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Sense of community in a primary school learning community

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education (Guidance Studies)
at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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I certify that the thesis entitled *Sense of community in a primary school learning community* and submitted as part of the degree of Master of Education (Guidance Studies) is the result of my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for any other degree to any other university or institution.

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Abstract

This study examined the strength and nature of the sense of community in a small New Zealand primary school learning community. The research used a mixed methods approach to examine individual and group-level predictors and characteristics of sense of community among parents, students and staff. The strength of sense of community was assessed through the Brief Sense of Community Index (BSCS) while further understanding of the sense of community was gained through analysis of qualitative data according to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of sense of community.

Factors identified as enabling sense of community were: acceptance and belonging, shared understandings of and commitment to parent volunteering, positive experiences of adult induction, being heard, shared norms or guiding principles, pride in the community, shared values and goals, reciprocal support, friendship, personal development, shared history, and sharing experiences. The study revealed a difference in the sense of community between students and adults in the school, with students having a higher sense of community. Parents with more children in the school had a significantly higher sense of community than parents with fewer children enrolled in the school. Data showed small negative correlations between sense of community and being in the Synergy building, and also between sense of community and frequency of contact between Synergy community members.

The findings reveal the overlapping and multi-dimensional nature of sense of community.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Authentic community requires us to do more than pepper our language with the word 'community', label ourselves as a community in our mission statement, and organize teachers into teams and schools into families. It requires us to think community, believe in community, and practice community – to change the basic metaphor for the school itself to community. We are into authentic community when community becomes embodied in the school's policy structure itself, when community values are at the center of our thinking. (Sergiovanni, 1994, p, xiii)

As Sergiovanni (1994) argued, for a school to be a community, it has to 'walk the talk'. Being 'in community' requires community members to behave, think and live according to the values of community. This presents a challenge, given that many people grow up in nuclear families or homes, and have no prior learning experiences that teaches them how to work and to learn within a community.

1.1 Background of the researcher

Not having prior learning experiences of how to be 'in community' was certainly the case for me when I first became a member of staff in the Synergy school community. In fact I was quite unprepared for the enormity of being part of a learning community. For almost ten years since graduating as a beginning teacher, I had worked as a primary school teacher in mainstream schools. Early in 2005 I was fortunate to join the Synergy community as a staff member. It is true, the saying that 'you don't know what you've got until it's gone', but I found the reverse, I didn't know what I had been missing until I had it.

What had been missing for me in the schools I had worked in prior to Synergy, was a sense of community. I certainly had some lovely relationships with students and colleagues and each year I created a small community of learners in my classroom. However, until Synergy I had not witnessed or experienced a sense of community as a whole school, and certainly never a sense of community that involved the parents.

I discovered that being a part of a community could be intense. I experienced highs, lows and everything in between. The highs were incredible: joy and excitement at the freedom I had as a staff member, the great support in tough times from community

members, and colleagues who were driven by a passion to make a difference as I did. I also experienced lows, which could only be described as character-building: the intense hurt and disappointment when relationships ended, the challenge of maintaining professional expectations when experiencing personal turmoil, and confronting and working through conflict. After being part of some of the community's births, deaths, marriages, celebrations, relationship break-ups, grievances, resignations and the inevitable welcomes and farewells of community members, I became intensely interested in the nature of a community. This interest led to a lot of questions. Was the Synergy community a healthy one? What could we do better? What makes some participate intensively in the community, while others 'sit on the fence'? What are our shared joys? What are our shared frustrations? What makes some members stay when it becomes challenging? What roles do we play individually and collectively in maintaining community? How do we 'create' community? What is a sense of community? Do other members believe as I do, that the Synergy community has a strong sense of community?

1.2 Justification for study

My thesis began as a result of my experiences and questions in being part of the Synergy community. It was my belief that learning communities such as the Synergy one, offered all of the key stakeholders in schools (students, parents and staff) an opportunity to be 'in community' and find a place for themselves to belong to something worthwhile and meaningful. I had the unique opportunity to investigate the Synergy community while working in it. This opportunity to learn at the 'grass roots' level was too appealing to not consider.

I believe we are lucky in New Zealand. Presently we have the capability to create our own curriculum, specific to the needs of our own school communities. A unique opportunity exists for schools to consider approaching the concept of community as something wider than the experiences I had, which were communities of learners in classrooms, rather than school-wide practices. This study urges schools to look beyond the New Zealand Curriculum's urging of teachers to cultivate the class as a learning community, to developing a sense of community in a school-wide learning community. This is not to disregard the importance of classroom community of learners, the creation of these is certainly a welcome relief from the traditional one-sided teacher as

knowledge holder practice (Sewell, 2006). However, I believe we need to do more. Classroom learning communities often exist in isolated pockets within schools, students are often learning with same age peers, and in most primary schools I have had experience in, there is certainly very little “shared activities and conversations with other people, including family members and people in the wider community” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 36). The notion of community is wider than the classroom.

It is my belief that a focus on sense of community will become even more important to society, certainly in education as we prepare children for their future, to be part of communities that we cannot even imagine. We know that society reaps what it sows, and the societies that invest in the long-term capacity of their children also make significant economic steps (Schubert & Little, 1998). In the future communities will be formed that venture into undertakings that are not only beneficial to the people in that group, but also to society at large (Zobel de Ayala II, 1998). It will be a sense of community that strengthens these communities.

1.3 Introduction to the research

Matusov (1999) asks the question “how does an innovative educational community maintain itself?” (p. 165). My intention was similar - to understand the aspects that contributed to psychological sense of community in a learning community. As Hill (1996) states, “If we can learn what aspects of communities foster a strong psychological sense of community, and can learn to increase those aspects, perhaps we will not have to concern ourselves with specific problems and the interventions to deal with them” (p. 437). The investigation of psychological sense of community in this study was analysed through the development of a framework based on the work of McMillan and Chavis (1986). My concern, as a researcher, was members’ experiences of each of the four dimensions as outlined by McMillan and Chavis: Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and finally Shared Emotional Connection. Member’s perceptions of experiences, behaviours, and practices that lead to a sense of community for all members was explored.

A mixed methods research methodology is used to explore perceptions of sense of community at the Synergy school. This methodology employs both qualitative and quantitative elements. The combination of these elements allows a thorough analysis of

sense of community, and enables the exploration of sense of community properties and perceptions that are unique to this community (Hill, 1996; Puddifort, 1996).

It is intended that this community-based research first and foremost informs and is of use to the Synergy community (Banister & Daly, 2006). However, the research may also provide greater understandings to other communities, in particular school learning communities.

1.4 Thesis overview

Chapter One has shown the underpinning factors upon which this study is formed. The following explains the order of this thesis. Chapter Two reviews the literature in relation to community and sense of community and outlines the decisions for the formulation of the research design. Chapter Three discusses the research approach. The theoretical approach underpinning the research is explained, as well as the research tools that are used. This is followed by the findings of the research for the Synergy school community in Chapter Four. Chapter Five discusses the findings of the results in relation to the literature. Chapter Six completes the thesis, outlining the conclusions of the study, as well as making recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to the notion of community and sense of community, especially in relation to school learning communities. The review first seeks to explain how community has evolved historically. The belief around renewed interest in the building of community in post-modern times is discussed and definitions of a post-modern community are given. The review then explains the meaning of the term 'sense of community', and how this relates to learning communities.

Contemporary research focusing on sense of community is evaluated and critical issues from this literature are considered. Finally, implications are drawn that are relevant to this research.

2.2 Historical perspectives of community

In order to better understand community, it is necessary to begin analysing community through a historical lens. In this way, we can begin to understand the role that semantics have on the word 'community' and the influence that these semantics have on our understandings. A historical perspective affords us an understanding about why and how human beings seek to belong to communities, and an understanding of how communities are different from organisations or other groups.

One of the earliest type of relationships that humans had was a kinship relationship common with the hunter-gatherer people of the palaeolithic age. These humans had groupings of between two and ten families that lived together nomadically. The hunter-gardening people eventually replaced the hunter-gatherers, and they became less nomadic as they cultivated the soil, and bred cattle. At the same time (the early palaeolithic age) nomadic, predatory herdsmen and hunters harassed the settled peasants, forcing them to establish fortified villages, leading to the development of village communities (Konig, 1968). People were acting in community ('*communis*') through constructing boundaries to ward off outsiders at this point in time; meaning the word 'community' became synonymous with inclusion and exclusion (Calderwood, 2000). As the population grew in these areas, villages were which led to the development of the individual house with a nuclear family within it (Konig, 1968).

These dwellings gave rise to the notion of 'neighbourhood' where people lived in a village with kinship links sometimes for many generations. The migration of people from rural to urban areas increased the size of villages, turning them into towns and cities, which had the effect of making it more challenging to have the same sense of community that was experienced in rural areas. Historically therefore, communities were mostly understood as communities of place or territory, even though they were essentially, what we would in postmodern times term a neighbourhood. According to Konig (1968), Tonnies work in the late 1800s was instrumental in outlining the essential difference between a neighbourhood and a community using the terms *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. It was through Tonnies' definitions that the word 'community' became implicitly related to close forms of social relationships rather than communities of place (Konig, 1968).

Gemeinschaft relationships have led authors to refer to communities of old as being a kind of utopia. People interacting in *gemeinschaft* ways related to each other for the intrinsic benefit, there being no tangible goal or benefit in mind other than the significance of the relationship. In contrast, *gesellschaft* relationships were formed and sustained by contracts, and could be somewhat contrived as the links between people were established for the primary benefit of trade or exchange of material goods, energy and time. In general, neighbourhoods of the past were called communities, even though they were more *gesellschaft* than *gemeinschaft*. The people in neighbourhoods could feel a part of them by simply living in the locality, rather than engaging or participating in them (Day, 2006). This is not to dismiss interest-based communities that existed alongside these neighbourhood communities, although as Day (2006) points out, these were usually specialist religious communities or alternative collectives, in which membership was elitist.

While Delanty (2003) argued that the *gemeinschaft* notion was discredited and associated with too much romanticism, it is a useful theory with which to understand the common assumption that a sense of community has been replaced in modern times by the age of individualism. In short, there is the assumption that society has been behaving in more of a *gesellschaft* way than a *gemeinschaft* way (Sergiovanni, 1994). The ethic of individualism or the decline of community in post-modern society is well discussed in the literature as underpinning many of today's social and economic

problems. Some believe that community has come to mean more about an economic market than a social and cultural exchange (Day, 2006; Etzioni, 2001; Kohn, 1998). The task faced by people in post-modern times is to learn about being part of a community when, historically, they have not done so.

2.3 Post-modern communities

Post-modern definitions of community are still evolving and there are varying interpretations of these. In addition, there is some debate about the term 'community' being misused, through reference to organisations or networks. It is clear however that post-modern communities have different rules and expectations from the communities of old.

While it is common to hear the word community used when discussing networks and organizations, there are marked distinctions between these groups, and while a sense of community can be found in some organisations and networks, they are not communities in the true sense of the word. According to Sergiovanni (1994), people in communities create social relationships with those who share similar ideas and intentions. However, in professional organisations, relationships are formed for people by external measures that rely on professional socialisation, norms, and purposes. Day (2006) highlights the differences between communities and networks by saying that “networks are designed to be more flexible, adaptable, and to require less wholehearted commitment, than a fully integrated community” (p. 217).

Elliott (2004) defined community and a sense of belonging as coming from “shared understandings about the world, common aspirations, and continuity of beliefs and practices” (p. 16). However, this definition is rather superficial, emphasising commonality and overlooking the diversity within a community. Delanty’s (2003) definition is similarly broad: “contemporary community may be understood as a communication community based on new kinds of belonging” (p. 187). He does not explain what new kinds of belonging are. Understanding community may be easier if we focus on the features and functions of a post-modern community rather than seek to define it.

Post-modern communities can be formed out of a shared interest or common goal (relational) or they can be formed where members are based in a specific area or location (locational) (Bess, Sonn, Fisher & Bishop, 2002). The relational aspect varies from historical communities that were mainly location-based. These post-modern communities are respectively referred to by some as communities of interest and communities of place (Nasar & Julian, 1995) or social relations and territories communities (Puddifort, 1996). These terms are further described by some researchers as accidental communities (instead of locational), and intentional communities (instead of relational). Forster (2004) defines accidental communities as communities that are formed because of sharing the same urban or suburban neighbourhood, whereas intentional communities are those that are formed to achieve a social, political or religious ideal. However, others make the distinction that intentional communities actually live together (Sargisson & Tower-Sargent, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the terms relational and locational are used. It is interesting to note that while there is a common perception that locational communities are less prevalent than relational ones in these post-modern times (Hyde & Chavis, 2007), paradoxically there appears to be a significant amount of research on locational communities.

2.3.1 Effect of globalisation and information communication technology on communities

The global nature of communication is offering more opportunities for the creation of post-modern communities than ever before. Virtual communities now link members together through technology rather than geography (Delanty, 2003; Obst & White, 2007). The development of online communities is a recent phenomenon with growing research in this area (Rovai, 2002; Forster, 2004). As locational communities provide less sense of community for inhabitants in the post-modern world than in earlier times, more and more people belong to online communities. These online communities are unique in that they do not rely on face-to-face interaction, with communication occurring through the Internet or mobile phones or a combination of both.

Post-modern relational communities may be created out of shared beliefs, as a response to oppression, or as an expression of individuality and these communities may take different forms such as: lifestyle, learning, interest, ethnic, spiritual, social, political or religious communities (Day, 2006; Forster, 2004). While historically, one may have

been the only person in a neighbourhood community with a particular interest, lifestyle or belief, there is the possibility now of making new connections through the internet and evidence to suggest that a sense of community can exist in some online communities (Forster, 2004; Roberts, Smith & Pollack, 2002; Rovai, 2002).

2.3.2 Multiple community belonging

Another feature of post-modern communities is the opportunity to belong to multiple communities. This situation has led people to cluster together and create new movements or organisations, and to actively search to belong (Day, 2006). These communities are more fluid than ever before, and so is the membership into them. Whereas once birth, geography and even upbringing could have restricted access to a community, there are now not the same restrictions to belonging (Day, 2006). People in current times may belong to many communities and allegiance to them can vary across time and circumstances (Bess et al., 2002; Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Delanty, 2003). Unlike the territorial communities of old, one can enter and exit a post-modern community with relative ease. With the ease of access though, there are potential challenges. Since people are continually joining and leaving, a post-modern community cannot rely on the undivided loyalty and commitment of its members (Day, 2006).

2.3.3 Schools as post-modern communities

Relevant to this research is how a school can be a relational post-modern community, in particular, a school setting that is also a learning community. Learning communities are a special kind of community and an example of a post-modern community. In a learning community there is an understanding that learning is by its nature community-based. Learning happens when human beings are involved with, and around, other human beings (Abbott & Ryan, 2000). Much can be learnt about a community of learners from the documentation of the “Open Classroom” (OC) school in Salt Lake City, Utah. This innovative school was organised by parents in 1977. The OC’s practice encapsulated a community of learners approach which is seen as an alternative to the adult-run style of learning, or the other end of the spectrum, the children-run style of learning. Rather both adults and children create it collaboratively and all participants are considered to be learners (Matusov, 1999). Turkanis, Bartlett and Rogoff (2001), explain that learning as a community is:

Creating instruction that builds on children's interests in a collaborative way, where learning activities are planned by children as well as adults, and adults learn from their own involvement as they help children learn (p. 226).

Parent volunteers at the OC work as 'co-ops' alongside teachers and students to create learning experiences for the students. Epstein and Salinas (2004) also define a school learning community as one that "includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities" (p. 12). Social constructivism is the underpinning model of learning in a learning community.

Learning communities are dramatically different from most people's experience of school and learning, where a teacher is directly responsible for the learning of approximately thirty students. As Sewell, (2006) pointed out, most education that people can relate to is an experience where "teachers as knowledge holders are authorised to control and make decisions about children's learning, and children as passive consumers are required to perform set tasks." (p. 2). If children are to grow up as life-long learners and in turn, become productive members of communities, they need to engage in new models of learning that sees them learn with adult members of the communities. In learning communities, the adults are both staff and parents.

While Abbott and Ryan (2000) assert that "learning and community naturally go together" (p. 3), and Kyriakides' 2005 research shows high achievement is associated with active involvement from parents, there is worrying evidence in New Zealand that parent involvement in primary school education is decreasing (Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003). Because all members in a learning community are stakeholders and enter into reciprocal relationships, it is important that all groups and individuals of a learning community learn together and also create a sense of community.

2.4 Psychological sense of community

According to Obst and White (2005), a psychological sense of community is "the defining element of any healthy community" (p. 127). A sense of community is the feelings and practices that members of a healthy community demonstrates (Calderwood, 2000). Belenardo's (2001) definition echoes this but includes that sense of community

“provides a sense of belonging to something that transcends the situational relationships in an organization” (p. 34). Bess et al. (2002) interpret sense of community differently when they describe it as “a process in which the members interact, draw identity, social support, and make their own contributions for the common good” (p. 6). Similarly, McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9).

McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) theory has particular significance for this study because the definition and accompanying theory of sense of community is accepted to apply in both relational and locational contexts (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Forster, 2004). Of further significance for this study was the work of researchers who had measured sense of community. McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) link their definition to specific dimensions. These four dimensions are: Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs and lastly, Shared Emotional Connection. A full description of these dimensions is given below. This description was used to inform and guide this study.

2.4.1 Membership

Membership is the feeling that members have when they are accepted by the community, they fit in and are welcomed as part of the community (McMillan, 1996). Community members have a right to belong. The community in turn has a responsibility to accept each person as a member.

There are boundaries to membership. Boundaries are essential, as they outline what it means to belong or not belong to the community. They also help the potential members to make informed choices before they undertake the initiation into the community (Fyson, 1999). The boundaries of membership enable emotional safety. When members identify with being a part of the community they can safely express their feelings and beliefs, which allows intimacy to occur (Obst & White, 2005). Another part of the Membership dimension is what McMillan and Chavis (1986) call a “common symbol system” (p. 10). A common symbol for a community could be examples of the following: a way of dressing, a flag, a name, song, logo, architectural style or holiday.

Essentially, these symbols are created intentionally, as a way to unite members, and serve to create distance between members and non-members.

Boundaries can provide additional advantages such as physical and economic safety as the community provides security for its members. In particular, these advantages are available for members who actively invest in communities. Investment relates to the personal input ones makes in becoming a member and maintaining membership. In some communities, members can gain membership by working for it, or by personally investing in the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The more that members are accepted and belong the more likely it is that they are willing to invest in or sacrifice for the group. Research supports the importance of participation and commitment in a community to developing a sense of community (Cicognani et al., 2008; Miers & Fisher, 2002). Members are entitled to pay dues, and the community has a right to know that dues will be paid. In McMillan's (1996) words "communities must know if a member will make available the time, energy, and financial commitment necessary to be a supportive, effective member" (p. 318). Block (2008) supports this view by saying that to belong in a community is to "act as an investor, owner, and creator" (p. 3).

2.4.2 Influence

Influence refers to the bi-directional and concurrent concept that a "community must be able to influence its members and members must be able to influence the community" (McMillan, 1996, p. 318). Members are most attracted to communities in which they can have power (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman, 1986). Community members perceive that they are able to contribute to decision-making and have some impact on the actions of other community members (Bess et al., 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Trust is an important principle in this mutual dimension as trust develops through the allocation and use of a community's power. McMillan and Chavis (1986) point out that a sharing of power gives the community greater ownership. McMillan (1996) further highlights the wealth of research that demonstrates the cohesiveness of groups when members are able to influence leaders and leaders are able to influence members. In addition, when the authority is related to principle rather than to power, a community is said to be healthy. Rather than simply answering to an authority figure, community members hold each other accountable against their

community's expectations in what McMillan (1996) calls a "principle above person" belief.

Community expectations may take the form of rules, laws, norms, guiding principles, or core values. These expectations allow group cohesion (McMillan, 1996). These expectations endure the passages of time and are strong enough to withstand the induction of new members. They are taught to new members and members feel compelled to follow them. For some community members, living within the expectations of a community mean a loss of freedom and individuality, particularly in a community that demands high conformity which suppresses self-expression (Bess et al., 2002). For others though, they may appreciate the opportunity to have some influence within the community, and will put up with the conformity or expectations. These people may put the community's needs before their own "for the common good". However, healthy communities also recognise, support and accommodate for differences and diversity between members and can operate successfully with this bi-directionality (Calderwood, 2000).

2.4.3 Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

People are attracted to communities that are rewarding and beneficial where individual members are able to meet their own needs as a result of being part of these communities (Obst & White, 2005).

The status of being a member in a successful community can be viewed as rewarding. If a community is seen as successful, it can be a strong drawcard for attracting new members. Another reward of being in a community is the competence of members in the community. Some community members may find that they are given opportunities to demonstrate their skills and competence, and in this way become valued members of that community. Individuals may also be drawn to communities where they are able to develop competence and learn new skills. Lastly, sharing values means that community members may be able to help each other satisfy their needs and goals. Community members may find that through sharing similar values, they also have similar needs, priorities and goals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As McMillan (1996) states, "Bonding begins with the discovery of similarities. If one can find people with similar ways of looking, feeling, thinking and being, then it is assumed that one has found a place where

one can be safely be oneself' (p. 321). This initial bonding though is at the early phase of community building. As the community develops, the focus shifts to how members are different, enabling the trading of resources. This *quid pro quo* arrangement means that while meeting their own needs and priorities, members will find that they are meeting others' as well, and vice versa, providing more cohesion in the community.

2.4.4 Shared Emotional Connection

This dimension refers to the connections that are built up as a result of shared experiences or shared history (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996; Obst & White, 2004). Shared experiences and history are the outcome of interaction and contact, therefore McMillan (1996) makes the crucial point that contact is essential for sense of community to develop. The interaction of individuals at events is important as interactions can either inhibit or facilitate the strength of the community. Emotional connections increase when members participate positively in the community, and they donate their time and energy to be present when the community is together. Those who invest more time and energy are likely to feel the impact of the community more in their life. The more important the shared event to those involved, the greater the bond, which explains why those who share crises bond well (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Shared experiences honour a community's values, and the stories from these experiences become part of its heritage and history. For McMillan (1996) collective experiences that build shared emotional connections are ones that convey a sense of "all for one and one for all" (p. 323).

Rituals, celebrations and ceremonies that honour community members create emotional connections and help to build strong communities (McMillan, 1996). Not every individual in a community has to participate in its events, but each member must be able to relate, to or identify with, the events (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

2.5 Benefits of a sense of community

With sense of community being integral for communities, it is understandable that it has become an important area of research. It is also inevitable that researchers have become interested in tools with which to measure it. Community researchers have been fairly traditional in their methodologies to explore community research (Banyard & Miller, 1998) with most of the research done in the general community field being quantitative

in nature (Buckner, 1988; Glynn, 1981; Hill, 1996; Nasar & Julian, 1995; Royal & Rossi, 1996). Much of the research using McMillan and Chavis' (1986) model of sense of community has also been studied quantitatively.

When measured, a psychological sense of community has been shown to have a positive effect on individuals in many ways. In general sense of community has been found to: prevent mental illness and suicide, decrease child abuse, improve the quality of child rearing, prevent crime, and improve resistance to disease (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986; Etzioni, 2001). Positive correlations have been found linking high sense of community with many other variables (Hill, 1996).

Sense of community has been found to have a profound impact on student performance, which means this factor is an important one to consider in the school setting or learning community (Royal & Rossi, 1996). This is not to say that students test scores are higher if they have a high sense of community, rather that there is a link with better psychological well-being that in turn leads to more success in learning. According to Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps and Lewis (2000) the gains are specifically about "prosocial development, academic motivation and attitudes, and feelings of personal well-being and satisfaction" (p. 39). In particular, for the high school students in Royal and Rossi's (1996) study, high sense of community was positively correlated with engagement in school activities and knowing the expectations that teachers had of them. Students in Carrington and Robinson's 2006 research also asserted that a sense of belonging enabled them to have greater social capital (interpersonal relations) in the school. According to Royal and Rossi (1996), higher social capital means that students are able to draw on knowledge capital (skills, competencies, knowledge) of others. Tennent, Farrell and Tayler's 2005 study of children in five early childhood and school settings, found that students who felt a strong sense of connection with their communities, felt safe, trusted those around them, and were therefore more successful at school. In 1994, Pretty, Andrewes and Collett found that a high sense of community negatively correlated to loneliness in adolescents. Furthermore, in 1996, Pretty and colleagues, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler and Williams found that among adolescents, high sense of community scores related to greater academic achievement, social acceptance, enjoyment of life, and a better coping ability. They also found that high sense of community directly correlated with the length of time adolescents lived in their

neighbourhoods. More recently, Bateman (2002) examined sense of community among sixth-grade students and found that the variety and nature of extra-curricular activities offered in a school correlate with school sense of community.

As Hill (1996) pointed out, for every positive correlation found between sense of community and other factors there was at least one study in which the relationships did not hold true. This highlights the possibility that we are not ready to make generalisations in the field of research about community, that the experience of participating in a community is setting-specific and can be best understood in relation to that particular community at a specific point in time, with its current members. McMillan and Chavis (1986) go to lengths to state that there are considerable dynamics within their four dimensions and also between the dimensions. This highlights the age-old “chicken or egg” scenario, where the researcher cannot be sure which attribute informs another. It is also a caution that there can be some overlap between the dimensions, making it a challenge for the researcher at times to interpret qualitative data.

2.6 Implications of sense of community for this research

To date, there has been no research in New Zealand that specifically inquires into sense of community in school settings. While there is research on students’ learning in schools and research on learning communities in general, more is to be known about the impact of sense of community in school settings, and how schools’ sense of community can be strengthened (Tennent et al., 2005). Schaps (2003) argues that schools who survey students about sense of community show mediocre mean scores, and that it is rare to find a school that has a strong sense of community. This has been the experience of this background research (Bateman, 2002; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson & Schaps, 1995). In addition, as qualitative research of sense of community in learning communities is also scarce, it is imperative that more research of this nature is undertaken in New Zealand so that the mechanism and relationships associated with sense of community can be understood.

Where research has been conducted in this area in the UK, Australia and the USA, it has involved education systems, cultures and settings that differ from those found in New Zealand. In addition, much of the research based in schools that promotes inclusiveness

and building community, focuses on the relationships between students and teachers. This is not to dismiss this type of research, in fact it is crucial. However, the relationship with parents has not been considered (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). Those who do examine the role of parents, focus on 'supporting' parents, or 'involving' them rather than them being co-creators with them (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Feuerstein, 2000; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). There is a definite gap in understanding not only the sense of community in a school in New Zealand, but that of a learning community where students, staff and parents are co-creators of learning. In addition, there is a lack of research generally analysing the sense of community of staff and parents working in a learning community, the exception being Belenardo's (2001) survey of parents and teachers at nine middle schools in California. Belenardo however employed only a survey to conduct her research, and did not include the children in the middle schools. This presents a significant gap in the literature that this study aimed to remedy, by doing both qualitative and quantitative research on sense of community with a whole community focus.

2.7 Summary of the literature

To summarise, this chapter discussed the challenge of defining community, and also sense of community. Research shows that the work of McMillan and Chavis (1986) has been instrumental in creating a definition and in-depth dimensions with which to analyse sense of community in a range of locational and relational settings. The research studies show that while some information can be gained from the research of others, sense of community is fundamentally context-specific. Furthermore, literature shows that having a strong sense of community is desirable and has many benefits for community members, making it an ideal construct to research in a school setting. Research reveals that there is little mention of sense of community experienced by staff or parents who are a fundamental part of schools, and even less so in learning communities. A whole school perspective of sense of community has not been addressed.

Chapter 3 Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a rationale for the methodological approach and research design underpinning this investigation and explains the methods and procedures used to answer the following research questions:

- Does the Synergy school community have a strong sense of community?
- How is sense of community perceived and experienced when analysed according to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection?
- Are there similarities and differences in how individuals and groups within the Synergy community perceive and experience sense of community; and what contributes to these similarities and differences?

This chapter also explains my role as a researcher, the ethical considerations related to this study, and the processes that I used to analyse the data.

3.2 Methodology

The first consideration in this study was whether a qualitative or quantitative approach would provide the best data. The original proposal was to measure the sense of community experienced by this school community, using a well-known tool called the Sense of Community Index (SCI). Original intentions were to analyse whether there was a relationship between the time spent in the community and sense of community; gender differences between adults and sense of community, and group differences and sense of community. As previously mentioned much of the research already done in the field was quantitative in nature and this formed the basis of my reading and early proposal on sense of community.

However, as Banister and Daly (2006) point out, community-based researchers need to choose methods carefully, and with sensitivity, to respect the setting, culture, and needs of the participants. Were the research data limited to only that gained through quantitative methods, the individual experiences and challenges faced by people in this

school community, could not have been explored. Banyard and Miller (1998) make the point that “qualitative methods are consistent with, and reflective of, a social constructivist position, in which reality is best understood by studying the ways in which people perceive, experience, and make sense of, the events in their lives” (p. 487). As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) point out, some methods are more effective than others depending on the types of research questions, and the depth of these questions. In the end, the research questions guided the methods. The second part of this research came about from the need to understand the sense of community experienced by members in this setting, in particular within each of McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) four dimensions. It was time to consider what methods would give the desired information.

3.2.1 Mixed methods research

Many researchers are now advocating mixed methods research (Banyard & Miller, 1998), also called multimethods research (Schutz, Chambless & DeCuir, 2004). In fact some researchers consider mixed-methods approaches to be preferential over the exclusive use of either qualitative or quantitative methods due to the many benefits that using both brings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Nastasi, 2009). Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) define mixed methods research as methodology and method, explaining “the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone” (p. 5). Quantitative methods have the benefit of showing the ‘whole picture’, while qualitative methods allow the individual voice to be heard which contributes to a better understanding of the elements of the whole picture.

A review of other mixed method studies focused on sense of community, were useful in guiding my decision to use a mixed methods approach. Evans (2007) conducted research into youth sense of community using existing survey tools, and interviews. Miers and Fisher (2002) also used both in-depth interviews and survey to gain a total picture of a church in crisis. Brodsky and Marx (2001) used a combination of the Sense of Community Index and interviews and focus groups to explore territorial and sub-communities. For these researchers, a mixed methods approach enabled them to better understand how sense of community is constructed in a unique community, to enable

triangulation, and to enable researchers to provide useful information to the community being studied.

As with all other research methodologies and methods, there are potential challenges and benefits of the mixed methods approach. One benefit is that mixed methods provides a chance to corroborate data. Looking for compatible findings lends credibility to the theory and research study (Schutz et al., 2004). There is also the potential for interesting findings when results are not compatible. Another benefit is that one method can be used to inform or guide the development of the next phase of the research.

A potential challenge of mixed methods research is that of time. It takes considerable time and resources to collect both types of data, make sense of data, and write about the findings (Schutz et al., 2004). The matter of time was considered for the present study, however the benefits of using the mixed methods approach were seen to outweigh the potential challenges. A decision was made to use the mixed methods approach by combining a survey tool with individual interviews and focus group discussions.

3.2.2 Surveys

Surveys are commonly used as a quantitative data collection method and can also be called questionnaires and tools (Hyde & Chavis, 2007). Surveys are a means of collecting a large amount of data in a short time, and getting data directly from the participants of a community. If a suitable number of quantifiable responses are received, statistical analysis can be conducted on the data (Denscombe, 2003). The statistical analysis allows generalisations from a sample group of a population to be made and applied to the whole population (Hutchinson, 2004). Respondents are randomly or purposefully selected, and the survey is conducted over the phone, through mail, in person or over the internet (Fowler, 2002). A variety of factors can affect the quality and quantity of survey data collected including: the language used, the length of the survey, a respondent's reading ability, access to the resources necessary to complete the survey, and attitudes about the value of the research (Hutchinson, 2004).

While some researchers create their own measurement tools, there are distinct advantages to using previously created and trialled ones when they are available and relevant for the context of study. Firstly, because they have been used previously known

errors or challenging aspects of the measurement tool can be addressed prior to use. Also, the immediate availability of the tool allows the tool to be tested to ascertain whether or not it will be useful in the particular context of research. Finally, access to a ready-made instrument frees the researcher from the time-consuming and expensive task of test construction.

The best-known measurement used to measure sense of community is called the Sense of Community Index (SCI) created by Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman and Chavis (Long & Perkins, 2003) and based on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) model of sense of community. This tool consists of twelve items. Three items are attributed to each of the four dimensions of sense of community (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999). The original SCI was used in a neighbourhood setting. The SCI prompted a lot of interest in the field of community research, and many researchers have used this tool or modified versions of it, in numerous locational and relational communities (Forster, 2004; Zaff & Devlin, 1998). Of particular interest to this present research was the use of the SCI in schools, with children and adolescents. Bateman (2002) argued that her studies in schools validates McMillan and Chavis' model and makes it an optimal tool to "evaluate, understand, inform, and strengthen our school communities" (p. 117). The SCI was therefore originally of high interest to this research, being a useful tool for students and enabling some comparison of data to other settings and researchers' findings. However, it became clear through further research that while the SCI is a sound measurement of overall sense of community, it was limited in its measure of the individual dimensions, needing more reliability for its subscales (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Forster, 2004; Obst & White, 2007). Other tools were therefore considered as the experience of the individual dimensions was an important focus in this study.

It was therefore exciting when a new development in the community research field occurred with Peterson, Speer and McMillan's (2008) Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS). The BSCS is an eight-item tool, and was developed to address the McMillan and Chavis' four dimensions of sense of community with two items addressing each dimension (Peterson et al., 2008). The items use a 5-point, Likert-type response format ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The mean score ranged from one to five reflecting an overall sense of community. A higher score represents a higher

sense of community, while a lower one indicates a neutral or lower sense of community. As yet, this tool is not known to have been trialled in a school or learning community.

The tool is new and simple for audiences to understand. While Babbie (1998) warns that the SCI includes negatively worded items that can be confusing to young children, the BSCS uses only positively worded items, making it easier for children to understand. I aimed to trial the BSCS in my school community and compare my results with Peterson et al.'s (2008) neighbourhood community results.

3.2.3 Interviews

Interviews are a primary method for collecting information from the population of interest. Some researchers go so far as to say that interviews are perhaps a ubiquitous data collection strategy within the social sciences (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). There are many different types of interviews in the social science field, made more confusing because researchers call them different things. For Nastasi (2009) these are termed “in-depth individual interviews”, “key informant interviews” and “focused group interviews”. Rubin and Babbie (2007) list in-depth interviews as “structured”, “semi-structured” and “open-ended”. Denscombe (2003) lists five types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, unstructured, group interviews and focus groups.

In identifying the types of interviews that exist in the social science field, it became clear that there was a continuum that reflected the way interviews are structured and conducted. At one end of the continuum interviews are conducted much like surveys, as respondents are asked set questions in a set order, and data are able to be standardized (Denscombe, 2003). At the other end of the continuum the researcher has little control over the nature and length of the responses, allowing the interviewee to develop or pursue a train of thought without many prompts from the interviewer. Midway along the continuum, interviews had an overall structure but questions were more open. This type of interview is commonly termed semi-structured.

After considering the various types of interview styles, a semi-structured in-depth interview approach was chosen for the present research. In an ‘in-depth interview’ the researcher generally has a particular topic to focus on and the interview is conducted in one session. The researcher starts by asking a question, and then acts as an active

listener, and uses as little conversation as possible, showing engagement through gesture and probes (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2006). Generally, the interview begins with icebreaking conversation and questions that help to create a relaxed interview climate and allow participants to feel at ease. Once rapport has been established, the researcher can ask pre-determined questions, commonly called an interview guide (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Babbie, 2007). The semi-structured nature allows the interview questions to be asked in any order and allows more of a natural, conversational style than a structured approach.

Semi-structured interviews can make analysis and comparability of responses more challenging, and there can be some inconsistency about the way semi-structured interviews are conducted with variations in the kind of information generated, however they are also believed to provide rich data (Rubin & Babbie (2007). In particular, they are believed to be an informative way to assess sense of community (Hyde & Chavis, 2007). Furthermore, they allow participants some freedom to talk about what was important to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Rubin & Babbie, 2007). Interviews, by their one-on-one nature, and particularly semi-structured ones are highly valued because they allow voices to be heard that may have been previously marginalised (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

3.2.4 Focus group discussions

Many people associate focus group discussions with market research strategies, as this is where they originated. For social scientists however, focus group discussions provide a means to explore people's opinions and diverse range of experiences in the relative safety of a group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Essentially, a focus group can be defined as a group of people brought together in a guided discussion of a particular topic (Rubin & Babbie, 2007). For some researchers, a focus group discussion is just one style of interviewing (Denscombe, 2003; Nastasi, 2009). The difference between how focus groups are used in market research and academic research is often the degree of systematic analysis applied to the transcripts (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001).

A challenge for the researcher who uses focus groups as a tool is the effect of the group dynamics. It is well documented that participants may alter their opinions or not voice

their real views in order to fit within the ideas being expressed by the group at large. Participants may also be intimidated by others thereby affecting contributions (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Rubin & Babbie, 2007). However, one of the positive features of a focus group discussion is that it provides a more natural setting than an interview, because participants interact with each other and construct meanings collectively (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). The dynamics of the conversation that can occur can be unanticipated and therefore allow a unique perspective with new ideas being considered (Rubin & Babbie, 2007).

Although some researchers recommend that a focus group comprises no more than eight people, others recommend 12 to 15 people as the optimum number (Rubin & Babbie, 2007). The advice of Krueger and Casey (2000) was helpful in deciding group size for this research. They suggest that a smaller size of four to six participants allows for easier hosting. In addition, their view was that a smaller size would also work well, as participants who are knowledgeable about a topic often have a great deal to share, and a small size means more opportunity for all participants to share.

Focus groups and interviews are complementary methods. Using both focus groups and interviews allows participants a choice about which method they are most comfortable participating in. Researchers are able to use the same interview guides for both formats, with some adjustment for children who participate in the research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Kleiber, 2004; Rubin & Babbie, 2007).

3.3 Methods

The following section describes the setting, as well as the methods in sequential order that took place to collect and analyse the data.

3.3.1 The research setting and participants

As mentioned in the introduction, the motivation behind this research lay in understanding the sense of community in the school in which I work as an educator. Synergy (a pseudonym) is a small New Zealand urban state primary school, catering for approximately 200 children from Years 0-8. The school also has a special character. The special character includes community-based learning, and relies on parent support and volunteerism to enable this. The participants in this research comprised anybody at

the Synergy community who wanted to participate. The participants included students, parents and staff.

In New Zealand, schools are zoned in order to create a roll cap. If a family lives within a zone, the local school within that zone is legally entitled to have that child enrol. However, Synergy has a large zone encompassing many areas. Children at Synergy come mainly from areas outside the immediate urban setting, with some children travelling up to an hour each day to attend the school. The research site has a unique blend of relational and locational aspects. The special character, lends the relational aspect, as community members are drawn together from sharing common goals or interests in learning. The locational aspect comes from connection to the school building where members are based. The study was carried out over one school year after consent was given by the Board of Trustees of the school (see Appendix 1).

3.3.2 Creation of the survey

The BSCS formed only part of a self-administered survey where other demographic information was also collected, the first question of the nine-question survey (see Appendix 2). Additional information deemed necessary for correlational analysis related to the hypotheses made up the remainder of the survey questions. The survey was kept deliberately short at the advice of Pretty et al. (1996), out of respect for the busy community members involved in the study and to make the survey more attractive for people to complete (Denscombe, 2003). At the advice of Babbie (1998, 2008), the most interesting part of the survey was placed at the beginning. The survey was set up online, on a website called Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). Users could log on via a weblink and complete the survey anonymously. As many people at the school communicated using email, and had high literacy levels, it was anticipated that there would be a high participation rate with an online questionnaire (Fowler, 2002). Participants could use their home or work computers and those without such access could use the computer especially set up in the school lounge.

The only challenge I found with BSCS was how to make the language more understandable for children. In particular, one of the Influence dimension questions was potentially challenging to understand: 'People in this school community are good at influencing each other'. After much deliberation the decision was made to adjust the

language of the tool only minimally, therefore this Influence question was left as it was originally written. Rather than adjust this and potentially affect the integrity of the tool, parents were asked to support their children whilst filling out the survey. The only change in this research to the BSCS therefore was that the wording of ‘neighbourhood’ was replaced with ‘school community’ (Peterson et al., 2008).

3.3.3 Invitation to participate in the research

Following the creation of the survey, an email was sent from the Board of Trustees to the families of Synergy to advise them of the upcoming invitation to be involved in the research, providing brief information about the study. An official invitation to participate in the research was then emailed home to parents of the school through the school office email database (see Appendix 3). Parents also received the Information Sheet for Students in their email (see Appendices 4 and 5). An invitation to students was also extended at a school meeting, with a proviso that their parents also gave consent for them to participate. Staff were invited to be involved in the research at a regular weekly staff meeting. All correspondence with participants was consistent with the school’s existing communication culture. For example, information sheets and emails were written in a conversational style with which participants were familiar. The consent included a choice for participants to do the survey only, an interview or focus group only, or both (see Appendices 5 and 6). If consent was completed for the survey, participants could choose to get a hard copy of the survey or to be emailed a weblink.

3.3.4 Administration of the survey

Following the initial email to the entire school, the response for consents was minimal (n=20). According to the Massey University’s Code of Ethical Conduct for Teaching and Involving Human Subjects guidelines, I was required to gain participant consent before I released the weblink or hard copy of the survey, and the consent needed to be received as a hard copy. It is unknown whether the issue of gaining informed consent was hindering participation (Denscombe, 2007) or whether there were other factors influencing participation. Hoping it was the first reason, I gained approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) to adjust the collection method by sending home hard copies of the consent and survey forms to each family, reducing the double handling of the previous process. Included in the package home were separate envelopes to return the forms. The returned consent forms and surveys were

directed to be put into a specially placed drop box in the school's reception area or posted to me at school. To ensure anonymity, I assured the school community that I would open the consent forms and surveys separately and load the survey data manually. The consent forms were only checked to ensure that signatures were included and that the same number of consents and surveys were received. This second approach was more successful than the first approach, yielding an additional 97 responses within one week. Denscombe (2003) advises a general return rate guide for surveys of 20%, or 30-250 surveys in small-scale research such as this. The response rate of 117 cases in this study fits within those guidelines. To be able to compare the BSCS data from the original survey, a suitable survey size was necessary (Peterson et al., 2008).

3.3.5 Survey analysis

Survey data received as hard copies were loaded manually onto Survey Monkey. When the survey closed, the data were analysed. Firstly, data were imported directly from Survey Monkey into Excel and further imported into software called Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). However, due to the way that I had constructed the demographic information questions in the survey, the import was not smooth, and I ended up taking each survey and manually loading it into SPSS. At this point of the analysis I was looking for how the data answered the first two research questions; essentially were people at Synergy experiencing a strong sense of community, and were there significant differences in the sense of community between the four dimensions? These findings informed the questions that were asked at the focus groups and interviews stage. For example, if there had been a notable variation between the dimensions, that would have been of interest to explore further. At this stage, the data revealed no differences between the four dimensions however, and showed a strong sense of community. Therefore a decision was made to explore the way that all dimensions were perceived and experienced by community members.

3.3.6 Focus groups and interviews

The next stage of the research included collating consent forms for the interviews and focus groups, and contacting those who had agreed to participate to arrange times to meet. Contact was usually made by telephone and email, depending on the contact details that the participant had provided on the consent form.

3.3.7 Creating an interview guide

Preparation for the focus groups and interviews involved a thorough process of drafting and polishing the interview guides. Not having a model for the interview guide, I went through a process of writing and rewriting open questions that could be asked and answered in an hour, and which equally explored the four dimensions. In addition, there was the challenge of writing the questions for the children in such a way that they were understandable but did not differ too greatly from the questions asked of the adults to allow for comparative analysis (see Appendices 7-10). There was one main difference between the adult and children's focus groups and interviews. I used a tool with the students called the 'blob tree' (see Appendix 11), as an additional way to find out their perceptions of the community at the advice of Schensul (1999).

3.3.8 Administering the focus groups and interviews

Focus groups and interviews were then held over a period of eight weeks. All focus group discussions and interviews were held after school, with one interview held on a weekend, that being a suitably negotiated time between the parent and myself. As I was also a full-time staff member, school times were not a good option for meeting. A total of 25 adults and seven students participated in this part of the research. A quiet room at the school was used to conduct the interviews, although two adults were interviewed at alternative mutually arranged venues. If we were at school, participants were offered a hot drink and some afternoon tea, before we settled into the session. If parents had children with them, they were offered refreshments and a choice of age-appropriate DVDs to watch in the school lounge while waiting for parents.

Focus group sizes were initially chosen with between four and six participants. The first focus group told me that they preferred less than six people in a group to allow greater participation and interaction, which was supported by Nastasi (2009). This advice was taken into account and subsequent focus groups were organised with approximately four people. Due to illness and other factors though, two focus group discussions had only two participants. In these cases, a decision was made to go ahead with the small focus group rather than to reschedule.

Before the interviews and focus groups took place I outlined to the participants how the session would be conducted, and thanked them for their time and interest. This allowed

participants to know what to expect. It also was a time to remind participants of the right to privacy and confidentiality. On both the adult and student consent forms, participants were asked to tick a box to state that they understood the confidential nature of the focus group discussion (see Appendices 5 and 6). In addition, before the focus group discussions commenced, I reminded the participants of this confidentiality. This protocol formed part of the interview guide (see Appendices 7-10). Before each focus group or interview was conducted I double-checked participant consent forms to ensure that I had received consent to voice record the session.

During the interviews and focus groups, I asked and guided questions from time to time, and attempted to refrain from offering ideas, thoughts and opinions in the discussion. In addition, I attempted to provide only neutral and non-verbal cues such as nodding, or short verbal and neutral cues such as “uh huh” (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Scott & Usher, 1999). This decision was made from an awareness that participants may form either socially desirable answers, or be discouraged from expressing opinions that they believed I may have disapproved of (Bloor et al., 2001). I made an effort to listen carefully to what the participant was sharing, and when it was appropriate to ask a question which followed on from a statement just made. Therefore there was variation in the order of the questions, the content, and the length of the sessions. For example, some focus groups spent the entire hour focussing on the first question, creating meaning collectively, often inadvertently answering questions I had yet to ask. In other groups, there was less group discussion and I was able to ask all of the questions from the interview guide.

There was less variation in the interviews than in the focus groups. With less discussion, there was more time to ask all the questions on the interview guide. The length of time of the individual interviews was between thirty minutes to an hour, depending on how much the participant shared. I also took notes during the sessions in case any of the voice recordings failed. Fortunately the recordings were successful and there was no need to rely solely on my notes. At the end of the session, participants were thanked for their time and I briefly explained the transcription process to them.

3.3.9 Transcription and analysis of interviews and focus groups

Immediately following each interview or focus group, voice recordings were transcribed. This allowed me to get close to the data and to identify key findings early in the analysis phase by becoming more familiar with the data (Kleiber, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2009). I transcribed the recordings which helped me to learn from early mistakes, and essentially become a more effective facilitator as time went on (Kleiber, 2004). An example of this learning was that in early interviews I asked, “What are the five best things about this community?” After listening to participants list more or less than five I realised that I could omit the word ‘five’ and still have an effective question. An effort was made to return the transcripts to the participants for editing within two weeks of the interview or focus group. Giving the transcripts back to the participants allowed them to have more ownership of their data, and helped to build trust between the participants and myself as the researcher. After the editing process, and with the participant’s signature on a release statement (see Appendix 12), changes were made to transcripts. Of the twenty-five transcripts given to adults, twenty-four were returned. Six of the seven children’s transcripts were returned. Only the transcripts that were returned were used in this research. Participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity at this stage. The transcripts were then ready for coding and analysis.

At the coding and analysis stage, much like Plas and Lewis (1996), the interview and focus group transcripts were coded for their fit into each of the four dimensions of sense of community: Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfilment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection. Four different coloured highlighters were used, one for each dimension, and when a word or phrase referred to a perception within a dimension it was highlighted and a keyword written in the margin. Often staff, student and parent transcripts were read as groups to more easily ascertain whether there were similarities reflected in the voices. A keyword search was also conducted on the digital versions of the transcripts to ensure that no reference to a keyword was missed. Additional analysis involved identifying common themes brought up by the participants that lay outside the four dimensions.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics and morals form an essential part of any social research (Denscombe, 2007). Due to this research being conducted in a school, where I was a member of staff, potential

harm could be done to the participants. Ethical research guidelines serve to protect and minimise harm of the individuals and organisations, taking part in the research and are discussed in detail below (Wellington, 2000).

3.4.1 Working with children

Asking student's for their perceptions was an important part of this research as the school in this setting has as one of its key statements "asking students first what they need in order to learn". Some researchers believe that students are worth listening to and are the experts on how they experience the world and their community (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Gollop, 2000). Just as important as having children participate in the research, was how to protect them, respect them, and minimise harming them (Underwood, Mayeux, Risser & Harper, 2006).

It was paramount that the students understood their rights in this research, and understood what it was that they were consenting to. To help children understand these issues, their Information Sheet was written in an easily understandable and visual way (see Appendix 4 and 5). Parents were asked to support very young children in the reading of this consent form and the survey itself. It was important that the students, who consented to participate in the study, also had parental consent. Therefore, a space was given on the Consent Form for Students for their parent's details (see Appendix 5). In addition, children were clearly advised of their ability to withdraw from the research at any time as suggested by Snook (2003). The children were told that neither their names, nor the names of anybody they mentioned would be used in reports written about the study, at the advice of Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias (1996). The children who agreed to be participants could choose to be interviewed either alone, or in a focus group. This choice showed respect for the children and sought to make them as comfortable as possible throughout the research. Children were also given their transcripts to edit and release. As a further protection to them, I asked that they also gain consent from their parents on the Authority for the Release of Transcripts Form (see Appendix 12).

3.4.2 Conflict of role

Researching in ones own community has the potential to cause harm. I had a dual role of being the researcher and being an educator in the school, a clear conflict of role

(Snook, 2003). An inside-researcher cannot help but influence the research, and as Scott and Usher (1999) point out “the way in which a researcher behaves towards participants in their research determines the status of the data and any conclusions drawn from them” (p. 128). Therefore steps were taken to minimise my influence and harm. This included my abiding by the statement I made on the Information Sheet that “I would like to assure you that your choice to participate or not, will not impact relationships or learning” which meant continuing relationships as close to normal as possible (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). For example, if someone in the community participated in the research whom I did not know beforehand, I made an effort to acknowledge that person if I saw them, but also an effort to not act in an overly familiar way. Another example was that I chose not to bring up anything out of the research context that anyone had discussed with me in the research context, even if I knew him or her well. If participants wanted to discuss anything, I let them initiate that.

Another ethical problem with being an inside-researcher is that data were filtered through my theoretical biases and position (Merriam, 1998). This is not usually an issue with statistical data, however it can be with qualitative methods. With this in mind I sought to triangulate the data as much as possible, drawing conclusions in the focus group and interview transcripts only when there were multiple sources of data. I also drew on the advice of Merriam (1998) who suggested that in addition to striving to be as non-biased and honest as possible, that I be open to the fact that my biases will not always be readily apparent even to me. For outside perspectives, my supervisors offered sound advice. To also address potential bias, I have aimed to create full and rich descriptions of results, so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

3.4.3 Maintaining professional commitments

Another ethical dilemma in this type of study is that the researcher can become so involved in the research, that their professional task can be neglected (Snook, 2003). I was managing a part-time Masters degree on top of my full-time educator position. I managed this tension by ensuring open and honest communication with the school community members and my colleagues. The most affected school members were advised ahead of time of my unavailability immediately after school especially while

interviews and focus group discussions were taking place. If there were urgent matters, I asked that they ring or email me and I would make a time to see them. In these ways, attention was given to carefully balance my professional obligations to the school and my responsibilities to this research. As was the case with another full-time teacher and part-time researcher, who commented in Bell (1999), “If my research had not been practically relevant I would have felt concerned about the extent of my commitment to it” (p. 44).

3.4.4 The researcher as a privileged learner

An ethical challenge of inside-research is the privileged position it affords the researcher. As the research developed, useful information was imparted that impacted on my professional practice. For example, when a community member commented that they felt included by having just one member of the community greet them by name, it led me to evaluate my own practice, and change the way I acknowledged or greeted people in the community. In this sense, I was afforded a privileged position of learning over other members of the community. However, as Snook (2003) pointed out, “far from this being unethical, sensitive variation of approach is what we would expect from professionals” (p. 164).

3.4.5 The right to privacy

The rights of research participants to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are paramount. In the case of this research, participants were advised that anonymity could not be guaranteed (Banister & Daly, 2006) as it was likely that community members may know some people who participated in the research (see Appendix 3). Indeed, what did happen through the research was that some members of the school were very open with others about being involved in the research. I left this to the discretion of the participants. Further efforts to maintain anonymity involved changing the name of the school and the participants.

For ethical reasons, children and adults were kept separate from each other in this research. This separation protected the children from hearing potentially negative views from adults and it also meant that the children were forthcoming as they shared their own opinions. In addition, adults could share openly without censoring their views and opinions. In one instance, both a parent and child wished to be interviewed together.

While this was satisfactory, the parent did wonder during the interview if the session would have gone better had they done individual interviews.

3.5 Chapter summary

This chapter introduced the school setting that this sense of community research was based in. The chapter described and summarised the methods used in this research to generate and analyse sense of community data in a school setting. Data were generated firstly through survey, with the survey data informing the second part of the research, the focus groups and interviews. Analysis and interpretation of data were informed by McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of sense of community. This chapter also reported on the ethical processes considered in relation to this research. The following chapter reports the key findings of the research.

Chapter 4 Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results from the two parts of the research. The first section of this chapter reports the results from the survey. This survey combines Peterson et al.'s (2008) Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) tool measuring sense of community with general demographic information. The survey questions were designed to answer the first research question 'Does the Synergy school community have a strong sense of community?' In addition, the tool was used to statistically determine part of the third research question: 'Are there similarities and differences in how individuals and groups within the Synergy community perceive and experience sense of community?'

The second section presents the key findings from the interviews and focus groups that comprised the qualitative part of the research. In this second section, McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection are analysed to arrive at twelve key themes. A final section presents an additional two key themes that sat outside the four dimensions.

4.2 Part One - Quantitative response to sense of community

This section shows the results of the survey (see Appendix 2), which was completed by children, staff and adults in the Synergy community.

4.2.1 General demographics

Participants in the survey (n=117) were all from the Synergy school community. Of the 117 participants, approximately 38% of the respondents were students (n = 44), 58% were parents (n = 67), 4% were staff members (n = 5) and 1% were former students (n = 1). The sample included 63.2% female respondents, 34.2% male respondents, and 2.6% preferred not to state their gender. Table 4.1 shows how long the respondents had been enrolled in the school community. The data showed that there was a small group (approximately 21%) who had been enrolled at the school for over five years, and approximately one-third of the community members who had been enrolled for less than two years.

Table 4.1. Results to question 4 in the survey: ‘How long have you been part of the Synergy school community?’

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Less than a year	23	19.7
Between 1 and 2 years	16	13.7
Between 2 and 3 years	19	16.2
Between 3 and 4 years	18	15.4
Between 4 and 5 years	16	13.7
Between 5 and 6 years	8	6.8
Between 6 and 7 years	7	6.0
Longer than 7 years	10	8.5

Table 4.2 below shows the ways in which community members are involved with one another. This was in response to the question ‘In what ways are you involved with other community members?’. Fifteen choices were listed for respondents to mark against. Table 4.2 shows the ten highest scoring ways that community members indicated they connected with one another, and the percentage of the 117 respondents that marked each of these ways. Results are listed in descending order with the top ten responses given.

Table 4.2. Results to question 5 in the survey: ‘In what ways are you involved with other community members?’

Ways respondents are involved with other community members	Number of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
I attend organised Synergy events such as symposia, school-wide camps and whānau group meetings	99	84.6
I socialise with people out of school hours	87	74.4
Through chatting informally with others at Synergy when I am in the building	83	70.9
Contact through my children’s friendships	73	62.4
I help with whānau group events during school hours	72	61.5
I live in the same region or areas as others	57	48.7
I help with fundraising at school	54	46.2
I share interests with others outside Synergy school hours	41	35.0
I help with fundraising out of school	40	34.2
I organise or help with whānau group events outside school hours	28	23.9

Table 4.3 below shows the percentage of the response of Synergy school community members on each of the eight BSCS scale items. Two items relate to each of the four dimensions. Items 1 and 2 relate to Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, items 3 and 4 relate to Membership, items 5 and 6 relate to Influence, and items 7 and 8 relate to Shared Emotional Connection.

Table 4.3. Percentage of responses and means for the eight items on the Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) using a 5-point Likert-type scale.

BSCS Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean (sample)
1. I can get what I need in this school community	32.5%	43.9%	20.2%	3.5%	0%	4.05 (n=114)
2. This school community helps me meet my needs	33.3%	46.5%	15.8%	4.4%	0%	4.09 (n=114)
3. I feel like a member of this school community	43.6%	40.2%	13.7%	2.6%	0%	4.25 (n=117)
4. I belong in this school community	46.6%	37.9%	12.9%	2.6%	0%	4.28 (n=116)
5. I have a say about what goes on in my school community	26.5%	50.4%	17.9%	5.1%	0%	3.98 (n=117)
6. People in this school community are good at influencing each other	27.6%	47.4%	21.6%	3.4%	0%	3.99 (n=116)
7. I feel connected to this school community	44.0%	36.2%	15.5%	3.4%	0.9%	4.19 (n=116)
8. I have a good bond with others in this school community	49.6%	38.5%	7.7%	3.4%	0.9%	4.32 (n=117)

It is important to note that while McMillan and Chavis (1986) often refer to their dimensions in a particular order, this being Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection, this order is not reflected in Peterson et al.'s BSCS tool. However, in section two of the results, the order of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) dimensions have been followed.

A total sample size of between 114 and 117 (variation due to lack of response on some items by individual research participants) yielded item means ranging from 3.98 to 4.32. Using a 5 point Likert-type scale with strongly agree, agree, either agree or disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree response options indicates a majority of respondents either strongly agree or agree with individual items. Item 8 ("I have a good bond with others in this school community") had the highest percentage of both strongly agree and agree responses combined (88.1%), with item 6 ("People in this community are good at influencing each other") having the lowest percentage (75%). Only two scale items,

items 7 and 8 (both in the Shared Emotional Connection dimension), elicited responses in the strongly disagree category, while item 5 (“I have a say about what goes on in my school community”) possessed the largest percentage of strongly disagree and disagree response (5.1%).

Cronbach’s alpha (test for internal reliability) for the overall BSCS was 0.89 ($m = 33$, $sd = 4.9$). Alphas among the subscales were 0.78 for Integration and Fulfillment of Needs ($m = 4.04$, $sd = .75$), .87 for Membership ($m = 4.26$, $sd = .74$), .53 for Influence ($m = 3.98$, $sd = .66$) and .81 for Shared Emotional Connection ($m = 4.25$, $sd = .80$). The overall mean for the BSCS (measuring sense of community) was 4.14 (from a possible mean total of 5), indicating a strong sense of community.

4.2.2 Correlation analyses

Correlations between individual BSCS items are presented in Table 4.4 below. Given the four factor model applied to the BSCS and the assumption of independence in four subscales comprising items 1 and 2 (subscale 1: Integration and Fulfillment of Needs); items 3 and 4 (subscale 2: Membership); items 5 and 6 (subscale 3: Influence); and items 7 and 8 (subscale 4: Shared Emotional Connection), it was assumed that highest inter-item correlations would be between items comprising each sub scale. However this was the case for only two sub scales - Integration and Fulfillment of needs (Items 1 and 2: $r = .64$, $p < .01$) and Membership (Items 3 and 4: $r = .77$, $p < .01$).

The correlation between items comprising the Influence sub scale (items 5 and 6) was .36 ($p < .01$) with higher correlations achieved between almost all of the other items. Item 3 (“I feel like a member of this school community”) also had a high correlation with the other item in the Shared Emotional Connection subscale, item 8 (“I have a good bond with others in the school community”) with a correlation achieved of $r = .70$, $p < .01$. The second-highest correlation was achieved between item 3 (“I feel like a member of this school community”), which is part of the Membership scale, and item 7 (“I feel connected to this school community”), which is part of the Shared Emotional Connection scale ($r = .76$, $p < .01$). Another high correlation with achieved between item 7, this time with item 2 (“This school community helps me meet my needs”) which is part of the Integration and Fulfillment of Needs subscale ($r = .64$, $p < .01$). These results

suggest a lack of expected sub scale independence within the BSCS and raises interpretive challenges.

Table 4.4. Pearson inter-correlation matrix of Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) items. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, $n = 117$

BSCS Item	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 8
1. I can get what I need in this school community	1.00	** .64	** .51	** .53	** .49	** .42	** .56	** .51
2. This school community helps me meet my needs		1.00	** .54	** .45	** .43	** .47	** .64	** .54
3. I feel like a member of this school community			1.00	** .77	** .32	** .35	** .76	** .70
4. I belong in this school community				1.00	** .32	** .29	** .62	** .54
5. I have a say about what goes on in my school community					1.00	** .36	** .40	* .23
6. People in this school community are good at influencing each other						1.00	** .40	** .43
7. I feel connected to this school community							1.00	** .68
8. I have a good bond with others in this school community								1.00

One of the initial aims of this part of the research was to test four correlation hypotheses. First, that sense of community would be positively correlated to the length of time people were enrolled in the community. Second, that sense of community would be positively correlated with how frequently people were in the Synergy building. Third, that sense of community would be positively correlated to frequency of contact with members of the Synergy community. Fourth, that parent sense of community would be positively correlated with the number of children a parent had attending Synergy.

As shown in Table 4.5 below there was no relationship between the length of time people are in the community and overall sense of community ($r = .06$). A negative correlation was found between overall sense of community and two constructs: that of

the frequency of the contact with members of the community had with each other ($r = -.30, p < .01$), and that of frequency of being in the Synergy building ($r = -.26, p < .01$).

Table 4.5. Pearson inter-correlation between mean Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) scores and response to the survey questions. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$

	Total BSCS score	Length of time at Synergy	How often in Synergy building	Contact with Synergy members	How many children at Synergy	History of children at Synergy
Total BSCS score	1.00	.06 (n=117)	**-.26 (n=116)	**-.30 (n=114)	** .38 (n=69)	-.09 (n=63)
Length of time at Synergy		1.00	-.03 (n=116)	-.03 (n=114)	.11 (n=69)	.13 (n=63)
How often in Synergy building			1.00	** .89 (n=113)	-.11 (n=68)	.03 (n=62)
Contact with Synergy members				1.00	-.13 (n=69)	.19 (n=63)
How many children at Synergy					1.00	-.13 (n=63)
History of children at Synergy						1.00

The negative correlation showed that overall sense of community was higher when members were in the building less, and there was less frequent contact with other members. A positive correlation was found between how many children an adult had at Synergy, and overall sense of community ($r = .38, p < .01$). In other words, the more children a parent had enrolled at the school, the stronger that parent's sense of community. Variations in n reflect the relevance of the items to various groups e.g. students, parents and staff in the Synergy school. The table also shows a strong positive correlation ($r = .89, p < .01$) between the frequency of contact Synergy members have with one another, and how often they are in the building.

4.2.3 Between group analyses

An initial research aim was to test hypotheses that there would be between-group differences in the sense of community experienced at Synergy. The first hypothesis was there would be a significant difference between male and female adults. The assumption was that because women are present more often than men in the Synergy community on a day-to-day basis, women would have a higher sense of community than men.

The second hypothesis was that there would be a significant difference between adult and student populations, with students having a higher sense of community than adults. Of initial interest was a between group analysis of paid members of the community (i.e. staff) and parents, as research suggests employed adults with status may experience a greater psychological sense of community, due to the greater investment and responsibility that they have in their community (Royal & Rossi, 1996). However this analysis was not carried out as the number of staff members who participated in the survey was very small (n=5). Therefore, staff were grouped with the parent group and renamed as an 'adult' group in the adult versus student t-test.

T-tests were completed on male adult versus female adult and adult versus student groups (Table 4.6), using independent samples analysis. While there was no support for the first hypothesis, there was a significant difference in the sense of community experienced by the adult and student populations, with students scoring significantly higher (mean = 35.13) than adults (mean = 31.72, $p < .001$). This indicated that students in the school had a stronger or higher sense of community than the adult group.

Table 4.6. Independent samples T-test showing total Brief Sense of Community Scale total scores with adults versus students.

	Sample Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Significance
Adult	71	31.72	5.16	t=3.87	p<0.001
Student	45	35.13	3.65		

4.3 Part Two - Qualitative response to sense of community

The following section describes the qualitative findings in relation to how staff, parents and children perceived sense of community at Synergy. The key themes in this section are organised into McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of sense of community. Six children, four staff members and twenty parents shared their perspectives.

For the purposes of clarity and to protect identity, staff refers to any of the following adult members of Synergy: office or administrative staff, the leader of the school and the full-time educators working with students who are directly responsible for a whānau group. Whānau group refers to a group of students that are multi-age grouped and who can choose to stay with an educator for several years. Parents who may have been

employed in the school on a part-time educating, aide or relieving basis, are included in the parent group. Where participants have used terms that would easily identify the school, more generic terms have been used. Where words have been added to make clear the meaning of the quotation, square brackets [] have been used.

4.3.1 Membership

The three key themes that emerged in the Membership dimension are listed below in Table 4.7. Students, staff and parents of the Synergy school community shared that it was an accepting community and a place they belonged to. Another key finding for adults was around the expectations of volunteering in the Synergy community and the effect that this had on sense of community. A further key finding was the importance of a successful induction for new adult community members.

Table 4.7. Key themes that emerged in the Membership dimension.

Findings for children	Findings for staff	Findings for parents
Feeling accepted and a sense of belonging - Unconditional acceptance for all	Feeling accepted and a sense of belonging - Questions raised by adults of more focus on whānau group belonging than whole school belonging - Acceptance as professionals Expectations around volunteering - A cause of frustration Induction of new adult community members - Challenges - School-wide practices	Feeling accepted and a sense of belonging - Questions raised by adults of more focus on whānau group belonging than whole school belonging - Children were accepted which impacted parent belonging - Safety Expectations around volunteering - A cause of frustration Induction of new adult community members - Challenges - School-wide practices

4.3.1.1 Feeling accepted and a sense of belonging

In a school-wide community sense, there was a strong perception that acceptance was practiced and diversity was valued. Students believed that “*everyone is a part of the community*” (Marina, p. 13). They thought that members were accepted unconditionally: “*That we don’t care what gender people are... it doesn’t matter what race, or skin you are, you are welcome*” (McLeod, p. 6). For the students, acceptance was often mentioned in relation to the welcome they received from other students upon enrolling at Synergy.

For parents, acceptance as a community member involved several elements. For many, the belonging they sensed in the community was attributed to the fact that they appreciated the acceptance that was extended to their children. Parents were overwhelmingly grateful that they had consciously chosen a school where their children were accepted, and where they saw this acceptance extended to all children in the school. Parents could be secure that their children were *“leaving the school knowing that they have been accepted for who they are, what they are interested in, and who they can be”* (May, p. 22).

Secondly, parents valued the acceptance and *‘understanding’* of who they were in the school community, which led to a sense of belonging, highlighted by Caroline’s comment, that *“there’s a place for me and everything that I am.”* (p. 4). Parents commented that they were understood, accepted and not judged by others, as Claire commented, *“the acceptance and non-judgemental part of everybody... it makes you safe to be able to be yourself”* (p. 4). As well as providing safety for adults, parents also referred to the school community being a safe one for the children. For another parent, the nature of a learning community, meant it was easier to belong in the Synergy school than *“at other schools, because you don’t feel separate from it, you feel a real part of it”* (Mandy, p. 8).

When staff commented on acceptance the context was in relation to their professional roles. They appreciated that working at Synergy allowed them to keep their identity as a person. They expressed the sense that *“...there’s a permission to just be, you know”* (Zephyr, p. 14). In addition, small things were important to the staff, such as wearing casual dress, and having bare feet at school while still being accepted as a professional.

Some members of Synergy referred to the fact that they thought that there was much more of a whānau group focus on belonging and membership, than a focus on the whole school. For these members, they thought that they had *“lost that whole... community connection”* (Olivia, p. 6). Several people referred to the way that students were divided by floors and that *“everything’s more (whānau group)... rather than across the levels”* (Diana, p. 5). Overall there was an opinion that people wanted to have more opportunities to do things together on a whole school community level. Examples given were wanting fundraising for the whole school rather than whānau groups, discos that

are school-wide rather than floor, maintaining workshops that allow groupings of students to mix across the school, and having older students helping the younger students with learning. One student in talking about a reading experience with other younger students offered a suggestion, that “*maybe if there was more stuff like that and we got to actually spend school time with them instead of just lunch and morning tea*” (Brogan, p. 15), it would build community.

4.3.1.2 Expectations around volunteering

A key finding for the parent and staff participants was around the expectation of volunteering and participation in the school. While there were many parents who did volunteer, as was the expectation, there was a view from staff and some parents that there were some parents who did not volunteer in the school. There was also a view that these parents directly benefited from having their children in the school but did little to contribute to the community. This lack of participation caused some frustration and disappointment, particularly from those who believed they themselves were actively contributing and believed that the expectations for membership in the Synergy community were clear. There was a perception that other parents lacked understanding of, or did not share in, the philosophy of Synergy, and that this contributed to their lack of volunteering. As one community member summarised:

I think some people don't buy into the school... I know that there are some children in the school that I have never even seen a parent. One has actually left, and I remember the only time I ever saw the parent, and they'd been here for years, was when he [the child] was picked up in the car park. And just shuttled away... why aren't they, they've obviously gone out of their way to choose this school, but why, what's that barrier, that's a question in my mind... why would you choose a school like this and not want to be part of it. So yeah, I mean that makes me really sad actually. It makes me angry and frustrated in some parts. (Wendy, p. 16)

Staff, like these parents, shared feelings of sadness and frustration. In addition to these feelings they also acknowledged how exhausting it was for them and other parents when some parents were not volunteering or participating. The staff agreed with parents that one of the reasons for the lack of participation was parents not buying into the philosophy. For example, Sam shared:

They've come here for their reasons, for their child, or for themselves, and I don't feel that they're really buying into the philosophy of what makes this place sing so that would look like them never being here, and

that puts more of a load on me and also on the parents who are stepping up, do you know what I mean? (p. 20)

Darcy who shared a similar view, thought that increasing numbers of parents did not have *“a need for a sense of community, because I think their community is somewhere else, and we’re a school for them” (p. 8).*

In fact, staff members’ own commitment and investment in the community meant that they viewed their roles as *‘bigger than a job’*, an *‘incredible responsibility’* and that participating in something bigger than themselves gave some staff a *‘sense of belonging’*. The flip side to the role being *‘bigger than a job’* meant that they struggled with the constant pressures of the role and wondered how to be *“everything for everybody” (Sam, p. 20)* Staff spoke of the many hours they worked and the challenge to maintain a personal life. There was a perception that staff would be able to do a better job if all parents were active in their volunteering as Zephyr highlighted, *“I don’t feel that I’m doing as good a job...as I want done, but I also don’t feel like I can give anymore time” (p. 12).*

Staff members also acknowledged that some parents were nervous and uncertain of what and how to participate, which may have led to a lack of participation and involvement. Zephyr acknowledged that *“there’s that unsureness of what to do”* because *“this is quite different to people’s school experiences” (p. 6).* However, Zephyr also expressed frustration in helping people to *“realise it is by coming in...and actively participating and being brave enough to get through those nervous initial times where you are outside your comfort zone”* that parents will need to *“go through that in order to be able to get to the other side” (p. 7).*

Another reason given for lack of volunteering by some was the differences in expectations of the staff members. Some staff and parents acknowledged that staff members’ practices varied about how they involve parent volunteers. This was summarised most succinctly by Pat. She shared a conversation she had with other parents when she was a new member of the Synergy community:

I don’t know when I should feel like I should show up, and they were both able to shed a little insight about, how did they put it? Very simply...[staff member a’s]...not going to be as needy and demanding

around you and the whānau group and so it's actually possibly a more difficult match in terms of feeling a sense of belonging in there because like they said if you start with [staff member b], you'll see a very different kind of picture, you know... asking you to be a part of and kind of drawing you in, and it's true (Pat, p. 9).

A staff member also acknowledges that staff need to be, *"bringing parents in on board. They can't expect parents to know things if they're not invited in and they've got to have open whānau groups and be supportive"* (Darcy, p. 10).

4.3.1.3 Induction of new adult community members

Many adults shared that *"the introduction to the school is maybe a challenge for the community"* (Mandy, p. 8). While some new members experiences were positive, others were challenging. Parents who were having challenging experiences pointed out that while they as adults were finding it a challenge, their children were not. There was a common perception from parents that it was harder to join the school when their children were older than five. School-wide initiatives for new families were also commented on. A common theme mentioned by members was the time it took to feel a part of the school.

Some adults recalled what it was like to be a new member of the school community. Terms used to describe this feeling were *'on the outskirts'*, *'scary'*, *'a period of feeling very lonely'*, and *'frightening'*. As one adult recalls, *"even though I'm not a new family anymore it still sort of touches me because I remember what it was like, to not know anybody, and not know what to do, and how you do it and what you could do or couldn't do"* (Debbie, pp. 14-15). Grappling with a new philosophy of teaching and learning was challenging for some, *"we were quite stunned by just having to put what you're used to from your own schooling and the schooling you were used to, to one side and just have to go with the flow"* (Claire, p. 19).

Some adults believed that all community members had a shared responsibility of initiating new people into the community, while other community members spoke of it as being other members' responsibilities. After an interaction with a new community member who was having difficulty, Taylor, a parent, shared her realisation that she needed to help initiate new families:

I really got that wake up call to how much we really need to foster the new people coming into the community...And I mean, I'm not a real chatty person, I don't tend to just stop and have little conversations with people so it's the hardest thing in the world for me to chat to someone new that I don't know anything about but I can see that is something I really need to work on (pp. 17-18).

While it was “*easier to talk to the people you already know*” it was acknowledged by Sam that “*you've got to start somewhere to grow a friendship don't you*” (p. 8).

While many adults spoke of the time it took them to ‘*settle*’ into the community, or to ‘*feel a part of the community*’, there were no apparent rules or similar patterns to how long it took. Paula said, “*it took me a good six months to actually feel part of the community*” (p. 15). For Mika, who had been at Synergy for two years, she said that while she believed she had a “*tremendous comfort level*” in the school community, there were a lot of days when still found herself “*slightly lost*” (p. 9). While for Diana, it had taken her five years until she felt “*a lot more comfortable*” (p. 1).

The school-wide practice of assigning buddy families had a mixed response from the adults interviewed. The favourable responses showed that even though some families had not developed a particular closeness, the new families appreciated knowing that there was someone they could chat with, “*I know that if there is something that I need to talk about or discuss that there's an avenue for me there...that's pretty amazing*” (Caroline, p. 15). Claire echoed this sentiment, “*And though I didn't really use her that much...it's good to have someone there that you could ring and say you know I don't understand how that works*” (p. 15).

There were some families for which the buddy family system was not so successful. A reason a parent gave for this was that they were assigned a buddy parent who was not actively involved in the school, as Debbie shared, “*We had, our buddy, who is lovely...but she's not a parent who's really involved day to day in the school, she works full-time. So...she didn't know either...and it was like oh it's really nice to meet you, I don't think you're going to be any help at all.*” (p. 15). Another reason given for the system failure was buddy families not understanding their role. For example, Mika shared that for her family it was not so much a problem with the people, more that they were too busy to help. Terry thought that she could only approach her buddy family if

there was a problem, *“it wasn’t just ring me for a chat, it was if you have any issues or problems talk to me and I was thinking well I don’t think I have actually but does that mean I can’t talk to you?”* (p. 15). Another new parent at the stage of this research was unaware of the buddy family system.

A school-wide practice of holding meetings for new parents was mentioned by some as being helpful. Briefly mentioned also were welcome family packs, one by a long-standing parent mentioning that welcome packs were being created when she joined the community five years before. They were also mentioned by a new parent, who had not received a welcome pack and wished she had.

Some parents thought that the strength of the relationships at Synergy was a potential obstacle for new adults. This was highlighted by the fact comments that the strong relationships could be *“disconcerting”* (Caroline, p. 15) and *“put you off”* (May, p. 15). Also highlighted by Diana, a parent, was the time when new members in the community entered, and it was a *‘shock’* for the people in the community, which led to a *“kind of us and them thing going on”* (p. 15).

The people who had ‘welcoming’ experiences at Synergy shared that *“Staff were the initial major influencing factors... because they were the ones we had the most contact with”* (Mika, p. 6). In addition, these people had experiences with community members that meant they felt *‘welcomed’* and *‘supported’*. They found the community members were *‘friendly’*, *‘open’* and *‘kind’*.

4.3.2 Influence

Table 4.8 below shows two themes that were findings in the Influence dimension. These themes were common across all groups at Synergy. The first key finding was that having a voice and influence in the school contributed to a sense of community. The second finding was that Synergy members used core values as guiding principles.

Table 4.8. Key themes that emerged in the Influence dimension.

Findings for children	Findings for staff	Findings for parents
Having a voice and influence in the community – Positive experiences in the community	Having a voice and influence in the community – Varied experiences – Concern that staff voice was stronger than other groups – Children’s voices were an influencing factor for staff	Having a voice and influence in the community – Varied experiences – Staff were an influencing factor for parents
Core values as guiding principles	Core values as guiding principles	Core values as guiding principles

4.3.2.1 Having a voice and influence in the community

Students on the whole believed that they had a say in the community, and that they were able to influence and to be influenced. This belief was evident through their use of words such as “choose”, “listening”, or “having a say”. They appreciated having a choice about where they could sit, how they used their time, what they learned, and through having the freedom to manage their learning. The students influenced each other in the following contexts: through their personal inquiry sharing, making movies together, and in combining their ideas. Students also believed that they had a say in wider decision-making, “they take our opinions into hand” (Drew, p. 4), and that people in the community entered into a reciprocal relationship of listening to each other’s opinions. This was discussed in context to remodelling the trust licence criteria, and during discussions in their whānau groups. They said that they respected each other’s opinions, highlighted by Drew, “even if they don’t agree with it, they can agree to disagree” (p. 13).

Some parents also considered that “every parent’s thoughts and feelings count, and there is a sense of knowing that” (Taylor, p. 12). The contexts given for this were: being able to communicate with staff and feel that they were heard and that issues were resolved, the ability to be part of the selection process for new staff members, that the community were open to “people running with an idea” (Mandy, p. 7), and that they were able to share at whānau group meetings. Not all parents shared this perception. One community member mentioned that while she felt she had a voice, she knew others “who don’t feel that they have a voice and who feel frustrated” (Diana, p. 17). Chris had expressed a divergent view to others, and “felt a slap in the face, so tended now “to be very careful what I say about this place” (p. 14).

Some parents mentioned that they had been influenced by staff members and other parents' interests and views. Mika shared that she was most influenced by having discussions with staff and parents about things she was interested in or had a challenge with. Helen spoke of sharing a similar interest with a staff member, and the staff member's interest influenced her to be more involved in the whānau group.

In addition, the research showed that parents were aware of the need to have positive relationships with staff members, and that:

If you didn't have that, that could taint your whole experience of being here, regardless of the relationships you have with other parents and how you're getting on with other children (Paula, p. 25).

Some parents commented that they perceived their experiences in the community were dependent on the staff member directly responsible for their child. Chris shared:

When I was in high school my scores would go up and down according to the teacher I had. And I find now that with me being a parent volunteer around here, my sense of satisfaction goes up and down according to the staff member I'm attached to (p. 20).

Similarly, MacKenzie commented that when there was a staff member she did not connect with she felt that she could not be involved at school, and that "*it was actually like a grieving for that period*", commenting that "*one person can make such a big difference to how I felt about the school and the community around it*" (p. 11).

Staff views on having a voice and a sense of influence were varied. While all staff acknowledged that they had a voice, not all were comfortable expressing their views. One staff member mentioned feeling somewhat cynical that having a voice made a difference. Some staff members expressed that they were satisfied that they had some influence. When staff members spoke of influencing one another, it was in relation particularly in their professional roles.

Staff were often influenced by students, and examples were given of staff listening to student voices. One staff member mentioned that the adults who were most influencing were also adults who were trusted and reliable in the school. She reflected that:

Sadly it does come down to that thing that if I can rely on you to be in the whānau group, and you spend some time there, and you come and talk to me about something you perceive going on...I'm going to take the time to

listen to you. If you've never been in the whānau group...I may not be as open" (Jamie, p. 17).

Some staff worried for parents and children that their voices were not heard enough. Jamie was *"very aware that every time you open your mouth as a staff member it carries more weight than if you were just a parent saying the same thing" (p. 14)*, while Darcy commented that *"there's parents there that probably are too quiet to speak up" (p. 4)*. This perspective was supported by parents like Mandy who mentioned, *"[I] don't necessarily know that I have the confidence yet or the time to properly voice things but I'm getting there" (p. 5)*. While staff members believed that student voices were listened to, heard and acted upon, there was a perception from some that children's voices did not carry as much weight as adults, and that school-wide students were not being given a democratic role in decision-making. Zephyr believed that the school needed some development in this area,

I don't think that's an avenue that we're as strong in as we need to be, to do what we're aiming to do, and aspiring to do, I don't believe that that particular area is as healthy as we can make it. And I'd like to see it become healthier" (p. 17).

A parent who had worked across the school supported this view, and discussed that while she was *'pro-democratic'* she had to approach working with students in different whānau groups in different ways.

4.3.2.2 Core values as guiding principles

There was positive mention of the core values that guided the Synergy community. Some students and parents thought that these were being lived, as Marina, a child, commented, *"and we...have core values in terms of actually taking them to hand and they use them" (p. 5)*. When discussing challenging situations that had happened at school, some adults reported that the core values had been used to resolve the situations, which led to a sense that *"they're actually filtering through to the way we interact with each other, and the way our kids interact with each other" (Olivia, p. 14)*. Some adults attributed this to the fact that they were prepared to consider the *'greater good'* or *'collective good'* and that this helped them be willing to invest in working through conflict. Evidence of this was in comments that adults believed they could *"think outside of ourselves a lot of the time" (Claire, p. 6)*. One staff member commented that:

Maybe I'm hurt and maybe a part of me can't let that go but on another level I actually just have to because there's a bigger picture here and there's no room for me to be petty or carry this round (Sam, p. 9).

This sentiment was echoed by another parent who said that *"maybe we're able to, even if there's...going on, put that wherever that goes, and carry on"* (Olivia, p. 15).

In addition to general statements about the core values being lived, there were numerous mentions of some of the core values, in particular trust, caring, respect and responsibility. The contexts given for trust were: in trusting the Synergy style of learning, trust that parents had when other parents worked with their children, trust that staff had in parents who were working with children, trust of the confidential kind with sensitive information, and parents trust in staff. The contexts given for caring were: people caring about the interests of others, the pastoral care that staff were involved in, and in general the caring extended between all groups - children, staff and parents. The community spoke about respect in these ways: respecting opinions of students, whānau groups needing to one another, parents respect for staff who went out of their way to connect with them, respect for staff in dealing with challenging situations with parents and children, respect for individuality, a respect for the establishment board of Synergy, and respect of the appreciation kind when parents shared information about a child to their parent after volunteering. The contexts given for responsibility were: responsibility of community members to support new people into the community, the responsibility of both staff and parents to find ways to have parents involved in the community, the responsibility that staff felt in their roles, and the responsibility that parents had to support the learning of students in the Synergy community.

4.3.3 Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

Three themes were found in relation to the Integration and Fulfillment of Needs dimension for the Synergy community shown in Table 4.9 below. These themes included: pride in the community, like-minded people, and personal development. Pride in the community was common across all groups (children, staff and parents), while the other two key themes were a feature in only one or two groups.

Table 4.9. Key themes in the Integration and Fulfillment of Needs dimension.

Findings for children	Findings for staff	Findings for parents
Pride in the community - Comparisons made to other schools	Pride in the community - Proud to be staff member in the community Personal development	Pride in the community - Comparisons made to other schools - Proud to be part of alternative school Like-minded people - Parenting philosophies Personal development

4.3.3.1 Pride in the community

Pride in the Synergy school was evident in the statements across all participant groups, as well as in the manner in which the participants spoke. This pride was experienced slightly differently for the staff, student and parent groups. Staff spoke of the status in their professional field, whereas students and parents defined how special their community was through comparisons with other schools they had previously attended, heard about, or had seen in the wider community. One parent captured this sense of pride by saying: *“I mean if people ask me that question, ‘Tell me what’s so special about Synergy?’ ...I say ‘Do you literally have an hour?’ (Wendy, p. 19).*

For some parents their sense of pride was related to their choice of Synergy as an alternative school learning community. Caroline, a parent, highlighted that other parents in schools had not questioned the education of their children whereas parents at Synergy had *“asked questions about why things are a certain way” (p. 20).*

For staff *“it felt like an incredible privilege and incredible responsibility” (Zephyr, p. 2),* to gain a position as an educator at Synergy. Another staff member, Sam, shared the feeling that it was *“a bit special to have been chosen and a part of this” (p. 21).* Darcy echoed this sentiment saying, *“I was lucky enough to be chosen for the position” (p. 1).*

The parents frequently spoke of the difference they perceived between the Synergy children and students from other schools with which they had come into contact. One of the common assumptions made from their observations was that Synergy children related well to adults. Helen, a parent, illustrated this point:

Yeah, one of the things that I think Synergy has done really well over the years, is to actually help kids to relate with adults. This is the sense that I get with other kids in other primary schools where you know, they only have that one teacher, their relationship with adults is very different from the relationship that Synergy kids have with adults. Because they are not afraid to go out and talk with adults you know, and be mature whereas a lot of other kids, kind of like have a bit of distance between themselves and adults. (p. 8)

Many parent comments also alluded to a sense of responsibility that students showed - one of the community's core values. Children were generally perceived as behaving more responsibly and respectfully in the wider community than children who attended other schools. This sense of responsibility was also echoed by all of the student participants who were interviewed. This point was illustrated by one student:

I've seen kids from other schools that have been walking along the street, and they're nuts and we're just thinking 'what the...?'. Because we're not used to that sort of thing because we're so responsible at Synergy (Marina, p. 2).

Students made many other comparisons between their peers at Synergy and students at other schools. The contexts they gave that spoke of their pride were: having choices and freedom and not feeling so 'trapped', the variety of learning opportunities available to them, the lack of student gossip, the lack of boredom, the high adult:student ratio, the laid back nature of staff, and the nature of the physical environment which "doesn't feel like a school building" (Toni, p. 7). All of these examples highlighted the students' perspectives that Synergy was a special community to belong to. For one student, the fact she could go to the toilet whenever she wanted to, meant for her that that Synergy was a 'cool' school. Drew proudly shared, "we're a good school and I'm proud of it" (p. 16).

4.3.3.2 Like-minded people

Parents spoke of the people at Synergy as 'like-minded'; people who shared the 'same ideas and aspirations' or who had 'similar philosophies'. Debbie, a parent, expressed this clearly when she said, "That's the nice thing about Synergy. That you can be pretty sure that most of the people here have the similar values and philosophies and parenting styles" (p. 1). These shared values contributed further to a sense of support for community members. Knowing that other people thought in similar ways was a reminder that "yes, I'm in the right place, and it reminds you yes I know why I am here

and I'm going to stick with it" (May, p. 5). There was also recurrent theme in the findings of the challenge for parents that existed in defending a learning community that others in the wider community perceived as an '*experimental*' school.

The like-mindedness and openness of members led to conversations about parenting challenges, and children's learning. For Gillian, being around people with similar philosophies about education, meant she did not "*have to prove anything*" (p. 17). This parent found it hard to relate to families who followed traditional educational philosophies, "*it's nice to be around like-minded people...when we do talk about education, just straight away we get each other*" (p. 17).

The parent co-operative nature of Playcentre and other learning centres like Playcentre, also attracted parents who shared the same child-raising philosophies. Parents who came from Playcentre often knew one another and shared a common interest in being involved in their child's learning. Having previous experience in alternative learning centres gave some parents '*good training*' for the type of involvement expected in the Synergy community.

4.3.3.3 Personal development

For adults (staff and parents) in particular, Synergy was considered to fulfil needs by providing opportunities for adults to learn and challenge themselves in new ways. Having a place to share ideas and develop skills, to grow in competence and confidence gave members a sense that their needs were being met. Parents and staff appreciated the ability to develop and learn new skills in collaboration with others. Synergy offered a collaborative environment, in which people were interested in and inspired by each other's passions and interests. As Hailey summed up:

If I've got a new interest I know there'll be someone in this community that will have that same interest and I can get in touch with them. And I've made contacts with people through those interests that really have not had a lot to do with the school itself, but I've made new contacts with people for exactly that reason, for a learning interest we've both had (p. 4).

For many adults this learning was not only about their own interests, they also learned by helping students to learn. Adults gained a sense of satisfaction and value from knowing that they had played a role in student learning. May, a parent, candidly

expressed that while her own children may not have appreciated her skills, she got a “sense of value being able to contribute those skills to other kids’ learning” (p. 2). Another parent spoke of her work “being appreciated and welcomed for what it is” (Terry, p. 5). For some adults, such as Diana, helping students built their own confidence:

I can see that my input there has a positive effect, which gives me a really good feeling. To be able to see that you’re actually able to encourage, or help a child is amazing... I get a lot of joy out of it and it just builds my self-esteem (pp. 4-5).

4.3.4 Shared Emotional Connection

Four themes were found in the Shared Emotional Connection dimension and these are shown in Table 4.10. These were that shared history, friendship, and shared experiences contributed to building shared emotional connections, which served to either increase or decrease sense of community. Only adults spoke of the shared history aspect, whereas in the themes of friendship, support and connection through school-wide experiences, all groups in the Synergy community shared their perceptions.

Table 4.10. Key themes found in the Shared Emotional Connection dimension.

Findings for children	Findings for staff	Findings for parents
	Shared history - Tragedy - Pioneering	Shared history - Tragedy - Celebrations - Pioneering
Friendship - Between children and staff - Amongst students	Friendship - Between parents and staff	Friendship - Between parents and children - Amongst parents - Between parents and staff
Support - Amongst students	Support - Between parents and staff	Support - Amongst parents
Connection through school-wide experiences - Being in same whānau group - Being in same learning groups or teams	Connection through school-wide experiences - Community symposia - Camps - Socialising	Connection through school-wide experiences - Community symposia - Camps - Socialising

4.3.4.1 Shared history

A key theme in the shared experience findings was that staff and parents who were present at the beginning of Synergy, termed ‘pioneers’, experienced belonging because of the shared experiences and shared understandings they created while establishing the

community. This pioneering spirit drew them together as a community, and for these members created a strong sense of community at the beginning. In the beginning, many of the pioneers sensed that “*everyone was watching us and it’s going to fail you know and you’re experimenting with your children*” (Olivia, p. 15). The pioneers described some of the experiences in the early days as: ‘scary’, ‘really intense’, ‘very explosive’, ‘awful’, ‘quite dysfunctional’, and also ‘fantastic’. It was through these experiences that a sense of community was established, and that they learned how to be part of a healthy, functioning community. According to Gillian, people who were part of that original pioneering group “*still feel that connection*” (p. 7).

Adults spoke of the way that “*the community has bonded and gelled*” (MacKenzie, p. 15), through experiencing tragedies and celebrations together. When tragedies occurred such as members of the community dying, and houses burning down, people would ‘rally around’. Even people who had left the community, “*immediately wanted to reconnect*” because “*they still felt like they were a part of the community, even though they’re not actually physically here, or have any kids here*” (Zephyr, p. 10). Rituals and celebrations too were mentioned, in particular celebration of learning events, babies being born, the ritual of students returning to reconnect after leaving for high school, and the “*heart-wrenchingly great*” (Wendy, p. 23) leaving ceremonies for departing year eight students.

4.3.4.2 Friendship

The terms ‘friendship’ and the ‘depth of relationships’ were used by almost all of the participants. Friendships occurred between and among almost all participant groups. However, for some adults the bond of friendship was elusive.

For staff members, the Synergy school offered the opportunity to form real and deep connections and “*lovely relationships with the kids*” (Darcy, p. 9). Staff believed that the opportunity to have children in their whānau group for a couple of years strengthened the emotional bonds. Darcy went on to say that “*You feel like they’re your own children, especially when you’ve had them for about three years*” (p. 9). A staff member described the farewelling of students as a grieving time after having them for two years. Children also spoke of how they appreciated their relationships with staff members:

Like they're your friends, because they are your friends as well as teachery things... because you can just laugh with them, and I've seen teachers from friends who don't go to this school,... and they're just like 'do this, do this, and do that' and they just say it, like basically just, they're just ordering them around like they're children slaves" (Drew, p. 3).

The Synergy community provided staff members with opportunities to develop friendships and deeply respectful relationships with parents too. For staff members who had enjoyed working closely with parents of children, their sense of community was impacted upon by *"losing different people...as they've moved out of the community"* (Zephyr, p. 12), and when families moved from one whānau group to another, which for some led to *"a genuine grief process that I go through, around that loss of a friendship"* (Jamie, p. 7).

Several parents spoke of the friendships they had made with children, other than their own, at school. Debbie, a parent, attempted to explain this unique relationship:

I've probably got quite good friendships with quite a few children, and I've got no idea who their parents are. They're just like kids that are, and it probably happens with adults as well, that you'll just click with (p. 11).

Parent-parent friendships were a unique feature at Synergy for some parents. Typically these parents talked about the strong relationships as being one of the most important things they had gained by being in this community. However, not all parents had built these same deep relationships. For example, one parent, Chris, did not know *"what a person is supposed to do...to form a kind of friendship with...parents (p. 13)*. Some parents reflected that while they *"wouldn't say I've made heaps of really intimate friendships"* (Taylor, p. 1) they appreciated the strength of the relationships they had at Synergy. Parents who had friendships shared four ways they built these. Some parent friendships were initiated through their children's relationships with other children. Secondly, for some parents, friendship was facilitated through support for one another. For example, one parent shared how her daughter had stayed one night a week at another family's home due to the strong and ongoing relationship that she had built with the parents of her daughter's friend. Thirdly, being in the Synergy building allowed connections to develop, as parents mentioned they see the same parents often. Finally,

parents also created friendships with other parents through running or participating in workshops together.

There were mixed results in the key finding of friendship with some adults discussing cliques. While some adults in the community reported that people mixed and there were no cliques, others clearly thought that there were cliques. These cliques involved both staff and adults, and had the impact for those not within them of feeling ‘*ignored*’. A parent shared how easily small groups could form without being aware of it, sharing that

My community has been a similar group of people the entire time. And so I haven't actually stepped out of that and so now I can really see that...you need to (Taylor, p. 18).

Those who commented on cliques thought that they formed as a result of close friendships and socialising, through sharing grumbles, and due to the need to find a group to be a part of. In addition there were comments that community members needed to be more ‘*outgoing*’.

All of the student participants spoke of friendships with their peers at Synergy. The feeling they shared was that “*The friends that you make here are amazing*” (Marina, p. 1). These students were able to articulate how they built and maintained friendships: through being given time to bond, working on learning areas with others, having sleepovers, being in the same whānau group, sharing similar interests and sharing them outside of school hours, and through listening to each other.

4.3.4.3 Support

A perception of reciprocal support was a strong feature across the entire Synergy community, in both a practical and emotional sense. Hailey, a parent, captured this perception by saying, “*I know that if anything's wrong I'll be supported 100%. I know that I'm available to support other people 100%*” (p. 4). While all participant groups alluded to the reciprocity of support, it was experienced and described differently for the three groups. Students spoke of the support as mainly peer-to-peer. For staff, the support was mainly discussed in relation to adult support. The parent group spoke mainly of parent-to-parent support.

For the students, the support was both practical and emotional. The practical help focused on: support with their learning (especially when they were struggling), fundraising, being welcomed and being initiated into the culture of the school. The emotional support took the form of including people when they were left out of groups and protecting each other emotionally if they were having social difficulties. As well as receiving this support, students saw themselves reciprocating support. Toni who was a new student to the community, gave an example of this practical support, "*Oli kind of helped me to get to know where things are, and how to kind of fit in here*" and then in turn "*I've helped welcome Pamela into the community*" (pp. 3-4). Another student spoke of the reciprocal emotional support of peers when a grandparent died, "*when our Nana died, Stuart and Sarah came along to the funeral which was really nice of them*" and then in turn because it had been modelled to him, he reciprocated, "*I have done the same thing with how Stuart came to...Nana's funeral, I went to...Peter's grandads...funeral and we helped*" (McLeod, pp. 4-5).

The parents said they supported each other by helping others through challenging times, and caring for one another's children. Parents spoke repeatedly of times they had been struggling and the usefulness of talking with other parents. MacKenzie echoed other parents' sentiments, stating that, "*You know that if you are faltering, people will as you say 'what can I do to help?' And the same as I would put up my hand and say what can we do to help*" (p. 3). Several parents spoke of the care that other adults showed their own children. This caring was evident when they took other parent's children on camp, or had children after school to enable another parent to work, or meet other commitments. Caring also involved looking out for the children of other parents in an emotionally supportive way. An example of this was when parents took the time to share their perceptions of how another parent's child was doing, if they had been working with the child. For parents this support was invaluable and enabled shared parenting as Sabrina said, "*I'm not the only person parenting my daughter. You know I've got all this support*" (p. 5).

The staff gave emotional and practical support to, and received the same support back from parents. An example of how staff gave support to parents included "*supporting them if they're running a workshop and they're unsure of what to do, then to give them ideas and work with them*" (Darcy, p. 3). Staff also supported parents with parenting

and personal relationship issues. Staff received practical and emotional support from parents too. Practical support was received in the form of parents: cooking meals for staff when they were ill, taking students on excursions out of the Synergy building, supporting other parents in their learning or induction to take the load off staff, through being reliable, and by supporting creativity and innovation. Several staff members noted the importance of the emotional support they received from parents in breaking the barriers of the traditional educator-parent relationship. A parent's support for Jamie demonstrated that: *"I care for you more than just as the (educator) of my child... I have a relationship that's based on that, but [it] isn't limited by that relationship"* (p. 5).

Some members of the Synergy community used the following metaphors to describe how their experience of being supported by others: 'second home', 'extended whānau' and 'another family'. These members spoke of the community as offering them an opportunity to be part of what some thought of as "a big family" (Mika, p. 9) especially when their relatives lived in other regions or in other countries, or when they parented alone. A benefit was that Chris' child was exposed "to all kinds of different people... basically the brothers and the sisters and the aunties and the cousins that he's never had" (p. 2). The physical environment and open plan arrangement of the building as well as the availability of people to chat with, helped enable support that comes with this notion as May, a parent shared:

The sense of home, that you can come in and make a cup of coffee and sit down on the couch, and if someone sees you and you're not feeling great, they can usually tell that and they will ask you how you are (p. 2).

4.3.4.4 Connection through school-wide experiences

Whole school experiences were a further finding in the dimension of Shared Emotional Connection. In this area of the research, there were clear differentiations between adult voices and children's voices. Students mostly shared experiences that occurred in school, whereas adults connected through a mixture of in-school and outside-of-school events. In addition, students spoke of these positively whereas for adults the experiences were mixed.

Students shared that the opportunities they had for connecting with others were twofold. Firstly, being in the same whānau group helped facilitate connections, as Toni shared how she got to know someone from "tidying our cubbies... during SDL time" (p. 7). For

others being in the same learning teams or groups in which they were collaborating, was key. Many of the students talked of the movies they were making in groups as a way of building these connections.

Members of the adult community mentioned the whole school camp, which took place at the beginning of each school year. For some it was a time to connect with others, and for some it was a negative experience and actually decreased their sense of community. For those for whom the experiences were positive, the whole school camp served to establish “*authentic connections with other people*” (Diana, p. 9). For another it was a chance to get to know people and staff outside her children’s whānau group. For some families though, the whole school camp was a negative experience. One parent stayed away from these camps as she found them too big. Another community member suggested that people at school camps connected mostly with their existing friends:

I go along to the community camps at...and I find that people really just sit down and chat with the people they've already bonded with. You don't make friends at these camps (Chris, p. 7).

Whole school camps were hardest for the new adult members in the community. “*This is scary, I don't know anybody*” (Sam, p. 4) described Sam’s first experience as a staff member on a community camp. There was a common reason for this challenge, not knowing anybody. Pat, a new parent member of the community, described her family’s first whole school camp as “*a very very difficult and disappointing experience*” (p. 4). In addition, Pat shared that she had since had conversations with parents, who also had had less than positive experiences, as shared below:

And then she said things to me like ‘Oh you know it’s always really horrible at camp in the beginning’ and ‘I didn’t come out of my cabin you know for the first day of camp when I first came’ which very much lead me to think if this is the experience that people had why the hell hasn’t anybody done anything to make it any easier? And I’ve gotten to know people in [my child’s whānau group], parents have said ‘Oh yeah, don’t ever go to camp, it’s terrible’, so all these people were kind of telling me that they don’t turn up for that bit, or you have to know people” (p. 6).

In contrast, many adults viewed whānau group camps as a place to build community and the experiences of these were resoundingly positive. Several people agreed that camps at the beginning of the year were helpful to “*bond parents*” (Darcy, p. 2) and “*gel a whānau group*” (Mika, p. 6). Zephyr recalled that it was in these off-site

activities that “*adults could sort of sit back and chill out and talk to each other over a cup of tea or whatever*” (p. 10). Another parent mentioned whānau group camps were a way for her to connect with other children, in particular girls, as her own children were boys.

Adult members of Synergy also mentioned community symposia as events that allowed shared emotional connections. These occurred once a term, and were a school-wide event. The type of symposia parents preferred were ones where “*there’s sort of actually like a focus to them and discussion and stuff*” (Claire, p. 10) rather than social ones.

These were symposia like the one that Mandy recalled, where:

All the parents were here and they shared some stories about what makes Synergy special and some of them were just amazing and we got grouped up and did different activities (p. 4).

Several parents though shared that they thought the social community symposia were much like the whole school camps, where “*people have come here obviously with the intention of sitting with certain people*” (Gillian, p. 7), and they no longer attended them as a result.

Socialising was mentioned as a contributing factor to developing a sense of community for the adults. Parents and staff commented that they enjoyed the opportunities which allowed for “*taking the time just to chat to people not necessarily related to school, just hanging out with people*” (Diana, p. 6). Both parents and staff enjoyed the interaction with each other in social settings and for some “*the social stuff is definitely a big part in building relationships*” (Jamie, p. 11). Some gave examples of going away together, ‘*hanging out*’ and having dinner together. Some commented that they would like to have more opportunities to socialise. New members of the community who had had challenging experiences at social get-togethers asked that other members of the community facilitate introductions and be on the look-out for new faces, “*helping sort of smooth things and oil the wheels of social contact*” (Terry, p. 9).

4.4 Other key findings

Two key themes were identified in the qualitative analysis that sat outside McMillan and Chavis' (1986) dimensions. These were school size having an effect on sense of community and the perception that sense of community decreased for parents as students got older.

4.4.1 School size

Several members of the community commented on the size of the community. Some members attributed their decreasing sense of community to the increased size. They remembered that there was a time when "*numbers increased quite dramatically*" (Gillian, p. 14) as Synergy increased its roll size. One community member 'worried' that the schools' roll had become too big, while another mentioned that "*we've just got to having 200 [students], to me you just lose a bit of your community feel*" (Darcy, p. 8). For community members the contrast between when "*there were less people at Synergy*" (Brogan, p. 14) to now, was that in the earlier days in the community "*everyone knew each other*" (Gillian, p. 8).

4.4.2 Sense of community as students got older

There was also a common view among parents that "*once the kids get into the senior school the sense of community kind of disappears a bit*" (Gillian, p. 4). The parents gave three reasons that they perceived contributed to this. Firstly, the children did not want the parents around as much. Secondly, the students did not need as much help as they were able to get out of the building with less adults due to higher ratios and being able to get a trust licence. Thirdly, parents were working longer hours when their children were older.

4.5 Chapter summary

In summary, the research data shows that there was in total twelve themes that mostly lay within the four dimensions. The data also revealed variance across some groups (staff, students, parents) as to what creates a sense of community for them. Secondly, when there was no group variance across themes, the contexts and the group experience were often quite different, highlighting that sense of community can be a personal and individual perception. Further analysis indicated that the four dimensions overlapped as

they appeared to be able to inform, be dependent on, and have an impact on, other dimensions. This observation was not surprising, as it was consistent with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) opinion. However, it did present challenges in the analysis and reporting of the data, particularly when isolating data to fit only one dimension.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings in relation to the research questions. The discussion returns to some of the issues raised in the literature review and considers the findings with reference to contemporary literature. The chapter is organised in accordance with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfilment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection. Key themes that emerged from the data are discussed within these dimensions with outlying data being discussed after the dimensions. Where possible, the data from the survey, focus groups and interviews are discussed together.

The original research questions were:

- Does the Synergy community have a strong sense of community?
- How is sense of community perceived and experienced when analysed according to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfilment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection?
- Are there similarities and differences in how individuals and groups within the Synergy community perceive and experience sense of community; and what contributes to these similarities and differences?

5.2 Membership

According to McMillan (1996), when a member joins a community they have the right to be accepted and to belong to that community. The boundaries to belonging in a community serve to provide security and safety for its members. Communities, by their membership nature, expect all members to make a personal investment in the community. The discussion below examines the findings from the Synergy school community in the Membership dimension and divides these findings into three sections: feeling accepted and a sense of belonging, expectations around volunteering, and lastly induction of new adult community members.

5.2.1 Feeling accepted and a sense of belonging

As mentioned, students perceived that they were accepted as soon as they and others arrived in the school. Mostly, these practices involved peer-peer interactions. In addition to practices and attitudes the students conveyed to one another, students felt that acceptance was practiced community-wide. Comments from the students support Graves' (1992) arguments that in a truly cooperative community "no one is excluded because of race, religion, personality quirks, differences of perspective, or non-conventional attitudes or interests" (p. 65). Osterman (2000) found that when students have a sense that they belong, they will be more willing to work within the expectations of the community. Evidence of this was found at Synergy by the students' comments, who believed they were '*responsible*', '*respected others*' and knew how to '*behave*'. Working within the expectations of the community also appeared to be the experience of adults in the Synergy community, and is further discussed in the Influence dimension.

Acceptance was often referred to by parents who felt that their children were appreciated and understood in ways that they may not be in other school settings. This would suggest that for parents, much of their own acceptance is based on the acceptance of (and therefore happiness of) their children in the learning community. Like the parents in Mapp's (2003) study, the Synergy parents appreciated the care that school community members extended to their children, which impacted on their connection to the school and the development of a sense of community.

Feeling accepted and the perception of a sense of belonging were interwoven in the comments that the participants made. Acceptance helped to pave the way for a sense of belonging for some community members. Belonging refers to a feeling that "I know I have a place in that group that only I can fill, that I can contribute something that is necessary to the group and is valued by other members" (Graves, 1992, p. 65). Belonging and membership at Synergy gave parents a sense of safety and security (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). As safety concerns are thought to inhibit sense of community (Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005), this research suggests that for parents, the physical and emotional safety of their children in the community has a positive impact on their own sense of community. The emotional safety also enabled the parents to be themselves, free from judgement. Staff at Synergy felt that they could be authentically themselves also, whilst maintaining their professional roles.

There was some concern that belonging on a sub-community (whānau group) level may have affected the belonging experienced school-wide. Whānau groups shared spaces in the school building and sometimes worked together. Bateman (2002) points to some of her earlier research that suggests that increased contact with students across grades in an organised, goal-oriented and school-wide fashion actually increases students' sense of community. Some students, parents and staff mentioned that they would like to see more linking and opportunities to mix school-wide.

However sub-communities are also important as research highlights that membership and belonging in a smaller sub-community is positively related to whole community sense of community (Royal & Rossi, 1996). Synergy data also show that this may be the case, as there was a significant relationship between how many children a parent had enrolled at Synergy and parents' overall sense of community, suggesting that the more whānau groups a parent is a part of, the stronger the sense of community. The positive correlation could also be related to participation as it would be expected that parents with more children would be volunteering at Synergy more because of the community expectations around the minimum time expected at school each week, leading to close contact with community members. Further research is needed at both a sub-community and macro-community level to ascertain the reasons for the relationship. However, given the research findings that people wanting more school-wide linking it could be useful for the Synergy school to consider that a fostering of the sense of community on a macro-community level may balance the “potentially divisive nature of the subcommunity” (Brodsky & Marx, 2001, p. 175).

5.2.2 Expectations around volunteering

Weisenfeld (1996) pointed out that there are sometimes explicit and specific conditions as part of membership in a community, and that these may subject community members to high demands. In the Synergy school community, a condition of membership was the notion of investment of time volunteering. The present research highlights McMillan's (1996) view that community members have a right to know that members will make the time available and give the resources necessary to be a supportive member.

The present research also highlights that this condition of membership, was not valued or recognised by all members as the notion of investment of time was the basis of some

frustration and disappointment for adults of the Synergy community. In fact, most times when adult participants in the research brought up volunteering, it was in a negative context with reference to some parents who were not '*stepping up*', and implied that some parents were gaining benefits without doing what McMillan (1996) refers to as "paying dues". For the Thoreau School, from which the OC evolved its principles and practices, the requirement of the parents to participate in the class for three hours per week per child, was to "provide an equal sense of community among all the families" (Rogoff, Bartlett & Turkanis, 2001). Like the Thoreau school, Synergy had set an expectation of a minimum amount of time on parent volunteering in the school. The lack of contribution of some parents at Synergy had a clear effect on sense of community at the school.

One reason that staff gave for why some parents at Synergy did not volunteer was that parents were unsure of how to volunteer in the school. Staff views were also however, that the only way to understand the principles was for parents to be involved. Research in other learning communities supports Synergy staff views in this area. According to Rogoff et al. (2001), parents in the community need to learn through "interested participation" rather than simply being informed of the philosophies, principles and practices of the school. Turkanis et al. (2001) also note that parents need to be part of the process in order to begin to understand how they can contribute to it for at least two years. They cannot "simply be handed the information" (p. 237), they need to figure out how to contribute by seeing and becoming a part of the process.

Another reason given for some parents not volunteering, was the perception that there were varying staff members' practices and expectations about parent volunteering in their whānau groups. This finding revealed that while the membership conditions may be made explicit to families upon enrolment, the expectation may not be maintained by staff members. The research points to the challenge that staff have to share goals and practices to increase family partnerships (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

The staff perceived that they could not commit more time and energy than they were already, which in part led to their frustration that there were parents in Synergy not fulfilling their membership commitments. The research served to highlight the professional commitment and the personal costs of being an educator in a school

learning community such as Synergy. The staff commented that their investment in the community often came at the cost of their personal lives, and this commitment was, “evidenced by a willingness to go beyond expected participation” (Belenardo, 2001, p. 35). They seemed to regard their roles in teaching and learning almost as a calling (O’Donnell, 2000), something that they need to be a part of, that gave meaning to their lives (Sarason, 2001). However, like the staff at the OC, they said that work encompassed much of their lives. According to Clokey-Till, Cryns & Johnston (2001) who worked in the OC, “Sometimes it felt like the effort and sacrifice were worthwhile for professional and personal growth. At other times it just felt all-consuming and overwhelming.” (p. 206).

For the Synergy school, the cost to membership was clear: ongoing participation (Reisch & Guyet, 2007). With dissension in this area having an impact on sense of community, the research therefore suggests learning communities such as Synergy could benefit from long-term goal setting and school-wide practices to address parent volunteering with a view to alleviating the feeling that some community members are carrying more than their share. In addition, with staff perceptions that they could not do more than they were already doing to help parents volunteer, the Synergy community has a challenge of how to have all community members work together to address this issue. Johnson and Johnson (2009) caution communities to be aware that active community members may be willing to reduce their efforts rather continue to contribute when others clearly are not. In a school learning community, which relies on co-creation of student learning, not addressing the issue of unequal volunteering could adversely affect student learning opportunities and school-wide sense of community.

5.2.3 Induction of new adult community members

While it was evident that people at Synergy were accepting, the results reveal that it was challenging for some new members to gain a sense of belonging. New community members were concerned with finding a place for themselves in a community and finding belonging within a group as evidenced by Graves (1992). Like other learning communities, the Synergy community had some practices and systems for inducting new families into the community. These systems and protocol included new family meetings, assigning buddy families to new families and giving new families a welcome pack of information (Mapp, 2003; Matusov & Rogoff, 2002; Turkanis et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, these practices showed variable impact on helping new community members transition into Synergy. The survey revealed that if 2009 was a regular year with an expected intake of families and enrolments, at least one-third of the community comprised families who had been in the community less than two years. These statistics, combined with the finding that many adults found the transition to Synergy ‘*very lonely*’ and ‘*frightening*’, highlight the potential for strengthening practices and behaviours in a school-wide and consistent fashion.

Some at Synergy thought that the strength of the relationships between existing community members could be a barrier for newcomers, and that the closeness of the relationships in Synergy could be ‘*offputting*’ or ‘*disconcerting*’. Miers and Fisher’s (2002) research on a struggling church community revealed that while the church needed new members to maintain the community, it was a high sense of community between the long-standing community members that actually inhibited an open welcome towards new members. A similar finding in the Synergy school could remind members to remember what it felt like to be a new, and to attempt to be more inviting to new members.

Research supports Synergy’s practices that new parents need to be mentored in a learning community. Calderwood (2000) argues that the pairing of a new family in the community with more experienced parent volunteers should provide new members with examples of competence, encouragement and support. The staff at the OC reported that parents could only understand the philosophy through active and shared participation in the teaching and learning process, in fact as Rogoff, Matusov and White (1996) state, “the same sort of participation in shared endeavours that is often cited as important for children’s learning” (p. 411). Matusov (1999), a parent and researcher at the OC, argues that it is helpful for newcomers to learn in shared endeavours with others who are using the philosophy in their practice. Through practice and mentoring, novices learn how to work within the philosophies of the community. In the Synergy community it could be best summed up by:

Helping some of those people with stepping stones to know what to do when they come in, until they can get that comfort that they know ‘oh I can come in and do this’ (Mika, p 10).

It was also evident from the data that Synergy was developing a welcome pack of written materials for new parents. While one parent thought this would have been helpful for her had she received it, the OC found that “although people often ask for written materials to help them learn the OC philosophy and practices, they seldom seem to find the written materials very helpful, even when they do read them.” (Turkanis et al., 2001, p. 234). It would appear from the OC experiences that mentoring is a more effective practice to learn the ways of being in a new community, than written materials.

Although the survey data showed no correlation between the length of time someone is enrolled at Synergy with sense of community, in terms of being a new member at the school, the voices of participants told a slightly different story. It was evident that not only did it take some time for new-comers to feel comfortable and ‘*settle into*’ the community, that also over time they became what Matusov (1999) terms a ‘model co-oper’ or parent volunteer. The qualitative research showed that parents in this research took anywhere from six months to five years to feel comfortable. This research suggests therefore that while schools can employ any one of a number of parent involvement strategies, parents mentoring one another, and having parents involved through “interested participation” can both help with the experience of settling into a new community, and satisfy membership commitments, contributing to the school sense of community.

5.3 Influence

The opportunity to have a say in a community or to influence others has been found to contribute to sense of community. The sharing of power is a significant factor in the Influence dimension, impacting notably on the sense of community of community members. The allocation and use of power can lead to either trust or mistrust. The discussion below examines the findings from Synergy in the Influence dimension and divides these findings into two sections: having a voice and influence in the community, and core values as guiding principles.

5.3.1 Having a voice and influence in the community

The students at Synergy shared their opinions and had influence over decisions at a whānau group level and a school level. Furthermore, the students appreciated this opportunity (Schaps, 2003), as they recognised that not all young people in schools have this experience. These findings resonate with the experiences of students in other learning communities. One example is the OC where students, like the ones at Synergy, felt that they were able to have a say, and learn to make responsible choices for their learning (Magarian, 2001). Evans' (2007) research with young people found that students feel a stronger sense of community where they experience some power and influence. This finding is consistent with a social-constructivist approach of sharing power, where students are able to share responsibility for learning, as well as to participate in dialogue to co-create shared understandings (Sewell, 2006). Having a say prepares them for the complexities of being a citizen in a democracy (Schaps, 2003). There were however, adults at Synergy who thought that developing more democratic education school-wide should be a future focus. Evans (2007) also supports this view, arguing that educators need to continue to help students to find their voice and influence, and to give them the necessary support to make these experiences positive and meaningful.

The perceptions of adults in this study varied according to their perceived influence and voice at Synergy. Some adults clearly felt listened to and that they were safely able to convey concerns. Hughey, Speer and Peterson (1999) state that a key feature in the development of sense of community is the ability to safely transmit concerns. These adults were able to share ideas and have a say in the community. Others adults however, felt that when they expressed a view about things that were not going so well, or voiced a frustration, they were not listened to and some others did not yet feel confident enough to speak up. This finding suggested that there was some room for improvement between the adult members of Synergy, to communicate and collaborate when the inevitable differences of opinion arose. Contrary to the experience of the children who can '*agree to disagree*'; adults had a harder time problem solving, similar to experiences of the adult members of the OC learning community (Turkanis et al., 2001). Unless effective mediation can occur for community members, their interests may be marginalised and what may follow is a decreased sense of community, and a decreased

desire to participate (Day, 2006; Hughey et al., 1999). If some staff and parents become doubtful that having a voice will not make any difference, research warns that the community may be demanding high conformity at the expense of participant freedom of expression (Bess et al., 2002). Graves (1992) suggests that if there is no room for dissent, the community is not a democratic one; it is in danger of becoming totalitarian. In order for communities to grow, it must be safe for all community members to express differences of opinion. Turkanis et al. (2001) advises communities to “use differing ideas as a resource for growth” and that rather than avoiding them, to recognise that “conflict is healthy and valuable, as long as respect is maintained” (p. 239).

The data also revealed parent sense of community could be dependent on and influenced by the staff member who was working with their child. Due to the required amount of participation and collaboration needed between parents and staff in a community such as Synergy, this is a consideration that may impact sense of community. In addition, as the children in the Synergy community can stay with the same staff member for many years, it is important to consider this issue. In a learning community such as Synergy, there is an expectation that power is shared equally among the student, staff member and parent, however, the findings highlighted that although this is the vision, the reality may be slightly different.

5.3.2 Core values as guiding principles

The results of this research showed that the core values of the Synergy community were being ‘lived’, supporting Schaps (2003) argument that when a community is needs-fulfilling, people become committed to its norms and values. These core values at the time of the research were responsibility, innovation, community, care, collaboration, respect and trust. Of these, the ones that were referred to most often by the participants in this study were trust, caring, respect and responsibility. Without these core values there would not be shared understandings, and the development of trust. When some challenges arose, community members were able to hold each other accountable against the community’s core values, evidence of a healthy community according to McMillan (1996). An example of this was when a parent witnessed a conflict between children, and intervened. She justified her intervention by saying “*I am allowed to say this...because we have values and...I’m living them*” (May, p. 14). The living of the core values shows the bi-directionality of the Influence dimension. While there were

members in the community who had influence over creating shared understandings such as the core values, the core values continued to influence members of the community.

5.4 Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

People are drawn to communities that will meet their needs, and be of benefit to them. Members of a community often share similar values, meaning that they also often have similar goals and needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The similarities bind people together and enable people to recognise differences and which enable trading of resources. The discussion below examines the findings from Synergy in the Integration and Fulfillment of Needs dimension and divides these findings into three sections: pride in the community, like-minded people, and personal development.

5.4.1 Pride in the community

Data generated showed that members at Synergy were proud of their community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that the reputation of a community is a strong drawcard in attracting members to a community. Communities with positive reputations are seen as beneficial to its members. Members were proud that they had chosen the Synergy community, a learning community that they preferred to other school communities. New Zealand research suggests that parents' perceptions of school influences their choice and commitment to them, and that the relationship between a parent and a school can be difficult when a school's reputation is in question (Witten, McCreanor & Kearns, 2007). The community members in this research spoke of the uniqueness of the community, supporting Day's (2006) view that "...what they have in common with 'everyone else' in their wider society matters less than what makes them different and unique" (p. 160). This uniqueness was documented through the Synergy members' constant comparisons to mainstream schools and their previous schooling experiences. While Bateman's (2002) study of sense of community in six urban middle schools in the USA was unable to account for the role that reputation played in student sense of community, it is apparent from this study that reputation did play a part in student sense of community, and also adult sense of community in the Synergy school.

5.4.2 Like-minded people

Findings from this study revealed the importance for Synergy members of finding like-minded people who shared similar values and were *'in tune'* with them. The parents' search for this unique school community and their subsequent ability to share with members, who had also been in pursuit of this kind of learning community, was one of the keys to building a sense of community. The importance of finding people with similar educational values was repeatedly commented on by parents.

My research findings suggested that parents at Synergy shared similar values about parenting and involvement in their children's learning. Like some of the parents in the OC, 45% of the parents in the qualitative part of this research had already experienced this community of learners approach in previous educational groups and recognised in each other their like-mindedness (Matusov & Rogoff, 2002). For some, having their children in Playcentre before coming to Synergy led to what McMillan (1996) calls a "discovery of similarities". In New Zealand, Playcentres are parent co-operatives where all parents are involved in supervising the children, and are "both teachers and learners" (Densem & Chapman, 2000, p. 143.). As the results showed, some parents believed the similarities with Playcentre, helped prepare them for Synergy. At a time where parents are increasingly placing their children in pre-school childcare centres to enable them to work full-time, this parent co-operative idea is very different to the experience in society at large (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). Having a shared prior experience meant that although these community members may have been strangers when they met, the ground had been set for shared connections which fulfilled parental needs.

The shared values of the parent members at Synergy also appeared to have an impact on acceptance and intimacy. Intimacy is a feature of the Membership dimension, which again demonstrates the inter-relationships between the four dimensions. Members of Synergy developed a sense of community due to their shared philosophies and values. By becoming members of a community, they felt sufficiently safe to develop intimacy in terms of what they discussed about parenting, behaviour and learning issues, and to get emotional and practical support through these discussions.

5.4.3 Personal development

Learning and skill acquisition were linked to sense of community, as some members of the Synergy community were able to meet their own needs through their joint participation in a learning community (Sewell, 2006). A feature of the learning at Synergy was that it was collaborative, meaning that each person is a learner and contributes to the learning of others (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009; Sachs & Logan, 1997). The importance of collaboration – in all its guises – is important to developing a sense of community. Abbott and Ryan (2000) also showed that learning is optimised when it occurs in community. Being at Synergy also meant accessibility to others with similar learning interests. Some adults at Synergy mentioned their appreciation of the opportunity to share their skills with one another and to be challenged in new ways. Matusov (2001) supports this notion, arguing that adult learning and development contributes to the creation of the social fabric of a community. In addition, adults at Synergy felt valued and appreciated through helping the students' learning, which in turn helped build their sense of community.

5.5 Shared Emotional Connection

Bonds form when people spend time together and interact together in positive ways, and when they make the investment to be a part of events and experiences. The discussion below examines the findings from Synergy in the Shared Emotional Connection dimension and divides these findings into four sections: shared history, friendship, support, and lastly connection through school-wide experiences.

5.5.1 Shared history

Stories of how a community honours its values form narratives that become part of its history (McMillan, 1996). These community stories are celebrated and shared with others. At Synergy, these stories were ones where the community came together to celebrate or to grieve. It may seem puzzling that McMillan and Chavis (1986) state that an individual does not have to be part of an event to form an emotional connection. However, these authors add that one has to be able to relate to the event. An example of this was a new member of Synergy who upon hearing of the death of a spouse of an established community member, and despite not knowing the family, volunteered to help in the family's business. These types of stories and legends of important events and

important people inspired the school and helped to reinforce the culture of its community (Noe, 2002, cited in Roberts & Pruitt, 2009).

Research by Calderwood (2000) suggests that it is necessary for communities to have times and events when they are 'in community'. The participants in this study talked about the importance of community-wide celebrations of learning, where students could share and be honoured for their learning. For some community members, these learning celebrations were "*a great snapshot of what the school is about*" (Paula, p. 23) and contributed to a sense of pride (Membership dimension) through seeing what and how students were learning. Roberts and Pruitt (2009) also assert that they send a message of what is valued, and that the public honouring of this helps to continually build the culture of the community.

Rituals that mark the exiting of community members were also important for creating a feeling of 'in community' (Calderwood, 2000; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009). An example of this type of celebration at Synergy was the graduating ceremony for students who were departing to high school. The whole school community came together to farewell the students and families who are leaving. Another more informal ritual at Synergy, similar to the OC, and remarked on by the parents and staff, was the return of students who had graduated from Synergy, to share their current school experiences and to reconnect with community members (Turkanis & Bartlett, 2001). The rituals in the Synergy community served to unite members of the community and give a sense of being part of something that has a past, present and future (Belenardo, 2001).

For some members at Synergy, the opportunity to be a creator and investor at the schools inception was an exciting concept (Block, 2008). A pioneering spirit drew them together as a community, especially those who chose to stay within it. These connections helped to build a sense of community as illustrated by Zephyr, "*[In] the really early days we just had such a huge focus on becoming a community*" (p. 9). For some, the participation in a type of education different to the 'norm' gave them enthusiasm and passion. This could be due to the fact that sense of community can increase when a community experiences a threat as the Synergy community did when beginning (Loomis, Docket & Brodsky, 2004). For this community, the threat was the lack of understanding from people in the wider community, and sometimes even their

families, who did not understand why families would choose an alternative way of learning for their children.

5.5.2 Friendship

The friends and relationships that community members made were very important for some members of the Synergy community. Although McMillan and Chavis (1986) do not specifically discuss friendship in their definition of sense of community and description of dimensions, other researchers have placed friendship within the Shared Emotional Connection dimension (Miers & Fisher, 2002; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002). According to the literature, friendship is crucial to building and maintaining community (Adams & Ueno, 2007; Trimberger, 2005). Friendship is understood as a mutual and egalitarian relationship characterised by attraction and preference between two people, who feel a special responsibility toward each other, doing good things for each other, but expecting nothing in return (Adams & Ueno, 2007; Salisbury & Palombaro, 1998).

An interesting finding in the present research was that of some parents' perceptions of developing friendships with children. This unique relationship was also documented in the OC (Matusov, 1999). The children at Synergy did not allude to this friendship with parents, but children did mention that staff "*are your friends as well as teachery things*" (Drew, p. 3). It could be assumed from these results that adult-child friendships could be a feature of learning communities wherein the traditional boundaries of power are blurred, which supports the co-construction of learning.

The link of friendship to sense of community in the present research was extremely strong for children. Every child involved in the qualitative research spoke of friendship and often at length, describing how they met, how they bonded and how they maintained their friendships. While some of the contexts they gave for bonding were outside school, the nature of the Synergy learning community enabled students to "*have more time to bond because you can bond while you're working and stuff...because...at other schools...you might be forced to work individually*" (McLeod, p. 1). Hamm and Faircloth's (2005) research revealed that students who were bored in class pointed to the lack of engagement with classmates as the major reason for their boredom. These

research examples highlight the importance of creating learning opportunities that allow students to interact with classmates in order to develop sense of community.

The ways in which adult friendships developed at Synergy between community members, supports Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, and Rosenberg's (2002) argument that people must have opportunities to have frequent interactions and to be in close proximity with one another for bonds of friendship to occur, as most friendships were formed as a result of child. This may be due to the emotional risks that community members open themselves up to in friendships (McMillan, 1996).

While overall the data showed that friendships were strong, important to community members, and experienced by many of them, the data also identified the perception adult cliques in the community, both in the past and in the present. While it is natural to bond through similarities, and indeed most friendship groups tend to be homogenous, these types of relationships also have the potential to alienate people and serve as a liability for a community (Adams & Ueno, 2007). Cliques focus on homogeneity rather than heterogeneity, and are not generally open to new people (Trimberger, 2005). One inherent danger of cliques is that if some groups or individuals do not feel included, they may not commit to community goals or norms (Graves, 1992). An example of this was a Synergy community member who no longer attended community events because of her perception of cliques. Another danger of cliques is that some adult cliques can influence and make decisions for the whole community. A useful lens with which to view friendship and cliques is the lens of social capital. Social capital can be referred to as the "quality of the relationships, the cohesion that exists among its citizens" (Block, 2008, p. 17). The important forms of social capital to understand are notions of 'bridging' and 'bonding'. Bridging social capital is inclusive, outward looking and allows for the bringing together of different types of people. In contrast, bonding social capital brings together groups who are of like mind, and are inward-looking (Putnam, 2000). Block (2008) argues that a healthy community needs a lot of bridging social capital. These research findings suggest that the bonding social capital is quite strong in the Synergy community. While the school has opportunities for bridging social capital, an active effort by community members to interact in this way would help build a sense of community among more community members, particularly in the parent and staff groups.

5.5.3 Support

This study revealed the importance of offering and receiving practical and emotional support in the building of a strong sense of community. While support was experienced in different ways by the parents, students and staff in the community, it was clear that reciprocal support was a key element in sustaining a sense of community among Synergy members.

Students appreciated welcoming support when they entered the school, and support they got with their learning. Practical and emotional support meant that students, as well as parents at Synergy felt they were “*all sort of a big family at Synergy*” (Drew, p. 4). The emotional support students gave each other showed an awareness of each other’s needs, highlighting Olivia’s views that “*the emotional maturity of our children is incredible*” (p. 13). The metaphor of family is not a new one for people who experience a sense of community. In Calderwood’s (2000) research, one primary school described themselves as a family. Furthermore, at the O’Hearn school in Mapp’s (2003) study, participants spoke of themselves as being part of a school family. The way that Synergy members could make a coffee, sit on the couch and connect with people also contributed to this feeling of “*extended whānau*” (Olivia, p. 15). Trimberger (2005) suggests that a significant amount of care-giving can happen as a result of relationships built within a community, as was the case in the Synergy community.

This research also revealed that there was a considerable level of practical and emotional support extended between parent and staff groups. The reciprocal support that occurred between parent and staff groups demonstrated that both groups were actively involved in breaking down the traditional educator-parent barriers.

5.5.4 Connection through school-wide experiences

The present research showed that three main rituals or events built emotional connections at Synergy. Camps, social events and symposia were ways to connect with others. These were themes consistent in both the surveys and the qualitative data. In addition, while these activities provided opportunities for the building of connection, it was the quality of the interaction at these events that was important (McMillan, 1996).

Being in the same whānau group offered students a chance to build emotional connections with peers. The opportunity for students to work in learning groups was also a way they connected with others and “[got] to know each other’s personality” (Toni, p. 6). These findings supports Royal and Rossi’s (1996) view, that a sub-community connection can inform a macro sense of community.

Some participants in the present study held strong opinions that the yearly ritual of the school-wide camps was an important tradition for the Synergy school community, and gave some members an opportunity to interact with each other through informal activities (Belenardo, 2001). Families stayed in a camping ground for two days and one night. The camps were intended as a time to connect with each other at the beginning of a new school year. However, for other members of the community who attended the school camps, especially those who were new, the lack of formal activities and structure, combined with not knowing people, made these school camps challenging. In recent New Zealand research of early childhood settings, evidence was found that intentional and planned practices to create a welcoming atmosphere, had an impact on the new partnerships (Mitchell, Haggerty, Hampton & Pairman, 2006). New Synergy members suggested two of the practices illustrated in Mitchell et al.’s (2006) study, that Synergy community members consider in the future. These were that community members introduce them to other families, and that parents and staff watch out for ‘shy’ and new parents at these events.

Research showed that members of the Synergy community viewed whānau camps more positively than the school-wide camps, as they enabled the building of a sense of community on a smaller scale rather than as a whole school group. This was consistent with suggestions that membership in smaller groups can help individuals feel more at home in the larger group (Miers & Fisher, 2002). Whānau camps suited parents who steered clear of large group gatherings. Parents and staff appreciated the relaxed nature of these, and the opportunity to get to know the students in another context.

In the same way that parents and staff appreciated the opportunity to get to know students ‘outside of school’, social activities and events were a way for parents and staff to get to know one another “not necessarily related to school” (Diana, p. 6). These

potential friendship activities according to Adams and Ueno (2007) allow casual interactions, which enable community members who occupy different status to connect.

5.6 Other research findings

This section discusses findings of the results not already discussed in the previous four sections. The results from the quantitative research not already discussed include the relationship between the length of time people were enrolled in the community and sense of community, the negative correlations that were discovered in the data, and the finding that sense of community was stronger in the Synergy community for students than for adults. This section also discusses the key themes of school size, a decreasing sense of community for parents as their children get older, and the dynamics among and within the dimensions.

5.6.1 Relationship between time enrolled in Synergy and sense of community

It was hypothesised that sense of community would be positively correlated to the length of time people had been enrolled at Synergy, as was the case for some other communities, due to the time takes time to develop relationships within a community, suggesting that those who are in the community longest would feel a greater sense of community (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Royal & Rossi, 1996). The survey data indicated no significant relationship between time enrolled in the school and sense of community, however in the focus groups and interviews most people agreed that the longer they were in the Synergy community, the more comfortable they became. After investigating the data further, it appeared that the data had not shown a discrepancy, rather the data revealed that sense of community for Synergy community members, was due to the individual and unique perceptions and possible experiences that members had. For example, a search of individual survey results shows that one female adult who has been in the community less than a year, perceived a high sense of community (38 out of a possible 40 points), whereas another female adult who had been in the community the same amount of time experienced a much lower sense of community (21 out of a possible 40 points). While not statistically analysed, these examples portray the individual's experience. While there were adults who had been in the community for many years, who perceived a strong sense of community, there were others who did not. This highlighted that there were additional factors which influenced their sense of community, rather than it being simply a reflection of time.

5.6.2 Negative correlations

The results of a Pearson's inter-correlation analysis revealed a negative correlation between sense of community and the frequency of the contact people in the Synergy community had with one another ($r = -.30, p < .01$). The question in the survey asked 'How much contact do you have with members of the Synergy community?'. While the correlation is small, it reveals some potentially interesting information and highlights that further research is needed. The negative correlation could be explained in different ways, as supported by qualitative data.

For some, the challenge may come from being part of a community without previous experiences of doing so. Communities, by their nature, require complex interactions among members, especially when "*it's a learning process even being involved in a community... because we've forgotten how to relate to, with one another*" (Caroline, p. 14). The negative correlation could also be explained by the fact that some members mentioned challenging interactions with other community members. Sabrina spoke of the fact that "*sometimes bad stuff happens at school, you know that's the nature of a community*" (p. 11). In addition, one community member spoke of the fact that when she was very actively involved as a parent, she found that her sense of community actually decreased as she thought the reality of the community was at odds with the vision. This comment suggests that sense of community is a perception, or as McMillan and Chavis (1986) call it, a feeling. Perceptions are also influenced by expectations. If the expectation that people have is not matched by their experiences, this may alter their sense of community.

A further negative correlation was highlighted in the research. Data showed a negative correlation between a members' frequency of being in the Synergy building and sense of community ($r = -.26, p < .01$). Similar to the frequency of contact correlation, this result emphasised that overall sense of community was higher when members were less often in the building. This was an interesting finding given the strong correlation that was found between the frequency of contact Synergy members had with one another, and how often they were in the Synergy building ($r = .89, p < .01$). This correlation suggests that much of the contact between community members is in fact in the Synergy building, rather than outside of it. It could be argued that frequency of contact is an entirely different factor to the quality of contact. For example, some parents shared that

they come in at three o'clock to pick up children, and because they needed to get in and out again very quickly, they would say hello to people and leave, without time for conversation. It could also suggest that the contact with members in the building is not of the type that is bonding and enabling emotional connection as evidenced by several parents. Chris shared that *"I can walk in the door here past people that I've even been introduced to and it's just like they look straight through me"* (p. 12). Comments like Chris' were matched by Terry, *"I have to say even here sometimes I've been sort of sitting on the steps just waiting and not many people say hello"* (p. 8). These comments could provide evidence for that there is a potential to strengthen sense of community when members are in the building, especially among the adults. If this is the case, the finding reveals the challenges of developing a shared emotional connection in the busy Synergy building, and provides a challenge to the community to further bridge social capital. It could also support the data that showed the importance of activities and experiences that build shared emotional connections outside of the Synergy building.

5.6.3 Student sense of community stronger than adults

Students in this research showed a significantly higher sense of community than adults at Synergy. The high student sense of community was evident in the way students spoke about the school. There were very few negative comments, with most comments almost overwhelmingly positive. As evidenced in Vieno et al. (2005), sense of community for young people has been found to be negatively correlated with antisocial behaviour, social isolation, worry, loneliness, violence and truancy. Vieno et al. (2005) also reported studies that found sense of community was positively correlated with happiness, social support, conflict resolution skills, tangible assistance and respect for democratic values and norms. None of the students in this study spoke of any of the above negative correlates, and alternately, there was mention from the students of the positive correlates listed above. The contrast between the higher sense of community of the students compared to the adults, highlights that the Synergy community is first and foremost a school learning community, with the priority being student learning and sense of community. A community such as this requires enormous commitment and energy from the adults in the community, therefore there is perhaps less focus and attention on the adults. This finding is not necessarily negative, the community is a school after all, and the primary focus is on the education of its students. That Synergy students have a relatively strong sense of community is encouraging as sense of

community has substantial effects on academic attitudes and motivation (Battistich et al., 1995). This research suggests that Synergy's practices for building sense of community are working for students.

5.6.4 Community size

A key finding from the qualitative analysis was the issue of school size. While not included in the dimensions by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as affecting sense of community, some participants discussed that they believed this to be so. Although, with approximately 200 students, this school was small in comparison to some other primary schools in New Zealand, it was telling that the only time school size was mentioned by community members was when speaking about how large it was. Members felt that the current size of the community made a sense of community challenging due to the sheer demand of knowing whom everyone was. This finding is supported by researchers who assert that to come together in community members must know one another (Abbott and Ryan, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1995; Strike 2004). A focus for researchers in this field is how small schools provide a better sense of belonging for their community members (Sergiovanni, 1995). Belonging may be achieved by having fewer people to fill the roles, which means each member is asked to do more, and members can see the importance of their contribution, which in turn gives them a sense that Graves (1992) speaks of, that "there is a place in the group that only I can fill" (p. 65).

5.6.5 Sense of community as students get older

The perception that some Synergy parents had a decreasing sense of community as the students got older, was an interesting finding. It was mentioned by parents in relation to their sense of community, rather than the sense of community that was experienced by the children. Some Synergy parents spoke about their own children not wanting them around as much as they got older, and that they did not need as much help. Abbott and Ryan's (1999) research supports this finding by claiming that at puberty young people begin to reverse their dependency on parents. Data showed that some parents at Synergy may have stopped or limited their contributions to the community on this basis. However, research also suggests that although adolescents are reversing their dependency on parents, children generally perceive their parents as being key sources of support (McGrath, Brennan, Dolan & Barnett, 2009). In addition adolescence is a time when young people need the support of non-parental adults suggesting that parents who

want to give their own child more autonomy may be able to support school and other families by monitoring and mentoring other children (Vieno, Santinello, Pastore & Perkins, 2007).

5.6.6 Dynamics among the dimensions

The research also highlights the challenge of interpreting the data and placing them within McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions. When Obst and White (2004) reviewed items within the four dimensions of the Sense of Community Index (SCI) they found that different authors may have interpreted a single item as fitting in as many as three dimensions. An example of this interpretive challenge can be highlighted by the illustration of the concept of friendship. As previously mentioned, some researchers have placed friendship within the Shared emotional connection dimension due to the way that members bond and become closer to one another (Miers & Fisher, 2002). Friendship could also be placed in the Influence dimension, if participants were indicating that through friendships they were known to influence one another (Adams & Ueno, 2007). Friendship may also be placed within the Membership dimension, with the understanding that when people have friends in the community they may be more willing to devote time in the community because they can help friends by doing so (Adams & Ueno, 2007). This example supports Hill's (1996) assertion that sense of community is setting specific. Interpretive challenges also highlight the need for a qualitative approach when studying sense of community. As the example of friendship has illustrated, researchers need to be prepared to listen carefully to their community participants, rather than being guided solely by other research findings.

5.7 Chapter summary

This chapter discussed key findings in relation to perceptions of sense of community of the staff, children and parents at Synergy. In summary, the Synergy community had a strong overall sense of community. The research showed that each of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) dimensions of Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection, played an important part in the development of sense of community. This chapter emphasised the importance of schools becoming learning communities. A learning community appears to offer staff, parents and children more opportunities to engage in co-creative practices and build understandings together to develop sense of community. When staff, parents and children engage in connecting

interactions with one another and operate within the expectations of the community, sense of community is developed and sustained.

The chapter also highlighted the challenges of sense of community, in particular it being a perception very much based on individual experiences, feelings or expectations. Sense of community is a personal construct and therefore can be impacted upon for a community member by even one adverse experience. Due to the fact that adverse experiences happened to a number of community members in this research, and these experiences involved interactions with other community members, the research at Synergy highlighted the importance that communities help their members to respect and value diverse opinions, and work to resolve conflict in healthy ways. In a learning community, where adults work so closely with students, the modelling of this by adults is paramount.

The following chapter presents the final conclusions from this study from which implications are considered for the Synergy community, and other communities interested in developing sense of community. The limitations of this research are also highlighted, and future research recommended.

Chapter 6 Conclusions and Implications

6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the results obtained in relation to the original research questions and discusses the implications of this research for learning communities. This final section also considers the theoretical contributions of this research and makes explicit the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes by highlighting further research opportunities.

6.2 Summary of the research questions

6.2.1 Does the Synergy community have a strong sense of community?

Data showed quantitatively that the Synergy school community scored a sense of community mean of 4.14 (from a total of 5). Qualitative data supported the quantitative data, that overall community members in the Synergy school perceived that they *do* have a sense of community.

The qualitative and quantitative analyses also suggest that the students as a group in Synergy community have a strong sense of community (a mean of 4.39 from a possible total of 5). When Schaps (2003) stated that most schools that survey students show mediocre mean scores in sense of community, he did not specify what particular scores would represent mediocrity. Battistich et al. (1995) surveyed students in 24 schools and found overall means between 2.95 and 3.29 (using 5-point scales). Bateman (2002) found mean sense of community scores across the sixth grade in three schools of only 2.69, 2.80 and 2.55 from a possible total of 4. In comparison to these studies, the present research demonstrates that student sense of community in the Synergy school community is certainly not mediocre, in contrast it is strong. No other research study has shown this strength of sense of community in a school.

6.2.2 How is sense of community perceived and experienced when analysed according to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection?

While many practices and behaviours may influence the strength of a sense of community, this study highlighted fourteen in particular. The factors identified as enabling sense of community are outlined below.

6.2.2.1 Membership

Critical to a sense of community is the experience of a positive induction to the school community, in particular for adults. Furthermore, developing an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parent participation within the learning community supported the development of sense of community. In addition, perceptions that members of the community were accepted by the community, and belonged within the community, further aided a sense of community.

6.2.2.2 Influence

Sense of community was enabled when members felt that they had a voice and their opinions were listened to. The development of sense of community was also aided notably when community members behaved within the shared norms or guiding principles of the school learning community.

6.2.2.3 Integration and Fulfilment of Needs

Crucial to sense of community was members having a sense of pride in the community. In addition sense of community was aided by members having shared values and goals which enabled them access to like-minded people. Furthermore for adult members of the community being able to learn and share skills through collaboration with other community members increased sense of community.

6.2.2.4 Shared Emotional Connection

Sense of community was created through shared experiences such as rituals, celebrations and tragedies. Opportunities to connect with others in a positive way at school-wide events helped strengthen sense of community. The development of sense of

community was also increased for those who experienced friendship and support in the community. Members who had formed friendships or deep relationships reported sense of community.

6.2.3 Are there similarities and differences in how individuals and groups within the Synergy community perceive and experience sense of community; and what contributes to these similarities and differences?

Seven key themes were common to all groups (students, parents and staff) in the Synergy community. These key themes were found across all of the four dimensions and were as follows: acceptance and belonging, having a voice, living according to guiding principles of the school, pride in the community, friendship, support and opportunities to connect with others. These findings suggest that these areas are important to human beings in communities regardless of age or position in the community. The findings also suggest that these key themes have become practices that are important to this community, and lived by the families and staff members, both within school and outside of it.

The remaining seven key themes were common across adult groups, with six themes shared by parent and staff groups, and one common to parents only (decreasing sense of community for parents as students got older). In addition to the themes mentioned in the previous paragraph, adult sense of community was affected by practices that directly affected them as adult members in the Synergy community. These were the successful induction of adults, having a shared history, having like-minded people to connect with, personal development, expectations around volunteering, and issues of school size.

Student data clearly showed that students as a group had a stronger sense of community than the adults in the research. Not only did survey data reveal this finding, but the students were much more positive overall in their reporting of a sense of community than adults. The difference between student and adult perspectives were in part due to their experiences. An example of this was that students felt that they could voice their opinion, whereas some adults clearly did not feel that they could. Students also reported resoundingly positively of the friendships that they made in the community whereas not all adults had strong relationships with other members of the community.

The research also showed that there were differences of perspectives or experiences among the key themes. Data also showed individual's diversity through the dimensions. For example, while one student spoke a lot of the value of the freedom that the Synergy community afforded her as being important, another student spoke mainly of Synergy people being welcoming, and the friends she was making in the community. The diversity in perspectives highlighted that although sense of community is based on collective experience, that is experience with and among other community members, it is also an individual construct, based on an individual's perceptions or feelings (Pretty et al., 1996).

6.3 Implications of the research

6.3.1 Implications for school learning communities

This research highlighted the need for learning communities to consider how they induct new adult members into the community, particularly new parents, so that they are able to pass on the norms and values of their unique communities. This is of particular importance to schools who have new members enrol each year, and schools that are inducting parents into an educational philosophy that is different to anything they have experienced before (Matusov, 1999). Schools are issued a challenge to support new parents in their induction and help them to collaborate and fully participate. If schools endeavour to become true learning communities, where parents are partners with staff, and where the voice of student, staff member and parent are of equal value, these groups must work together to devise strategies and practices which mentor and support new adults. In addition, as some of the responsibility for this falls on staff members in learning communities Seeley (1993) recommends that schools who are actively pursuing parent participation, reorganise their budgets and revise their professional job descriptions to make this a priority in their schools. The findings from this study also emphasise the importance of developing a sense of community at a whole school level in addition to sense of community at a sub-community or classroom level. This finding is consistent with that of previous research studies (e.g. Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Calderwood, 2000; Weisenfeld, 1996). In developing a sense of community, schools must realise that, while the presence of sub-communities is necessary, that all groups must have opportunities to work together. This is especially important for learning communities who value innovation and collaboration. Opportunities to mix allows the

building of sense of community across the four dimensions. These opportunities in school may take the form of buddy programmes, group inquiries around shared interests, circle discussions, workshops, and multi-level excursions (Bradshaw, 2001; Schaps, 2003). Outside of school they may take the form of any type of social or learning activities which include all families and staff in the school community.

6.3.2 Implications for children in learning communities

This study illustrated the importance of children working and learning together to create a sense of community. Children learn much through collaboration and shared thinking (Turkanis et al., 2001). Seizing opportunities to work together and communicate now will help students develop the collaborative skills necessary to participate in and lead the communities of tomorrow. The present study also showed the importance of adults learning alongside children. While learning in a school is a priority for the students, a learning community allows for all members of the community to learn together. Children therefore need to understand that working with people with diverse interests and perspectives can be important for their growth. This understanding will mean that students need to be open to allowing other students and adults to be a part of the learning experiences in a school learning community.

6.3.3 Implications for educators in learning communities

The importance of educators helping parents to learn to volunteer and to participate as learners in learning communities is also underscored in this study. Educators need to be aware of, and be prepared to play a critical role in guiding parents to participate in a learning community. The research also builds on work that highlights the challenges of staff-parent relationships (Davies et al., 1996) and Adams and Christenson's (2000) research, showing the importance of trust between teachers and parents. Educators must be mindful of the inherent power that they have, and how this power can influence the degree of involvement of parents in a learning community (Feuerstein, 2000). This perception of power has implications for the interactions and communication that educators extend to parents, by taking steps to model and develop respect, trust and support.

Arising from these implications is the need for an educator in a learning community to take on a different role to that of a traditional teacher. In fact, it requires that the

educator allow the coordination and planning of the classroom to be shared among all participants (Polson, 2001). It is acknowledged that educators are not trained for this level of intensity of collaboration (Turkanis et al., 2001). However, the willingness of an educator to be a 'learner' coupled with a level of trust from parents that while the educator is learning the children will also be, is the first step in changing the traditional teacher-parent relationship. Findings from this research stress the need to create opportunities for students to participate actively in learning communities. Students in this research appreciated opportunities to work with other students in learning teams, mix with children across the school, have a say and influence decision-making, and in particular appreciated the perception that staff members were their friends as well as their educators. These findings support Vieno et al.'s 2005 assertion that democratic school climate increases school sense of community. For parents volunteering in learning communities, this finding is just as important for them to be aware of.

6.3.4 Implications for parents in learning communities

Findings from the present study revealed the capacity and potential of parents in participating in breaking down the traditional teacher-parent relationship. This is a unique finding to this learning community, and challenges the wealth of material published that points to the fact that it is solely an educator's role to involve, support and nurture parents. This research clearly shows that staff appreciate and value moments when parents support, help, encourage, and nurture them as educators and as people. In addition, staff appreciate when parents do this for other parents and for students.

This study revealed the importance of bridging social capital among parents in particular. Feuerstein's (2000) findings echo this research finding that parent cliques can influence parent involvement. Schools are one of parents' main sources of community belonging in New Zealand (Witten et al., 2007). In addition, it is through getting to know one another, that parents reinforce the shared values of the school for their own and other children (Strike, 2004). Therefore, it is vitally important that parents practice both bonding social capital (friendship forming) as well as bridging social capital.

6.4 Contributions to research

Findings from this research contribute to three areas of knowledge: sense of community research in schools, measurement of sense of community, and research in learning communities.

6.4.1 Contributions to sense of community research in schools

This study has further clarified the practices and conditions that lead to a sense of community in schools. These findings build on the work of Belenardo (2001) who surveyed parents and teachers in nine middle schools in the United States, as well as Bateman's (2002) work on the parameters of sense of community with sixth-grade students in three schools in the USA.

6.4.2 Contributions to understanding measurement of sense of community

The use of Peterson et al.'s (2008) Brief Sense of Community Scale further contributed to the understanding of measurement tools in the field of sense of community research. This study has revealed the effectiveness of using this tool in a small school learning community in a New Zealand setting. This builds on the work of Peterson et al. (2008), and many others researchers who have used other measurement tools to measure sense of community.

6.4.3 Contributions to research in learning communities

This study has incidentally identified some of the differences between a school, and a learning community. It also highlighted practices and perceptions of all community members (students, parents, and staff) within a learning community that lead to a sense of community. This study builds on the work of the community members of the OC in Salt Lake City, documented in the book *Learning together: Children and adults in a school community*, and other publications.

6.5 Limitations of this study

A limitation of the present study was with regard to the BSCS tool. Comparing the data from this study with Peterson et al.'s (2008) was an original intention of this research. Through the use of the BSCS, there was a finding that was of concern, regarding the internal validity of the Influence dimension. When the BSCS was originally used by

Peterson, Speer and McMillan in 2008 with an adult only population, they achieved an internal reliability of .77 for Influence. This study achieved only .53, well under the expected minimum Cronbach's alpha value of .7 (Brace, Kemp, & Snelgar, 2009). This may suggest that the wording of the Influence questions was not understandable or familiar to participants, maybe in particular the children. Influence is not an easy concept for children to understand and as there is no direct synonym for the term 'influence', rewriting item 6 is a challenging task. However it is clear from a .53 value for the Influence dimension, that if this tool were to be used in another school community such as the Synergy one, benefit may be gained from rewriting these questions, and perhaps even trialling the tool before using it. A researcher may even find that they need to develop a child-specific BSCS-type tool to measure sense of community for young students. The challenges with internal validity may also be associated with the fact that the dimensions overlap with other constructs such as empowerment, which has lead other researchers to either eliminate or rewrite McMillan and Chavis' (1986) Influence dimension (Vieno et al., 2005). For example, Vieno et al. (2005) excluded McMillan and Chavis' (1986) Influence dimension as they believed it a narrow definition of community, measuring an individual's disposition to participate in decision-making. These researchers preferred to create a construct that measured democratic school climate, which was more aligned to capture an agreed upon climate of expectations and perceptions. A democratic construct rather than one that measures individual voices may benefit learning communities, and in fact be more consistent with the philosophy of a learning community.

Readers of this research are cautioned that the limits of this study do not allow the generalisation of the findings beyond this research setting. As Mapp (2003), who interviewed eighteen parents and seven school staff of one school, commented, the focus of this research being in only one site without comparison to another, and the sample size in part two of the research make this data unique to the community in which the research was held.

A further limitation of the study regarding generalization to other communities is specifically about the correlates discussed in this research. While there were positive and negative correlations between sense of community and other factors, Hill (1996) cautions researchers that correlations do not necessarily hold true in all communities.

Sense of community is an aggregate variable. In addition to the correlates of sense of community changing from one community to another, correlates can change within a community over time. Therefore research at Synergy at a different time may yield different results.

Furthermore, it is useful for readers to consider that research into sense of community in the present setting, allows meaning to be attributed among people in the Synergy community, in this context at this time in history (Weisenfeld, 1996). Research into the sense of community in this setting carried out at another time, with different community members, or with the same community members who may have different perceptions, may yield quite different results.

6.6 Further research

This study was the first in New Zealand to focus on the establishment of sense of community in a school designed as a learning community. Further research may build on this study in order to develop further understanding in the New Zealand context. In reviewing the present findings, this study suggests that further research into sense of community could investigate the following:

- The relationship between school size and sense of community by doing comparative studies between different settings (Vieno et al., 2005);
- The challenge that this research had with the Influence dimension of McMillan and Chavis (1986), and create measurement around democratic school culture rather than an individuals' disposition to participate in decision-making (Vieno et al., 2005);
- The relationship between sub-community sense of community and whole school sense of community by measuring membership in both simultaneously (Brody & Marx, 2001);
- The notion that inconsistent findings in sense of community studies is due to measurement rather than theoretical problems, as argued by Peterson et al. (2008), by using the BSCS widely in sense of community research;
- The modification of the BSCS to make it more suitable for younger participants. Like the Sense of Community Index tool, the BSCS was developed from adult theory and research, and may need modification to better measure sense of community for primary school age students (Pretty et al., 1996);

- The sense of community of staff in learning communities. Research could specifically address the relationship between sense of community and role overload, mentioned in Royal and Rossi (1996).

6.7 Final words

I have been incredibly lucky to be afforded a trusted position as a researcher in the Synergy community. Through being a keeper and presenter of community member's perspectives and stories, I have been afforded a unique look into individuals' experiences, and I believe I have grown hugely as a result of this. Over the year of generating and analysing data I have been able to use what I have learned to transform the way I have connected with people in the community. I have also been able to use what students in the research shared to inform my own practice as an educator.

Sergiovanni (1994) asserts that a community is 'into community' when community values are at the heart of its thinking. The heart and soul of this thesis for me was continuing my learning about how to be 'in community', learning how to put community values at the heart of my thinking. I will sign off with a gem from a parent about her musings about the Synergy school, which echoed my own sentiments about community:

Our Western society is quite dysfunctional...each of us are really segregated, so it's the children are there, and they go off to a school environment...you drop them off at the gate, and you wave goodbye. And...something that I do a lot is question myself on how things would be if we were still living in tribes. You know they say that our evolution to this point happened in tribal scenarios, it didn't happen in the nuclear family...But I'm just seeing that here...the reason it feels so different is because it's all inclusive, we've brought back that thing of the children aren't separate from the adults...there's a transmission that happens between people, and...it happens between adults and children as well, and it's an unspoken thing, it's actually an energetic thing...and I feel like that's what's happening here in this environment and that's why everyone feels so different (Caroline, pp. 11-12).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: School information sheet and consent form for Board of Trustees



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Psychological sense of community in a special character primary school study

School Information Sheet for Board of Trustees and staff at



The notion of and practice of community has interested me for some time, and being part of the learning community has piqued my interest even further. Our community is unique, and the sometimes extremely busy nature of it means we don't get a lot of time to step back from the trees and survey the forest. I'd like to do this in my research that forms part of my M.Ed requirements.

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) is a concept that has been extensively studied, in settings from neighbourhoods to prisons, from adolescents to the elderly. However there is a gap in this field of research in primary schools, and

particularly in learning communities. 'Community' is one of our core values, and one of the most challenging core values to articulate and break down. PSOC, as I am using it in my study, essentially means "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

What follows is an explanation of the research that I would like permission to carry out at

Part 1 of the study

The first part of the research will involve a survey called the BSCS (Brief Sense of Community Scale). It has 8 questions and uses a likert-type scale that asks participants to rate their agreement with the statement, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. It is designed to take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Everyone in our school community (students, parents and staff) will be invited to participate. It will be available online, or alternatively as a paper copy. This survey has been selected for many reasons including:

- it honours our inclusive nature at school in hearing opinions of everybody who wants to contribute
- it is a short quantitative research tool that requires members in our community, who already have significant time restrictions, to complete it;
- it has been created by experts in the sense of community field

Consent from both adults and children is required and details of the survey will only be given to those who consent to participate.





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Benefits of this research are:
• that by identifying the factors that contribute to our sense of community, we can work towards enhancing them, thereby further improving our sense of community. This in turn will impact on student learning, and the learning of our entire learning community.

By consenting you have the following rights:

- to decline to participate;
- to withdraw from the study at any time;
- to ask any questions about the study at any time;
- to refuse to answer any particular questions;
- to provide information on the understanding that the name of the school and participants will not be used in the final report without permission;
- to be given access to a summary of findings on conclusion of the study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 08/48. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x 6929, email humanethicssouthb@massey.ac.nz

Please complete the school consent form to indicate your agreement to participate. Copies of information sheets for families at school are attached for your perusal.

If you have any further questions, please contact me, or one of my supervisors.

RESEARCHER
Sharlene Petersen

11m Cell

THESIS SUPERVISORS
Dr. Alison Sewell
School of Educational Studies
Massey University
Palmerston North
Phone: 64 6 3569099, ext 8853

Dr. Jean Annan
School of Education at Albany
Massey University College of Education
PO Box 102 904
North Shore Mail Centre.

Part 2 of the study

The second part of the research is an interview or participation in a focus group discussion. Again everyone in the community is invited to participate and participants will have the choice of an individual interview, or a focus group discussion, depending on which they feel most comfortable with. These will take place after school at and will be approximately 1 hour in duration. The questions in the second part of the research will focus on the factors that lead to a sense of community, and a discussion around opportunities to further develop a sense of community.

Participants in this research will be asked to consent to their voice being sound-recorded. This is to allow transcription and ensure as much accuracy in the interpretation of data as possible. Upon transcription participants will have an opportunity to edit the transcription before it is used in the research. The audio files will be used for this research only.

As we are a small school, and people know each other well, I cannot guarantee anonymity. It is likely that people will know people who participate in the research, particularly interviews. In addition there may be connections made between statements and the persons making them in the report. I will not use any participant's name or the school name.





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LETTER OF INVITATION FOR SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A SPECIAL CHARACTER

PRIMARY SCHOOL

January 2009

Dear _____ and the Board of Trustees

I am writing to ask for formal permission for _____ to participate in my research project as part of my Masters in Education (Guidance Studies) at Massey University.

The aim of this study is to measure and understand the psychological sense of community as experienced by members within our community.

Please find attached an Information Sheet outlining the focus and purpose of the study and the participation sought. Accompanying this is a Consent Form that I would appreciate you signing and returning to me.

Kind regards

Sharlene Petersen





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SCHOOL CONSENT FORM

PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A SPECIAL CHARACTER

PRIMARY SCHOOL

We have read the information sheet for the study and have had the details of the study explained to us satisfactorily.

We have had questions regarding the study answered to our satisfaction, and we understand that we may ask further questions at any time.

We understand that the school has the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and to decline to answer any particular questions.

We agree to voluntarily participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

We understand that the researcher will need to access school databases to obtain address details of the families a and we give permission for this.

Director's signature

Name

Date

.....

.....

.....

Board Chair's signature

Name

Date

.....



Appendix 2: Survey

Psychological sense of community in a special character primary					
1. These questions ask for your thoughts on community.					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I can get what I need in this school community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This school community helps me meet my needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like a member of this school community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I belong in this school community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a say about what goes on in my school community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People in this school community are good at influencing each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel connected to this school community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a good bond with others in this school community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Which gender are you?					
<input type="radio"/> Female					
<input type="radio"/> Male					
<input type="radio"/> Prefer not to answer this question					
3. Which of these describes you? (You may choose more than one)					
<input type="checkbox"/> Student					
<input type="checkbox"/> Staff member					
<input type="checkbox"/> Parent					
<input type="checkbox"/> Extended family member (caregiver, aunt, uncle, grandparent etc)					
<input type="checkbox"/> Former student					
Other (please specify)					
<input type="text"/>					
4. How long have you been part of the school community?					
<input type="radio"/> Less than a year					
<input type="radio"/> Between 1 year and 2 years					
<input type="radio"/> Between 2 and 3 years					
<input type="radio"/> Between 3 and 4 years					
<input type="radio"/> Between 4 and 5 years					
<input type="radio"/> Between 5 and 6 years					
<input type="radio"/> Between 6 and 7 years					
<input type="radio"/> Longer than 7 years					

Psychological sense of community in a special character primary

5. In what ways are you involved with other community members? You may choose as many answers as you like.

- I socialise with people out of school hours
- Contact through my child/ren's friendships
- I offer parent or adult support at during school opening hours
- I help with fundraising at school
- I help with fundraising out of school
- I attend organised community events such as meetings
- I help with events during school hours
- I organise or help with events outside school hours
- Through chatting informally with others at when I am in the building
- As part of learning groups e.g. thinktank, Board of Trustees, Enviro-Schools
- As a staff member
- I share interests with others outside school hours (e.g. we are in the same sports teams, we go to the same yoga classes, we are in the same book club, we go to the same church etc)
- I live in the same region or area as others
- My children attend early childhood centres with other parents
- I carpool with other families

Other (please specify)

6. How often are you in the building?

- Daily
- Several times a week
- Once a week
- Several times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month

Psychological sense of community in a special character primary

7. How much contact do you have with members of the community?

- Daily
- Several times a week
- Once a week
- Several times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month

8. Only answer this question if you are an adult.

If you have children, how many are currently enrolled at _____ ?

- None
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- More than four
- I don't have children

9. Only answer this question if you are an adult.

If you have children, how many are not currently enrolled, but have been enrolled at _____ in the past?

- None
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- More than four
- I don't have children

Appendix 3: Information sheet for adults



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Psychological sense of community in a special character primary school study

Letter of invitation to adults in the community of

March 2009

Hi all

My name is Sharlene Petersen, and I am one of the here at

As some of you are aware I am doing a thesis as part of my Masters degree at Massey University. The aim of my research is to look at the sense of community that people experience in our school. Sense of community can be described as a feeling that members have when we belong and feel that we matter to the community, and a faith that our needs will be met through our commitment to the community.

Your rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher; and,
- be given access to a summary of the project findings.



Doing this research will help me compare our sense of community to other settings, but more importantly will give data specific to us. By identifying the factors that contribute to our sense of community, we can work towards enhancing them, thereby further improving our sense of community, which in turn impacts on the learning of our children.

Part 1 - Survey

Firstly, everyone in the community will be invited to participate in a short survey that will take about 15 minutes to fill out. This can either be done on a paper form, or online. This survey is an existing tool, created by an expert in this field, and allows me to compare against well-established and regarded data from educational experts.

While I will need your consent to participate in this research, please be assured that the survey is anonymous, to ensure you can be completely honest in your opinions. After I receive your Consent Form you will be sent the online link for the survey. You can also complete a hard copy of the survey and hand this in to the box at reception.

Information about Part 2 of the research is on the next page.





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**IMPORTANT INFORMATION
REGARDING YOUR CHILD'S
PARTICIPATION**

Part 1 – Short survey

I believe it is important to have student voices reflected in this research. As will be the case for your children, if they agree to participate in the survey, they will be given the online link or a paper copy to fill in. Your child can only participate if you and your child give consent. Children have a different information sheet and consent form than adults. You are more than welcome to assist your child in completing the survey. In fact very young students may require your help to access and read the survey.

Part 2 – Interview or focus group discussion

The students will also be given an invitation to participate in interviews or focus groups. These interviews or focus groups will take place after school on a day of the week most convenient to you. The students are under no obligation to accept their invitation to participate. They have the same rights as you do.

Some of the children in your family may once have been at and are no longer enrolled. They are also welcome to participate in this research, as is anyone in your extended family.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or either of my supervisors via the details below.

RESEARCHER
Sharlene Petersen
Cell
Wk
Email:

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Dr. Jean Annan
School of Education at Albany
Massey University College of Education
PO Box 102 904
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Phone: 64 9 414 0800, ext 9814

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 08/48. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x 6929, email humanethicssouthb@massey.ac.nz.

Part 2

Secondly, you are all invited to participate in an individual interview or focus group discussion to further explore some of the factors contributing to sense of community. These will take place some time after the survey and will take approximately 1 hour after school. If you choose a focus group you will be in a discussion with other adults.

All information shared in these discussions will be treated in a confidential way. You will ask to be sound-recorded (this helps in the accuracy of the data), and you will be given a copy of the transcription for editing if you choose, before any of the information is used in the study.

Any names of people and the school will not be used in my thesis. It may be likely however that given connections within the school, people may know those who have participated in the research. In addition some may make connections between what is said and the person who made the statement.

I would like to assure you that your choice to participate or not, will not impact relationships or learning.





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INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS



The research is about sense of community - how we belong and care for each other as a school community.

I (Shar) would like to find out if we have a good sense of community, and what we can do to improve it.
You can be part of the study:

You can fill in a 15 minute survey.
You can do it on a paper copy or on the internet (you will be given the link to go to).
If you want help, your family can help you fill it in.

You can do a 1 hour group interview (focus group). You will be asked questions as a group (with other kids).

Or you can have a 1 hour interview on your own.

You need to get permission from your caregiver to be involved.

You can tell Shar
that you don't want to answer any questions
that you want to turn the sound recorder off
that you want to know more about any of the research
that you don't want to do the research anymore

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Appendix 5: Student consent form



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MY RIGHTS

I know that I can pull out of the study at any time.

I know that I don't have to answer every question.

I know that my name will be kept secret.

I know that anything I tell Shar won't be shared with anyone else.

PART 1: SHORT SURVEY *Please circle yes or no*

I agree to participate in the short survey.
YES NO

I would like to receive information about doing the survey on the internet.

YES NO

OR

I would like to receive a hard paper copy of the survey.
YES NO



Sense of community study

CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW OR FOCUS GROUP

You can choose to be interviewed (on your own) or in a focus group (with other kids).

Focus Group *Please circle yes or no*

I would like to participate in a focus group
YES NO

OR

Individual Interview *Please circle yes or no*

I would like to participate in an individual interview
YES NO

I agree to the interview/focus group being sound-recorded.
YES NO

I would like to have my sound files sent to me after the research is completed.
YES NO

I agree to keep confidential anything discussed in the focus group.
YES NO



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Child's full name:

Child's signature:

Date:

CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS



Sense of community study

Full name of caregiver completing consent form:

Relationship to child:

Caregiver signature:

Date:

Thanks for completing this form. Please pop it in to the box at reception.



Appendix 6: Adult consent form



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ADULT PARTICIPANT CONSENT

PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A SPECIAL CHARACTER

PRIMARY SCHOOL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

PART 1: SURVEY (Please tick to show consent)

- I consent to participate in the short survey.

- I wish to receive details about accessing the survey online **OR**
- I wish to receive a hard paper copy of the survey.

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW OR FOCUS GROUP (Please tick to show consent)

- I would like to be contacted to participate in a focus group **OR**
- I would like to be contacted to participate in an individual interview

- I agree to the interview being sound-recorded.
- I wish to have my sound files sent to me after the research is completed.
- I agree to keep confidential anything that is discussed in the focus group.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name - printed

Details of how best to contact me

Thanks for completing this form. Please pop it in to the box at reception.

This consent form will be held for a period of five years



Appendix 7: Interview questions for students

OPENING for INTERVIEWS

Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed on your ideas about our sense of community at .

We'll be about an hour, and this is how the hour will work -

The session is sound-recorded because I don't want to miss any comments. Your name won't be used in any writing, and your comments are confidential.

There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your opinions and points of view.

My role in this will be to guide the discussion from time to time and ask questions to keep us on track, but I won't be offering my own thoughts or opinions.

Any questions about the process?

INTRO QUESTION

Could we start by you telling me about how you came to be a member of ...

INTEGRATION AND FULFILMENT OF NEEDS

What do you get from being in this community?

Probe: What are some of the good things you get out of being in this community?

MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING

What sorts of things do people at do that mean you feel a part of the community as a whole?

What sorts of events are there at that make you feel part of the community?

What do you say to friends about who don't go to ?

What do you do that helps other kids or adults to feel part of the community?

INFLUENCE

Have there been any times when you have changed your mind about something because someone at has given you a good explanation or shared their point of view? Tell me about that ...

Have there been times at when you have shared your point of view or ideas and someone has changed what they thought or did? Tell me about that ...

Part of our special character states "Everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher", tell me about this for you

SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

What events or experiences have led you to having strong friendships with other community members?

BIG QUESTIONS

Have your feelings about being in the community changed with the longer you've been here?

Probe: What are the reasons for this?

ACTIVITY – here is a blob tree, and it shows an example of what people do in a community. It might give you some ideas for the next two questions.

In your opinion, what are the 5 best things about this community?

In your opinion, what are the 5 most important issues this community faces?

INTERVIEW ENDING

Thank you so much for your contribution to this research. I very much appreciate your time and thoughts to understanding our sense of community at . I will type up the transcript as soon as I can, and get it back to you for a chance to edit.

NB Some participants want their sound-recording so discuss with children at this point how and in what format they want to receive it.

Appendix 8: Interview questions for adults

OPENING for INTERVIEWS

Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed on your ideas about our sense of community at .

We'll be about an hour, and this is how the hour will work -

The session is sound-recorded because I don't want to miss any comments. Your name won't be used in any writing, and your comments are confidential.

There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your opinions and points of view.

My role in this will be to guide the discussion from time to time and ask questions to keep us on track, but I won't be offering my own thoughts or opinions.

Any questions about the process?

INTRO QUESTION

Could we start by you talking with me about your circumstances around becoming a member of ...

INTEGRATION AND FULFILMENT OF NEEDS

What do you personally gain from being in this community?

What do you believe your children gain from being in this community?

MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING

What practices, activities, behaviours or experiences contribute to you feeling a part of the community as a whole and/or groups within the community?

Probe: What do you do to enable others to feel part of the community?

INFLUENCE

How have you been influenced by members of this community?

Probe: How do you believe you have influenced members in this community?

Probe: Part of our special character states "Everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher", tell me about what this means for you

SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

What events or experiences have lead you to having a strong bond with other community members?

BIG QUESTIONS

Has your sense of community changed during your time in this community?

Probe: What are the reasons for this?

In your opinion, what are the 5 best things about this community?

In your opinion, what are the 5 most important issues this community faces?

FOCUS GROUP ENDING

Thank you so much for your contribution to this research. I very much appreciate your time and thoughts to understanding our sense of community at . I will type up the transcript as soon as I can, and get it back to you for a chance to edit.

NB Some participants want their sound-recording so discuss with people at this point how and in what format they want to receive it.

Appendix 9: Focus group questions for students

OPENING for FOCUS GROUPS

Hi everyone, I'm Shar. Thanks for joining our chat on the sense of community at

We will be here about an hour today and this is how it will work -

The session is sound-recorded because I don't want to miss any comments. None of your names will be used in any writing, and your comments are confidential. This means I won't say who said what and if I do use your comments I'll make up a name. Each of you here has also agreed to keep secret anything discussed in this group today. Do we all agree again to do this?

There are no right or wrong answers in a discussion like this. I am interested in your opinions and points of view, even those you believe they are different to other people in the group. If you don't agree with other people's ideas please let them have their say, and you can share your ideas too.

You don't need to speak in any order, this will flow more like a conversation than an interview. It would be helpful if you don't talk while someone else is talking, it interferes with how clear the sound recording is.

My role in this will be to guide the discussion from time to time and ask questions to keep us on track, but I won't be offering my own thoughts or conversation.

Do you have any questions about the process?

Note if it all feels a bit awkward chatting I'll scribe with them on big sheets of paper, which they'll all be used to

INTRO QUESTION

Could we start by you introducing yourself and telling the group about how you came to be a member of ...

INTEGRATION AND FULFILMENT OF NEEDS

What do you get from being in this community?

Probe: What are some of the good things you get out of being in this community?

MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING

What sorts of things do people at do that mean you feel a part of the community as a whole?

What sorts of events are there at that make you feel part of the community?

What do you say to friends about who don't go to ?

What do you do that helps other kids or adults to feel part of the community?

INFLUENCE

Have there been any times when you have changed your mind about something because someone at [redacted] has given you a good explanation or shared their point of view? Tell us about that ...

Have there been times at [redacted] when you have shared your point of view or ideas and someone has changed what they thought or did? Tell us about that ...

Part of our special character states “Everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher”, tell me about this for you

SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

What events or experiences have led you to having strong friendships with other community members?

BIG QUESTIONS

Have your feelings about being in the community changed with the longer you’ve been here?

Probe: What are the reasons for this?

ACTIVITY – here is a blob tree, and it shows an example of what people do in a community. It might give you some ideas for the next two questions.

In your opinion, what are the 5 best things about this community?

In your opinion, what are the 5 most important issues this community faces?

FOCUS GROUP ENDING

Thank you so much for your help in this research. I very much appreciate your time and thoughts.

I will type up our chat as soon as I can, and get it back to you for a chance to edit your piece. When you get it you can sign it and hand it back if you are happy with it, cross out any things you don’t want used, or explain what you mean if something doesn’t sound very clear.

Appendix 10: Focus group questions for adults

OPENING for FOCUS GROUPS

Hi everyone, I'm Shar. Thanks for taking the time to join this discussion on the sense of community at . I know how busy you all are.

Essentially this is how the hour will work -

The session is sound-recorded because I don't want to miss any comments. None of your names will be used in any writing, and your comments are confidential. Each of you here has also agreed to keep confidential anything discussed in this group today.

There are no right or wrong answers in a focus group discussion. I am interested in your opinions and points of view, even those you believe are differing to others in the group.

You don't need to speak in any order, this will flow more like a conversation than an interview. It would be helpful if you don't talk while someone else is talking, and I'd encourage you if to invite others' opinions if they haven't had a chance to share.

My role in this will be to guide the discussion from time to time and ask questions to keep us on track, but I won't be offering my own thoughts or conversation.

Any questions about the process?

INTRO QUESTION

Could we start by you introducing yourself and the circumstances around becoming a member of ...

INTEGRATION AND FULFILMENT OF NEEDS

What do you personally gain from being in this community?

What do you believe your children gain from being in this community?

MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING

What practices, activities, behaviours or experiences contribute to you feeling a part of the community as a whole and/or groups within the community?

Probe: What do you do to enable others to feel part of the community?

INFLUENCE

How have you been influenced by members of this community?

Probe: How do you believe you have influenced members in this community?

Probe: Part of our special character states "Everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher", tell me about this for you

SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

What events or experiences have lead you to having a strong bond with other community members?

BIG QUESTIONS

Has your sense of community changed during your time in this community?

Probe: What are the reasons for this?

In your opinion, what are the 5 best things about this community?

In your opinion, what are the 5 most important issues this community faces?

FOCUS GROUP ENDING

Thank you so much for your contribution to this research. I very much appreciate your time and thoughts to understanding our sense of community at . I will type up the pieces of conversation important to my research into a transcript as soon as I can, and get it back to you for a chance to edit your piece.

Appendix 11: Blob tree

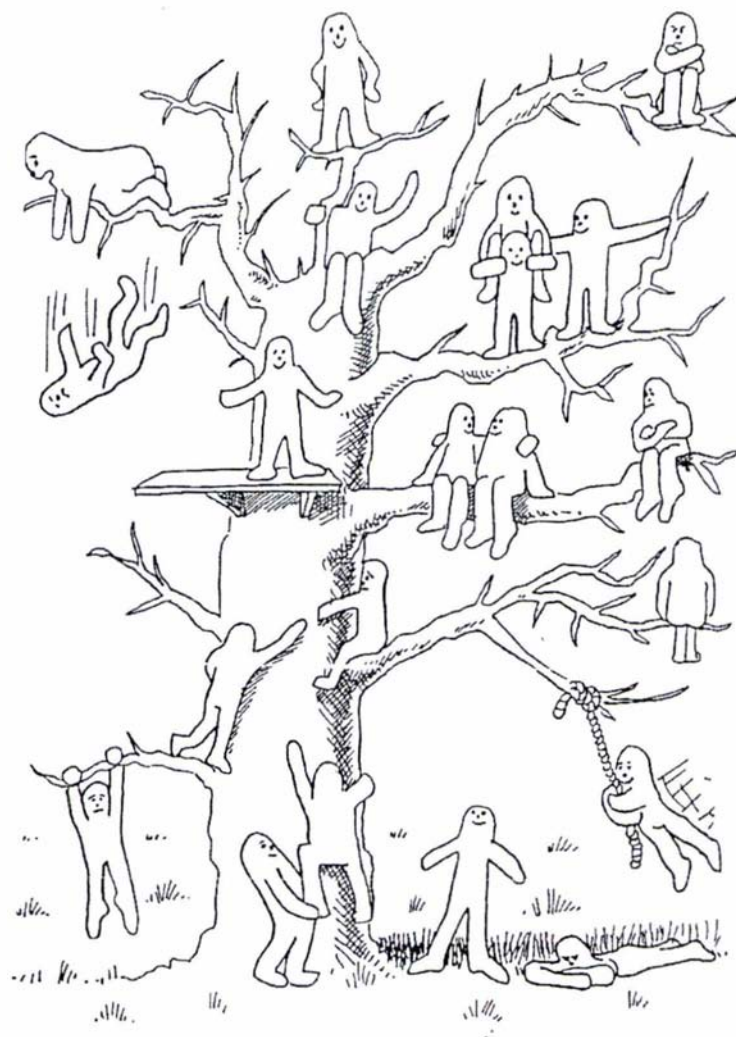


Figure 26.1 The 'blob tree'

(Reproduced from Games Without Frontiers with the kind permission of Pip Wilson, this book, published by Marshall Pickering, contains other group ice-breakers and ideas from getting groups thinking. The book is available by post from Ramford YMCA, Rush Green Road, Ramford RM7 0PH.)

Appendix 12: Authority for the release of transcripts



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PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A SPECIAL CHARACTER PRIMARY SCHOOL

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

This form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview/s conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript, and extracts from this, may be used by the researcher Sharlene Petersen, in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name - printed _____

