Promoting School Connectedness Among Urban Youth of Color: Reducing Risk Factors While Promoting Protective Factors

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While the concept and definition of school connectedness has changed over the years, several common indicators are generally agreed upon by educators, researchers, and clinicians. Specifically, feeling connected to school involves positive and prosocial connections to peers, teachers, and staff at school; a sense of enjoyment and liking of school; a belief that school is important; active engagement in school activities; and a perceived sense of belonging, closeness, and commitment to school (Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006). High levels of school connectedness are associated with positive physical and mental health outcomes such as increased emotional well-being, less substance abuse, better physical health, decreased levels of suicidal ideation, reduced depressive symptoms, lower risk of violent or deviant behavior, and reduced risk for teen pregnancy (for review, see Thompson et al., 2006). Moreover, youth with higher levels of school connectedness also demonstrate positive academic and educational outcomes that include more regular school attendance, enrollment in school for a longer period of time, and higher academic performance as measured by grades and classroom exam scores (for review, see Blum, 2005a).

The multitude of positive outcomes associated with high levels of school connectedness has been documented across racial, ethnic, and income groups. However, lower levels of school connectedness are more prevalent among minority students and youth attending urban schools (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000). Given these findings, more attention needs to be devoted toward understanding, fostering, and promoting school connectedness among minority youth from urban areas. As part of this process, it is important to examine risk (school discipline policies, classroom management, risky behaviors) and protective factors (social support, extracurricular activities) in the context of the urban environment so as to inform the design and implementation of targeted and culturally relevant prevention and intervention programs. Therefore, this article will provide a broad overview of risk and protective factors associated with school connectedness in minority youth from urban environments. Although space limitations preclude a more detailed discussion of interventions for school connectedness, this article will discuss general recommendations and strategies for adults, including teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and mentors, to improve school connectedness among these youth.

RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER LEVELS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

Zero-Tolerance School Discipline Policy

Creating an environment within the school where students experience a sense of belonging, including feeling safe and accepted, is integral to maintaining and fostering school connectedness. In many urban school districts with a large minority student body, zero-tolerance policies are strictly enforced with the aim of increasing safety within the schools. Zero-tolerance policies are administrative rules intended to address specific problems associated with school safety and discipline. Supporters have credited zero-tolerance policies with helping make students feel safer in school. However, in contrast to the goals of the policy, evidence indicates that students in these schools report feeling less safe as compared to students attending schools with more moderate discipline policies (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). Moreover, findings indicate that school connectedness is lower in schools that suspend students for minor infractions compared to schools with more lenient policies (McNeely et al., 2002). Stringent discipline policies are especially problematic for minority groups, as research has demonstrated that African American, Hispanic, and Native American students are subject to disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion when compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). Harsh disciplinary punishments like suspension and expulsion exclude students from school, thereby decreasing their connectedness to the school environment.

Administrators, educators, and policy makers are encouraged to establish positive school climates and environments by developing and enacting discipline policies that are applied fairly and equally to all students. Discipline policies should be reviewed regularly by students, teachers, and administrators and revised appropriately based on feedback (Blum, 2005a).

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Classroom Management

Urban schools with diverse student bodies and few resources are often characterized by large classrooms, frequent classroom disruptions, and a lack of complex, active instruction. These conditions often result in poorly managed classrooms, a clear risk factor for low school connectedness. Students from these classrooms report low connectedness to school mainly because they believe the environment is not conducive to meaningful student learning and that adults in the school don’t care about their learning and about them as individuals (Blum, 2005b; Freiberg, Huzinec & Templeton, 2009).

Teachers in urban schools often experience structural (e.g., large classrooms), contextual (e.g., limited resources), and administrative obstacles (e.g., zero-tolerance policies) that serve to negatively impact their ability to maintain proper classroom management. When teachers are provided with quality training in behavior management, broad ranging positive effects can be expected including fewer disciplinary and special education referrals, increased student achievement, improved teacher retention, and an enhanced climate of respect within the school (Politzok & Gottlieb, 2006). Classroom-level recommendations include employing a wide variety of instructional methods and technologies; providing experiential, hands-on learning opportunities; and, delivering course content that is relevant to the lives of students. School policy level recommendations include setting high academic standards for all students; limiting the size of the school to create small learning environments; and forming multidisciplinary education teams in which groups of teachers work with students (Blum, 2005b).
Individual Risk Factors and Behaviors
Resnick and colleagues (1997) demonstrated that lower levels of school connectedness were associated with risky and unhealthy behaviors among youth, such as higher levels of violence, cigarette smoking, alcohol and marijuana use, and earlier onset of sexual activity. Although the association between school connectedness and health risk behaviors is well demonstrated, few studies have addressed these variables in a way that permits us to understand causality.

Students who engage in risky behaviors and report low school connectedness tend to have significantly more visits to the school nurse when compared to students who report higher levels of school connectedness (Bonny et al., 2000). As such, school nurses should be trained to identify students at-risk for lower school connectedness because these students may be primary candidates for referral to prevention and intervention efforts. School-based health centers can also be an effective strategy for indirectly promoting school connectedness (McCord, Klein, Foy, & Fothergill, 1993).

PROTECTIVE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER LEVELS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

Social Support Factors
Social support is an important protective factor that can play a significant role in shaping a student’s feelings of connectedness with his or her school. Although social support can come from a number of sources, the three primary sources are parents, school personnel, and peers. In each case, specific, changeable aspects of these relationships have been associated with differing levels of school connectedness.

Parents: Parents’ attitudes and behaviors regarding school are strongly associated with their children’s connectedness and engagement to school. In a study of urban middle school students, a majority of whom were students of color, parent factors were associated with student-reported engagement with their school. Specifically, students who felt unsure about their parents’ expectations of them at school reported less connection and engagement with their school (Murray, 2009). In another study with a diverse sample, the degree to which the adolescents’ parents encouraged their schoolwork was positively associated with the students’ engagement in school (Steinberg et al., 1992).

Encouraging parents to communicate clear expectations regarding school, such as regular school attendance and homework completion, has the potential to increase connectedness for their children (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). It is important to note, however, that parents need not participate in formal school-planned activities in order to be involved in their child’s schooling. Parents can be involved by sitting with their children as they do homework, or simply by asking the child how school was each day (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). In turn, schools should make every effort to include parents as participants in the discussion of how to best help their child, rather than consider parents to be passive receivers of the information (Carreón et al., 2005).

School Personnel: Social support provided by school personnel can serve as a powerful impetus for increasing school connectedness, particularly among minority students attending urban schools. In a study of Hispanic middle school students, social support from teachers was a strong predictor of student engagement whereby youth perceiving more positive attitudes and behaviors from teachers demonstrated higher school engagement scores (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). In a similar study, teacher warmth was found to be most salient for Hispanic students while academic validation was more important for non-Hispanic white students (Hudley et al., 2003).

School counselors can also play an important role in increasing school engagement by providing a unique opportunity for continuous social support for students, as a student’s counselor will often stay the same across all the years the student is at a school (Davis & Lambie, 2005). As a result of this ongoing relationship, as well as a counselor’s specialized training, a school counselor is an ideal candidate to both provide ongoing support to students who may be in need with increased support, as well as to communicate with the student’s family (Davis & Lambie, 2005).

Social support from teachers may represent a direct mechanism by which school connectedness can be fostered for minority students (Hudley et al., 2003). Keeping in mind how busy teachers are, a teacher can display warmth to his or her students in a variety of ways that do not have to take significant time away from instruction. For example, a teacher can set aside just five minutes a week to have a weekly “check-in” with his or her class, during which time the conversation focuses on what the students are doing outside the classroom, any problems they’re having with the class material, or any difficulties they are experiencing in the school more generally.

Peers: Peer relationships also play a critical role in determining how connected a student feels toward his or her school. Adolescents who report multiple positive and prosocial friendships also note higher levels of engagement in school and feelings of school belonging (Vaquera, 2009). Alternatively, middle school students from diverse backgrounds who reported that their five closest friends participated in problem behaviors (including drinking alcohol, bullying, being disrespectful to teachers, fighting, and lying to parents) also indicated lower levels of school connectedness (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009).

Schools, as well as neighborhood and community programs, should encourage the development of prosocial friendships among adolescents by helping to create opportunities for positive interactions. For example, schools and extracurricular programs could recommend the use of group work as a means of both learning material and encouraging social interactions. Further, schools could create mentoring programs, pairing new students with returning students, to facilitate the development of friendships. Outside of school, participation in sports leagues, arts programs, or recreational groups also provides opportunities to develop friendships with others who may attend the same school.

Student Involvement in Extracurricular Activities
Active participation in extracurricular activities represents another protective factor for urban youth that contributes to students’ school connectedness (Blum et al., 2002). Extracurricular activities present opportunities for participation in formalized experiences within school and in the community; within-school activities include options such as sports, fine arts, academics, clubs, and student government, while out-of-school activities include options such as boys and girls clubs, volunteer work, and other community groups.
Unfortunately, many ethnic minority students do not participate in extracurricular activities and therefore do not receive the numerous benefits that those activities offer. For example, Hispanic youth are less likely than their peers to participate in school-based extracurricular activities; however, Hispanic youth who do participate in these activities report the highest levels of school connectedness (Feldman & Matjasko, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to attract students who are at risk for school disconnectedness to school-based and community-based extracurricular activities. Developing extracurricular activities that are youth-driven and allow students to have a voice and feel included will likely result in extracurricular programs that are inclusive and more attractive to all students (e.g., peer counselors, peer tutors, new-student orientation programs, buddy programs, multicultural awareness weeks, family nights, youth councils) (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Having high levels of school connectedness is associated with positive educational outcomes that include high academic achievement and school completion. As such, it is especially concerning that low levels of school connectedness occur disproportionately in low-income, urban neighborhoods and among racial and ethnic minorities (Daly et al., 2009). Thus, a great challenge facing educators, administrators, researchers, parents, mentors, and other adult figures is finding ways to promote school connectedness among this vulnerable population. Research has begun to elucidate which risk and protective factors are most strongly associated with connection to school. The next step is to place greater emphasis on developing prevention and intervention efforts with the purpose of diminishing those risk factors associated with school connectedness while simultaneously promoting protective factors. The evidence is promising for efforts that focus on the development of moderate discipline policies; staff training on appropriate classroom management of behavior; promotion of social support among parents, teachers, and peers; and the expansion of school- and community-based extracurricular activities and programs. As strategies for promoting school connectedness become better known, it is imperative that we disseminate these proven methods so that various stakeholders across schools, neighborhoods, and communities can play an important role in positively influencing school connectedness among urban youth of color. —

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