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Adam M. Volungis
Assumption College, am.volungis@assumption.edu

Katie Goodman
Lesley University

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School Violence Prevention: Teachers Establishing Relationships With Students Using Counseling Strategies

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Adam M. Volungis¹ and Katie Goodman²

Abstract

Although youth violence rates continue to decrease in the United States, it remains the second leading cause of death for adolescents. Furthermore, school violence remains a sociocultural concern, especially due to increasing media attention. Research consistently indicates that preventing school violence involves measures that go beyond formal protocols. One factor that has emerged from this research is that the quality of relationships between students and teachers, commonly referred to as school connectedness, may have a significant role in preventing school violence. However, there is very little literature that addresses how mental health professionals, such as school counselors, can assist teachers in fostering school connectedness with their students. This article provides a theoretical conceptualization of teacher–student relationship and communication skills that contribute to eventual school violence prevention through the development of school connectedness. The ultimate goal of this theoretical model is to provide conceptual and applied guidance in bridging the gap between research and practice.

Keywords

school violence prevention, school connectedness, teachers, school counselors, bullying

Although youth violence in the United States continues to decline in communities and schools (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015; Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015), media coverage of mass homicides has significantly increased public awareness, especially school shootings. Furthermore, although rates of youth violence have declined, it remains the second leading cause of death for adolescents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). Thus, school violence continues to be a significant public health concern in the United States. Moreover, this sociocultural phenomenon is a concern for schools across the world—for example, Australia, Columbia, Hungary, Israel, Korea, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, Spain (Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, & Goesling, 2002). In fact, Benbenishty and Astor (2008) stated that school violence is an international concern that warrants global collaboration in preventative efforts.

School violence in the context of this review refers to purposeful aggressive acts and/or threatening another person on school grounds or during school functions. Hence, although seemingly obvious, school violence is considered a sociocultural concern because it has negative impacts ranging from psychological (e.g., posttraumatic stress) to physical (e.g., death) at the individual and systemic levels (Hammond, Haegerich, & Saul, 2009; Hyman, Cohen, & Mahon, 2003; Ludwig & Warren, 2009). The 2015 Youth Risk Behavior

Survey, a nationally representative sample of United States students in Grades 9 to 12, found that 7.8% of students engaged in a physical fight on school property in the past year, and 4.1% carried a weapon on school property within the past 30 days (CDC, 2016). In addition, Robers et al. (2015) indicated that the violent victimization rate in schools (37 per 1,000 students) was greater than the violent victimization rate away from schools (15 per 1,000 students). Similarly, bullying can also be considered a form of school violence in that not only physical and psychological harm can be a result of such behaviors but also it is highly correlated with negative school climate and predictive of future violent behaviors (Ericson, 2001). In fact, the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that 20.2% of students had been bullied at least once over the past year on school property (CDC, 2016).

Besides the more visible consequences of youth violence (i.e., injury or death), there are also other consequences that may not be immediately apparent. Victimization and

¹Assumption College, Worcester, MA, USA

²Lesley University, Boston, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Adam M. Volungis, Department of Psychology, Assumption College, 500 Salisbury St., Worcester, MA 01609-1296, USA.
 Email: am.volungis@assumption.edu



exposure to violence is associated with multiple risk-taking behaviors and poor mental health outcomes: posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety-hyper-vigilance, depression, suicidal ideation, helplessness, anger, high-risk sexual behaviors, and substance abuse (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001; Hammond et al., 2009; Ludwig & Warren, 2009). Simply put, beyond physical well-being, there are many negative social, emotional, and psychological outcomes associated with youth violence; many of which have lasting effects.

The purpose of this review is to translate what mental health professionals know about developing and maintaining trusting relationships to the school environment as a means to preventing school violence. Even though there have been multiple calls for targeting school personnel to consistently and effectively implement basic counseling relationship skills with their students, there appears to be a scarcity of literature on this topic (Lai-Yeung, 2014). In many ways, this review is a “call” to school counselors to recognize that they can have a significant impact on preventing school violence by modeling and training school teachers in the basic counseling skills they use in their everyday interactions with students. In other words, the consistent application of counseling relationship and communication skills in everyday, micro-level, interactions with students can create a climate of trusting relationships that promotes school violence prevention on multiple levels.

First, we provide a concise review of the literature linking relationship and communication skills and school connectedness to possible mechanisms involved in preventing of school violence. Second, these concepts are put together within a theoretical model by highlighting key teacher–student relationship and communication skills. Thereafter, we provide brief supplemental case vignettes demonstrating the application of these skills. Finally, implications for school counselors in training school teachers and recommendations for future research targeted at preventing school violence through school connectedness are discussed.

Relationship Skills and School Connectedness

Considering the aforementioned rates of school violence and potential physical and psychological consequences, it is understandable that school violence continues to be a major concern among educators and parents (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006). School violence is studied from multiple perspectives in an effort to understand both predictive and preventative factors. The quality of relationships between school personnel (e.g., administrators, teachers, counselors) and students, known as school connectedness, has received much attention as a possible factor associated with incidents of school violence. In fact, Fein et al.’s (2002) federally funded threat assessment suggested the teacher–student relationships in schools is a critical area to be considered as an avenue to preventing school violence. A commonly accepted

definition of school connectedness is the perception of being cared for by school personnel, positive relationships within the school climate, and being comfortable to talk to an adult within the school about a problem (Hunt et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). From an empirical operational definition perspective, school connectedness has been defined relatively consistently (e.g., Henrich, Brookmeyer, & Shahar, 2005; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). Examples of common questions used to measure this construct include: You feel close to people at your school? You feel safe in your school? How much do you feel that your teachers care about you? In sum, there are clear themes of tapping into relationships with other peers and teachers, and a sense of safety.

Although there is a plethora of research recommending schools to have “high” levels of school connectedness (the “what”), the literature on actual mechanisms to develop this key construct (the “how”) is sparse (e.g., Lai-Yeung, 2014; Orpinas & Horne, 2004). For example, treating students with dignity and respect, a key component of school connectedness, is often associated with successful prevention/resolution of violent school events (Daniels et al., 2010; Orpinas & Horne, 2004; Smith & Sandhu, 2004). The relationship and communication skills discussed in this review are associated with individuals reporting a strong relational alliance due to feeling understood, validated, and valued as a human being (e.g., dignity and respect). Extensive research has demonstrated the effectiveness of these skills enhancing the quality of therapeutic relationships (e.g., Hill & O’Brien, 2014; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2013; Rogers, 1995). It is believed that these skills can also be used to enhance teacher–student relationships.

School Connectedness and School Violence Prevention

The major theoretical premise of this review is that the more students feel connected to their teachers, the fewer incidents of school violence (Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Henrich et al., 2005; Karcher, 2004; Volungis, 2008, 2016). The attachments students have with school personnel—school connectedness—influence how they respond to perceived injustices. In general, students who feel connected with school personnel engage in fewer disruptive/oppositional behaviors, experience relatively more stable social–emotional well-being, and have higher academic achievement than their peers who report low levels of connectedness (Karcher, 2002; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Smith & Sandhu, 2004). Furthermore, students are also more prone to seek assistance with interpersonal problems if they feel connected to their teachers and peers, which results in a decreased propensity to feel alienated by others (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Overall, there is significant support for school connectedness having a vital role in preventing school violence due to

positive school personnel relationships (Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Henrich et al., 2005; Karcher, 2002; Volungis, 2016; Yablon, 2010). Thus, it is no surprise there is a strong consensus that school connectedness is a critical area to consider as an avenue to preventing school violence (Fein et al., 2002; Hoagwood, 2000).

A broad perspective to take from building strong teacher–student relationships is that when students feel like they have close relationships with teachers they can trust and look up to, along with having their own thoughts and feelings validated, the less prone they are to contemplate acts of violence when distressed (Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Henrich et al., 2005; Karcher, 2004). Feeling alienated, being bullied, and not having positive models to emulate effective problem-solving strategies are just a few examples of key risk factors for students to consider serious acts of school violence (Ericson, 2001). The identified skills discussed here have been demonstrated to have a significant role in the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal growth. Thus, an open and trusting teacher–student relationship is viewed as a protective factor against considering violence as a viable option.

A more salient outcome of strong teacher–student relationships is that students are more willing to speak up when there is knowledge of a potential violent act. In other words, when there is a nonstigmatizing climate, students are more apt to seek assistance from trusted teachers when they are aware of a potential violent event. Research has consistently established that students have a greater propensity to communicate their concerns if they perceive a strong connection with both peers and school personnel (Daniels et al., 2007; Daniels et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 1998; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Seeking help from trusted school personnel with potential knowledge of a violent act is not trivial. Oftentimes perpetrators, or would-be perpetrators, share their plans of a violent act with other students before it takes place (e.g., Daniels et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2000). O’Toole has referred to this phenomenon as “leakage.” However, although leakage is a common occurrence, there are many times when students have prior knowledge of a violent act, but never report it to school personnel. Not communicating possible knowledge of a planned violent act is referred to as the “code of silence” (O’Toole, 2000). This code of silence is especially hard to break when students do not feel they have a trusting relationship with school personnel.

However, if a student trusts at least one member of the school personnel who is willing to take the time to listen, not judge, and provide support, there is an increased proclivity to proactively communicate concerns of potential harm to others. For example, in a sample of middle school and high school students, Brinkley and Saarnio (2006) found that out of 33% of students who had knowledge of a potential violent event, about 75% reported that they were willing to report this knowledge to an adult. More specifically, it was found

that if students felt they had a close and trusting relationship with at least one teacher, the more likely they were to communicate their knowledge of a potential violent act. Yablon’s (2010) study of elementary, middle school, and high school students found that quality of teacher–student relationships had a significant influence on students’ willingness to seek help for physical, relational, and verbal violence. This trend appears to support the notion that students who may be hesitant to share any “leakage” for fear of being a “rat” or “snitch,” or have the perception they have no one to confide in, may have a greater proclivity to communicate such knowledge with a trusted teacher. In other words, a strong teacher–student alliance, fostered by basic relationship building and communication skills, may be a key factor in breaking the code of silence.

Theoretical Model: Teacher Skills, School Connectedness, and Prevention of School Violence

Figure 1 depicts a three-stage theoretical conceptualization of the teacher skills necessary fostering school connectedness and prevention of school violence. First, there are the core teacher–student relationship skills within the context of treating students with dignity and respect: empathy, genuineness, and nonjudgmental attitude. It is important to note here that from this point forward, multicultural competence is a must to develop a true teacher–student alliance. Concurrently, attending and listening skills are used to begin developing teacher–student trust. Second, are the teacher–student communication skills beyond attending and listening: open questions, reflection and validation of feelings, paraphrasing, reframing, challenging, self-disclosure, and summarizing. It is important to note that the teacher–student communication skills are presented in a manner that represents a typical sequence as the teacher–student relationship develops (i.e., basic to more sophisticated skills). This stage is crucial because it reflects the transition from an individual level of trust to a collective level of trust, which ultimately promotes the development of school connectedness. This process allows for putting trusting relationships into action, which leads to the final stage of preventing school violence. Here, students are now changing their perceptions, corresponding behaviors, and responsiveness to other events. More specifically, students are more willing to not only consider alternative options for their own distress and problems but also speak to trusted individuals (i.e., teachers, administration) if they become aware of another student’s motives for violence.

Teacher–Student Relationship Skills

A therapeutic alliance is a key ingredient in building and sustaining understanding and trusting relationships between therapists and clients. Teachers, in trying to establish a

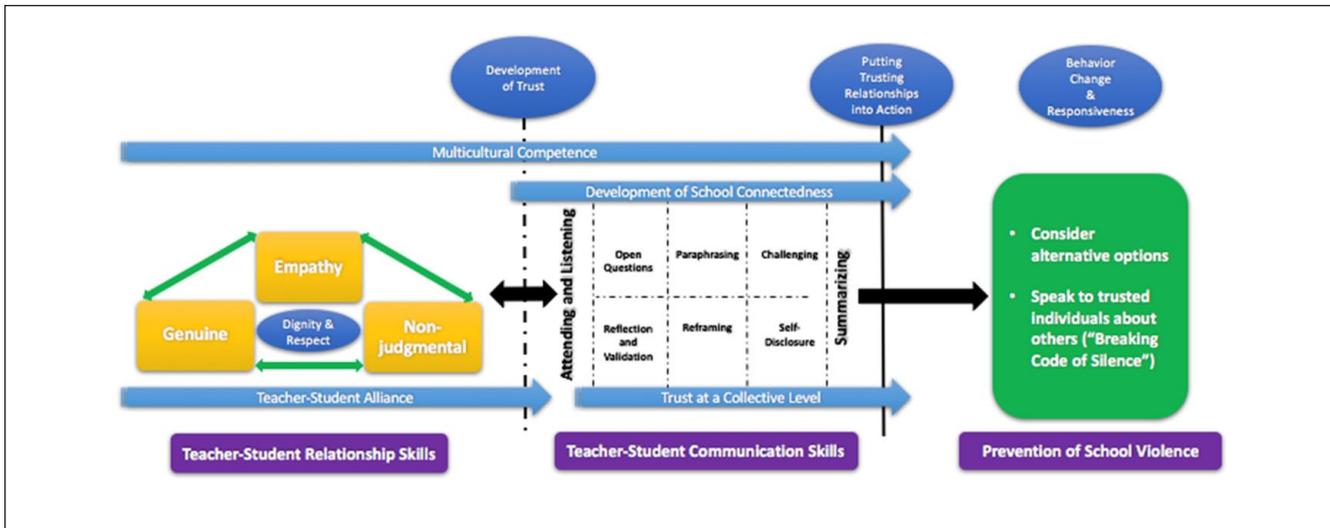


Figure 1. Theoretical model: Teacher skills, school connectedness, and prevention of school violence.

similar foundation of trust with their students, must learn and grow aware of what is involved in their teacher–student interpersonal alliance if they are to build strong attachments that encourage school connectedness. Fostering strengths and providing hope through connectedness cannot be accomplished without teachers first establishing a foundation of trust and understanding with their students.

Interpersonal alliances have been conceptualized in various ways. However, in most definitions, core features are shared. A pivotal part of addressing and understanding what an alliance is rests on the recognition that to accomplish any goals or employ any intervention with another person, there needs to be first an open and trusting relationship that is collaborative in nature. Rogers (1995) identifies key core features that comprise a nurturing alliance including genuineness, empathic understanding, and being nonjudgmental. These core features have important implications for developing a strong teacher–student alliance. Genuineness requires self-awareness of one’s feelings and presenting oneself in balance between what is said/done with how one thinks/feels about a particular topic. If done effectively, genuineness allows for direct and clear expression of a teacher’s experience in an authentic manner. Empathic understanding is something that is much more than compassion or pity (i.e., feeling bad for a student). Rather, true empathic understanding is a cognitive awareness of another person’s feelings. For teachers, it means accurately understanding the emotional experience of a student. Stated differently, it means standing in the students’ shoes and seeing the world through their eyes. A nonjudgmental attitude truly involves separating the student from the behavior. The focus is more on teachers describing the situation, rather than evaluating the student. Ultimately, these facilitative conditions are reciprocal in nature in that they are both an attitude and a technique not only for building a nurturing teacher–student

alliance but also for conveying dignity and respect and facilitating effective communication. Although the importance of the alliance may wax and wane as the relationship evolves, its establishment in the beginning is necessary, especially for maximizing effectiveness for the following teacher–student communication skills.

Multicultural Competence

It is important to note here that teachers engender a constant level of multicultural competence. More specifically, multicultural competencies include awareness, knowledge, and skills (American Counseling Association, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2003). Awareness includes teachers being cognizant of their own cultural influence on the students they interact with, including possible privilege between teachers and students with different backgrounds. Those who lack awareness of their own cultural influence will struggle with developing awareness of others. The more teachers can be aware of their own assumptions and stereotypes about students from different groups, the less chance there will be microaggressions, or inadvertent small insults and slights. An effective way to deepen understanding of such differences between one’s own cultural group and other groups is to deliberately seek additional knowledge. Thus, if teachers find that their cultural background is different from their students, it would behoove them to learn about their history, worldviews, and present concerns. It is possible that traditional approaches to using certain counseling skills, such as the ones forthcoming, may be ineffective and/or inappropriate with certain groups. At the very least, modifications in how particular skills are applied with different students will need to be taken into consideration. Teachers who are purposeful in putting effort toward being multiculturally competent with their students will have greater potential to develop both a

strong teacher–student alliance and enhance the effectiveness of their teacher–student communication skills.

Teacher–Student Communication Skills

Teacher–student communication skills are important for use with all students in day-to-day interactions. Such skills as attending and listening are relatively common for most teachers in their daily interactions; however, other skills such as reframing and challenging may be less common (and require more training and supervision). Effective implementation of such skills with a student has the potential for the greatest impact during critical interpersonal interactions. It is important to note that “critical” does not necessarily refer to only major events of emotional expression (e.g., aggressive verbal threats to another student, crying extensively in the hallway). Rather, critical refers to opportunities where a teacher observes and engages with a student in emotional distress and is able to provide validation, alternative perspectives, and problem solve. The following highlights some of the more common helping and communication skills used in mental health and school counseling adapted from Hill and O’Brien (2014) and Ivey et al. (2013).

Attending and listening. Attending and listening are two skills that are good to learn first. Each skill is responsible for the initial positive nonverbal messages that students will receive from the start. In fact, attending and listening can also be viewed as a bridge between developing a teacher–student alliance and teacher–student communication skills. In many ways, being a good listener is just as important as being a good talker. Attending means to direct one’s attention and physical body to another person. This can be displayed by positioning one’s shoulders directly in alignment with the other person’s shoulders, and self-awareness of appropriate social distance where the teacher is close enough to show concern/interest, but not too close where students feels like their personal space is invaded. It is also important for teachers to be cognizant of how closely they are situated spatially from the student they are communicating with (i.e., proxemics). Sitting a moderate distance (2-3 feet) away from the student is an appropriate beginning baseline. Eye contact is also a key nonverbal behavioral means of communication. Although eye contact can vary greatly across cultures, the use of gaze aversion (i.e., occasionally looking away) is often most effective in minimizing possible anxiety and intimidation. In other words, providing some eye contact, but not staring, often conveys a sense of concern and support. While this is all occurring, initially maintaining relatively neutral facial expressions and attention to matching students’ facial expressions can also help build a nonverbal connection.

To listen to another person, one must first attend and show nonverbally that the person is being addressed and respectfully focused on. Listening involves understanding the verbal and nonverbal messages that students communicate. The

teacher as a listener needs to be attuned to what the student is saying verbally, as well as nonverbally, to receive the full message. The use of paralanguage through a calm tone of voice and matching one’s pitch and volume with the student (when appropriate), including the use of minimal encouragements (e.g., “uh-huh,” “yes”), can be used to convey active listening and an emotional connection. Kinesics, which refers to the relationship of bodily movements, can also help enhance different aspects of communication. Body movements such as head nods, postural shifts, and use of hand gestures (used moderately) make students feel that they are really being listened to. Effective use of kinesics conveys a level of engagement and understanding from the teacher, which can be beneficial to conveying and maintaining trust and connection. It is also important to note that remaining silent during student pauses/hesitations may be a more prudent option than trying to fill in the silence with comments, which may be perceived as not understanding and/or interrupting. In other words, an immediate verbal response is not always necessary. In fact, silence can provide unique moments of mutual reflection and stimulus for the student to continue talking. To present oneself as a good listener will help one to be perceived as empathic and be in the position to gather important information.

Open questions. To render open and honest verbal responses from a student, teachers should effectively utilize open questions. Although close-ended questions can be powerful in particular moments for specific information, if overused or not complemented by open-ended questions, it can be too restricting and sometimes convey inaccurate presumptions. Similarly, asking “why” is often irritating to most youth. The goal of using open-ended questions is to encourage exploration in what comes to mind for the student as opposed to fishing for a particular answer. In other words, without the limits of “yes” or “no,” a student can clarify an emotion as well as explore in that moment what comes to mind. Many students have a difficult time expressing thoughts and feelings. For these students, open-ended questions can help them focus on a particular topic, clarify their reactions, and encourage verbal communication. Teachers should use open-ended questions carefully and with awareness on what topics and issues are most salient for each student.

Reflection and validation of feelings. Reflecting feelings involves repeating the statement made by students back to them with a clear emphasis on their feelings. There are times when the student’s feelings are mentioned in the statement, and other times when the feelings must be identified by the teacher through nonverbal messages alone. It is important to note, however, that even if feelings are mentioned in the statement expressed, it is still part of the teacher’s responsibility to listen closely to all messages coming from the student and discern if the nonverbal messages match the verbal message. By teachers reflecting back feelings to students,

they are encouraging students to experience their feelings in a safe and nonrejecting way. The goal is not to intellectualize the student's feelings, but to allow the student to express them more freely and to have the option open to possibly engage in cathartic relief with the teacher. This type of relief is not often available in peer groups and can aid in stress reduction and promote greater mental clarity around decision making. The risk for teachers in reflecting back feelings is to eliminate the possibility of contradicting emotions. Students might have conflicting emotions about a particular event or topic, and if the teacher reflects back one emotion only, and negates others, students might feel misunderstood or possibly shameful about the emotions that were not shared. Before using this skill, teachers should be mindful of how emotions are not linear and are sometimes conflicting.

Validation of thoughts and feelings is a skill that is also very powerful and effective with others. Most individuals want to feel validated in their experience before implementing problem-solving strategies or receiving feedback from others. A common misunderstanding made by some people is equating agreeing with validation. In other words, to be validating of another's thoughts and emotions requires agreeing with those thoughts and emotions. However, this is untrue. Validation is a skill that allows one to understand another's experience and to refrain from judgment, advice, and other explicit opinion making so that the person feels heard and understood. After teachers validate a student's experience, they can then decide how best to address the situation with other skills (i.e., challenging, reframing, etc.). The student will most likely be in a position to engage more fully after being validated.

Paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is a verbal summary of what another person just said. This summary filters the key words, phrases, and relevant content from multiple sentences, some of which may be confusing. Paraphrasing is helpful because it offers the student clarification, especially when they have trouble articulating their thoughts or feelings. For teachers, paraphrasing can be especially helpful because it conveys curiosity and care in what the student is trying to say versus interpreting thoughts quickly, which can ultimately be read as invalidating. Teacher paraphrasing allows the conversation to be led by the student, while also encouraging the student to naturally move the conversation forward. In other words, the teacher's opinion, reaction, or advice is not being inserted early into the discussion. Rather, paraphrasing facilitates and clarifies the student's thoughts in a validating manner.

Reframing. Reframing can include components of paraphrasing, but there is more of a shift from clarification to a different meaning of the initial message communicated. This can be done by adding new language to what has been already said by the student. In other words, it can involve the teacher taking the student's comment and rewording it in a way that shifts the meaning and understanding in another direction, one that will enrich insight and not obscure it. Reframing

also can involve looking at a student's behavior in another context, including adding more inclusion of positivity and explaining the meaning of the behavior. Such insight can facilitate shifts in cognitive and behavioral patterns. It is important to note here that the purpose of reframing is not "being positive." Rather, the goal is to provide an alternative perspective that is both realistic and adaptive for relieving student distress and effective problem solving.

Challenging. The point of challenging students is not to make them feel attacked or pressured, but rather is intended to foster increased awareness of their feelings and experience. Many students are not aware of their dysfunctional thoughts and disruptive behaviors. It is, therefore, helpful to have a trusting and safe relationship in which one can be challenged and foster clarity around some of these cognitive and behavioral patterns. It can be difficult to address a solution to a problem without first looking at the way in which the person is conceptualizing the problem or event. Dysfunctional thoughts and disruptive behaviors must be brought to light before clear problem-solving strategies and discussions on solutions can even happen. One of the ways to challenge that and seems best suited for the teacher–student relationship is using gentle humor. By using humor, the challenging piece of the interaction is softened and easier for the student to receive. It is important that the teacher knows the difference between "laughing with" the student opposed to "laughing at" the student. When this distinction can be clearly made, humor is a useful approach to challenging and can allow students to reflect on their thoughts without having to initially regulate feelings of shame or hurt.

In situations where humor would not be appropriate, confrontation might be a viable option. When dysfunctional thoughts and disruptive behaviors have become too rigid and promote significant distress, it is helpful to evaluate their utility and consequences. Thus, when there is a strong alliance, sometimes directly confronting a student's maladaptive cognitive and/or behavioral pattern and how it affects the student personally may be the most effective in providing insight. It is important that the teacher is gentle in the language used and is clear in showing the relationship between dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors to relevant life consequences. In addition, during the confrontation process, teachers should be mindful to validate the student's feelings.

Self-disclosure. Self-disclosure, although requiring careful discretion, is a particularly important skill for teachers to use with students. Small levels of self-disclosure can help students gain a better understanding of their own feelings and experience, as well as the teacher's. Simply put, self-disclosure is when one shares personal information with another person. Self-disclosures can relate to a personal experience in one's past that can apply to the current situation at hand, or it can relate to the disclosure of immediate thoughts or feelings related to the other person in the relationship. For teachers,

self-disclosure should not include personal information that is unrelated to the student. However, it could involve sharing with students their experience in the relationship and how they feel in the process of interacting with them. Another way self-disclosure could be helpful for students is if teachers share their personal experience dealing with a challenging situation that is similar to what they might be going through. This can help students cope with challenges better and feel less alone in their struggle.

Summarizing. Although seemingly simplistic, summarizing is a necessary step when approaching the end of a conversation. In some ways, a summary is an extension of paraphrasing as it highlights the key themes of what the student communicated and the support and information provided for the student. A good summary shows the student that the teacher has a clear understanding of the situation, while also implicitly indicating what the student can take away from the conversation moving forward. This also provides the student the opportunity to clarify any inconsistencies in understanding what was summarized and ask additional questions. Finally, this is also a good time to set up a plan for future discussions and highlight particular tasks or goals related to the student's distress that initiated the conversation.

Prevention of School Violence

No single skill leads to school violence prevention. Rather, it is the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts: in this case, school connectedness. As these skills are consistently and effectively implemented, students will have an increasing role in reducing school violence. This goal is achieved for the purpose of two key preventative mechanisms: (a) fostering an overall positive school climate where students are less prone to consider violence as an option to coping with distress and (b) if students are considering violence as an option, or knows of other students who are considering/planning a violent act, they will be more prone to share these thoughts with a trusted teacher.

Effective Application of Teacher-Student Communication Skills

The following is a brief hypothetical case example that provides some contextual background of a student recently struggling with an emotional-behavior disorder. Thereafter, an example for each teacher-student communication skill is provided based on brief vignettes, including inappropriate and appropriate application. Also, note the implicit integration of the teacher-student relationships skills of empathy, genuineness, and nonjudgmental; it is not just what communication skills are used; it is also how they are used. Although the case is hypothetical, the context and teacher responses are based on actual clinical experience of the first author providing psychological services in a variety of school settings.

Joe is a 9th grade male student who, in the past month, has been displaying unusual, non-characteristic behavior. Although typically a social student, he has recently withdrawn from his peer group, his participation in class has decreased significantly, and he is now missing practices for the school basketball team. Joe has also been increasingly irritable towards his teachers when asked relatively basic questions, including a recent verbal outburst with threats to harm a teacher ("I'll slap you if you ask me that question one more time!"). Other students have also reported similar incidents where Joe has made verbal threats. Usually a B average student, Joe's grades have dropped significantly to mostly D's and he remains resistant to offers for help from his teachers ("I don't care anymore!"). During a recent meeting with his teachers, a school counselor noted that some of these behaviors are more likely due to depressive symptoms, rather than purposely being oppositional/defiant.

Attending and Listening

A teacher sees Joe intentionally banging his foot on another student's chair during quiet reading time. The other student turns around and asks him to stop. Joe replies, "Shut-up!"

Poor skill implementation. The teacher stares sternly at Joe and then walks over to him, hovering over his desk, and states in a loud tone, "This is a warning. If you do not stop hitting that chair we might need to find you a different space to read," and then walks away.

Effective skill implantation. The teacher first quietly approaches the student and kneels down to face him shoulder to shoulder. The teacher then, with stable eye contact and a calm facial expression, curiously inquires as to why Joe is doing the repetitive behavior and listens carefully to the emotional tone, affect, and words in his response. Shrugging and looking down at the floor, Joe responds, "I don't know, I have too much on my mind." The teacher then asks about his thoughts and explores other possible feelings.

Open Questions

A teacher sees Joe skipping lunch to sit in the school entrance lobby. Joe is clenching his fist and staring at the floor.

Poor skill implementation. The teacher sits next to Joe and asks, "Did you skip lunch today?" After no response, the teacher states, "Did you do that because you are mad?" Joe responds, "Whatever." The teacher then suggests that Joe join his friends. Joe displays no interest in this suggestion.

Effective skill implementation. The teacher sits next to Joe, observes his nonverbal cues, and then asks, "If you don't mind, tell me how you are feeling today?" Joe, looking straight ahead responds, "Not good, I am tired of everyone at this school." The teacher then compassionately inquires further into what the problem might be.

Reflection and Validation of Feelings

A teacher, while helping Joe complete a math problem as other students are working silently, hears him say aloud, “I hate math, I hate school, and I hate you right now.”

Poor skill implementation. The teacher responds to Joe by saying, “You might hate me and math right now but I can tell you that is not going to make things easier. You can get this done if you focus more and complain less.” Joe responds, “I need to use the bathroom.”

Effective skill implementation. The teacher responds to Joe by saying, “It sounds like you are pretty frustrated with all of this right now. I understand that this math work is very challenging.” Joe responds as he lifts his paper up, “It’s hard to do this one, because I can’t remember the equation.” The teacher, with curiosity, asks Joe where he is getting stuck.

Paraphrasing

A teacher during a scheduled one-on-one time with Joe hears him say, “I suck at reading and never want to come back here.”

Poor skill implementation. The teacher then says to Joe, “Seems to me you need to be in a different reading group, reading books that are less challenging for you. Am I right?” Joe responds, “I can read fine.”

Effective skill implementation. The teacher then says to Joe, “What I am hearing you say is that you don’t think you’re good at reading and you’re feeling frustrated. Does that sound right?” Joe responds, “I can learn stuff, but not when there are big words I don’t know.” The teacher nods his head and then asks questions about how class lessons are going and if he needs help with his homework.

Reframing

Outside a special education classroom, a teacher finds Joe hanging around the bathroom when the teacher knows he should be in class. After inquiring about why he is not in class, Joe responds, “I feel like an idiot being in a special math class. It’s a joke. I wish I could just play basketball and not go to school. That’s what I’m good at.”

Poor skill implementation. The teacher, in an attempt to reframe what was just said, responds to Joe, “What I hear you saying is that you want to be playing basketball instead of being in class. We both know that is not an option.” Joe responds, “This sucks.”

Effective skill implementation. The teacher, in attempt to reframe what was just said, responds to Joe,

I can see how frustrating it must be to sit in a class practicing something you find hard and don’t really enjoy. However, the skills you have displayed in basketball can benefit you tremendously with math problems. The determination, willpower, and daily practice you put into the game can be put into math. You can even practice with math problems about basketball.

Joe responds, “That sounds a little better. Can I try those problems?”

Challenging

A teacher while walking around the room observing small group activities notices Joe swear at one of his close friends. The teacher, after finding a quiet space in the room with Joe, asks him why he swore at his friend. Joe responds, “He was saying I never pay attention and was about to flip out at me.”

Poor skill implementation. The teacher then says to Joe, “It is not okay to swear and call others bad names. It hurts their feelings. You know that is the rule.” Joe responds, “He started it so why don’t you pull him to the side?”

Effective skill implementation. The teacher then says to Joe, “Perhaps you insult others as a way to protect yourself from being insulted first, but I wonder if you need to insult the people in your life that you trust and feel safe with.” After a moment of silence Joe says, “I sometimes don’t know what to say after someone hurts my feelings.”

Self-Disclosure

During a movie in science class, Joe, after being asked repeatedly to be quiet, continues to fake cough and sneeze loudly. The teacher asks Joe to the back of the room and they begin discussing the issue. Joe sarcastically states, “I must be allergic to something I guess.”

Poor skill implementation. The teacher responds to Joe by saying,

Joe, I know you are faking it and you need to stop. This is inappropriate and if you continue I’ll ask you to leave class. Might I also remind you that your homework tonight is going to be on this movie, so you might want to pay attention.

Joe responds, “Maybe I won’t do the homework then.”

Effective skill implementation. The teacher responds to Joe by saying,

Joe I’m pretty sure you are faking it. I know the movie is a bit dry, but you can’t distract the class because of it. When I was your age I also found these films boring, but now that I am older I see how much cool information is in them and how much you can learn if you just stick with it a bit.

Joe responds, “Okay, I’ll try.”

Summarizing

The teacher and Joe are about to end a 5-min conversation about Joe expressing his thoughts and feelings after being teased by one of his peers. The teacher responded to Joe because she heard him yelling and threatening those who teased him. The teacher notices that Joe now appears calm and is receptive to the provided feedback and support.

Poor skill implementation. The teacher says to Joe, “I hope you understand what we just discussed. Everything is going to be okay if you can just keep yourself together.” Joe responds, “I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything if they tease me again.”

Effective skill implementation. The teacher begins the summary by saying,

Joe I’m impressed that you were willing to take the time to share with me your thoughts and feelings about being teased. I know you said that you’re feeling better, but I just want to make sure we are on the same page before you go to class. So, like we discussed, if you are teased again it is okay to advocate for yourself and tell them to stop. However, if they don’t stop teasing, I suggest you walk away or ask another teacher for assistance instead of threatening to hit them. You are always welcome to come back and talk to me if you’re feeling frustrated. In fact, is it okay if I check in with you later in the week to see how things are going?

Joe responds, “Yes, that’s fine. I’ll do my best to not yell back if I’m teased. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.”

Implications for School Counselors

The most direct and practical approach for building school connectedness and preventing school violence is through both teachers and students. The ultimate goal is to build a school climate that includes dignity and respect both within and between teachers and students. Like any other training program, it is important to demonstrate to both administration and teachers the value in taking the extra time to build on their preexisting relationship and communication skills. You essentially want to show that the more they put in, the more they get back. More specifically, this can include improved teacher–student relationships, student well-being, student academics, and potential reduction in school violence. The more teachers are receptive and understand the value of enhancing teacher–student relationships, the greater the chance for developing a successful program.

One direct means to building teacher–student relationships is by training teachers in the aforementioned teacher–student skills. Although teachers receive prior training in some of these skills (e.g., attending and listening and open-ended questions), other skills such as reframing, challenging,

and self-disclosure may not be as common (and more complex) and require special training. Also, further training can always enhance preexisting teacher skills.

For pragmatic and resource reasons, it is not unreasonable to have such skills taught to the teachers in a group setting rather than individual trainings. This setting would provide school counselors the opportunity to train teachers using these skills through vignettes (such as the examples provided earlier) and role-plays with fellow colleagues. Thereafter, school counselors can periodically observe teachers “in action” in the classroom and other school-related settings. Research has also shown that use of such skills in a nonclassroom environment can help establish a meaningful teacher–student alliance (Daniels et al., 2010). For example, the physical presence and interaction with students in hallways, cafeterias, and extracurricular activities are also prime opportunities to utilize these skills. In other words, teachers should be consistent in their social interactions with students in a variety of school-related contexts. If these skills remain a consistent expectation, school counselors can provide follow-up trainings and supervision for continuous feedback. These observations and supervision can be used as one form of assessment to determine adherence and effectiveness for each skill set.

Extending training beyond just the teachers can include integrating students for feedback on what skills they find most helpful and other skills lacking and/or in need of improvement. This can also include such programs as student-only focus groups that address both student–student relationships and student–teacher relationships. Thereafter, representatives from these focus groups can meet with teachers and administrators as a means of having a continuous reciprocal open dialogue about the relationships between students and teachers. This can also include a discussion about potential multicultural differences that teachers may want to learn more about and/or what students want to make teachers aware of. Finally, school counselors can spearhead occasional “awareness days” focusing on topics related to school connectedness (e.g., dignity and respect, empathy, student–teacher appreciation).

Implications for Future Research

There is extensive literature touting the benefits of school connectedness and research showing negative correlations between measured levels of school connectedness and school violence. However, there are no known studies that have explicitly implemented training programs for teachers (or students) with the goal of measuring teacher skill acquisition and student-reported school connectedness over time. This is a rich opportunity for researchers to use quasi-experimental designs to demonstrate what teacher skills best foster school connectedness and whether such training, by extension, can reduce student violence in schools.

Effectiveness studies can explore feasible implementation strategies for teacher skills training programs specific to

enhancing school connectedness. Figure 1 highlights the teacher–student relationship and communication skills that show the most promise for developing a teacher–student alliance based on previous research on therapeutic relationships. Studies can focus on the effectiveness of specific skills (e.g., are some strategies more effective than others?) or all the skills together (i.e., Gestalt). This should also include observational strategies to insure fidelity and adherence to the training program’s skills and goals.

For measuring school connectedness over time, there are already preexisting well-validated measures largely based off the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (e.g., Henrich et al., 2005; McNeely et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). Using such measures is strongly suggested as it allows for a consistent operational definition and assessment of school connectedness across studies. For measuring school violence, many schools already have a preexisting system that tracks reported violent acts during the school year. Of course, not all violent acts are reported. Student self-report measures can also be used to assess violence. Although seemingly obvious, it is important that studies are clear in identifying how violence is operationally defined (e.g., physical assault, verbal aggression, Internet aggression). Overall, integrating a skills training program and at least measuring school connectedness and school violence over time will allow for more formal research methods and, consequently, a clearer understanding of the relationships among these key variables.

Conclusion

In conclusion, much research has been devoted to measuring and touting the important role of school connectedness and prevention of school violence. Yet, minimal to no literature has explicitly addressed “how” school connectedness can be achieved and/or enhanced by school personnel. Because school connectedness is a malleable construct, it only makes sense that guidance and direction should be provided to enhance teacher–student relationships (Volungis, 2016). The postulated theoretical model in Figure 1 is provided with the hope that this can afford conceptual and applied guidance in bridging the gap between research and practice. More specifically, the provided theoretical model can be used as a guide to develop and assess effective prevention and intervention strategies to assist teachers in improving their relationships with students through school connectedness.

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Author Biographies

Adam M. Volungis, PhD, is a counseling psychologist and assistant professor in the Clinical Counseling Psychology Program at Assumption College. He specializes in cognitive-behavioral therapy for youth and families. His research interests include prevention of school violence, suicide prevention in adolescents, college student mental health and smartphone dependency, enhancing cognitive-behavioral therapy with technology, and youth internalizing/externalizing disorders.

Katie Goodman, MA, is an adjunct professor at Lesley University, the school-based counseling coordinator at Arbour Counseling Services in Boston, and a licensed mental health clinician. She is also a psychoanalytic candidate at the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis.