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# Family, School, and Forms of Capital

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Family, School, and Forms of Capital

by

Sonja Taylor

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Sociology

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## Abstract

This dissertation contains three separate but related papers, each with a different focus. In the three papers, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how different forms of cultural and social capital appeared in the relationship between families and schools. The first paper covers an interview study exploring how teachers in elementary school understood and used email to facilitate partnership with parents, a form of social capital that has the potential to benefit families from all class backgrounds. The second paper investigates the relationship between socioeconomic status, bonding social capital and cultural capital; I tested whether social capital affected teacher perceptions of shared goals (a form of cultural capital). The final paper focuses on how children's sense of belonging affected their ability to exhibit grit, a key characteristic for academic success.

*Paper 1 – Email and facilitation of parent–teacher relationships.* Parent–teacher communication is a fundamental way parents can participate in their children's education. Prior research has shown the importance of parent participation in supporting student success. Researchers have specifically noted the importance of relationship building between parents and teachers. Communication between parents and teachers acts as a form of social capital, helping parents gain access to the cultural capital of shared goals. At the same time, technology has enhanced communication methods. Using interviews with eight Title I teachers and eight non-Title I teachers, I investigated the role of email in helping teachers facilitate partnership with parents. By comparing responses from teachers who worked with parents from different class backgrounds, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of some of the benefits and drawbacks of email communication, as

well as assess barriers that prevented some parents from using this form of communication. I found that digital communication, including email, could act as a form of social capital, helping parents gain access to the cultural capital of achieving goals shared between parents and teachers. My findings indicate that although email could be a useful tool, significant barriers persisted for parents from lower-SES backgrounds regarding accessing meaningful conversations with teachers. Helping lower-SES parents remove barriers by providing reliable access, training, translation services, and support for teachers could help reduce class-based inequities in schools, thereby engaging a broader range of parents in partnership with teachers.

*Paper 2 – Mothers’ social capital and teachers’ perceptions of shared goals.*

Previous researchers have examined the role of social capital in helping parents further the interests of their children in school. Although much of the research has focused on parent networks, some researchers have begun to examine the role of social capital within one important dyad – the parent-teacher relationship. Most researchers studying the social capital in parent–teacher relationships have suggested that middle- and upper-income parents have access to more and broader forms of social capital. Thus, these parents are more likely to have access to the social capital found in parent–teacher relationships and, therefore, to the cultural capital found in shared goals. In this study, I used a subsample from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ( $N = 1,340$ ) and logistic regression to test if higher-SES mothers were more likely to be viewed by teachers as sharing goals with the school. Additionally, I constructed an index for measuring bonding social capital and tested whether having higher levels of social capital increased the likelihood that

teachers perceived mothers as sharing goals with the school. Finally, I examined whether social capital mediated the relationship between SES and teacher perception that mothers in the sample shared goals with the school. I found that teachers were more likely to perceive higher-SES mothers as sharing school goals. Further, I found a positive relationship between higher levels of bonding social capital and teacher perception that mothers shared goals with the school. However, social capital did not act as a mediator between mothers' SES and shared goals; therefore, possession of bonding social capital had a unique positive relationship with the likelihood that teachers perceived mothers as sharing goals with the school. My findings highlight the need for continued research on the role of bonding social capital to show how it might contribute to building or accessing other forms of capital.

*Paper 3 – Belonging and teacher perception of student grit.* Grit, in the form of persistence, has emerged as an important noncognitive trait that contributes to academic success. Many studies have shown that an SES gap exists in student achievement and that more grit is required for lower-SES children to succeed in school. Although teacher perception of grit in relation to SES is less clear in existing literature, research has shown that teacher perception is important for student achievement. In addition, a growing body of research has shown a relationship between grit and students' sense of belonging. In this study, I conceptualized belonging as a form of social capital. I measured belonging by creating an index from the children's responses to questions about their time at school and how often they felt close to someone, happy, safe, and part of their schools. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, I tested whether teachers were

more likely to perceive grit in higher-SES children relative to lower-SES children. Additionally, I used logistic regression to test if children's sense of belonging mediated the relationship between SES and teacher perception of grit. To test for mediation of children's sense of belonging related to teacher perception and SES, I calculated predicted probabilities across two models, one including the index of child sense of belonging. I found a positive relationship between higher-SES and teacher perception of children's grit and between children's sense of belonging and teachers' perceptions of children's grit. Calculation of predicted probabilities across models did not reveal evidence of mediation; therefore, children's sense of belonging was shown to have a unique and positive relationship with teacher perception of grit. Past research has shown that lower-SES children need to exhibit more grit to achieve academic success, but my research shows higher-SES children are seen by teachers as exhibiting more grit. My findings highlight the need for continued research focused on the relationship between teacher perceptions of grit and SES. Further, because children's sense of belonging showed a unique and positive relationship with teachers' perceptions of grit, my findings demonstrate that belonging can be used as a form of social capital in relation to student success.

## **Dedication**

For my grandmother, Ellora Margaret Van Lydegraf



## Acknowledgments

*“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness  
That most frightens us.*

*We ask ourselves  
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you not to be?” – Marianne Williamson*

Who am I not to be? I have held onto these words for many years. Originally they came to me on a bookmark, falsely attributed to Nelson Mandela. The fact that one of my favorite inspirational quotes was not cited correctly is vastly amusing to me, given the importance of correct citations in my life, and for me this mistake gives the quote even more power. As a female, first generation college student – who grew up poor with a single mom – I have always been slightly astonished by any of my accomplishments. In other words, I am shocked as (insert expletive) that I am actually where I am in life – and consequently I often find myself overwhelmed with gratitude and humility. My grandmother would surely say that this is “better than the alternative.”

With her words, Williamson asks me to question the assumptions and stereotypes contained in my identity and she challenges me to embody the best of who I am. The mistaken citation reminds me of the importance of seeking evidence, but it also demonstrates the imperfections and failures that happen in life – despite our best intentions. Mistakes are the footprints of learning and my path to this degree has been long. Frustration and failure have become familiar companions and they rest now (just

briefly) in this moment of triumph. I cannot set them aside for long, because they are intimately connected with learning and learning is essential.

I want to thank my Committee Chair, Dr. Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer, for her endless patience, support, guidance and critical feedback. Emily has been an incredible mentor for me, demonstrating not only the skills required for strong research integrity, but also showing me by example how to provide meticulous, helpful, and parsimonious feedback. My students have no idea how much they benefit from all she has taught me. I am grateful to the other members of my committee – Lindsey Wilkinson, Dara Shifrer and Candyce Reynolds – for their suggestions and support. I was fortunate to have a committee full of brilliant scholars and while this sometimes proved challenging, I cannot thank them enough for the ways they pushed me and for how much I grew from their advice and expertise. I am certain that I challenged them a great deal as well – I have had much on my plate the last 4 years.

My dissertation defense came at a particularly difficult time, directly after the passing of my grandmother. I was able to tell her that my defense was about to be scheduled so she knew that it was happening, but she was unable to see me through to the end. It is my deepest honor that, despite the chaos of my life, I was able to be there for her to the very end. I hope that before she transitioned, I was able to demonstrate to her how much her love and support have meant to me. She was not just my grandmother, she was my roommate, my best friend and my soul mate – I could not be who I am today without her. I am so very grateful for my family and friends who helped me keep moving

toward my goals, even when it seemed impossible – particularly the members of my household. Thank you Sean, Donovan, Liam, Joey... and the kittens.

I have to acknowledge the amazing people I work with, who have supported me in my growth as an educator and who have cheered me on during this educational journey – Krys Roth, Nicolle Dupont, Kari Kono, Jaime Wood, Mike Lupro, Maurice Hamington, Sarah Dougher, Rakeem Washington, Pete Leineweber, Evan Selby, Kate Molony, Ian Twiss, the rest of the Senior Inquiry faculty at Westview, Liberty, Roosevelt, Jefferson, Madison and Reynolds who work with me every day to help our students understand that they belong in the essential conversations of our society. They ARE the essential conversation of our society.

Most importantly for this work, I acknowledge and thank the teachers who participated in the qualitative portion of my dissertation. As a result of my conversations with these teachers, I am even more grateful for the good work they do on a daily basis to help build the foundation for our future. Finally, I am grateful beyond words for the students I have the privilege of serving. The youth of our world have so many challenges, both now and in the future. I believe in their capacity for empathy, action, growth and change and I hope that I can serve them in ways that are constructive and meaningful. I try every day to live by the unattributed quote, “I cannot do all the good the world needs, but the world needs all the good I can do.”

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The American Dream is founded on the idea of meritocracy—the premise that hard work, individual skills, and ability can create social mobility (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Despite the fact that most Americans would endorse the idea of meritocracy as a foundational concept, their “lived experiences often tell them that factors other than individual merit play a role in getting ahead” (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 1). Although individual attitudes and work habits have some bearing on getting ahead in America, hard work alone is not enough to make a difference (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Instead, “getting ahead” depends on a combination of hard work and nonmerit factors that work together to facilitate social mobility (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Nonmerit factors might include culturally shaped skills, habits, and styles, as well as survival strategies (Farkas, 1996).

Merit and nonmerit factors interact in U.S. educational settings. On the one hand, when it comes to the American Dream, education is understood to be the “engine of meritocracy” (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 101). The American Dream hinges on beliefs in individual power, capacity, and agency—education is seen as the “great equalizer,” the place where hard work can help students improve their life chances (Johnson, 2006, p. 31). However, the systemically and qualitatively different experiences and performances of American students show that educators have not delivered on the underlying promise of public education (Farkas, 1996; Johnson, 2006). For example, some children who have experienced marginalization because of race and class have developed hostility toward public schools or lost trust that teachers care (Farkas, 1996).

Even though the American Dream does not guarantee that everyone will be successful in America, it does suggest that people will have equal opportunity to excel, without any unfair advantages or barriers (Johnson, 2006). People come from different backgrounds; therefore, a system is needed to provide balance and legitimacy to support the idea of the American Dream. Education is the vehicle expected to deliver the promise of equity, providing opportunities that reduce inequalities (Johnson, 2006). However, when asked to reflect on their experiences, most people could not claim that schools in America were actually providing an experience that lived up to this promise (Johnson, 2006). Instead, a complex system reinforces and reproduces socioeconomic inequities (Farkas, 1996; Johnson, 2006; McNamee & Miller, 2009).

### **Forms of Capital: Social and Cultural Capital in Context**

Educators have attempted to measure the educational outcomes of different populations by developing theories to describe forms of capital that reproduce inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Farkas, 1996; Lareau, 2011). Classical sociological theorists have grounded the concept of forms of capital in theory developed by Karl Marx (Lin, 2017). Lin provided a useful diagram that includes major authors for each form of capital, as well as brief explanations of function, each scholar's definitions of capital, and the level of analysis used in each body of research. Particularly useful to my research are the parts of the table that deal with cultural and social capital. Table 1 shows this adapted portion of Lin's categorization of theory for help in framing my definition of terms.

Table 1

*Theories of Cultural and Social Capital*

	Cultural Capital	Social Capital	
Theorist	Bourdieu	Lin, Burt, Marsden, Flap, Coleman	Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam
Explanation	Reproduction of dominant symbols and meanings (values)	Access to and use of resources embedded in social networks	Solidarity and reproduction of group
Capital	Internalization or misrecognition of dominant values	Investment in social networks	investment in mutual recognition & acknowledgement
Level of Analysis	Individual/class	Individual	Group/Individual

*Note.* Theories of Cultural and Social Capital Adapted from Building a network theory of social capital. In N. Lin, K. Cook, & R. S. Burt (Eds.), *Social capital: Theory and research* (pp. 3–28). New York, NY: Routledge.

In the three papers in this dissertation, I defined forms of capital relevant to the each study and connected the items I examined to the form of capital they represented. My research primarily focused on forms of cultural and social capital, paying particular attention to how social capital could help people activate or acquire cultural capital within the context of the home–school relationship.

### **Three Papers: Setting the Stage**

In three papers, presented as three separate studies in this dissertation, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how different forms of cultural and social capital



appeared in the relationship between families and schools. My first paper was a qualitative exploration of how teachers in elementary school understood and used email to facilitate partnership with parents. The second paper tests the relationship between socio-economic status, social capital and shared goals (a form of cultural capital). The third paper showed how children's sense of belonging could affect teachers' perceptions that the children were exhibiting grit, a key characteristic for academic success.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Cultural capital** – Cultural capital is embodied in people as a function of knowledge, skills, and language. These elements allow them to navigate the dominant society successfully (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In my quantitative study on mothers and social capital, I conceptualized teachers' perceptions of shared goals as a form of cultural capital, because sharing goals implies common language and expectations regarding skills and procedures.

**Digital communication** – Previous researchers have discussed both technology and email when studying how parents and teachers have used digital communication (Murray, 2015; Olmstead 2013). In the first paper, I used the term *digital communication* when referring to email and other forms of technology that teachers use to communicate with parents. In the responses, teachers might have referred to *email* or *apps*. Digital communication was a more useful term because it encompasses the multiple ways parents and teachers can communicate through the Internet.

**Digital Divide** – The Digital Divide has been framed as a division between those who have access to technology and those who do not (Baym, 2015). An example of this

might be two schools, one where there are computer labs and one where no computer labs are present. However, as access to technology has increased, researchers have begun to refer to a second level digital divide that is focused on whether or not there are skills to use available technology (Mesch, 2012). For example, while all parents with kids in a particular school might have smartphones that allow them to access the internet, some parents may be more skilled at how to use email to communicate with their children's teacher compared with a parent who feels intimidated by the process and might therefore miss out on opportunities to connect.

**Grit** – Grit has been defined as a combination of persistence and passion for long term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). Authors have also defined grit as consisting of both persistence and continued interest (Bowman et al., 2015; Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Weisskirch, 2018). While both persistence and passion are components of grit, passion is harder to capture quantitatively. However, some research has shown that persistence and continued interest are correlated with each other when it comes to teacher perception of student learning (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). With this in mind I used a measure of teacher perception of persistence as a proxy for the concept of grit. In any case, persistence is essential to academic success (Christensen & Knezek, 2014).

**School Type** – In my first study school type was originally meant to be distinguished by Title I and non-Title I schools. However, it became clear during my research that even within these designations there were broad variations in school culture and resources that impacted the perceptions and experiences of the teachers I

interviewed. Thus, school type should be seen as a broad term that allows for variation between the perceptions of teachers who work in different schools.

**Social capital** – Social capital is a resource that derives from relationship to others and, as noted in Table 1, is a function of an individual being embedded in a particular social network or as a consequence of mutual recognition and acknowledgment (Lin, 2017). For example, an individual might learn of a job opportunity through a friend who is part of their social network or feel empowered to seize an opportunity as a result of being part of a community where they feel mutual recognition and acknowledgement. My three studies emphasized mechanisms for accessing social capital. Specifically, I used three elements—bridging social capital, bonding social capital, and belonging as a form of youth social capital.

**Bridging social capital** – Bridging social capital is found in extended networks with relatively weak ties (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital can be used as a resource to benefit people when they learn about new opportunities and processes that they would not otherwise know about and could use to their advantage (Lancee & Bram 2016). Bridging social capital can be used to “get ahead” (Johnson, Honnold, & Threlfall, 2011; Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital might also help individuals acquire cultural capital if the knowledge and skills gained from weak ties allow them to gain more alignment with dominant cultural norms (Freeman, 2010). For example, through building a relationship with their child’s teacher, a parent might learn more about the norms and expectations of the institution where their child learns, allowing that parent a chance to better support the academic success of their child.

**Bonding social capital** – Bonding social capital is found within strong ties and close kin networks (Johnson et al., 2011; Putnam, 2006). This form of social capital is a resource for getting by and maintaining well-being. For example, a friend or family member might provide free childcare. One downside to bonding social capital is that it can create obligations in addition to resources—for example, when people draw on the resources, an expectation of future reciprocity could result, and fulfilling those obligations might prove challenging (Coleman, 1988).

**Belonging as youth social capital** – In my third paper, I conceptualized belonging as a form of social capital because it fulfilled Lin's (2017) social capital criteria of mutual recognition and acknowledgment. I then tie belonging to Bassani's (2007) definition of Youth Social Capital because a child's sense of belonging is a social resource that I argue, in my final paper, can be transformed into social capital that can influence teacher perception.

**Socioeconomic Status (SES)** – SES is a widely used term in sociological research and while there is variation in how it is measured, most agree that it is some combination of income, education and occupation (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). SES is important because research has shown a relationship between SES and academic achievement (Sirin, 2005). In my quantitative studies I use measures of maternal education and income to determine SES.

**Title I and non-Title I Schools** – Title I schools receive governmental financial assistance because they serve higher numbers of low-income families (US Department of Education (n.d.)). In my first study I am interested in looking at how class differences

might shape teacher perceptions. Therefore, I interviewed teachers from schools that received Title I funding and schools that did not.

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## **Chapter 2: Email Facilitation of Parent–Teacher Relationship**

The first paper presented in this dissertation is an exploration of the role of digital communication in facilitating the growth of social capital in the relationships between parents and teachers. A positive connection between parent participation and children’s educational achievement has been well-documented in the literature (Castro et al., 2015; Coleman, 1988, 1993; Crosby, Rasinski, Padak, & Yildirim, 2015). Some research has shown that digital communication and other forms of technology can facilitate a stronger connection between families and school by enhancing parent–teacher communication (Olmstead, 2013). Strengthening parent–teacher communication is important; studies have shown that parents use the social capital created through parent–teacher communication to activate or access cultural capital (Freeman, 2010; Taylor, 2015). The cultural capital that parents access is in the form of shared goals with teachers (Bastiani, 2018), which signifies a stronger partnership between parents and teachers, leading to better outcomes for students (Lightfoot-Lawrence, 2003). Thus, it is important to understand how teachers perceive the role of digital communication in building the social capital found in relationships between parents and teachers.

Social capital has been defined broadly as resources accessed as a function of relationship to others (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Communication between parents and teachers is an aspect of social capital explored within both family and school literature (Coleman, 1988). Overall findings have shown that higher-SES parents have used their social networks for their children’s benefit through increased participation in groups such as the PTA (Coleman, 1988; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). For



example, Coleman (1988) found parents from higher-SES backgrounds worked together to achieve outcomes that benefited their children; in contrast, lower-SES parents lacked connections with other parents that might have given them solidarity and enhanced power within the school system. Other research has shown that higher-SES parents were more likely than were lower-SES parents to use their connectedness with peers to further the interests of their children at school, partly because connections for lower-SES parents occurred along kinship lines (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2002). In other words, social network patterns of higher-SES parents were more effective in advancing parents' academic goals for students; however, few studies exist on how lower-SES parents have used or built social capital with teachers.

In order to have a more nuanced understanding of how social capital works, other scholars have called for more research on how social capital functions within different groups (Bassani, 2007; Lin, 2017). Some researchers have suggested that social capital accessed and activated by lower-SES groups has presented opportunities not used by higher-SES groups (Baym, 2015). For example, this increased opportunity was observed among people from lower-SES backgrounds as they used digital communication (Baym, 2015; Gonzales, 2017). In particular, the proliferation of smartphones has allowed low-income and minority families greater access to the Internet and its opportunities—including access to expanding social capital—by providing an avenue to build and maintain social networks (Gonzales, 2017). Specifically in relation to schools, some researchers have noted the growing importance of digital communication between parents and teachers, a potential source of social capital (Olmstead, 2013).

Scholars have called for more research along multiple avenues involving digital communication in relation to both social capital generally (Coffé & Geys, 2007; Poortinga, 2006) and parent involvement in school specifically (Posey-Maddox, 2012). In addition, scholars have recommended examining the effects of smartphone proliferation, particularly on low-income and marginalized groups (Olmstead, 2013; Pearce & Rice, 2013). Although limited research exists on teachers' use of digital communication with parents, the evolving nature of digital forms of communication and the mixed results from previous research have created an ongoing gap in the literature centering on the role of technology in the home–school connection (Baym, 2015; Gonzales, 2017; Olmstead, 2013). Because the role of digital communication in the context of partnership between parents and teachers is not well understood, more research is needed to investigate how teachers view the role of digital communication in facilitating their partnership with parents.

If teachers perceive digital communication as beneficial for building partnership and shared goals (a form of cultural capital) with parents, then supporting digital forms of communication for all parents would be important for student success. If teachers perceive that smartphones provide increased Internet access and help families from lower-SES backgrounds participate more in their children's schooling through digital communication (a potential source of social capital), then helping parents gain and maintain access to smartphones and service would be important for student success. However, if teachers find digital communication is not useful for building partnership and shared goals, or if they find digital communication is harmful to building partnership,

then schools might want to create policies that limit digital communication. If teachers perceive that digital communication is beneficial, but that lower-SES families have limited access and that smartphones do not help parents from lower-SES backgrounds participate more in their children's schooling, then reliance on digital communication between parents and teachers might exacerbate existing inequities between families from different SES backgrounds.

To explore teachers' perceptions of the role of digital communication, I asked the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the pros and cons of digital communication in facilitating parent-teacher relationships?
  - a. Do teachers' perceptions of the pros and cons of digital communication in facilitating parent-teacher relationships vary across school type?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication between parents and teachers?
  - a. Do teachers' perceptions of the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication between parents and teachers vary across school type?

## **Background and Literature**

### **Parent Participation**

The importance of parent participation in student achievement has been well-documented in existing literature (Coleman, 2018; Crosby et al., 2013; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Parental participation includes communicating from home to school, attending

school functions, volunteering in the classroom, attending parent–teacher conferences, helping children with homework, providing extra educational opportunities at home, and participating in school policy decision making (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). In a study of the reproduction of social class, Lareau (1987) emphasized the importance of the home–school relationship and provided a foundation for the examination of small moments or micro exchanges between parents and teachers (Lareau, 2015). Lareau (1987, 2015) has greatly contributed to the perspective that the most efficacious forms of parent participation are communication, conferences, and interaction with teachers, all of which strengthen the connection between home and school (Bastiani, 2018; Edwards & Redfern, 2017; Landeros, 2011). In particular, the partnership between teachers and parents is a key factor in students’ academic success (Landeros, 2011), because within that relationship is the opportunity to develop a shared understanding about academic goals that could help parents reinforce students’ learning at home (Taylor, 2015).

Research has shown that some lower-SES parents can use the parent–teacher relationship to access and activate valuable forms of cultural capital, in the form of shared goals between parents and teachers (Freeman, 2010; Taylor, 2015). Thus, partnership between parents and teachers is built through communication; therefore, applying tools that increase opportunities for communication could be helpful in facilitating parent–teacher relationships and the shared goals of partnership—digital communication is one such tool (Olmstead, 2013).

## **The Importance of Digital Communication**

Although extensive literature exists related to parent–teacher communication, fewer studies have been conducted on the intricacies and perceptions of the efficacy of digital communication for parents and teachers (Thompson, 2008). In the studies that do exist, researchers have found that the main focus of digital communication between parents and teachers involves behavior and grades (Domina, 2005; Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; Natale & Lubniewski, 2018; Thompson, 2008). Additional research has indicated that digital communication could help parents engage with teachers more often and at more length (Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Olmstead, 2013). Because digital communication frees people from time constraints, connections can be maintained in a way that fits any schedule. However, time constraints are not the only reason working-class and low-income parents communicate less frequently with teachers, compared to their middle- and high-income counterparts. Schedule barriers—what Williams and Sánchez (2013) termed “time poverty” (p. 55)—have been documented as significant obstacles to parents trying to communicate with their children’s teachers (Finders & Lewis 1994; Graham-Clay, 2005).

Because time can be a barrier for parent–teacher interaction, fluency with digital communication might be critical in helping parents mitigate a barrier to fruitful dialogue, thereby helping children achieve the best possible academic outcomes. However, if some parents do not have access to digital communication, schools that rely heavily on digital communication could create barriers for parents who do not have access (Baym, 2015). This inequality of access to digital communication is part of a larger discussion focused

on a digital divide between the “haves” and “have nots” (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Mesch, 2012).

### **Digital Divide**

The term *digital divide* is used to describe the technology gap between the so-called haves and have nots (Dimaggio et al., 2001; Mesch, 2012). Over time, researchers have differentiated two distinct levels of digital divide, and some have pointed to the need to understand the digital divide in more nuanced ways (Mesch, 2012; Tsetsi & Rains, 2017). *Level 1 digital divide* refers to physical access to different forms of technology; in contrast, *level 2 digital divide* refers to a gap in proficiency and types of use (Mesch, 2012; Tsetsi & Rains, 2017). Assessing types of use is important because some forms of technology appear to be more beneficial for expanding opportunities, while other types of use seem to reinforce barriers or block individuals from accessing the potential opportunities that technology provides (Warshauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004). Other researchers have argued that conceptualizing the digital divide as binary is problematic and limits understanding of its actual function (Warshauer et al., 2004).

Recent researchers have suggested that the proliferation of smartphones and the less expensive access they provide to the Internet has shifted the digital divide in some instances (Gonzales, 2017; Pearce & Rice, 2013). In other words, poor people have more access to the Internet now because of smartphones. Additionally, some researchers have found that individuals from low-income and marginalized groups use digital platforms of communication in ways that individuals from higher class backgrounds do not (Gonzales, 2017). Specifically, low-income and marginalized groups have benefited from social

aspects of digital communication; in some cases, they have been able to leverage their proficiency with social use to build social capital by expanding their quantity of weak ties through digital connection (Gonzales, 2017; Pearce & Rice, 2013). However, in many cases, existing inequities are exacerbated by both the Internet generally and dependence on smartphones for Internet access specifically (Warshauer et al., 2004). Specifically within schools, inequities may be exacerbated not only by unequal access but also by how technology is implemented (Warshauer et al., 2004). In addition, although access to the Internet and forms of digital communication has increased for marginalized groups because of the smartphone, issues persist with gaining reliable and affordable connection to service providers (Gonzales et al., 2018).

In sum, when Internet access reached the public, scholars had mixed reactions to the new form of technology. Some argued that the Internet would create opportunities to alleviate inequality (Gonzales, 2017; Pearce & Rice, 2013); others argued that the new technology would reinforce existing inequality based on sociodemographic differences (Warshauer et al., 2004). Researchers studying the effects of the Internet have confirmed both perspectives (Marler, 2018; Tsetsi & Rains, 2017). Others have recommended exploring the different levels of access to technology among individuals from different groups, the types of technology they use, and how they use technology (Dimaggio et al., 2001; Pearce & Rice, 2013; Warshauer et al., 2004). In addition, researchers have suggested studying specific contexts that might shape whether technology acts as a barrier or a benefit (Dimaggio et al., 2001; Wellman et al., 2001). As mentioned, the proliferation of smartphones has increased access to the Internet for low-income and

marginalized groups (Gonzales, 2017; Pearce & Rice, 2013); however, researchers have found mixed results regarding whether smartphones are acting as barriers or benefits when it comes to building social capital for members of these groups (Gonzales, Calarco, & Lynch, 2018; Tsetsi & Rains, 2017). These mixed results have prompted a need to seek a deeper understanding of how digital communication is used by different groups and in different contexts—and more specifically, how digital communication could provide opportunities for social capital.

### **Digital Communication and Social Capital: Bridging the Digital Divide**

Social capital differs from other forms of capital in the sense that it exists as a function of relationship. Founding scholars of the concept (e.g., Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988) described social capital as a resource that could be accessed as a function of belonging to a particular group, existing within social relationships and providing access to resources that would not otherwise be available without those relationships. Building on these concepts, Putnam (2000) differentiated social capital into specific categories, claiming that the most important categories to consider were bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital consists of strong ties with close networks, and bridging social capital consists of differentiated weak ties that provide access to new sources of information and opportunities (Baym, 2015; Johnson et al., 2011; Lin, 2017; Putnam, 2000).

Strong ties are connections that facilitate bonding social capital, useful for maintaining existing social space; in contrast, weak ties are bridging social capital, helpful for increasing opportunities for social mobility (Baym, 2015; Johnson, Threlfall



& Honnold, 2011). Bonding social capital is exclusive because it derives from the relationships people have with others who are most similar, accessed through “strong ties” to kin networks and close friends (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). On the other hand, bridging social capital is inclusive because it forms within relationships established by “weak ties” with people who are different (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). The social capital found in parent–teacher communication could be considered a type of bridging social capital because it creates a relationship in which parents gain access to new knowledge and skills through a weak-tie relationship; this knowledge could be used to improve their children’s educational opportunities and outcomes.

Regarding technology, recent research has shown that marginalized groups use the Internet for networking more often than do groups that are more advantaged (Gonzales, 2017). The connections marginalized groups make often help them access bridging social capital: “Disadvantaged groups are using the Internet to engage with dissimilar or weak tie relationships that they do not engage with offline, especially compared with advantaged groups who do not display this pattern” (Gonzales, 2017). Further, not only do people from marginalized backgrounds use this opportunity, they are also the primary users of the Internet as a source of bridging social capital (Gonzales, 2017). In sum, digital communication such as email between parents and teachers might offer a unique context in which to explore the efficacy of a digitally facilitated weak-tie connection.

### **Technology and Cultural Capital: Digital Competency**

Some scholars have argued that differences in cultural capital arise due to a difference of cultural values; however, research has shown that lower and higher SES parents share values for their children. Instead of a difference in values, cultural capital can be seen as a “tool kit” of skills, knowledge, and habits that benefit individuals and increase chances of either maintaining socioeconomic status or attaining social mobility (Farkas, 1996; Swidler, 1986). These cultural tool kits help facilitate strategies used by individuals to navigate their daily lives (Swidler, 1986). Familiarity with a particular set of skills could prevent some individuals from adopting a new set of skills, habits, and language that might help them “get ahead”—barriers that might need mentorship in order to remove (Lareau, 2015; Swidler, 1986). Swidler (1986) noted,

To adopt a line of conduct, one needs an image of the kind of world in which one is trying to act, a sense that one can read reasonably accurately (through one’s own feelings and through the responses of others) how one is doing, and a capacity to choose among alternate lines of action. (p. 275)

In other words, the way in which an individual imagines and develops strategies for how to move forward require a context from which they determine common sense courses of action – contexts that can differ based on SES.

In terms of skills, habits, and knowledge in the digital world, traditional assumptions about how people build and transfer cultural capital might not necessarily apply. For example, Rafalow (2018) argued that digital skills in the technological age constitute a type of cultural capital available to individuals from working class and marginalized groups. In this instance, cultural capital is defined as familiarity with institutionalized norms that can either include or exclude individuals from obtaining

opportunities and resources (Rafalow, 2018). In the case of digital skills, these could be considered cultural capital if possessing them helps parents align with parent–teacher communication norms that improve outcomes for students. In other words, if parents possess digital skills that allow them to facilitate partnership with teachers through digital communication, those digital skills are acting as a form of cultural capital.

Another way to view digital skills as a form of cultural capital is to conceptualize digital skills as tools that help parents navigate educational institutions in ways that benefit their children. Lareau (2015) has built on 20 years of research to develop the idea of cultural capital as a series of strategies or a set of tools—in that sense, cultural capital means knowing the “rules of the game” (p. 2). If teachers perceive that lower-SES parents are successfully building relationship with teachers through digital communication using existing digital skill sets, this could show that digital skills are a form of cultural capital that lower-SES parents access through their understanding of these digital rules of the game.

### **Current Study**

This study focused on teachers selected from two types of schools: Title I-funded schools serving low-SES student bodies and schools that did not receive Title I funding, serving more affluent student bodies. The teachers in this study taught elementary students in third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms in the Portland Metropolitan Area. Participants worked in three districts and came from a variety of backgrounds, although most of them had been teaching for eight to 10 years. I interviewed eight teachers from

Title I elementary schools and eight teachers from non-Title I schools in order to compare groups and look for differences in how teachers at the two types of schools used email.

I scheduled individual interviews with the participants to ask them how they understood the role of email and how they used email in facilitating partnership with their students' parents (Appendix A). Additionally, I inquired how they viewed using smartphones to email with parents. From this teacher-centered perspective, I sought to understand how email affected parent–teacher partnership as well as how advances in technology reshaped or enforced parent–teacher partnership generated by access to social capital for these teachers.

The home–school partnership represents a broad opportunity for engagement in bridging social capital; since teachers regularly interact with parents from lower SES backgrounds. Because increased access to bridging social capital for lower SES parents could help increase student success (Freeman 2010), more research is needed to help educators understand the potential mechanisms for families to access this capital. In this study, I aimed to provide insights into how parents and teachers could use digital communication to augment and expand families' opportunity for accessing bridging capital in support of student success.

Two research questions guided the study. In Research Question 1, I sought to determine teachers' perceptions of the pros and cons of digital communication for building parent–teacher relationship. This question was important because effective communication between parents and teachers is essential for student success (Lightfoot-Lawrence 2003). Learning how teachers perceive the pros and cons of digital

communication could help educators create better systems and practices to minimize the cons and maximize the pros.

In Research Question 2, I sought to assess teachers' perceptions of the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication between parents and teachers. This question was relevant especially for lower-SES parents—if teachers perceived smartphones as a benefit, then investing in finding ways for lower-SES parents to access reliable smartphone service could help increase academic success for students from lower-SES families. For both research questions, I sought to compare responses across school type. Comparing teachers' responses across school type was necessary to identify barriers that lower-SES parents might encounter.

## **Methodology**

### **Data and Participants**

I interviewed 16 participants who worked as third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers in the Portland Metropolitan Area. I emailed principals in schools with different neighborhood demographics and asked for permission to contact individual teachers by email to ask them to participate in the study. In addition, I contacted friends and colleagues who worked in education or who had children in elementary school to gain referrals to teachers who might qualify for the study. Initially, I narrowed the scope to fifth-grade teachers in a single school district. However, interest in participating was low. Thus, I modified the study to include teachers from across the Portland Metropolitan Area who taught Grades 3 and 4 in addition to Grade 5. With this expansion, I was able to reach my minimum recruitment goal of 16 teachers: eight from Title I schools and

eight from non-Title I schools. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants interviewed for this study.

Table 2

*Demographics of Participants*

	Title I # of <i>n</i> , <i>n</i> = 8	Non-Title I # of <i>n</i> , <i>n</i> = 8
Age		
30-40	3	2
40-50	5	4
50 +	0	2
Gender		
Female	6	6
Male	2	2
Education		
Masters	7	8
Post Masters	1	0
Race		
White	6	8
Black	1	0
Mixed race	1	0
Grade taught		
3rd	1	0
4th	4	3
5th	3	5

Five principals gave permission for me to contact teachers in their schools, producing eight interviews. The remaining eight participants contacted me after hearing

about the study from friends or colleagues. Among the Title I teachers I interviewed, two were men, and one of the men identified as Black. Most of the teachers from Title I schools were aged between 40 and 50, identified as White, and taught fourth grade. One of the Title I teachers was pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership. All the teachers from the non-Title I schools identified as White. Two of the non-Title I participants identified as male; the majority of the non-Title I teachers were aged between 40 and 50, and most taught fifth grade. Demographics in a small study like this cannot be used to make any empirical claims; however, a snapshot of participants' characteristics could provide avenues for further inquiry.

### **Data Analysis**

All interview recordings were stored on a password-protected device, transcribed, and uploaded into a cloud-based version of ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data-analysis software package used for managing, organizing, and coding (Atlas, n.d.). I then used a combination of thematic analysis and grounded theory procedures to construct codes, which I collapsed into themes. Some codes derived from themes found in existing literature; however, in addition, I used grounded theory procedures to draw codes from the data themselves. At the first level, I coded each interview line by line separately from the rest of the interviews. This process resulted in 46 individual codes of various frequencies across the entire sample. After initial coding, I grouped my interviews within the two categories of Title I and non-Title I schools so I could seek patterns and compare between the two groups.

Coding is the “first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data, to make analytic interpretations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Appropriately, the codes came from experiences of the participants themselves but also reflected themes found in existing literature. In the next level of analysis, I drew quotes from each interview that reflected the initial codes and compiled them to find and synthesize patterns and explain larger themes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). During this process, I created memos from which stories emerged; I attached the stories to specific themes. I drew on existing literature to help with theoretical coding, looking for “relationships between categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). In the following section, I report detailed findings based on the interview data.

### **Findings**

From the final coding of the teachers’ stories, I began to understand how teachers used digital communication to build and maintain relationship with parents, helping to promote student success. In addition, I learned how digital communication and smartphones could be helpful for lower-SES parents, although barriers persisted. In terms of my two research questions, I learned that despite some gains in access for lower-SES parents, in some cases, teachers felt that inequities were exacerbated by digital communication. The finding show the effectiveness of digital communication for building partnership could be limited if it exacerbates social inequities.

Overall, I found that teachers across school type perceived digital communication to be helpful for building partnership with parents; however, teachers from non-Title I schools consistently said they would use digital communication regularly with all parents,



and some parents even started their relationships with teachers through email. In contrast, the Title I teachers mostly said they would initiate relationships with parents by telephone or in person, followed by digital forms of communication. Although a representative comparison was not possible with such a small sample, the responses show important differences could exist in teachers' use of digital communication across school type. Teachers mentioned various pros and cons of digital communication connected with building partnership, including (a) teaming and positive check-ins, (b) asynchronous timing and role validation, (c) partnership pitfalls, and (d) behavior issues and special accommodations. Teachers from both groups indicated digital communication in the form of email was a frequently used mechanism for communicating with parents. One teacher from a non-Title I school noted,

Email is used pretty much every day as far as communicating with parents about troubleshooting things, sending out information—like our weekly calendar I send out via email in addition to a hard copy that I send home with students because I want to make sure that parents are getting multiple opportunities to see that.

On the other hand, compared to non-Title I teachers, Title I teachers said they were more likely to use face-to-face communication; some said they did not use digital communication much at all. Even so, several teachers from Title I schools talked about the increased amount of communication since email had been integrated into communication systems in their schools.

Overwhelmingly, I've had more communication with parents over the last few years of using that [email] than I have in really any of my years teaching, and they'll just respond right away even if it's a quick hey, thanks. I just get a lot more feedback, and it's usually really positive, like, wow, thank you for reminding me. Hey, my kid had a great day at school today. He told me about this. (Title I teacher)

In the next section, in response to the research questions, I describe themes connected with teachers' perceptions of the pros and cons of digital communication (RQ1) and how perceptions varied by school type (RQ1a). In addition, I describe teachers' perceptions of the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication (RQ2) and how perceptions varied by school type (RQ2a). I conclude the section with some additional observations emerging from the data that could prompt future research related to digital communication and the home-school relationship.

### **Research Question 1: Pros and Cons of Digital Communication**

- RQ1. What are teachers' perceptions of the pros and cons of digital communication in facilitating parent-teacher relationships?
- a. Do teachers' perceptions of the pros and cons of digital communication in facilitating parent-teacher relationships vary across school type?

In the first research question, I asked how teachers perceived the pros and cons of digital communication in facilitating parent-teacher partnership. I compared responses across school type. Teachers identified pros of digital communication as the asynchronous timing of digital communication, the ability to send detailed messages regarding behavior, and the ability to make special accommodations. Teachers described how they used digital communication to build partnership and acknowledged that digital communication was particularly useful when it came to addressing behavior and special accommodations.

However, participants acknowledged drawbacks of digital communication. For example, teachers across school type said negative aspects of digital communication were counterproductive in building partnership with parents; however, mentions of negative aspects appeared more frequently in teachers' discussions of digital communication at schools non-Title I schools with more affluent student bodies. Teachers who worked in Title I schools said they used digital communication less frequently, compared to non-Title I teachers, and did not mention many aspects of digital communication that could be potentially harmful to their parent–teacher partnerships. However, these Title I teachers said digital communication could be more helpful if more parents had reliable access and if language barriers could be surmounted. Some of the partnership pitfalls teachers mentioned included trouble with boundaries and miscommunication that could occur because digital communication lacked nuance and tone.

In sum, the cons of digital communication mostly involved the expectations of more privileged parents who interacted with teachers from non-Title I schools and a lack of access attributable to financial barriers, language barriers, or both that could occur in both Title I and non-Title I schools – although the language and financial barriers were mentioned by all Title I teachers and only a few of the non-Title I teachers. In addition, non-Title I teachers did not mention that language or financial barriers were a significant issue, while the Title I teachers expressed these limitations as a significant factor in how they engaged in digital communication. I discuss pros and cons in detail in subsequent paragraphs, including the themes of teaming and positive check-ins, asynchronous timing, partnership pitfalls, and barriers to productive digital communication.

**Teaming and positive check-ins.** Teachers talked about how digital communication facilitated partnership by building shared goals with parents through a combination of teaming and relationship building. *Teaming* and *relationship building* might seem similar; however, teachers described different strategies and types of interaction, thereby differentiating the two terms. In relationship building, the quality of interaction between parents and teachers was the focus. Teacher or parent might have mentioned some action of the child not necessarily related to academics. For example, teachers might have noted a child's particular interest or noticed the child seemed to be having a good day. Other comments regarding relationship building involved the tone teachers used in their emails and the way they coordinated digital exchanges with face-to-face meetings to build a sense of trust with parents.

In contrast, when teachers described circumstances that qualified as teaming, they were talking about concentrated back-and-forth communications with parents involving shared goals and working together to help children succeed in specific tasks. Teaming or partnership references involved troubleshooting and clarifying assignments and learning outcomes, thus helping kids know that parents and teachers were working together. Concentrated efforts focused on helping kids who were struggling with behavior issues. When teachers talked about teaming, they mentioned "being on the same page" with parents:

Usually, what I ask parents to do, is if we're on the system, to email me and then I'll respond right away because I want the families (for check in and check out), I want them to take responsibility that we're partnering on this and it only works if we're teaming. (Non-Title I teacher)

I go out of my way to create a bond and a relationship with each of my students. That's like my whole philosophy is we're in this together. We got each other's back. (Title I teacher)

All the teachers sought to establish and maintain a partnership with parents.

Further, they believed such a partnership was essential to the success of the students involved—they perceived digital communication as a useful tool in facilitating that process. Teachers from all the schools described using multiple digital communication strategies to build relationships. One strategy for building relationships employed across the sample involved a combination of “positive framing” and “positive check-ins.” Teachers used positive framing when they were trying to navigate difficult conversation, for example, if they planned to discuss student problems. In addition, they used positive framing as a strategy in setting the tone for building relationships with parents; they sought to initiate a positive experience so that parents would feel invited into conversation. This approach helped set a framework for the interaction and the teaming that would follow.

A positive check-in could be spontaneous or planned; in either case, teachers used the positive check-in approach to maintain the parent–teacher relationship and to encourage ongoing interactions. Further, teachers used positive check-ins to celebrate their students and validate parents' roles in the partnership. In addition, teachers used positive check-ins to encourage parents who might have been having a hard time. For example, as teachers from both groups explained,

When I see the kid doing a good activity or getting an assignment done, I'm like, oh, let's go email dad. So, that brings positives to it, because I don't want to always have negative emails. (Title I teacher)

That's kind of my favorite way to use it, just like a quick sentence about something nice that happened in the classroom. I'll send a longer message, maybe after school, about something that happened good. I try to keep it as positive as possible. (Non-Title I teacher)

**Asynchronous timing.** Teachers said the asynchronous timing component of digital communication was more convenient for many parents who were unable to communicate during regular school hours. Teachers described the importance of asynchronous timing for fostering effective partnership between parents and teachers. Teachers said the asynchronous timing of digital communication allowed them the time they needed for thinking carefully before responding. Teachers noted that the benefit of thinking carefully about what they were going to say benefited both parents and teachers.

The benefit [of digital communication] is that I think versus a phone call; one, I can be very thoughtful composing an email as opposed to a phone call which has its benefits definitely but I can be more direct but careful and thoughtful in what I want to get across and how I want to do it. And I'm able to follow through with my thoughts because there's no one else on the other side asking or interrupting. And then I also think it gives the benefit to the receiver of the same thing. They're not put on the spot with a phone call or information if it's negative or challenging or whatever it is. Even if it's positive, not always knowing how to react and having time to read it at a time that's convenient. (Non-Title I teacher)

Particularly in this population that we work with, work schedules, parenting schedules, make it difficult to give a phone call or connect with the teacher right on the spot. So, email when it's the most convenient time for them I think would be helpful as well. (Title I teacher)

**Role Validation.** All the teachers talked about how meaningful it was to have their role as teacher validated by receiving appreciation from parents. Several of them described how receiving unexpected digital communications from parents noticing and appreciating the efforts the teachers made for their children really made their day. In addition, teachers mentioned they tried to reciprocate with the parents and recognized that this positive interaction and validation of efforts and roles was an important source of

trust and relationship building that allowed them to work together more successfully. Teachers explained that email helped facilitate these brief exchanges because the messages could happen at their convenience, and the messages could be brief. In addition, because of asynchronous timing, teachers and parents did not have to coordinate when to send and receive these messages.

His mom, from the Caribbean, sent me an email and said thank you for taking care of my baby when I'm not there. She said that you made such—it was a really nice—just a few sentences, but—I knew she was still on her honeymoon. She was legit in the Caribbean, and she sent it to me. So, that was meaningful to me, because it just shows that, yeah. She didn't have to call me. She could just send me a quick note when she was thinking about to say thank you. (Title I teacher)

[It is meaningful] when you have an exchange where you feel like they know that your interest is, like, in the best interest of their kid and you feel the same—like, you feel like you connected and sort of in a way that best supports their child and sort of like that home to school connection is strong. (Non-Title I teacher)

Many of the positive aspects that teachers spoke of regarding digital communication were integral to building shared goals and partnership with parents. All the teachers emphasized how beneficial it was to student success to have strong partnerships between parents and teachers. Because of their belief in the importance of ongoing communication and partnership, all the teachers made special efforts to respond to digital communication from parents, often outside work hours.

**Behaviors and special accommodations.** Shared among all the teachers was a perception that digital communication was extremely helpful in working with parents on student behavior issues and special accommodations. Teachers described different approaches, such as positive framing or discussing the particulars in person and then using email to follow up. A few teachers talked about a strategy of sharing a Google Doc with parents to document behavior for kids who were particularly struggling.

That's my number one thing with email, was it helps with behavior, for sure. I've seen it with one kid in particular I'm thinking one of—maybe the hardest kid I've ever had. And it took me a year and a half to finally realize I hadn't even emailed the dad yet. I emailed the dad and he was, like, why didn't you tell me this before? I was like "Oh, I don't know. "He was like, "Just email me every day . . . Anything that happened, just email me." And all of the sudden, the kid was completely different the second day. I'm like, "Oh my gosh! This is so powerful!" That was maybe six or seven years ago. And ever since then, I think about that all the time, like the first day of school, I need to get on every parent to make sure, especially the ones with the biggest behavior problems. (Non-Title I teacher)

**Partnership pitfalls.** Although teachers noted many benefits from digital communication related to facilitating partnerships, they also noted issues unique to digital communication, some of which were counterproductive to building strong partnerships. For example, teachers from both school types described miscommunication as a problem in building successful partnerships. In fact, the possibility of miscommunication grew with increased use of digital communication; thus, it seemed to be more problematic in non-Title I schools at which digital communication was more prevalent. Two other pitfalls teachers mentioned were problems with digital communication and problems with building partnership; however, teachers' responses differed by school type. Teachers working in non-Title I schools were more likely to talk about boundaries, specifically, parent expectations leading to an overstepping of boundaries. On the other hand, teachers working in Title I schools were more likely to talk about financial and language barriers that made it hard for parents to access the benefits of digital communication. Miscommunication, boundary issues, and financial and language barriers are described further in the next paragraphs.



**Miscommunication.** One of the main drawbacks of digital communication that hindered building partnership involved the likelihood of miscommunication made possible by the fact that digital communication lacked tone.

I think emails are easier to misinterpret as a result than phone or face to face. And so it takes me so much time wordsmithing because I want to be really careful that there is no way to misinterpret tone and that's hard. (Non-Title I teacher)

In addition, teachers talked about accidentally replying to everyone with a response they meant to be private or sending digital communication to the wrong person. Teachers shared that such accidents could potentially be damaging to not only the relationship with a particular parent but also to relationships with colleagues and other parents in the community.

I mean, that's one of the worst, where I accidentally sent a response to a parent that was not meant for the parent and then had to [ . . . ] one of the worst days of my life. So, I've done that too. That can go on your dangers of email. (Non-Title I teacher)

In an attempt to avoid the problem of miscommunication, teachers in the sample spent a great deal of time constructing digital communication. In addition, they developed strategies to engage in digital communication. Some strategies involved creating rules about the topics they were willing to discuss; for instance, one teacher mentioned she only sent positive digital communication. Another teacher said she would keep her digital communication brief and to the point. Another teacher mentioned that she only used digital communication as a follow-up to an in-person meeting. These strategies show the teachers' sensitivity to the possibility of miscommunication as well as an awareness of the importance of parent-teacher partnership and a desire not to harm that relationship.

**Boundaries.** Regarding aspects of digital communication that could harm the parent–teacher relationship, many teachers described having issues with lack of boundaries. Several teachers actually used the phrase, “I find myself answering emails in bed at night.” Teachers talked about the need to create boundaries, but almost all admitted they did not adhere to the boundaries they set; in fact, they responded or spent time writing emails in response to parents during time that should have been theirs.

And that workload, outside of 9:00 to 5:00, or for us it’s 8:00 to 4:00, was insane, and I didn’t know how to buffer that because I always wanted to answer their questions and it took a colleague being, “No, no, you end at 4:00. You’re done. It’s okay.” It’s like, “But, but, but—” And she was, “No, you need to set boundaries.” Because these parents will email whenever the heck they want to because they can. It’s easy. (Non-Title I teacher)

I really like knowing about it before walking in the morning and I’m hit with it. So, I mean I’ve honestly responded to emails at 11:30 at night on a school night if I’m awake and I check my email one more time. (Title I teacher)

Teachers who said parents did not respect their boundaries said parents’ expectations about response time hindered successful partnership. For example, one teacher mentioned,

I mean, I love communicating with parents and getting to know them better and helping how I can, but I mean there are some parents that are pretty demanding, like they’ll email me at, like, 6:00, 7:00, 8:00, and I coach as well after school, so I mean, like, this week, I have practice 6:00 to 8:00. (Non-Title I teacher)

On the other hand, sometimes students were in crisis. In such cases, the extra time teachers spent outside of work hours on digital communication stemmed not from parent expectations but from teachers’ need to help their students.

Teachers perceived the time spent on digital communication during their personal time as an asset. For example, all the teachers in the sample described at least one exception in which they had set a boundary and then answered digital communication

from parents when they should not have been expected to respond. Further, some teachers acknowledged they knew they should honor their boundaries; however, the communication and relationships they had built with parents through digital communication were so helpful to them in the classroom, they would not consider limiting their response parameters. For example, a teacher described responding to digital communication from a parent while he himself was on vacation in Mexico:

I looked back at our emails and one of them said “Hola from Mexico.” I’m writing this parent on my vacation in Mexico. Like, what am I doing? It’s not a vacation if I’m still working. But at the same time, it’s like I want the parent to feel like I’m there for them no matter what. (Non-Title I teacher)

In sum, loose boundaries represented a potentially helpful component of digital communication when it allowed teachers to trouble-shoot, solve problems, and help parents who needed special accommodations for their children. On the other hand, loose boundaries were problematic for building an effective partnership with parents when teachers perceived parents were not respecting their time. Most of the teachers did not have a structure in place to create solutions that could mitigate boundary problems. One teacher was adamant that she did not respond to digital communication when her work day was over, but even she noted exceptions to this rule, particularly based on students’ needs when families were in crisis.

***Financial and language barriers.*** Despite the benefits and potentially harmful aspects of digital communication, teachers noted some cases in which digital communication was potentially beneficial yet unavailable as a tool because of financial and language barriers. Teachers from both types of schools mentioned the difficulty of

ensuring all parents had access to email. Teachers recognized the unfairness inherent in the different levels of access among the populations they served.

The other thing about email is that it's really not equitable. In this school, it's far more equitable. [Even in our] school, we have pockets of families that don't have computers at home [ . . . ] So, you've got a large population of people who have email, and then it's unfair to the people who don't have access. (Non-Title I teacher)

A difficulty is that a lot of parents either have spotty access to technology or don't have any at all. It's not a universal tool. (Title I teacher)

One teacher connected the difference in digital communication specifically to social class by stating that "elite parents" sometimes used digital communication to "bully" teachers into accommodating their wishes in the classroom (Non-Title I teacher).

The less money the parents have, the better the email system works. The reason I feel this way is working parents have so much on their plate that email can really facilitate conversations that can't happen on a daily regular basis. The problem with the email system and higher socioeconomic populations is, from my perspective, they have a tendency to use that as a bitching platform; as a way to attack the teacher; as a way to demand their rights; as a way to have freedom of the tongue, where they wouldn't actually tell you. If you work with the more working-class families, or lower economic families, or families from different language backgrounds, it facilitates communication, because if it's a different language barrier, they can at their pace and at their ease, they can understand the conversation through their friends interpreting or vice versa, and for working-class families that are busy, they use it as a tool to basically cut to the chase, okay, sign the report card, get it back to you. (Non-Title I teacher)

In addition, teachers pointed out the difficulties with digital communication arising from language barriers, although non-Title I teachers did not talk about encountering these barriers, the Title I schools consistently expressed concern over these difficulties. One teacher mentioned students spoke four different languages in her classroom.

Yeah. I would have to have it translated in multiple languages to meet the needs of everyone, and I don't feel that would be very fair for me to send out an all English newsletter or equitable. (Title I teacher)

I don't release information to all my parents at one time through email because some of my parents don't have computers at home. A lot of them don't speak English, so it doesn't make as much sense to use typed English as a primary means of communication. (Title I teacher)

For most of the teachers in the study, email was the primary form of digital communication used for building partnership with parents. However, in some cases teachers mentioned using various apps as a way to connect with parents and keep them engaged in conversation. These apps are a contribution to digital communication unique to smartphones, the subject of Research Question 2.

### **Research Question 2: Prevalence of Smartphones Impact**

- RQ2. What are teachers' perceptions of the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication between parents and teachers?
- a. Do teachers' perceptions of the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication between parents and teachers vary across school type?

In the second research question, I asked how teachers perceived the increased prevalence of smartphones in terms of impact on digital communication between parents and teachers. I compared responses across school type. Teachers at Title I and non-Title I schools agreed that smartphones increased access for lower-SES parents and noted that barriers to access persisted for lower-SES parents, in addition to mentioning issues with language barriers.

**Smartphone impact.** I asked teachers if the proliferation of smartphones had affected their interaction and partnership with parents. Some of the participants who worked as teachers before smartphones became prevalent mentioned a significant shift with the advent of the smartphone. Other teachers who had entered the field more recently noted that smartphones provided another means of accessing various forms of digital communication. Additionally, several teachers mentioned smartphones not only provided increased access for some parents to use digital communication in the form of email but also provided alternative means of digital communication between teachers and parents in the form of apps—in fact, these apps were sometimes more easily accessed for the parents involved.

I do have parents that almost exclusively email, and I know it's from their phones. And so, I mean I think that maybe families that don't have Internet at home probably email off the phone a lot, because they have the LTE or the 3G or whatever it might be, and with a lot of parents having busy job schedules, they're not always at the computer or jobs where they can, and so I think that it makes it easier for them to at least glance at an email. (Non-Title I teacher)

From my perspective, the smartphone hasn't helped with email communication per se, but it does help with communication because there are other apps and ways of communication—communicating with parents and families that are not necessarily email. (Title I teacher)

For example, one of this teacher's most meaningful stories about digital communication with parents involved a smartphone app. His story shows the flexibility in type of digital communication that smartphones could provide:

I have a student who is totally into music. I've known that for a while. He came in one day and told me that [ . . . ] one of his goals was to learn a new instrument, and me being a musician, I thought that was kind of cool and loving music the way I do. And so, I decided I was going to use Classroom Dojo to communicate with his parents about a program named Ethos. [ . . . ] And I say, "I'm going to pass that along to your parents." And so, obviously the quickest way to do that was to, through Classroom Dojo. So, I just sent a quick message, "We both know

that [ . . . ] loves music. He told me that he had a goal of playing an instrument. I just wanted to pass along this information about the Ethos program. This is why I think it'll be great for him. This is why it was great for me as a parent and for my son as a student. You should check it out.” The parent responded and said, “Thank you. Really appreciate it. Thank you for following up and sending this. Thank you for cultivating his passions,” etc., so forth, so on. (Title I teacher)

Teachers noted that smartphone proliferation meant everyone had a phone with them all the time; teachers considered this a mixed blessing. The convenience and availability of constant communication resulted in an extension of teachers' work days; they often felt obligated to respond to parents quickly. In addition to the increased workload, teachers found themselves with permeable boundaries and struggled to draw hard lines to preserve their private time. Thus, smartphones could increase access for parents from lower-SES backgrounds; however, they could harm relationships built on digital communication between teachers and higher-SES parents.

### **Additional Observations**

Although teachers in both Title I and non-Title I schools shared similar perspectives and uses of digital communication, some important differences emerged. Teachers in non-Title I schools almost all used multiple forms of digital communication on a regular basis—for example, to send weekly updates and group emails about needs in the classroom or reminders about field trips, in addition to responding individually to parents' emails. The Title I teachers generally had no expectation that parents would be using digital communication to receive general information. Teachers in Title I schools were more likely to use digital communication for clarifications, to follow up on conferences, and to work with parents on students' behavior issues.

In addition to the findings mentioned, two other factors seemed to have a significant impact on the efficacy of digital communication as a tool for building parent–teacher partnership—school culture and teacher proficiency. Even within the same demographic group, descriptions of school culture varied from site to site. For example, some Title I teachers had access to efficient translators to help non-English-speaking parents, while other Title I schools had cumbersome translation services that created enough of a barrier that teachers seldom used those services because the process was not equitable.

The other variable found among teachers at both school types was teacher proficiency. Some of the teachers felt uncomfortable with digital communication and described their own lack of skills in navigating the digital world. Others were deeply engaged in technology and expressed comfort and appreciation for digital communication as a useful tool.

I interviewed all the teachers in their own classrooms at the schools where they worked; thus, I saw their classrooms as well as some of the dynamics of the relationships between staff members. I sensed how the dynamics of relationships affected their engagement with digital communication. Some school leaders strongly encouraged teachers to use digital communication in particular ways and with particular frequency; in contrast, other leaders provided consistent support technology but held no expectations about frequency of digital communication. However, across the sample, teachers reported receiving little training on using digital communication to maximize the parent–teacher partnership. Rather, administrators let the teachers themselves decide to what extent and



when to integrate digital communication into their partnerships with parents. Teachers' ability to choose their preferred use of digital communication meant teacher proficiency largely determined the ways they used digital communication to facilitate partnerships with parents.

### **Discussion**

Existing research has shown that digital communication could be useful in helping parents and teachers build partnership and work toward shared goals (Olmstead, 2013). Parent–teacher partnership appears to be a particularly effective form of parent participation, correlated with student success (Landeros, 2011; Lareau, 1987, 2015). Communication between parents and teachers that helps students is a type of social capital—resources are available as a function of the relationship (Coleman, 1988). With the addition of digital communication, parents and teachers have another tool to help them build effective strategies, particularly for parents who have schedules that do not allow them to have frequent communication with teachers during school hours or at pick-up and drop-off times (Olmstead, 2013). However, to take advantage of this additional tool, parents need digital skills to engage effectively in digital communication with teachers (Rafalow, 2018). Therefore, digital skills represent a form of cultural capital if they allow parents to navigate the institutional practice of communicating effectively with teachers in ways that benefit students (Rafalow, 2018).

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of how teachers perceive the pros and cons of digital communication as a tool for helping build partnership with parents to facilitate student success. An additional aim was to determine if the increased

prevalence of smartphones as a tool for accessing digital communication could be helpful in creating opportunity for parents from lower-SES backgrounds to build partnerships that would increase student success. Inherent in these questions was the understanding that access to forms of digital communication might be connected to SES location. Therefore, if teachers perceived digital communication as beneficial, and if SES determined access, the tool of digital communication could exacerbate existing inequities among families as a function of parents' ability to use digital communication effectively to work with their children's teachers.

The findings show that teachers found digital communication helpful for building partnership with parents; however, rules and access were critical issues that needed to be addressed for digital communication to be most effective and to avoid exacerbating existing inequities. In terms of the pros of digital communication (RQ1), the themes that emerged from the data most relevant to thinking about pros of digital communication in facilitating partnership for parents and teachers included teaming and positive check-ins, asynchronous timing and role validation, and behavior and special accommodations. These three themes represent relationship elements that could provide a form of bridging social capital—the findings show that a stronger relationship between parents and teachers increases the chances that teachers could be a resource for parents in helping their children succeed in school.

The themes that emerged from the data most relevant to thinking about the cons of digital communication fell into two categories that seemed tied to parent SES. For all teachers, two of the cons discussed were miscommunication and lack of boundaries.

These seemed to be most problematic for higher-SES parents. Teachers explained that higher-SES parents communicated much more frequently using digital means. The other two cons teachers described involved accessibility, most often mentioned in relation to lower-SES parents. The two most-often mentioned barriers to successful digital communication with parents were language and financial barriers. For some of the Title I teachers, these two barriers made digital communication with parents very unlikely.

Researchers have noted the importance of participation in the form of parent–teacher communication (Bastiani, 2018; Edwards & Redfern, 2017; Landeros, 2011). Landeros in particular focused on the importance of the parent–teacher partnership. In my study, teachers overwhelmingly agreed that their communication and partnership with parents were critical to students’ academic success. Teachers offered strategies for finding agreement and building and maintaining relationships with parents. They expressed willingness to work with parents to discover the best avenues for communication and applied multiple strategies using different forms of digital communication.

In talking about the ways they built partnership with parents, teachers essentially were explaining how they helped parents build a type of cultural capital that would help them increase chances of student success. Researchers have demonstrated that social capital in the form of parent–teacher communication can activate or grant access to forms of cultural capital (Freeman, 2010; Taylor, 2015). Thus, the social capital found in parent–teacher communication could be considered bridging social capital—parent–teacher communication involves gaining new knowledge through a relationship built on

weak ties. Many of the teachers told meaningful stories about digital communication that connected directly with families who were struggling with finances or other limitations. Further, teachers described instances in which they had connected parents to resources. From the teachers' perspectives, it appears that parents who successfully engaged in relationship building with teachers gained access to new habits, language, and skills, thereby creating cultural capital.

Although teachers discussed ways that parents accessed cultural capital through their shared dialogue, they noted inequities in access and language barriers, which presented significant barriers for many parents. Researchers have suggested the proliferation of technology has helped close inequities in access to the Internet (Baym, 2015). However, some scholars have found that a divide persists; access can be problematic for many people from lower-class backgrounds (Gonzales et al., 2018). Consistent with previous research, many of the teachers in this study noted problems with access for many parents. The Title I teachers who worked with larger populations of working-class and low-income parents were most cognizant of this barrier; however, non-Title I teachers also noted problems with digital communication and equity for parents. At the same time, because teachers mentioned holding few formal conferences and because working parents had less opportunity to engage informally at pick-up and drop-off times, teachers said more parents were able to participate in partnership with teachers through digital communication. In addition, school culture and budget priorities influenced how teachers overcame barriers. These tensions revealed the need for more

research into how digital communication could support parents and how school leaders could work to alleviate barriers experienced by lower-SES parents.

I found limited evidence that parents from lower-SES backgrounds used technology to enhance their networks of weak ties, supporting previous findings about how marginalized groups make use of the Internet to harness social capital (Gonzales, 2017). Although my findings indicate the proliferation of smartphones and smartphone apps has increased the overall number of parents who communicate with teachers, across the sample, teachers acknowledged a large number of parents could not fully benefit from technology for a number of reasons. For example, issues persisted with access for parents, and in some cases, issues involved lack of support from schools. Schools that provided more support for teachers in terms of training, access to software, and translation services created a culture wherein parents were more likely to use digital communication with teachers. In particular, smartphone apps seemed to be a useful alternative for many teachers who worked in Title I schools.

Baym (2015) chronicled the higher risk of miscommunication in the digital realm. My findings were consistent with Baym's findings in the sense that one of the main aspects of digital communication potentially harmful to building partnerships involved misunderstandings and difficulty assessing tone. Baym suggested that new forms of digital nonverbal communication have been developing; perhaps some training and proficiency of norms would help alleviate this issue. Because digital communication seems to be increasing, more research is needed to discern how to use digital

communication effectively in relationships, particularly in mentoring relationships such as the partnership between parents and teachers.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several potential limitations are noted. First, the small sample size could be considered a limitation. However, the small sample sizes generally found in qualitative research have been supported by methodological studies (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Hennick, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2016). Because my sample size was relatively small and selected from a limited area, I cannot generalize the findings to other teachers in other schools. However, many of the themes and concerns are consistent with those found in previous studies (Olmstead, 2013); therefore, the conclusions contribute to evidence supporting the need to strengthen understanding of bridging social capital and the parent–teacher relationship as one source for that type of capital for families from all class backgrounds.

An additional limitation relates to the low diversity among the sample of teachers. Portland has a predominantly White population, particularly in K-12 schools. On the other hand, several teachers worked in relatively diverse school districts, and one teacher worked with parents who spoke several different languages. It could be helpful in future studies to match demographics between parents and teachers to see if demographic characteristics influence participants' email use. However, this would be difficult to do in Portland, Oregon, because the population of teachers in K-12 is predominantly White.

Despite the limitations, the findings nevertheless provide an important foundation for continuing research into how email and smartphones have shaped the social capital

forming in relationships between teachers and parents. In addition, focusing on the role of parent–teacher communication as a form of participation represents a fruitful avenue of inquiry regarding how parent participation can contribute to student success.

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### **Chapter 3: Mother's Social Capital and Shared Goals**

Researchers have found that parent participation in school positively affects student academic achievement (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015). Parent participation includes communicating from home to school, attending school functions, volunteering in the classroom, attending parent–teacher conferences, helping children with homework, providing extra educational opportunities at home, and participating in school policy decision making (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). Additionally, many scholars have noted the role of social class in amount and type of parent participation (Coleman, 1988; Farkas, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McNeal, 2012). Given that parent involvement is an important contributor to student success, and given the role of social class in parent participation as well as in the disparity of outcomes in education related to social class, a need exists for research focused on the roles of social class and parent participation in education.

In this study, I investigate the level of social capital held by mothers from different class backgrounds as well as the effect of social class on the likelihood that teachers perceived they shared goals with mothers of the children they taught. Shared goals represent a form of cultural capital, made possible by a common understanding between parents and teachers—a sign of compliance with dominant standards of school interaction (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In this study, I explore the likelihood that parents from different class backgrounds had access to parent participation and cultural capital in the form of shared goals. In addition, I test whether greater social capital explained the differences in teacher perceptions' that mothers shared school goals. This test is

important—if mothers from lower-SES backgrounds could access and activate cultural capital from their access to social capital, this ability could help educators make better choices about policy to address socioeconomic inequity in schools, for example, by providing networking resources for low-income parents.

I argue that some forms of cultural capital particularly useful for student academic success are available to and used by parents from all class backgrounds. Further, I argue that social capital could help parents from all class backgrounds access cultural capital in the form of shared goals. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal study containing a rich source of data regarding aspects of social capital (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Because the FFCWS contains data from both mothers and teachers, and because it oversampled for low-income participants, it is uniquely situated for an exploration of the connection between social and cultural capital among mothers from all class backgrounds. The FFCWS data contains many variables corresponding to different forms of social capital, including bonding social capital, which is formed in connections with strong ties, and bridging social capital, which is formed in connections made through weak ties (Johnson, Honnold & Threlfall, 2011).

### **Bonding Social Capital vs. Bridging Social Capital**

Understanding the difference between bonding social capital and bridging social capital is important—some researchers have suggested that certain forms of social capital can facilitate activation of cultural capital (Freeman, 2010). Much of the literature has indicated that only parents from middle- and upper-class families are able to activate

cultural capital in schools (Horvat & Lareau, 1999). However, some researchers have suggested that cultural capital activates in or through the parent–teacher relationship (Freeman, 2010; Taylor, 2015). In essence, the form of social capital available to parents through parent–teacher communication facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. In the case of parent–teacher communication, the social capital might be defined as a type of bridging social capital, because it is found in a relationship formed by weak ties, as opposed to the strong ties found in bonding social capital (Putnam 2000). However, it may be that in some cases, bonding social capital can also enhance parent access to shared goals.

Bonding social capital is characterized by strong social connections within particular groups (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Hawkins & Maurer, 2009; Johnson et al., 2011; Kim, Subramanian, & Kawachi, 2006). In addition, it is associated with maintenance of social status; for individuals in more marginalized and lower-SES groups (Johnson et al., 2011), bonding social capital is often associated with “getting by” and might commonly be represented by neighborhood or kin networks (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2018; Ellison et al., 2011).

Although bonding social capital can be beneficial in many cases, it has drawbacks for individuals from lower-SES backgrounds, manifesting, for example, in greater obligations toward those with whom strong ties are present as well as in exclusion from higher-SES groups (Coleman, 1988; Goddard, 2003). In terms of obligations, bonding social capital can be a limiting factor for people trying to get ahead because of the amount of time they must spend fulfilling obligations that occur from being members of a

closed social group (Adams et al., 2018). Further, social closure by a group in a high-SES neighborhood or by a parent group could exclude lower-SES families, particularly in mixed-SES schools, from taking part in the decision-making processes in their schools (Adams et al., 2018).

Bridging social capital is described in the literature as a form of social capital characterized by weak social ties—that is, ties that are differentiated and outside of close kin networks (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Lancee, 2016; Larsen et al., 2004; Park & Bowman, 2015). Literature on bridging social capital has focused on the resources that become available through this outside connection, showing how those resources can be used to help individuals get ahead (Coffé & Geys, 2007; Johnson et al., 2011). Several researchers have described bridging social capital as the stronger or more beneficial form (Bram, 2016; Hawkins & Maurer, 2009; Larsen et al., 2004). However, some authors have suggested that bonding social capital is an important prerequisite for accessing bridging social capital and that the two forms can work together to create the strongest results (Burke et al., 2011; Park & Barlow, 2015).

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Johnson et al. (2011) explored the concepts of bonding social capital and bridging social capital more deeply by constructing a social capital scale to integrate measures of bonding social capital and bridging social capital into an index. The goal was to learn more about how social capital works to build more social capital (Johnson et al., 2011). The authors studied the differences between bonding social capital and bridging social capital to show

how both forms of social capital worked together to affect outcomes related to marriage and employment for low-income single mothers (Johnson et al., 2011).

Johnson et al. (2011) found women who scored higher on the combination social capital index were “more likely to be married and employed three years after giving birth” (p. 25). In contrast, women who scored higher only on the bonding social capital scale were not “more likely to maintain employment or transition into marriage” (Johnson et al., 2011, p. 25). In sum, Johnson et al. argued that both bridging social capital and bonding social capital, as represented in the combined index, were necessary for social capital to help low-income women effectively “get ahead” and achieve their goals (Hawkins & Maurer, 2009; Lancee, 2016; Larsen et al., 2004). In this study I use the social capital scale developed by Johnson et al. (2011) as a foundation for constructing a scale to measure bonding social capital.

### **Current Study**

In this study, I investigate the relationship between SES, bonding social capital, and teacher perception of shared goals, which represent a form of cultural capital. I focus on the data specifically from mothers and teachers for this study because research has shown that mothers are more often the primary parent who interacts with children’s teachers in elementary school (Landeros, 2011; Lightfoot-Lawrence, 2003; Taylor, 2015). The purpose of this study is to answer a call for research specifically focused on particular types of social capital. In addition, I seek to explore how bonding social capital might function to help participants gain access to a form of cultural capital—in this case, teachers’ perceptions of goals shared between parents and schools. In the study, I



construct an index to measure elements of bonding social capital and test whether it mediates the relationship between SES and teacher perception of shared goals, a form of cultural capital.

Two research questions guide the study:

1. Are higher-SES mothers more likely to be perceived by teachers as sharing goals with the school?
2. If yes, does bonding social capital mediate the effects of SES on teacher perception that mothers share goals with the school?

### **Data and Subset**

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) is a longitudinal study that has followed a birth cohort of 4,898 children born in urban areas in the United States between 1998 and 2000 (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). The FFCWS study was conducted with a predominantly low-income, minority sample that has been followed for the last 20 years (year 15 data were recently published; FFCWS, n.d.). Children born to unmarried parents were oversampled by almost a 3:1 ratio; cities were selected to provide representative data for U.S. cities of 200,000 or more people (Reichman et. al, 2001). The core study consisted of interviews with mothers, fathers, or primary caregivers gathered within 48 hours of birth or soon after, followed by additional interviews when children were one, three, five, nine, and 15. Approvals to conduct the interviews were obtained from both the Princeton University Institutional Review Board and the individual hospitals (birth year; Reichman et al., 2001).

The analytical sample for this study combines teacher, parent, and child data from the nine-year follow-up study, in addition to baseline demographic information. Of the original 4,898 cases, I dropped 2,661 cases in which the dependent variable had missing

data from half of the teachers originally surveyed. Because my social capital measures were connected specifically with resources available to mothers, and because the data came from the mother-focused follow-up survey, I focus on the social capital of the mother specifically. Additionally, I dropped 28 cases with missing social capital index variables. Because I focus on maternal resources, I dropped 56 cases in which the child did not live with the mother full-time. I dropped 759 cases in which fathers attended school conferences; my intention was to focus on the connection between teachers and mothers. Finally, I dropped 54 cases with missing demographic variables. The final analytical sample is  $N = 1,340$ .

## Measures

### **Dependent Variable: Shared Goals (Cultural Capital)**

A question in the nine-year survey asked teachers whether they perceived shared goals between themselves and parents. The question was “How much do you feel the child’s parents/guardian have the same goals for their child that the school does?” and possible responses were: not at all, a little, somewhat, a lot, or a great deal. Because of small cell size, I collapsed my dependent variable from ordinal to binary and recoded the variable to combine the top two categories; thus, *a lot* and *a great deal* = 1, and the bottom three categories *not at all*, *a little*, and *somewhat* = 0. In determining where to split the responses, I rely on previous research measuring the efficacy of trust within parent–teacher relationships. For example, Adams and Christenson (2000) described the category of *medium trust* (which I equated with the category *somewhat*) to be fraught with defensive posturing and uncertain trustworthiness. In other words, the lack of trust

and defensiveness made developing shared goals problematic. Consequently, I determined the category of *somewhat* was not conducive to the cultural capital found in shared goals.

### **Independent Variables**

**SES: Income and education.** Previous researchers have used income and education to measure socioeconomic status and job prestige (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In this study, I include variables for mother's household income at the nine-year follow-up as well as education at baseline. Specific jobs were not reported in a way that allowed me to measure prestige; however, the income and education variables serve as proxies for SES.

The FFCWS all-waves version of the dataset contains constructed variables for annual household income and education. I recoded the constructed variable for annual income to match the six ranges given as a choice in the study questionnaire. Income ranges were coded as 1 = less than or equal to \$10,000; 2 = \$10,001 to \$20,000; 3 = \$20,001 to \$30,000; 4 = \$30,001 to \$40,000; 5 = \$40,001 to \$60,000; and 6 = greater than \$60,000. The constructed variable for education was broken into four categories. I recoded them to match so that 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school or GED, 3 = some college, and 4 = four-year degree or more.

**Bonding social capital index.** I use the social capital index models created by Johnson et al. (2011) as a foundation for constructing my own scale to measure social capital. In their study, Johnson et al. tested whether a bonding social capital index and a combination bonding social capital and bridging social capital index increased the

chances that low-income mothers got married or found stable employment. In my analytical sample, the measures that Johnson et al. (2011) used were not all available, because not all mothers in my sample answered the questions and because my sample included mothers from all income groups; in contrast, the Johnson et al. study focused on low-income mothers. However, building on their concept, I construct a scale to measure social capital. Although Johnson et al. described their index as a combination of bridging social capital and bonding social capital, the index I construct uses variables measuring bonding social capital only. In much of the research, bridging social capital is seen to have higher value because it grants users access to a diverse set of weak ties and new sources of knowledge (Lancee, 2016). However, in the relationship between parents and teachers, it may be that bonding social capital can actually help mothers access a specific type of cultural capital, in the form of shared goals with their children's teachers. One reason that bonding social capital might help in the context of parent-teacher relationships is that bonding social capital could provide the stability and back-up a mother needs in order to take the time to build a relationship with her child's teacher. If bonding social capital is shown to have a positive relationship with teacher perception of shared goals, this study could be an important step in helping to understand ways that bonding social capital can lead to other forms of capital.

The measures used for the bonding social capital index comprised five questions, four of which Johnson et al. (2011) used. The measures corresponded to questions in the FFCWS linked to childcare, housing, and a small loan. In the first question, mothers were asked if there was "someone you could count on to help with emergency childcare." This

question represented a measure of bonding social capital because access to childcare is a function of a close relationship that requires trust; further, childcare itself is a resource that helps mothers “get by,” a requirement of bonding social capital (Poortinga, 2006). I coded the variable for this question 1 = yes and 0 = no. The second question I used for constructing the bonding social capital index was “Could you count on someone if you needed a place to live?” Similar to the question connected to emergency childcare, this question represented a strong tie that requires trust and helps mothers get by. I coded the variable 1 = yes and 0 = no. The third question used to construct the bonding social capital index was “Is there someone you could count on to loan you \$200?” This measure represented access to a resource through a strong or close relationship, thus representing strength of bonding social capital. I coded the variable 1 = yes and 0 = no. I added a fourth question: “Could you count on someone to cosign a loan for \$1,000?” to assess a level of trust, for example, whether the mothers could access people who would risk their credit scores by cosigning a loan. I added a final question to the combined social capital index: “Could you count on someone to help pay for activities for your child?” This question represented access to strong-tie connections through relationship. Reliability testing using these five measures resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of .73. I computed a new variable for the index using the SUM function with a range of 0 to 5.

### **Method**

In this study I seek to assess whether differences existed in teachers’ perceptions of shared goals for parents from different SES backgrounds. First, I test for income and education differences in the distributions of teachers’ perceptions of shared goals using a

chi-square test for both SES measures. This test shows whether differences exist in how teachers perceived shared goals related to SES background before controlling for other factors. Next, I conduct multivariate models. To investigate whether teachers were more likely to perceive that mothers with higher-SES share goals with the school, I estimate logistic regression models predicting teacher' perceptions of shared goals with mothers' reported income and education. To test whether bonding social capital mediates any relationship between teachers' perceptions of shared goals and mothers' SES, I estimate logistic regression models predicting teachers' perceptions of shared goals with mothers' social capital. Next, I calculate the predicted probabilities for teachers' perceptions that mothers shared goals with the school in both models and compare the difference between lowest and highest probabilities for both income and education across both models.

Logistic regression presents difficulties during interpretation because of the presence of unobserved heterogeneity (Mood, 2010). Because variables that are not accounted for can affect results whether or not they correlate with other independent variables, care must be given to interpreting the results for logistic regression, particularly when comparing across models (Mood, 2010). In this case, I could not compare coefficients reliably across models; thus, the odds ratios I report are only reliable to show direction of effect contained within each individual model (Mood, 2010). To look for possible mediation and compare across models, I estimate the predicted probabilities of teachers agreeing that they and mothers "shared goals" by each level of income and education before and after controlling for social capital. I expect any differences in these predicted probabilities between models to illuminate whether any impact of mother's

income and education can be attributed to mothers' social capital. In both models, I control for marital status reported during the baseline study, the sex of the focal child, and the race/ethnicity of the mother.

### **Results**

Most of the mothers in the study were unmarried during the baseline interviews, more than 50% identified as Black non-Hispanic, approximately 20% identified as White non-Hispanic, and 24% identified as Hispanic; 3% chose Other. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample.

Approximately 33% of the mothers in the sample reported having less than a high school education during the baseline study, 34% reported having completed a high school diploma or a GED, and 27% reported having attended some college. In contrast, only 6% of mothers reported having completed a four-year degree or higher during the baseline study.

A majority of mothers in the study reported an annual household income of less than \$40,000; the most frequently reported annual income category was \$10,000 to \$20,000. Approximately 15% reported an annual income of between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and 15% reported an annual income of more than \$60,000. In the lower income brackets, approximately 18% of mothers reported an annual income of less than \$10,000, 21% of mothers reported an income of \$10,000 to \$20,000, 17% reported an income of \$20,000 to \$30,000, and 14% reported an income of \$30,000 to \$40,000.

The mean score for the combined index was 3.87 with a range of 0 to 5. Almost 55% of mothers in the sample indicated that they could count on someone to cosign a

loan for \$1,000. Approximately 75% of mothers indicated they could count on someone to help them pay for activities for their child that they could not afford. Results of descriptive statistical analysis show that a majority of the mothers in the study had access to these types of bonding social capital, regardless of their SES.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Analytic Sample*

	Mean	SD	Range
Married	0.19		(0,1)
Unmarried (ref)	0.81*		(0,1)
Female child	0.49		(0,1)
Male child (ref)	0.51*		(0,1)
Race/ethnicity			
White/non-Hispanic	0.19		(0,1)
Black/non-Hispanic	0.54*		(0,1)
Hispanic	0.24		(0,1)
Other	0.03		(0,1)
Education	2.1	0.92	(1,4)
Less than HS (ref)	0.33		(0,1)
HS/GED	0.34*		(0,1)
Some college	0.27		(0,1)
4-year degree+	0.06		(0,1)
Annual income	3.34	1.71	(1,6)
Less than \$10K (ref)	0.18		(0,1)
\$10-\$20K	0.21*		(0,1)
\$20-\$30K	0.17		(0,1)
\$30-\$40K	0.14		(0,1)
\$40-\$60K	0.15		(0,1)



Greater than \$60K	0.15		(0,1)
Social capital index	3.87	1.38	(0,5)

*N* = 1,340; \*Modal category; (ref) = reference category for logistic regression

Table 4 shows differences by mothers' household income in teachers' perceptions of shared goals. The chi-square test, a test of nonindependence, proves to be significant ( $p < .001$ ). Mothers who reported higher household income are more likely to be perceived by teachers as having shared goals. As the annual income reported by mothers' increases, the difference between the top and bottom category for teachers' perceptions grows. For mothers in the lowest income bracket, 7% of teachers responded *not at all* to the question about whether they believed mothers shared goals with the school. In contrast, 26% responded *a great deal* when asked whether mothers shared goals with the school. For mothers in the highest income bracket, only 1% of teachers responded *not at all* to the question of whether mothers shared goals with the school; 46% responded *a great deal* to the question of shared goals. Notably, teachers perceived at least half of all mothers as sharing goals with the school *a lot* or *a great deal*, regardless of income.

Table 4

*Bivariate Analysis: Income*

Shared Goals	< \$10K	\$10-20K	\$20-30K	\$30-40K	\$40-60K	\$60K+
Not at all	7%	4%	7%	3%	2%	1%
A little	14%	12%	11%	5%	10%	3%
Somewhat	23%	29%	19%	24%	22%	17%
A lot	30%	30%	35%	33%	34%	33%

A great deal	26%	25%	29%	35%	32%	46%
Chi-square = 68.38 ( $p < .001$ ).						

Table 5 shows bivariate analysis results using mothers' level of education, indicating whether teachers perceived mothers as sharing goals with the school. In terms of the education reported at baseline, the test proves significant ( $p < .001$ ). The largest difference in teachers' perceptions appears for mothers with four-year degrees or higher—79% of teachers perceived mothers with four-year degrees or higher as having shared goals with the teachers *a lot* or *a great deal*.

Table 5

*Bivariate Analysis: Education*

Shared Goals	Less than HS	HS/GED	Some College	4-year degree+
Not at all	6%	4%	2%	1%
A little	15%	9%	5%	1%
Somewhat	27%	25%	19%	7%
A lot	30%	32%	34%	34%
A great deal	22%	30%	40%	57%
Chi-square = 90.55 ( $p < .001$ ).				

As the level of reported education increases, the gap between the percentage of teachers reporting the top and bottom categories grows. For mothers who reported less than a high school education at baseline, 6% of teachers responded *not at all* to the question of whether mothers shared goals with the school. In contrast, 22% responded

*a great deal* to the question about whether mothers shared goals with the school. For mothers with four-year degrees or higher, 1% of the teachers responded *not at all* to the question about sharing goals with the school; 56% responded *a great deal*. However, 52% of teachers perceived mothers with less than a high school education as having shared goals, showing that many mothers had access to the cultural capital found in shared goals, regardless of education.

Table 6 shows results from a logistic regression analysis. Model 1 includes the control variables and variables for socioeconomic status. Model 2 adds the bonding social capital index. In Model 1 – relative to unmarried mothers, mothers who had a male child, mothers with less than a high school education and mothers with an annual income of less than \$10K – being married at baseline, having a female child, and the SES variables of education and income categories of \$30,000 to \$40,000 and greater than \$60,000 were significantly positively related to teachers' perceptions of shared goals with mothers. Results in Model 1 show that the education variable is significantly related across all categories; however, the income variable is only significantly related in two of the six categories. This finding shows the relationship between teachers' perceptions of shared goals and SES is more closely related to the education variable rather than to a combination of income and education.

In Model 2, the statistical significance of education for the categories of high school diploma/GED, some college, and four-year degree or more remain the same as in Model 1. In contrast, the categories of household income from \$30,000 to \$40,000 and

greater than \$60,000 are no longer statistically significant. Most notably, the bonding social capital index shows significance for positive effects ( $p < .005$ ).

Table 6

*Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Models Predicting Teacher Perception that Mothers Share School Goals*

	Model 1 Exp(B)	(SE)	Model 2 Exp(B)	(SE)
Married	1.69*	(0.20)	1.71**	(0.20)
Not married (ref)				
Race/Ethnicity:				
White/non-Hispanic (ref)				
Black/non-Hispanic	1.07	(0.17)	1.109	(0.17)
Hispanic	1.07	(0.19)	1.10	(0.19)
Other	0.48†	(0.39)	0.47†	(0.39)
Female child	1.36*	(0.12)	1.33*	(0.12)
Male child (ref)				
Socioeconomic variables				
Education				
Less than high school (ref)				
HS diploma/GED	1.4*	(0.14)	1.39*	(0.15)
Some college	2.2***	(0.16)	2.12***	(0.17)
4-year degree+	5.6***	(0.41)	5.34***	(0.41)
Annual income				
Less than \$10K (ref)				
\$10,001-\$20K	0.93	(0.18)	0.88	(0.18)
\$20,001-\$30K	1.23	(0.19)	1.16	(0.20)
\$30,001-\$40K	1.43†	(0.21)	1.32	(0.21)
\$40,001-\$60K	1.08	(0.24)	0.97	(0.21)
Greater than \$60K	1.70**	(0.24)	1.38	(0.24)
Bonding social capital index			1.14*	(0.04)
Constant	0.78		0.51	
Pseudo r-square	0.075		0.081	

† $p < 0.1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Being married at baseline, education at baseline, and having a female child continue to show positive effects. After controlling for marital status at baseline, race/ethnicity, child sex, education, and income, I find that for each increase of mother's social capital index, mothers are 1.14 times more likely to be perceived by teachers as sharing goals with the school.

Once I controlled for social capital in Model 2, both categories of household income that were statistically significant in Model 1 are no longer statistically significantly different. This change indicates that the effect of income on teacher perception might be mediated by bonding social capital. However, comparisons across models when using logistic regression can be problematic because effects can change after adding new independent variables depending on variables not included in either model; thus, relationships cannot be deduced by comparing coefficients (Mood, 2010).

To test if mediation is actually occurring, I calculate predicted probabilities for the predictor variables measuring SES in both models, using the following equation:  $\text{Probability} = \frac{\text{Exp}(A + B(X))}{1 + \text{Exp}(A + B(X))}$ . Table 7 shows the predicted probability results by category for the variables of both education and income. In each case, I use the value attached to modal categories to account for other variables. In addition, I report the difference in spread between the predicted probabilities for the categories of education and income in each model and the calculated difference in spread between models. Results show no difference in spread between the highest and lowest categories of the education variable when comparing across models, suggesting that bonding social capital does not mediate the relationship between education and teacher perception of shared

goals. For the income variable, the spread between the highest and lowest categories did decrease slightly though not enough to argue that the impact of annual income is being mediated by bonding social capital.

Overall, this finding indicates that the presence of bonding social capital does not mediate the relationship between SES and teachers' perceptions that mothers shared goals with the school. Instead, the presence of bonding social capital has a unique and positive relationship with teachers' perceptions that mothers shared goals with the school.

Table 7

*Predicted Probabilities for Teachers Perceptions that Mothers will Share Goals with the School*

	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Education</b>		
Less than HS	.42	.33
HS/GED	.52	.40
Some college	.63	.51
4-year degree+	.81	.72
Difference in spread	0.39	0.39
Change in difference	0.0	
<b>Annual income</b>		
Less than \$10K	.54	.43
\$10,001-\$20K	.52	.40
\$20,001-\$30K	.59	.47
\$30,001-\$40K	.63	.42
\$40,001-\$60K	.56	.43
Greater than \$60K	.65	.51

Difference in spread	0.11	0.08
Change in difference	0.03	

### Discussion

Past research has been limited in terms of how social capital functions for parents from low-SES and marginalized backgrounds (Bassani, 2007; Gonzales, 2017). In fact, researchers have focused on the highly visible impact of higher-SES parents, especially in the context of higher-SES parents having greater influence on school policy and curriculum; disadvantages for lower-class parents are implied (Coleman, 1988; Horvat et al., 2003). Fewer researchers have focused on how lower-SES parents have used social and cultural capital; however, some research has shown that lower-SES parents do have access to these forms of capital (Freeman, 2011; Taylor, 2015).

In response, scholars have called for more research to examine how social capital works on a broader scale by focusing on specific dimensions of the theory and by exploring how different groups use social capital (Bassani, 2007; Johnson et al., 2011). By using the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study dataset, I took advantage of the unique way in which the FFCWS data documented the family/school relationship from both teacher and parent perspectives. In addition, the FFCWS data included the social resources available for parents from a broader perspective. This scope allowed me to examine the relationship between bonding social capital and cultural capital and gain a deeper understanding of how parents from lower-SES backgrounds used social capital in their relationships with their children's schools.



The findings lead me to question the assumption made by many scholars that bridging social capital is more valuable for “getting ahead.” In some contexts, bonding social capital alone may actually increase access to cultural capital. This study is important for bringing attention to the relationship between bonding social capital and access to a form of cultural capital found in shared goals between teachers and parents. When teachers perceive that parents share goals with the school, working together for children’s academic success could become easier.

Consistent with existing research, I find that higher-SES mothers are more likely to have cultural capital in the form of shared goals with teachers. For the different measures, education level at baseline seems to be the most important component of SES for predicting shared goals. However, mothers from all income and education levels have access to cultural capital in the form of shared goals; thus, the findings provide nuance to some of the research that has focused primarily on the cultural capital of parents from higher-SES backgrounds (Coleman, 1988; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 1987).

I selected questions from the FFCWS based on their capacity to measure bonding social capital. The responses showed that bonding social capital could increase the likelihood that teachers will perceive mothers as having shared goals, a type of cultural capital. Results of a logistic regression support the finding that teachers are more likely to perceive higher-SES mothers as sharing goals, compared to mothers with lower-SES. In the first regression model, after controlling for marital status, race, and gender of the child, teachers are more likely to perceive mothers as sharing goals with the school when mothers have higher levels of education during the baseline study and higher levels of

annual income in the nine-year follow-up. This finding is consistent with literature reporting the important positive effects of social capital for high-SES parents (Coleman, 1988; Horvat et al., 2003). However, the significance of income does not hold up in the second model.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Some limitations affected this study. First, the FFCWS data oversampled for participants from low-income and marginalized backgrounds; therefore, the data might not accurately represent some communities. In my analysis, the fact that I had to collapse my dependent variable likely led to the loss of some nuances within the data; however, the richness of the dataset provided a viable way to study bridging and bonding capital in more depth. An additional limitation in my analysis was the imprecision of using probability to test for mediation.

Further, by focusing on the mothers in this study, I ignored contributions that could come from examining the father data. In my analytical sample, the fathers were not as present as were the mothers for the focal children; therefore, including father data would have decreased the sample size significantly. However, future researchers should examine the role of fathers' social capital to discern how it contributes to the academic success of their children.

Finally, although the findings of this study add to a growing body of work on how social capital works for families from all class backgrounds, much more research is needed. Although this study is not focused on race, in light of the current political climate, it seems particularly important to explore possible negative effects that could

emerge regarding mothers identifying as Other in response to the question about race/ethnicity. Future researchers should seek to discover if language barriers are present and to identify ways to address limited access to bridging social capital for families who do not identify as members of the dominant culture.

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#### **Chapter 4: Belonging and Teacher Perception of Grit**

Grit, defined as persistence and passion for long term goals, has emerged as an important trait for success (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) Recent research has shown that grit is an important contributor to academic achievement (Christensen & Knezek, 2014), particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2014). The relationship between grit and belonging has been studied in multiple educational contexts, particularly in higher education (Becker, Schelbe, Roman, & Spinelli, 2017; Nora, 2004). At the elementary-school level, the relationship between belonging and grit has not been as highly documented. More research is needed on the relationship between grit and belonging because elementary school is the foundation for future success in school (Benner et al., 2016).

In this study, I investigate the level of grit reported by teachers for children from different class backgrounds as well as the effect of child-reported sense of belonging on teachers' perceptions that the children exhibited grit. Belonging represents social resources transformed into social capital (Bassani, 2007), made possible by "mutual acknowledgment and connection to others" (Lin, 2017, p. 5). In the study, I explore the relationship between social class, child reported sense of belonging and teacher perception of grit. I test whether teachers are more likely to perceive higher-SES children as exhibiting grit relative to lower-SES children. In addition, I test whether higher levels of belonging explain any differences in teachers' perceptions that children exhibited grit. This is important—if children from lower-SES backgrounds show higher levels of grit from feeling a greater sense of belonging, this finding could justify directing

more resources toward helping children feel a stronger sense of belonging as one way of addressing inequality in schools.

I argue that belonging acts as a form of social capital for children in the context of school, and further, I claim that children from all class backgrounds can access belonging as a form of social capital. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal study that provides a rich source of data related to child well-being. Because the FFCWS nine-year follow-up contains data from children, parents, and teachers, and because it oversampled for low-income participants, the FFCWS gives me a unique opportunity to explore the connection between sense of belonging and grit for children from all class backgrounds.

In the study, I use a teacher-reported measure for child persistence in completing tasks, which researchers have considered an important component of grit and a noncognitive skill that could be valuable in the context of education (Lareau, 2015). Measuring grit in this way and testing predictors of social class and child-reported sense of belonging provide a quantitative mechanism for documenting the relationship between social class, sense of belonging, and grit. Thus, one way this study contributes to existing literature is by offering a way to operationalize students' "grittiness" from a teacher perspective.

## **Grit**

Authors have primarily defined *grit* as consisting of a combination of two components—persistence and passion for longterm goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) or consistency of interest (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Bowman



et al., 2015; Weisskirch 2018). Researchers measuring grit have emphasized that persistence is the most salient aspect of grit when measuring correlation between grit and academic achievement (Bowman et al., 2015, Lareau, 2015), sense of belonging and self-esteem (Weisskirch, 2018), and noncognitive predictors of academic success (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017). For example, Weisskirch (2018) found that a higher level of belonging and self-esteem contributed to higher levels of perseverance and greater likelihood that college students would feel confident about their ability to do well in their courses (p. 25).

In measuring grit, some scholars have relied on self-reported measures of perseverance; however, some critics have considered self-reported measures a limitation because individuals often over- or underestimate their own abilities to persevere in completion of goals (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017). In response to this limitation, Akos and Kretchmar suggested that researchers use external measures for evaluating persistence. In the case of students in elementary school, their teachers are well positioned to act as external evaluators of children's grit.

### **Belonging and Grit**

Educators have applied their understanding of the important connections between belonging and grit to create programs aimed at helping college students, particularly those with less cultural and social capital, gain a sense of belonging in school (Becker et al., 2017). Researchers have documented the connection between grit and belonging in high school and middle school, usually in relation to finding ways to help support students who have less cultural and social capital make transitions more smoothly and

persist in their educational goals (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Kitano et al., 2018). In other words, students who have a stronger sense of belonging exhibit more grit.

Although studies have focused on the importance of belonging in terms of transition between grades and retention in higher education, limited research exists on the importance of belonging for helping elementary school kids persist toward educational goals. Focusing on how these concepts interact in elementary school children is important because research has shown that experiencing success and recognition early in life can promote a continued pathway to success (Benner et al., 2016, p. 1061).

Belonging has been positively correlated with components of grit in multiple studies. Specifically, researchers have found that sense of belonging and connectedness among peers is a significant resource that helps motivate people to persist in the face of adversity (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Won, Wolters, & Mueller, 2018). In other words, a stronger sense of belonging might correspond to higher levels of grit.

Belonging has been conceptualized as relatedness (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Osterman, 2000), as a process of sense making tied to place and value (Stahl & Habib, 2017), and in the context of membership in a particular group (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). These different ways of understanding belonging have been tied to academic engagement and grit (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; Stahl & Habib, 2017). Because of the components of relatedness and membership within a group, sense of belonging can act as a form of social capital. The element not clearly understood is the relationship between social capital (in the form of belonging) and teachers' perceptions of grit.

## Theory

### Social Capital Theory

The most important quality of social capital differentiating it from other forms of capital is that it is accessed through relationships (Coleman, 1988). Some researchers have studied how social capital functions at a group level (Lin, 2017); others have assessed how social capital functions at an individual level (Lin, 2017). However, social capital at all levels involves resources available through relationship (Lin, 2017). Most notable, within education, social capital has been framed using Coleman's (1988) research to support findings that the social capital accessed by parents from high-SES backgrounds gives them more power in school policy and curricular decisions. Coleman defined three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Coleman noted the advantages of higher levels of social capital demonstrated by parents from privileged backgrounds who combined their networking and economic resources to push for participation in decisions about anything from overarching curriculum to individual accommodations needed for their children. Although higher-SES parents have been assumed by researchers to have more social capital and to use it more effectively, parents from lower-classes theoretically could access and use social capital as well.

Few researchers have examined how parents from lower-SES backgrounds might access or activate social capital. However, families from lower-SES backgrounds do have access to social capital in various forms (Bolívar, 2011; Goddard, 2003). Much of the research on how families from lower-SES backgrounds use social capital has focused on

differentiating between bonding social capital and bridging social capital and showing how those elements work together or build on each other (Coffé & Geys, 2007; Larsen et al., 2004).

In a recent study, scholars investigated the contributions of both financial capital and social capital to student academic success and determined that social capital actually mattered more than did financial capital for student achievement (Salloum, Goddard, & Berebitsky, 2018). Salloum et al. (2018) considered social capital reported from a teacher perspective, in particular, how teachers estimated “trust, social networks, and norms” (p. 290). The authors noted the need for a measure of social capital from the student perspective (Salloum et al., 2018). This finding was consistent with other researchers recommending study of ways in which youth social capital differs from adult social capital (Bassani, 2007).

In addition to looking at different forms of social capital, researchers have focused on adding to theory by narrowing the unit of analysis; for example, researchers have examined how the social capital theory framework could apply specifically to the youth population (Bassani, 2007). Additionally, scholars have attempted to narrow the theoretical focus by concentrating on a particular context (e.g., school, home, medical field, tech industry, digital communication; Baym, 2015; Gonzales, 2017). Many current researchers have called for additional study to build a deeper body of literature within a particular subfield of social capital, so that educators could use it more effectively and intentionally (Bassani, 2007; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

One basic motivation for continued research into how social capital is defined, accessed, and activated stems from its role in reproducing or dissolving social inequality (Salloum et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to gain a deeper understanding social capital, including who uses it most effectively and how it can be developed for disadvantaged groups. A basic introduction and development of social capital has emerged from study of the interactions between families and schools (Coleman, 1988).

In this study, I respond to the need for more research on how social capital is conceptualized in different contexts., I specifically study one way youths make use of social capital (in this case, elementary-aged school children). I apply a measure of social capital reported by young people themselves. Thus, my findings build on literature specifically targeted to gain a deep understanding of youth social capital.

### **Belonging as Youth Social Capital**

Bassani (2007) wrote explicitly about the relevance of social capital for youth. Drawing on Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital, Bassani explored five areas of social capital with respect to how they were accessed and used for young people: (a) influences of social capital on well-being; (b) the positive nature of this connection; (c) transformation of social resources into social capital; (d) the complexity of creating social capital; and (e) the influences of family and school on young people's access to social capital (p. 18). For this study, the most relevant aspects of Bassani's research were areas *c* and *e*. In this study, belonging acts as a form of social capital attributable to social resources (e.g., feeling close, happy, safe, and connected). Additionally, I test whether this social capital resource (in the form of child sense of belonging) influences teachers'

perceptions of students' grittiness, a positive outcome that qualifies for element *e* on Bassani's list. In sum, grit can be a key factor in academic success and in some educational settings such as college an individual's capacity to exhibit grit is related to their sense of belonging (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Kitano et al., 2018). Investigating the relationship between belonging and teacher perception of grit in elementary school is important for extending the conversation about the role belonging plays in student success in elementary school – since grit is one key to academic success.

### **The Current Study**

In this study, I examined the connection between social class, children's sense of belonging, and teachers' perceptions of grit. Two research questions guided the study:

1. Are teachers more likely to perceive children with higher-SES as exhibiting grit, relative to children with lower-SES?
2. Do children's differences in feeling a sense of belonging at school mediate any relationship between children's social class and perceived grit?

. Although some qualitative researchers have studied the importance of student connectedness and teacher perception in schools (Bower, Van Kraayenoord, & Carroll, 2015), the questions from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study dataset allow me to examine the relationships among grit, SES, and belonging for elementary school children using quantitative methods. Thus, I have contributed to an important line of inquiry for thinking about interventions that can help children from all backgrounds succeed in school.

## **Data and Methods**

### **Data and Subset**

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) is a longitudinal study that followed a birth cohort of 4,898 children born in urban areas in the United States between 1998 and 2000 (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanaha, 2001). The study was conducted with a predominantly low-income, minority sample that has been followed for the last 20 years (year 15 data were recently published; FFCWS, n.d.). Children born to unmarried parents were oversampled by almost a 3:1 ratio; cities were selected to provide representative data for U.S. cities with 200,000 or more people (Reichman et al., 2001). The core study consisted of interviews with mothers, fathers, or primary caregivers, gathered within 48 hours of birth or soon after, followed by additional interview when children were one, three, five, nine, and 15. Approvals to conduct the interviews were obtained from both the Princeton University Institutional Review Board and the individual hospitals (Reichman et al., 2001).

I restrict the present study to a subsample of the nine-year follow-up FFCWS, which included teacher interview data about teachers' perspectives on focal children. In addition, the nine-year follow-up FFCWS included a questionnaire for the focal children, which contributed variables about students' feelings related to school. Parent data are used to determine SES. Cases were dropped if data were missing from the student, teacher, or parent surveys. From the original 4,898 cases, I dropped 2,651 cases in which the dependent variable was missing data; the large number of missing cases was attributable to the lower teacher-survey response. Because I rely on mother-reported data

for demographic variables, I removed 198 cases in which children were not living with their mother full-time. I removed 83 cases showing missing responses from child-reported variables. Finally, I removed 12 cases with missing demographic variables.

The final analytic sample consists of 1,954 cases with data from parents, teachers, and children. Table 8 shows descriptive statistics. In approximately half the analytical sample, the mothers identified as Black/non-Hispanic (49%); 23% identified as White/non-Hispanic, 24% identified as Hispanic, and 4% chose *Other*. About half the sample involved female focal children (48%). Mothers who were not married at the time of the baseline study made up the majority of the sample (74%). In terms of education level, more than half the mothers in the sample (61%) reported their education level was high school or less when their children were born.

Table 8

*Descriptive Statistics for Analytic Sample*

	Mean	SD	Range
Married at baseline	0.26		(0,1)
Unmarried (ref)	0.74*		(0,1)
Race/ethnicity			
White/non-Hispanic	0.23		(0,1)
Black/non-Hispanic	0.49*		(0,1)
Hispanic	0.24		(0,1)
Other	0.04		(0,1)
Female child	0.48		(0,1)
Male child (ref)	0.52*		(0,1)
Education	2.21	0.99	(1,4)



Less than high school	0.29		(0,1)
HS diploma/GED	0.32*		(0,1)
Some college	0.27		(0,1)
4-year degree+	0.12		(0,1)
<hr/>			
Annual household income	3.7	1.77	(1,6)
Less than \$10K	0.14		(0,1)
\$10,001-\$20K	0.18		(0,1)
\$20,001-\$30K	0.16		(0,1)
\$30,001-\$40K	0.13		(0,1)
\$40,001-\$60K	0.15		(0,1)
Greater than \$60K	0.24*		(0,1)
<hr/>			
Belonging index	12.41	3.77	(0,16)

*N* = 1,954; \*Modal category, (ref) = reference category for logistic regression

## Measures

### Dependent Variable: Grit

My outcome variable is teachers' perception of student grit. The nine-year FFCWS teacher survey contains a series of questions designed to collect attitudes about schoolwork and learning. I chose one of the questions that specifically addressed persistence as my dependent variable: "During the last month, decide whether the child behaved this way *never*, *sometimes*, *often*, or *very often* when considering how often they persisted in completing tasks?" Teacher responses were coded as 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, and 4 = very often.

### Independent Variables: Socioeconomic Status and Belonging Index

**SES: Income and Education.** Previous researchers have used income and education to measure socioeconomic status and job prestige (Benner et al., 2016; Lareau,

1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In this study, I include variables for mother's household income at the nine-year follow-up as well as education at baseline. Specific jobs were not reported in a way that prestige could be measured; however, the income and education variables serve as proxies for SES.

The FFCWS all-waves version of the dataset contains constructed variables for annual household income and education. I recoded the constructed variable for annual income to match the six ranges given as choices in the study questionnaire. Income ranges were coded as 1 = less than or equal to \$10,000; 2 = \$10,001 to \$20,000; 3 = \$20,001 to \$30,000; 4 = \$30,001 to \$40,000; 5 = \$40,001 to \$60,000; and 6 = greater than \$60,000. The constructed variable for education was broken into four categories. I recoded them to match so that 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school or GED, 3 = some college, and 4 = four-year degree or more.

**Belonging Index.** Several questions were asked of children in the FFCWS nine-year follow-up involving their feelings about belonging at school. Children were asked "Do you feel like you are a part of your school?" and asked to qualify if they felt that way *not once in the past month, 1 to 2 times in the past month, about once a week, several times a week, or every day*. In addition, children were asked to rate with the same scale whether they *feel close to people at school, feel happy to be at your school, and feel safe at your school*. Children's responses to these questions were coded as 0 = not once, 1 = 1 to 2 times in the past month, 2 = once a week, 3 = several times a week, and 4 = every day. I included these four variables together in a reliability analysis, which resulted in a

Cronbach's alpha of .69. I then constructed an index using all four variables by summing responses, resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 16.

### **Control Variables**

In addition to the independent variables, the analyses controlled for demographic variables known to correlate with SES, belongingness, and grit. These measures included mother's marital status (1 = married/partnered, 0 = otherwise), child gender (1 = girl, 0 = boy), and mother's race/ethnicity (White non-Hispanic, Black-non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and other). I recoded the variable for mother's race/ethnicity into dummy variables for each category.

### **Method**

In order to assess whether differences existed in teacher perception of grit for children from different SES backgrounds, I test for income and education differences in the distributions of teacher perception of grit using a chi-square test for both SES measures. This test shows whether differences exist in teacher perception of grit related to SES background before I control for other factors. Next, I apply multivariate models. To investigate whether teachers are more likely to perceive that children with higher-SES exhibited grit, I estimate logistic regression models predicting teacher perception of grit with mothers' reported income and education. In order to test whether children's sense of belonging mediates any relationship between teacher perception of grit and children's SES, I estimate logistic regression models predicting teacher perception of grit with children's sense of belonging. I then calculate the predicted probabilities for teacher

perception of grit in both models and compare the difference between lowest and highest probability for both income and education across both models.

Logistic regression presents difficulties during interpretation because of the presence of unobserved heterogeneity (Mood, 2010). Because variables that are not accounted for can affect results whether or not they correlate with other independent variables, care must be given to interpreting the results for logistic regression, particularly when comparing across models (Mood, 2010). In this case, I could not compare coefficients reliably across models; thus, the reported odds ratios are only reliable to show direction of effect contained within each individual model (Mood, 2010). To look for possible mediation and compare across models, I estimate the predicted probabilities of teachers reporting that children exhibited grit by each level of income and education before and after controlling for child-reported sense of belonging. Any differences in these predicted probabilities between models is expected to illuminate the relationship between children's sense of belonging and SES in terms of teacher perception of grit. In both models, I control for marital status reported during the baseline study, the sex of the focal child, and the race/ethnicity of the mother.

### **Results**

Table 9 shows differences by mothers' household income in teachers' perceptions of grit. The chi-square test, a test of nonindependence, proves to be significant ( $p < .001$ ). It appears that children with mothers who reported higher household income are more likely to be perceived by teachers as exhibiting grit. As the annual income reported by

mothers increased, the difference between the top and bottom categories for teacher perception grows.

Table 9

*Bivariate Analysis: Income*

Grit	< \$10K	\$10-20K	\$20-30K	\$30-40K	\$40-60K	> \$60K+
Never	10%	10%	9%	5%	5%	3%
Sometimes	36%	37%	33%	38%	30%	22%
Often	28%	34%	29%	32%	35%	32%
Very often	26%	19%	29%	25%	30%	43%

Chi-square = 96.48 ( $p < .001$ ).

For mothers in the lowest income bracket, 10% of teachers responded *never* to the question about whether they perceived children as exhibiting grit; 26% responded *very often* when asked whether children exhibited grit. On the other hand, for mothers in the highest income bracket, only 3% of teachers responded *never* to the question of whether children exhibited grit while 43% responded *very often* to the question of grit. Notably, teachers perceived at least half of all children as exhibiting grit *often* or *very often*, regardless of mother's reported income.

Table 10 shows the results of bivariate analysis for mothers' level of education and teacher perception of children exhibiting grit. In terms of the education reported at baseline, the test proves significant ( $p < .001$ ). The largest difference in teacher perception appeared for children of mothers with four-year degrees or higher. As the

level of education increased, the gap between the percentage of teachers reporting the top and bottom categories grew.

Table 10

*Bivariate Analysis: Education*

Grit	Less than HS	HS/GED	Some college	4-year degree+
Never	8%	8%	6%	2%
Sometimes	38%	32%	29%	22%
Often	31%	32%	33%	30%
Very often	23%	28%	32%	46%

Chi-square = 58.18 ( $p < .001$ ).

For children of mothers who reported less than a high school education at baseline, 8% of teachers responded *never* to the question of whether children exhibited grit; 23% responded *very often* to the same question. For children of mothers with four-year degrees or higher, 2% of the teachers responded *never* to the question about grit, and 46% responded *very often* to the same question. However, 54% of children with mothers who reported having less than a high school education during the baseline study were also perceived by teachers to be exhibiting grit, showing that many children, regardless of SES are perceived by teachers as exhibiting grit and therefore could gain the academic benefits that may have come with that grit.

### **Logistic Regression**

Table 11 shows the results from a logistic regression analysis. Model 1 includes the control variables and variables for socioeconomic status. Model 2 adds the belonging

index. In Model 1, relative to mothers with less than a high school degree, mothers with some college and those with a four-year degree were statistically significantly more likely to have children that teachers perceived as having greater grit. In addition, the SES variable of income shows a positive relationship with minimal statistical significance for the categories of \$40,000 to \$60,000 and greater than \$60,000. Results in Model 1 show that, relative to the reference category of less than high school, the education variable is significantly related across two categories; the income variable, relative to the reference category of annual income of less than \$10K, is only significantly related in two of the six categories, and the *p*-values for significance were higher for the education variable.

Table 11

*Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Models Predicting Teacher Perception that Children Exhibit Grit*

	Model 1 Exp(B)	(SE)	Model 2 Exp(B)	(SE)
Married at baseline	1.33*	(0.14)	1.36*	(0.14)
Unmarried (ref)				
Race/ethnicity:				
White/non-Hispanic (ref)				
Black/non-Hispanic	0.81	(0.14)	0.82	(0.14)
Hispanic	1.15	(0.15)	1.13	(0.15)
Other	1.22*	(0.29)	1.24	(0.29)
Female child	2.28***	(0.10)	2.20***	(0.10)
Male child (ref)				
Socioeconomic variables				
Education at baseline				
Less than high school (ref)				
HS diploma/GED	1.20	(0.12)	1.19	(0.12)
Some college	1.28†	(0.14)	1.27†	(0.14)
4-year degree+	1.46†	(0.22)	1.39	(0.22)
Annual income				
Less than \$10K (ref)				
\$10-\$20K	1.01	(0.17)	0.98	(0.17)
\$20-\$30K	1.15	(0.17)	1.11	(0.18)
\$30-\$40K	1.09	(0.18)	1.06	(0.18)
\$40-\$60K	1.40†	(0.18)	1.35	(0.18)
Greater than \$60K	1.98***	(0.19)	1.92*	(0.19)
Belonging index			1.05***	(0.01)
Constant	0.72		0.41***	



Pseudo r-square	.078	.085
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† $p < 0.1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

In Model 2, the statistical significance of education for the category some college remains the same as in Model 1. In contrast, when compared to the reference categories of less than high school and an annual income of less than \$10K, the education category of four-year degree or more and the category of household income from \$40,000 to \$60,000 are no longer statistically significant. Additionally, the  $p$ -value of the income category of greater than \$60,000 drops from  $p < .001$  to  $p < .05$ . Most notably, the belonging index shows significance for positive effects ( $p < .001$ ). Controlling for marital status at baseline, race/ethnicity, child sex, education, and income, for each increase on the sense of belonging index, children are 1.05 times more likely to be perceived by teachers as exhibiting grit.

Once I control for sense of belonging in Model 2, the variables of both education and income shift in categorical significance. This outcome could indicate that the effect of SES on teacher perception might be mediated by children's sense of belonging. However, comparison across models when using logistic regression is problematic because effects can change with the addition of new independent variables depending on variables not included in either model; therefore, relationships could not be deduced by comparing coefficients (Mood, 2010). To test if mediation is actually occurring, I calculate predicted probabilities for the predictor variables measuring SES in both models, using the following equation:  $\text{Probability} = \frac{\text{Exp}(A + B(X))}{1 + \text{Exp}(A + B(X))}$ . Table 12 shows the predicted probability results by category for education and income. In each case, I show the value attached to modal categories to account for other variables. In

addition, I report the difference in spread between the predicted probabilities for the categories of education and income in each model.

Table 12

*Predicted Probabilities for Teacher Perceptions that Students will Exhibit Grit*

	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	.54	.39
HS diploma or GED	.58	.43
Some college	.60	.45
4-year degree+	.63	.47
Difference in spread	0.09	0.08
Change in difference	0.01	
<b>Annual income</b>		
Less than \$10K	.41	.28
\$10-\$20K	.42	.29
\$20-\$30K	.45	.30
\$30-40K	.43	.30
\$40-\$60K	.50	.35
\$60K+	.58	.43
Difference in spread	0.17	0.15
Change in difference	0.02	

Results show very little difference in the spread between highest and lowest predicted probability within the categories for each variable when comparing across models. This finding indicates that child's sense of belonging does not mediate the relationship between SES and teacher perception of grit. Instead, children's sense of

belonging has a unique and positive relationship with teachers' perceptions that they were exhibiting grit.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Previous researchers have explored the connection between grit and academic achievement (Christensen & Knezek, 2014) and between belonging and grit (Becker et al., 2017; Nora, 2004). Results from my analysis show that belonging has a unique and positive relationship with teachers' perceptions of the presence of grit, conceptualized as teachers' perceptions of student persistence. Because research has shown that grit positively impacts educational outcomes, anything that increases the likelihood that teachers perceive students as exhibiting grit is important to understand. My study shows that an elementary school child's sense of belonging is positively correlated with teacher perception of grit, providing evidence that a sense of belonging can act as a form of youth social capital.

Because the measures for child sense of belonging seemed focused on children's connection with others at school, in this study, I was most interested in focusing on the role played by social capital with respect to teachers' perceptions of grit. However, there may be other aspects of belonging that are more tied to culture – for example of belonging is sometimes defined in connection with identity (Gray, Hope & Matthews, 2018). Some researchers have looked at the role of secondary school teachers as gatekeepers who reward students based on a broad list of characteristics that reflect membership within the dominant culture (Farkas et al., 2014; Lamont & Lareau, 1988;

Swidler, 1986). Because belonging can also be conceived as connected to identity, future research should explore sense of belonging as a source of cultural capital as well.

This study built on previous research to show one way that belonging can contribute to perception of grit, a quality shown to be important for academic achievement (Strayhorn, 2014). My results show that for elementary school children, belonging has a unique positive effect on teachers' perceptions that students exhibit grit. In addition, looking at grit as a developing characteristic supports the idea that belonging acts as a form of youth social capital, functioning as a mechanism that holds children in school where they learn habits and behaviors that translate into success in the dominant culture.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Results of the study indicate that more effort should be spent on developing policies that support creating a sense of community and belonging for elementary school children. Additionally, teachers should receive specific training on the importance of student belonging, including helping teachers develop habits, skills, and language specifically geared to facilitate student sense of belonging. Strategies and methods of behavior form in elementary schools; if belonging is an important contributor to grit, educators need to prioritize supporting students in a way that supports the importance of feeling included – belonging.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One limitation of this study was that it was not possible to derive meanings from teachers' and students' survey responses. Qualitative differences might exist across

experiences of feelings of belonging and perceptions of grit that this study did not capture. It is important for future researchers to explore elementary school children's understanding of what it means to belong and assess how children feel about their ability to persist related to their sense of belonging. Further study of the connection between belonging and social capital could help educators understand different ways that people from different class backgrounds navigate the educational system. Additionally, although in this study, I found a relationship between SES and grit, the mechanism for testing was not definitive; future researchers should question whether children's sense of belonging does in fact mediate this relationship.

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## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

I began my research with a desire to understand more deeply the role of different forms of capital in the relationship between home and school. I was motivated by the cognitive dissonance I perceived between the idea of the American Dream and the reality of social inequality. In addition, I felt that examining forms of capital within the context of school might foster a better understanding of how to reconcile the idea of school as a “great equalizer” (Johnson, 2006, p. 31) with the reproduction of social inequalities documented by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1989), Lareau (1987), and Farkas (1996).

### **Contributions from My Studies**

In the first paper, I found that teachers perceive both pros and cons when it comes to the use of digital communication to build and maintain relationships with parents. The pros of digital communication included teaming and positive check-ins, asynchronous timing and role validation, and behavior and special accommodations. The cons described by teachers included miscommunication and lack of boundaries as well as barriers related to access. Additionally, I found that the proliferation of smartphones in recent years has increased the ability of parents from lower-SES backgrounds to form relationships with teachers and work toward shared goals. I also found that smartphone apps might be a more inclusive way for teachers to communicate with parents across class background, particularly if there are language barriers, but that teacher proficiency with technology can act as a barrier if the teacher was less enthusiastic about pursuing different technological expertise.

In the second paper, I found that mothers across all class groups had access to forms of bonding social capital and that there might be some interaction between bonding social capital and the income component of SES. Most important, I found that bonding social capital was available to mothers from lower-SES families, and their bonding social capital had a statistically significant positive effect on teachers' perceptions that they shared goals with their schools.

In the final paper, I found that a child's sense of belonging was a form of social capital that had positive effects on teachers' perceptions that children would persist in completing tasks, an important element of grit. Given that retention is a constant concern of primary level and secondary level educators, an increased awareness of the power of this form of social capital presents many possibilities for influencing policies directed at improving educational experiences not necessarily tied to concrete monetary resources.

Overall, these three papers represent a significant contribution to the literature on social capital and provide many additional avenues of inquiry for future research.

### **Revisiting Themes from my Introduction**

#### **Social Capital and Social Mobility**

Putnam (2000) argued that diminished social capital affects the quality of the education American children receive and has the potential to create the most damaging consequences, specifically related to decreased opportunity for social mobility (p. 306). Education has long been named a key to social mobility, yet increasingly, the opportunities for social mobility seem to be shrinking, and policy makers have been unable to create educational systems that reduce rather than reproduce inequality (Brown,

2013). Brown argued that social mobility itself has actually become part of the problem because of society's inability to "resolve the central problem of educational and societal inequalities" (p. 10). In drawing attention to the central nature of education in the role of reproducing social inequalities, Brown underscored Putnam's findings highlighting the importance of education. Putnam connected the relevance of social capital:

Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. A considerable body of research dating back at least fifty years has demonstrated that trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group, and larger community have wide-ranging effects on the child's opportunities and choices and hence, on his behavior and development. (p. 296).

In my qualitative study on the role of email in facilitating parent-teacher communication, I investigated one area in which social capital could be enhanced to increase the odds of social mobility.

### **Cultural Capital and Lower-SES Families**

Farkas (1996) argued that scholars have spent too much time looking for differences in values possessed by families from different class backgrounds (p. 12). Instead, educators should understand that values are shared across all income groups; different levels of cultural capital "are better described as culturally-shaped skills, habits and styles than as values or preferences" (Farkas, 1996, p. 12). Skills, habits, and styles can be formed into "tool kits" that individuals use to carry out strategies to help them achieve their goals. Farkas (1996) argues that previous researchers have focused too much on the alignment of values between higher-SES parents and teachers to explain disparity of education outcomes (p.12). My findings provide more evidence that other factors are involved. The cultural capital lower-SES parents can access and activate might actually be a powerful tool in shifting stratification norms in elementary schools.

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## Appendix A: Qualitative Research Instrument

### *Interview Questions*

Tell me about how email is used in your communications with parents?

What kinds of emails do you send/receive?

(prompt) are they about how the child is doing? Informational? Different topics?

From your perspective, what are some of the benefits of email communication with parents?

Can you tell me a story about an email communication that highlights this benefit?

From your perspective, what are some of the struggles or difficulties involved in email communication with parents?

Is there a story you are willing to share that illustrates this issue?

Have you noticed any change since the proliferation of smartphones in the frequency of technology based communication?

How do you perceive smartphones as impacting the use of email in parent/teacher communication?

Is there a story you can tell me that demonstrates the impact that smartphones have had?

What is the role of email in building a partnership with the parents of your students?

Are there specific strategies you use when emailing parents in order to facilitate being on the same page?

Have you thought of other ways you could use email in communication with parents?

Tell me a story of one email interaction that you have had with one of your student's parents that stands out as particularly meaningful for you.

Why does that particular interaction stand out?

*Short demographic survey*

Age:

Gender:

Race:

Marital status:

Education:

Occupation:

Annual Income (circle one):

30-39K

40-49K

50-59K

60+



## **Appendix B: Quantitative Codebook**

The following is a list of codes used in my quantitative analysis which came from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The allwaves version was used as a source for data.

### Constructed variables

Race/eth – cm1ethrace

Household income – cm5hhinc

Mother's education at baseline – cm1edu

Child sex – cm1bsex

### Mother survey

Marital status – m1a4

Social support

Count on a friend to loan \$200 – m5e3

Count on a friend for a place to live – m5e4

Count on emergency childcare – m5e6

Count on friend to co-sign \$1000 bank loan – m5e6

Count on help to pay for child's extracurricular activities – m5e6b

### Child survey

Do you feel part of school – k5e1a

Do you feel close to someone at school – k5e1b

Do you feel happy at school – k5e1c

Do you feel safe at school – k5e1d

### Teacher survey

Do you feel parents share goals with the school – t5d7

Do you feel that child persists toward completing tasks – t5b2