

Article

Collaborating with Families for Innovative School Mental Health

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Abstract: In this study, a comprehensive narrative literature review is presented, examining the cross-section between family engagement and student mental health. Guided by two research questions and grounded in resiliency theory, the overlapping spheres of influence framework, and the literature on protective factors and positive childhood experiences, this study unveiled five primary themes: emphasizing the importance of educators promoting supportive relationships at home, engaging families in building teacher–student connections, collaborating to establish routines and rituals, nurturing a sense of belonging at home and at school, and fostering collaborative problem solving and self-regulation. These themes are illuminated through practical vignettes. This study guides school-based mental health practitioners and educators and provides a roadmap for future research in family–school partnership for enhancing student well-being.

Keywords: family engagement; parent involvement; student mental health; protective factors; promotive factors; positive childhood experiences



Citation: Bachman, H.F.; Cunningham, P.D.; Boone, B.J. Collaborating with Families for Innovative School Mental Health. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 336. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030336>

Academic Editors: Dawna-Cricket -Martita Meehan, Sharon L. Custer, Kristy Brann and Kyle Bush

Received: 11 January 2024

Revised: 12 March 2024

Accepted: 18 March 2024

Published: 21 March 2024



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1. Introduction

In 2021, the United States Surgeon General issued an advisory warning of “alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges” for youths, among them persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, increased suicidal ideation, and a rise in visits to emergency rooms to treat related concerns [1] (p. 3). Findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s 2011–2022 Youth Risk Behavior Survey underscore the urgency of the Surgeon General’s advisory: mental health among youths continues to decline post-pandemic, with significant increases in depressive symptoms and thoughts of, plans for, and attempts of suicide, particularly for female and LBGQ+ youths [2].

Challenges for youth mental health did not, however, begin at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trauma has had a well-documented impact on the long-term health and well-being of children and youths. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined as potentially traumatic events occurring before an individual reaches adulthood [3]. Over 60% of children in the U.S. have reported exposure to ACEs [4], which may include exposure to violence, having a loved one attempt or die by suicide, or growing up in a context of substance abuse, mental health issues, or instability [5]. Other factors potentially contributing to ACEs include persistent discrimination based on identity [6,7] and experiencing homelessness or other economic hardships [8].

Fortunately, protective and promotive factors may lead to better social, emotional, physical, and academic outcomes for children and youths by buffering the harmful effects of ACEs [9,10]. These factors can also be referred to as positive childhood experiences (PCEs), which research has shown to directly mitigate the impact of ACEs [11]. Examples include parental support during hard times, family closeness, family traditions, and school engagement [10,11]. Resilience in youths is built through experiences they have in the interactions in systems such as schools, families, and communities. Shifting to strategies

for the interaction in homes and schools that build protective and promotive factors has the potential to counteract the adverse effects of trauma and develop resilience [9,10,12]. Thus, home–school partnership interactions that build protective and promotive factors can maximize efforts to develop resilience in youths [13].

Whereas individual research studies have examined siloed solutions to specific research questions, no prior research has attempted to synthesize findings across family engagement and mental health to surface a set of comprehensive research-backed strategies. To this end, in this study, we sought to review the relevant research literature to explore the role of family–school partnerships for innovative student mental health support. Our study drew upon the family engagement framework of overlapping spheres of influence, in which optimal collaboration among home, school, and the community is represented by three overlapping spheres, with the child represented at the intersection of the overlap [14]. In this model, the more the three spheres of influence are in harmony, the less dissonant influence will be exerted on the child. From the field of mental health, we drew upon resiliency theory, which posits that children (and the systems within which they exist) can adapt successfully to significant challenges [9]. Specifically, we asked the following research questions:

1. What family–school partnership themes support students’ general, everyday mental health and well-being?
2. What specific collaborative practices of educators and families align with these themes so that students experience mental health support at home and at school?

2. Materials and Methods

To explore the research questions of the study, we used a narrative review method, taking care to eliminate potential sources of bias by identifying explicit criteria for inclusion and a systematic approach to analysis. A narrative review was selected because family–school collaboration in students’ mental health is a relatively new area of scholarship. Thus, a narrative review is appropriate for identifying current themes across studies and research gaps in the body of knowledge [15].

2.1. Sources of Information

We used the following databases to conduct our search: APA PsychINFO, Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and Education Research Complete. Additionally, once we found sources that appropriately matched our selection criteria, we engaged in citation mining where we looked at well-cited sources within the articles we were reviewing. We also used Google Scholar to view articles that had cited the articles we were reviewing in order to discover additional sources relevant to our topic.

2.2. Search Terms

In our search of the research literature, we primarily focused on “protective factors”, “promotive factors”, “positive childhood experiences”, and “adaptive success in the face of trauma”. Although each of these terms has slightly different definitions, they are well-cited within the literature on trauma, mental health, resilience, and preventative and proactive support for children and adolescents. Their use provided a great many studies to review.

2.3. Selection Criteria

We included studies that provided research and background on specific factors, strategies, or interventions related to preventative approaches supporting child and adolescent mental health and well-being. Additionally, studies were included if they provided this information within the specific contexts of school or home. Studies were excluded when they did not refer to specific factors that support or aid school-age children or adolescents either at home or in school. We also excluded studies that emphasized only reactive approaches to treating trauma after the trauma had occurred. Sources were included when they were

peer-reviewed, government reports, or research-based intervention models. Only sources written in English were reviewed.

2.4. Analysis Process

After selecting studies for inclusion, we analyzed studies through a detailed and iterative process. This included taking thorough notes on the primary themes that emerged from each study and highlighting specific opportunities for preventative measures within the home or school environment. Once a comprehensive list of prominent protective factors was generated, we reviewed the notes on each factor to see which protective factors had been researched from the perspectives of home and school with opportunities for partnership between the two. A matrix was created in which protective and promotive factors supported by at least two studies were listed on one axis, and family strategies and school strategies were listed on the other. Studies were placed within the matrix to generate a synthesis indicating multiple sources of support for each factor. After selecting the final high-impact, partnership-focused protective factors, we sought out additional research on each factor to provide a comprehensive overview of each factor and to generate an understanding of opportunities for collaboration between families and schools.

3. Results

Our analysis of the research literature revealed five primary themes. These themes are useful for guiding educational practitioners in partnering with parents and caregivers to support the positive mental health of children and youths. Each theme is detailed with support from the research literature. Then, examples in practice are provided to illustrate how the theme may be enacted in real-world, school-based settings. We base our examples in practice on our experience in K-12 school districts; however, the school vignettes we provide in this article are fictionalized for illustrative purposes.

3.1. Theme One: Students Benefit When Educators Encourage Supportive Relationships at Home

One theme emerging from the research literature is that a major protective factor for children against the negative impacts of trauma is having supportive relationships at home [9,10,16–18]. The mechanism for this protective factor is through the family relationship being defined by parenting that is nurturing and builds connection, which, in turn, promotes a sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in children and youths [19]. Schools can promote positive relationships in the homes of students by supporting and celebrating one type of family engagement—parenting.

In the Epstein model of parental involvement, family engagement in education is delineated through six types of actions: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decisionmaking, and collaborating with the community [14]. The first, parenting, highlights the critical role of parents and caregivers in establishing home environments conducive to learning and development. Schools have an essential role in supporting the role of parenting. Educators must seek to understand and honor the many forms of parenting evidenced in the school community and position parents as integral and reciprocal partners with the school [20]. Every family is unique, with different strengths and ways of showing care toward their children. When schools support unique ways of demonstrating nurturing and connection in parenting, children benefit [21]. Educators support parenting by creating a welcoming school environment where parents and caregivers feel fully integrated, establishing partnerships that support the family unit, and valuing how families care for children. Educators can also provide information about child development and ideas for supporting children and youths at home; these messages are strengthened when co-created, shared, and evaluated by families themselves [22].

In addition to celebrating and supporting parenting as a form of family engagement, research also indicates an opportunity for schools to support parents' and caregivers' own mental health [10,23]. Parents and caregivers for whom their own mental health and physical needs are provided have an increased capacity to establish homes that buoy

their children's healthy development. Educators and schools can implement formal and informal programs to address the home environment by supporting positive parenting while advocating for and raising awareness of community-based resources available to support caregivers' needs.

Finally, family relationships can be strengthened through informal support and community efforts. Schools' efforts to build a community among families and to address parent and caregiver well-being can improve children's mental health [24]. Schools can sponsor or encourage parent and caregiver networking to increase family well-being through positive social connections with other families [25]. In addition, educators must also be sensitive to the negative prior experiences many parents and caregivers have had with schools themselves. Working to proactively create welcoming, positive, and open relationships between school personnel and families can counteract these negative experiences and promote a more positive experience with their children's school [26].

Theme One in Practice

James was a boy who had difficulties focusing in class and often received referrals to the Green Grove Elementary School office for his behavior. His mom, Mary, was accustomed to receiving phone calls from the school detailing his latest discipline issue, and though she always followed up with James about these issues, she was becoming exasperated with the phone calls. They often entailed her having to leave work to go to school, resulting in lost wages. After a certain point, she started occasionally avoiding picking up the phone because she knew nothing positive would come of answering.

Recently, James' school began a practice of making regular, positive phone calls home. James' teacher, Ms. Smith, called Mary to praise James' creativity and to express how she values Mary's engagement in her son's education. Ms. Smith mentioned how James was particularly focused on a project blending science and art to create a visual model, and how he had emerged as a leader of the group with whom he was collaborating. Mary was taken aback by the change in tone of the conversation and opened up to Ms. Smith regarding her concerns with James' behavior in school and at home. She shared her perspective about the origins of his behaviors, his strengths, and ways that she has had success in redirecting James at home. These positive phone calls home opened a two-way dialogue between Ms. Smith and Mary about ways to support James. The calls positively impacted James' relationships with his teacher and mom and improved both his teacher's and mother's work experiences.

3.2. Theme Two: Students Benefit When Families and Schools Are Engaged in Building and Supporting Relationships between Teachers and Students

Among other important protective factors for children and youths, a particularly salient one is a trusting and caring relationship with an adult outside of the home [27,28]. The school is one setting for such relationships due to the significant amount of time children and youths spend there. Adults outside of the school have been shown to influence the quality of teacher-child relationships [29]. When families are more engaged in their children's education at home or through two-way communication with the school, their children are more likely to have close and harmonious relationships with their teachers [29]. Children and youths feel more welcomed by the school when their families engage in two-way communication with the school [30]. Children also have more positive relationships with their teachers when their families have a greater sense of efficacy for supporting their learning at home [30].

When teachers and their students have positive relationships, students are more likely to experience a number of benefits, such as increased school engagement, improved social functioning, adjustment to school, and academic achievement [31–33]. When teachers and students have high-quality relationships, those relationships are characterized by warmth, empathy, and encouragement of learning, whereas negative relationships are characterized by conflict [32]. Students are more likely to have positive relationships with teachers

when teachers have a greater sense of well-being, which indicates that an emphasis on teacher well-being could yield more positive teacher–student relationships [34]. Other school-based strategies to enhance positive teacher–student relationships include getting to know students and their families, developing shared norms with the class, establishing routines and rituals as a community, using positive behavior reinforcement, and positively redirecting negative behavior [35].

Theme Two in Practice

After reviewing their school’s data regarding discipline referrals and suspensions, the Green Grove Elementary School leadership team decided to implement restorative practices throughout their school. They established a goal of decreasing suspensions and increasing equitable discipline practices. The team viewed restorative practices as a way of creating stronger relationships among students, between teachers and students, and between school personnel and families in their community. All the teachers and staff in the building received professional development on restorative practices, with a special focus on the implementation of restorative circles. Although there was some initial pushback from some of the teaching staff regarding the change in practices, after implementing these changes for two years, the school administration noticed a significant decrease in both office referrals and suspensions. Teachers also noticed a significant increase in students’ abilities to apply problem-solving skills to minor interpersonal conflicts in the moment, without the need for adult intervention.

Families were viewed as crucial collaborators through this process as well. The school offered workshops for families on these restorative practices and sent home messages to families regarding the purpose of these changes and what it would look like for their child. Additionally, depending on the situation involving their child, families were invited to join the restorative circles. Families’ wisdom in solving conflicts in their homes and communities was valued, and, in turn, they became vital sources of knowledge for the school community. Ultimately, due to their shift in practices, Green Grove Elementary School noticed that the relationships among students, between teachers and students, and between the school and families were enhanced.

3.3. Theme Three: Students Benefit When Rituals and Routines at Home and at School Support Students’ Growing Sense of Identity and Stability

Family life and schools are both contexts that provide opportunities for establishing routines and rituals that enhance the sense of stability and identity for children and youths. As children grow, in addition to adverse childhood experiences, they encounter daily minor stressors, such as losing things, witnessing family arguments, and having difficulties with school assignments [36]. Children and youths who are repeatedly exposed to minor, frequent stressors are more likely to develop psychological symptoms that lead to internalizing and externalizing behaviors [37,38]. In addition to challenges related to a sense of stability in daily routine, children and youths also develop a sense of personal identity throughout adolescence [39]. Unfortunately, often youth self-esteem tends to decline during the transition to middle school [40].

Routines and rituals both have important roles in supporting children and youths’ mental health. Routines are consistent, daily practices creating structure and stability, such as packing lunch at home at a certain time every day or having a predictable homeroom class at school. Rituals are less frequent practices that build culture and community because of the special meaning placed on the activity [41,42]. Rituals carry a greater sense of meaning and tradition, such as family holiday celebrations or school pep rallies. Both routines and rituals serve as a protective factor for children and youths, buffering against the impacts of trauma and daily stressors and promoting a sense of overall well-being [43–45]. Specifically, even when experiencing a high frequency of daily stressors, children and youths who report more daily routines experience better psychological functioning than those who

report fewer daily routines [37]. Rituals, on the other hand, promote a sense of belonging at home and at school and aid in personal identity development [46].

Why is a collaboration between home and school important in routines and rituals for children and youths? First, when children and youths sense that home and school have similar values and expectations, they experience less anger, perform better academically, and have higher self-esteem and academic self-efficacy. In addition, children and youths who experience similar values and expectations at home and school are more hopeful than students who report experiencing greater dissonance between home and school [47]. To build student expectations that share the values of families, schools should prioritize a strengths-based family engagement approach. Such an approach prioritizes understanding and incorporating families' routines and rituals into school-day practices [48]. Doing so has the potential to benefit students' sense of identity and stability as they experience meaningful rituals and consistent routines at home and at school.

Theme Three in Practice

Green Grove Middle School is in a rural, agricultural county. Many of the families across the county are farmers or are engaged in agriculture in some way. Historically, the staff at Green Grove Middle School have persisted with planning their traditional, school-based parental involvement events aimed at getting parents and caregivers to support the school's goals. Over the years, fewer and fewer families attended annual Open Houses, Literacy Nights, or Back-to-School Nights. Additionally, in the school community, the high levels of anxiety and depression reported by students in the school in recent years are of great concern. The school staff recognizes that their current opportunities to build partnerships with families to support students are not effective. They wonder if there is a better way to create a sense of community between the school and families to support students' experiences of positive school rituals.

In an effort to form collaborative partnerships with families in the school and to help build a sense of school community for the students, the administration at Green Grove Middle School formed an advisory committee with several representative parent members. As a team, the advisory committee decided to establish an annual, family-centered Harvest Festival at the school. The festival occurs just before the start of the major agricultural harvest season each year and serves as a celebration for the entire community. Several community organizations agreed to volunteer their time and services each year to create an event that is focused on celebrating a rich cultural tradition with deep roots in the community, and open to all members of the students' families and the families of school staff members as well. The Harvest Festival has become an anticipated annual event filled with favorite family games, traditional foods, local music, and local vendors. All school staff members and most families attend the Harvest Festival each year. It has become a valuable tradition for the entire community that is grounded in the cultures of families and traditions of the local area.

3.4. Theme Four: Students Benefit When Educators Nurture Students' and Families' Sense of Belonging within the School Community

The research literature also indicates that students experience benefits when educators support students' and families' sense of belonging in the community of the school. A strong sense of belonging can be considered a protective factor because it buffers against the effects of trauma. A sense of belonging can be defined as feelings of acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support from others in the school community [49]. School belonging encompasses the teacher-student relationship, a student's experiences within the school, and a student's feelings toward school [50]. School belonging is particularly salient for adolescents, who are most sensitive to feelings of social identification or isolation [50].

A sense of belonging has benefits for students' schooling and well-being. First, school belonging has several important outcomes for students at school. It is associated with higher levels of academic adjustment, better behavior at school, and a more positive

attitude toward school and learning [50–52]. Second, the benefits for students socially and psychologically include increased happiness, adjustment, and self-esteem, and decreased violence, bullying, emotional distress, and risk taking [50–52].

Even more than peer support, research has demonstrated that teachers and family members are significant contributors to students' sense of school belonging [50]. When students believe that their teachers are willing to assist with problems and care about them, they feel like they belong at school. Families also contribute in several ways to a child's sense of school belonging through the quality of family relationships [16,53–57], family support for learning [58,59], social support from families [17], and family communication [60,61]. Schools can collaborate with families to enhance and support these contributions families make to students' sense of belonging in school through two-way communication [30,54]. In addition, promoting family engagement in school extracurricular activities has been shown to increase students' sense of school belonging [62].

Theme Four in Practice

After reviewing schoolwide trends in student data regarding their sense of school belonging, Green Grove Elementary School decided to prioritize Tier 1, preventative practices that they hoped would increase all students' sense of belonging. Several new practices and programs were implemented. First, the school adopted a whole-school program, Caring School Community, that had research results indicating its impact on students' sense of belonging. This program emphasizes relationships among the entirety of the school community. Second, Green Grove made efforts to restructure the timing within their school day to allow for student clubs and interest groups to meet weekly during the school day. The purpose of this change was to create opportunities for students to interact and connect regarding shared non-curricular interests.

Families were viewed as collaborators throughout the implementation of these changes. A group of parent and caregiver leaders and students were invited to join the committee that reviewed several school-wide programs and ultimately selected Caring School Community. Additionally, parents, caregivers, and students were invited to share their perspectives regarding the changes that were made to the school schedule. They were able to provide input regarding the clubs and interest groups that were developed to foster community among the students. By the end of the first school year, student data revealed a significant increase in students' sense of school belonging.

3.5. Theme Five: Students Benefit When Educators and Families Collaborate to Encourage Students to Solve Problems and Self-Regulate in a Range of Contexts

Across their lifespan, humans face challenges and must solve problems and self-regulate to achieve optimal outcomes. Problem solving and self-regulation, both categorized as executive functioning skills, help children and youths focus, plan, make progress toward goals, regulate emotions and behaviors, address challenges, and solve problems [35,63]. These skills are used to succeed in the face of challenges throughout life [9]. Unfortunately, adverse childhood experiences and prior trauma hinder problem solving and self-regulation, which have long-term detrimental effects on children's and youths' academic achievement and mental health [3].

Problem solving and self-regulation can be developed through school–family collaboration [64]. A few methods that develop problem solving and self-regulation include games and physical activities geared toward skill building, music and art, and practice with setting goals [64]. The selection and implementation of problem solving and self-regulation activities should match the age and developmental level of the child. Schools can partner with families in the development of problem solving and self-regulation by integrating idea sharing into family engagement activities and events. Schools can also add tips for family conversations to existing educational practices such as homework and share strategies with families for use with their children at home. Educators should also solicit information from families about what problem solving and self-regulation strategies are already used

in homes so that school-based strategies can align with culturally relevant family practices with which students are already familiar.

In addition to specific skill-building, healthy sleep patterns and mindfulness have both been shown to be associated with problem solving and self-regulation [65,66]. Schools can incorporate mindfulness into the school day and share information with families about the benefits of mindfulness and simple, age-appropriate strategies for practicing mindfulness at home [65]. Schools can also learn from families about students' sleep patterns, communicate the importance and benefits of sleep, the range of sleep needs across human development, and how to promote healthy sleep patterns [66–68]. Schools should also gather feedback from families to inform policies affecting school-based factors, such as start times and homework load, that contribute to sleep difficulties for students [69].

Theme Five in Practice

Green Grove High School decided to implement a daily, schoolwide mindfulness program to positively impact students' self-regulation. The program involves encouraging students to engage in a "mindful minute" at the beginning of each class and includes a set of brief lessons taught over the course of three weeks to help students develop their mindfulness skills. Additionally, to encourage family involvement in the lessons the students are learning, the school counselors decided to use a text messaging service to send out weekly, brief messages to the students' parents and caregivers. Among the messages were brief explanations of some of the concepts that were being taught regarding mindfulness as well as conversation starters that parents and caregivers could use when talking with their children about mindfulness. The hope was to share more about the benefits to students of mindfulness, explain how the school was helping to develop students' mindfulness skills, create some shared language with families around mindfulness, and generate opportunities for parents and caregivers to talk to their children about what they were learning.

To create messages that would be most useful to families, the school counseling team invited a panel of six families (parents, caregivers, and their students) representing all three schools in the district to help write and test the content. They ensured that the families they invited included a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds to best reflect the full school community. Families gave their advice on what topics to include, how long the messages should be, and how often they should be sent. They also helped create a short video featuring the family representatives explaining to other families what mindfulness is and how it is beneficial to students. The team decided that each week, the final message of the week would be a "Did you try it? What did you think?" message. Families could reply to the school with their feedback. This practice was very useful to the school counselors to continue to refine the mindfulness program for future years. As a result of incorporating family perspectives in planning, parents and caregivers, staff, and students had the sense that everyone was on board with the mindfulness program. Students had new strategies to calm down in stressful situations, and both families and staff reported improved self-regulation at home and at school.

4. Discussion

The five themes revealed by the research discussed in this article suggest that schools and families have the potential for powerful collaboration to support student mental health and well-being. Critical practices supporting family–school partnerships can enhance positive familial relationships as well as positive relationships with teachers and other non-family adults, the development of routines and rituals, the strengthening of a sense of school belonging, and encouragement of problem solving and self-regulation. Each of these strategies brings with it numerous benefits for students' mental health and well-being as described in detail in the results. A consistent thread across the research is that students benefit from school–family collaboration in support of their well-being, particularly when

practices are aligned across contexts through two-way communication and valuing students' family experiences and knowledge.

The Ohio School Wellness Initiative [70] serves as an example of school–community–family collaboration to support student mental health and well-being. In this model, four guiding pillars have been identified as essential to resources and activities for student mental health: systematic, equitable, collaborative, and sustainable. Family–school partnerships reflect the intersection of two systems. Effective partnerships between these systems are equitable, including the families of all students. They are also, by definition, collaborations between families, school personnel, and students. These partnerships mirror the essential conditions underscored by the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships [71], which is divided into process conditions and organizational conditions. Process conditions include relational, linked to learning and development, asset-based, culturally responsive and respectful, collaborative, and interactive. Organizational conditions include systemic, integrated, and sustained. The themes revealed by the research literature express approaches proposed by both the Ohio School Wellness Initiative and the Dual Capacity-Building Framework by proposing strategies that are systemic and proactive, integrated throughout children's daily home and school lives, collaborative, and built on the belief that both educators and adult caregivers have knowledge and skills to offer, and are sustainable and sustained throughout a child's day-to-day life and over their development.

4.1. Implications for Future Practice and Research

4.1.1. Research

Our study is the first to synthesize findings across family engagement and mental health to surface a set of comprehensive research-backed strategies. As the exploration of protective and promotive factors continues to develop, additional research is needed to test specific interventions designed to enhance home–school partnerships that strengthen protective factors. While this article revealed evidence-informed themes for partnerships, research on these protective factors is largely siloed and focused on either schools or homes and not their intersection. However, partnership-based approaches that occur in that intersection have been shown to lead to positive outcomes for students, and it is reasonable to believe that these benefits would extend to efforts focused on enhancing the mental health of children and adolescents. With that said, more empirical support is needed to better understand the benefits that specific interventions designed to form partnerships between schools and homes in support of mental health would have on students. This research could involve both quantitative data focused on specific mental health outcomes as well as qualitative data that explores the experiences of schools, families, and students as these interventions are implemented.

4.1.2. Practice

Efforts to enhance partnerships between homes and schools in support of mental health are greatly needed. By focusing on protective factors, schools can provide preventative and proactive support to students. Additionally, by taking a partnership approach to working with families in providing this support, schools can enhance the benefits to students. These efforts can occur across all levels of the school, involving administrators, teachers, school counselors, and all other members of the school community. Focusing on protective factors may include practices that occur on an individual level, within classrooms, or with individual students. They may also involve school-wide practices or programs designed to engage families and students in support of mental health. Regardless of when and where this support occurs, schools may wish to inform their faculty and staff on the importance of protective factors, their role in providing these supports, and opportunities to partner with families to enhance their impact.

4.2. Limitations

As a narrative review, our study aimed to synthesize prior research studies in a relatively new field of study: family engagement in support of student mental health. However, our selection of a narrative review comes with some limitations. Because our purpose was to determine family–school engagement themes that support student mental health, we may have unintentionally limited our awareness of studies that supported an opposing viewpoint. Narrative reviews have been criticized as being subjective, lacking explicit inclusion criteria, and thus leading to biased interpretations or inferences [72]. We took care to document our inclusion criteria and reduce subjectivity to mitigate this effect; however, this remains a potential limitation with this type of review. A follow-up systematic literature review or research study would help illuminate further the research questions posed in our study.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we conducted a narrative literature review of relevant research to investigate how family–school collaboration may support student mental health. Throughout our investigation, we aimed to close a research gap by synthesizing as-yet disparate and siloed findings in student mental health by exploring two primary research questions. First, what family–school partnership themes support students’ general, everyday mental health and well-being? Second, what specific practices of educators and families align with these themes so that students experience mental health support at home and at school? Our literature review revealed five primary themes: (1) students benefit when educators encourage supportive relationships at home; (2) students benefit when families are engaged in building and supporting relationships between teachers and students; (3) students benefit when rituals and routines at home and at school support students’ growing sense of identity and stability; (4) students benefit when educators nurture students’ and families’ sense of belonging within the school community; and (5) students benefit when educators and families collaborate to encourage students to solve problems and self-regulate in a range of contexts. Taken together, these themes provide a guide for future research and practice. School-based mental health practitioners and educators can use the guidelines offered by our review of the literature to steer collaborative efforts with the families of their students in support of student mental health and well-being. Researchers can further explore family–school partnership interventions based on these themes and test their effectiveness in promoting student mental health. Improved child and youth well-being can be supported more effectively through understanding and capitalizing on the synergies and unique benefits of practices within the shared system of family–school partnerships.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.F.B., B.J.B. and P.D.C.; Methodology, P.D.C.; Formal Analysis, P.D.C.; Investigation, P.D.C. and B.J.B.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, H.F.B. and P.D.C.; Writing—Review & Editing, H.F.B. and B.J.B.; Funding acquisition—B.J.B.; Supervision—B.J.B.; Project administration—H.F.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Contents were developed as part of a Statewide Family Engagement Center grant from the US Department of Education, #84.310A, by The Ohio State University. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created in this study. Data analyzed are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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