be dismissed entirely. Consequently, further research should be conducted to explore how race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability status, and gender may relate to student experiences with peer mentoring and their sense of school belonging at the high school level.

The peer mentoring program utilized in this study paralleled the structures of the peer mentoring program studied at a high school in the western United States by Roybal (2011). Roybal found the peer mentoring program produced mixed results in regard to sense of belonging outcomes, and he cited adjustments had to be made to the peer mentoring program to address issues with logistics and implementation fidelity. Since the current study produced different results, it is recommended further research is conducted to explore how various peer mentoring program structures may or may not contribute to changes in school belonging at the high school level.

Finally, Karcher et al. (2010) claimed the implementation of peer mentoring programs has outpaced the research analyzing their outcomes. These researchers expressed concerns about mentor self-awareness and their abilities to recognize their own biases. Karcher et al. also expressed concerns that teenagers lack the ability to reflect, empathize or show concern for others in a way that would produce a positive mentoring

experience. For these reasons, it is recommended that further research be conducted to address these concerns and to determine what type of peer mentor training is necessary to address these perceived deficits and produce positive results.

Concluding Remarks

A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need directly tied to student achievement and well-being in the educational setting. It is vital for school districts to continue seeking the best methods for promoting and propagating a sense of school belonging for every student under their care, and the implementation of a peer mentoring program is just one of many proactive measures districts can employ. This study contributes insights into the development of school belonging through a peer mentoring program specifically through the lens of connection with school, connection with peers, and connection with teachers, however, further research is still necessary to determine if a peer mentoring program is truly the best intervention strategy for promoting school belonging. With the boundless to-do list most building-level and district-level leaders seem to face in today's educational environment, a focus on school belonging must remain a high priority in order for all students to reach their fullest and greatest potentials.

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Appendix A. Application for Research Study to [redacted]

Application to Conduct Research in [redacted]

Name	Organization	Department		
Diane Markley	Baker University	K-12 Educational Leadership		
Address	City	State	Zip Code	
8700 W. 117th Street	Overland Park	KS	66210	
Phone Number	Fax Number	E-mail		
816-359-6873 913-220-7367		DianeEMarkley@stu.bakeru.edu; markleyd@[redacted]		

I have read and understand the process of application to conduct research in the [redacted]. I also verify that the information provided in this application is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Diane Markley — Signature — 09.12.23 — Date

Is this study part of your work for a degree?
☒ Yes ☐ No
If Yes, complete the following:
☐ Ph.D. ☒ Ed.D. ☐ M.A./M.S
☐ Undergraduate ☐ Other
University or College: Baker University
Date of IRB Approval (or date of application if pending) 9.13.23
Advisor's Name: Dr. James Robins
Advisor's Telephone: 816-604-8045

Attach a concise, yet thorough, response to each of the following items.

1) Title and purpose of study

The title of this study is "A Qualitative Study of Changes to Student Sense of Belonging Following Participation in a Peer Mentoring Program." The purpose of this study is to explore if high school students' sense of school belonging changes following their participation in a peer mentoring program.

2) Timeline

I plan to conduct student interviews from October 2023 through December 2023. I will allow time after each interview for students to review the transcript of their interview to ensure their perceptions are represented accurately. I hope to complete the research and defend my dissertation by May 2024.

3) Benefits to the district

This study may contribute to the current research about peer mentoring by providing more information about the potential impact of peer mentoring on students' sense of school belonging at the high school level. The district may be able to use the outcome of this study to evaluate its current peer mentoring practices and determine if those practices need to be modified or expanded. The concept of school belonging aligns directly with the district's comprehensive school improvement plan and may help the district determine if peer mentoring is a successful strategy for cultivating school belonging for students across the district.

4) Research Design Summary

For this study, I will conduct interviews with fourteen students – seven who received peer mentoring as a freshman in the 2022-2023 school year, and seven who provided peer mentoring to freshmen in the 2022-2023 school year. I will obtain rosters of freshmen students from the 2022-2023 school year via Infinite Campus, and I will obtain the Panther Mentor roster from our club/activities attendance sheets. From there, I will use simple random sampling to identify potential study participants. I will call the parent/guardian of each student identified to explain the study and to gain verbal permission from the parent/guardian to send them more information. Next, I will send the attached consent form to the parent/guardian for them to review and then sign and return. After parents/guardians have given their consent for their student to participate, student participants will receive the attached information about the study, and they will be asked to give verbal assent to indicate their willingness to participate.

Interviews will be conducted and recorded through Microsoft Teams at a date/time agreed upon by the researcher, the student, and his/her parents/guardians. The researcher will also utilize Microsoft Teams to create a transcript of the interview, and the study participants will have the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure they accurately represent each participant's perceptions. Every student participant will be given a pseudonym, and no identifying information about the participants will be disclosed within the study. The study transcripts will be stored on a password protected device only accessible by the researcher. All recordings and transcripts will be destroyed five years after the conclusion of the study. The interview protocol for these interviews (including the questions to be asked) is attached to this application.
No inducements or incentives will be utilized to entice participation in this study.

I will code the transcripts following the interviews utilizing strategies outlined by Saldana (2016) in his coding manual. I also plan to utilize an electronic coding software program to assist in this process.

5) Assurance of anonymity of [redacted] students & staff

All students participating in the study will be assigned a pseudonym. No personal identifying information will be utilized within the study, and the pseudonyms will be used throughout the study and written dissertation. Raw data will only be shared with my dissertation advisor and research analyst. All electronic data contained within the study will be password protected on my district laptop, and only I have the password to this laptop and its contents.

6) Risks of the research

There are no significant risks to students who participate in this study. Participation in the study is voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any point in the research process. If students share negative or upsetting experiences about their belonging and acceptance, I will work with their parents and appropriate school personnel to provide support as needed.

7) District involvement

I will be asking for the Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment to review my interview protocol and provide feedback on the interview questions. I will also be asking three members of the [redacted] administrative team to review the interview questions and provide similar feedback. I plan to interview 14 students. Staff are not needed for this study. I hope to complete interviews by the end of December 2023, and I hope to complete my investigation and defend my dissertation by May 2024.

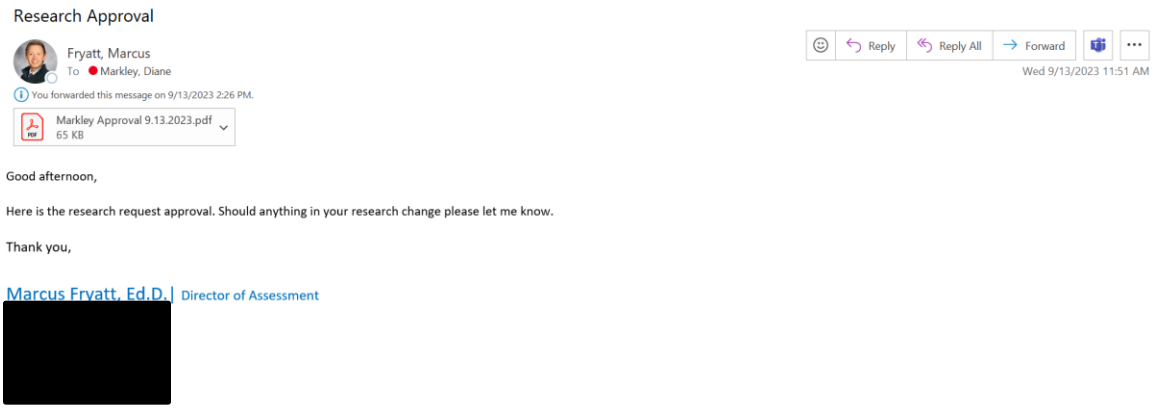
8) Funding Sources

There are no funds needed for this study.

9) IRB approval

Please see the attached letter from my dissertation advisor – Dr. James Robins.

Appendix B. Approval to Conduct Research in the [redacted]



Research Approval

Fryatt, Marcus
To Markley, Diane

Reply | Reply All | Forward

Wed 9/13/2023 11:51 AM

You forwarded this message on 9/13/2023 2:26 PM.

Markley Approval 9.13.2023.pdf
65 KB

Good afternoon,

Here is the research request approval. Should anything in your research change please let me know.

Thank you,

Marcus Fryatt, Ed.D. | Director of Assessment

[redacted]

[redacted]

Research Checklist and Approval

Date: 09/12/2023

Submitted to: Director of Research, Evaluation & Assessment

Submitted by: Diane Markley

Research Proposal Title: A Qualitative Study of Changes to Student Sense of Belonging Following Participation in a Peer Mentoring Program

Principal Investigator(s): Diane Markley

Checklist

- ☐ Completed "Application to Conduct Research in [redacted]
- ☐ Copy of "Informed consent" letter to study population/parents
- ☐ Copies of measurement instruments
- ☐ Approval from university human subjects committee (IRB) if applicable
- ☐ Copy of your complete application package

Approval of this research is contingent on adherence to district procedures as outlined in the document entitled "Application to Conduct Research" and the information provided with the application. The district must be notified of any substantive changes to the information contained in the application. The district reserves the right to withdraw approval of research if the research is deemed to no longer be in the best interests of the [redacted] students, staff, or the district.

Research Application: ☒ Approved ☐ Denied Date: 9/13/2023

Signatures

Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment

Principal

Principal

Principal

1/9/2023

Appendix C. Application for IRB Approval

BAKER UNIVERSITY

IRB Request

Date 9.12.23

IRB Protocol Number _____ (IRB use only)

I. Research Investigator(s) (students must list faculty sponsor)

Department(s) School of Education - Graduate

	Name	Signature	
1.	Diane Markley	Diane E. Markley	Principal Investigator
2.	Dr. Jim Robins		☑ Check if faculty sponsor
3.	Dr. Li Chen-Bouck	Li Chen-Bouck	☐ Check if faculty sponsor
4.			☐ Check if faculty sponsor

Principal investigator contact information

Phone 913-220-7367

Email dianeemarkley@stu.bakeru.edu

Address 8700 W. 117th Street

Overland Park, KS 66210

Note: When submitting your finalized, signed form to the IRB, please ensure that you cc all investigators and faculty sponsors using their official Baker University (or respective organization's) email addresses.

Faculty sponsor contact information

Phone 816-604-8045

Email James.Robins@bakeru.edu

Expected Category of Review: ☐ Exempt ☑ Expedited ☐ Full ☐ Renewal

II. Protocol Title

A Qualitative Study of Changes to Student Sense of Belonging Following Participation in a Peer Mentoring Program

III. Summary:

The following questions must be answered. Be specific about exactly what participants will experience and about the protections that have been included to safeguard participants from harm.

A. In a sentence or two, please describe the background and purpose of the research.
The purpose of this study is to explore if high school students' sense of school belonging changeds following their participation in a peer mentoring program. The researcher is seeking to fill a gap in the research about the potential impact of participation in a peer mentoring program on high school students' development of school belonging.

B. Briefly describe each condition, manipulation, or archival data set to be included within the study.
There are no conditions, manipulations, or archival data involved in this study.

IV. Protocol Details

A. What measures or observations will be taken in the study? If any questionnaire or other instruments are used, provide a brief description and attach a copy.
A copy of the interview protocol is attached. Two sets of questions have been developed - one for students who received peer mentoring and one for students who provided peer mentoring. The questions focus on three specific components of the students' sense of school belonging prior to engaging with the peer mentoring program and after engaging with the peer mentoring program. Those components include their connection to the school, their connection to their peers, and their connection to their teachers. There are no questionnaires or additional instruments involved in this study.

B. Will the subjects encounter the risk of psychological, social, physical, or legal risk? If so, please describe the nature of the risk and any measures designed to mitigate that risk.
There is no psychological, social, physical, or legal risk involved in the participation of this study.

C. Will any stress to subjects be involved? If so, please describe.

There is no significant stress anticipated for subjects involved in participation with this study. Students will be asked to recall personal experiences tied to belonging and acceptance, and depending upon their individual experiences, these could be difficult memories for a participant. If a participant finds a specific question uncomfortable, they have the option not to answer. If a participant is uncomfortable, they can leave the study at any time. The researcher will have the parent/guardian's contact information for each participant and can follow-up with them to provide emotional support to the student following the interview as needed.

D. Will the subjects be deceived or misled in any way? If so, include an outline or script of the debriefing.

They will not be deceived or misled in any way.

E. Will there be a request for information which subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive? If so, please include a description.

Again, students will be asked to recall personal experiences tied to belonging and acceptance, and depending upon their individual experiences, these could be difficult memories for a participant. If a participant finds a specific question uncomfortable, they have the option not to answer. If a participant is uncomfortable, they can leave the study at any time. The researcher will also access demographic information about student participants from the school information system. This information includes race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and grade/age.

F. Will the subjects be presented with materials which might be considered to be offensive, threatening, or degrading? If so, please describe.

The subjects will not be presented with materials which might be considered to be offensive, threatening, or degrading.

G. Approximately how much time will be demanded of each subject?

Each interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review a transcript of their interview to ensure it accurately represents their perceptions. This member check process is completely optional and not required of the participants. They may choose not to review their transcript.

H. Who will be the subjects in this study? How will they be solicited or contacted? Provide an outline or script of the information which will be provided to subjects prior to their volunteering to participate. Include a copy of any written solicitation as well as an outline of any oral solicitation.

The subjects for this study include 7 students who received peer mentoring during their freshman year of high school, and 7 students who provided mentoring to students during their junior and senior years of high school. Parents/guardians will first be contacted by phone with general information about the study (its purpose, structure, and why their student was identified as a potential participant). If the parents/guardians indicate they are interested in learning more about the study, the researcher will email the study consent form to those families (attached). Once a signed parental consent is provided to the researcher, general information about the study will be provided to potential student participants (see attached) and the researcher will obtain verbal assent of the participant.

I. What steps will be taken to insure that each subject's participation is voluntary? What if any inducements will be offered to the subjects for their participation?

All participants will be invited to participate in the study through verbal assent after a parent/guardian provides written consent. The consent form clearly states that participation is completely voluntary, and this will be explained to the participants when acquiring verbal assent as well. There is no participation requirement. There are no inducements.

J. How will you insure that the subjects give their consent prior to participating? Will a written consent form be used? If so, include the form. If not, explain why not.

Parents/guardians of study participants will provide written consent for students to participate. The consent form is attached. Participants will also provide verbal assent. The information to be shared with participants is also attached.

K. Will any aspect of the data be made a part of any permanent record that can be identified with the subject? If so, please explain the necessity.

No aspect of the data will be made part of any permanent record that can be identified with the subject.

L. Will the fact that a subject did or did not participate in a specific experiment or study be made part of any permanent record available to a supervisor, teacher, or employer? If so, explain.

A record of participation will not be made part of any permanent record available to a supervisor, teacher, or employer.

M. What steps will be taken to insure the confidentiality of the data? Where will it be stored? How long will it be stored? What will be done with the data after the study is completed?

All participants will be given a pseudonym throughout the entire process. During data collection, data analyzation, data interpretation, and reporting data, pseudonyms will be used. All interview recordings and transcriptions will be saved to a password protected folder on the laptop of the researcher. The researcher will maintain the data from the study on a password protected laptop, and all data will be deleted from the laptop five years following the completion of the study.

N. If there are any risks involved in the study, are there any offsetting benefits that might accrue to either the subjects or society?

While there are no significant risks to the subjects or society, those who potentially share difficult experiences related to their school belonging may be able to provide insights that could possibly provide a foundation for change within the school and school district where the study is taking place.

O. Will any data from files or archival data be used? If so, please describe.

No data from files or archival data will be used.

Appendix D. IRB Approval

BAKER UNIVERSITY
Over Confidence

Baker University Institutional Review Board

October 4, 2023

Dear Diane Markley and Jim Robins,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at skimball@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4563.

Sincerely,

Scott K. Kimball

Scott Kimball, PhD
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
Jiji Osiobe, PhD
Tim Buzzell, PhD
Susan Rogers, PhD

Appendix E. Study Consent Form for Parent/Guardian

Dear Parents,

My name is Diane Markley, and I am a doctoral student at Baker University. I am conducting a study to understand how high school students' sense of school belonging changed following their participation in a peer mentoring program. I am interviewing both sophomore students who received mentoring during their freshman year of high school as well senior students who served as mentors during their junior and senior years of high school. This study is meant to expand existing research about peer mentoring and school belonging, and this study may provide your student's school district with insight into how school belonging changes following student participation in a peer mentoring program and potential next steps for the district to consider following the study.

During an individual interview, each participant will be asked up to 13 interview questions about their peer mentoring experience, and the interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The main topics addressed in the interview questions include your child's perceptions of their connection to their school, to their peers, and to their teachers prior to participating in the peer mentoring program and after. Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and participants may decline to answer any question at any time. Participants may also discontinue their participation in the study for any reason at any time.

Throughout the study, all personally identifiable information about participants will be kept confidential. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of the study. Interview transcripts will be password protected, and only Dr. Robins (my dissertation advisor), Dr. Chen-Bouck (my dissertation research analyst), and I will have access to the raw data. To ensure the transcript accurately describes participant's experiences and perceptions, they will have the opportunity to review transcript of their interview and make changes.

Consent to Participate:
I understand that my child's participation in this research study is completely voluntary. I also understand that my child or I may discontinue my child's participation in this study at any time for any reason. I understand the principal researcher can be contacted via email at DianeEMarkley@stu.bakeru.edu or by phone at (816) 359-6873 should I have any questions or wish to discontinue my child's participation.

I have read and understand the above statement. By signing, I confirm that I am at least 18 years old, and I am the guardian of my child. I give permission for my child to participate in the study.

Parent/Guardian Signature_____ Date _____

Advisor: Dr. James Robins
jrobins@bakeru.edu

Appendix F. Study Assent – Information to Be Shared with Participants

Who Am I?
My name is Diane Markley, and I am a doctoral student at Baker University.

What is the study I am conducting?
I am trying to understand how high school students' sense of school belonging changed following their participation in a peer mentoring program. I am interviewing both sophomore students who received mentoring during their freshman year of high school as well senior students who served as mentors during their junior and senior years of high school. Your participation in this study will provide valuable insight into school belonging. With that, I hope to be able to provide information to your high school about the changes or lack thereof in school belonging that may result from participation in the peer mentoring program at the school.

How will I protect your confidentiality?
Throughout the study, all personally identifiable information about you will be kept confidential. Nobody will know what you shared at the interview but me. You will be assigned a pseudonym when I report the results of the study. Interview transcripts will be password protected. You will have the opportunity to review and correct your interview content. This means you will receive an interview transcript in email and have the chance to ensure the transcript describes your perceptions accurately.

What is involved in the interview?
You will be interviewed individually. I will ask you up to 13 questions about your peer mentoring experience. Main topics included in the interview questions are your feelings of connectedness to your school, your peers, and your teachers both before and after participating in the school peer mentoring program. The interview may take about 30-45 minutes. We will hold the interview digitally via Microsoft Teams at a date and time we agree upon. The participation of the study is completely voluntary. You can decline to answer any question at any time during the interview. You may also discontinue your participation in the study for any reason at any time.

Do you have any questions about the study?

Ask for oral assent.
Your parent/guardian has agreed to let you participate in the study. What do you think? Are you willing to participate?

Appendix G. Interview Protocol

Opening Statement

Thank you for participating in this study. I want to understand your experience of sense of school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program. The interview should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. This session will be recorded through Microsoft Teams, and the contents of this interview will only be accessible to myself, my dissertation advisor, and my dissertation research analyst.

You will be assigned a pseudonym to identify your input into the study. There will be no identifiable information used within this study. Please speak openly and truthfully about your experiences in the peer mentoring program. You may decline to answer any question at any time and for any reason, and you may discontinue your participation in this study for any reason at any time. If you wish to no longer participate in the study, I will not use any portion of your interview session within the study.

Following this interview, I will send you a transcript of your responses through email. You will have the ability to make any changes to your responses that you feel are needed to represent your perceptions accurately.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Sophomore Student Interview

Opening Questions

To begin the interview, I would like to explore your general feelings about school.

1. What do you like about going to school?
    a. Probing questions – Why do you feel that way? Have you always felt this way? What factors have influenced your feelings about school?

2. How would you describe your sense of school belonging when you first started attending your high school?

RQ1: What are the changes, if any, in high school freshmen students' sense of school belonging after participating in a peer mentoring program?

The first few questions are about your past. Please think about your experiences in 7th and 8th grade as you answer these questions.

1. Prior to 9th grade, how connected did you feel to your school?
    a. Probing questions: In what ways did you feel like a part of your school? How involved were you in school activities? Were the people friendly to you in your school? Then ask for an example.
2. Prior to 9th grade, how connected did you feel to your peers at school?
    a. Probing questions: How well did you relate to your peers? Did your peers show an interest in you? If answers yes, then ask how did they show the interest? Did you feel accepted by your peers? Then ask for an example.
3. Prior to 9th grade, how connected did you feel to your teachers at school?
    a. Probing questions: Did your teachers show an interest in you? If answers yes, then ask how did they show the interest? If you had a problem, how comfortable were you talking to a teacher about the problem? Did your teachers make an effort to get to know you? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.

The next series of questions will ask you to reflect on your freshman year and your school experiences after working with your Panther Mentors in 9th grade.

4. After working with your Panther Mentors in 9th grade, were there any changes to your sense of school belonging?
5. After working with your Panther Mentors in 9th grade, were there any changes to your feelings of connection to your school?
6. If yes, what were the changes? If no, move on to question 8.
    a. Probing questions – Do you feel like a part of your school in new ways? If the answer is yes, then ask in what new ways? Are you more involved in school activities? If the answer is yes, ask for an example. Do you think people are more friendly to you in your school now? If the answer is yes, ask for an example.
7. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
    a. Probing questions – Who were the individuals who influenced these changes and in what way? Were there any specific events or experiences that influenced these changes? If the answer is yes, then ask for more details of the events or experiences.
8. After working with your Panther Mentors in 9th Grade, were there any changes to your feelings of connection to your peers at school? If no, move on to question 11.
9. If yes, what were the changes?
    a. Probing questions – Did your ability to relate to your peers change? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. Did the amount of interest your peers showed in you change? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.

Did your feelings of acceptance among your peers change? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.

10. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
    a. Probing questions – Who were the individuals who influenced these changes and in what way? Were there any specific events or experiences that influenced these changes? If the answer is yes, then ask for more details of the events or experiences.
11. After working with your Panther Mentors in 9th Grade, were there any changes to your feelings of connection to your teachers at school?
12. If yes, what were those changes?
    a. Probing questions – Did your teachers show an interest in you in new ways? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. If you have a problem now, do you feel more comfortable talking to a teacher about the problem? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. Do your teachers make a greater effort to get to know you? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.
13. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
    a. Probing questions – Who were the individuals who influenced these changes and in what way? Were there any specific events or experiences that influenced these changes? If the answer is yes, then ask for more details of the events or experiences.

Senior Student Interview Questions

Opening Questions

To begin the interview, I would like to explore your general feelings about school.

1. What do you like about going to school?
    a. Probing questions – Why do you feel that way? Have you always felt this way? What factors have influenced your feelings about school?
2. What motivated you to apply to be a Panther Mentor?
    a. Probing questions – How did you hear about the program? Who encouraged you to apply? What did you hope to get out of serving as a Panther Mentor?
3. How would you describe your sense of school belonging at your high school prior to becoming a Panther Mentor?

RQ2: What are the changes, if any, in high school senior students' sense of school belonging after serving as a mentor in a peer mentoring program?

The first few questions are focused on your high school experiences prior to serving as a Panther Mentor.

1. Prior to becoming a Panther Mentor, how connected did you feel to your school?
    a. Probing questions: In what ways did you feel like a part of your school? How involved were you in school activities? Were the people friendly to you in your school? Then ask for an example.
2. Prior to becoming a Panther Mentor, how connected did you feel to your peers at school?
    a. Probing questions: How well did you relate to your peers? Did your peers show an interest in you? If answers yes, then ask how did they show the interest? Did you feel accepted by your peers? Then ask for an example.

3. Prior to becoming a Panther Mentor, how connected did you feel to your teachers at school?
    a. Probing questions: Did your teachers show an interest in you? If answers yes, then ask how did they show the interest? If you had a problem, how comfortable were you talking to a teacher about the problem? Did your teachers make an effort to get to know you? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.

The next series of questions will ask you to reflect on your school experiences after serving as a Panther Mentor.

4. After serving as a Panther Mentor, were there any changes to your sense of school belonging?
5. After serving as a Panther Mentor, were there any changes to your feelings of connection to your school?
6. If yes, what were the changes? If no, move on to question 8.
    a. Probing questions – Do you feel like a part of your school in new ways? If the answer is yes, then ask in what new ways? Are you more involved in school activities? If the answer is yes, ask for an example. Do you think people are more friendly to you in your school now? If the answer is yes, ask for an example.
7. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
    a. Probing questions – Who were the individuals who influenced these changes and in what way? Were there any specific events or experiences

that influenced these changes? If the answer is yes, then ask for more details of the events or experiences.

8. After serving as a Panther Mentor, were there any changes to your feelings of connection to your peers at school? If no, move on to question 11.
9. If yes, what were the changes?
    a. Probing questions – Did your ability to relate to your peers change? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. Did the amount of interest your peers showed in you change? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. Did your feelings of acceptance among your peers change? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.
10. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
    a. Probing questions – Who were the individuals who influenced these changes and in what way? Were there any specific events or experiences that influenced these changes? If the answer is yes, then ask for more details of the events or experiences.
11. After serving as a Panther Mentor, were there any changes to your feelings of connection to your teachers at school?
12. If yes, what were those changes?
    a. Probing questions – Did your teachers show an interest in you in new ways? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. If you have a problem now, do you feel more comfortable talking to a teacher about the problem? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example. Do your teachers make a

greater effort to get to know you? If the answer is yes, then ask for an example.

13. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
    a. Probing questions – Who were the individuals who influenced these changes and in what way? Were there any specific events or experiences that influenced these changes? If the answer is yes, then ask for more details of the events or experiences.

Closing Statement

This concludes our interview. You will be given the opportunity to review your interview transcript within the next two weeks to ensure your responses accurately describe your perceptions. Should you have any questions or concerns, please email me at DianeEMarkley@stu.bakeru.edu or call me at (816) 359-6873. Thank you for taking the time to help me explore how participation in a peer mentoring program may change students' sense of school belonging at the high school level.