Rules Without Relationships Lead to Rebellion: Secondary Teachers and School Belonging

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Abstract

School belonging encompasses many complex psychosocial and interpersonal components in the classroom. Teacher–student relationships are the cornerstone of school belonging and can predict student success in the secondary grades. In this qualitative study, interviews with nine high school teachers provided insight into how they viewed their role in creating a sense of classroom community and making sustained connections with their students. Findings indicated that teachers who demonstrated high levels of caring and were consistent in their approach to behavior management reported a stronger bond in the classroom. Teachers also reported challenges to establishing belongingness, the implications of which are discussed.

Key Words: school belonging, adolescence, secondary teachers, high schools, classroom community, teacher–student relationships

Introduction

High school students face many challenges related to their psychosocial and emotional well-being. One area of concern for teachers and parents is a lack of engagement with the school community that may precipitate early school withdrawal (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Wong et al., 2019). A significant part of an adolescent's daily experience in school is a function of their psychological membership to the learning environment, also known as school belonging (Goodenow, 1993). School belonging refers to the quality of the interactions

and types of engagement students have with peers, teachers, student support personnel, and other members of the school community. The need to belong has been well documented (Allen et al., 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mc-Millan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000; Slaten et al., 2016) and speaks to a fundamental human imperative to be connected and feel valued by those in the aforementioned groups. It is not enough to simply *be* in the class, one must feel *a part* of the class.

School belonging has been researched extensively in relation to academic motivation (Anderman, 2002; Furrer et al., 2014), value expectancy (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), positive peer relationships (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Vollet et al., 2017), and school completion (Wang & Eccles, 2012). The role of the teacher in establishing belonging is compelling (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Hallinan, 2008; Tillery et al., 2013). Teachers set the tone for the classroom through the values they express, instructional techniques they employ, and overall approach to relationship building. Of particular interest in the present study is how secondary teachers actively cultivate and sustain a sense of belonging with their adolescent students, many of whom are grappling with the competing demands of their peer, home, and social media worlds.

The Role of the Teacher in School Belonging

Also known by the terms school connectedness, psychological membership, and school community, researchers have examined the nature of school belonging from early childhood to postsecondary and with qualitative and quantitative approaches (Allen et al., 2018; Pendergast et al., 2018; Roffey et al., 2019; St-Amand et al., 2017). A consistent theme that emerges from these studies is how integral the teacher is to this process (Barile et al. 2012; Cabello & Terrell, 1994). In particular, high school teachers are instructing multiple groups of students, many of whom may have significant concerns related to the challenges of normatively developing teens. Mental health impairments, the proliferation of social media, burgeoning sexuality, and tense home environments can affect how students show up in the classroom and the ways in which they feel attached to their teachers and other students.

Affectively, teachers who have positive relationships with students display characteristics that facilitate a sense of community in the classroom. A consistent component of school belonging, respect, implies the teacher views students as persons worthy of positive consideration and regard. These teachers are perceived as likeable and friendly to their students and demonstrate caring in the classroom (Johnson, 2009). Closely related to this idea is the need for trust as a precursor to school belonging (Russell et al., 2016). Adolescent students are experiencing intense changes in their peer group and increased

social competition. Having a strong relationship with an adult, such as their teacher, can mitigate the effects of these concerns (Allen et al., 2018; Ibrahim & El Zataari, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015). Finally, teachers who support school belonging among students use discipline in a constructive, not punitive, way. They recognize the importance of tempering warmth with accountability to encourage a stronger connection in the classroom (Bondy et al., 2013; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Instructionally, teachers who encourage a sense of school belonging will provide many opportunities for students to be autonomous in their learning. This includes offering choices in how students learn and demonstrate mastery of the material (Gaias et al., 2019; Patall et al., 2010). These teachers view feedback positively and not only provide substantive and actionable feedback to their students, but also encourage students to express how they feel about the class content and methods of instruction. Teachers make content relatable to students and illuminate how coursework is applicable (Keyes, 2019) to their future professional careers and interests. Rules are viewed more as boundaries in the classroom, and many are co-constructed with students to provide a feeling of accountability and responsibility to the larger group. Expectations are clearly expressed and consistently applied (Doyle, 2013; Quin et al., 2018; Sprick, 2013).

The body of research on school belonging has focused primarily on student reports of their experiences with teachers and peers (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). More empirical information needs to be obtained about teachers' perceptions of their role as agents who support school belonging. There is a benefit in speaking with teachers and exploring their viewpoints about methods and practices for addressing the psychosocial and emotional needs of their students. As adults in schools are often the gatekeepers and creators of school community, much can be gained from an analysis of the strategies secondary teachers employ to maintain positive interactions and strengthen relational bonds in the classroom. When teachers prioritize positive relationships, while simultaneously holding students accountable for their behavior and actions, the spirit of the classroom is reinforced. The title of this article reminds educators to avoid focusing on rules and regulations to the detriment of a personal connection with their students. A balance of warmth and high expectations results in better academic, psychological, and social/emotional outcomes for students (Bondy et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

School belonging is predicated on the social and psychological experiences of students in the classroom and larger school community. Maslow's Theory of

Self-Actualization (1962) provides a useful theory for examining how teachers support school belongingness with their students. Maslow contends that all humans are motivated by basic needs such as sleep, food, and safety, followed by growth needs such as love, achievement, and mastery. For many years, the field of education inverted Maslow's hierarchy, presuming that students would first achieve and then feel connected to others. The research presented here and elsewhere (Eccles et al., 1993; Osterman, 2000) shows this to be a flawed presumption. According to Maslow's theory, students must first feel connected to others and valued by those in their learning environment before they are motivated to achieve. When students feel respect and a sense of community with others, those interpersonal relationships can propel them into the achievement domain. When educators focus on increasing relatedness in the classroom, they create a safe psychological space where every student has a chance at mastery and success. In this study, the following research questions were examined:

1. How do secondary teachers create a learning environment that supports a sense of school belonging with their students?
2. What student characteristics or experiences may hinder teachers from establishing a sense of school belonging with their students?

Methodology

This initial pilot study used a qualitative methodology to answer the proposed research questions. With a focus on how people interpret and make sense of their lived experiences, qualitative research uses participants' words to convey affective states of being, which is a useful application when examining a construct such as school belonging. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated, the use of effective qualitative methods means a researcher can investigate "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). This research study was a foundational foray into establishing the ways that high school teachers conceptualize belongingness and facilitate its presence with their students. The goal of this endeavor was to engage with the participants to launch future studies that can focus on targeted populations of teachers and students to establish effective relational and instructional practices that build a sense of classroom community.

Context

The research site was a large, suburban high school in the Southeastern United States. The student body has approximately 1,700 students enrolled, with a great many diverse populations represented (i.e., 20% gifted and talented; 45% African American; 18% served under IDEA or Section 504; 7%

Emerging Bilingual). The graduation rate was 78%, and the average SAT score was 940. The majority of teachers were White and are considered "mid-career" with an average of 5–10 years of experience.

Sample Participants

A form of purposeful sampling was used in order to obtain the most useful information possible (Patton, 2014). In effect, to get pertinent data one must "go to the source." Upon institutional review board approval and school district authorization, I worked with the principal and assistant principal to recruit teachers to participate in the study. Teachers were apprised of the purpose of the study and told they would be compensated for their time with an online voucher for school supplies. Emails were sent to the entire instructional staff, and interested teachers were asked to contact me directly to participate. In the final sample, nine teachers were selected. None of the participants were known to the researcher prior to the study, nor were any of the participants selected due to any specific, predefined characteristic. These teachers varied in many ways, including sex, years of experience, content area, and professional development, with four teachers having leadership experience, including in curriculum development (Polly; note: all names are pseudonyms), in management positions within the athletic department (Frank and Chris), and through statewide program development (Shannon). Table 1 lists each participant with a pseudonym and additional demographic details.

Table 1. Teacher Participant Sample

Pseudonym	Sex	Content Area	Years Teaching in Total	Years Teaching at Current School
Lisa	F	Special Education	8	4
Paul	M	Culinary Arts	10	10
Shannon	F	Health & Wellness	20	1
Nissa	F	Spanish	5	2
Susanna	F	AP Psychology	22	1
Chris	M	Engineering	10	7
Polly	F	Earth Science	34	4
Frank	M	AP History	9	3
Yasmine	F	Biology	2	1

Data Collection

In using a qualitative paradigm to address the posed research questions, I chose individual interviews as the primary method for data collection. As a secondary part of this study, teachers also kept journals to guide their thought process about establishing belongingness, although those journal entries were not a focus of this current investigation. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to underscore pertinent characteristics of school belongingness as described in the literature. Examples of interview questions included: *What strategies do you use to create a sense of belongingness with your students? What challenges have you encountered in establishing classroom community? Why do you believe some students are more engaged than others? How do you encourage positive, prosocial interactions between students to facilitate strong peer relationships?* The average time of the interviews was 43 minutes. Interviews were transcribed immediately in preparation for analysis (Davidson, 2009). The raw data consisted of over 58 pages of single-spaced interview transcriptions, field notes, and audit trails.

Data Analysis

The goal of data analysis in a qualitative study is to reduce the data into meaningful themes that show how "individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 24). The basis for analysis involved synthesizing all verbatim transcripts and descriptive notes of the behavior of the interviewees, including parenthetical thoughts related to gesturing, perceived mood, and so on. Every interview was reviewed to reflect basic demographic information such as sex, years in teaching, and content area. Then each interview was read for an initial impression. As I read through the transcripts, I noted observations, made comments, and offered suppositions parenthetically. A form of open coding helped to connect ideas that appeared to flow together (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

To further make meaning out of the participants' words, I reduced the data into themes. This process involved identifying sections in the data that addressed belongingness both from the extant literature base as well as organically from the participants themselves. Units of data were compared to differentiate between abstract categories (Maxwell, 2013). These groupings directly addressed the conceptual nature of the research questions and illuminated ideas from the original raw units of data. This inductive process of thematic analysis allowed for an emergent response to the original research questions.

Because qualitative research does not utilize deductive methods of analysis and theory testing (Hatch, 2002), trustworthiness has to be established. Taking steps as the researcher to ensure the data collected are credible and reliable

improves the quality of the research and provides the reader with a sense of the level of rigor applied. Multiple methods of data collection were used with this sample, the primary measure of interviewing being the one presented in this manuscript. Second, an audit trail detailing the process from recruitment to analysis was available to a colleague for review and input. The iterative process of reviewing smaller units of data, which evolved into larger themes, allowed clear relationships to emerge and materialize.

Finally, as the researcher, reflexivity was a significant consideration because my professional background involves providing psychological services in the schools. Never having been a classroom teacher, I had to ensure I was paying close attention to the words of my participants to understand how their daily experiences with students could be contrasted to mine. The teachers I interviewed all had different cultural backgrounds and value systems they brought into the classroom. How they viewed their work with students was a function of their perceived roles as instructor, counselor, coach, parental figure, mentor, critic, and confidant. As an educator for over 15 years (but not a classroom teacher), I had to journal and otherwise reflect on my biases by reviewing the data with these influences and perspectives in mind. Taking time with the data and giving each participant's voice a clear path was a critical part of revealing the discoveries that surfaced.

Findings

Four thematic categories were established by analyzing the raw interview data from the participants: caring, consistency, contracts, and challenges. Overall, the teachers provided rich descriptions of how they viewed their role in creating a sense of community in the classroom. They also shared pertinent examples of relational and instructional tools they used with a high degree of success. Each theme will be illustrated with representative quotations from the teacher participants, and implications for methods to facilitate school belongingness in secondary grades will be addressed.

Caring

With an emphasis on the positive, warm interactions that teachers have with students, caring is a central tenant of school belonging (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). When teachers display an interest in students' lives, both inside and outside of the classroom, they demonstrate the importance of establishing a positive relationship with their students. Teachers in the study highlighted this critical perspective in their reflections on caring in the classroom.

A big part of it [caring] is getting kids out of their comfort zone…and once you get through that…you can kind of connect. (Shannon, Health and Wellness)

What I've learned throughout the years is in secondary…it really starts with me. If they can build that rapport with me, hopefully it will trickle down. (Lisa, Special Education)

An African American female teacher emphasized the need be culturally responsive in her teaching and display sensitivity in how she addressed her students individually and in front of their peer group (Milner & Tenore, 2010). She recognized that her intonation and type of speech would influence how the students perceived her and her ability to connect with them. She also knew that her method of communication could ebb and flow based on the context of the conversation. In fact, she spoke about treating students fairly, not necessarily equally, which was a common sentiment with other teachers as well.

It's important to be culturally aware…how you talk to people is very important. I can't expect my kids to respect me if I don't give them respect…so it's definitely a two-way street. Obviously, the fact that I'm here, and I'm here for them, that obviously gives me a little respect… but I'm not going to degrade them or say anything derogatory. (Yasmine, Biology)

Because she had an understanding of adolescent development and the importance of the peer group, Yasmine recognized how public criticism would not be well received. When students were corrected, it was often privately or away from the group. Responsive secondary teachers know that the peer group is king in adolescence, and students will try to save face in front of their classmates. Yasmine and others in the sample were intentional in establishing boundaries but doing so in a way that kept the relationship with the student intact.

In this same manner, another part of showing caring and warmth was related to how teachers expressed their expectations for students' interpersonal and academic behavior in the classroom. When teachers provided appropriate behavioral boundaries for students, they could leverage that trust into a sustained, positive relationship.

Definitely challenging, high expectations…my kids know what's expected of them when they walk in. I like to say that there's a different atmosphere in here. They know that if you're present with a smile on your face, you become human to them. Your personality shows through your teaching….The more authentic you can be, the more you show you care. (Frank, AP History)

School belonging is grounded in students feeling warmth, respect, and appreciation from members of the school community (Tillery et al., 2013). Teachers bonded with students by being present, engaged, and trustworthy in word and deed. They did this by showing up with a positive attitude, engaging in rapport-building activities regularly, and maintaining high expectations for students' behavior. As Frank noted above, being relatable to students and revealing parts of your personality through humor and light-hearted banter can support an open and inclusive classroom. If teachers wanted students to come to class with a good disposition and ready to be engaged, they had to model the behavior they wanted their students to emulate.

Consistency

In order for teachers to show caring and concern, they had to be reliable in how they interacted with and otherwise engaged with students. These teachers relayed that the quickest way to lose trust from their students was to be inconsistent in their actions. Some students struggle with feelings of mistrust and disappointment from adults in both the home and school environments. In this sample, teachers explained that a significant part of establishing school belonging involved showing up each day and being honest, truthful, and dependable (Furrer et al., 2014; Spilt et al., 2011).

> If you say it, you better do it. Let the actions speak. If I say I'm going to use this token economy or I'm going to check on them, and I fail to do that…obviously that [creates a] lack of trust. Where a lot of these kids come from…they've had these hopeless promises come to them; that translates to community in the classroom. I have to be diligent about keeping whatever I say. (Lisa, Special Education)

> I know what I want, what works. You stick to it, and you're consistent and patient. For the kids, it's predictable. Environments that are unpredictable are things, in many cases, they're used to, and they don't thrive well. For that 90 minutes, if you can be predictable and consistent and all those other things…eventually they will be successful in that environment. (Frank, AP History)

Consistency was also discussed in relation to the structure of the classroom and the activities and instructional tools teachers used to establish a routine. Students were expected to engage in particular tasks as established by the teacher, but teachers provided a degree of choice as well. Students were given varying degrees of latitude with respect to how they could be assessed on certain tasks. According to these teachers, students reacted well to having "freedom within boundaries."

The science teachers in this sample (Polly and Yasmine) used choice boards quite frequently to allow students to select a method of assessment that could speak to their preferred style of learning and expression. Students could choose to make presentations, write a brief research report, or complete a WebQuest activity to demonstrate mastery of the material. Students were still being held to particular standards, but there was flexibility granted. Chris, an engineering teacher, relayed how he addressed a chronic behavioral problem with one student by giving him a choice ("I said, 'You can ignore today's bell work if you respond to this letter'"). Susanna also shared her perspective on giving choices to her students:

> I let them sit where they want; I don't give assigned seating. I tell them they can sit with their friends until they mess it up, and then you mess it up, I'm moving you. I always make sure somebody has a partner… somebody they can ask questions…so they are not alienated. (Susanna, AP Psychology)

In this case, Susanna demonstrated caring as well by ensuring students had others close in their vicinity to call on for support and feedback. The teaching adage of "ask three and then me" means that teachers encourage students to engage with each other before seeking their assistance. Viewing their classmates as equal participants in the transmission of knowledge can increase students' engagement and allow the teacher to shift into a role of facilitator.

Another area in which teachers showed consistency was in the routines they established early in the semester. They reviewed, rehearsed, and reinforced procedures to ensure that instructional time was maximized while minimizing incessant disruptions.

> It's structure. They don't have pencils, so what I do is I have the pencils that are already sharpened…and I give them to them. We're not standing in line and goofing off to sharpen our pencil. I just walk by every morning, "Do you have a pencil?"…"No."…Here you go. I give them the bell ringer sheet; it's colored paper so they can find it fast. Every day the bell ringer is up there, every day they walk in. (Polly, Earth Science)

If students fell short of rules or expectations, teachers were explicit in how they would enact a consequence to maintain consistency within the class (Stronge, 2018). Teachers who were in tune with the need for students to feel bonded to them and their classmates discussed thoughtful and intentional ways of correcting students without punitive measures such as referrals to in-school suspension (Sprick, 2013).

> I tell them all the time…professionalism is really doing what you're told…having a decent attitude. That's kind of my way to get you out of a

referral. There was a consequence, but I want to deal with it in these four walls. It's made me be really creative, which is good. (Chris, Engineering)

In this example, a teacher could demonstrate consistency and caring at the same time, by using logical consequences with a student to avoid entanglement with school-level administration while still providing necessary correction for the rule infraction. As evidenced by the participants in this sample, teachers who care and are consistent in the classroom do not withhold consequences, but instead enact logical forms of correction that help students see the connections between their behavior and inevitable outcomes.

Contracts

In developing rules and boundaries for the classroom, teachers often used collaborative methods to get buy in with their students. Co-constructing rules and using social contracts in the classroom were ways teachers supported school belongingness. They understood the need for adolescents to have some sense of autonomy over their environment and, subsequently, feel more accountability to the group (Ruzek et al., 2016).

What I am doing this semester [is] going over my expectations. Up there on the wall we create this full value contract in here, the contract between student and teacher and what we build. We do a lot of work on that…but at the same time there are school rules that I have to make sure that I convey. Those are the four things that I give them as to what our contract is. What they do is brainstorm [other expectations], and I put up the posters around the room. (Shannon, Health and Wellness)

Each classroom made their own social contract. There were four questions, and we talk about it. What do you expect of your teacher and of yourself? What are things that should not ever happen in here? You come up with it and write it in class. Everybody has to sign the contract, and it stays up, and you use it as a reference. If somebody is doing something that is not on the social contract, *check yourself*. Are we abiding by our social contract as a class or an individual? (Nissa, Spanish)

In both these instances, teachers used the social contracts as ways to provide a common behavioral guidepost for the participants in each class. This method for establishing classroom norms would often happen frequently throughout the first few weeks of the semester and would be supported by conversations about the purpose and promise of using boundaries in a productive working group. Teachers would have students devise rules individually, then in small groups, before finally launching into a full group discussion and consensus

building session. The contract was reciprocal, and teachers, too, had to be willing to abide by the boundaries set forth by the group. These limits would often involve how members of the classroom community, teachers included, addressed others.

> I learned a long time ago to try to quietly correct people. Calling people out never works. I slipped up a couple of times and had a really interesting [experience]. We [student and I] ended up having a meeting with a counseling director. That's the way it works. I ask the students for feedback. We had conversations about procedures and rules we have. (Paul, Culinary Arts)

Coercive engagement (Reeve, 2009) with students is characterized by aggressive, defensive, and negative interactions in the classroom. Teachers in this study recognized the importance of modeling the behavior they wished to see from their students. To this point, Paul explained, "There is a fine line between being rigid and being understanding at the same time." As instructional leaders, if they fell short of mutually agreed upon boundaries and expectations, they described a willingness to apologize, brainstorm different solutions, or seek the help of student support personnel to get the relationship with the student back on track.

Challenges

Each teacher in the sample discussed many obstacles that can occur when building a sense of belonging with adolescent students. The most frequently mentioned challenge involved the ubiquitous nature of social media (Baturay & Toker, 2017; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Teachers varied in their approach to addressing excessive use of social media, but each had deliberate thoughts about it and offered useful ways of thinking about how social media comes into the learning environment and how it affects students' connections to each other. Teachers also described how the "post and regret" nature of social media has hindered students' ability to resolve conflicts.

> They are so worried about what their friends are doing…what they are posting. The kids will go on social media and embarrass or call them out or start fights over it. You rarely have it in class face to face. It's always because of something that happened outside of school that's being brought into school. (Susanna, AP Psychology)

> Things that kids have faced that we [adults] never had to deal with. The depth that social media has penetrated our lifestyle is huge. It controls every aspect of their lives from their phone to how they interact. The lack of social skills that these kids have is unbelievable…not being able

to resolve conflict, not being able to have a conversation with someone. (Frank, AP History)

In both instances, these teachers highlight how, even if social media is not necessarily activated or used with the classroom setting, the fallout from it influences peer interactions and can disrupt the learning process. As peer relationships are a significant part of school belonging (Vollet et al., 2017), teachers had to be mindful of how to address these pockets of out-of-class activity without eroding trust or respect from the students. One way teachers intentionally encouraged positive student interactions was to use peer feedback in substantive ways. Teachers reported demonstrating to their students the importance of providing specific and credible feedback to each other while completing formative work in the content area. Teachers also extolled the benefits of using specific tools (e.g., Google Docs, Visual Discovery) to help students provide comments and constructive responses to each other on outlines, projects, and presentations. Teachers could then use the outcomes of the peer feedback to assess students in a summative evaluation.

Other challenges to establishing school belonging involved the mental health issues that some students experience as they navigate coming to a place of acceptance about their sexuality and expressing themselves to others (Mulcahy et al., 2016; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Two teachers discussed how they connected with parents to get students back into the fold, and how they reemphasized caring and respect with the peer group.

> I have students who struggle with their sexual identity. I had one student identify as transgender. I tell my kids you don't have to accept everyone's choices or their stance, but you have to be respectful. You might have kids on this side who don't necessarily agree with that…and they are entitled to their opinion. But I needed to make sure that they didn't cross any lines and make that student feel off to the side or uncomfortable. (Yasmine, Biology)

> I had a student who was always quiet, and something happened from last year to this year when he came out [as gay]. He was not caring about his schooling anymore. Here was a student going from A's and B's to C's and D's. There was definitely something going on. [I am] talking with mom, just to chat. She had some concerns as well, and I found out that she was fearful that this student would do harm. (Lisa, Special Education)

As related to tense home environments, one teacher explained that bonding with her students meant that she often had to go above and beyond to connect with them and demonstrate her positive regard. As she explained here, if a parent or caregiver was not present to show up for her students outside of the classroom, she would step in and do it.

> I have a note under my desk [of] where my kids work. I go to their work and talk to their bosses. If you don't have a parent who cares, it feels good to look good in front of your boss. My teacher is bragging on me…it's that kind of stuff. People are like "you do too much, you get too involved." I don't know how to do my job a different way. I don't understand doing it a different way because I wouldn't have the results that I have. I wouldn't have my kids be well behaved and coming to class and staying awake if I didn't do all of these things. (Nissa, Spanish)

Another relational strategy Nissa would use is to have students share "Good Things" with each other on a regular basis. This was a chance for the entire classroom community to celebrate accomplishments and receive accolades from each other. Good Things could be anything from athletic pursuits to receiving a coveted award or position. Taking dedicated class time to recognize each other and the affirmative experiences of the group encouraged classroom bonding and an appreciation of each student's skills, talents, and abilities that they bring to the learning environment. This same teacher also perfectly encapsulated Maslow's theory in her response to how she builds respect and positivity in the classroom. From attending to basic physiological needs such as hunger and thirst, to higher growth needs like love and belonging, Nissa addressed the need to be open with and trusted by her students.

> You stop it [disrespect] at the door. You're bringing in an emotion and behavior into our classroom that started outside of our classroom. What can we do to fix it right now? They want a cup a water. They want the gummies I have in there. There are a whole lot of things outside of school that we can't control, but we can control what happens when they walk into our room. (Nissa, Spanish)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how secondary teachers viewed their role as facilitators of school belonging, the strategies they used to support this engagement, and any challenges they experienced with students. Teachers were very candid in their belief that establishing positive relationships was central to their work with adolescents. They showed positive regard to students and frequently requested feedback to ensure they were meeting the needs of those in the learning environment (Eccles & Roeser, 2003; Johnson, 2009). Teachers actively built on students' strengths and offered methods for attending to areas of improvement. They recognized that effective teaching is characterized by quality interpersonal engagement in the classroom.

The relational and instructional techniques the participants used ranged in nature, but all had the main goal of deepening the bond they had with students. Related to Maslow's Theory of Self-Actualization (1962), these teachers recognized the power of feeling valued and respected in the classroom. Connection was a precursor to achievement and high academic performance. Thus, the teachers engaged students on a personal level to build trust and demonstrate they could be reliable figures in the students' lives. Because the participants made establishing a community of learners a priority, they experienced teaching students who were more involved and willing to be active in their learning. This relationship had to be reciprocal (Ibrahim & El Zataari, 2019), in that if teachers expected students to be open and "show up for the day," they had to as well.

In this vein, teachers recognized the value of the peer group and how they needed to ensure that students supported each other and maintained positive interactions. Teachers spoke of group cohesion and a shared vision as ways of characterizing their classroom environments. In adolescence, the peer group is paramount, and these teachers leveraged students' developmental needs to create a positive space for learning. Teachers discussed how they used intentional group work, peer review, and social contracts to keep students focused on common goals. The contracts provided a blueprint that would guide the interactions of all participants of the classroom environment, the teacher included. As a method of classroom management, using social contracts meant boundaries were confirmed, and all members of the group had a choice to participate within the parameters set.

Relating to choice in instruction, teachers respected the need for autonomy and a reasonable degree of freedom in the classroom. They provided opportunities for students to choose partners, seating arrangements, and how they would be assessed (e.g., choice boards). Teachers were also willing to provide academic support for students to meet them "where they are." Using supplemental instruction, tutoring, and peer feedback were tools teachers used to ignite students' learning and provide support for metacognitive processes of reflection and prediction. This finding is supported by research that shows students need to feel a sense of agency (Riley, 2019) over their learning. As a part of this present study on school belonging, teachers who offer multiple chances for students to make decisions regarding their learning recounted stronger relationships and more constructive exchanges in the classroom.

At its core, school belonging is a function of one's psychological and social membership to a larger group. To this end, teachers did experience obstacles to building classroom community despite their best efforts. The influence of social media was palpable in the interviews with teachers. Teachers relayed how issues that students had on social media platforms would come into the classroom

and cause disruptions to the learning environment (Baturay & Toker, 2017; Davis, 2012). While teachers were sensitive to the external social pressures in adolescents' lives, they still felt a need for assistance from student support personnel and administrators to manage how it affected classroom time.

Mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression were mentioned as causative factors that sometimes interfered in the bonding process (Ahn, 2011; La Greca & Lopez, 1998). If students were highly truant or otherwise not engaged when they did come to school, teachers had a difficult time reaching through and making a positive connection. Maslow's theory explains how basic physiological needs such as sleep and security can affect students' belongingness and subsequent engagement in the classroom. Teachers recalled how students struggling with mental health issues would require additional home-school collaboration efforts as in the case of Lisa and Yasmine's respective students. Students would sometimes sleep in class or experience side effects from pharmaceutical therapies, such as Polly's student who was newly diagnosed with ADHD and whose medication was yet to be calibrated. These obstacles would affect the student's ability to be an active part of the class. Teachers would have to address the interpersonal relationship with the student and their developmental needs before their academic performance could change, a call back to Maslow's theory.

Finally, more intensive intervention efforts from administrators were mentioned by teachers. While they wanted to enact consequences consistently for all students, they struggled with how to attend to these concerns without negatively affecting the relationship with the student. Many of the teachers reported cautious optimism with the administrative team, several of whom were newly hired. Their previous experiences with school leadership warranted some hesitation, but they were hopeful that the new administrative team would be open to their suggestions for ways to build a stronger sense of community within their departments while still maintaining rigorous standards and expectations for behavior.

Limitations of Research and Future Directions for Research

This pilot study focused on the lived experiences of a small number of secondary teachers in a large high school in a specific geographical region of the country. While the findings cannot be extrapolated to other populations, there is a benefit in continuing to explore the topic of school belonging through the lens of all participants in the school community. The majority of research on psychological membership in high school focuses on students' perceptions. Examining the viewpoint of teachers who are charged with establishing and maintaining the conditions under which belongingness occurs is essential.

The sample of teachers in this study varied greatly in their years of experience. In the future, it would be useful to implement a longitudinal study to see how teachers' perceptions of belongingness change over time. Studying a novice teacher into mid-career and examining the tools and strategies adopted to support classroom community would be beneficial. It would also be helpful for future researchers to use observational methods to see what teachers are doing in the classroom and how those practices may or may not support the relational components of school belonging.

Conclusion

The average high school student is growing up surrounded by competing societal demands and weighty expectations. Schools should be perceived as psychologically safe spaces where students can connect with others in deep and meaningful ways. If a student feels a sense of belonging to their school community, they most likely enjoy high-quality, sustained relationships with their teachers and peers. The evidence provided in this study shows that teachers are gatekeepers of belongingness. The choices they make to actively engage with students and build positive relationships determine the degree to which the learning environment will thrive. Relationally, belongingness requires teacher caring, warmth, and feelings of trust. Instructionally, teachers both provide and elicit actionable feedback, offer many opportunities for autonomy in the classroom, and make content relatable to the students. They demonstrate consistency in how they enact consequences and in the level of expectation they have for all students. While the teachers in this study shared great successes in building bonds with their students, they also experienced obstacles related to mental health concerns and social isolation. Administrators and student support personnel can use these findings to create pathways for helping secondary teachers guide their students to young adulthood safely and securely.

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