

CARING AND FUN

Fostering an Adolescent-Centered Community Within an Interdisciplinary Team

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This qualitative case study analyzed how one interdisciplinary team within a large middle school fostered a responsive adolescent-centered community for eighth-grade team students. Data were collected during the spring semester of the 2009 school year via observations, individual interviews, and focus group interviews with nine participants, including four eighth-grade students, four eighth-grade team teachers, and one middle school principal. Findings indicate developmentally responsive school organizational structures (i.e., interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, homeroom, and common planning time) and team teacher characteristics and practices helped to promote an adolescent-centered community that met eighth-grade students' needs for care and fun, in addition to other basic and developmental needs. Meeting eighth-grade students' needs for care and fun emerged as the major theme in the promotion of an adolescent-centered, developmentally responsive community within one interdisciplinary team at the middle level.

The promotion of a middle school environment responsive to students' needs is a vital component of an effective middle school, noted as one of the essential attributes of the Association for Middle Level Education's (AMLE) *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Two important needs young adolescents have include the need to be cared for and experience school as fun (Noddings, 2005; Schmakel, 2008). While care and caring school communities have been

examined at the elementary school (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997) and more recently at the high school levels (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Garza, 2007; Lee & Ryser, 2009; Schussler & Collins, 2006), studies that focus on care and caring school communities are not overly abundant at the middle level (see Alder, 2002; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2000; Hayes Ryan, & Zsellar, 1994 as exceptions). The notion of school as fun has been around for a long time, as Dewey (1910) believed the perfect mental

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condition for learning was, “To be playful and serious at the same time” (p. 218). However, fun in school as a need students want fulfilled within the school environment and exactly what students consider to be “fun in learning” has been relatively understudied at the secondary level (see Schmakel, 2008, as an exception). Additionally, few studies have directly investigated how students’ needs for *both* care and fun are met within the middle school.

While research highlights the importance of a responsive middle school environment, including structures and practices that meet the needs of young adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993; NMSA, 2010), there has been a recent call for additional research that examines, embraces, and retains responsive middle level innovations known to work well for students at the middle level. Building relationships with students, interdisciplinary teaming, and common planning are three practices specifically mentioned as exemplary middle level elements that warrant continued investigation (Caskey, 2011). Further, Caskey (2011) urges that students be treated as “honored guests” where they are invited into conversations, including research conversations, and looked upon as having noteworthy contributions to add. Listening to student voices in order to understand how students’ needs, specifically the need for care and fun, are met within an eighth-grade interdisciplinary team may help to extend the current literature base on how such middle school practices are responsive to the needs of today’s young adolescent. The current study utilized a within-site qualitative case study approach to gain a detailed understanding of how one interdisciplinary team at a large middle school nurtured an adolescent-centered community that was responsive to students’ needs for both care and fun in school. Interdisciplinary teaming and other organizational structures (i.e., flexible scheduling, home-room, and common planning time), along with developmentally responsive teacher characteristics and practices, may promote an adolescent-centered community responsive to

students’ needs for both care and fun while also meeting other basic and developmental needs.

An Adolescent-Centered Community

We conceptualize an adolescent-centered community as one that fosters an environment responsive to students’ needs, including the need to receive care and to experience school as fun. We used four interconnected theoretical frameworks to help guide our conceptualization and examination of how interdisciplinary teaming may foster a responsive adolescent-centered community. Specifically, we utilized self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000), stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993), a caring school community (Battistich et al., 1997; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010), and the need for fun in school (Glasser, 1996; Larson & Gatto, 2004; Schmakel, 2008).

According to the self-determination theory, individuals have basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Meeting these basic life-long needs allows for intrinsic motivation and high quality learning to flourish. The stage-environment fit theory suggests educators can foster a responsive environment by providing a match between students’ developmental needs and the opportunities afforded within the classroom and school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993). These needs must be addressed within the school to promote positive functioning, engagement, and motivation (Eccles, 2004). Eccles (2004) highlights the importance of a responsive school context:

Individuals have changing emotional, cognitive, and social needs and personal goals as they mature ... schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate students’ interest and engagement as the students mature. (pp. 125-126)

Responsive school environments may provide a foundation for the establishment of a community where students feel cared for (Noddings, 2005) and experience school as fun (Larson & Gatto, 2004; Schmakel, 2008). Chaskin and Rauner (1995) conceptualize caring as a way to respond to students' basic psychological needs, including the need for belongingness, connectedness, support, and competency. A caring school environment is described as, "A place where students and teachers care about and support each other, where individuals' needs are satisfied within a group setting, and where members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group" (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010, p. 396). Glasser (1996) claimed all human behavior is driven by four needs, including the need for fun. Extant theory and research suggest the notion of "school as fun" as being associated with pleasure, enjoyment, and a lack of academic rigor does not fully capture the notion of the teacher, the classroom, or learning as fun (Larson & Gatto, 2004; Mann, 1996). Rather, "school as fun" may include exciting learning activities, forging meaningful connections to the learning material, in addition to supportive and caring teacher-student relationships (Larson & Gatto, 2004; Schmakel, 2008). When the school environment and the learning experiences fulfill students' needs, a sense of true community, engagement, interest, exploration, and enjoyment is often experienced (Battistich et al., 1997; Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although a school environment where students experience care and fun may benefit students of all ages, it is particularly important during early adolescence, when individuals often undergo multiple developmental changes and declines in academic motivation and engagement (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993).

Essential Components of an Adolescent-Centered Community

Previous research indicates several components are essential to fostering an adolescent-

centered community that meets students' needs. Responsive school organizational structures along with teacher characteristics and practices that make it easier to get to know students are essential aspects of an effective middle school (Eccles et al., 1993; NMSA, 2010). Middle schools should be organized to encourage positive relationships, support responsive teacher characteristics and practices, and promote a sense of community. Organizational structures, such as interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, and homeroom can help increase the amount of time team teachers have to build positive relationships with students, meet students' needs, and afford teachers the opportunity to collaborate with one another (George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mertens & Flowers, 2004; NMSA, 2010). Research suggests teaming, along with its complementary structures, help to create opportunities for students to establish a deep sense of community (George & Alexander, 2003; Pate et al., 1993; Powell, 1993), stable relationships and deep bonds with teachers and classmates (George & Alexander, 2003), and an affiliation with a peer group (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

While organizational structures set the foundation for an adolescent-centered community, teachers who exhibit characteristics and employ practices that are developmentally responsive play a significant role in nurturing this community. Teacher-student relationships are among the most salient of school-based social relationships for students, "When students make a lasting connection with at least one caring adult, academic and personal outcomes improve" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 143). Responsive teachers exhibit characteristics such as a sense of humor, "withitness," good management skills, respect, kindness, helpfulness, high expectations, and being a warm demander (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Bosworth, 1995; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Hayes et al., 1994). Teachers may cultivate caring relationships by modeling caring behavior (Noddings, 2005) as well as demonstrating interest and enthusiasm

through the subject(s) they discuss, soliciting prior knowledge, and encouraging identity formation and exploration (Cushman & Rogers, 2008). In addition, students report responsive teachers take time to know their students well, provide constructive feedback, and are academically helpful (Alder, 2002; Wentzel, 1997).

Although students' experiences of care and fun in school are essential components of a developmentally responsive community and recent qualitative research has focused on students' perceptions of understanding middle school as a fun and caring place, care and fun are often examined separately. Research indicates middle school students perceive teachers as caring when they know them well, provide guidance and academic help, hold high expectations for behavior and achievement, encourage success and positive emotions, listen to students, and foster opportunities to experience fun (Alder, 2002; Garza, 2007; Hayes et al., 1994; Lee & Ryser, 2009; Wentzel, 1997). Middle school students want teachers who help them learn about themselves and their classmates, are fair, treat them with respect, and provide opportunities for students to contribute to classroom decision making (Cushman & Rogers, 2008). Further, fun in learning is salient at the middle level as young adolescents are motivated when they perceive activities as productive, fun, enjoyable, and interesting (Schmakel, 2008). Together these findings suggest middle school students crave a caring and fun community and that teachers play a critical role in creating such a community. However, to the authors' knowledge, care and fun have not been directly examined in middle school together, in addition to the roles that school structures and teachers play in responding to the needs of young adolescents, including experiencing care and fun. Thus, the current study examines care and fun in school in tandem to gain a deeper understanding of how these needs may be met by responsive school structures and responsive teacher characteristics and practices at the middle level.

METHODS

Purpose

The aim of this within-site qualitative case study investigation ($N = 9$) was to gain a detailed understanding of how one interdisciplinary team nurtured an adolescent-centered community that was responsive to eighth-grade students' needs for fun and care as well as other basic and developmental needs. Case study methodology was selected due to its ability to study a single bounded system, such as an interdisciplinary team, in great detail (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, we wanted to know, "How does one interdisciplinary team at Ford Middle School foster an adolescent-centered community responsive to their eighth-grade students' needs, including the need for care and fun in school?" This study was part of a larger longitudinal multi-site qualitative case study ($N = 23$) that investigated the developmentally responsive nature of the transition from middle school (eighth grade) to high school (ninth grade). A multisource case study approach highlighting the complexity of student, teacher, and administrator voices provided a deep understanding of how one interdisciplinary team fostered an adolescent-centered community.

Context

Ford Middle School is located within a large, socioeconomically and ethnically diverse school district in the Southeastern United States. At the time of data collection (spring of 2009), Ford had a total school enrollment of 1559 students, including 480 eighth-grade students dispersed among four teams. Sixty percent of Ford's population was minority and 53% of students received free/reduced lunch. The team highlighted in the current study, the Rams, was a split-level seventh and eighth-grade team with 56 eighth-grade students and four teachers.

Identification of Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select the team and participants in order to help ensure an “information-rich” case (Patton, 2002, p. 46). This study was part of a larger, year-long multisite qualitative case study ($N = 23$), including four students who were on the same split-level seventh and eighth grade team, all four of their team teachers, their middle school principal, in addition to each students’ core ninth grade school teachers ($N = 13$) and their high school principal.

Nine people who were part of this larger investigation participated in the current study. The middle school principal selected one eighth-grade team based on a set of predetermined criteria (i.e., an interdisciplinary eighth-grade team, student population of the team represented the overall middle school demographics, and all team teachers were willing to participate). All 56 eighth-grade students on the selected split-level seventh and eighth-grade team who met additional criteria (i.e. were scheduled to attend the primary feeder high school for ninth grade) were invited to participate. Four eighth-grade students who represented the overall demographics of the school and team who had plans to attend the major feeder high school and who returned parent permission slips were selected for participation. Student participants included Troy (Black male), Jimmy (White male; eligible for free and reduced lunch), Katelyn (White female; eligible for free and reduced lunch), and Lauren (Hispanic female). All four team teachers participated, including Mrs. Copeland, Ms. Hamilton, Ms. Mirabelle, and Ms. O’Connell along with Mrs. Cramer, the school principal (all White females). Teaching experience ranged from 2 (Ms. Hamilton) to 9 years (Mrs. Copeland). The principal had been an administrator at Ford for 3 years. All participants, including parents/guardians of the student participants, signed informed consent forms. Students were read an informed assent protocol and provided verbal affirmation along with written consent prior to participat-

ing. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and identifying components of the school (e.g., school and team name) to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

The present study utilized Merriam’s (2009) qualitative case study methodology grounded in the aforementioned theoretical frameworks to gain insight on how one interdisciplinary team cultivated an adolescent-centered community that met students’ needs for care and fun in school. Multiple sources of data were collected, resulting in a theme-based description of the case (Creswell, 2007). As part of the larger study, all four students were followed across the middle-to-high-school transition and were observed in their core courses (4 team teachers in eighth grade, 13 teachers in ninth grade), as well as interviewed individually and in focus groups at both the eighth-grade and ninth-grade levels. Individual students’ core teachers were interviewed at the eighth and ninth grade levels, in addition to the principal at both school sites.

In the current study, focus group and individual interviews served as the primary method of data collection with classroom observations and archival data serving as secondary sources.

Seven interviews took place, including one teacher team focus group interview, one eighth-grade student focus group interview, four individual eighth-grade student interviews, and one principal interview. Semi-structured interview protocols guided all individual and focus group interviews. A sample question for students included, “If you could create the best eighth-grade team teacher ever, what would that teacher look like and how would they teach?” A sample question for teachers included, “Describe how you build relationships and connections with your eighth-grade students.” All interviews were audiotaped and completely transcribed (totaling 58 single-spaced pages of transcripts). Individual students were followed throughout

their team classes in eighth grade. In addition, non-structured portions of the day (e.g., before and after school, class interchanges, lunch, in school activities and events) were observed. Thus, a total of 26 observations took place (totaling approximately 24 hours of observations), including 24 classroom and lunchtime observations, one observation of the eighth-grade team end of year luau party and the eighth-grade send-off. Archival evidence included student work, lesson plans, students' schedules, and team rules. Methods designed to minimize subjectivity include the use of member checks, peer reviews, a research journal, and the use of analyzed data to help collect additional information.

Data Analysis

The current study utilized Hatch's (2002) inductive approach to data analysis. This approach involves looking for patterns in data and making general statements regarding the phenomena. Hatch's method was selected due to its ability to focus deeply on a particular entity (i.e., interdisciplinary team) and highlight participants' stories. Inductive analysis begins with reading and rereading the data, resulting in separation of data into analyzable

parts that, based on the research question, merit further examination. These analyzable parts are referred to by Hatch as frames of analysis. Both researchers independently coded all data into frames, compared and discussed each frame until a consensus was reached. The next step in inductive analysis is to form domains. Domains are a set of categories that reflect relationships represented in the data. Using the main research question as a guide, both researchers collaboratively formed domains. Each domain was refined until it completely and clearly represented how the interdisciplinary team studied in this investigation promoted an adolescent-centered community. Two domains emerged from the data: organizational structures-student relationship and team teacher-student relationship. Domains were evaluated for sufficient support and disconfirming evidence were analyzed. By asking, "How does all this fit together?" (Hatch, 2002, p. 173), eighth-grade students' need for care and fun emerged as the major theme in the promotion of an adolescent-centered community within the interdisciplinary team. Last, a master domain sheet was created (see Table 1) and excerpts from the data were chosen for inclusion in this manuscript.

TABLE 1
Master Outline of Relationships That Served as a Way to
Promote an Adolescent-Centered Community Responsive to Eighth-Grade Students' Needs

Organizational Structures-Student Relationship
– Organizational structures served as a way to promote an adolescent-centered community responsive to eighth-grade students' needs
• Interdisciplinary teaming
• Flexible scheduling
• Homeroom
• Common planning time
Team Teacher-Student Relationship
– Team teachers themselves helped to promote an adolescent-centered community responsive to eighth-grade students' needs
• Teacher characteristics
• Teacher practices

RESULTS

Findings indicate two types of relationships served as a way to promote an adolescent-centered community responsive to eighth-grade students' needs within their interdisciplinary team, especially the need for care and fun (organizational structures-student and team teacher-student; see Table 1). Results from the organizational structures-student relationship suggest interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, homeroom, and common planning time were central to the promotion of care and fun within an adolescent-centered community. Results from the team teacher-student relationship suggest developmentally responsive teacher characteristics and practices may have helped to promote an adolescent-centered community where students' needs for care and fun were met.

Organizational Structures-Student Relationship: Promoting a Caring and Fun Adolescent-Centered Community

Teaming is very important to me. It's the whole child that we look at in middle school. We are looking at building relationships, a lot of physical and social things going on. Things that they don't always share with their parents. Things that they share with a friend and hopefully with teachers through relationships. I want them to leave Ford [Middle School] with a good foundation in education but also good human nature. How to seek advice, how to look for help, how to be a leader, how to know when to step back, these are all just as important as the academic and I feel like if we don't give that to them in middle school, I'm not sure where they are going to get it. —Mrs. Cramer, Principal

As reflected in Mrs. Cramer's quote above, interdisciplinary teaming is viewed as the heart of a responsive, adolescent-centered community. Within the organizational structures-student relationship, interdisciplinary teaming along with its complimentary structures (i.e.,

flexible scheduling, homeroom, and common planning time) helped to set the foundation that fostered an adolescent-centered community for eighth-grade team students. Specifically, organizational structures provided opportunities for team teachers to be able to meet students' needs for care, fun, and connectedness.

Eighth-grade students were divided into two smaller groups for a blocked period of time (131 or 160 minutes total depending on the bell schedule) that consisted of two classes (science and social studies) and a homeroom period. Because math and English classes were grouped by ability, in the afternoon students were not necessarily in the exact same small group that they were in the morning. However, groups remained relatively intact throughout the day. This type of organization followed the middle school concept design. Students experienced an increased amount of time during their school day with a smaller, more intimate group of students and team teachers. Team teachers valued the sense of connectedness brought about by the organizational structures and believed students benefited from this organizational arrangement as well as they experienced a sense of relatedness to both their team teachers and fellow peers. As Ms. Mirabelle stated, "I do feel that when we have those 56 kids, they know each other better, they see the same faces all day. I think we are lucky to have a tighter knit group than other teams." Students, like Katelyn, confirmed Ms. Mirabelle's statement:

Researcher: So talk to me about your team, the Rams [eighth grade team name]?

Katelyn: It's cool. We have fun students and cool teachers.

Researcher: Do you have similar kids from your team in your classes?

Katelyn: Yes.

Researcher: What do you think about that?

Katelyn: It's cool because you get to see them all day.

Students' perception of their team teachers and teammates as "fun" was related to the amount of time they spent together on a daily basis. As a result of the organizational structure of this team, students recognized only eighth-grade students as members of their team. Further, students viewed the small group of eighth-grade students they spent most of their morning with as their "home-room team" or team within their eighth-grade team, increasing their sense of relatedness to the group. As Lauren explained:

Lauren: These two classes [science and social studies] are the ones that I am mostly friends with. There are some kids in the other classes, but it's not like these classes.

Researcher: So it's your team?

Lauren: Yes. I'm more friends with my homeroom team. We spend first period and second period together.

Findings suggest common planning time provided team teachers the opportunity to communicate with one another and to act as a cohesive unit in order to best support students' needs, a noted byproduct of this middle level organizational structure. The flexible team schedule afforded teachers the opportunity to have a common planning and lunch period where they spent a large block of time (approximately 100 minutes) together every day. During this time, teachers discussed individual students and planned team-wide events. Teachers shared how being on a team together increased teacher communication, helping them work together to best meet students' needs, specifically for care and fun. As Ms. O'Connell shared:

I feel that we help instill that [a sense of team] in them too. Because we meet every day at lunch [joint common planning and lunch period], we know that so and so was having a bad day this morning and then they see you and you say, "I heard that you were having a bad day this morning." "How did

you know that?" It's because we are tighter as a team, so the students realize that we are working as a team to try and help them.

Students knew that their team teachers had daily planning time together, ate lunch together, and worked as one cohesive group. Witnessed during multiple observations, students, like Jimmy, would enter Ms. Hamilton's classroom during lunchtime, the place where team teachers met for common planning and lunch, to talk about schoolwork, their personal lives, and solicit advice. Teachers encouraged this type of behavior by making in-class announcements and providing passes to students who wanted to meet with them during lunch.

Interdisciplinary teaming, scheduling, homeroom, and common planning afforded opportunities for teachers to plan and carry out several team-wide events that were perceived by students as both fun *and* educational. Such team events included homeroom competitions, a time capsule, and a luau. Students reported the time capsule was one of the most fun and memorable events of their eighth-grade year. As Lauren shared:

I really liked the time capsule because we all got to put something in it, all the eighth graders on our team. If someone dug it up we would want them to remember us by the little items that we put in there ... we went out and Mrs. Copeland brought a rose bush, bought a gate to put around it, and brought a stone. I got to hold the stone and put it on the ground. So we all took a class picture of that. I think that by her taking the time to make all that stuff and get all that stuff for us was really special.

Students recognized the time and effort team teachers put into creating such fun events, perceiving their efforts as a way that their teachers demonstrated care. When discussing the eighth-grade team luau, Troy expressed how such events made him feel cared for by his team teachers:

Troy: Yeah. It took all that time to set it up [eighth-grade team luau].

Researcher: So you noticed that it took some extra time on their part? How did that make you feel when you realized that?

Troy: That they cared about us.

***Team Teacher-Student Relationship:
Promoting a Caring and Fun
Adolescent-Centered Community***

Researcher: What's it like to be on the Rams?

Katelyn: Fun, we have fun teachers.

Researcher: What makes your teachers fun?

Katelyn: They are really young and relatable.

Researcher: What do you mean when say relatable?

Katelyn: They try to help you as much as they can. And they try to be in your situation to help you through things ... the way they teach classes. They make it fun learning.

Katelyn, one of the eighth-grade students, illustrated in the above quote the importance of teacher-student relationships in promoting an adolescent-centered community that is both fun *and* caring. Within the team teacher-student relationship, teacher characteristics and practices may have helped to promote a fun and caring adolescent-centered community. Participants often perceived care and fun in school as being connected—teachers were as viewed as fun when they were caring and caring when they were fun. Teacher characteristics such as being fun and making learning fun along with being a caring, warm demanding educator were perceived to help foster an adolescent-centered community within the team. Teacher practices, including fostering high quality teacher-student relationships and providing fun, in-class activities and team events further supported the promotion of a responsive adolescent-centered community. However, some team teachers lacked a complete understanding of students' needs for care and fun, which served as a barrier to promoting a responsive community for students.

Meeting Students' Needs for Care and Fun: Teacher Characteristics

Team teachers were purposefully selected by the school administrators to be members of one of four eighth-grade teams at Ford. During an interview with Mrs. Cramer, the principal at Ford, she explained the characteristics she sought in her eighth-grade teachers, "I have to have the right teacher that can have the right relationship, non-sarcastic, caring yet nurturing, but can also give eighth-grade students their space." Throughout student interviews, all students reported that responsive teachers knew them and their friends well; were respectful, funny, athletic, outgoing, and relatable; handled disruptive students; and made school fun. Fun, continuously mentioned by every student in the study, was highlighted as an important characteristic that students looked for in their team teachers. For students, perceiving team teachers as fun was associated with teacher characteristics such as being relatable and caring, as noted in Katelyn's quote above.

During the teacher focus group, team teachers shared instances when they took on the characteristics of caring warm demanders by believing it was their responsibility to help students achieve academic excellence, communicating high expectations, and providing multiple supports to help students be successful. Ms. Hamilton reflected on the notion of being a warm demander:

For me, it goes with the high expectations thing. Zero is not an option in my class. I tell them that you have to be in a coma to get a zero in my class. I give them a 100 at the beginning of the semester and it's their job to keep it. I don't accept zero's. You have to do the work.

When asked how they handle less than quality student work, Ms. Mirabelle stated:

With all tests, I grade it. I offer it to every student that if you want to make the corrections to this you can get back half the points. That will definitely bring your grades up. If you

made a 70 or lower, it's not an option, you have to do it. I sometimes have a student that gets a 90 and they want to do it, and I say that they can do it. They just need to write it on a separate piece of paper, copy the problems and redo it. Usually they do earn back points like that, so it helps them bring up their grade. With homework assignments that I collect and grade, if I don't think it's quality work, I don't grade it. I put a note on it that they have to redo it.

Ms. Hamilton echoed this sense of high expectations for student work, "I will give it back to them to improve it. They have an option to continue to make changes and upgrade their grade."

All students in this study wanted their teachers to display the characteristics of a responsive, warm demanding teacher. For example, Jimmy stated in an individual interview, "I like the 'in between' one [teacher] that enforces the rules but likes to joke around, like Ms. Hamilton." The notion of teachers having high expectations and supporting student success is echoed in Katelyn's statement, "They [team teachers] help you prepare for high school and do a lot to make you stay on track. If you need help with work, or understanding high school, they help you." However, not all teachers consistently displayed these characteristics. For example, with regard to adhering to high expectations, Ms. O'Connell shared how she aimed to prepare students for the "real world" where she believed they would not receive additional assistance or second chances:

I hold very high expectations in my classroom. If they are not prepared, I kick them out. They go to Ms. Mirabelle's room. If you don't have a pencil and paper, I don't want you in my class and they are immediately kicked out to another room and their job is to make up the work and if they don't make it up it's a zero ... to me it's important to teach them because in the workforce they are not going to get hand outs.

Meeting Students' Needs for Care and Fun: Teacher Practices

Team teachers' developmentally responsive characteristics resulted in a series of practices that may help to promote a caring and fun adolescent-centered community. Two key teacher practices included fostering caring teacher-student relationships and providing fun, engaging in-class activities that helped to encourage a sense of fun in learning (Bosworth, 1995; Juvonen, 2007; Larson & Gatto, 2004; Schmakel, 2008). Additionally, responsive team teachers recognized student success, helping to communicate care for their students. However, not all team teachers continuously engaged in these responsive practices.

Several key components helped to define high quality team teacher-student relationships, including the desire for teachers to engage in one-on-one conversations and to demonstrate respect toward students. Engaging students in conversations allowed teachers to connect with, relate to, and demonstrate care. Mrs. Copeland reported:

I think that just by the smallest contact too, they [eighth-grade students] want to build relationships with teachers. Even the smallest comment opens the door. You can be like "Hey, I love your shoes" and they will be like, "Yeah, my mom bought them for me and then we went to the mall." And it's like a deluge and it's just the little comment that opens them up. They are like "Oh my gosh she cares," and then they open up and talk.

In the teacher focus group interview, Ms. Mirabelle agreed with Mrs. Copeland and elaborated on the importance of teachers engaging students in conversation as a way to connect with and get to know them:

They [students] like talking. So when you ask them a question, they open up and then they want to know something about you. I've found that the eighth graders like to ask me questions, so if I am willing to speak about myself or answer questions, then they are like "Well, I want to ask her something."

Responsive teachers, like Ms. Hamilton, recognized the importance of forging connections by dedicating in-class time to relationship building:

I ask them about their day, “Guys, it’s so great to see you back from spring break. So for today’s activity I want you to write about your spring break and then we are going to share it” because they want to talk about it. So let’s talk about it. And I think that by showing an interest in the activities that they do, “Hey does anybody have fun plans for the weekend? What are you going to do?” It shows them that you want to know about their lives, what they do for fun, and their spare time. So just by engaging them.

All students perceived many of their team teachers as fostering teacher-student relationships where they felt cared for. When asked if she felt teachers knew her, Lauren stated she believed her team teachers knew her:

I can see them [team teachers] walking down the hall and they would know me. I mean, they only have two eighth grade classes. I think they know me because I got the awards too. I think they recognized the things that I have done, so they know me.

Katelyn also discussed how a team teacher was able to forge a personal connection with her and engage her in conversation, “She talks to me a lot. Ms. Hamilton had my two best friends last year. So she knows about me. She knows that I like sports and I’m athletic.” Further, all students perceived teachers who they had a close relationship with as fun, engaging, and relatable. As Lauren elaborated:

I definitely like Mrs. Copeland a lot. She’s very fun. She is very understanding and she always likes to do experiments with us and she knows that we will enjoy them. Ms. O’Connell, the social studies teacher is actually from Texas too. So a lot of the restaurants that we went to we can talk about and she knows where everything is.

For students, care and respect were interconnected and considered an essential element in the team teacher-student relationship. Respect was viewed as reciprocal in nature; as teachers gave students respect, students treated teachers with respect. When asked to clarify how teachers demonstrate respect, Katelyn responded, “If I treat them with respect, they give me respect.” Students recognized their team teachers respected them because they offered to help. As Troy described, “I know they respect me because if they didn’t respect you, they wouldn’t want to help you at all.”

In addition to high quality team teacher-student relationships, fun, in-class activities emerged as a responsive teacher practice. Teachers attested to the importance they placed on fostering fun in learning. As Ms. O’Connell shared, “I like to mix things up. I think, what haven’t I done in a while, what would be fun to do? What would be exciting for them?” All four students in the current study stated that hands-on learning is their preferred way to learn. When asked why, all students replied because it was *fun*. Students recognized their team teachers’ attempts to make learning fun. When asked to describe his eighth-grade team, Troy stated, “Fun, we do fun stuff. Good teachers. If you are an eighth grader, it’s *always* the funnest.” Further, Katelyn voiced she wanted team teachers to be “fun” by engaging students in hands-on activities, “Bunch of hands on activities, no homework, just really fun and not boring.... Getting involved in stuff and not just sitting down and doing work. Hands-on activities.” Students reported fun, educational hands-on activities as one of their favorite ways to learn. In response to a question about what a day of fun learning would entail, students replied:

Lauren: A lot of activities, videos, what we did today with building dinosaurs.

Katelyn: Hands on stuff.

Troy: What we did today was fun. In history sometimes we play earth ball.

Katelyn: Name the country with the last letter in the country, then you throw the ball and

the next person has to name a country with that letter.

Troy: We also play philosophical chairs. That is fun.

Students reported that fun, yet educational, hands-on activities helped to engage them in learning. This is reflected in Lauren's description of making ice cream and fluffernutters in her science class:

I like [learning] to be hands on. I like the experiments that we did in science; they are a lot of fun. We made ice cream and we also put foil in this solution. When you are a scientist you have to write down an experiment. So we made fluffernutters, so in order to have some, you had to write down how to make it, so you had to be specific.

Troy attested to the importance of class activities being both fun and educational, "All the activities that she [team teacher] does is fun, but at the same time you are still learning."

Caring, responsive team teachers also recognized student success. By recognizing students' success, responsive team teachers were able to clearly communicate to students how much they cared about them and applauded their efforts and achievements. For example, Mrs. Copeland elaborated on how she regularly sent postcards to parents of students who did something positive in her class:

It's just random positive recognition ... when kids do something good in class, or their grades are super great, or they have a good test, I just drop it [postcard] in the mail to mom and send them home. The kids like them. I just sent a whole bunch of them out."

Mrs. Copeland perceived this practice as a way to communicate both care for her students and that hard work is recognized and applauded. Both Lauren and Katelyn, who received postcards, perceived such recognition as their teacher communicating care.

Ms. O'Connell also recognized student success by sending e-mails to parents when students did something positive. After an

assignment that required students to write their legacy, Ms. O'Connell sent Katelyn's mother an e-mail that stated:

Katelyn has blossomed into quite a mature, joyful student over the last few months. It's been neat, as her teacher, to watch her grow into even a more beautiful young lady. She's trying hard while keeping a great attitude. I'm proud of Katelyn and her accomplishments.

Ms O'Connell attached the e-mail to Katelyn's graded legacy assignment with the following note:

I am really, really proud of you girl! Thank you for sharing your legacy with me. You are turning into a great leader that people look up to. You work hard, you're trustworthy, you're dependable ... the list could go on! Keep up the good work and awesome attitude. You really are setting an example that others see.

However, not all team teachers continuously engaged in what students considered fun and caring responsive practices. In individual interviews, students spoke of their least favorite classes as ones where team teachers primarily used textbooks, workbooks, and overhead notes as teaching strategies. When students were asked their least favorite way to learn, Lauren attested, "Just being given the work and the textbook. Every day you write down the notes off the overhead and you start working. It's my least favorite subject." Students' least favorite class was described as lacking fun by three of the four students, as reflected in the following statement:

Katelyn: The teacher didn't do anything to make the class fun. We just worked from the workbook all day.

Researcher: And fun would be what?

Katelyn: Hands-on and stuff like that.

Students described experiences of receiving consequences from team teachers without an explanation or full understanding as to why

they were receiving them, which was perceived as another non-responsive practice:

Troy: I get kicked out a lot.

Researcher: Why do you get kicked out?

Troy: Sometimes I didn't do anything and get kicked out and I don't know why.

Teacher practices may have a lasting impact on students' academic and social adjustment. For example, Jimmy stated that last year in seventh grade, "I got close to failing." When asked to elaborate he stated:

Jimmy: Only [failing] my math class, because of the way that she taught. She wouldn't explain it; she would make us just copy and notes and then get right to it. I didn't really like doing the homework. I did sometimes, sometimes I couldn't understand it. This year we have gotten more acquainted. The thing that I didn't like was that she told me that I wouldn't amount to anything or go to college.

Researcher: Why did she say that?

Jimmy: Because I was not doing well in the class.

Researcher: How did that make you feel?

Jimmy: It made me feel bad and I got sent out of her class a lot because last year I didn't really have a lot of equipment. I never had pencils and supplies so she would always send me out before the day's lesson.

This experience of almost failing math had repercussions for Jimmy's friendships. As Jimmy stated:

Most of my friends I met in sixth grade. One of my best friends since then is Brad. He goes to school here and is in eighth grade. He's not on my team this year, but was for my sixth and seventh grade year. He's not this year because I didn't really like last year. I got close to failing [in math], so instead of putting me with him in algebra 1 honors, they just put me in regular algebra with Ms. Mirabelle.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to gain a detailed understanding of how one interdisciplinary team nurtured an adolescent-centered community that was responsive to eighth-grade students' basic and developmental needs, including their need for care and fun. We conceptualized an adolescent-centered community as one that fosters an environment responsive to students' needs, notably the need to receive care and to experience school as fun. Two major conclusions materialized from this study. First, interdisciplinary teaming and its complimentary structures (i.e., flexible scheduling, homeroom, and common planning time) helped set the foundation for a caring and fun adolescent-centered community. Team teachers who embodied developmentally responsive characteristics capitalized on these structures and utilized responsive practices to foster an adolescent-centered community that met students' needs for care and fun. Second, students' need for both care and fun were essential to the promotion of a responsive adolescent-centered community within their interdisciplinary team. Team teachers and students often viewed care and fun as interconnected needs within the teacher-student relationship. Thus, findings from this study underscore the importance for educators to recognize students' basic and developmental needs and to understand how school organizational structures and teacher-student relationships may help to support these needs. Middle level educators can help foster an adolescent-centered community by being responsive to students' needs, including students' basic psychological need for relatedness, and unique to the current study, the need for care and fun.

Although such conclusions are informative and provide valuable insight, this study is not without its limitations. Due to its epistemological focus and case study methodology, the study is based on the voices of nine participants from one school site. Only four students were selected to participate due to the current investigation being part of a larger,

year-long qualitative investigation where each student was shadowed throughout his/her day at the middle school and high school level. More students may have provided additional perspectives. It is also important to note that in the constructivist paradigm, the researcher is an intimate and essential part of the research process and that the final product is a coconstruction of both researcher and participant understandings. Further, data were collected during a relatively brief period of time, providing a snapshot of how an adolescent-centered community was fostered. Lastly, voices from one eighth-grade team were included, limiting our understanding of whether this adolescent-centered community manifested throughout the entire school. Despite these limitations, this study provided a rich understanding of how one interdisciplinary team nurtured an adolescent-centered community that was responsive to eighth-grade students' needs for care and fun, in addition to other basic and developmental needs.

Our first conclusion is that interdisciplinary teaming and its related structures provided the foundation for an adolescent-centered community that met students' needs. According to NMSA (2010), "The team is the foundation for a strong learning community characterized by a sense of family. Students and teachers on the team become well acquainted, feel safe, respected, and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks" (p. 31). Caskey (2011) called for research that supports current middle level structures and practices. While there are noted byproducts of teaming, this study reminds us of the importance of interdisciplinary teaming as it helps to meet students' basic and developmental needs. Developmentally responsive team teachers capitalized on interdisciplinary teaming and its complimentary structures and utilized responsive practices in order to foster an adolescent-centered community that met students' needs for care and fun, in addition to their basic need for relatedness. Findings from this study align with prior research that both middle school

structures (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006; NSMA, 2010) and developmentally responsive teachers who employ responsive practices (Battistich et al., 1997; Eccles, 2004; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; NMSA, 2010) are essential components to creating an adolescent-centered community. Thus, findings highlight that responsive middle school structures and teachers are critical to fostering a true adolescent-centered community invested in student learning and well being (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2010). Also aligned with extant research, findings indicate instances of unresponsive teacher characteristics and practices may serve as a barrier to the promotion of a community within the school or classroom that meets students' needs (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2000).

Our second conclusion is that meeting students' need for both care and fun was essential to the promotion of an adolescent-centered community. Teachers with a hands-on, student-centered approach to teaching fostered an adolescent-centered community where learning was perceived as educational and fun. Students and teachers often perceived care and fun as interconnected needs that were met within an adolescent-centered community where teachers are fun when they are caring and caring when they are fun. Consistent with research, results from the current study suggest teacher-student relationships help determine the degree students feel cared for and part of their school community (Noddings, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Schussler & Collins, 2006). According to Noddings (2005) and affirmed in this study, students must be receivers of care in order for the caring relationship to be complete. Further, findings from this investigation underscore students' desire to experience fun in school and learning (Larson & Gatto, 2004; Schmakel, 2008), as both students and teachers recognized students' need to experience school and learning as fun. This aligns with research

that suggests “school as fun” includes exciting learning activities, where teachers and students work together to make learning meaningful and meet students’ needs (Glasser, 1996; Larson & Gatto, 2004; Schmackel, 2008).

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for researchers and educators to be more responsive to students’ needs for care *and* fun by promoting an adolescent-centered community at the middle level. Results from the current study indicate meeting students’ needs for care and fun is an essential component of an adolescent-centered community at the middle level and contributes to our understanding of responsive school environments for young adolescents. Responsive organizational structures, in tandem with developmentally responsive teacher characteristics and practices, helped to cultivate an adolescent-centered community within the interdisciplinary team investigated in this study. There is a need to continue to listen to student voices in order to be responsive to their needs at the middle level and for additional research to further examine successful innovations (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, building relationships with students) and how they may help meet young adolescents’ multiple needs (Caskey, 2011). Future research is necessary in order to determine whether such adolescent-centered communities where students’ needs for care and fun are met generalize to an entire school or to multiple schools, and whether such communities are sustainable over time and impact students’ adjustment.

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