Family Engagement in a Catholic School: What Can Urban Schools Learn?

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Abstract

U.S. public schools have an important opportunity to positively impact children and families from historically marginalized communities, serving as a stable point for children as they grow and a front-lines point of intervention for families. However, few schools are able to successfully create authentic, egalitarian partnerships with communities of color impacted by urban poverty. Coleman's (1988a, 1988b) seminal work on the social capital and academic success generated among low-income families with children attending Catholic schools, and Brinig and Garnett's (2014) research on the impact of Catholic schools in communities impacted by poverty led us to wonder what urban public schools might learn about family engagement from urban Catholic schools. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what a small urban Catholic middle school (Grades 4-8) located in a neighborhood significantly impacted by community violence, sex work, and drug use, does to engender trusting relationships with families and support the generation of social capital. Participants included 14 parents, students, and alumni who shared their experiences of being part of this school community and the practices or values that created strong community bonds and supported school persistence among children and youth. Results point to the importance of nonjudgmental attitudes among school staff, a communal organization of the school, and shared values across home and school settings.

Key Words: family engagement, private, Catholic, urban middle schools, community, values, poverty, parents, students, teachers, relationships, social capital

Introduction

Researchers have demonstrated that the chronic, toxic stress caused by poverty is significantly correlated with learning and behavior problems and negative academic outcomes among children and youth (Burke et al., 2011; Eamon, 2005; Rothstein, 2010). However, researchers have also consistently demonstrated the positive effects of family involvement in their children's education on academic achievement, academic engagement, and even mental health (Jeynes, 2005, 2012a; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014); this potential positive impact has led some scholars to believe that bridging the gaps between families and schools is one of the most critical points of intervention for families living in urban poverty (Crosnoe, 2004).

The literature on family engagement in urban schools is replete with deficit-based narratives documenting the challenges that urban schools face in engaging parents from historically disenfranchised communities (Valencia & Black, 2002). There may be much to learn from urban Catholic schools in terms of how they have not only increased the academic achievement of students of color living in urban poverty more so than their public school counterparts, but have also created positive change in the community at large (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Bryk et al., 1993; Jeynes, 2012b). Although some researchers (e.g., Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Bryk et al., 2010) have explored the impact of Catholic schools on urban youth and communities, few have explicitly explored family engagement in urban Catholic schools and how the relationships created between families and educators in these spaces may be critical in understanding how social capital can be generated.

As part of a larger study on one such exceptional Catholic middle school serving fourth through eighth grade students in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, California (Proehl et al., 2017), the purpose of this study was to specifically explore parent and student perceptions of this school's efforts to engage families, build relationships, and generate social capital among families living in a neighborhood significantly impacted by community violence, sex work, and drug use. This small Catholic school has had enormous success in school persistence compared to neighboring districts, with the goal of serving those in the community most affected by poverty—immigrant families of color (Proehl et al., 2017). Through qualitative interviews with students, alumni, and their parents, we sought to identify those family engagement practices or values that might support other urban schools in creating community and disrupting cycles of poverty.

Family Engagement in Urban Schools

In an effort to challenge deficit-based narratives, Valencia and Black (2002) brought to light the myths that circulate among educators regarding families who supposedly don't "want" to be involved in or don't even "care" about their children's education, asserting that all families, regardless of race or class, make meaningful contributions to their children's schooling. Many researchers and practitioners who collaborate with communities of color impacted by poverty know that these types of deficit-based narratives are not only false but also dehumanizing, further hindering the creation of the trusting relationships necessary for successful family–school partnerships (Mapp & Hong, 2010). Lareau's work on the role of social class in family–school relationships highlighted how schools tend to value only compliant types of parental involvement: parents who do not question teachers' authority. This type of involvement is not congruent with many parents' distrust of school systems given the historical legacy of segregation and oppression for families of color (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). A key finding in Lareau and Horvat's (1999) work was how a family's lack of social and cultural capital made it more difficult to engage with schools, revealing the need for schools to change their conceptualization of parental involvement and meet families on their own terms.

In their synthesis of research on equity issues in family and community engagement in schools, Baquedano-López et al. (2013) reviewed research documenting culturally relevant and empowering models of parental and community involvement in schools. The models they reviewed not only affirmed diverse families' at-home practices and the positive impact on their children's education, but also encouraged and extended the social networks of parents in an effort to align with the needs of families. Reschly and Christenson (2012) argued that partnerships between families and schools can only be formed through shared goals and decision making. This type of partnering is first grounded in trusting and humanizing relationships as the foundation for generating community power and social capital (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Along this same line of thinking, Noguera's (2001) research on family and community empowerment in urban schools found that "when school and community have formed a genuine partnership based on respect and a shared sense of responsibility, positive forms of social capital can be generated" (p. 193).

Social Capital in Urban Schools

Coleman (1988b) was one of the first scholars to introduce the concept of social capital, using the lower dropout rates of youth from low-income communities attending Catholic schools versus those attending traditional public

schools to illustrate his analysis. Like financial resources and human capital, social capital allows people to accomplish things that they could not do without it. The difference, however, is that social capital is actually derived from the trusting relationships among people; therefore, the power of social capital rests in the ability of communities to do things together that they could not otherwise do individually. Coleman (1988b) argued that social capital is generated when communication is consistent and clear between the school and parents and among parents with children attending the same school. Coleman (1988a) claimed that social capital is particularly important in communities facing the challenges of poverty because of the lack of human and financial capital.

Saegert, Thompson, and Warren (2001) compiled evidence on the power of social capital in combating poverty. Their research is a powerful demonstration of how social capital indirectly (via the generation of human and financial capital) improves many aspects of the quality of life for families in historically disenfranchised communities, ranging from health care to education to political participation. Warren and Mapp (2011) defined two main types of social capital: *bridging social capital*, or connections between different groups, and *bonding social capital*, or connections between people who are similar in important ways. They asserted that both types are necessary to transform people, communities, and institutions. This is why urban schools can be such effective sites for generating social capital in communities facing poverty—they create space to build both bridging and bonding social capital, strengthening community cohesiveness and connecting communities with knowledge, opportunities, and resources that allow for capacity building (Noguera, 2001). Researchers examining the influence of social capital on educational outcomes have found that both family social capital, or a nurturing home environment, and community social capital help children do well in school (Israel et al., 2001). Stability, community engagement, and community connection all seem to be important factors in supporting children in school. Importantly, these are the factors that many Catholic schools are able to offer children and families (Bryk et al., 1993; Proehl et al., 2017).

Social Capital and Family Engagement in Catholic Schools

Generally speaking, religious institutions have been important sources of community life and social capital in low-income communities, often supporting the survival of families through the services they provide (Warren et al., 2001). In Coleman's seminal analysis (1988b), he noted how Catholic schools and the families with children who attended them had a profound sense of trust in the social environment of the school and clear communication and information flow, which resulted in a congruence in values and social norms

that promoted positive behavioral and academic expectations; this, in turn, supported academic achievement and school persistence. Coleman (1988b) termed this clear communication and information flow *closure*, asserting that social closure between parents and the school and also among parents with children at the same institution were critical to the generation of social capital in his analysis.

Jeynes (2012b) conducted a 90-study meta-analysis exploring the relationship between school type (private, charter, or public) on various student achievement and behavior outcomes. Results indicated that attending private religious schools was associated with the best academic and behavioral outcomes, even while including rigorous statistical controls for socioeconomic status. The faith-based school advantage was significant despite the fact that public schools receive substantially more federal and state educational funding per student than private religious schools do, leading Jeynes (2012b) to wonder what factors beyond money might explain this advantage. He posited that factors like teacher and community investment in students, a form of social capital, may be at the heart of explaining these favorable outcomes.

In a different approach to examining the role of Catholic schools and social capital, Fleming, Lavertu, and Crawford (2018) conducted a large-scale quantitative study to determine the impact of high school options on postsecondary student success. They found that students who attended Catholic schools outperformed comparable students from public, non-Catholic private, and non-sectarian private high schools specifically by having higher college GPAs, higher graduation rates, and a greater likelihood of graduating in a STEM subject. The Catholic school advantage positively affected many subgroups including non-White, low-income, urban, and low-achieving students. The researchers surmised that the difference could be attributed to higher academic standards in Catholic schools as well as better teaching with greater flexibility. They also posited the possibility that Catholic schools promote higher levels of social capital.

Crea et al. (2015) examined strengths and weaknesses of family engagement at one specific Catholic school that served a range of families of color. Like other researchers, Crea and colleagues found a mismatch in perception of involvement between parents and staff, identifying this as a weakness in this school's family engagement practices. However, it was noted that central to this school's identity and mission as a Catholic institution was meaningful engagement with families. As a result, evidence of the mismatch in perception of involvement between caregivers and educators was then used to improve family–school partnerships—an action that was a result of their commitment as a Catholic school. Researchers offered suggestions for how school leaders could

increase the quality of their communication with parents, thus creating better social closure. More recently, Vera et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study to identify the factors that facilitated Latino parents' engagement in their children's education in Catholic schools. The researchers found that the parents' perception that the teachers were invested in their children's success while also encouraging them to actively participate in their children's education were positively associated with parental engagement, again pointing to the importance of meaningful relationships and closure in communication between parents and teachers, which then generates social capital for students and families.

Bryk et al. (1993) investigated the unique features of Catholic schools that create positive spaces for youth and promote academic achievement among a range of students. They conducted extensive analyses of several small, Catholic high schools, quantitative analyses of a national database on Catholic and public high schools, and a historical analysis of the beginnings of Catholic schools and their mission, values, and purpose. Bryk and colleagues found several key features of Catholic schools as organizations that they asserted would likely produce similar positive results for youth achievement and personal development, regardless of a school's or community's religious affiliation. One of these key features was what Bryk and colleagues termed a *communal organization*, which included a variety of school activities that allowed for youth to have meaningful interactions with adults and other students (a form of community building), an expanded view of the teacher as not just an educator but as a role model for students and a member of the surrounding community with a commitment to creating positive relationships with parents, and a set of shared beliefs that engenders a profound sense of trust between teachers, parents, and administrators. This trust, Bryk and colleagues argued, was one of the most important features that predicted positive academic outcomes for youth when comparing other schools serving similar communities.

Brinig and Garnett (2014) built on Byrk et al.'s (1993) work, further investigating Catholic schools as community institutions and the impact Catholic schools have not just on youth outcomes but on low-income communities as a whole. Utilizing survey and crime data, Brinig and Garnett empirically demonstrated the negative impact of Catholic school closures on urban neighborhoods, specifically in terms of crime rates. Their explanation for this phenomenon was that Catholic schools not only created social capital within the school, but outside the school and within the neighborhood as well and are thus true community institutions. They suggest that "Catholic schools generate social capital not because they are educational institutions that connect parents but also because they are community institutions that connect neighbors" (p. 131). They urged other scholars to engage in research that examines how schools are not just educational institutions, but community ones as well.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The question becomes, what does De Marillac Academy (DMA), a small Catholic school located in a low-income, urban area of California, do, specifically, to engender trust among students and families and the school? Which practices or values create such strong community bonds, and how does this generate social capital inside and outside school walls? Previous research has found DMA to be an exceptional Catholic school that has been successful in supporting low-income families who face all of the challenges associated with poverty (Proehl et al., 2017). As part of this research, the purpose of this qualitative study was for parents and students to tell their stories of how they have been touched by this school and to understand how they experienced DMA's efforts of family engagement. We wanted to know, from the perspectives of the families themselves, how this school has established trustworthiness with families, built meaningful relationships, and generated social capital and hope among families and the community. To this end, we interviewed the members of four family units (14 participants total) in order to understand how each family has experienced DMA's efforts to build relationships with them and how the school was able to do this.

Methods

Setting

DMA, a Catholic middle school (Grades 4–8) co-sponsored by the Daughters of Charity and the De LaSalle Christian Brothers, was founded in 2001. Fulfilling the two religious orders commitment to serving the poor through education, the school is located in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco—a neighborhood that is known for homelessness, drug traffic, and crime while also serving as home to many immigrant families trying to establish themselves in the United States. DMA's vision emphasizes "that neighborhood of residence and socioeconomic status should not determine a child's access to a quality education or ultimate success in life. DMA's holistic program liberates students and graduates to lead lives of choice, meaning, and purpose" (De Marillac Academy, n.d., para. 2). The DMA president provided permission for the researchers to use the actual name of the school in this publication (T. Flynn, personal communication, May 10, 2018).

DMA is one of eight San Miguel middle schools in the U.S., offering a unique educational and financial model. For instance, to meet the needs of students who fall below their grade level on standardized tests, the school day and school year are longer, and extensive support is provided to help bring

students to grade level and beyond. Students facing significant economic, family, and social challenges require extensive assessment and counseling, which is provided by volunteers or through partnerships with such organizations as the California Pacific Medical Center. Approximately one-half of the students receive individual counseling, and all participate in regular class meetings—generally weekly—to discuss challenges they are encountering and to identify alternative strategies for dealing with conflict and stress.

As a Catholic school, religious education is provided and academic achievement is emphasized, but so are noncognitive skills, which are identified as Student Learning Expectations (SLEs). Six virtues—responsibility, compassion, perseverance, leadership, gratitude, and integrity—are woven throughout the curriculum, emphasized in the counseling sessions, prominently placed on the walls, and rewarded in both private and public settings. The families are also informed about the SLEs through their orientation to the school, participation in family meetings and family teacher conferences, and attendance at school events. Students are required to take a religious education course that meets daily for all four years of middle school. As with many Catholic schools, numerous co-curricular activities are offered, which reinforce the six SLEs, and parental involvement is required. In addition, newsletters are sent home every week in English and Spanish, again emphasizing the importance of the six virtues. As part of the admissions process, family members are also interviewed, and they are advised that their commitment is needed not just for the five years that their children are at DMA but also during the next four years until the students graduate from high school.

In addition to the characteristics described above, there are two unique features of the San Miguel model. First, graduate support is provided to help DMA students enroll in high school, and counselors follow up with and support the graduates through high school and college (or other educational programs). Through the Graduate Support Program, graduates remain connected to the school, seek out support when they are challenged, and come back to DMA for service projects after they have graduated. Second, like other San Miguel schools, DMA provides a full scholarship program for all enrolled students. Parents pay a nominal fee; the students' education is primarily supported through the support of the Daughters of Charity, De La Salle Christian Brothers, individual donors, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and corporate sponsors.

The school serves 114 fourth through eighth graders in their educational programs, 278 students enrolled in high school and postsecondary institutions, and 278 families who were provided support services such as family intervention and referrals to outside resources. One hundred percent (100%) are

students of color with Latino/a students representing 67% of the population. The average student retention rate for 2011–16 was 95% (C. Giangregorio, personal communication, December 11, 2016). To provide individualized attention within the academic realm, the school maintains a 12:1 student teacher ratio, supplemented with a cadre of volunteers. Statistics available for the study showed that, in 2017, 96% of the DMA graduates completed high school in four years, in comparison to the following graduation rates for low-income students: 83% (local), 78% (state), and 75% (national). Of the DMA graduates who completed high school in 2017, 96% were enrolled in college in 2018 (T. Flynn, personal communication, May 10, 2018).

Researcher Identity and Positionality

The three authors of this article are faculty members in a Catholic college, with the first two authors teaching in a graduate counselor preparation program and the third author teaching in a doctoral program in leadership. Our areas of expertise include school-based mental health and organizational leadership and change, as well as family engagement, school–community partnerships and collaborative action research projects, and organizational structures that support equity and inclusion in school and university settings. The lead author identifies as Chicana, and the second and third authors are White women. The first two authors, who are both bilingual in English and Spanish, conducted the interviews; the third author was the principal investigator for a prior research study at the same school. As such, the first two authors had no prior experience with the school, although we have both been involved in other research projects in K–12 settings, and we read the results of the earlier study before initiating the current project. All of us are committed to understanding current issues in urban education and the impact of Catholic education on families from historically marginalized communities, with a specific interest in the role and importance of relationships as a healing force for families.

Prior to entering the setting for this study, we talked about our respective roles and any assumptions we might make about the setting and the school. Given our research backgrounds and prior experiences in urban school communities, as well as our lived experience as faculty members in a Catholic institution of higher education, we approached the study with familiarity regarding the extent and impact of deficit-based narratives on urban communities of color and with a strong preference for a strengths-based approach. That is, we expected that we would hear examples of social capital and resilience within the families, and we imagined that we might hear stories that reflected their unique understanding of the impact of the school on their lives. We did not know what they might specifically identify as the nature of that impact,

and this question was a particularly compelling one. Both the first and second author entered the site to conduct the interviews together with an understanding that some parent participants might prefer to engage with us in Spanish and some in English; we took our lead from them, based on the language in which they introduced themselves to us, confirming preferred language use as rapport was established.

Participants

We conducted a total of 13 interviews with 14 participants, including six parents and eight students (two of the parents attended the same interview together). The youngest student was in the fourth grade, and the oldest was 24. Five of the students were currently enrolled at DMA, and the other three were alumni. The participants were members of four families who volunteered to be part of this phase of the study. Three of the families identified as Mexican or Mexican American and one as Asian/Pacific Islander. Participants were recruited through a process of convenience sampling, specifically through referrals by the school counselor and based on availability as well. Two of the families had additional children who were not able to participate in the study, one of whom lived out of state and the other whose high school schedule did not permit him to return to DMA for an interview. Table 1 shows demographic information about the participants; pseudonyms are provided for all participants.

Table 1. Student Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Grade	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Parent(s)
Isabela Torreon	8	F	Mexican/Mexican American	Alicia Castillo
Paul Torreon	10	F	Mexican/Mexican American	Alicia Castillo
Marc Aragon	8	M	Mexican/Mexican American	Marta Fuentes & Juan Aragon
Luisetta Pineda	4	F	Mexican/Mexican American	Elisa Arroyo & Ezequiel Pineda
Ezequiel Pineda, Jr.	BA	M	Mexican/Mexican American	Elisa Arroyo & Ezequiel Pineda
Alyssa Quiambao	6	F	Asian/Pacific Islander	Angelica Quiambao
Nathan Quiambao	8	M	Asian/Pacific Islander	Angelica Quiambao
Alexa Quiambao	11	F	Asian/Pacific Islander	Angelica Quiambao

Data Collection

Interviews represented the primary method of data collection and took place during one month near the beginning of the school year. The interviews lasted between 8–52 minutes, with an average of 24 minutes across the 13 interviews. We developed semi-structured interview protocols in both Spanish and English, with separate versions for parents and students. We asked the participants to decide for themselves whether they wanted to participate in the interview in English or Spanish. The protocols were designed based on the overarching research aims, which were to understand the history, challenges, and aspirations of students attending DMA and to gain perspective on factors that account for both student success and the success of the school. We wanted to provide a space for parents and children to tell the stories of the ways, if any, in which their lives have been touched and transformed by the educational experience at DMA. Because our goal was to encourage storytelling, we crafted broad, open-ended questions to ask participants to tell us, in their own words, about their experiences at DMA. Keeping in mind that some of the topics, such as school success and challenges, family values, and the impact of the surrounding urban environment, could be sensitive for both students and families, we worked to build rapport with each interviewee and allowed plenty of time for follow-up questions.

We chose a qualitative approach for this study because qualitative methods are ideal for examining sensitive topics, for eliciting more in-depth information from the participant's point of view, and for capturing the voices of each participant (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The rich description that can be gained from qualitative methods was best suited for this project, in which we wanted to understand phenomena related to meaning-making from members of the school community. Participants were invited to explore and reflect on their experiences from their own perspectives as students or parents. We used mostly "what" and "how" questions in an effort to support a storytelling method of inquiry. The broad topics for the interview protocols prompted participants to share their family history prior to DMA, their perceptions of the strengths and areas of improvement for the school, their values and hopes or aspirations, any challenges they experienced at the school, and the meaning that DMA has had in their lives.

Document review represented an additional strand of the data collection process. We examined documents related to the school's founding mission and values, promotional materials, the school website, graduation and alumni statistics, and information on the goals, values, and culture of San Miguel schools in general. The information gathered from the document review process informed the development of some of the interview questions and proved to be

helpful in our emerging understanding of the key principles, educational approach, and practices and of perspectives on the school's success.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed in the language in which the interview took place. The interviews that were conducted in Spanish were also translated into English, so that all members of the research team would be able to read the transcripts. We relied on the principles of qualitative data analysis and worked independently and collaboratively toward a thorough understanding of thematic patterns within the transcripts (Patton, 2002). Our approach was mostly inductive, with tentative themes emerging from an initial process of open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We employed both case analysis and cross-case analysis methods (Patton, 2002), examining findings within each interview as well as across interviews.

Our approach to triangulation of data included multiple methods of data collection (i.e., both interview data and document review for data source triangulation), as well as investigator triangulation during data analysis, which took place over several months of discussions among the three of us about the interviews and comparison of notes and potential findings (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The process of triangulation supported accuracy in our work, offered alternative explanations for various findings, and enhanced the internal validity and reliability of the study (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Rather than ask directly about the topics of family engagement and social capital, our interview questions focused on the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of students and parents at DMA. In our review of the transcripts, we looked at the data in the context of the literature on family engagement and social capital and examined connections between the stories of the participants and factors that influence the development of trust and engagement. We used both hand coding and the NVivo qualitative data analysis software to organize and interpret the transcripts, which also increased the accuracy of our findings. Eventually, we identified five themes, which are discussed in the following sections.

Results

In the following pages we briefly define each of five themes with several key markers. Finally, to illustrate each theme's meaning and significance, we present direct quotations from parents, alumni, and students in order to demonstrate how the theme occurred across all three perspectives.

Theme 1: School as a Nonjudgmental, Healing Space

Many parents talked about how the staff at DMA, especially those in family liaison roles, not only always made themselves available to families, but were there to support families no matter the challenge they were facing. Many families spoke fondly of the Director for Student and Family Services and the importance of having a person at the school in this role. It was clear that all families interviewed had enough trust with those who worked at DMA to be honest about what supports they needed, without fear of judgment or retribution. Alicia Castillo, mother of a current student Isabela and alumnus Paul described her relationship with the Director for Student and Family Services in this way:

> She's my number one. If I have a problem or if I have something, anything that's going on, especially with Isabela and Paul, she's the one. I can talk to her, and I can tell her what's going on without me worrying, "Oh, she's going to judge me. Oh, what is she going to think about me?"…I come to her, and I explain my problem, even with a phone call, "I'm going through this. What should I do?" She always comes up with something. I don't know what she has, but something [is] in her heart that she comes with every family, for every family.

Juan Aragon, father of eighth grade student Marc Aragon, similarly described the unconditional and nonjudgmental positive regard faculty and staff had for families regardless of the struggles they were facing. He said,

> It is something totally unusual that that person is authentic and that people—you can come and talk to that person about anything, about any issues that you might have in your family and your life. We haven't been in real trouble in order to come to that person to say "Hey, this is happening in my life, I'm about to get divorced or my wife is hitting me." I haven't been at that level, at that need, but of course we can talk about assistance with the kids. There are just a few schools, I think, where you can really get close, and there's a bridge that facilitates communication, closeness.

Indeed, parents seemed particularly grateful for this type of support, because of the benefits to all the children attending DMA. Marta Fuentes even mentioned the negative impact of trauma on children, which no doubt relates both to the effects of poverty and community or domestic violence, and how vital the school's willingness to meet students and families where they are at was:

> Pero, digo ¡qué bueno!, qué bueno que cuando menos se le ayuda a los niños porque pues los niños empiezan a tener otros traumas o empiezan

a tener problemas en la escuela, calificaciones, con otros niños porque… ya los irrita por la cuestión de que en su casa tal vez haya gritos, entonces yo siempre les digo: "ahí les van a ayudar"…les dan consejería…o sea académicamente, todo, todo; o sea yo la verdad agradecida, agradecida totalmente con la escuela. [But, I say, "how great"! How great that at least the children get help because, well, the children start to have other traumas or they start to have problems in school, grades, with other kids because…they're already irritated because probably at home there is screaming, and then I always tell them: "There they will help you" and… they'll give you counseling…be it academic, everything, everything; so for me, the truth is I am very grateful, totally grateful to the school.]

Alumna Isabela, when she explained the accessibility of her previous teachers in supporting her with topics that perhaps weren't easy to discuss, also seemed to agree with her mother Alicia. She explained:

I guess the teachers, because they're really involved with the student's life. Not like in a weird way. Like they know if you have a problem, even if you don't tell them. They know if you have something that you feel uncomfortable talking to with somebody else, they offer help….Even if you get something wrong, or you don't know how to do it, they're right there to help you. Even if you don't know it at the moment.

Across interviews, there was a sense that those at DMA were there for families and students no matter what, be it trauma, family strife, financial issues, or academic struggles. Current student Luisetta Pineda summed this up beautifully when she said, "They don't give up. They try to help so that everybody has a good future."

Theme 2: "Like a Family": Trusting Relationships and Community

Across all interviews, participants shared that DMA felt like a familial, community space, where community members knew each other, cared about each other, and could rely on one another. Parents, students, and alumni alike used the words "family" and "community" frequently, and they consistently described those in the school as "we." References to family, community, a feeling of connection and care, and trusting relationships were grouped into this theme. Examples from parents, alumni, and current students illustrate it.

Several parents described DMA as a family because of the consistent support, care, and resources the school offers. Marta Fuentes, mother of eighth grade student Marc Aragon, described her experience and the experience of other parents she knows in the following way:

Sí, sí, por lo que he sabido, como una familia en sí, ¿no? Y yo lo he sabido no nada más por mí, por otros padres que nos comunicamos y platicamos y dicen: "no, no, o sea, la ayuda que nos dan es muchísima para lo que podemos aportar", ¿no? [Yes, yes, for what I've known, it's like a family in and of itself, no? And not just what I've known for myself, from other parents with whom we communicate and talk, and they say: "no, no, or that is, the help that they give us is so much for what we are able to contribute", no?]

Another parent, Angelica Quiambao, similarly described DMA like a family, again noting the way that the faculty and staff at DMA demonstrated their support for families' needs and contrasting DMA with public schools: "You know when you go to a public school it's very different; here it's more like you're family. They ask you, 'Oh, what do you need? Any resources? We're here for you.'" Finally, Elisa Arroyo, who was interviewed with her husband, succinctly described DMA as the couple's family and extended family. She stated simply, "De Marillac Academy es nuestra familia; son como nuestras tías, nuestros primos, nuestros hermanos. [De Marillac Academy is our family; they are like our aunts, our cousins, our brothers.]"

Alumni of DMA stressed the consistency of their relationship with the school over time, well beyond graduation, and spoke fondly of the love and care they felt from the DMA community. Paul, a tenth grade student who graduated from DMA two years prior, discussed the ways members of the DMA community supported one another:

I think the big thing about how De Marillac Academy helps people is, like I said, the community. We're a big community; we always talk to each other; we always encourage each other, so people feel more connected and are willing to do the good thing.

In another example, 24-year-old alumnus Ezequiel went on to describe how many of the graduates he knew had a desire to return to the school to give back because of the way that DMA felt like a home to him and others. This is especially profound given that it had been over 11 years since he attended DMA. He explained:

I can't stress enough the relationships. We're actually trying to start a committee or a graduate committee, and one of the things I mentioned when we were having a meeting about that was how all the students, they come back because of the love they have for the place. I think that love is rooted from the relationships that were made with the teachers and the staff. You come back to home, right? You always come back home, and home is where the heart is. Home is where love is; home is where you felt good. This is a place where a lot, if not the majority of us, felt good.

Current students similarly used the words family, bond, and community to describe their experience at DMA. Eighth grade student Marc also used the word "love" to describe the connectedness at DMA:

It's a sort of love we have as like De Marillac Academy. How I would describe it is one thing: we're all one community. The students and the teachers are all one. That's the bond, the love you feel between all of the students. It's heartwarming.

Theme 3: Shared Values Across Home and School

Families interviewed in this study also discussed the significance of school-wide learning expectations (SLEs) at DMA, which, as previously discussed, include the inculcation of noncognitive skills, namely responsibility, compassion, gratitude, perseverance, leadership, and integrity. Especially noteworthy among interviewees were the ways in which parents described the SLEs as values that they also shared in their homes and utilized in their parenting practices, resulting in consistent language between home and school that further supported children in developing good character. Angelica, for example, discussed how she uses the values instilled in the SLEs to solve disputes between her children at home, explaining,

I always tell them, too, at home, "Hey, we lead by honesty, integrity, hard work, perseverance," all of that. I always tell them, so if the middle one makes fun of the youngest one, "Hey, is that a kind thing to say? Is that a kind thing? How would you feel if it was the other way around?" It's always back and forth with that. "Oh, is that integrity? Are you being grateful right now for what you receive?" I think those are the main things that I like about versus when they were in public school, because they all started in public school. I'm sure there's emphasis, but not as much as here.

Other parents also expressed appreciation for the scope of DMA education beyond academics and again how this aligned with the values they practiced at home. Juan, for example, attributed this in part to DMA being a Catholic school and emphasizing a value of kindness and compassion towards others, which he also wished to instill in his children. He said, "Yeah, you can be the best in academics, but if you don't have a soul, if you...It is a Catholic school and you have to be good to others. Be good to yourself and be good to others."

Parents also noted the ways that they tried to support the SLEs which the teachers were trying to impart, telling their children how important it was to listen to their teachers and to follow their guidance. Marta Fuentes, for example, discussed how she supports the teachers' SLEs, tying her reasoning for this

to her gratitude and trust in the good messages teachers were giving her children, again highlighting a consistent connection between home and school. In response to the question, "What are the most important things that you want your children to learn in school?" she commented,

> Pues en la escuela, todos los buenos principios que le dan los maestros…o sea la verdad es que estos maestros dan tanto por ellos, que yo y mi esposo estamos muy agradecidos porque…les dan buenos consejos, les aportan buenas ideas, ¿verdad?…yo siempre les digo a mi hijo…"todas las cosas te las dicen por tu bien, para que tú te superes, para que tú seas algo bien en la vida."…Tus padres y tus maestros, lo que te están diciendo es para que tú te formes, para que tú te superes. [Well in school, all the good principles that teachers give…the truth is that these teachers give a lot for [the students], my husband and I are very grateful because… they give them good advice, they give them good ideas, right?…I always tell my son…"Everything they say is for your own good, so that you may overcome, so that you become something good in this life."…Your parents and your teachers, what they are telling you is so you educate yourself, so that you excel.]

Alumni also pointed out the importance of not just the academic education they received at DMA, but also the values they learned and how they have carried these values with them through high school and beyond. Alexa Quiambao, eleventh grade student and alumna, said that at De Marillac she learned "to help others, I guess. They taught us a lot of values like compassion and responsibility, and I guess that's ingrained in me now, to follow that through to high school as well." College graduate Ezequiel Pineda similarly shared, "I think one of the biggest, more important things that I learned, which started here and… ended in college, was learning how to question everything and how to be a good person." It was clear that Ezequiel had been transformed by his time at DMA, and that this transformation shaped his adult self in significant ways.

Current students also consistently talked about the SLEs and the ways their education extended beyond reading, writing, and mathematics. What was particularly powerful, however, were how these values seemed to connect back to the overall sense of family at DMA, further solidifying the strong home–school connection that seems to make the character education efforts so successful and lasting. Current student Alyssa, who is Angelica's daughter and Alexa's sister, explained, "I've learned manners, for one. I've also learned that if we want to be strong and united as a school and as a family, we have to trust each other. If we need help, we have to just ask." Exemplified in this quote is Alyssa's strong sense of support from both her home and her school, which serves as an extended family, gives her a sense of community, and helps build her character.

Theme 4: You Are Never Alone: The Beginnings of Social Capital

Every parent interviewed discussed how the faculty and staff at DMA went out of their way to make themselves available to answer questions, to support families in crisis, to follow up on student homework or projects, or to problem solve with families about school-related or non-school-related challenges. References to never feeling alone, as well as to consistent and open communication and availability, were grouped into this theme. Although codes in this category were indeed related to the first theme around family, references grouped into this theme extended beyond a feeling of family to evidence of networks created with and among families that resulted in positive outcomes for children. Many parents were grateful for the communication between teachers and parents, explaining how this support helped their children be successful academically. Angelica Quiambao, for example, shared how much she valued her daughter's teacher's availability, saying,

> Well, all of the teachers are very nice. They made quite an impression with me and my husband. They always say, "Hey, you can reach us. This is our email address." I thought that was really good. You could email them at any time if you have a question. Usually the youngest one is the one with a lot of questions. "Yeah, yeah, let's email your teacher. Let's make sure that you have it," if she has a big project. To me, open communication is really the key, so if I have any questions, I would just email them, or I would call the office.

This constant communication and availability helped parents feel a sense of trust and community. Indeed, the way parents talked about DMA was like an extended family member who was just as committed and invested in the health and well-being of their children as they were. Elisa Arroyo put it succinctly when she reflected,

> Sin importar si es sábado o domingo, si es 7:00 de la mañana, 8:00 de la noche, 5:00 de la tarde. O sea el venir con ellas es que sabes que te van a sostener, que te van a echar la mano. [It doesn't matter if it's Saturday or Sunday, if it's 7:00 in the morning, 8:00 at night, or 5:00 in the afternoon. In other words, to go with them is to know that they will support you, that they will reach out a hand to you.]

This sense of community, however, wasn't just between teachers or staff and families, but also among the families themselves, an advantage of the small school setting and another way in which community was generated; this is a form of social capital as families' networks extended beyond their own family to other families in the neighborhood, in addition to the school. Marta Fuentes

recounted her own experience creating friendships with other parents, as well as other families she's talked to:

> Yo oigo de otros padres, de otras amistades que tengo, que hace uno amistades aquí; y realmente la gente se acerca mucho, o sea, de porque pienso que como son salones pequeños también eso nos ayuda a la escuela a tener comunicación entre nosotros los padres, porque hay otras escuelas donde como son tan grandes todos los padres se alejan, y aquí afortunadamente nos conocemos todos los del salón, todos los de otros salones, y hay mucha comunicación, y como somos del barrio, entonces nos vemos. Primero hay gente que a lo mejor no nos conocemos pero nos empezamos al saludo y ahí empieza uno a acercarse y pregunta— cuando son nuevos, empiezan a preguntarle a uno, que ya está más viejo aquí, y ya, nos vamos comunicando. [I hear other parents, from other friendships that I have, you make friends here, and really, people become close, so it's why I think the class sizes are small, too. That helps us at the school have communication amongst us the parents, because there are other schools that since they are so big, parents are distant, and here, fortunately, we know everyone in the class, and other classes, and there's a lot of communication, and since we are from the neighborhood, then we see each other. First there are people that we probably don't know at first, but we start greeting each other, and from there you start approaching and ask—when they're new, they start to ask people who have been here, and now, we go on communicating.]

This type of social capital, generated both between families and the school and among families whose children attend DMA, seemed especially important for immigrant families, given the isolation and stress immigrants can experience leaving behind the family and social networks in their home country and having to recreate those in the United States. Juan Aragon discussed these challenges, saying, "well, being an immigrant is a whole challenge. It's not just the area, it's the country, the culture; you face many obstacles. Language barrier, social…you leave family, you leave friends, you leave everything. Everything." It seems the social networks generated at DMA were critical to many families who found themselves without supports as they made their way in a new country.

Parents also discussed the value of being able to rely on those at DMA to help motivate their children, creating a home–school support system that helped reinforce youths' resilience and perseverance. Alicia talked at length about how she and the school worked together to keep her children on the right track, despite challenges in life, and about the power that comes from having multiple sources of support. She explained,

> In my situation, they gave my kids the special therapist one-on-one because we have the situation of their dad. He's there but not there. They were not looking for the future. They were, "I don't care. Who cares what happens tomorrow." I wanted them to be motivated. I wanted them to be able to say, "I want to do it. I can't wait for tomorrow." De Marillac Academy was able to help me to keep them motivated. It doesn't matter what. I understand it's your dad, but if he doesn't want to be here, your mom is here, so you have to keep going because she's here. Every step of the way they have helped.

Alumnus Ezequiel Pineda also touched on how the school and his parents together helped instill in him a sense of perseverance and integrity, further demonstrating how the network created between families and the school was effective in supporting resilience among youth. He passionately explained to us what resilience meant to him, which he learned at school and from his parents,

> Resilient, I think that's having hope and having resilience, which are two things that they [parents and the school] instilled in me, [it] is amazing. You can do anything with those two things, because you can bounce back, and you can say, "You know what, I fell down, or this happened to me, or this thing got in the way, but let's try it again. Let's do it again."

Alicia Castillo even went on to almost define social capital in her own words when describing how she and the school and her extended family support her children. She said that she tells her children constantly that,

> We have have to stick together, because together we can do more, more than one at a time or one on their own. We always talk about it. We always say, "Well, you know, we cannot fix it at home. Maybe we can fix it in school." If I cannot fix it in school, then we can fix it with grandpa because grandpa is our help. I always tell them, "You're never alone. You always have somebody next to you. We have to stick together."

The idea that her children were never alone and her value of sticking together as a family no doubt helped facilitate her children's success in school and in life.

Importantly, alumni and students also noted this feeling of never being alone, which they were grateful for. Alexa Quiambo, eleventh grade alumna, shared,

> I'm very grateful for the experience because I got to meet wonderful people and people who would be willing to support me throughout the years, even up to the end of college, basically….I guess it's that everybody really cares about everyone else, so it's not like you're on your own.

Current student Isabela Torreon also described her feeling of never being on her own to figure things out and how this was preparing her to be ready for high school. She told us, "If you're stressed out, or it gets difficult for you to pick a high school or actually go through the process, they're not going to pause it, but they're going to help you go through it. They're not going to leave you alone just to do it on your own."

Theme 5: Mission and Disrupting the Cycle of Poverty

As previously described, central to DMA's mission is the goal of providing access to a quality education, regardless of neighborhood or socioeconomic status, so that children who attend DMA are able to determine the direction of their own lives. Parents, alumni, and current students alike all spoke to this mission and the ways they saw this work happening for themselves and for the neighborhood. Several parents described neighborhood conditions and economic limitations as significant challenges in their lives, a reality that was important to acknowledge. Elisa Arroyo, for example, described,

> Los retos más grandes han sido la zona de drogas y pues no tener dinero para guardar para que nuestros hijos vayan a la universidad, ese es uno de los retos más grandes que siempre hemos padecido, no sólo nosotros, sino a nivel vecindario. Por eso es la opción de vivir aquí. Como dijo mi esposo, es más barata la renta, pero tomamos el riesgo también de estar entre drogadicción y prostitución. [The biggest challenges have been the drug area and, well, not having money to save so that our children can go to university. That is one of the biggest challenges we have always endured, not just us, but at a neighborhood level. But that's the option of living here. Like my husband said, the rent is cheaper here, but we also take the risk of being around drug addiction and prostitution.]

Alicia Castillo described the neighborhood similarly, contrasting the experience inside school walls versus the experience on the streets right outside the school. She explained, "There's so many things out there that they have to go through: homelessness, drugs. All we can say or all we can talk to them and tell them is, 'Be careful...'."

Juan Aragon, father of current student Marc, explained financial strain and how DMA has been a support in the face of these challenges, which is linked to their mission of preparing children for self-determined lives which will benefit society at large. He shared,

> I mean, economically we are so limited. What this school offers to the kids and to the families is huge. It's not a question, it's just thank you for being concerned to getting close to parents and to try to, because....

Institutions like this, they should exist more….They are concerned; they know what's out there so they try to put our kids in that perspective of readiness, prepare them for whatever they might confront. Not just that, they also want to give good kids to society. It's not just, "Oh, I wanted to achieve good grades because I want you to attend Stanford," or whatever prestigious university it is. They want to have good citizens. They are concerned about the problems that society [has]. They want these kids to have compassion. They want these kids to be leaders in a good way, not just be political leaders.

Elisa Arroyo spoke directly to what she perceived to be DMA's mission in her own words, like Juan, mentioning the mission to give children access and opportunity and success beyond material possessions. She shared with us that she often talks about the importance of attending university with her children, because of the job security that comes with professions that require more education and how working hard in school at DMA is linked to opportunities for these jobs. She said that she tells them that with a degree,

Ya no estamos con esa angustia de que va a aplicar a un trabajo y ya mañana o pasado mañana lo van a tirar porque recortaron personal y recortar personal es mirar también cuál es tu certificado, en qué estás graduado, no se despide tan fácil a un cirujano, a un abogado, ¿verdad? Entonces siempre he creído y siempre he observado que esa es la misión de De Marillac Academy, sacar a las familias del Tenderloin—de aquí a los niños, tener una mejor oportunidad, mejor estilo de vida, no sólo material, porque no sólo se enfocan en lo material, les enseñan religión, les enseñan modales, les enseñan a ser humanos, a rezar, a no ser egoístas. [We no longer have that anguish of going to apply for a job and then tomorrow, or the next day, they are going to fire you because [when] they cut staff, [they are] also looking at what is your certificate, what did you graduate with? They don't fire a surgeon, or a lawyer, right? So then I have always believed and always observed that this is De Marillac Academy's mission, to take the families [out of here] so that the kids have a better opportunity, a better lifestyle, not just material, because they focus on more than material things, they focus on religion, they show them role models, they teach them how to be human beings, to pray, and to not be selfish.]

It is clear that Elisa was speaking to a mission working towards disrupting the cycle of poverty; but it is also interesting that, for her, part of this mission was supporting children and families in leaving the neighborhood, as opposed to returning and contributing to the improvement of the neighborhood. Alumni

and current students were also very clear on DMA's mission of providing quality education to support the academic and life success of youth in the neighborhood, but some of these youth had a slightly different perspective on what this meant for their neighborhood. Eleventh grade alumnus Paul Torreon said that he thought the mission of DMA was to "help the community of the Tenderloin, have more kids that are successful, and maybe someday the kids will bring back stuff for the community." Current eighth grade student Marc Aragon similarly described, "I feel like one mission they have is to be a part of the Tenderloin and like make it into a safer and better place. I think another one is to help other types of families with less money than the other ones." These youth seem to view returning to and lifting up the community with their education as part of disrupting the cycle of poverty.

Alumnus Ezequiel, Jr., now 24 years old, was able to provide a unique perspective as a young adult of how DMA's mission of ending the cycle of poverty and "elevating the community" has contributed to his personal motivation to pursue a graduate education in counseling to be able to help others in his community. He shared with us,

> I've been blessed with so many things, and I can't throw that away. I think that, in and of itself, that realization is huge because when you know where you have been and what you have been through and the things that have been given to you, you can propel yourself even further because, okay, I don't have time to waste.

Discussion

Research has consistently supported the benefits of parent involvement in their children's education (Jeynes, 2012a), as well as the academic benefits for students attending Catholic schools versus public ones or even private, non-faith-based schools (Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman, 1988a; Jeynes, 2010, 2012b). Few scholars to date, however, have explicitly investigated family engagement in urban Catholic schools. To this end, the purpose of this study was to explore what DMA does to create trusting relationships with families and support the generation of social capital. Results point to the importance of teachers and staff approaching families with non-judgmental attitudes, being available for consultation, and consistently communicating with parents and caregivers. Furthermore, shared values across home and school settings were critical in creating a positive school climate and sense of stability and community investment in children and their families.

Nonjudgmental Attitudes and Investing in School–Community Liaisons

An important theme that families consistently brought up was the freedom with which they felt they could approach staff or faculty at DMA for help, without fear of being judged. Parents spoke especially fondly of the persons in family liaison, social work, or career guidance roles and how these staff members were instrumental in creating such an open and honest space where families could bring any challenge they were having, whether that was related to financial troubles or domestic violence, without being shamed, judged, or condescended to. This type of nonjudgment was healing for parents and children alike and is an important lesson for other urban educators.

Scholars investigating both ineffective and effective family–school relationships have pointed out the deficit-based narratives that permeate many educators' interactions with families of color, which often include a blame-the-victim attitude that assumes parents "just don't care" about their children's education (Valencia & Black, 2002). Implicit in these narratives is the judgment families feel from educators, administrators, or staff members that precludes creating an honest relationship that acknowledges families' sociopolitical contexts or the legacy of institutional oppression in schools. Importantly, parents at DMA felt this nonjudgment from those in mental health or community support roles, which is evidence to support schools investing in these types of roles in order to truly meet families on their own terms. Indeed, school-based mental health professionals are trained to self-reflect on the biases they bring to their work, especially when working with communities that have been historically disenfranchised or may be different from their own (American Counseling Association, 2014; Ratts et al., 2015). In the same way that urban schools serve as important sites of access for families (Noguera, 2001), researchers have also indicated that school-based mental health clinicians can serve as critical points of contact for families as well as important conduits of information to administrators and teachers as schools attempt to adequately address the needs of the families they serve (Committee on School Health, 2004). Furthermore, access to mental health clinicians in schools can support family stability—a critical factor in supporting children's success in school (Israel et al., 2001; Jeynes, 2010).

Creating a Positive School Culture: Communication, Small School Communities, or Something Else?

Similar to what Proehl and colleagues (2017) understood about the culture of DMA, parents, alumni, and students repeatedly likened the school to a family, which resulted in an overall school culture perceived as welcoming and

safe, grounded in care, concern, and even love. A positive school climate has been linked to a myriad of positive outcomes, including safer schools, higher achievement outcomes, and more engaged families (see Wang & Degol, 2016 for a review). For example, Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) seminal work on parent involvement connected families' perceived invitations from teachers, as well as a welcoming school environment, to parents' motivation for involvement. Importantly, when participants described why or how DMA felt like a family, they spoke about the consistent communication and availability of the faculty and staff, which created an overall sense of mutual respect and responsiveness—critical aspects of a positive school culture. Not surprisingly, the finding that trusting relationships are foundational to creating a welcoming and safe environment is consistent with the community organizing literature (Warren & Mapp, 2011) and research regarding effective family–school partnerships (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). This culture even trickled down to the students themselves, who, through listening to and encouraging one another, also created a tight-knit, reliable student community.

Although constant communication and availability were critical in creating a welcoming environment for families, it is important to note that DMA is a very small school, serving just 114 students with a 12:1 student–teacher ratio. Smaller schools have been linked previously to improved student achievement outcomes and lower dropout rates (Gardner et al., 2000), as well as increased parent participation (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; Walsh, 2010). School size alone, however, does not entirely account for improved achievement outcomes or increased parental involvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). For example, Lee and Smith (1995) found that when large public high schools restructured school systems to incorporate a more personalized approach and collaborative learning strategies, what they termed "communal organization," students made significant achievement gains. The idea of communal organization connects back to Bryk and colleagues' (1993) work on the characteristics of successful Catholic schools, which included factors like a strong sense of community among teachers and a shared set of beliefs on how people in the school should be with one another. There is no doubt that the small school size contributed to the community feeling of DMA, but perhaps above and beyond this, the communitarian features of the school, such as personalized learning plans and the responsiveness to parents, created a climate that encouraged parents to engage meaningfully with the school.

Home–School Congruencies and Teacher Expectations

A profound finding was the consistency and frequency with which parents and students discussed the role of schoolwide learning expectations (SLEs),

such as responsibility, compassion, gratitude, and perseverance, in their daily lives. Parents explicitly referred to the school's SLEs at home to resolve arguments among their children or to prompt children to make good decisions. Similarly, students and alumni articulated how these values became a part of their own identities or internal moral compasses, guiding their behavior inside and outside of school over time. Notably, this congruence between the values and expectations in school and those at home is exactly what Colemen (1988b) termed closure between home and school—values and norms that are clearly communicated between parents and the school and consistently enforced in both settings. The academic benefits of this overlap of the family and school spheres as children develop has been consistently supported by research on family–school relations (Epstein, 2018). The result was that children felt safe, contained, and supported at home and at school, which, as Coleman (1988b) asserted, is a form of social capital that can help children be more successful. Furthermore, other researchers who have studied values-based education or community service curricula have also found that education beyond academics has important and lasting effects on youths' civic engagement and responsibility (Youniss et al., 1997), which was evident in how alumni discussed the values they learned at DMA and the effects on their goals in life and sense of responsibility to their community.

Teachers' willingness at DMA to welcome and support families may also be related to their own conceptualizations of their roles as teachers. In their discussion of the foundational characteristics of successful Catholic Schools, Bryk et al. (1993) specifically noted an expanded view of the teacher as a role model and community member who families encounter outside of school walls (be that at community events or via home visits) and who considers teaching to be a transformative process. Jeynes (2012b) found that teachers at faith-based schools were more demanding and had higher expectations of their students, which he hypothesized could be because religious educators, given their presumed values, may be more likely to believe in all children's potential. Additionally, teacher expectations have long been linked to student achievement outcomes, especially for students of color (van den Bergh et al., 2010). Perhaps other urban schools might be able to incorporate professional development that helps teachers to see themselves as community members and role models and expands their professional work to their personal values and beliefs.

Social Capital Combats Isolation and Supports Student Success

Noguera (2001) advocated for schools to be responsive to the needs of children, their parents, and the community in order to generate positive forms of social capital for families who may not have other resources. Parents, students,

and alumni at DMA articulated a feeling of "never being alone" as a result of the support and connection they felt to the school, evidence of the school's responsiveness and the creation of social capital. Relatedly, parents' experiences of the school and parent community at DMA helped to combat feelings of isolation and stress associated with being immigrants in a new country without extended family or social networks, as well as the challenges associated with poverty. Other researchers have also found that social capital can buffer families and communities from the negative effects of poverty, such as stress, limited access to health care, or community violence (Saegart et al., 2001). There was also evidence of bridging social capital, in that parents made connections with school staff and were connected to resources outside their networks, and bonding social capital, in that parents also discussed forming networks and connections with other DMA parents. Warren and Mapp (2011) asserted that both forms of social capital are necessary to create positive change in individuals, communities, or institutions. Similarly, Byrk et al. (2010) found family–school–community partnerships to be an essential part of positive school reform; it seems there is evidence of the positive impact of these connections at DMA, because parents gained access to comprehensive mental health and social services via partnerships with community organizations and medical centers, as well as extended school days and childcare for working families (Proehl et al., 2017). By being responsive to families' needs, connecting families to outside resources, and generating community among families, children and parents affiliated with DMA were afforded an extended network that supported resiliency and stability.

Mission Is Important, But So Is Empowerment

Central to all aspects of DMA is their mission of disrupting cycles of poverty by providing access to a quality education, regardless of income or the neighborhood in which a child grows up. This mission guides decision making, teacher development, and provision of supports to families. It was clear through our interviews with families that parents, alumni, and students also saw the centrality of this mission to the school and were clear in how this mission had positively affected their current lives and their hopes for the future. It cannot be ignored that this mission is linked to DMA as a Catholic educational institution, founded by religious orders in which the education of young children and the economically disadvantaged is central to their identity. Research has shown that the Catholic church specifically and religious institutions generally serve important social service functions in communities impacted by poverty, because of these institutions' concern for economic justice (Foley et al., 2001). It may also be true that a Catholic school may draw

a specific type of educator with values linked to social justice and community service, or relatedly, a specific type of parent with a commitment to a particular religion. Furthermore, it is important to note that the majority of the families of students attending DMA (approximately 70%) are Latino/a, who, broadly speaking, have cultural or religious ties to the Catholic church (Daniels, 2014). However, perhaps what is most useful to other nonreligious urban schools is how the mission united staff, students, and parents and, relatedly, how a common mission can influence institutional decision making (Proehl et al., 2017).

Brinig and Garnett (2014) argued that Catholic schools are successful in supporting students, families, and neighborhoods because they are community institutions that promote social interactions and generate social capital both inside and outside school walls. Interestingly, as participants talked about the mission of DMA, they related it back to the Tenderloin district itself, and the challenges students and families faced living in a neighborhood impacted by drugs, sex work, and community violence. Notably, however, youth and parents had slightly different takes on DMA's mission in relation to their neighborhood. While parents saw the mission of the school as supporting their children in leaving the neighborhood for safer areas where they might also be more professionally successful, youth tended to see the mission as contributing to the Tenderloin community, bringing back knowledge and supports that might lift up the community. Importantly, in reviewing school-related mission statements and artifacts, leaders at DMA see the mission as related to self-determination—that is, youth should have the opportunity to make informed decisions about what they want to do with their lives, whether that is moving out of the neighborhood or remaining there, the key being access and opportunity to lead lives of choice (Proehl et al., 2017). It may be that this mission is more clearly articulated to youth than it is to parents, or it could be evidence of generational differences that are common between the immigrant and second generations. For example, researchers have found that the immigrant generation tends to be more optimistic about U.S. systems, given that they have left their home countries for opportunities in the U.S., whereas the U.S.-born second generation tends to more deeply understand the impact of discrimination and systems of oppression (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Perhaps youth attending DMA, who tended to be second or even third generation, felt more empowered to challenge existing systems and therefore invested in changing their neighborhood.

Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009), a practitioner–scholar–activist whose work centers around youth of color in urban schools, discussed the importance of *critical hope* for urban youth, or a hope linked to the recognition of systems of oppression, active struggle against these systems, and solidarity and sacrifice

in a collective struggle to change harsh conditions for youth living in urban poverty. It seems that while youth in this study were empowered with a sense of this critical hope, the interviewed parents, by Duncan-Andrade's definition, were not. Strikingly, researchers who have also studied equity issues in parental and community involvement in schools have noted that empowering models of family engagement tend to be the most successful with historically disenfranchised communities—that is, engagement models where parent communities are empowered to challenge oppressive educational systems or use their voice to leverage for social change in their neighborhoods (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Although DMA was quite successful in generating social capital with and among families, there did not yet seem to be strong evidence of parent empowerment or efforts to organize collectively as has been seen in other case studies of transformative forms of family engagement that have positively impacted school reform efforts (e.g., Brooks, 2009; Bryk et al., 2010; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

DMA was successful in building meaningful and supportive relationships with families for many reasons. According to the experiences of the families themselves, it appears that constant communication and information flow, availability, and nonjudgment on the part of school staff created a safe space that students and parents were willing to enter honestly, sharing their needs and establishing trust. The formation of this trust allowed for the creation of shared values across home and school, which then meant that children received consistent enforcement of these values and expectations in both settings, creating safety and containment in the face of challenging neighborhood situations and fostering resilience and motivation among youth. Additionally, connecting parents to resources via community partnerships and connecting parents to one another allowed parents to feel they had a strong community to rely on, an important support as many families worked to create new networks as immigrants or battled the challenges associated with poverty. Finally, it appears that the shared mission of disrupting the cycle of poverty united students, parents, and school staff, further solidifying a tight-knit community committed to offering youth access and opportunity.

All of the aforementioned elements or practices have the potential to be adopted by other urban, public schools. For example, urban public schools could invest in family liaisons and school-based mental health clinicians who can be available to bridge the gaps between families and educators. Responsiveness and availability to families in need, as well as the ability to connect families

to other community organizations and resources, can further embed schools within the communities they serve. Furthermore, urban public schools could collaborate with families to adopt values-based student learning expectations that are mutually agreed upon by the school and parents. Family input on the co-creation and adoption of these expectations would ensure parent buy-in, supporting the likelihood that these values would also be reinforced at home and creating the social closure necessary to generate social capital (Coleman, 1988b).

Given the small sample size and qualitative focus on this research, this study cannot determine whether or not a communitarian focus might engender more trusting relationships in larger, public schools with similar populations, though other researchers have made this claim (e.g., Bryk et al., 1993; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). It must also be acknowledged that De Marillac is a unique school for many reasons that may not transfer to large public schools, such as the small student-to-teacher ratio, their religious education curriculum, and continued support for students who have graduated. Additionally, because our approach was to witness the stories of the families themselves and let them lead the conversation, we cannot determine how the potential cultural and religious congruence, especially for the Mexican and Mexican American families, might have influenced a connection to this Catholic school and its staff and faculty, or how religious commitment might also influence family and student outcomes, a connection that has been demonstrated in other research (Jeynes, 2010). Future research might explore how public schools' commitment to community engagement or civic education could engender the same type of values-based education found at DMA, or how a clearly articulated mission around economic and racial justice might unite families and schools in urban neighborhoods. It also remains important to continue to explore how schools can support authentic partnerships with parents that create opportunities for empowerment and advocacy work among the parents themselves, moving beyond models of charity in disenfranchised communities to ones of solidarity and critical hope.

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