Parental Involvement in a Low-Income Middle School: Influences on Student–Teacher Connectedness

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Abstract

School connectedness is associated with a broad range of positive academic and mental health outcomes. A dimension of school connectedness, student–teacher connectedness, is related to improved academic progress and may be an important protective factor against risk-taking behaviors, particularly for low-income students and for those with limited parental support. The purpose of this qualitative secondary data analysis was to explore teacher perceptions of parental involvement in a low-income, rural middle school serving a diverse student population and the influence on student–teacher connectedness. Data were taken from transcripts from five focus groups comprised of middle school teachers, administrators, and clinicians (*n* = 26). Thematic analysis included first and second cycle coding followed by developing Venn diagrams to depict categories and patterns before reaching consensus on themes. Three themes were identified: (1) parental support of students; (2) parental modeling for students; and (3) parental interaction with teachers. Overall, teachers perceived a lack of parental involvement in this low-income diverse middle school which led to missed connections between students and teachers. This disconnect may be the result of multiple factors, including perceived low levels of parental support for students, differing expectations between parents and teachers, and perceived poor quality interactions between parents and teachers. When formulating strategies to enhance student–teacher connectedness, consideration should be given to the extent and importance of the role of parental involvement.

Key Words: parental involvement, middle school students, student–teacher connectedness, teacher perceptions, parents, teachers, low income

Introduction

School connectedness, defined as the perception by students that adults and peers within school care about them and their learning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009), is associated with a broad range of positive academic and mental health outcomes (Datu & Yuen, 2020). Mental health outcomes, such as reduced suicidal thoughts and behaviors and lower levels of depression and anxiety, have been found in adolescents with positive perceptions of school connectedness (Carney et al., 2018; Datu & Yuen, 2020; Marraccini & Brier, 2017; Whitlock et al., 2014). Academic outcomes, such as enhanced school motivation, engagement, and achievement are associated with higher levels of school connectedness (Datu & Yuen, 2020). Each dimension of school connectedness—including student–peer, student–parent, and student–teacher connectedness—is associated with various facets of academic performance and behaviors (Datu & Yuen, 2020). The dimension of student–teacher connectedness is related to improved academic progress and less risk-taking behaviors, aggression, disciplinary issues, and internalizing symptoms associated with depression (Biag, 2016; Foster et al., 2017; Ramsey et al., 2016). Overall, students who feel more connected to teachers have a lower prevalence of mental health concerns (Jones et al., 2022; Malta et al., 2022).

Student–teacher connectedness can be engendered through enhanced parental involvement (Thompson et al., 2006). Parental involvement refers to the manner any parent or adult acting in a parental role works with their child and school to promote positive academic outcomes (Hill et al., 2004). Encompassing home and school, parental involvement includes parents' style of life; expectations, rules, and supervision at home; participation in school activities; interactions with school staff; and direct or indirect communication to their child about education (Caridade et al., 2020; Curtis et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2020). The intersectionality between parent and teacher has the potential to influence student–teacher connectedness with significant implications for student outcomes.

While high quality, recurrent parent–teacher interactions promote communication about students and their progress at school, perspectives may vary. VanValkenburgh et al. (2021) found disagreement between teachers and parents as many parents felt that they were not given guidance to assist students with learning at home or the opportunity to make decisions about student discipline or placement in courses. These types of conflicting views are concerning

as students' perception of a weak relationship between the parent and teacher may be a factor in whether the student has problems at school or may negatively influence existing school problems (Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Studies have also found that teachers who perceived low levels of parental involvement were likely to appraise students as having problem behaviors, incivilities, and poor social skills (Caridade et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2017) or contributed to mistrust between the school and families (Lasater, 2019). Teacher impressions about families from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds can significantly impact perceived levels of parental involvement and are predictive of student outcomes (Hilgendorf, 2012). For example, Luet et al. (2018) found that teacher beliefs that students in a high-needs school district with a racially diverse student body had difficult home lives sometimes informed and guided lowered academic expectations. This may be of particular concern in middle school when student–parent relationships may be challenging and there is typically a significant drop in parental involvement (VanValkenburgh et al., 2021).

Studies have shown that student–teacher connectedness serves as an important protective factor against risk-taking behaviors, particularly for low-income students and for those with limited parental support (Brooks et al., 2012; García-Moya et al., 2019; Nasir et al., 2011). While studies about school connectedness are vast and research exists regarding teachers' perceptions of parental involvement, more research is needed on the dimension of student–teacher connectedness, particularly in schools with diverse populations (García-Moya et al., 2019). To add to the current knowledge, this study aimed to expand understanding of teacher perspectives regarding parental involvement in a low-income middle school serving a diverse student population and how those perspectives may influence student–teacher connectedness. Understanding this association is important for the future development of strategies to strengthen relationships that facilitate student–teacher connectedness.

Bronfenbrenner's Social–Ecological Model of Human Development

The social–ecological theory of human development by Urie Bronfenbrenner (2005) guided this research and is an effective framework for studying student–teacher connectedness within the context of parental involvement. The main proposition of the theory is that the dynamic relationship between the child and the context, comprised of nested levels or environmental systems, establishes the human development process (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). While the multilevel contextual relations that occur are interactive and reinforce the effects of each other, the child is an active agent embedded within the system and contributes to the evolving process of development (Bronfenbrenner,

2005). These nested systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

The interactions between all systems are influential in indirectly predicting the contextual support of the child, but the microsystems of family and school independently and directly affect the developing child (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021). These person–context relations can be modified or altered in a manner that positively impacts the way the child develops (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), such as enhancing student–teacher connectedness by altering individual- and microsystem-level forces in the home and school (Allen et al., 2016).

The focus of this study is within the mesosystem in which parent–teacher interactions and relationships indirectly and directly intersect and may be influential in determining the quality of student–teacher connectedness within the school microsystem (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Crespo et al., 2013). Because Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes the significance of the interdependence between systems and how interactions within one setting can be shaped by the interactions in another, it provides an appropriate framework to explore the influence of parental involvement on student–teacher connectedness.

Purpose of Study

Previous research was conducted in a low-income, racially and ethnically diverse, rural public middle school to examine teacher perceptions of students' mental health needs and the use of student–teacher connectedness strategies to address these needs. While results from this research are reported elsewhere (Tyndall et al., 2022), it is important to note here relevant data that led to this secondary data analysis. Survey data from the primary study indicated the majority of teachers reported a lack of parental involvement as a barrier to positively connecting with students. Findings also revealed a theme of "Missed Connections" described as missed opportunities for teachers to connect with students. While the primary research focused on factors contributing to student–teacher missed connections, our team noted that *parental involvement* was an underlying theme which also affected student–teacher connectedness. As a result, a more focused secondary analysis was warranted to further examine this underlying theme. Therefore, the purpose of this secondary data analysis was to explore teacher perceptions of parental involvement in a low-income, racially and ethnically diverse, rural middle school and the influence on student–teacher connectedness.

Methods

To investigate additional questions not explored in the primary study, a qualitative secondary analysis was undertaken (Heaton, 2008). Specifically, a

supplementary analysis (Heaton, 2008) was used to conduct a more in-depth exploration of student–teacher missed connections within the context of parental involvement. This qualitative secondary data analysis was guided by the following research question: How do teachers perceive the influence of parental involvement on student–teacher connectedness in a low-income, rural middle school serving a diverse student population?

Primary Study Setting

In January 2019, co-author Deborah Tyndall participated in our university's Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy (EOSA). During the academy, Tyndall developed a partnership with a rural, public middle school in the Southeastern United States. This Title I middle school served a student body (n = 430) of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students comprised of 56% African American and Black, 22% Hispanic and Latino/a, 17% European American, and 0.03% of two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). The majority of students (72%) were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, which was higher than the state average of 44% (State Department of Public Instruction [SDPI], 2018). For the academic year 2018–19, short-term suspensions, criminal acts, and incidences of bullying/harassment, were four to nine times higher as compared to the county and state averages (SDPI, 2019). Additionally, the school had a record of low literacy achievement on standardized assessments and has been challenged with constant teacher turnover. To meet Title I requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), the school hosts several parental engagement activities during the academic year including open house, use of school-issued technology events, and educational fairs on accessing community resources.

Study Participants

Teachers within the school were recruited to participate in one of four focus groups. Out of 22 teachers, 20 (91%) agreed to participate. The sample represented core teachers from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade levels and teachers who taught electives. Teacher participants were mostly female (65%) and identified as White (n = 15) and African American (n = 5). Data from a fifth focus group with six school administrators and clinicians (i.e., counselor, social worker, school nurse) were included to provide additional perspective on parental involvement. Administrators/clinicians were mostly female (67%) and identified as White (n = 5) and African American (n = 1). Most participants (77%) were new to the school and had been employed for three years or less. Five participants had been employed in the school 4–5 years, with one participant employed in the range of 6–10 years. The majority of participants

ranged in age from 45–54 years (42%), followed by ages 35–44 (23%), less than 34 (23%), and greater than 55 (12%).

Data Collection

Data for the primary study were collected during August through November of 2019 after receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data were generated from five audiorecorded focus groups, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, which were held at the middle school. Each of the focus groups consisted of 4–6 participants and was conducted in a conference room during teacher planning periods or team meeting times. A semistructured interview format was used to elicit participant experiences with students with emotional health needs. Sample questions included: What are your concerns working with students who may have mental health needs? What strategies do you use to manage mental health needs? As this secondary analysis was using an existing database to elaborate on a theme not fully analyzed in the primary study, additional IRB review was not warranted. Researchers involved in the primary study are the same researchers who conducted this secondary data analysis, which strengthens credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019).

Analytic Strategy

Six phases of thematic analysis were followed to establish trustworthiness: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting (Nowell et al., 2017). Using clean, uncoded focus group transcripts, data were reanalyzed to examine parental involvement as a contributing factor to student–teacher missed connections. A deductive approach to coding was undertaken initially to explore the theme "Missed Connections" from the primary study. First and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016) was completed by the first two authors using a newly generated coding scheme, analytic memos, and peer debriefings. After second cycle coding, the third author joined the analytic process which began with extracting noteworthy data elements. Three noteworthy examples from each focus group were shared via Google Jam board, an interactive online whiteboard workspace. The iterative process continued with each researcher developing a trinity configuration using a Venn diagram to depict categories and patterns generated from the exemplars (Saldaña, 2016). Through continued dialogue and peer debriefings, parental involvement surfaced as a predominant influence on teachers' perceptions of their connectedness with their students.

Researchers' Positionality

At the time of data collection, the first author was in the role of graduate research assistant on the project. Both Pestaner and Tyndall co-led the first focus group, with subsequent focus groups being conducted by one of us with one to two undergraduate research students assisting with logistics and note-taking. For two years following data collection, both researchers worked on various other projects within the school using a community-engaged research approach. Additionally, we attended open houses at the school for the purposes of parent/student research recruitment which gave us an opportunity to meet and interact with parents. By the time of the final analysis phase, we had become familiar with some of the school's inner workings and challenges faced by administrators, teachers, and support staff. In an effort to assess potential influences of the first two authors' positionality on interpretation of findings, the third author joined the project during the analysis phase to bring additional perspective. Lewis's background includes practice and research experience in school counseling and school district leadership. The authors were all employed at the same university during the research analysis and are dedicated to community-engaged research and scholarship. While Tyndall is a past EOSA Scholar, Lewis and Pestaner are enrolled in the academy's current cohort. Tyndall lives in the same community as the middle school, and all of us grew up in surrounding counties and attended either low-income or rural schools in the public education system. While our practice experiences are different from those of our participants, there are some similarities. The authors have worked in service professions in public sectors, including nursing and school counseling, which may have influenced our position of interpreting participant experiences in under-resourced and short-staffed environments. While engaging with reflexivity, we dialogued about influences and potential biases of our experiences and employed investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970) to bring about a comprehensive understanding of the data. Among the influences and potential biases noted is that all three researchers are White from middle-class backgrounds, investigating the involvement of predominantly Black parents with a school consisting of a majority White teaching staff. As such, our positionality should be thoughtfully considered by the reader with regard to the design of the study and the interpretation of findings herein (Holmes, 2020). We acknowledge that our positionality is shaped by our privilege, our biases, and our access to resources and spaces, thus undoubtedly influencing our research. We continually strive to be humble and seek to actively listen to those participants and colleagues with different lived experiences than our own.

Results

Teacher retention has been challenging for this Title I school, as noted in the reporting of the primary study (Tyndall et al., 2022). Notably, of the 22 teachers employed at the time of data collection, three retired and 10 resigned during the following two-year period. The authors feel it is important to note that many participants became emotional and tearful during the focus groups. Some expressed feelings of burnout and frustration with the lack of school and community resources to support students, as well as pressure to improve academic performance. While focus group questions were aimed to understand student–teacher dynamics, perspectives regarding levels of parental involvement emerged. Reanalysis yielded three themes where more parental involvement was desired by teachers to support student–teacher connectedness: Parental Support of Students, Parental Modeling for Students, and Parental Interaction with Teachers. Understanding teacher perspectives as presented in these themes was important in facilitating the identification of opportunities to enhance parental involvement at the mesosystem level to promote a more positive influence on the quality of student–teacher relationships at the school microsystem level. Still, the reanalysis of focus group data revealed that many participants viewed parental involvement through a deficit lens that may be based on values imposed by traditional educational power structures reflecting Eurocentric, White, middle-class notions of how parental involvement should be defined.

Parental Support of Students

As participants discussed the emotional health needs of students, they speculated that for many of their students there was a need for more parental support. Participants felt this lack of parental support resulted in some students coming to school with emotional baggage and displacing their emotional pain onto others. It was felt that the demands of work life resulted in parents teetering between no parental presence and an extreme parental presence. One participant perceived that some students were hurt individuals who inflicted hurt onto others in the school as a way of releasing suppressed anger.

> We do have some parents, especially mothers, that work a lot or work shifts where they're not home when their kids are home…and I think it ends up being like extreme parenting when they can. Where it might be [parents are] handling this issue, but then [they] don't have the time to do it consistently. It's more like "I'm going to fuss at you and punk you down"…but then, because [the student] felt that way, [they want

to] punk someone else down [to] show how big [they are] because that happened to [them]. Hurt people hurt people.

Participants sensed these students would come to school and "act out" and that their emotional pain was often substituted with being "mean to everybody." Teacher participants labeled "acting out" behaviors as disrespect toward others, verbal and physical aggression, and peer bullying. The school's bullying rates had been significantly higher than the state averages over the previous few years prior to the study, and several participants shared that "teachers also get bullied." Some referred to these behaviors as a "lack of empathy" toward others and thought them to be a continuation of a "behavioral cycle" originating from home life experiences. One participant questioned if student–parent relationships might have an influence on low empathy, which was contributing to teachers having difficulty making positive sustained connections with their students.

> I just wish the sense of empathy could be created in these students. I don't know the best way to create that understanding of what empathy is for others, but they don't have a connection. Whether it is social media creating that disconnect…or the disconnect between parents and [students]. How do you develop empathy in them? I don't know, but they're lacking it, and I think that's the root of a lot of their bad decisions.

Teachers reported that some of their middle schoolers had a transient lifestyle and were raised by multiple family members in different households. Other students lacked parental support, while others were exposed to forms of traumatic stressors, such as parental drug use and incarceration. Many speculated that students felt minimized or emotionally hurt by these parenting behaviors and were guarded toward others in school to compensate for their own hurt. One participant shared an encounter with a parent during a progress report meeting. She recalled it being a "devastating" moment in her career when she felt a parent could be contributing to a student's withdrawn behavior:

> We have a student…he was so quiet all the time, so I'd make an effort to constantly try to talk to him…or constantly praise him for doing stuff. And then when his mother came to one of our progress report nights, it was kind of just a light bulb moment. She was like, "Oh, I'm surprised he's doing well in piano, he's so stupid." I was like, this is why this child is behaving the way he's behaving…I think it's the way their parents talk to them which in turn is how they come to school and approach education in general, like their self-worth and mental [state].

In addition to the need for more emotional support from parents, participants felt support in the area of academics was also needed. Participants shared

how some parents at the school demonstrated a general disdain for or disinterest in schooling, which may have carried over in how students viewed and engaged in school. Further, examples were provided where parents did not seem to value all aspects of schooling. Others in the group supported a statement by their colleague who shared that a parent dismissed notification of their child having a C grade in one of their elective classes. The participant stated the parent's response was, "Well they don't need that to pass, do they?" This low regard seemed to seep into how children felt about school and approached learning. Participants speculated that the need for more supportive parenting hindered student–teacher connectedness as students' emotional needs impacted their engagement with learning in the classroom.

Parental Modeling for Students

Teachers indicated that some of their students struggled with conducting themselves in school in a socially appropriate manner, often resulting in disciplinary problems. The descriptions of this struggle seemed to relate to expectations by teachers of the students to utilize social norms for appropriate behavior within the school or classroom. Several participants provided insight into the struggle students had with perceived appropriate versus inappropriate behavior at school when they were expected to adhere to "two sets of rules." One participant perceived there was a lack of rules and expectations in the home, and when students tried to adjust to school expectations of behavior "it doesn't go over too well." Another teacher was empathetic, stating,

> You've got one set of [home] rules, but then we want them to walk through the door and completely shut those rules out and follow [school] rules, and we're asking kids who are still developing to do that. I mean, it's honestly just a struggle.

Although participants indicated that students conducting themselves in accordance with school norms and expectations was a skill the middle schoolers were still developing, they also felt that a lack of parental or family modeling and reinforcement of these behaviors may stunt skill development.

While behavioral norms were promoted through school rules and classroom expectations, not all parents seemed to be in congruence with the school in this regard. For example, several participants indicated that some parents have encouraged their students to fight, clearly in opposition to school efforts to teach children how to manage conflict peacefully. Participants had firsthand experience with "bully-like" behaviors from parents and felt students were learning these types of "survival behaviors" in their home environments and then bringing those coping behaviors to school.

> Their parenting behaviors are what the students are emulating…and a lot of their parenting behaviors are bully-like behaviors where they get what they want by being very brash….That's where we try very hard as a school to break down and help them understand there's other ways to tackle issues and problems…so, I feel like I need to be modeling all of those positive behaviors.

The disconnect between parental expectations for acceptable behavior in the home and teacher expectations for acceptable behavior in the school exacerbated the divide between these two critical influences in children's lives and, ultimately, may have left students confused. This confusion may have created resentment and mistrust towards teachers, possibly impacting students' ability to build relationships with their teachers and vice versa.

Participants speculated that, for some of their students, the lack of ability to follow school norms and expectations when stepping onto school grounds was due to them functioning as "the adult" at home. One participant noted a misalignment with parent–child roles due to a lack of supervision, stating, "Some of these children that we're asking to listen to us are the parent at their home, and that's part of their problem." This misalignment influenced teachers' abilities to enforce socially appropriate behaviors in the classroom and likely created tension that presented barriers for student–teacher connectedness. Another participant referred to it as "self-policing among children" as she often saw students off-campus who were unsupervised and lacked structure. One participant elaborated with:

> I hate to speculate on what somebody's home life is like, but it seems like at home, they're probably allowed to do whatever they want. Possibly, they don't really have anybody at home that is guiding them…so whatever feels good, they do it. And I think that [students] bring that in, and that struggle that we have of what [students] do at home is one thing, what you do at school is something else.

While a few participants considered the failure to follow school norms and expectations as a typical adjustment in adolescence, most thought that unacceptable student behaviors were from a "lack of being taught." Participants did acknowledge external influences that were most likely making it difficult for students to meet school expectations for behaviors. As such, there exists a misalignment among parents and teachers regarding a shared set of expectations for school behaviors and attitudes towards education.

Parental Interaction With Teachers

Participants felt that fostering student–teacher connectedness was sometimes difficult because there were parents who had a "distrusting relationship"

with the school. This lack of trust likely contributed to parents withholding information about their children's emotional and mental health, which in turn inhibited how well teachers could connect with their students. Participants noted that information sharing depended on what parents were willing to share. Parents did not always see the value of informing the school of situations impacting their child's well-being. One participant expressed frustration about two students who had mental health issues and the parents did not inform the school until several months into the academic year. The participant felt this information was critical because "we're going to handle this child a little bit differently because of the history." In other situations, parents seemed to avoid the school's attempts to reach out because of concern over a noted decline in the student's mental health.

> We called parents and they wouldn't even answer the phone. We would invite them and send mail; they would send back saying they aren't coming. They never showed up, not once. Mom had kicked him [the student] out of the house because she couldn't handle him anymore.

These examples of limited, or a lack of, communication resulted in participants feeling there was a need for better parental interaction with teachers.

Issues with communication between the parents and the school may have been influenced by a high teacher turnover rate at the school. Notably, the majority of teachers had been employed with the school for three years or less. Participants were not oblivious to the impact this was having on student–teacher connectedness. They recognized that relationship-building and trust was needed so students and parents would not see teachers as a "stranger" and for them to "see you as part of them…so they work with you." To engage parents, several participants identified strategies to improve communication with parents. For example, a few participants were creative in their approach to engage parents by using Class Dojo©, a classroom communication app. This communication app seemed to be a helpful strategy to connect with parents in an efficient manner "because it's like a text, which is much easier to do during the day than to stop and make a phone call." One participant commented on several features of the app:

> I use it for positive rewards and negative rewards, and…its' got a built-in translator so…this parent was non-English speaking, so she sent me a message in Spanish about an issue that her child was having….If it is something more important, then it's also documentation that we can print later that's date- and time-stamped, of "we had this communication previously."

These participants felt such an app fostered parental involvement as it "helps parents feel comfortable" with communicating minor issues like students forgetting an assignment. The app was also used to denote positive and negative rewards based on student performance and gave parents the ability to see and comment on teacher posts.

Discussion

The findings suggest there are factors surrounding parental involvement within the home and school that may influence student–teacher connectedness. Teachers described their perceptions of student–parent relationships and circumstances at home that may have implications on how students interact with others in school, react to school expectations, and respond to teacher attempts to build relationships. Student capacity for relationship-building in school may be influenced by the quality of student–parent relationships (Crespo et al., 2013; Oldfield et al., 2016). As such, poor quality student–parent relationships may have a negative influence on the way students build relationships with others, including teachers, since student interactions with parents are often mirrored in student–teacher interactions (Chan et al., 2013; Crespo et al., 2013).

Participants described a lack of parental support and perceived some parenting practices as harsh. Living in impoverished neighborhoods may be challenging for parents due to unemployment, crowded housing, and decreased access to healthcare, resulting in higher stress levels relating to parenting and more tenuous relationships between children and parents (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Foster et al., 2017). While some teachers expressed negative perceptions of parenting practices, it may be that these perceptions are based on monolingual, White, middle-class values and not reflective of the low-income, diverse student body (Ho & Cherng, 2018). Approximately 78% of the student population are youth of color (NCES, 2019) compared to mostly White focus group participants. Similar to Henderson et al. (2020), White middle-class teachers may perceive the parenting abilities or involvement of socioeconomically and racially diverse parents as less than optimum (Ho & Cherng, 2018). White teachers may view Black students from impoverished backgrounds as lacking positive role models and proper supervision in the home or having parents that place minimal value on education (Hines, 2017). This framing of Black students with a deficit-oriented view perpetuates the assumptions that academic failure is the result of these deficits rather than the pedagogical or systemic practices within schools dominated by White cultural norms (Hines, 2017; Hyland, 2005). These perceptions may influence student–teacher connectedness since

negative teacher opinions about students have been associated with teacher beliefs that poor parenting practices adversely affect students' academic progress, particularly among families of color (Ho & Cherng, 2018).

Participants described the home situations of many students as disruptive, transient, or unsupervised. Since familial disruption negatively influences connectedness with others (Poland & Ferguson, 2021), discord within these students' home situations may also be influencing student–teacher connectedness. Participants speculated that homelife stressors, such as parental drug use and incarceration, and "bully-like" behaviors by parents were causing emotional difficulties for students resulting in displacement of those emotions onto others. Student emotional responses were described as disrespectful, verbally and physically aggressive, and bullying toward peers and teachers. Notably, the school's bullying and in-school suspension rates were both higher than the county or state average rates (SDPI, 2019). Students with higher levels of problem behaviors have been shown to have lower levels of connectedness with school (O'Connor et al., 2021); as such, behaviors that may be emanating from stressors outside the school and possibly rooted in emotional needs may be contributing to missed connections with teachers.

The findings of this study suggest that teacher expectations for student behavior and attitudes toward education are not supported and modeled by all parents. Parents' expectations and values regarding education that don't align with middle-class norms may be viewed as deficient resulting in a disconnect between parents and teachers about what should be considered appropriate (Hilgendorf, 2012). For teachers and schools to be successful, this disconnect cannot be ignored, given that parental attitude toward education is the most significant predictor of the behavior children exhibit in school (Bobic & Tosic, 2016). Notably, some parents may have had negative experiences in school themselves as children, which may carry over into how they view education and interact with teachers (Baker et al., 2016).

There may be conflicting views between teachers and parents about what is meant by high quality parental involvement (Chappell & Ratliffe, 2021), which may stem from misalignment of the values of White teachers with those of parents of color (Henderson et al, 2020). Henderson et al. (2020) found that teachers often perceived that parental involvement encompasses only in-school participation, without considering in-home educational interactions that may be occurring between parent and child as a valuable component of parental involvement. Parents may experience barriers that prevent them from being as involved with in-school participation as they desire, due to lack of resources or work commitments, particularly among low-income and racially diverse populations (Chappell & Ratliffe, 2021; Ho & Cherng, 2018). Additionally,

parents may be concerned that their absence from school activities is viewed as a lack of interest or involvement in their child's education, and this may diminish motivation to interact with teachers (Hilgendorf, 2012). Teachers in the current study discussed a lack of communication from parents about student issues that teachers perceived to be of importance, such as mental health needs. Just as there may be conflicting views about what is meant by high quality parental involvement, there may be a disconnect about what information parents feel they should share with the school. This divide between parent and teacher, particularly for youth of color, may result in parent–teacher misunderstandings leading to distrust of teachers and poor quality relationships (Henderson et al., 2020).

The mistrust between parents and teachers may be the result of factors emanating from both parent and teacher attitudes and actions. Teacher perceptions about low-income parents of color may emanate from a deficit lens that may influence their attitudes and involvement with parents (Lasater, 2019). The perception that parents place minimal value on education can further erode trust between parents and teachers (Lasater, 2019). Conversely, parents may only communicate with teachers if there is a problem with their child and may view teacher-initiated communications about their child as critical instead of supportive (Lasater, 2019). It may be that parents within the middle school were reluctant to communicate with teachers about the mental health needs of their child because of distrust of teachers or the educational system due to past traumas related to minoritization (Hine, 2022). Additionally, stigma often exists within rural communities, and parents and caregivers may prefer to deal with problems within the family (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). To enhance communication and trust between parents and teachers, parents must perceive that teachers' attempts to communicate with parents are genuine and authentic gestures of wanting to support their child (Lasater, 2019). Accordingly, teachers must understand that as representatives of the school within the parent–teacher dyad, they may be perceived as the dominant force within the dyad, whereas parents may feel vulnerable and at risk for betrayal of their trust, particularly among low-income parents of color (Hine, 2022; Khalifa, 2018).

Another barrier to trust building between parents, teachers, and students may be the high rate of teacher turnover. Schools serving youth of color in areas of concentrated poverty, particularly in rural regions, are challenged to retain experienced, qualified teachers that are sorely needed in these schools with static academic scores and graduation rates (Orfield, 2013; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Since most of the teachers had been employed at this school for three years or less, it may be that they had minimal, if any, experience working with students and families from low-income communities. Teachers new to the

profession are often placed in low-income schools and may not understand the strengths and needs of the student population and their families, particularly if they did not grow up in such a community (Luet et al., 2018). As such, they may lack understanding about the knowledge students and families bring into the school and may expect less from students (Luet et al., 2018), creating additional challenges between parents and teachers. High teacher turnover may be a source of constant disruption of relationships within the school (Ford & Forsyth, 2021). Since trust, an essential element of student–teacher connectedness, evolves over time (Brake, 2020), teacher turnover may have hindered relationship-building with students and may account for students' guarded behavior toward teachers and was likely also reflected in parent–teacher interactions. In schools that are already struggling and subject to state and district pressures to improve achievement through accountability measures and sanctions, such as those in impoverished neighborhoods with a majority of students of color segregated by race and poverty, the adverse effects of high rates of teacher turnover on academic success are more pronounced (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Orfield, 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

Practice Implications

Similar to this low-income diverse middle school, many schools have difficulty connecting with parents (Dikkers, 2013). The home, the school, and the community are overlapping spheres of influence on the development of a child (Epstein, 2011). When parents are connected with their child's school, academic performance and engagement improve for their child (Rodriguez et al., 2013; Wolfe, 2014). Additionally, students' relationship with their parents has significant implications for the quality of relationships with others, including teachers (Chan et al., 2013; Crespo et al., 2013). Therefore, strategies to enhance parental involvement should start with schools supporting the student–parent relationship. Collaborating with the community to offer resources to parents or to facilitate school events focused on student–parent activities could be strategies to improve connectedness, particularly during the middle school years when student–parent relationships may be tumultuous (Foster et al., 2017; Joyce & Early, 2014; VanValkenburgh et al., 2021). While encouraging parents to become involved in school activities and extracurricular activities may facilitate connectedness, consideration should be given to more focused efforts among diverse school populations (Thompson et al., 2006).

Supporting students' emotional needs by providing teachers with relevant training and strategies may facilitate opportunities to enhance student–teacher connectedness. For example, creating a positive classroom environment com-

prised of supportive learning and social activities can foster connectedness with students while assisting them to build social–emotional skills (Midford et al., 2017). These skills empower students to manage and cope with stressors (Midford et al., 2017), such as the homelife stressors described by participants that many of these students encounter. School-based social–emotional programs, such as mindfulness training, have demonstrated positive outcomes including increased emotional control, prosocial behavior, and academic performance and decreased peer aggression (O'Connor et al., 2017). Similarly, supporting the development of peer relationships by facilitating opportunities for group work and cooperative learning may enhance prosocial behavior (Oldfield et al., 2016). One way to mediate the challenges resulting from a lack of parental involvement is to encourage cohesive peer relationships (2016). This may be particularly important in this school which is challenged with maintaining consistency among peers resulting from seven feeder elementary schools creating a new social dynamic in middle school. Since students with more numerous and positive connections with their peers transition more successfully from school to school as they matriculate (Kingery et al., 2011), this adds an additional barrier to developing student connections with one another and with the school overall. As such, policy changes to this relatively unique attendance pattern for a rural school should be considered when developing strategies to build positive social connections among students and between students and teachers. Consideration of such changes must be accompanied by policies to battle housing inequities and residential segregation (Lawrence & Mollborn, 2017) that otherwise lead to disparities in the quality of education a student receives based upon their race or ethnicity or income.

A partnership between families and schools toward supporting a student's learning by establishing agreed-upon expectations and a regular system of authentic and intentional communication is recommended (Lasater, 2019). Teacher agency, whereby teachers assist parents in overcoming obstacles to involvement in their child's learning, such as by using Class Dojo© or other supportive technology applications, is an important component of such a partnership (Hilgendorf, 2012). Using Class Dojo©, a practice referenced by several participating teachers, shows promise for establishing regular, efficient communication with parents. Informal communication facilitated by tools such as Class Dojo©, particularly in low-income schools, has been shown to be a more effective means to engage parents over traditional methods (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021). This family and school partnership should foster parent agency and engagement, rather than merely parent attendance or involvement in a teacher- or school-led information session (Epstein, 2011; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Identifying a parent liaison may be instrumental in bridging racial/ethnic differences and facilitating an approachable space for parents within the school (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Henderson et al., 2020). When school staff communicate effectively and create a welcoming environment for both students and parents, they establish the conditions necessary for positive parent engagement, which in turn builds relational trust (Constantino, 2016; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Weiss et al., 2018). Additionally, if parents are provided the space and encouragement to lead conversations with other parents around the schooling of their children while acknowledging the needs of teachers and schools to safely and effectively educate their students, distrust of school officials or educational systems may be mitigated. Such partnerships create a shared sense of responsibility for learning among educators, families, and the community at large (Epstein, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007).

Educators must also recognize the inherent power inequity between schools and parents (Khalifa, 2018). The social, economic, and cultural capital that individuals possess in terms of knowledge, assets, and norms are often gauged by those in positions of power (Crumb et al., 2022), which may influence the way teachers perceive parents. Parents with limited access to capital assets may not have the ability nor means to be physically present and participate with in-school activities (Hilgendorf, 2012). Parents of students that grow up in homes that do not fit within what some teachers may consider to be an appropriate family structure may be judged to be less supportive and involved with the student's education (Hilgendorf, 2012). While it is important for teachers to acquire knowledge about the lives of students outside of school and the strengths that each family brings to the educational process, it may be difficult for teachers to realize those strengths among students from socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds different from their own (Delpit, 2006). Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to reflect upon their perspectives and, instead of insisting that parents strive to procure school capital, to become more culturally responsive by seeking to understand the capital assets that parents can bring to the school and their child's learning (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Lynch, 2021). Cultural competency training may provide teachers with an understanding of how to effectively engage diverse parents and inform teaching strategies, as culturally competent professionals expect variations in student perceptions of safety and connectedness (Daniels, 2021; Henderson et al., 2020). While capable teachers are able to build strong student–teacher connectedness in the absence of a parent–teacher relationship, a parent–teacher relationship comprised of mutuality, reciprocity, and validation of the strengths of each party is ideal (Lynch, 2021). Perhaps, more importantly, educating teachers on potential biases about parental involvement may shift their perceptions of what

is considered high quality parental involvement and facilitate more effective parent–teacher engagement and improve student outcomes (Thompson et al., 2017; VanValkenburgh et al., 2021). While these strategies are important considerations, they require funding, and in rural and low-income schools, funding is often a barrier to implementing programs that may enhance parent-teacher relationships (Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this research. First, findings were generated from a secondary data analysis collected from a single setting. The setting represented one low-income, rural school serving 78% students of color, with high teacher turnover, and therefore, findings may not be transferable across other Title I middle schools. While we had a high response rate (91%) with teacher participation in focus groups, we acknowledge that this research only captures the perceptions of teachers within the school at one point in time. Since perspectives may vary between teachers and parents regarding levels of parental involvement, further research is needed to capture parent voices. A mixed-methods approach is recommended, in which parents complete surveys measuring the extent of parental involvement, such as the Parent–Teacher Involvement Questionnaire (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1991) or a similar survey, followed by focus groups to explore perceptions about parental involvement. Multiple perspectives would provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of parental involvement and student–teacher connectedness rather than a lone perspective (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). Finally, since the focus group data were collected prior to the pandemic, it likely does not capture the additional stress on schools and communities and its impact on parental involvement nor student–teacher connectedness.

Conclusion

Connectedness can be bolstered between students, parents, and teachers by instituting activities in the classroom that facilitate a supportive learning environment, providing school-based social–emotional programs, encouraging positive peer relationships, and ensuring that parents are aware of community resources and supports. Establishing family–school partnerships is an important tool for schools to build trusting relationships with parents. Such partnerships encourage teacher agency whereby teachers support parents' involvement with their child's education by meeting parents where they are situated and fostering parent agency so that parents can assume a leadership role in educating their children. Teacher training on cultural competency and

biases about perceptions of parental involvement may stimulate a recognition of the knowledge and strengths of parents to support the educational needs of their children in low-income, racially and ethnically diverse schools. These biases may have shaped teacher perceptions of parental involvement in this school system embedded with ideals that may differ from its low-income, diverse community members. Teacher perspectives about parental involvement were often viewed through a deficit lens. These deficit-based perspectives may be more problematic than the actual quality and quantity of parental involvement, particularly given the implications to student–teacher connectedness, when teachers believe that parental involvement is lacking. Unless perspectives are viewed through a lens of understanding and validation of the community and its members, there will continue to be a misalignment of parent–teacher expectations and values which will negatively impact student outcomes.

During our third year of partner engagement, we learned that the local Board of Education elected to close this Title I school. News outlets reported there were several factors behind the decision including a high number of reassignment requests, numerous staff vacancies, and underutilization by half of the school's capacity. This is unfortunate, as student–teacher connectedness takes time to build and is disrupted by school closures, which likely had a negative impact on many students. Funding to support the success of similar low-income schools at risk for closing should be prioritized at the local and state levels. While speculative, some of the factors that led to the school's closure may reflect disengagement by teachers and parents from each other, reiterating the significance of connectedness between teachers and the families they serve.

This article is not an easy read, because it addresses reality. Our intent here is not to be critical of these teacher participants or their stories, but to offer opportunities for dialogue in a safe, non-judgmental space as we are appreciative for their voices and how this research offers additional insight into student–teacher connectedness. Schools are made up of humans and their interactions—teachers, students, family members, administrators, countless other staff, and community members. Each of those people can and will make bad choices at times. We can blame the institution or the system or the individual, or all of the above. The question is, though, what can we do about it in the small window of time we have with any given student and parent/caregiver? How can we support the teacher to reach out to that parent, and whether or not that effort is successful, how can the teacher and the rest of the school community best support the student? Yes, we must work to improve the system, but policy and culture shifts take time, and students cannot wait (Redding, 2021). When formulating strategies to enhance student–teacher connectedness, consideration should be given

to the extent and importance of the role of parental involvement, as well as the influence of the broader systems surrounding the micro- and mesosystems on the contextual support of students.

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