

STUDENTS' WELLBEING AND SENSE OF BELONGING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
OF RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS IN A SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICT

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of PATRICK A. DEHUFF find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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cancer, he leaves behind a legacy of love and support for his family. As I navigated the challenges of completing a doctoral program, my memories of my father inspired me to do my best.

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to explore factors, including students' relationships and interactions with peers and school staff, which strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school. The study was conducted as a qualitative, descriptive case study in a small, rural, K-12 school located in the Pacific Northwest. The study addressed two research questions: 1) How do students' relationships and interactions with peers and school staff affect their wellbeing and sense of belonging at school? 2) What factors contribute to (strengthen) or impede (weaken) students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school? The data for the findings came from 40 open-ended interviews of students, parents/guardians, school staff, and community members; field observations performed by three researchers; and a review of documents (newspaper clippings, newsletters, board minutes, etc.).

The findings of the study resulted in four themes and four conclusions. The themes include: 1) "It's like a family;" 2) "Students are loved and cared for;" 3) "Close relationships are fostered;" and 4) "Students feel included." When these factors (themes) were present, it fostered a positive school environment where students were excited about school and didn't

want to disappoint school staff, and staffs' personal interest in students and awareness of their needs increased. The four conclusion of this study include: 1) Students' relationships with school staff and their classmates were central to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school; 2) Students' relationships at school were strengthened when students were well known and personally acknowledged, recognized, and cared for by the school staff and their classmates; 3) When close relationships at school were fostered, the school was perceived as an extended family for students; and 4) When the school became an extended family, students' expectations for positive interpersonal interactions and support at school were greater. The study concludes with five recommendations consisting of three organizational recommendations and two research recommendations.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father whose courage, integrity, and honor have been guiding principles in my life and who taught me that the most important thing in life is to love your family.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Recurring efforts for school reform occurred over the latter half of the twentieth century and this cycle of reforms has continued to move from one fad to another (Borman, Brown, Hewes, & Overman, 2003). During the first decade of the twenty-first century, a major focus of school reform has been accountability and choice. These ideas were at the heart of President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which changed the focus of public schools by measuring school quality based on standardized test scores (Ravitch, 2010). In the school reform effort of accountability, organizational policies and practices were put into place that promoted competition and individualism rather than collaboration and community. Little attention was given to the affective needs of students, and students experienced more isolation, alienation, and polarization (Osterman, 2000).

To attend to the affective needs of students and overcome students' feelings of isolation and alienation, a sense of belonging must be fostered in students and schools must be developed into caring communities characterized by stable, close relationships (Strike, 2010). When schools function as caring communities, members share an emotional connection, a sense of belonging, and a belief that members' needs will be met through their commitment to one another (Osterman, 2000). According to Comer, Haynes, Joyner, and Ben-Avie (1996), "Strong relationships build community whether that community is in the classroom or among the teacher, parents, and students in the community of learners we call the school" (p. 46). In schools where communities of concern and commitment exist, caring relationships are central with strong relational ties that are analogous to family bonds (Anness, 2003). Strong, caring relationships are prerequisites for learning and critical to developing and maintaining motivation and engagement in academics (Comer et al., 1996; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

When children feel accepted, included, and welcomed, they experience happiness, elation, and tranquility. Conversely, when children feel rejected, excluded, or ignored, they experience feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Positive relationships and a sense of belonging in school are protective factors that reduce recidivism and have been linked to reductions in violence, substance abuse, suicide, and dropout rates (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

An overly bureaucratic and centralized educational system inhibits schools from functioning as caring communities where students feel personally known and valued (Strike, 2010). As educators grapple with the dilemma of attending to the affective needs of students while dealing with the demands caused by an increasing level of bureaucracy and accountability, there are some valuable lessons to be learned from the successes of small schools. Small schools are more likely to provide a cohesive sense of community because they foster more intimate relationships and a more participatory learning environment (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). A sense of community is more likely to flourish in small schools where students are more likely to: engage in positive interactions and relationships with others; experience less alienation; develop a stronger sense of belonging and improved self-esteem; and be less likely to engage in negative social behaviors (Cotton, 1996).

There are varied definitions of what constitutes a small school. Some define small schools as having a maximum enrollment of 500 students, while others stipulate a maximum enrollment of 400. While a student population ranging from 400 to 500 is often considered the maximum enrollment to define a small school, the most effective small schools have 300 students or less (Cotton, 2001). Rather than a numerical limit, Meier (1998) offers an operational description of a small school. Meier defines small schools as those where the

staff can sit down at a table and work together collaboratively, where all students and staff know each other well, and where the school and families consistently collaborate face-to-face over time.

### **Problem Statement**

Strengthening students' sense of belonging at school and fostering strong, positive relationships are key factors in developing schools into communities of caring where the affective needs of students are met. Because of their small size and ability to personalize the educational environment, small schools are ideal settings to develop communities of caring (Strike, 2010). Research contrasting small schools with larger schools demonstrates a distinct advantage of small schools in developing an environment that is conducive to learning and ameliorates the negative influences of truancy, dropping out of school, crime, and discipline issues that are often inherent in larger schools (Bingler et al., 2002; Driscoll et al., 2008; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Lear & Wasley, 2001).

However, a positive, nourishing school environment does not come exclusively because of the small size of a school, but rather because a small school is adept at capitalizing on the strengths that come from being small (Cotton, 2001). While there is plenty of research that demonstrates a stronger tendency towards students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in small schools, there is a scarcity of research on the specific factors that strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging within small schools (Bingler et al., 2002).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore factors, including students' relationships and

interactions with their peers and school staff, which strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in a small school district located in the Pacific Northwest.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions provide a framework for the study and define the area of focus (Simons, 2009). The proposed study included the following research questions.

1. How do students' relationships and interactions with their peers and school staff affect their wellbeing and sense of belonging at school?
2. What factors contribute to (strengthen) or impede (weaken) students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school?

### **Methodology**

This research study was conducted as a qualitative, descriptive case study of a small, rural K-12 school located in the Pacific Northwest to explore factors that strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school.

### **Significance of the Study**

Comer et al. (1996) notes, "Humans are social beings who need community support and involvement to develop adequately. Their behavior is an adaptation or reaction to their environment as they build that necessary community, and is based on their perceptions of their environment, rather than on any objective reality" (p. 29). In schools where children feel valued and personally connected to one another and relationships demonstrate caring and family-like bonds, student achievement improves (Ancess, 2003). Despite research that shows the positive impact of forming relationships and a sense of belonging at school, these factors are often treated as immeasurable factors, and rarely factored into the assessments of

school improvement by policymakers (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The significance of this proposed study is to gain a deeper understanding on the factors that bolster or impede students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following two sections explain the limitations of this study, including the ability to generalize the findings and the influence of positionality. Methods to maintain objectivity and reduce the impact of positionality are discussed.

#### **Generalizability**

One of the challenges in doing case study research is understanding the extent to which findings are generalizable. A typical concern is that a case, or sample of cases, is too small to generalize (Simons, 2009). According to Yin (2012), the idea that the case serves as a sample of some larger context is the wrong way to think about it. While case studies cannot be generalized on statistical measures, they may be generalized on analytic grounds, depending on the nature of the research questions and the purpose of the study. The case study researcher has an obligation not necessarily to generalize, but to demonstrate how findings may be transferable to other contexts or be of use to others (Simons, 2009). A limitation of this proposed study is that it is a case study on the factors that strengthen or diminish students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in a single, small, rural school district. While the findings may be transferable to other small schools in rural districts, it will be more difficult to apply these findings to a medium-sized or large-sized school, or to a suburban or urban school regardless of size.

## **Objectivity and Positionality**

A good case study seeks data to explore rival explanations. In addition to exploring rival explanations, the researcher should maintain a level of skepticism during data collection on whether the data is reflective of genuine thoughts, actions, or events, and whether participants are giving candid responses. Data collection should include a deliberate search for contrary or discrepant evidence (Yin, 2009). This study examined students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in the school district where I work as the superintendent. This poses some challenges in relation to positionality and objectivity.

To help maintain objectivity and minimize the impact of positionality, common case study protocol was followed during data collection. The protocol provided a mental framework similar to a detective following protocol when investigating crimes, or a health care practitioner following protocol while conducting a differential diagnosis of symptoms (Yin, 2012). To further minimize the influence of positionality and make this study more robust, triangulation was employed, utilizing multiple investigators, sources of data, and methods to confirm emerging findings (Merriam, 1998).

## **Summary**

While school reform efforts have focused on accountability and choice (Ravitch, 2010), the affective needs of students, which are important factors in the motivation and engagement of students, are often overlooked (Ryan & Powelson, 1991). Schools have become more centralized and bureaucratic, causing alienation and disengagement for many students (Noguera, 2002). Small schools provide more personalized attention characterized by strong and authentic relationships (Cotton, 1996; Strike, 2010).

While research has shown a stronger tendency for students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at small schools, there is a scarcity of research on factors that strengthen or weaken students' wellbeing and sense of belonging within small schools (Bingler et al., 2002). The purpose of the study was to explore factors that strengthened or weakened students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school and the research questions defined the area of focus.

Limitations included challenges encountered with generalizing the findings. The uniqueness of small, rural schools limits the ability to generalize the findings to larger schools and schools in suburban or urban districts regardless of size. Another limitation is my positionality as the primary researcher. To make this study more robust and minimize the impact of positionality, triangulation with multiple investigators, sources of data, and methods was utilized (Merriam, 1998).

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Children at Risk**

While many children in the United States grow up with supportive families who help them build skills and confidence, there are many other children who do not have adequate support (Parkay, 2013). Youth who have weak connections to adults often gravitate to peers with antisocial values and behaviors (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2010). Frustrated, lonely, and feeling powerless, youth without adequate support often turn to violent or obscene music, video games, television shows, and movies (Parkay, 2013).

Our society has become more modern, mobile, and complex (Strike, 2010), and “an increasing number of young people live under conditions characterized by extreme stress, chronic poverty, crime, and lack of adult guidance” (Parkay, 2013, p. 86). These conditions affect students’ behavior in the classroom. It is reflected in academic performance, shown by disinterest and disengagement in learning, truancy, and lower grades. It is also shown socially by conflict with peers and withdrawal from others, physically by harming one’s self, and emotionally with outbursts of anger or violence (Hanewald, 2011). Quite often when teens get into serious trouble, it is a group performance instead of a solo act as they suspend self-responsibility and become captive to their peers (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2010).

Because of many factors involved in a child’s biological, social, and psychological makeup as well as interactions between a child and his or her environment, even children with good support at home and school can have difficulties. The challenge becomes much greater for those bearing the burden of coming from dysfunctional homes and communities (Comer et al., 1996).

## **Resilience and Protective Factors**

Considering the obstacles that children “at risk” face, it is hard to imagine how they cope. Yet, despite their dire circumstances, some youth beat the odds and become well adjusted (Byrnes, Huizinga, & Tiet, 2010). Many educators are frustrated because the daunting circumstances that children “at risk” face are largely beyond their control. As we strive to close the achievement gap for our marginalized and “at risk” students, it may be beneficial to explore factors that helped some of these youth develop resiliency in the face of adversity.

The word resilience comes from the Latin word “resilire,” meaning to leap or bounce back. It is the ability to return to one’s original form after being bent, squeezed, or stretched out of shape (Hanewald, 2011). The concept of resiliency has multiple meanings (Kaplan, 2002). It can signify quick recovery from disruptive change or misfortune, doing well despite the odds, a ubiquitous phenomenon of people’s responses to stress, or a person’s ability to handle developmental tasks in the face of adversity (Benard, 1991; Bottrell, 2009; Lee, Kwong, Cheung, C, Ungar, & Cheung, M, 2010). According to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), resiliency is a process, not an individual trait. Likewise, Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) define resilience as a process of successful adaptation despite threatening circumstances. Regardless of the varied definitions of resiliency, the identifying characteristics of resilient youth include social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Gore & Eckenrode, 1994).

Risk factors are offset by protective factors, often described in the context of three primary systems in the child’s world: family, school, and community (Hanewald, 2011). Just

as risk factors are cumulative, protective factors have a cumulative effect as well. The more that protective factors are present, the more likely it is that the child will be resilient (Willms, 2002). Protective factors include: a sense of belonging; close personal relationships; positive interactions with others at school and in the community; access to support; strong social networks; and participation in extra-curricular activities (Daniel & Wassell, 2002).

While all of these protective factors are helpful, the importance of developing a sense of belonging and forming close, personal relationships is critical. Brendtro and Mitchell (2010) note, “Humans are highly social beings whose brains are designed to connect with others for a sense of belonging” (p. 6). Building positive relationships builds resilience by meeting universal needs for attachment. Youths who have strong bonds with adults are more likely to talk to them during times of difficulty and are more likely to learn coping and interpersonal skills (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2010).

### **Sense of Belonging**

The need for belonging and the desire for interpersonal attachment is a fundamental human motivation (Osterman, 2000). Maslow (1968) proposed a hierarchy of needs that placed the need for belonging at the middle of a hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, basic biological needs such as water, food, and shelter must be met first. The next layer in the hierarchy of needs is safety, which is followed by the need for belonging before esteem and self-actualization needs can be met. The concept of belonging is broad, and defined in many ways such as relatedness, sense of community, support, and identification (Osterman, 2000). The need to form and maintain interpersonal relationships is at the core of satisfying the need for belonging. Bowlby (1973) posited the importance of forming and maintaining relationships to satisfy a need for belonging in his attachment theory. Baumeister & Leary

(1995) described the need for belonging as a pervasive drive to develop personal relationships and pointed out that the failure to satisfy the need for belonging can produce pathological and long-lasting negative consequences. When deprived of a sense of belonging, individuals often experience negative outcomes that include emotional distress, and increased stress and health problems (Anderman, 2002).

Satisfying the need for belonging depends on frequent personal contact and interactions with other people and the development of an interpersonal bond characterized by affective concern, stability, and continuation into the future. People who have strong and well-established social relationships are less inclined to seek out additional bonds than people who are socially deprived (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Frequent contact with people who are non-supportive or indifferent will do little to satisfy the need to belong. Relationships with strong feelings of attachment and commitment but lacking regular contact can fail to satisfy the need to belong as well. Relationships can substitute for each other as seen when one area of social contact compensates for another (strong family ties can compensate for weak relationships at school or work) or when people move and change schools or jobs and establish new relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A sense of belonging in school satisfies a basic psychological need for children (Ryan, 1995). Children who experience a sense of belonging have stronger inner resources, sense of identity, and intrinsic motivation. They have more positive attitudes towards school, and are more likely to become engaged and participate in the learning process (Osterman, 2000). A sense of belonging is often characterized by feelings of inclusion, connectedness, and support (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Children develop a sense of belonging in school by feeling personally accepted, respected and supported by their classmates and school staff

(Goodenow, 1992). While a sense of belonging in school is defined in various ways, including relatedness, sense of community, support and identification, an underlying theme is one of attachment (Chung, Hill, Hawkins, Gilchrist, & Nagin, 2002; Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

### **Belonging and Student Motivation**

School belonging is associated with intrinsic motivation, academic achievement, and high expectations for school success (Anderman, 2002; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Academic motivation grows out of a complex web of social interactions and personal relationships (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). In a development framework for understanding student motivation, Wentzel (1999) found a link between students' sense of belonging and the pursuit of goals that are valued in a school context. Weiner (1990) stated that, "School motivation cannot be understood apart from the social fabric in which it is imbedded" (p. 621). As students feel that they are valued members of a school, they are willing to put forth more effort and commit themselves to the purposes of school. If students believe that others at school are supporting them, are on their side, and willing to help, they believe they have the resources necessary to be successful (Goodenow, 1992). According to Ryan and Powelson (1991), extrinsic motivators are ineffective methods of improving academic motivation for an extended period of time and suggest that learning is enhanced by intrinsic factors such as autonomy, support, relatedness, and belonging.

Osterman (2000) found little evidence in her review of literature that belonging directly relates to academic success. Rather, she found that belonging was more strongly linked to measures of school engagement, which she believes is a precursor to student achievement. A key factor that influences students' engagement in school is their sense of

membership in the school. When there is a personal connection to school, students are more likely to engage in their studies and try to fulfill expectations (Cothran & Ennis, 1997). Engaged students are interested in learning and they persist in tasks until they are completed (Newmann, 1992). Increased student engagement improves academic outcomes and a lack of student engagement leads to disruptive school behavior and poor school performance (Finn & Rock, 1997; Marks, 2000). According to Finn's (1989) model of school engagement known as the Participation Identification Model, student engagement has two primary components; a behavioral component of participation and an emotional component of identification. Finn's model of school engagement provided a framework for research by Goodenow (1993a) who posits that a sense of belonging in school directly influences student motivation, engagement, and achievement and developed one of the most widely used measure of school belonging, the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale*.

### **School Withdrawal and Impact of Relationships**

A lack of a sense of belonging can lead to substance use, low school achievement, school dropout, and poor social and emotional adjustment to school (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). A lack of attachment and bonding to school is a major factor in the development of delinquency (Joseph, 1996; O'Donnell, Hawkins, & Abott, 1995). The participation-identification paradigm, described by Finn (1989) posits that a lack of belonging leads to adolescents' withdrawal from school-based activities and results in academic failure, emotional withdrawal, and alienation. Community and school violence have been perpetuated by students with a history of social alienation and detachment (Sandhu, 2001).

A qualitative study of four culturally-diverse schools that included 18 months of observation and interview data concluded that crises in education stemmed from relationship problems within schools. Alienation, distrust, and a lack of respect, understanding, and personal connections were cited by students and teachers as fundamental barriers to learning (Voices from inside, 1992). A feeling of isolation and a lack of meaningful relationships at school are primary factors in adolescents' decision to drop out of school (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997). School bonding acts as a buffer against life challenges and an antidote to negative developmental outcomes (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Youth who are actively pursuing the values and tasks of school and involved in classroom and extracurricular activities are less inclined to commit antisocial acts (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

A caring and supportive relationship with an adult is a protective factor and promotes resiliency in children. While much of research has focused on the parent-child relationship, teachers are also significant role models in students' lives (Werner, 1993). The relationship between students and teachers plays a major role in determining whether students feel cared for and are a welcome part of the school community (Osterman, 2000). Positive interpersonal attachments with teachers provide a protective influence and reduces the risk of substance abuse and delinquent behavior (Guo, Hawkins, Hill, & Abbott, 2001; Morrison, Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly, 2002). Research by Wentzel (1999) found that teachers, peers, and family affect student performance in different ways. Teachers have the strongest influence on students' engagement and academic behavior while peer support was a predictor of social competence. A lack of peer support was a predictor of emotional distress, causing anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

In a study that incorporated a sample of 167 sixth grade students in a middle school, Wenzel (1999) found that teacher support was a significant factor with improving students' interest and engagement in school. Similar to Wenzel's findings, Goodenow (1993a) and Ryan and Powelson (1991) found that stable and satisfying relationships with teachers and peers at school have a positive impact on motivation and engagement in academics. In a study of 353 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students, Goodenow (1993b) found a positive association between perceptions of school belonging and teacher and peer support. In schools where students have a strong sense of belonging, teachers tend to express warmth and support and spend more time talking to students about social and personal issues (Solomon, Battstich, Kim, & Watson, 1997). Students' friendships and positive relationships with their classmates was also a predictor of academic achievement (Wenzel & Caldwell, 1997). Social support of students by their peers has been positively linked to school engagement, and in a study by Johnson, Lutzow, Strothoff, and Zannis (1995), behavioral referrals dropped by as much as 71% when supportive relationships among students were implemented through cooperative learning and bonding activities (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005).

### **School Climate and Culture**

Meeting the affective needs of students can be enhanced or inhibited by the climate and culture of a school. School culture and school climate are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. While there is a close association between school culture and school climate, they do not have identical meanings. School climate is often referred to as the tone, or vibe, of a school and is often the visitor's first impression of what they see, hear, and feel (Sharratt & Derrington, 2011). School climate is often measured as a subjective feeling that students, parents, staff, and others have about a school (Gonder & Hymes, 1994). The

atmosphere and tone of the school, defined as its climate, are driven by the culture of the school (Sharratt & Derrington, 2011).

Hargreaves (1997) defines school culture as the attitudes, values, and beliefs that are common in a school. Deal and Peterson (1999) have a similar definition of school culture as the patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that are formed over time. Phillips (1993) provides a more comprehensive definition of school culture as the “beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize a school in terms of: how people treat and feel about each other; the extent to which people feel included and appreciated; and rituals and traditions reflecting collaboration and collegiality.” Although there are varied definitions of school culture, a common theme is that the underlying core values, beliefs, and traditions of a school is reflective of the school environment and how people in the school relate to one another (Deal & Peterson, 1998).

Culture facilitates the coordination of efforts among people in a loosely connected and nonlinear world but can become so entrenched that it constrains innovation (Sergiovanni, 1991). If school culture becomes too dynamic and fluid, it can become weak and ineffectual. Conversely, school culture that is “cast in stone” and too rigid can squash individuality and creativity (Sergiovanni, 1991). School culture is not static. Rather, it is continually shaped through interactions among staff, students, parents, and community members, and through personal reflection (Finnan, 2000). Rituals and school traditions help define a school’s culture. According to Hollins (1996), “schools are shaped by cultural practices and values and reflect the norms of the society for which they have been developed” (p. 31). Students flourish in a school culture that values collegiality and promotes a positive learning

environment. Students flounder in a school culture that is toxic and acerbic (Deal & Peterson, 1998).

### **The Impact of School Size**

Developing a sense of belonging and forming close, supportive relationships is best facilitated in small schools where the school culture tends to be more personalized, and collegial, and the school climate tends to be more warm, friendly, and inviting. Small schools are fighting for their survival because of budget cutbacks. For many years, school consolidation was a popular approach to school reform among legislators and school boards but enthusiasm for consolidation began to wane in the 1980s (Guthrie & Reed, 1986; Walberg, 1994). Current economic pressures on state governments have revived interest in school consolidation (Slate & Jones, 2005). State legislatures around the nation have been urging policymakers and state officials to reduce the number of school districts and schools (Carson, Hess, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2010).

As school enrollment continued to grow, many students felt disconnected from a culture of support and attachment with teachers, staff, and the learning community (Driscoll et al., 2008). From 1940 to 1990, the number of schools in the U.S. declined by 69 percent despite a 70 percent increase in population (Walberg, 1994). Larger schools become more centralized and bureaucratic, causing anonymity, alienation, and disengagement (Noguera, 2002). When students experience anonymity and alienation, they do not feel cared for, affirmed, or valued and are more likely to disengage from school activities, affiliate with oppositional groups (gangs and drug culture), and respond to school efforts with passive resistance or hostility (Strike, 2010). The weakness of attachments in schools is a reflection

of modern society, where people change jobs and locations more readily, relationships tend to be temporary, and the family structure is less stable (Strike, 2010).

Ayers, Klonsky, and Lyson (2000) suggest that, “Small schools can be an antidote to an educational system that has lost its soul as it has become more bureaucratic and impersonal” (p. 13). Small schools provide intimacy, a sense of belonging, and common purpose (Meier, 1996). Comer (2004) notes that students are social beings who need community support and involvement to develop properly. Researchers report that small schools are organized more communally and provide personalized attention with a nurturing environment that fosters a culture of learning (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Strike, 2010). Personalization, one of the key strengths of small schools, is enhanced by strong and authentic relationships (Cotton, 1996). Relationships dominate students’ feelings about school and learning comes naturally when children interact with adults who show support, positive regard, high expectations, affiliation, and bonding (Comer et al., 1996; Ancess, 2003). “Knowing one’s students matters,” writes Deborah Meier (2002), “including, and perhaps especially, those who are hardest to know” (p. 111).

### **School Size and Safety**

Small schools are safer schools, where discipline issues such as truancy, classroom disruption, substance abuse, theft, vandalism, bullying, fighting, and gang participation are much less frequent, providing an environment where learning can thrive (Driscoll et al., 2008). Strong parental support and adult connections present in small schools create a safer environment for students (McComb, 2000). “Small is inherently safer. If a student is sad, depressed, or on the edge, teachers and classmates are more likely to take notice in a small

school” says Kathy Simon, co-executive director of the Coalition for Essential Schools (as cited in Kennedy, 2003, p. 22).

According to a U.S. Department of Education report (2010), when comparing small schools with less than 300 students to larger schools with 1,000 students or more, there was a significant increase in the ratio (calculated as a rate per 1,000) of students with disciplinary issues and criminal behavior at large schools in all categories identified in the report. The categories included theft (272 percent increase), violent incidents (227 percent increase) and other incidents (223 percent increase), which included vandalism, possession of a firearm, explosive device, or knife, and the distribution, possession, or use of alcohol or illegal drugs. Stockard and Mayberry (1992) sum it up well by stating, “Behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is canceled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment” (p. 47).

Small schools have higher graduation rates (Bingler et al., 2002). Although defined by a single event, dropping out of school is usually the result of a long process of disengagement and withdrawal (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Dropping out of high school, which can lead to long-term financial and social consequences, can often be avoided at smaller schools where struggling students are identified earlier, provided close supervision, and held accountable by a staff that knows them well (Driscoll et al., 2008).

The cost of students dropping out of school and being absorbed by society is significant. Dropping out of school influences a person’s health and job opportunities. There is a negative influence on family relationships, and the chances of being on welfare or going to prison increases. On average, dropouts earn one-third less income and are three-and-a-half times more likely to be arrested. In the adult criminal justice system, 82 percent of inmates

are dropouts, and the annual cost to incarcerate a prisoner is four times the annual cost to educate a child (Bingler et al., 2002).

### **Small School Environment**

In addition to safety issues, there are a variety of reasons why students who struggle at larger schools can prosper in small schools (Howley & Bickel, 2000; Nathan & Febey, 2001). Many of these factors revolve around the small school environment, which fosters the development of meaningful relationships; creates a school environment that is safe, personal, and intimate; and ameliorates the conditions that create alienation and disengagement (Ancess, 2003; Meier, 2002; Strike, 2010). Small schools can intervene early and provide flexibility in meeting individual student needs. Students who would normally fall between the cracks at a larger school can flourish in a small school where their struggles are noticed early and timely intervention is provided (Cotton, 1996).

Students in small schools experience a greater sense of belonging and relationships among staff members, among students, between staff and students, and between the school and its surrounding community is more personalized (Cotton, 1996). Students have a strong safety net of people surrounding them who know them well and care about them (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001). People cannot connect in the same ways in larger schools where many of the students are anonymous (Bingler et al., 2002). In contrast to the anonymity associated with larger schools, students in small schools are well known to their teachers and their classmates (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006).

In smaller schools, students receive personal attention and develop a sense of belonging that guards them from falling through the cracks (Kennedy, 2003). Staff and

students of small schools have a stronger sense of personal efficacy and students' self-perceptions are enhanced; both socially and academically (Cotton, 1996). Small schools have the ability to foster better relationships, promote stronger support networks, and improve the likelihood that students will successfully complete their education (Cotton, 2001).

Small schools have higher participation in extracurricular activities. Although large schools offer more varied extracurricular activities, the students are more polarized, with a group of active participants at one end of the continuum and a large group of students who do not participate at the other end (Viadero, 2001). At a small school, everyone's participation is needed and, therefore, it is less likely that a student will be overlooked or feel isolated (Cotton, 1996). Although some may not consider participation in extracurricular activities as important as academics, there is a positive correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and: a student's self-esteem; attitude towards learning; attendance; grade point average; standardized test results; and motivation for post-secondary education (Collins & Duyar, 2008).

In small schools, communication is more meaningful because the staff is well acquainted with students, parents, and extended family members. Parents are more likely to have greater personal involvement with staff, school activities, and their child's progress (Collings & Duyar, 2008). In small communities, schools are vital and serve to unify the community by bringing residents of varied ages and backgrounds together to participate in activities and services provided by their local school (Bard et al., 2006). In addition to educating children, schools in these communities function as cultural and social centers where people can watch and play sports, hold meetings, organize political forums, and catch a play or attend a dance. Of all civic organizations in small communities, schools are one of the

most vital as they serve the broadest constituency and nourish their local community, fostering community cohesion and civic participation (Bingler et al., 2002).

Because of the many advantages found in small school settings, a small school reform effort has been underway. Government and private funding sources have provided an influx of money available for large schools to create small learning communities (Cotton, 2001). Some educators believe that smallness has the power to improve education. However, being small does not guarantee success. Small schools are not effective solely because they are small but rather because they are able to capitalize on the benefits (safety, sense of belonging, participation, personalization, and parental and community involvement) of a small school environment (Bingler et al., 2002).

### **Summary**

Many children in the United States have insufficient support at home and some live in extreme conditions of stress and poverty (Parkay, 2013). Modern society has become more mobile and complex, and youth who have weak connections to adults and have inadequate support gravitate to peers with antisocial values (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2010; Strike, 2010). These social conditions are reflected in academic struggles and behavioral issues in school. Risk factors can be offset by protective factors which build resilience in “at risk” children (Hanewald, 2011). A critical protective factor that builds resiliency in children is the development of a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is a basic need for children and associated with motivation, engagement, and academic achievement in school (Anderman, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Ryan, 1995). A lack of belonging can lead to academic failure, withdrawal, and recidivism (Sandhu, 2001). Conversely, a strong sense of belonging buffers

life's challenges and ameliorates negative social outcomes (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Forming close, meaningful relationships is an important factor in developing a sense of belonging. Supportive relationships with teachers have the greatest impact on student engagement and academic performance while peer support has the greatest impact on social behaviors (Wentzel, 1999).

School environment, which is often referred to as the climate and culture of a school, can influence whether schools meet students' affective needs. School climate is the tone, or vibe of a school and is often the first impression that visitors have of the school (Sharratt & Derrington, 2011). School culture is formed by the attitudes, values and beliefs that are common in a school and how people relate to one another (Deal & Peterson, 1998). As school enrollments have increased and schools have become larger and more bureaucratic, anonymity and alienation of students have increased (Noguera, 2002). An antidote to this anonymity and alienation can be found in small schools where school climates tend to be warmer and more inviting, and close relationships are developed.

Small schools have higher graduation rates and are safer learning environments with fewer negative social outcomes such as behavioral problems, disciplinary issues, and criminal activity (Bingler et al., 2002; Driscoll et al., 2008). Much of this can be attributed to the small school environment which is more conducive to students' developing a strong sense of belonging and fostering strong, supportive relationships (Ancess, 2003). In addition, small schools have higher participation in extracurricular activities, and more parental and community involvement. While there are numerous advantages of small schools in meeting the affective needs of students, their success in meeting those needs is not assured simply

because they are small. Rather, the success of small schools in meeting students' affective needs lies in their ability to capitalize on the benefits of their small school environment.

## **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design and the methods used in this qualitative case study to explore factors that strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in a small school district located in the Pacific Northwest. This chapter will distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research, and discuss the purpose of inquiry, research design and methodology, data collection and analysis, site and participant selection, and ethical considerations as they pertain to this study.

### **The Purpose of Inquiry**

There are meaningful differences between qualitative research and quantitative research (Patton, 2002). The primary purpose of qualitative research is to understand and interpret social interactions, while the primary purpose of quantitative research is to test hypotheses, determine cause and effect, and make predictions (Stake, 1995). In qualitative research, the researcher often participates in the study and is immersed in it, while the quantitative researcher is ideally an objective observer (Patton, 2002). In qualitative research, the nature of observations tends to be more subjective and occurs in a natural environment. Quantitative research, on the other hand, tends to be more objective and often occurs under controlled conditions to isolate causal effects (Merriam, 2009). Evered and Loius (1981) distinguish between these two research approaches as “inquiry from the outside,” reflecting a quantitative study using a deductive mode or “inquiry from the inside,” reflecting a qualitative study using an inductive mode.

Numerous definitions of qualitative research exist (Patton, 2002). Shank (2002) defines qualitative research as a planned, orderly inquiry grounded in the world of experience to help researchers understand how others make meaning. Robinson and Savenye (2004) define qualitative research as devoted to developing an understanding of human systems. Patton (2002) describes it as an effort to understand unique situations and the interactions and contexts in which they occur. While there are many definitions, a common theme is the idea of inquiring into or investigating something in a systematic fashion (Robinson & Savenye, 2004).

While some researchers advocate either qualitative or quantitative as the preferred research methodology, the real question is not which method is superior, but rather what research method is best suited to the research questions being asked and the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this study and the research questions being asked was to understand and interpret social interactions and other factors that influence students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school. The researcher was immersed in the study and actively participated in the collection of data, including open-ended interviews, and field observations. The nature of the field observations was subjective and occurred in the natural environment of a small school setting. The research was conducted as a planned, orderly inquiry that was grounded in the experiences of students, parents/guardians, school staff, and community members to help understand and make meaning of students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in school. Based on the purpose of the study and the research questions being asked, qualitative research is best suited for this study.

## **Case Study Method**

Case study research stems from the desire for a close-up, in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases in their real-world contexts (Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam, qualitative case study research is an ideal methodology for understanding educational phenomena. As Merriam (1998) describes it,

A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

The case study approach is preferred when “how?” or “why?” research questions are asked and a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context exists (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009). A case is bounded (person, organization, event, or other social phenomenon) and is the main unit of analysis in a case study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Since a case study emphasizes the study of a phenomenon within its real-world contexts, it is best to collect data in natural settings, as opposed to relying on derived data such as responses to survey questions or a researcher’s instrument in an experiment (Barkley, 2006). Case studies can be defined as exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Court, 2003). A descriptive case study is the most common form of a case study and can offer detailed, revealing insights into the social world within the boundaries of the case (Barkley, 2006; Yin, 2012).

Qualitative, descriptive, case study methodology is best suited for this proposed study based on the desire for a close-up, in-depth understanding of students’ wellbeing and sense of belonging in their real world contexts; the research questions being asked; and the existence

of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). The case was bounded to an organization (a small, rural school district in the Pacific Northwest) which was the main unit of analysis and data was collected in its natural setting in order to elicit detailed, revealing insights (Barkley, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Sources of Evidence**

Good qualitative, descriptive case studies utilize multiple sources of evidence (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Sources include observation, interviews, documents, archival records, and artifacts. A common source of evidence is direct observation in a field setting. The opportunity to make these direct observations is a distinctive feature of doing case studies (Stake, 1995). Observations can focus on human actions, environments, or events. The researcher will develop a narrative, taking into account observations and associated field notes. Caution should be exercised when developing the narrative to ensure that it is neutral and factual, representing the views of the field participants. Another common source of evidence is open-ended interviews. Open-ended interviews provide a richer and more extensive source of evidence than survey data. In addition to answering a researcher's questions, open-ended interviews can reveal participant's thoughts about situations and how they construct reality (Yin, 2012).

This study utilized multiple sources of evidence including field observations, open-ended interviews, documents, and archival records. Field observations and open-ended interviews constituted the bulk of the data for the study.

## Data Collection

The following sections describe three types of data collected during this study: field observations, open-ended interviews, and documents and archival records. Field observations were made by three staff members at Cascade Range School. All field observations, including comments from students and staffs were recorded and coded to ensure accuracy and avoid any misinterpretation. The field observations occurred over the first semester of the 2012-13 school year.

**Field Observations:** The primary focus of field observations was to identify and explore factors that affect students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at a small, rural district in the Pacific Northwest. While the field observers were instructed to make note of all factors that affect students' wellbeing and sense of belonging, they specifically looked for the following factors.

- Safety.
- Quality of relationships.
- Level of student participation.
- Overall school environment.
  - Inviting?
  - Caring?
  - Supportive?
  - Flexible?
  - Personalized?

**Open-ended Interviews:** The case study interviews consisted of 15 open-ended questions for students (Appendix A), parent/guardians (Appendix B), and school staff (Appendix C), and nine open-ended questions for community members (Appendix D). The questions sought to understand the factors that strengthen or weaken students' wellbeing and sense of belonging from the students', parent/guardians', school staffs', and community members' perspective. The open-ended interviews sought to answer the questions of what makes students feel: cared for (or uncared for); welcome (or unwelcome); and included (or excluded). In addition, interviewees were asked what makes students' friendships stronger (or weaker); whether students feel supported (or unsupported) by school staff and how students' feelings about school staff affects their school experience; what makes students do their best (or keeps them from doing their best); and to describe the atmosphere of Cascade Range School.

As the interviewees answered the questions, the interviewers asked additional probing or clarifying questions pertinent to the question that was being asked. Three staff members at Cascade Range School conducted the interviews. The bilingual paraprofessional conducted the interviews of the Hispanic parents in their native language (Appendix E). The school cook conducted the interviews of the students, with the exception of one student, because the student and the school cook were related. The superintendent/principal conducted the interviews of the school staff, community members, remaining parents/guardians, and one student (who was related to the school cook). All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure that the entire dialogue was accurately captured.

**Documents and Archival Records:** Board minutes, newsletters, flyers on activities or events, information on student and staff recognition, and other miscellaneous documents and archival records were examined.

### **Data Analysis**

One of the challenges faced during the data analysis of this study was to make sense of a large amount of data. Merriam (1998) urges researchers to make data collection and data analysis a simultaneous activity. Therefore, each interview and field observation was transcribed promptly so the analysis could begin without delay. Although the interviews and observations were professionally transcribed, they were reviewed to ensure that the transcribed text matched the recorded interviews and observations. Following the matching of transcribed text to the recorded interviews and observations, the transcriptions were reviewed to identify any similarities, differences, and emerging patterns, which were recorded in a notebook.

While the interviews and observations provided the bulk of the data, documents and archival records provided additional insight and were included in the analysis of data. Initial codes were assigned to the data, utilizing an open coding process, and sub-coding was developed to facilitate further disaggregating (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The themes that emerged from the interviews, field observations, documents, and archival records became the focus of analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting qualitative research, the ethical treatment of participants is critical. In this study, strategies were employed to ensure ethical treatment and reduce discomfort for

participants. Initially, participants in the open-ended interviews received a copy of a written consent form that outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions being asked, and the benefits and risks of the study. Participants were advised that their participation was completely voluntary and that there was no penalty if they chose not to participate. Participants were also informed that they had the option to not answer any one (or all) of the questions being asked and that they could discontinue their participation in the interview at any time. They were also informed that participants would remain anonymous and that the data for this study would be kept private and confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law, and stored in a locked cabinet.

### **Site Selection and Demographic Information**

The site selected was the Cascade Range School (pseudonym), a small, rural school located in the Pacific Northwest. Cascade Range School is the only school in the Cascade Range School District (pseudonym). For many years, the primary employment in the region was in timber and the railroad, which runs through Cascade Range School District and includes a train station. Currently, the primary employer in the district is Cascade Range School. Many people commute to their jobs elsewhere and choose to live in Cascade Range School District because of its rural nature, the beautiful mountainous setting, and the abundance of recreational activities including hiking, camping, boating, snow-skiing, and snowmobiling. Cascade Range School District encompasses 295 square miles, with a population of 1,134 in 2010, which is an increase in population of 297 over the census data from 2000. Adults make up 82.7% of the population in 2010, which is slightly higher than the percentage of adults (77.7%) in 2000. The population in 2010 was primarily Caucasian (89.3%), which was slightly less than the percentage of the Caucasian population (93.3%) in

2000. Of the 10.7% minority population in 2010, the Hispanic population is the predominant ethnicity at 9% of the total population (Census Data, 2010).

The Cascade Range School District includes many prestigious homes. While this provides an assessed property valuation in the district that allows for low tax rates on Maintenance and Operations levies in comparison to neighboring school districts, many of these prestigious homes are second homes for recreational use by affluent families whose primary residence is outside of the district boundaries. The level of affluence in Cascade Range School District is not indicative of the student population, where 65.22% of the student population in October 2012 was on free/reduced lunch. This has posed some financial challenges for Cascade Range School District, which is limited in Title One funding because these funds are allocated to schools based on poverty statistics generated from census data instead of the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch count.

Cascade Range School has a student population of 92 students, grades K-12 according to form P223 (head count) reported to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) for October 2012 and recorded on report 1251H (OSPI, 2012). In addition, there were six students enrolled in preschool, which meets two days a week. The student population was primarily Caucasian (81%) in October 2012. Of the minority population, the primary ethnicity was Hispanic (15% of the student population). Other ethnicities included African-American, Native-American, and Chinese. The classes are small and teachers instruct multiple grade levels. Many staff members wear multiple hats and juggle multiple responsibilities. From a social justice and equity standpoint, the district strives to provide equal opportunities for all students, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status. A bilingual paraprofessional provides additional assistance to ELL students and helps build

strong relationships between the school and the families where English is not their native language. Cascade Range School provides preschool and full-day kindergarten, without charge, to provide equal educational opportunities regardless of families' economic situation. In addition, there are no "pay for play" fees associated with sports and extracurricular activities to provide equal access to all students.

### **Participant Selection**

The following two sections explain how participants for the field observations and open-ended interviews were selected.

**Field Observations:** The participants of the field observations included students and staff members from the elementary, middle school, and high school grade levels. Field observations occurred within the classroom and outside the classroom. The interactions outside of the classroom included passing time, recess, lunchtime, and after-school activities.

**Open Ended Interviews:** The participants for the open-ended interviews consisted of 12 students who were randomly selected. The random selection came from drawing four names from the roster of fifth and sixth grade elementary students, four names from the roster of middle school students (seventh and eighth grades), and four names from the roster of high school students (ninth-12th grades). Of the 12 students that were randomly selected and interviewed, their parents/guardians were also interviewed (in a separate interview), which constituted the parent/guardian interviews.

Eight of the 12 students (66.66%) randomly selected for interviews were female (vs. 49% in the general student population). Five of the 12 students (42%) randomly selected for interviews were on free/reduced lunch (vs. 65.20% in the general student population). Eight

of the 12 students (66.66%) randomly selected for interviews were Caucasian (vs. 81% in the general student population), three of the students (25%) randomly selected were Hispanic (vs. 15% in the general student population), and one of the students (8.34%) randomly selected was a mix of Caucasian and Native American ethnicity.

12 staff members were randomly selected for interviews. The random selection came from drawing six names from the roster of certified staff and six names from the roster of classified staff. The certified staff who were randomly selected included a combined preschool and kindergarten teacher, a combined first and second grade teacher, a combined fifth and sixth grade teacher, a combined science and math teacher, a combined P.E., art, and health teacher, and a special education teacher. The classified staff who were randomly selected included one of the paraprofessionals that assists classroom teachers with struggling students, the cook (who is also a volleyball coach and ASB advisor), the janitor, a bilingual paraprofessional that assists with struggling students and ELL students, the school secretary, and one of the bus drivers (who also works in building maintenance and student supervision).

Four community members (without children attending Cascade Range School) were selected for interviews. Rather than random selection, these four community members were chosen based on their extensive volunteer work at Cascade Range School and their frequent interactions with students and school staff.

### **Research Participants**

The following sections provide a description of each student and staff member who was interviewed. The sections include: 1) Elementary grade level; student participants; 2) Middle school grade level; student participants; 3) High school grade level; student participants; 4) Teacher participants; and 5) Classified staff participants.

## Elementary Grade Level; Student Participants

Table 1 presents the names (pseudonyms), grade level, and gender of the elementary students who were interviewed; and the following sections present thumbnail sketches of these students.

**Table 1: Elementary Grade Level; Student Participants**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Keane	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Male
Tory	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Rachel	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Rosy	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female

**Keane:** Keane is a fifth grade male student who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten except for a couple of months at the beginning of the third grade when he attended a larger school in a neighboring district. Keane is an only child. His mom and dad owned a sports apparel business for many years and recently transitioned careers from the sports apparel business to real estate sales. Keane is a carefree and happy child and is polite and kind towards other children, school staff, and his family. Keane enjoys snowboarding, snowmobiling, riding motorcycles and playing baseball. It was Keane's love of baseball that prompted his parents' decision to place him in a larger school in a neighboring district at the beginning of the third grade. They reasoned that a larger school district would provide Keane with more competitive opportunities in sports and that a transition to a larger school would be easier for him while he was young. After Keane transferred to the new school, he became sullen and withdrawn. Initially, his parents thought he would adjust to the new school. After three months with no improvements in Keane's disposition, he came back to Cascade Range School where his normally happy and carefree disposition quickly returned.

**Tory:** Tory is a fifth grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since preschool. She has an older brother in the seventh grade and her family has lived in the Cascade Range School District for many years. Tory has struggled academically but has made significant gains in the past couple of years. She is very social and friendly to everybody. She has an inquisitive nature and often knows what is happening in the lives of many of her fellow students. This past year, she has matured a lot and has told some of the school staff that she wants to stay out of the drama that sometimes occurs between young girls. Over the past five years, Tory has been a member of the junior jag cheerleaders, a group of elementary grade cheerleaders who promote school spirit and cheer on the athletes of Cascade Range School during their athletic events. She has recently taken on a leadership role as the captain of the cheerleading squad and she encourages and motivates others on the team. Tory enjoys playing on the Wii and participating in sports, including volleyball, basketball, and softball.

**Rachel:** Rachel is a fifth grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since the first grade. Rachel has two sisters and a brother who attend Cascade Range School. Rachel's family had some financial setbacks in this depressed economy that have made it difficult for them to meet their basic needs. Rachel is a kind and thoughtful girl and loves to help other students. Family is very important to Rachel and she willingly helps her mother care for her three younger siblings. This has developed nurturing skills in Rachel that are obvious at school when she interacts with younger students. She helps in the school kitchen and loves to mother the younger kids. According to the school cook, she would gladly feed all of the little ones if given the chance. She is an avid reader and enjoys drawing

and making sketches. She also enjoys playing volleyball at school and riding her bike and playing tag with her brothers and sisters.

**Rosy:** Rosy is a fifth grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since preschool. She has a brother in kindergarten and comes from a close-knit family. She has aunts, uncles and other family members who live close to one another and spend a lot of time together. She is caring and has a wonderful sense of humor. Rosy does well academically and has a maturity that is beyond her years. Instead of going to lunch recess with other fifth and sixth grade students, she prefers to help in the kitchen. She serves lunch to the kindergarten through third grade students and helps clean up after they have finished eating. According to the school cook, Piper, she would “give the shirt off her back” to help someone else. She enjoys drawing and cooking. Rosy’s favorite type of cooking is baking. At a recent harvest festival at Cascade Range School, Rosy made most of the baked goods that were given out for the cakewalk activity.

**Middle School Grade Level; Student Participants**

Table 2 presents the names (pseudonyms), grade level, and gender of the middle school students who were interviewed; and the following sections present thumbnail sketches of these students.

**Table 2: Middle School Grade Level; Student Participants**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Vanessa	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Bella	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Luke	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Male
Anthony	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Male

**Vanessa:** Vanessa is a seventh grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since preschool. Vanessa has a younger brother who is in the fifth grade. Vanessa has lived in the Cascade Range School District all of her life. In describing Vanessa, the school cook, Piper sums it up well by saying “she’s got the softest heart...she’s very emotional and takes care of everybody else before she takes care of herself.” Vanessa has done well academically at Cascade Range School. She recently transitioned into middle school and went about the increased schoolwork and homework with vigor. She is a determined girl who enjoys all of her classes and teachers and is driven to achieve her goals. She enjoys sports and has participated in soccer, volleyball, basketball, softball, and archery. Vanessa took up archery in the middle of the fifth grade and has done very well. In her first year of archery competition, she got second place in her division (fifth grade girls) in the Washington State Archery Tournament and went on to compete at the National Archery Tournament in Louisville, Kentucky. The following year, she got first place in the Blue Face Archery Tournament, first place in the FITA Archery Tournament and first place in the Multicolor Archery Tournament and was recognized as a champion archer by the National Archery in the School Program (NASP). Vanessa went on to place third in her division (sixth grade girls) in the Washington State Archery Tournament in the sixth grade and competed in the National Archery Tournament in Kentucky and the World Archery Tournament in Florida. While these are many accomplishments for such a young lady, the most remarkable quality that Vanessa exhibits is genuine humility and concern for others. Rather than talk about her accomplishments, she prefers to encourage other students and congratulate them for their achievements.

**Bella:** Bella is an eighth grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten. Bella is a fraternal twin and younger than her sister by two minutes. When she meets someone new, she is shy and a bit reserved. Once she has the opportunity to know another person, she opens up and is very kind and warm hearted. She cares for all living beings and is known for her love of animals. When her family decided to raise chickens, Bella always made sure that every chicken was doing okay, every day. In the sixth grade, she received an award after a class hiking field trip when she made sure that every student on the field trip stepped off the trail to avoid stepping on a caterpillar. Bella does well academically and she enjoys playing volleyball, basketball and competing in archery. Sometimes during sporting events, she gets frustrated with herself when she misses a ball or makes a mistake. Bella tends to be hard on herself because she doesn't want to let anybody down. Although it is difficult on her when she makes a mistake, she does not let those feelings deter her from coming back and giving it her all. This past year, Bella shot well at the Washington State Archery Tournament, and went on to compete at the National and World Archery Tournaments. Bella enjoys sledding during the winter and boating, swimming, and tubing at the family cabin on Lake Chelan during the summer.

**Luke:** Luke is an eighth grade male student who has been attending Cascade Range School since the third grade. Prior to coming to Cascade Range School, Luke attended a large school in West Seattle. Luke's parents are immigrants from Romania and own their own construction company. Luke has a younger sister in the seventh grade. Luke is a bright boy who has an avid interest in science and technology. Luke is a good chess player and likes to play online games such as Grepolis, Forge of Empire, and Mine Craft, which are strategy games that allow players to build online cities and explore ancient civilizations and customs.

Luke is focused and determined in everything that he does. In addition to his love of technology and interest in science, he enjoys riding bikes, swimming, and snowboarding.

**Anthony:** Anthony is an eighth grade male student who has attended Cascade Range School since preschool, with the exception of the second grade, due to a move outside of the district. Anthony’s great grandparents are raising him. Prior to coming to live with his great grandparents, Anthony lived in an unstable environment and had a difficult childhood. Under the loving care of his great grandparents, he has flourished and is growing up to be a kind and respectful young man. Anthony is protective of his younger cousin, a girl in the third grade at Cascade Range School who came from a similar home environment and is now being raised in the same home by his great grandparents. He keeps a watchful eye out for her and helps her like an older, overprotective brother would. Anthony enjoys reading mythical books, playing basketball, acting, and writing poetry.

**High School Grade Level; Student Participants**

Table 3 presents the names (pseudonyms), grade level, and gender of the high school students who were interviewed; and the following sections present thumbnail sketches of these students.

**Table 3: High School Grade Level; Student Participants**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Lily	9 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Michelle	10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Jennell	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Female
Chuck	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Male

**Lily:** Lily is a ninth grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten. She comes from a close family where her aunts, uncles, and other relatives look out for each other and visit on a regular basis. She has two older brothers; one who graduated from Cascade Range School two years ago. Lily is a bit shy around adults, but is quite outgoing around her peers, and likes to be the center of attention. She is a smart, energetic, fun-loving person who can be easily distracted from her studies and tends to be a bit “boy crazy.” When she is not living up to her potential, she responds well when others encourage her to do better and provide positive reinforcement. She is the ASB treasurer and enjoys playing sports, including basketball and volleyball. She does well in archery and has competed in State and National Archery Tournaments.

**Michelle:** Michelle is a 10th grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten. She does not live within the district boundaries but prefers to attend Cascade Range School because of its small size. Michelle is easy-going, likable, and has a wonderful sense of humor. She has great communication skills and is at ease talking to children and adults alike. Although she appears to be relaxed most of the time, she is competitive and tends to be a perfectionist. Michelle has excelled in archery and has competed in state, national, and world archery tournaments. She placed first in her division in two Washington State Archery Tournaments, with a score that became a state record. Michelle’s parents are supportive of her and actively help her pursue her goals. Despite the financial challenges they have faced over the past several years, they found a way to provide Michelle with the financial resources to compete in archery tournaments. In addition to archery, Michelle is active in ASB, knowledge bowl, volleyball, and basketball.

**Jennell:** Jennell is an 11th grade female student who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten, with the exception of the seventh grade, when she attended a larger school in a neighboring district. When Jennell was younger, she tended to be sullen, withdrawn and reclusive. While she is still shy and reserved at times, she is much more outgoing with a more positive outlook on life, and she has been a great role model to others on overcoming adversity. She is well liked by her classmates and she is always respectful to adults. She is actively involved in all of the activities at school. She is doing well academically and she is on the honor roll. She is the ASB president and participates in basketball, volleyball, and archery. Jennell willingly helps others but avoids any recognition or acknowledgement of her accomplishments. When she is recognized or acknowledged for her achievements, she becomes embarrassed and her face turns bright red. She is a junior firefighter with the local fire department, providing support to the firefighters and helping with fundraising events. Jennell has received numerous awards for sports, including first team all league for volleyball and basketball, a hustle award, an honorable mention award, a defensive award, and numerous sportsmanship awards. Jennell was recently selected, along with 35 other students from across the nation, to represent the USA in a basketball tournament that will be held in Australia in July 2013.

**Chuck:** Chuck is a 12th grade male student who has attended Cascade Range School since the first grade. He has an older brother who graduated last year and currently enrolled in a two-year diesel mechanic program in Kirkland, Washington. Chuck's family live on a lake in the Cascade Range School District and the entire family keep active with outdoor recreational activities. Chuck is a polite young man and well liked by his classmates. He has an easy-going personality but is also focused on achieving his goals. Chuck is an avid bow

hunter and one of his hobbies is taxidermy. He is currently working as an apprentice to a taxidermist, which will be the major focus of his senior project. In addition to hunting, Chuck enjoys a wide variety of outdoor activities including swimming, boating, snowmobiling, skiing, and riding motorcycles. Chuck enjoys working out and is physically fit but is also highly motivated by food. According to the school cook, Piper, he frequently offers his assistance in the kitchen in exchange for double helpings. After he graduates this coming June, he plans on attending the Seattle Maritime Academy in the Marine Engineering Technology Program.

### Teacher Participants

Table 4 presents the names (pseudonyms) of the teacher participants, and the grade levels and subject areas taught; and the following sections present thumbnail sketches of these teachers.

**Table 4: Teacher Participants**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Grade Level Taught</b>	<b>Subject Area Taught</b>
Katherine	Kindergarten-12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Special Education
Montana	5 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Reading, Writing, Math, Science, Social Studies
Angie	7 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Science, Math
Betsy	1 <sup>st</sup> - 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	Reading, Writing, Math, Science
PJ	Kindergarten-12 <sup>th</sup> grade	P.E., Art, Health
Julie	Preschool-Kindergarten	Reading, Writing, Math

**Katherine:** Katherine has been the special education teacher at Cascade Range School over the past six years. Katherine has a background in fitness, marketing, advertising and public relations. As a young adult, Katherine began promoting fitness at the Bellevue and Mill Creek athletic clubs. She taught classes on weight lifting, race walking and water aerobics. She became a competitive weightlifter, and competed in the Miss Northwest and Miss Washington

competitions for bodybuilding and power lifting. Katherine went to college and received a bachelor's degree in marketing and advertising. Katherine became a personal fitness trainer and helped individuals achieve fitness goals. One of Katherine's clients was a marketing director for Everett Mall. She put Katherine in touch with the Bon Marche, where Katherine worked over the next 20 years. Initially, Katherine started off in advertising and then was promoted to public relations. From there, she was promoted to fashion and special events director, buyer, and division manager.

Katherine had children and decided to cut back on her work demands and focus more time and attention on her family. When her daughter was enrolled in a private Catholic school, Katherine was recruited for fundraising because of her background in marketing, promotions, and special events. Katherine went back to school to obtain a teaching certificate in elementary education and was hired as a teacher at the private Catholic school where her children attended. After an unfortunate accident where her husband fell and suffered a significant head injury, Katherine quit working at the Catholic school. After a year of adjusting to the accident and the impact to their family, Katherine returned to work as a long-term substitute for a school that was located near their home. Katherine saw an advertisement for a special education teacher at Cascade Range School and decided to apply for the position. She was selected for the position and continued her education to obtain her SPED credentials and a Master's degree in special education. Her background in marketing and special events have been helpful as she has lead a leadership class for secondary students, assisted with ASB activities, and has been instrumental in fostering team spirit at Easton School.

**Montana:** Montana has taught a combined fifth and sixth grade class at Cascade Range School over the past 10 years. Prior to coming to Cascade Range School, Montana

worked at a private Catholic school for 12 years. Montana wanted to become a monk and the monastery needed him to become trained in work that they could utilize. They gave him a choice between cooking and teaching and Montana chose teaching. After a six year training program, Montana was trained to be a teacher and a Franciscan monk. Montana enjoyed his job as a teacher and Franciscan monk but decided to consider other options when he was faced with a mandatory transfer from the state of Washington to the state of California.

As Montana contemplated where he could work as a teacher and stay in the state of Washington, he drove by Cascade Range School and saw a help wanted notice on the door. Montana filled out an application, interviewed for a combined fifth and sixth grade teaching position and began working at Cascade Range School. Montana loves outdoor activities including hiking, camping, swimming, cross country skiing, and riding mountain bikes and horses. With all of these outdoor activities available in the Cascade Range District, the employment opportunity was an ideal fit. Montana has an amazing connection with students and is one of the most successful teachers to utilize Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) strategies, which incorporates a variety of visual aids and hands on learning. Montana puts in a lot of extra effort to make his teaching interesting and exciting. When Montana was asked to what he attributes his strong connection to students, he replied, “I guess that I am still a kid myself.”

**Angie:** Angie has taught math and science at Cascade Range School for secondary students over the past six years. Before coming to Cascade Range School, Angie worked in recreation management at state parks for close to a decade. As a child, Angie was a tomboy and grew up on a farm in Wisconsin with two older brothers. Both of her brothers wanted a job where they could work outdoors. One of her brothers became a forester and the other

brother received a degree in archaeology and hydrology. Angie followed in their footsteps by completing a degree in national resource management. Angie has worked at the Ginkgo Petrified Forrest State Park in the Wanapum recreation area, the Crawford State Park in Metaline Falls, and for the Mount Spokane recreational area.

During the time that Angie worked in recreation management, she realized that the most enjoyable aspect of her job was teaching others about resource management and other related topics. Because she had such a love for educating others in her job at the state parks, she decided to pursue a career in education. When she was a ranger at Ginkgo Petrified Forrest State Park, she had five months off in the winters when she could take classes. She also took additional classes during the other months by working split shifts. Angie completed a degree in the broad category of science and a degree in Biology at Central Washington University. Angie has incorporated the concepts learned in national resource management into some of her science lessons. Her hobbies include horseback riding, gardening, and working on outdoor projects.

**Betsy:** Betsy has been a teacher at Cascade Range School over the past 21 years. The first four years, she worked part-time and taught fifth, sixth, and seventh grade students. Over the past 17 years, she has worked full time and taught a combined first and second grade class. She completed a bachelor's degree at Evergreen State College and a teaching degree at Western Washington University. Betsy also completed a Master's degree in Education, with a major in supervision and curriculum at Central Washington University. Betsy has been a leader in promoting science in the elementary grades. She trains other elementary teachers in the latest teaching techniques in science and serves as the science coordinator and liaison

between the school district and the science cooperative with the local Educational Service District (ESD).

Reflecting on her days as a student at Evergreen State College, and her experience as an educator, Betsy believes that science education needs to focus on “hands on” learning activities. Amidst the ongoing focus of raising standardized scores in reading and writing in public schools, Betsy believes that students do best when educators create an environment that fosters a love for reading. She advocates reading great literature to students and having students immersed in reading. In her spare time, Betsy enjoys hiking, reading, and travel. Her travels include sites in Alaska, Hawaii, and Italy.

**PJ:** PJ has taught P.E, grades K-12, and art, and health for secondary students at Cascade Range School over the past 32 years. She completed her Master’s Degree in Education and went through the rigors of becoming Nationally Board Certified. PJ is a leader in the field of education and has been a leader in a variety of professional educational organizations, received numerous awards, and is often sought out to present at educational conferences. PJ’s professional affiliations with educational organizations include: President Elect, 2012-2013 for Washington Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (WAHPERD); American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR); National Association for Sports and Physical Education (NASPE); National Art Education Association, U.S. Archery Association; and the Washington State Archery Association.

PJ’s expertise on building and sustaining quality, innovative programs for students are sought out by many other educators. PJ has developed programs in fly-fishing and fly tying, cross-county and downhill skiing, archery, geo-caching, and rock climbing. She takes full

advantage of the mountainous, outdoor setting of Cascade Range School District to bring memorable, life-long experiences to students. In this day of reduced budgets and cutbacks, PJ stands out as a leader who finds a way, somehow to fund these wonderful programs that she develops. She spends many hours on her own time lobbying potential funding sources and has rallied the local community to raise funds for expenses associated with her successful archery program, including the costs to send students to State and National Archery tournaments.

**Julie:** Julie is the preschool and kindergarten teacher at Cascade Range School. Prior to being the preschool and kindergarten teacher, Julie taught special education. She has worked at Cascade Range School over the past 16 years. One of the initial appeals of teaching to Julie was having summers off. Once Julie began teaching, she quickly realized that the lasting appeal of teaching for her was making a difference in the lives of children. Realizing the positive impact of early learning, Julie has focused her energies into building a successful preschool and full-day kindergarten program. She makes learning exciting and fun for kids, affectionately known as her “Houligans” based on a resemblance to Julie’s last name. As students at Cascade Range School progress in grades and age, they fondly remember their “Houligan” days and many students ask to be a student aide in Julie’s class.

Julie is organized and determined to provide her early learners with fundamental literacy and beginning math skills. Her classroom management skills are consistent and effective and her preschool students proceed into full-day kindergarten knowing the routine of the “Houligan” classroom. In addition to her intense work with early learners, Julie is a key advocate for all children at Cascade Range School and is often the first person to volunteer for extra duties that further the educational efforts of the school. Julie’s two children attend

Cascade Range School, which gives her a perspective as a parent of children attending the school, as well as her perspective as a teacher. Julie and her family enjoy outdoor activities such as snowmobiling, camping, and riding quads and horses. In the summers, they raise hay which helps provide feed for their horses.

**Classified Staff Participants**

Table 5 presents the names (pseudonyms) and job duties of the classified staff who were interviewed; and the following sections present thumbnail sketches of these staff.

**Table 5: Classified Staff Participants**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Job Duties</b>
Angelic	Paraprofessional
Teresa	Paraprofessional, ELL Coordinator
Ginger	Custodian
Barbara	Bus Driver, Student Supervision, Secretarial Support, Custodial, Building Maintenance
Edith	Secretary
Piper	Cook, Volleyball Coach, ASB Advisor

**Angelic:** Angelic has worked at the Cascade Range School as a paraprofessional for 19 years. Angelic grew up in Issaquah, Washington before getting married and having two children. Angelic and her husband bought property in the Cascade Range School District in 1984 and built a house on their property in 1986. She has a daughter and two grandsons who live in the area. Her two grandsons attend Cascade Range School. Angelic also has a son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren who live in Colville, Washington. Her daughter-in-law is a kindergarten teacher and her son is a fourth grade teacher who coaches football and baseball. Angelic is versatile and assists with classroom instruction in a variety of classrooms

and ability levels. She is gifted in helping struggling students reach their potential and has worked with students in programs such as SPED, Title One, ELL, and LAP.

Angelic has a special connection with students. When she was asked to what she attributed this special connection, she commented that, “We are all children inside but we get busy as adults and don’t take the time to simply lay on the grass and look at the clouds in wonder.” Angelic loves to be around kids because they haven’t lost that sense of awe and wonder. Angelic enjoys outdoor activities such as gardening, hiking, gathering firewood, and boating. She particularly enjoys being near water and is quite content sitting next to a river, which she finds calming and a good way to “carry your worries away.” Angelic also enjoys cooking and is one of several staff members at Cascade Range School who provide a monthly lunch feast to the entire staff at the school.

**Teresa:** Teresa has worked as a paraprofessional and coordinator of ELL services at Cascade Range School over the past three years. Prior to coming to Cascade Range School, Teresa has worked in a variety of school settings, which has given her valuable experience working with many students from diverse backgrounds. She worked for the Pasco School District for eight years, Brewster School District for three years, Odessa School District for two years, and Ephrata School District for four years. In addition, Teresa owned and operated her own daycare facility for 13 years. Teresa is a warm, caring person who recognizes when a need exists and will do everything she can to meet the need. You can find Teresa helping at all of the extracurricular activities and sporting events. Her warm, caring nature resonates with the students and families with whom she works hard to build genuine relationships. Her work with ELL students and their families is exceptional.

Teresa is married to the school counselor at Cascade Range School. They have four grown children. Two of their children have graduated from college and one of their children is currently enrolled in Montana State University on a baseball scholarship. Teresa is a dog handler and has worked with golden retriever puppies. She enjoys reading, waterskiing, and entertaining family and friends. Teresa is a gourmet cook and her culinary skills are the joy of many at Cascade Range School as she builds camaraderie by recognizing staff members on their birthdays and helps provide a monthly lunch feast for staff.

**Ginger:** Ginger began volunteering at Cascade Range School 30 years ago when her youngest son was four years old. She was hired as a full-time paraprofessional 26 years ago. The paraprofessional position was reduced to part-time and Ginger began to supplement her time as a paraprofessional with supervision of students during recess and assisting in the lunchroom. After working for five years as a paraprofessional, she left Cascade Range School to manage a local convenience store-gas station. Two years later, Cascade Range School had an opening for a custodian position. Ginger was selected to fill the position and has worked as a custodian over the past 21 years. Ginger takes pride in her work and it is apparent by the way that she maintains the appearance of Cascade Range School. Visitors frequently comment on how nice the school looks. When students and staff travel to other schools during sporting events, it is rare to find another school that has been so meticulously maintained and cleaned. When Ginger was asked why she is so diligent in her work, she replied, “Of course, I take a lot of pride because I don’t want to let anybody down. People walk into our building and say, ‘Wow, look at this!’ It is my job to make sure that our school is so clean that the kids can safely roll on the floor if they want to.”

In addition to her hard work and dedication to the custodial work and assisting in the kitchen, Ginger cares about all of the students and staff at Cascade Range School and seems to have a knack for knowing everything that is going on. She is affectionately known as Mama G because of her caring nature and her willingness to do anything to help. Ginger is married to Doug, the previous transportation-maintenance supervisor at Cascade Range School District who retired last year after 34 years of dedicated service. One of her daughters works as the cook, volleyball coach, and ASB advisor at Cascade Range School and another daughter works as a basketball coach and substitutes for the secretarial position as needed. Ginger enjoys drawing, painting, listening to music, making jewelry, and camping.

**Barbara:** Barbara has worked at Cascade Range School over the past 14 years. Prior to working at Cascade Range School, she managed a local convenience store-gas station. She began working as a part-time bus driver upon the suggestion of the transportation-maintenance supervisor. In addition to driving a bus route, she gradually assumed other duties. In a small school, staff often wear multiple hats and take on a variety of roles. Barbara is a good example of the versatility that makes a small school work. She willingly takes on a variety of roles including bus driver, student supervision, secretarial support, custodial, and maintenance. In addition to her varied duties, Barbara can always be counted on to help with extracurricular events and fund-raising events. Barbara's enthusiasm and commitment to Cascade Range School lies, in part from her experience as a student at Cascade Range School. She attended the school during her kindergarten and first grade years. Her parents divorced and she left Cascade Range School but was able to return and attend from the fifth grade through her high school graduation in 1981.

When Barbara was asked why she is always willing to put in the extra effort to work such varied roles and participate in extracurricular events, she credits her mom and dad for instilling a work ethic in her and helping those who are less fortunate. She came from a big family of seven boys and one girl, and family is very important to her. She contemplated living in a warmer climate but the beauty of the region and the abundance of trees and recreation opportunities keep her rooted in the Cascade Range School District. She enjoys riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle, and a variety of outdoor activities, including walking in the woods, camping and even cutting firewood.

**Edith:** Edith has worked as the school secretary for Cascade Range School over the past seven years. Prior to working at Cascade Range School, she worked at Inglewood Junior High School for nine years, monitoring in-house suspensions and doing various secretarial duties, including sports clearance and attendance. Edith is one of the first people who students encounter when they arrive at Cascade Range School and she greets them with a hearty “hello.” Multi-tasking is an important skill for those in the front office of a small school, as roles are more varied and often complex. While greeting students is one of the enjoyable aspects of her job, she has found that her role has changed over the years because of budget cuts. In order to preserve instructional positions, staff reductions have occurred in the central office through the elimination of the principal and business manager positions. While certain aspects of those positions were contracted to an Education Service District (ESD), there was a shifting of roles and responsibilities to the remaining office support staff that made their jobs more challenging.

When Edith was asked why she enjoys interacting with students, she replied that she has empathy for children and enjoys their playful spirit. Before she worked for school

districts, Edith owned her own frame shop and gallery in Redmond, Washington. She has two grown children, three granddaughters and a grandson on the way. She enjoys gardening, hiking, reading, making jewelry, visiting with family, and going out to dinner with friends and co-workers. She has a beautiful singing voice and has sung in school plays and choral groups.

**Piper:** Piper has worked for Cascade Range School over the past 13 years. Piper worked as a paraprofessional for the first two years, and a cook during the following eleven years. In addition to her duties as the head cook, she is the volleyball coach, ASB advisor, and health assistant to the school nurse. Piper is the daughter of Doug, who recently retired from his position as the transportation-maintenance supervisor. She is also the daughter of the custodian, Ginger and a sister to the basketball coach and substitute secretary. Most of Piper's childhood was associated with Cascade Range School where she attended school from kindergarten through her high school graduation and she spent a lot of time on the weekends at school with her dad. There would be times when the entire family would be at school on the weekends, pitching in to help. After graduating and becoming an adult, Piper wanted to work at Cascade Range School so badly that she applied for any open position, regardless of whether she was qualified for the position.

Piper is affectionately referred to as the "lunch goddess" by a well-known disk jockey and program director of a popular radio station. When Piper was asked how she acquired the nickname "lunch goddess," she said that she refused to be called the lunch lady, which is sometimes portrayed as a heavy set lady wearing starched white clothes and black hairnets and slopping food onto trays. In contrast, Piper has a warm and caring disposition and connects with students and their families in a remarkable way. Her lunchroom is a safe haven for kids and they are comfortable sharing their stories and concerns with Piper. In addition to

her various duties at Cascade Range School, Piper is community minded and she volunteers at the local fire department, and is involved in many fund raising activities. When Piper was asked to what she attributes her community involvement, commitment to the school, and strong connection to kids, she is quick to give the credit to her father who she describes as the “best man in the world.”

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Introduction**

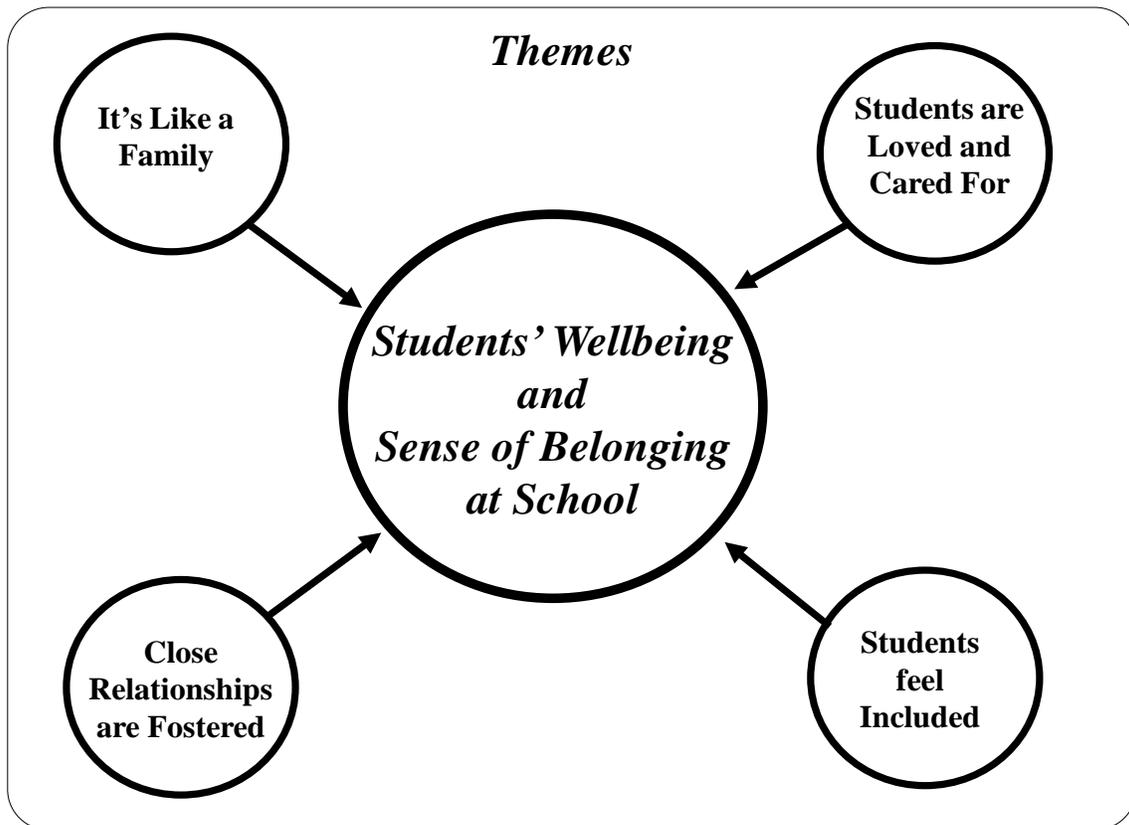
The data for the findings of this study came from 40 open-ended interviews of students, parents/guardians, school staff and community members; field observations performed by three researchers; and a review of documents and archival records (newspaper clippings, newsletters, board minutes, etc.). The interviews and observations were recorded. The data were transcribed and checked with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. The data revealed four themes. The themes include: 1) “It’s like a family;” 2) “Students are loved and cared for;” 3) “Close relationships are fostered;” and 4) “Students feel included.”

The first theme of “It’s like a family” came from numerous comments made during the interviews and observations of Cascade Range School being “like a family.” The link between Cascade Range School and the concept of family was frequently mentioned in answers to a variety of interview questions. The correlation between Cascade Range School and family was made by all of the groups (students, parents/guardians, school staff, and community members) that were interviewed. The second theme of “students are loved and cared for” came from answers to interview questions and observations that indicated that students are loved and cared for at Cascade Range School. The interview responses that supported this theme came from all of the groups that were interviewed. Students’ feeling that they are loved and cared for was a foundational piece to the third theme that “close relationships are fostered.” The data from the interviews and observations showed that forming close relationships was important in meeting the affective needs of students and that when students felt genuinely loved and cared for, it was pivotal in fostering these close relationships. Finally, the fourth theme is one of inclusion. Students feel included in the

academic and extracurricular activities at Cascade Range School. Inclusion of students was mentioned in many of the interview responses and by all of the groups that were interviewed.

Figure 1, titled, “Influence of the themes” illustrates the influence of the four themes on students’ wellbeing and sense of belonging at school.

**Figure 1: Influence of the Themes**

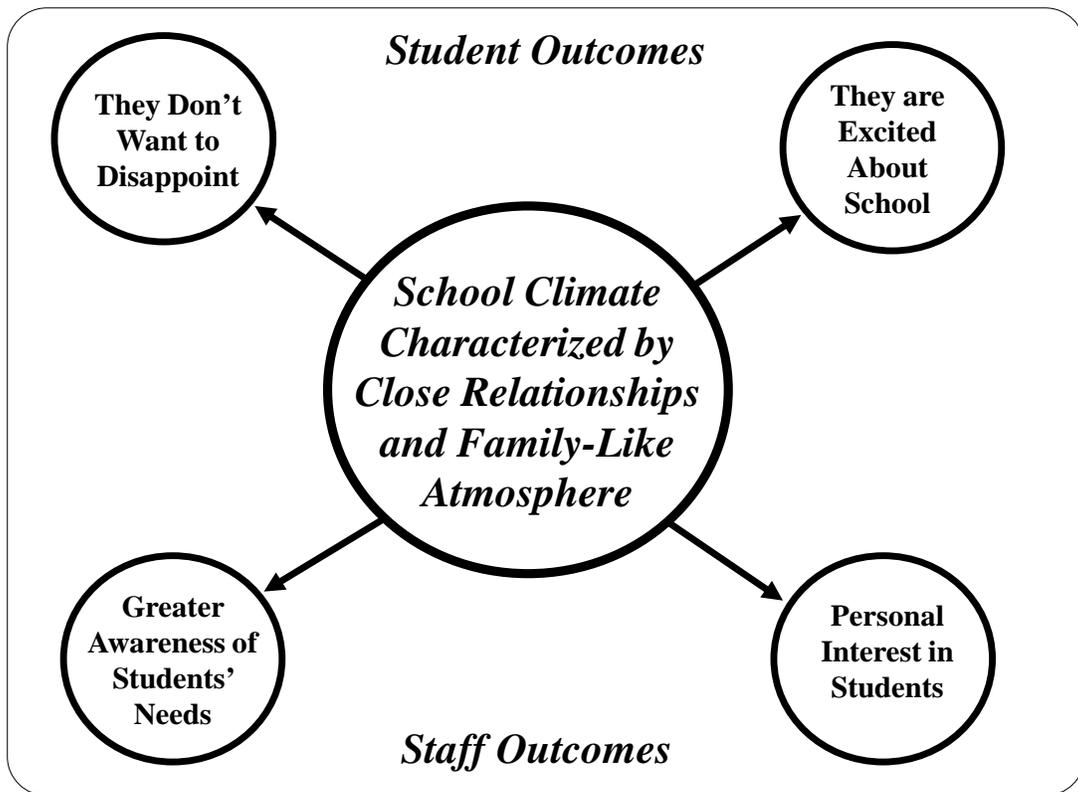


The main factors (themes of the findings) that enhanced students’ wellbeing and sense of belonging led to four salient outcomes. These included two outcomes for school staff: 1) “Staff takes a personal interest in students;” and 2) “Staff has a greater awareness of student needs;” and two outcomes for students: 3) “Students are excited about school;” and 4) “Students don’t want to disappoint.” The outcome for school staff of “staff takes a personal

interest in students” was found in many of the interview responses and observations and indicated that staff got to know students individually and encouraged and supported their interests and activities. The outcome for school staff of “staff has a greater awareness of student needs” came from comments made about staffs’ awareness of students’ struggles and their willingness to intervene and offer help. The outcome for students of “students are excited about school” came from interview responses and observations of the excitement and enthusiasm that students have for school. Students are excited about school and their enthusiasm for school is apparent from the moment they step onto the school bus in the morning or stand in line at the front door of the school waiting for the doors to open. The outcome for students of “students don’t want to disappoint” was reflected in the interview responses of students and their parents/guardians who spoke about the close relationships between school staff and students. As these relationships developed and became closer, the students didn’t want to disappoint the school staff in the same way that a child doesn’t want to disappoint his parents.

Figure 2, titled, “Outcomes” illustrates these outcomes, which occur when the themes (close relationships and family-like atmosphere where students are loved and cared for, and feel included) of the findings are present.

**Figure 2: Outcomes**



The themes and outcomes reinforce one another. Students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school is enhanced when close relationships are fostered, and the school becomes an extended family for students where they are loved and cared for, and feel included. This fosters a positive school environment where students are excited about school and don't want to disappoint staff, and staffs' personal interest in students and awareness of their needs increases. As the strength of the factors (themes) increase, the outcomes become stronger which, in turn, reinforces the themes. Students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school is influenced by the degree to which these themes and subsequent outcomes are present (or absent). The following sections discuss the themes and outcomes in detail.

## **Theme 1: It's Like a Family**

During the interviews and field observations, one of the most frequent comments made was that Cascade Range School is like a family. The family type of atmosphere at Cascade Range School enhanced students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school. This family type of atmosphere was generally viewed positively but there were concerns about short-term conflicts that occasionally arose between students. These conflicts stemmed from students being so close and spending so much time together that it resembled sibling rivalry. The positive aspect of these conflicts is that they tended to be short-lived and students were able to quickly resolve their differences and continue their close friendships. The following cases illustrate the family type of atmosphere present at Cascade Range School.

Lily is a ninth grade student who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten. Lily said that people care about her at Cascade Range School and everyone knows each other and it feels like a family. Lily's mom described the atmosphere at school as one big family where everyone helps each other with everything. Rosy is a fifth grade student who has attended Cascade Range School since preschool. Rosy's mom described the school as a family where school staff always looks out for the children as a whole person, not just as a student. When Rosy's mom was asked how Rosy feels when she walks into Cascade Range School in the morning, she spoke about Rosy and her son who attends kindergarten, "Happy, because the first person that sees them says 'Hello Jr.. Hello Rosy.'" It makes them feel like family. It makes them feel at home only they are studying."

Jennell is a junior who has attended Cascade Range School since kindergarten with the exception of the seventh grade. Jennell said that she feels welcome at Cascade Range School because she feels like she has known everyone forever and it's like one giant family. Chuck

is a senior who has attended Cascade Range School since the first grade. When he was asked how he feels when he walks into Cascade Range School in the morning, he replied that he feels at home. Keane is an only child who is in the fifth grade at Cascade Range School. When Keane's parents were asked how Keane feels when he walks into Cascade Range School in the morning, they replied,

Like he owns the place. Pretty much shuts the car door and away he goes (pause).

Like I say, it's almost like a second home for him (pause); he's got brothers and sisters and lots of family (laughs). There's no problem with getting him up in the morning and getting him ready and getting him off to school. When I was that age, I would pretend like I was sick to get out of school. He will (pause) unless he's on his deathbed, he wants to be here.

Katherine, the special education teacher at Cascade Range School said that students feel welcome and comfortable at Cascade Range School and that they feel like it's their home. Vanessa is a seventh grade student at Cascade Range School. When Vanessa's mom was asked what makes Vanessa's friendships stronger or weaker, she responded,

I think stronger because it's such a small unit and I think over the years because they grow up with these kids from preschool or kindergarten way up through if they stay. There's a core group of them that will graduate from Easton that have been together the whole time. It's more than just a (pause) friendship, they sort of become a family unit. They're a part of your family even though they don't live in your house, they're part of your family unit. Ummm, because of that time spent together, because everything that you do, whether it be sports, you are right there with that person and it's the same people that do everything.

When Michael, a community member was asked what encourages students to do their best, he replied, “They’re like family (pause) and, you know, kids tend to want to do good for their family, and so everybody’s so close, I think that that’s why they want to do it...It’s a big family thing...they’re like brothers and sisters.” When Edith, the school secretary was asked to describe the atmosphere at Cascade Range School, she replied,

I think it’s like a big family and I think that people really look out for each other here (pause), and more so than in a larger environment because we have more time to have contact (pause), the fact that we get to know everybody, everybody’s parent, who goes with who. I think it’s a nice, intimate family atmosphere...It’s a nice thing. It’s like a big family and I think that’s a really positive thing.

The family type atmosphere is further alluded to by references to students’ relationships with other students being similar to sibling relationships. Piper is the school cook, ASB advisor, and volleyball coach at Cascade Range School. When she was asked what makes friendships stronger or weaker, she replied,

That one could be very similar because the strong friendships are from being together all the time, and the negative side to that is that they’re together all the time (laughs)...So there’s always those sibling fights (pause)...the girls are traveling together, they’re playing together. Yeah, and they know each other so well they know what irks each other. They know the point of how far you can push it and where to stop, so that’s the hard part of that. We’re so small that we’re together all the time. Even with me, I’m together all the time with those kids, so you can see the things that you just shake your head sometimes and go, really. Why am I doing this? Then on the next day you have this most amazing day with these kids that (pause) puts

everything into perspective of why we do what we do. I think it's the same for the kids. One day that person is just driving them crazy, then the next day it's I love you, you're my best friend.

Similar to Piper's comments, Jennell said that students become close friends and sometimes get frustrated with each other and have arguments but since they are so close, they are able to work it out by the next day and they're all getting along. When Jennell's mom was asked about Jennell's friendships with other students, she replied, "They are like sisters. They talk all the time. They stay at each others' houses. They do movie nights, have parties, all the good stuff, so it's just like a little family, just in different houses." Tory is a fifth grade student who has attended Cascade Range School since preschool. When Tory's mom was asked about Tory's friendships with other students, she replied,

...both my kids have strong friendships because they've gone here since preschool and first grade and a lot of the kids that they've gone with haven't transferred from Cascade Range School so you have that close-knit of friendship that you've carried on through the years (pause). I think that's great to have. I mean I didn't have that growing up because we moved a lot or our school was too big. You might have had your one friend, but then you stayed away from everybody else in the hallway because that was their clique. Here you don't feel like that. You go out in the playground, you play with...the same kids everyday and you know everybody's name...friendships are still like family. Everybody plays with everybody and maybe one day you come home and you're mad at them and then the next day she's asking for that one to spend the night. You look at her like, 'What happened to yesterday?' (laughs) 'You didn't like that one yesterday,' but it's like you said, it's like their brother or their sister (laughs).

## **Theme 2: Students are Loved and Cared For**

The second theme of the findings is that students feel loved and cared for at Cascade Range School. As I read through the data, I am reminded of the old adage, “people won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Students’ wellbeing and sense of belonging is enhanced when they are surrounded by people that love them and care about them. Students feel cared for when people take a personal interest in them, provide extra help them when they struggle, encourage them to do their best, and acknowledge them for their accomplishments. When students feel that they are cared for by school staff, they don’t want to disappoint them and will put in extra effort to do their best. When students feel safe and cared for, they are excited to be at school and their enthusiasm helps foster a positive learning environment. The following cases illustrate the love and care that students receive at Cascade Range School.

When Montana, the fifth and sixth grade teacher at Cascade Range School was asked what makes students feel supported by school staff, he said that staff doesn’t just appear to care, they really do care. When Montana was asked what encourages students to do their best, he replied,

I would like to think it’s the fact that they can make mistakes and they’ll still be loved and cared for. You have a child in your room for two years, how can you not love them? Any of them, even the hard ones (laughs). You don’t appreciate what they’re doing. You still love them.

Betsy is the first and second grade teacher at Cascade Range School. Similar to the comments made by Montana, she said that the staff at Cascade Range School are genuinely caring people. When Michael, a community member was asked what makes our students feel like

people care about them, he replied, “Because everybody does care about them. People go out of their way to do things for the kids...Everybody seems to genuinely care about the kids.” When Keane’s parents were asked what makes Keane feel supported by school staff, they replied,

How much everybody cares for him (pause), like family, just like, ‘Hey, good morning Keane, how you doing?’ (pause) It’s everybody in the building. It seems like everybody’s really present and aware of what the kids are going, how their disposition is, and I believe that if a child was acting differently than they normally do that somebody, whether it was Piper or Momma G or Edith or you or the teacher or somebody would notice that kid wasn’t acting the way that they normally act. Rather than being so busy with other things going on that they don’t notice.

### **Awareness of Students’ Needs**

While there are plenty of affluent homes in the Cascade Range School District, many of them are second homes for wealthy families that live on the west side of the state. This outward appearance of affluence is not reflective of the socioeconomic status of many of the students at Cascade Range School, who come from families that have financial struggles and find it difficult to meet their basic needs. It is difficult to provide a quality education to a child whose basic needs are not being met. Betsy, the first and second grade teacher made the following comment about children whose basic needs aren’t being met.

I think that we realize the whole child requires other needs, basic needs to be met before they can be successful in school...I just think if you think about the hierarchy of needs (pause), if you have a safe home and food on the table and things like that, then you come to school prepared to go on and learn. If you don’t have those things

it's much harder, not to say you can't but it's much harder because you are going to be focusing on those basic needs.

Montana expressed similar concerns, "It's hard to educate a child when they're not getting enough to eat or they're not getting the love that they require from their parent. These needs need to be met before education happens." One of the most fundamental ways to love and care for students is to help students and their families when they are unable to take care of their basic needs. Actions speak louder than words and the interviews and observations revealed numerous examples of actions taken by school staff to help impoverished students and their families. Montana commented,

...people know they can come here for help. Nobody will be turned away. I think (pause) those people that work here do care about the kids. They want to be here. They care about them not only in school but at home. We can see that through our food drive, or somebody hears somebody needs something. There's people here to help them...in a couple of cases, there's been folks that have no food and I know there's been food cards mailed to them or sent to them.

Teresa, the ELL coordinator and one of the paraprofessionals at Cascade Range School made comments similar to those made by Montana,

Well, my thought immediately turns to going beyond instructing. I really think that our kids feel a sense of (pause) just being cared for. I see so many people in the building going out of their way, going that extra mile to make sure kids have everything they need, whether it's boots or a coat. Kids are just really well cared for by the staff here...I think that there hasn't been a situation where I've seen where a student needs something that hasn't been taken care of by someone here. They need

material things, even family where they're in a monetary situation, where they are needing a resource; someone always knows someone...I've just witnessed first-hand that there are a lot of people here that are willing to just go above and beyond to fill a need.

Edith, the school secretary at Cascade Range School commented,

We see what the challenges are, and there are plenty of them out there. People are struggling financially and there's a lot of issues going on with some of these families, but I think we make a really valiant effort to make everybody feel welcome and supported...All the people that are there for them, in terms of (pause) you know, clothing banks that Piper does, she knows there's a need, the food baskets, (pause) a lot of things are done behind the scenes here for kids that never get acknowledged (pause), like monies put in at the lunch counter that someone might need with nobody saying a word. I just know that people do a lot of random acts of kindness in this building without expecting to be acknowledged...It's kind of amazing, the generosity that I've seen over time here. We've all done it. We've all pitched in and helped some families we've known were in need, either by giving a little money or finding some clothing, donating whatever you can, giving a ride to someone... paying for ASB cards for kids because they didn't have any money... loving the kids and really caring about them... I think we're pretty incredible that way.

Barbara, one of the bus drivers and student supervisors at Cascade Range School expressed her thoughts that children should not feel excluded because of their family's financial struggles. She said,

Most of us here understand, we know when a family is struggling and we try to (pause) adapt or help them so they don't feel like they're outcast or pulled away from the other students. A child should never feel like they're not worthy just because they have no money...if it's a poor family or a lower income family, we really try to include them (pause), if it's somebody just buying them a coat or somebody buying them a pair of boots or a pair of basketball or tennis shoes. Yeah, or paying the \$5 so they can go on a field trip, stuff like that. It seems like here that there's always that availability so that no one's excluded.

During one of the field observations, Piper was asked to describe her involvement with helping students and their families when they were having financial struggles. Piper commented,

Well, it just depends (pause) what they're short with. Sometimes it just can be \$20, could be gas money, it could be just some milk, or baby food, or diapers, or some extra blankets... I hope it just makes them feel better and that it makes them positive, that they feel they can live another day, that it takes the stress off of their life.

### **Personal Interest in Students**

Students feel cared for when the school staff acknowledge them, take the time to get to know them as individuals, and take a personal interest in them. Edith said that students feel welcome when the school staff knows them individually by name, engages them in conversations, finds out what their interests are, and personally acknowledges them for their accomplishments. When Vanessa was asked what made her feel welcome at Cascade Range School, she replied, "Teachers talking to you not just as a teacher like actually physically having a conversation. It doesn't have to do with school, really, it can be anything...They're

pretty awesome.” When Vanessa’s mom was asked what encourages Vanessa to do her best at Cascade Range School, she commented,

I think it’s because everyone is rooting her on and is watching and she wants to do her best not just for us as parents but for all those people because she respects the people (pause) her teachers, the staff, the support staff down there because they all stop and say hi to her in the halls. In a school this size, you know your janitor well, you know your cafeteria cook well, you know your coaches really well I mean (pause) uhm, and all the paraprofessionals that aren’t even instructing you, you just know everybody in the building, so they’re all (pause), stop and say hi and try to encourage her to do her best at whatever she’s doing and she (pause) usually steps up to that. She’s the kind of kid that really likes to hear that positive reinforcement and she steps up to the plate to try to please. She loves the fact that she walks down the hall and everybody knows who she is.

When Vanessa’s mom was asked what makes Vanessa feel supported by school staff, she replied,

Well, I think when you walk through the hall they already know how she did at the last basketball game or how she did at archery, they are already congratulating her whether she did great or not so good. They already know and they are constantly encouraging her to do good and she will say, ‘But, I didn’t beat my last score’ and they say, ‘Yeah, but you went to a World Archery Tournament in Florida and how cool is that?’ They’re always encouraging her. Her goal is always to beat her last score so if she doesn’t make that, then she feels kind of down but the rest of the staff is

just there encouraging her, 'Well, you will get that next time but it's still cool that you went.'

Michelle is a ninth grade student. When Michelle was asked what makes her feel like people care about her, she said that school staff take the time to answer her questions and do not blow her off. Chuck, a senior at Cascade Range School said that teachers take a personal interest in students, are willing to work with them one-on-one, and that they notice when students are down and offer to help. Bella is an eighth grade student. When Bella was asked what makes her feel supported by school staff, she said that the staff is always willing to talk to her, and they ask if she needs help, and they encourage her to do her best. When Jennell was asked what makes her feel that people care about her, she said that everybody notices when something's wrong and ask her if she wants to talk or if there is anything they can do to help. When Jannell's mom was asked what makes Jannell feel supported by school staff she replied,

A lot of them try to come to the sporting events. She's having this fund-raising for her trip to Australia (pause) and we have staff donating money and donating stuff for the auction. They're just real supportive on trying to help her achieve her goals and that's one thing I like about our school, is they really are genuine, where you walk in the school and they do say hi to you and not just bypass you.

When Keane's parents were asked what makes Keane feel like people care about him at Cascade Range School, they replied,

Gosh, where do we begin? Everybody from the cook in the cafeteria all the way up to the superintendent know him well and watch out for him and he's just really comfortable here. Well, even when he hurt himself (pause) the fact that you took care

of him, Sally took care of him (pause), Barbara came to check on him, and Fred came by to check on him. I got a call from one of the teachers. Everybody has a vested interest in the children.

Students felt that school staff was supportive and took a personal interest in them when they attended, and sometimes participated in their extracurricular activities. When Piper was asked what makes students feel like people care about them, she replied,

I think when they support the kids' causes. Some of the staff, they show up for games. That means a lot to the kids because obviously they have to be in class with the teacher, but when it's their extracurricular activities and the staff shows their support, the kids really feel (pause) like then that they care enough to stay after because it's not on their school time, it's on their own time...I hear the kids say, oh, did you see this teacher or this one showed up or this one came to our game. Barbara, she's doing our books (pause), she gets done cleaning and runs to the gym to do the books. Ginger, the custodian makes sure she's on that, gets her work done, gets on that bleacher. You yourself, you try to get down there...it's amazing what they see, and they know who all came into that gym, who was there, and then they all discuss it...and it does have an effect on them to sometimes try harder in class then because that teacher came and supported them in something that they enjoy. It's a huge impact.

While most of the comments were positive in regard to the staffs' support of students, there were some interview responses that indicated a lack of participation by some of the staff in students' extracurricular activities. When Julie was asked if there was anything that makes students feel uncared for, she mentioned a lack of attendance at activities or games by some of

the staff. Piper also expressed a concern about a lack of attendance by some of the staff and said that it can be disappointing for the students. She said,

Yeah, it makes it hard, because every kid wants (pause), they want an audience. In every activity, not just in the sports, but in the plays or Halloween carnival (pause) you want to make sure that everybody is there, you feel disappointment if it's not.

Knowing students well and taking a personal interest in them helps prevent students from falling through the cracks. When students are struggling at Cascade Range School, the school staff notice and make efforts to find out what is wrong and how they can help.

Keane's parents commented that kids at Cascade Range School don't get lost in the shuffle because they are closely watched. Like Keane's parents, Vanessa's mom believes that students are closely watched and less likely to slip through the cracks. Vanessa's mom commented,

I guess if you're a kid that's getting into trouble a lot it can be a sort of a negative because you're going to be looked at under a microscope because you got a lot of eyes keeping track of you and making sure that you're doing the right thing, but I think that's a good thing because I think it (pause), uhm, allows those kids to strive to do better and not get away with those things and be told that, 'Hey! You're not doing the right thing let's get back with the program,' so I think it's important so that kids won't slip through the cracks. I feel like you just don't lose your kid in a small school. It's not only you looking after him, it's the school, the community of the school, other people in that school that have a vested interest in seeing your kid succeed. I think it's unique that if there's a problem (pause) I'm not only getting notification from possibly the teacher that there's a problem, but I also already have received a few texts from

different people in the building to let me know that, 'Hey! I think there's something up!' so I already have a heads-up on what's going on. I think that's unique.

### **Students Don't Want to Disappoint**

When students feel that school staff cares about them, strong relationships between the students and school staff develop and students don't want to disappoint school staff. The following examples illustrate this concept.

Anthony is a seventh grade student. When he was asked what encourages him to do his best, he said that he wants the teachers to know that he is trying and feels that he is letting them down if he doesn't do his best. When Jennell was asked what encourages her to do her best, she said that she didn't want to let anyone down. Jennell's mom gave a similar response, saying that Jennell looks up to the staff and doesn't want to disappoint anybody and wants to set a good example for the younger children. When Piper was asked what encourages students to do their best, she replied, "...most of the kids, when they come in and ask for help from me on (pause) reading, math, or stuff like that (pause) they don't want to ever disappoint me. They always want to do their best because of our personal relationships."

Doug is a recently retired transportation and maintenance supervisor that worked at Cascade Range School for 34 years. Doug is the father of Piper, the school cook and the husband of Ginger, the custodian at Cascade Range School. Doug talked about the importance of relationships between students and school staff and said, "Once you've befriended that child, like we do every day they get to a point where they definitely don't want to disappoint you because they know how you feel about them." When Vanessa's mom was asked what makes Vanessa feel welcome, she replied,

I think it's sort of the same thing. It's the fact that everybody knows her and she strives to do well and so (pause), she likes that recognition and it continues to thrive in her, to never disappoint these people that are watching her whether it be a game or whether it be her grades or whether it be interactions with people (pause). I think it motivates her to (pause), she would always be a good person, but I think it motivates her to continue down that path.

### **Students Are Excited About School**

When students feel welcome, safe, and cared for, they are excited about being at school. The excitement for school starts at the beginning of the day, even before Cascade Range School opens their doors. When Tory's mom was asked what makes Tory feel welcome at Cascade Range School, she replied,

I mean even from the get-go, from the beginning, when Fred picks her up, she knows she can get on the bus and talk to Fred. They banter and tease back and forth right on the bus before she even gets there so it starts even from 07:15 in the morning until when she enters the door at the school; that she knows (pause) I mean, everybody from Momma G to Piper to anybody. I can call and check on her if she needs something or if she left grouchy, Piper can check on her...Tory's confident. She's comfortable...She just walks in like she pretty much owns the place (laughing). She's got the good confidence, backpack on and she's good. It's just a friendly, small family that you have here.

The excitement for the new school day continues when students arrive at Cascade Range School and some students line up at the door an hour before school starts. Edith made the following remarks,

Everyone's very friendly and welcoming when the kids come in the morning (pause). I think they feel safe, hence the kids that show up way before they even should, probably because they want to be here. Obviously, why would you come to school at 20 minutes until eight in the morning if you didn't want to be here? In fact, it's interesting because I think, gosh, if I was a kid...I'd be sleeping probably to the last minute. It says something about the atmosphere here. We've seen even after school sometimes that this is where they want to be. In this little town, I think this is the place where kids (pause) there are things to do and people to be with and it's safe, and I think that's a great indicator right there. Everyday when I show up, there are kids at the door waiting to come in.

Once student enter the school, the excitement they have for school is obvious. Julie, the preschool and kindergarten teacher commented,

(Laughs) I would think that they would feel excited... when they're bouncing from the front porch down the hall to the cafeteria...based on my observations, they're ready to go. They're running, they're joking, they're hopping, they're happy, they're smiling. They're, you know, playing with one another. They just seem to be happy to be here.

Similar to Julie's comments, Betsy said, "I think they feel that they are happy to be here. They're cheerful and they can't wait for the door to open to enter the building. They're charging in." Once the students get into the school, they can play in the gym, visit in the commons, or have lunch with Piper. The kitchen is a popular place for students and their

families in the mornings as Piper starts the day off with a nice breakfast. When Piper was asked what she observes in the kitchen in the morning, she replied,

When they come to the lunchroom, I get to see them and they're happy, smiling, laughing (pause) and joking, and they're ready for the day. I serve about 42 to 45 breakfasts in the morning, so I see a good group of the elementary, and a lot of their parents come in with them and have breakfast and then they (pause), so we have a lot of family interaction at that time, and they seem happy to be here. They're excited for the day.

During the field observations, one of the researchers commented about mornings in the kitchen,

It's an amazing connection that happens here in the morning and I think it sets the whole tone for the whole day (pause). I mean, it really is. Talk about a family atmosphere. That is just incredible (pause), and I can feel it as soon as I walk through there. It's the way that Piper relates to families, to kids, people giving each other hugs, there are smiles on everybody's faces.

### **Theme 3: Close Relationships are Fostered**

The third theme of the findings is that close relationships are fostered at Cascade Range School. The family type atmosphere of Cascade Range School where students feel cared for provides an environment where close relationships develop. Close relationships between students and school staff and between students and their peers enhance students' wellbeing and sense of belonging. The importance of these relationships was frequently referred to in the interview responses of students, parents/guardians, school staff, and community members. Students like to be warmly greeted by the school staff and their fellow

students. When PJ, the P.E., art, and health teacher at Cascade Range School was asked what makes students feel like people care about them, she replied,

I believe just the way we greet each other in the hallways, always very positive, never negative (pause), our caring attitudes, offering assistance when we see them struggling instead of walking by them (pause), helping them, just always helping, just not ignoring, being role models ourselves.

When Bella's mom was asked how Bella feels when she walks into Easton School in the morning, she said that Bella comes in with a good attitude because the school staff and her friends are always there to say "hi" or "good morning" to her. When Jennell's mom was asked what makes Jennell feel like people care about her, she said that everybody makes an effort to say "hi" to Jennell and that everybody talks and communicates a lot. When Barbara was asked how students feel when they come to Cascade Range School, she replied,

Welcomed (pause). There is always someone there to greet them with hello. If it's not us on the bus first thing in the morning, there's some adult in the hall, either you, Sandy, Piper, Ginger, Edith, somebody is always saying 'good morning.' They're always welcomed into the school... Yeah, I think that (pause) just having a smile on your face and saying 'good morning' to somebody starts the day off good.

A warm greeting and acknowledgement of students enhances their wellbeing and sense of belonging. On the other hand, when school staff or fellow students are aloof or seem indifferent, it inhibits students' wellbeing and sense of belonging, particularly in a small school setting where students are well known by the school staff and their classmates. While most of the comments about greetings and acknowledgment were positive, the negative feelings that students have when people around them are aloof or reserved becomes apparent.

When Jennell was asked if there was anything that made her feel unsupported by school staff, she replied,

No. I mean there are just other teachers that you (pause) like have a better connection with...Sometimes you just like naturally connect with someone. There's a couple teachers when you walk by them they won't make eye contact with you or say 'hi' in the hall so it's just kind of like (pause) wall up, not going to try to talk to you...You can tell if you say it that it's not something that they really want.

When Piper was asked if there was anything that makes students feel unwelcome, her reply was similar to comments made by Jennell. Piper stated,

I would say, at the same point, you know if you walk in and nobody is there to kind of greet you. If you don't get (pause) then you just kind of walk in into an empty hall. I'm not saying run out and have to greet, but when you see somebody in the hall to make sure you say 'hi,' or if you just walk by them, head down and staff members or other people (pause) or anybody in the building, if they just walk by instead of greeting, I think that kind of makes them uncomfortable.

Students develop close friendships with their classmates. Many of these friendships developed over time because students often attend Cascade Range School from the early primary grades through their high school graduation. When Anthony was asked what makes his friendships stronger, he said that he has gotten to know his friends over the years and they have a lot to share and talk about and they are always willing to help each other out. When Lily was asked what makes her friendships stronger, she said that she has known most of her friends at school since she was in kindergarten and that they have become stronger over the

years. When Vanessa's mom was asked about Vanessa's friendships with other students, she replied,

Oh, I think they're sort of inseparable (laughs) friendships because it's a small tight group. Uh, when you're only talking eight to ten kids in your class, you develop a bond that's, (pause) I think that's different than most schools. You look after each other, you help each other in math, you do homework together, you're there when they get hurt, you know when they are sick, they're texting each other about homework or different things at home or how to figure out how to do problem number 20 (laughs). I think it's the strengths of the relationships because it's such a small school that you develop those relationships, it's not something I think that's developed in one year or maybe even two but (pause) because she's gone her whole life there and now they know her and she knows them and they interact on so many levels.

### **Close Proximity**

Students at Cascade Range School are in close proximity to their classmates because they're together during classes, breaks, lunches, and extracurricular and afterschool activities. This is viewed as both a positive and negative factor by some. When Chuck was asked what makes his friendships with other students stronger, he said that small groups of students spending a lot of time together makes friendships stronger. When Chuck was asked what makes his friendships with other students weaker, he replied, "The same fact, that there's not that many students (laughs), sometimes people can get on your nerves pretty easy." When Bella was asked what makes her friendships stronger, she said that her friendships with other students are stronger because they have the same classes and get to hang out together.

When Bella was asked what makes students' friendships with other students weaker, she replied, "It's small so if some rumor gets out or something bad happens everybody knows about it and then, I don't know it's just things travel quicker." Angie, a science and math teacher at Cascade Range School said that students don't pick fights with other students but sometimes choose to be aloof or indifferent towards one another when a conflict arises. However, since students can't avoid daily interactions with each other, any aloofness or indifference between them tends to be short-lived. When Angie was asked about students friendships with each other, she replied,

I see some very close friendships that will probably last a lifetime. They get to know one another really well. They are going to bump into each other. They can't avoid each other. Our school is small. They're going to see each other. They've got the commons area where they're together...Geographically, they have to be near each other. In a larger school you could go probably two weeks and not see the same student very much if you chose to ignore them. At Cascade Range School, it is a little harder to do that.

When conflicts arise because students spend so much time together, the students learn how to work through these conflicts because it is difficult to avoid interactions and become anonymous in a small school. Betsy, the first and second grade teacher commented,

When you think of two kids in a bigger district you'd think they would be better off moving to a different class, but that's not the reality here. They are going to have to work it out, because you're seeing the same people in class all the way through.

When Teresa was asked what makes students' friendships with other students stronger, she replied,

What makes them stronger, I would think (pause) because we're such a small school, you know, they don't have many options. In a larger school if you're not getting along with a friend you just go seek out somebody else but here they're in a position to have to get along. Otherwise you're not going to have any friends. There are not too many friends to pick from. I would just say that the smallness of it strengthens friendships because they've had to work through stuff...Because what I've witnessed with the kids that I work with is I think that their friendships are becoming stronger when there has been conflict and they've had to work through it.

The small student population and the closeness of the students relationships with one another helps prevent the formation of cliques. Luke is an eighth grade student. When Luke was asked what makes him feel included, he replied, "You know everybody and you have a bunch of friends here, it's not like other schools they have groups; everybody is your friend basically. There's no group to be excluded." When Keane's parents were asked what makes students' friendships stronger, they replied,

Maybe part of what makes it stronger then is that he is in a small school environment where he does get to know the kids well versus a larger one where he'd feel more anonymous...You don't see him branching off into subgroups, which in a big school that's prevalent. I think that's the beauty of the school, though, is every kid is accepted for what they are, if they're jock or whatever.

When Doug was asked about students friendships with other students, he replied,

We're one of the schools that I can tell that is not very cliquey. Everybody pretty much has an opportunity. You don't really see these little groups getting by their self and nobody else can get into that group (pause) and a lot of that is because we're

small...It seems there's a place for everybody and a group for everybody. I shouldn't use the word group, but individuals' friendships can be formed at anytime around here with any student. You just don't have that (pause) we are here and you are there type of an attitude.

The closeness that students have with one another can be a barrier for new students when they initially come to Cascade Range School. When Angie was asked what makes students feel unwelcome, she stated,

New students, when they come in, there's a certain barrier to get past on the new student. The other students, because they are a pretty closed group, pretty close-knit group that have to work together (pause), they're protective of that dynamic of their small group, and they want to make sure that if they're welcoming an outsider into their class-level club that this is somebody who's not going to upset the equilibrium and the dynamics that they've got going on. So, that student would feel unwelcome until they've passed through whatever process that is of fitting in and finding their place within that group.

While new students sometimes experience a barrier to their inclusion into this close group of students, the barrier is often short-lived as new students become acclimated to their new surroundings and become acquainted with other students. When Ginger, the janitor at Cascade Range School was asked what makes students feel excluded, she commented,

...if you're new and you come and the kids look at you and they're feeling you out and (pause), you know, that can give you a bad feeling, make you feel kind of excluded right away, but I see new kids coming here...two or three days they kind of hung back (pause), and within the next week everybody was sitting at the same table

and everybody was having lunch and having fun. So, it's just how somebody when they walk through the door how they feel when they come.

Once new students become acclimated and get the opportunity to interact with the student body and staff at Cascade Range School, they feel included in this close-knit group. Students who have social difficulties and may have been ignored or left out at a larger school are accepted at Cascade Range School. When Vanessa's mom was asked about Vanessa's friendships with other students, she replied,

I think it is tight and what's nice about it is that it's tight with everybody even when there're kids that may have been considered sort of an outcast, because they are a little different or they have issues that they deal with. It doesn't happen as much at Cascade Range School because they accept that person, it may take a little while but they grow up with this person, they learn their limitations and what they're good at and accept it and I think they try to include them in everything. Instead of possibly being subject to bullying that happens at other schools, these kids end up sort of protected by our other students.

#### **Theme 4: Students Feel Included**

The fourth theme of the findings is that students feel included at Cascade Range School. This feeling of inclusion was brought up frequently during the interviews and was mentioned by students, parents/guardians, school staff, and community members. Students felt included in the activities at Cascade Range School, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom with extracurricular activities and school events. When Jennell was asked what made her feel included, she talked about the classroom environment and said that students are automatically brought into classroom conversations because the classes are small. When

Jennell's mom was asked what makes Jennell feel included, she replied, "Anything happening, they ask her to help out, volunteer to work events or help out in classrooms. Whatever is happening, they always include the students to help out, so she loves that part." Michelle said that she feels included because she gets to play on the teams and clubs at Cascade Range School, including volleyball, basketball, archery, ASB, knowledge bowl, and the history club. Lily said that she feels included and that she throws herself out there and volunteers for everything. Anthony said that he feels included because he gets the opportunity to play sports. When Bella was asked what makes her feel included at Cascade Range School, she replied,

Oh yeah, there's so many sports that nobody's ever left out or just not joined in (pause) and it's nice because you're not excluded...Yeah, because it's not a fifty student class where it's your just kind of there. You don't ever get asked questions. You're always asked questions, you're always involved, you're always in the class like into it (pause) and your teachers are always including you because that's what I like about it because it is so small.

The inclusion of students in activities at Cascade Range School was viewed by most as a positive factor that improved students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school. However, the high level of inclusion was primarily due to the small numbers of students and there were some concerns about a lack of competition in academics and extracurricular activities. When Vanessa's mom was asked if there was anything that keeps Vanessa from doing her best, she replied,

I think in the areas where maybe a larger school would offer more would be (pause) maybe a little more competition in sports or academics possibly, I don't know. Uhhh,

larger schools, you have more kids to pull from so you might be challenged a little bit more because in sports or in academics possibly, if there's programs that they have that we don't have...So I think that yes there might be some areas where (pause) some short comings in the sense of sports, in some academics where it might force Vanessa to come up to it in a whole other level that maybe she may not come up to because of the fact that she's not challenged as much by another student not from an organization but by another student because sometimes that brings out that competition. Oh, they know these things and I don't! Let me just strive up to that.

However, any loss of competitive advantage is offset by the benefits of inclusion. Vanessa's mom continued with the following comments,

I also think that (pause) the trade off there would be that in a larger school I think you can get lost, there's so much competition that sometimes kids give up and don't keep trying, they give up because there's always going to be someone better than you, sometimes you may not even get a chance to participate in these programs or sports because you're eliminated because you don't make the cut, you don't make the team and that just doesn't happen here, you are part of the team no matter what your ability is (pause) and we'll work with that.

The ability for all students to participate in extracurricular activities was a frequent response to questions of inclusion. When Chuck's mom was asked what makes Chuck feel included, she responded,

The best example (pause) there's a lot of examples, but I think the best one is sports for the boys. They had the opportunity to be involved in some team sports that they

wouldn't in another school, a larger school...but because this is a small school, everybody was encouraged.

When Michael, a community member was asked what makes students feel included, he replied, "The biggest thing is sports. Every kid gets to play. You only have so many, so everybody gets to feel like a star. That's the biggest inclusion right there." Students feel included because they are recruited into participating in sports, clubs, fund-raising events, and other activities at Cascade Range School. When Vanessa's mom was asked what makes Vanessa feel included, she replied,

...some students, if they don't step forward and be a part of the group then (pause) what is sort of nice is they are sort of pushed to step forward and be part of the group because they're needed whereas, 'We need you to try out for this team, we need you to be part of this because we just have such small numbers,' and you're sort of recruited and so these kids that may have never stepped forward or never thought that they could be an athlete or thought that they could be on knowledge bowl (pause) you know, it's different because we sort of go after them and say, 'Hey! We need to make a team and we could use your help. We don't care if you don't know these things, we'll work with that, we'll teach you.' So I think we catch some kids that may have never have that opportunity or even thought they could do it...with Vanessa...she was pretty shy and so I think that's developed her personality some to that, 'Hey! We can make this happen, we can get this accomplished,' and so I think she feels very included and she tries to include other people because she understood that it takes time and she stuck with it so now she does pretty good...she keeps practicing, she keeps trying because she felt included.

## **Students Are Sheltered from the Real World**

While students feel included in the activities at Cascade Range School, some expressed concerns about students being too sheltered and not having enough opportunities or exposure outside their local community. Betsy commented,

....sometimes students I think might fail to see the world beyond our small community (pause), to see the importance of doing very well. If they don't have experiences that help them to believe that they can go beyond this small of a town...and you can't help but have a limited number in a small town, unless you get out of it a lot, then they might think, well, why do I need to do this?

Edith also expressed concerns about students being sheltered. She said,

...I think in some ways these kids are pretty sheltered. They haven't had a lot of life experiences and a lot of contact with a lot of different people because of the smallness, so (pause) in one sense I think that it's a little bit of a detriment. It's not anything we're doing; it's just that we are so, so tiny...when they get out in the big world, some of the kids barely have ever been to Seattle and that kind of thing, that's sort of culture shock a little bit for them...I can't imagine growing up here my whole life and then suddenly going off to the University of Washington or something. I would've been completely (pause) like a duck out of water.

Tory's mom had similar concerns about the transition of students to post-secondary educational opportunities after graduating from the small, sheltered environment at Cascade Range School. However, she also pointed out that the sheltered environment at Cascade Range School is beneficial and that we just need to focus on preparing students for the life they will have after they complete their studies at Cascade Range School. Tory's mom said,

I think the experience of being a small knit school, it's going to be a shock, I think, when kids go off to college and they have to deal with the bigger classrooms and not the close-knit that you have in our classrooms. You kind of have to be more independent when you're in college. And, here when you have an issue you could raise your hand and your teacher's right on top of you. You have to be a little more independent...but you can't take that away from a kid now (pause) in order to prepare them for college. You can only just prepare them the best that you know how and let them go.

### **Enrichment Activities**

While concerns were raised about students being too sheltered at Cascade Range School, there were interview responses, field observations, and archival documents that indicated that students participated in enrichment activities while they attended Cascade Range School. Students participated in field trips and archery tournaments where they are exposed to other regions and cultures. Four of the students (Vanessa, Lily, Michelle, and Bella) that were interviewed placed in the top five in their category during the state archery tournament this past year, and qualified to compete in the National Archery Tournament. All four students competed in the National Archery Tournament in Louisville, Kentucky and three out of these four students competed in the World Archery Tournament in Orlando, Florida. Enrichment activities during these tournaments included trips to art and historical museums, and sightseeing in Kentucky and Florida. Additional enrichment opportunities came in the form of teaching when these students taught archery to college students at Central Washington University and taught archery to groups of adults at a state governors' conference at the Suncadia resort.

During the spring break in 2011, secondary students were provided an opportunity for sightseeing and cultural enrichment during a week-long field trip to Spain. The trip was coordinated by a staff member at Cascade Range School who had previously lived in Spain. Another opportunity for sightseeing and cultural enrichment will be provided to Jennell this summer when she embarks on a journey with 35 other students from across the nation to represent the USA in a basketball tournament in Australia. An opportunity for enrichment that happened a little closer to home was provided last year when secondary students went on a week-long field trip of historical sites in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The trip was coordinated by Howard, the history teacher at Cascade Range School. In a review of documents, a local paper quoted Howard as saying “Books are great. I’m a big advocate of books, but they can make history feel distant. I wanted our students to experience history and see how it contributes to their lives today.”

### **Summary**

The four themes of the findings reflect a school where students are well known, cared for, and feel included. This fostered an environment where close relationships flourished. These close relationships resembled family-like relationships and the school was frequently referred to as an extended family. While this was viewed as a positive attribute of the school, some interviewees commented about occasional conflicts that arose between students that resembled sibling rivalry. The upside of these conflicts is that they were usually short-lived and the students involved in these conflicts quickly resumed their close relationships. While there were some concerns raised about students being too sheltered, there were interview responses, observations, and documents that indicated that a variety of enrichment activities

were offered and that the opportunity for inclusion is greater at Cascade Range School because the student population is small.

When these themes were present, students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school was enhanced and four salient outcomes developed. These included outcomes for school staff which included more personalized interest in students and a greater awareness of their needs and outcomes for students who felt more excited about school and didn't want to disappoint staff.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

My primary goal in conducting this study was to explore factors which strengthened or inhibited students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in a small, rural school. While research demonstrated a stronger tendency of students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at small schools, there is a scarcity of research on the factors that either strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging within these small schools. This study sought to answer the following research questions, "How do students' relationships and interactions with peers and school staff affect their wellbeing and sense of belonging?" and "What factors contribute to (strengthen) or impede (inhibit) students' wellbeing and sense of belonging?" The research study was conducted as a qualitative, descriptive case study in a small, rural K-12 school. The analysis of the data lead to the identification of four themes: 1) "It's like a family;" 2) "Students are loved and cared for;" 3) "Close relationships are fostered;" and 4) "Students feel included."

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study provided insight on the factors that strengthened or inhibited students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at a small, rural school. Insights from the findings helped develop the following four conclusions. The conclusions include: 1) "Students' relationships with school staff and their classmates were central to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school;" 2) "Students' relationships at school were strengthened when students were well known and personally acknowledged, recognized, and cared for by the school staff and their classmates;" 3) "When close relationships at school were fostered, the school was perceived as an extended family for students;" and 4) "When the school became

an extended family, students' expectations for positive interpersonal interactions and support at school were greater." The following sections discuss these conclusions in detail.

**Conclusion 1:** *Students' relationships with school staff and their classmates were central to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school.*

At the heart of students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school lie the relationships that are formed between students and school staff and between students and their classmates. Relationships was the dominant factor influencing students' wellbeing and sense of belonging and this factor was reflected in all of the findings' major themes and sub-themes. In the first theme, titled, "It's like a family," students' relationships with school staff and classmates were the primary reasons given by the interviewees that Cascade Range School was "like a family." In the second theme, titled, "Students are loved and cared for," the findings related to students being loved and cared for at Cascade Range School revolved around students' relationships at Cascade Range School. In the third theme, titled, "Close relationships are fostered," students' relationships at school were the focus, and factors which enhanced or inhibited the development of close relationships were included in responses to the interview questions. In the fourth theme, titled, "Students feel included," students' relationships played an important role with inclusion. Oftentimes, students were initially apprehensive about participating in new school activities. Students became less apprehensive and more willing to participate in new school activities when close relationships were formed at school, and students were encouraged and supported by the school staff and their classmates.

The importance of relationships in meeting the affective needs of students has been discussed in previous research findings, and these findings support conclusion 1 of this study.

According to Osterman (2000), relationships play a major role in determining whether students feel cared for and are a welcome part of the school community. Comer et al. (1996) and Ancess (2003) found that relationships dominate students' feeling about school. Meier (2002), Ancess (2003), and Strike (2010) posit that strong relationships at school help create school environments that are safe, personal, and intimate.

**Conclusion 2:** *Students' relationships at school were strengthened when students were well known and personally acknowledged, recognized, and cared for by the school staff and their classmates.*

While the core of students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school lie in students' relationships with the school staff and their classmates, the factors that make these relationships strong are when students are well known and personally acknowledged, recognized, and cared for. As students' relationships with school staff and classmates were strengthened, the relationships became closer and students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school was enhanced. This was found in the first three themes of the findings, titled, "It's like a family," "Students are loved and cared for," and "Close relationships are fostered." In the first theme, titled, "It's like a family," many of the interview responses that drew comparisons between Cascade Range School and the concept of family were rooted in examples of close relationships developed at school where students were well-known, acknowledged, recognized, and cared for. When Lily made the comment that the school feels like a family, she said it was because everyone knows each other and people care about her. When Rosy's mom described the school as a family, she said it was because the school staff always looks out for her children and greets them warmly every day. When Edith was asked

to describe the atmosphere at Cascade Range School, she said it was like a big family because people get to know everybody and they look out for each other.

In the second theme of the findings, titled, “Students are loved and cared for,” interviewees spoke about the positive impact of students’ relationships at school when students are personally known and cared for. Keane’s parents said that Keane feels supported by school staff because they care about him, have a keen awareness of students’ needs, and recognize when students are struggling. Vanessa’s mom said that Vanessa feels supported by school staff and is encouraged to do her best because everybody at school knows who she is, cares about her, roots her on, and congratulates her for her accomplishments. Jennell said that she feels cared for at school because everybody notices when something’s wrong and offers to help. In the third theme of the findings, titled, “Close relationships are fostered,” the interview responses indicated that close relationships among students and between students and the school staff grew over time as their relationships were strengthened. These relationships were strengthened when students were personally known, warmly greeted and acknowledged, individually recognized for their interests and accomplishments, and cared for.

The positive impact of strong relationships in school has been discussed in previous research findings, and these findings support conclusion 2 of this study. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), children experience happiness, elation, and tranquility when they feel welcomed, accepted, and included. Cotton (1996) posits that personalization is a key strength of small schools and is enhanced by strong and authentic relationships. According to Goodenow (1992), children develop a sense of belonging in school by feeling personally accepted and supported by peers and school staff.

**Conclusion 3:** *When close relationships at school were fostered, the school was perceived as an extended family for students.*

When students' relationships with school staff and their classmates were strengthened over time, close relationships developed. These close relationships at Cascade Range School created a school environment that was akin to a family-like environment and the school was perceived to be an extended family for students. Based on interview responses and observations, students' wellbeing and sense of belonging was enhanced by the family-like atmosphere and close relationships that were fostered at school. Many interviewees said that Cascade Range School was like a family and these responses were reflected in all of the finding's primary themes. These comparisons between the school and family focused on close relationships at school and were often described in ways that resembled family relationships. Keane is an only child. When Keane's parents were asked how Keane felt when he walks into Cascade Range School, they said, "Like he owns the place...it's almost like a second home for him (pause), he's got brothers and sisters and lots of family (laughs)."

When students developed close relationships with school staff, they didn't want to disappoint the staff, similar to how children don't want to disappoint their parents. When Anthony and Jennell were asked what encourages them to do their best, they said that they didn't want to let the school staff down or disappoint them in any way. Students' friendships with one another became close over the years, as many of them have grown up together. When Vanessa's mom was asked about Vanessa's friendships, she replied, "Oh, I think they're sort of inseparable (laughs) friendships because it's a small tight group...it's more than just a (pause) friendship, they sort of become a family unit. They're part of your family even though they don't live in your house." Close friendships between students resemble

sibling relationships. Students spend a lot of time together and get in squabbles that are similar to sibling rivalry. However, conflicts among them are normally resolved quickly and they tend to be protective of one another, similar to the manner in which siblings are protective of one another.

The continuity of relationships at Cascade Range School is another factor that has helped form close relationships at school and contributed to the family-like environment and perception that the school is an extended family for students. There is little turnover of staff at Cascade Range School. Two years ago, an English teacher retired after working her entire career (thirty-three years) at Cascade Range School. Last year, two staff members, a math teacher and the transportation/maintenance supervisor, retired after working at Cascade Range School their entire careers (thirty-four years each). PJ, who currently teaches P.E., art, and health, and coaches archery, has worked over thirty years at Cascade Range School. While other staff members have less than thirty years experience at Cascade Range School, many have tenures which range between ten and thirty years. Although there is some turnover of students due to family moves, there are core groups of students who attend Cascade Range School from their early primary grades through their high school graduation.

Previous research findings postulate a connection between close relationships at school and family-like bonds, often termed a *caring community*; and these findings support conclusion 3 of this study. According to Anness (2003), caring relationships similar to family bonds are present in schools where communities of concern and commitment exist. Comer et al. (1996) posit that strong relationships build community in the classroom and among teachers, parents, and students in the community of learners that is referred to as school. According to Osterman (2000), emotional connections and sense of belonging are fostered in

schools that function as caring communities. Strike (2010) discussed the importance of meeting the affective needs of students and found that a sense of belonging in students is enhanced when schools become caring communities with stable, close relationships.

**Conclusion 4:** *When the school became an extended family, students' expectations for positive interpersonal interactions and support at school were greater.*

While there were many benefits of the school becoming an extended family for students, the bar was raised with regard to students' expectations for positive interactions and support from the school staff and their classmates. In family relationships, children are deeply impacted by the quality of personal interactions with family and the level of support they receive at home. In a similar manner, students attending schools characterized by close relationships and perceived as extended families for students, are deeply impacted by the quality of personal interactions and the level of support they receive at school.

Students began the day with positive interactions with school staff and their classmates when they are warmly acknowledged and greeted in the morning. When Tory's mom was asked what made Tory feel welcome at school, she said that Tory feels welcome from the moment she steps on the bus and is warmly greeted by the bus driver. Tory's mom commented, "Tory's confident. She's comfortable...She just walks in like she pretty much owns the place (laughs)." However, there were also comments that students felt slighted when they weren't acknowledged or warmly greeted. When Jennell was asked if there was anything that made her feel unsupported by school staff, she said that a few teachers avoid eye contact with her and don't say "hi" when they pass by her in the halls. Similar to Jennell's comments, Piper said that students feel uncomfortable when school staff walks by them without any greeting or acknowledgement of them.

While many interviewees said that the school staff takes a personal interest in students, there were also concerns raised about a lack of participation and support of students' extracurricular activities by some of the school staff. Piper said that students feel supported by school staff when staff attends their after-school activities, and that they are disappointed and feel unsupported when there is a lack of attendance. Students also have high expectations for positive interactions and support by their classmates. When Angie was asked about students' friendships with one another, she said that students at Cascade Range School get to know each other really well and develop close friendships that are likely to last a lifetime. Angie said that students rarely resort to fighting at school, and tend to deal with conflict with their classmates by being aloof or indifferent towards them. While this would tend to be less impactful for students in larger schools where anonymity is more prevalent, it tends to be more difficult for students who are accustomed to close relationships with their peers. These conflicts are usually short-lived because students are in close proximity to one another throughout the day and they are uncomfortable when there is friction or tension between them.

### **Recommendations**

The following organizational and research recommendations are based on the findings and conclusions of the study. Organizational recommendations include: 1) "Incorporate the goal of meeting students' affective needs into the school's mission;" 2) "Provide professional development for school staff on meeting students' affective needs;" and 3) "Enhance students' relationships through bonding experiences." Research recommendations include: 4) "Conduct similar research in additional school settings;" and 5) "Explore whether a link exists

between students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school and student achievement." The following sections discuss these recommendations in detail.

### **Organizational Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** *Incorporate the goal of meeting students' affective needs into the school's mission.*

Meeting students' affective needs should be a part of a school's overall mission and included in the school's mission statement. According to Gabriel and Farmer (2009), "A mission statement is the wind that brings you to your desired harbor. It guides your travel and powers your momentum" (p. 54). In addition to being included in the school's mission statement, meeting the affective needs of students should be reflected in the day-to-day practice and aligned with the school's goals and objectives. When meeting the affective needs of students becomes a part of the school's overall mission, it is more likely to be reflected in the school's culture (attitudes, values, and beliefs) and climate (tone, or vibe).

**Recommendation 2:** *Provide professional development for school staff on meeting students' affective needs.*

Professional development on meeting the affective needs of students should be included in the professional development of school staff. In many schools, professional development includes a wide variety of strategies designed to improve instruction. Some examples include the alignment of curriculum to common core standards, instructional frameworks supporting the new teacher-principal evaluations, guided language acquisition design, math and reading benchmark assessments, and a variety of offerings provided through local Educational Service Districts. However, there is a scarcity of professional development on meeting the affective needs of students. While professional development on instructional

strategies is important, meeting the affective needs of students should be included in a comprehensive program of professional development for school staff.

**Recommendation 3:** *Enhance students' relationships through bonding experiences.*

Relationships are strengthened through bonding experiences where students interact with their classmates and school staff in activities and work together to achieve common goals. Since relationships are central to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging, schools should increase the opportunities for these bonding experiences. Based on interview responses and a review of the archived documents, students attending Cascade Range School were involved in a variety of bonding experiences. While some of these bonding experiences occurred during the normal course of the school day, the more impactful experiences happened outside of the school day, in a variety of activities, and locations. One example was the archery program where students won the state title five out of the past six years and qualified some archers to compete in National and World Archery Tournaments. The bonding experiences occurred during practice (before and after school), tournaments, and through a variety of projects the archers sponsored to raise funds and promote the archery program. Other examples of bonding experiences at Cascade Range School include sports, knowledge bowls, historical and cultural field trips (Pacific Northwest and Spain), and outdoor activities such as cross-county and downhill skiing, snowshoeing, rock climbing, fly-fishing, and geo-caching. These activities bring students and staff together as they plan, fund-raise, and participate in these activities together.

## Research Recommendations

**Recommendation 4:** *Conduct qualitative case study research on the factors that enhance or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school in additional school settings.*

As discussed in the limitations section of the introductory chapter, this case study explored factors that strengthened or inhibited students' wellbeing and sense of belonging in a single, small, rural school district. These findings may be transferable to other small schools in rural districts, and it would be beneficial to confirm or refute the reliability of these findings by conducting similar qualitative case studies in other small, rural school districts. In addition to examining the reliability of these findings, further studies will likely reveal additional insights. Because of the nature of relationships in small schools in rural communities where students are well known, it is more difficult to apply the findings from this study to larger schools or schools that are more urban in nature. Therefore, to gain insight on whether the factors that strengthen or inhibit students' wellbeing and sense of belonging vary depending on the size of the school and the community, it would be beneficial to replicate the study in larger schools and schools that are located in more suburban and urban communities.

**Recommendation 5:** *Explore whether a link exists between students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school and student achievement.*

While the factors that influenced students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at Cascade Range School were explored in this study, there remains the question of whether improvements in students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school improves student achievement. While there is a focus on standardized test scores in public schools, there is a scarcity of research on the impact of students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school on

test scores or other measures of student achievement. While there are benefits to improving students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school regardless of the impact to student achievement, it would be beneficial to explore whether a link between students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school and student achievement exists. If a link is found, perhaps some of the resources could be diverted from the costly and ever-changing program of standardized testing to the improvement of students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school.

### **Summary**

The four conclusions of this study build on one another. Relationships between students and school staff and between students and their classmates were central to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school. These relationships were strengthened when students were well known and personally acknowledged, recognized, and cared for at school. As relationships were strengthened over time, the relationships became close, and the school became an extended family for students. When the school became an extended family for students, the students' expectations for positive interactions and support at school increased.

The five recommendations of this study included organizational recommendations and research recommendations. The organizational recommendations included the incorporation of meeting student's affective needs into the school's mission, providing professional development on the affective needs of students, and enhancing students' relationships through bonding experiences. The research recommendations included the replication of this study in additional school settings, and exploring whether a link exists between students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at school and student achievement.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Guide for Students**

1. How would you describe the atmosphere at Cascade Range School?
2. What makes you feel like people care about you at Cascade Range School?
3. Is there anything that makes you feel uncared for at Cascade Range School?
4. How do you feel when you walk into Cascade Range School in the morning?
5. What makes you feel welcome at Cascade Range School?
6. Is there anything that makes you feel unwelcome at Cascade Range School?
7. What encourages you to do your best at Cascade Range School?
8. Is there anything that keeps you from doing your best at Cascade Range School?
9. What makes you feel included at Cascade Range School?
10. Is there anything that makes you feel excluded at Cascade Range School?
11. Tell me about your friendships with other students.
12. What makes these friendships stronger (or weaker)?
13. What makes you feel supported by school staff?
14. Is there anything that makes you feel unsupported by school staff?
15. How do your feelings about school staff affect your school experience?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide for Parents/Guardians**

1. How would you describe the atmosphere at Cascade Range School?
2. What makes your child feel like people care about him/her at Cascade Range School?
3. Is there anything that makes your child feel uncared for at Cascade Range School?
4. How does your child feel when he/she walks into Cascade Range School in the morning?
5. What makes your child feel welcome at Cascade Range School?
6. Is there anything that makes your child feel unwelcome at Cascade Range School?
7. What encourages your child to do his/her best at Cascade Range School?
8. Is there anything that keeps your child from doing his/her best at Cascade Range School?
9. What makes your child feel included at Cascade Range School?
10. Is there anything that makes your child feel excluded at Cascade Range School?
11. Tell me about your child's friendships with other students.
12. What makes these friendships stronger (or weaker)?
13. What makes your child feel supported by school staff?
14. Is there anything that makes your child feel unsupported by school staff?
15. How do your child's feelings about school staff affect his/her school experience?

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Guide for School Staff**

1. How would you describe the atmosphere at Cascade Range School?
2. What makes our students feel like people care about them at Cascade Range School?
3. Is there anything that makes our students feel uncared for at Cascade Range School?
4. How do students feel when they walk into Cascade Range School in the morning?
5. What makes students feel welcome at Cascade Range School?
6. Is there anything that makes students feel unwelcome at Cascade Range School?
7. What encourages students to do their best at Cascade Range School?
8. Is there anything that keeps students from doing their best at Cascade Range School?
9. What makes students feel included at Cascade Range School?
10. Is there anything that makes students feel excluded at Cascade Range School?
11. Tell me about students' friendships with other students.
12. What makes these friendships stronger (or weaker)?
13. What makes students feel supported by school staff?
14. Is there anything that makes students feel unsupported by school staff?
15. How do students' feelings about school staff affect their school experience?

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Guide for Community Members**

1. How would you describe the atmosphere at Cascade Range School?
2. What makes our students feel like people care about them at Cascade Range School?
3. Is there anything that makes our students feel uncared for at Cascade Range School?
4. What makes students feel welcome at Cascade Range School?
5. Is there anything that makes students feel unwelcome at Cascade Range School?
6. What encourages students to do their best at Cascade Range School?
7. Is there anything that keeps students from doing their best at Cascade Range School?
8. What makes students feel included at Cascade Range School?
9. Is there anything that makes students feel excluded at Cascade Range School?

## Appendix E

### Interview Guide for Parents/Guardians (Spanish)

1. ¿Cómo describiría el ambiente aquí en la Escuela Cordillera de las Cascadas?
2. ¿Que cosas hacen a su niña sentirse que estamos al pendiente de ella?
3. ¿Hay algo que hace a su niña sentirse que no estamos al pendiente de ella?
4. ¿Cómo se siente su niña cuando entra a la escuela en la mañana?
5. ¿Qué hace a su niña sentirse bienvenido a la escuela?
6. ¿Hay algo que hace a su niña sentirse incómodo en la escuela?
7. ¿Qué anima a su niña hacer su mejor esfuerzo en la escuela?
8. ¿Hay algo que detiene a su niña de hacer su mejor esfuerzo en la escuela?
9. ¿Qué hace a su niña sentirse incluido en la escuela?
10. ¿Hay algo que hace que su niña se sienta excluido en la escuela?
11. Háblame de las amistades de su hija con otros estudiantes.
12. ¿Qué cosas hacen que estas amistades sean fuertes o débil?
13. ¿Qué hace a su niña sentirse apollado por el personal de la escuela?
14. ¿Hay algo que hace a su niña sentirse sin apollo del personal de la escuela?
15. ¿Cómo se siente su niña sobre el personal de la escuela, afectan su experiencia en la escuela?