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"I'm Somebody You Can Come to": How Teachers Cultivate Social Connections Among Black Students Post COVID-19

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Abstract

Amid concerns over the unequally distributed long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for children and schools, there is a renewed focus on mechanisms to promote positive wellbeing and restore social connections among Black students. As teachers are lauded as critical in supporting student well-being, their perspectives may help to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for Black students and leverage the contributions of families and communities to support students' needs. Using interviews with teachers, we examined the following aims: (1) Investigate the mental health challenges Black students experienced following the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) Identify school-wide efforts to support resilience. Participants in this study included 15 teachers nominated by their principals and colleagues for demonstrating excellence in supporting Black students. Teachers described their Black students as experiencing (1) ongoing mental health problems, (2) disengagement from school, and (3) relearning how to socialize. To promote social connections and wellbeing, teachers described how their schools reinvested in connection and prioritized equitable access and use of technology. Understanding the unique mental health challenges Black youth face is critical for cultivating pathways towards resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic. Results contribute to the continued investigation and intentional promotion of equity and cultural responsivity when supporting Black students' wellbeing. Researchers and educational shareholders can work to create and maintain socially and emotionally supportive environments that promote mental health by learning from the experiences of Black students and the teachers that support them.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Black youth; social connection; mental health

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1. Introduction

Resilience—though widely used and defined—has been characterized in many ways (see Southwick et al., 2014). Although once viewed primarily as an individual trait, it is now more commonly understood as a broader, dynamic process (Allen et al., 2018). In research and public discourse, the term has frequently been applied to marginalized communities. Specifically, for Black communities, this has translated into expectations of enduring and overcoming adversity, including the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow laws, police violence, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic created a collective disruption that produced long-term stress. For groups already facing significant barriers—such as Black youth—the risk of negative outcomes increased exponentially (Osman et al., 2025; Salami et al., 2024). In the wake

of the pandemic came unprecedented levels of loneliness, anxiety, and prolonged social isolation (Wilkialis et al., 2021), all of which posed significant threats to the long-term social connections for Black youth. As society continues to adjust to its "new normal," these challenges persist and understandably shape the experiences of Black youth in schools, particularly in terms of their relationships with peers and teachers. These social disruptions outweigh the notion of resilience as an individual responsibility. Instead, they call for system-level approaches to resilience that prioritize wellbeing and meaningful social connection for Black youth. Schools are a critical site for understanding the experiences of Black youth because they are primary social environments where academic pressure, racial dynamics, peer relationships, and access to support services intersect—factors that were significantly disrupted during COVID-19. Teachers offer a valuable perspective because they regularly observe students' behavioral and emotional changes, witness structural inequities firsthand, and can provide insight into both the challenges students face and practical, school-based solutions to support their mental health. In the current study, we used the insights of teachers to examine the ongoing social challenges Black American youth in the United States face following the COVID-19 pandemic and identify school-wide efforts to support resilience.

1.1. The COVID-19 Pandemic

As of approximately 13 March 2020, many have argued that modern day life as we know it was changed forever. Since then, the term "unprecedented" has often been used to describe the events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and the months and years following. In its early days, the COVID-19 pandemic was described as the "great equalizer," assuming we all equally experienced its effects (Mein, 2020). Later, some would later refer to "twin pandemics," where marginalized communities were experiencing the effects of COVID-19 in addition to economic and environmental effects of racism (Douglas et al., 2023; Luttrell et al., 2022). In turn, Black communities were more likely to contract COVID-19, and Black youth were 2.4 times more likely than their White counterparts to have a parent or caregiver die (Douglas et al., 2023; National Institutes of Health, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, a significant stressful life event, would mark fears about contracting the virus, economic uncertainty, and the civil unrest that ensued. These stressors were coupled with the normative stressors Black youth experienced in their daily lives (see Miller et al., 2002; Ortega-Williams et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Scholars have argued that social support was crucial for mitigating the negative impact of COVID-19 stress (Butler-Barnes, 2023). Although schools are often critiqued for their unfair treatment of Black students (see Dumas, 2014; Hope et al., 2015; Simson, 2013), research also finds that these are contexts which can provide vital social connections necessary for their long-term health (Rose et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2022).

1.2. The Inequitable Impact of COVID-19

Beyond disproportionate health and economic consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic also intensified longstanding racial inequities within schooling contexts. During remote instruction, unequal access to reliable internet, quiet learning spaces, and consistent adult supervision created additional barriers for many Black youth (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Inequity, however, was not limited to issues of access. In some settings, schools reproduced familiar patterns of surveillance and discipline in virtual environments (Welsh, 2022), where Black students were more likely to be penalized or removed from online classrooms for circumstances tied to their home contexts, including background noise, caregiving responsibilities, or perceived disruptions. These dynamics raised concerns that

anti-Black disciplinary practices were being translated into new formats, further straining relationships between schools and Black families and communities.

Alongside these realities, the pandemic unfolded alongside a national and global racial reckoning following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black individuals. For Black youth, schooling during this period occurred within a broader sociopolitical climate marked by racial trauma, grief, and heightened awareness of systemic injustice. Schools were not insulated from these realities; in many cases, they mirrored and at times amplified the tensions shaping students' daily lives (J. M. Jones, 2021). Taken together, these conditions suggest that Black youths' schooling during COVID-19 cannot be reduced to generalized narratives of learning loss. Instead, it is more accurately understood as a layered experience shaped by racialized stress, institutional inequities, and disrupted social connection.

These compounded inequities likely influenced how Black youth returned to school and how teachers interpreted students' disengagement, distress, and relational needs in the present study. The disproportionate consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic create ongoing social challenges for Black students' wellbeing, and it is imperative that research not only understand this impact but uncover school-wide efforts to reestablish social connections.

1.3. Schools Responses to COVID-19

Global estimates indicate that 1.6 billion students experienced school closures and learning disruptions at the start of the spring of 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Within the United States, COVID-19 exposed deep rooted inequities entrenched in the educational system, which influenced how educators and schools responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing inequities shaping the experiences of minoritized students (Childs et al., 2023). Schools implemented a variety of responses immediately following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the months that ensued, with many of these practices still in place today in hopes of mitigating and recovering the "learning losses" students experienced (Page et al., 2021). Specifically, in response to COVID-19, schools have engaged in changes in their policies *and* practices impacting students including utilizing new technological platforms to better engage with students (Tackie, 2022), adopting grading policies to offer students the opportunity to make up coursework without jeopardizing their grade point averages (Protonentis et al., 2021), and using more holistic, person-centered practices such as "modeling vulnerability," trauma-informed care, and daily compassion (Grooms & Childs, 2021).

Central to many of these changes were the pivotal role of teachers in supporting their implementation and sustaining connections with students. Beginning in adolescence, students begin to exhibit declines in their connection to teachers (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). However, through these relationships, teachers demonstrate their nurturing qualities and importantly, provide students with social support that fosters social and academic development and improves the classroom environment (Lam, 2019). Furthermore, positive student–teacher relationships are associated with greater academic achievement (Sointu et al., 2017), in addition to long-term overall health, physical health, psychological health, and lower substance use (Kim, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted student–teacher relationships, which schools must continue to try to repair (Newberry & Hinchcliff, 2024; Soemantri et al., 2023). For example, Vagos and Carvalhais (2022) found that although teachers in their study perceived no differences in the quality of relationships with students, many students viewed online learning as impersonal, and perceived high conflict after the pandemic. Despite the general feeling of distance following the pandemic, there is evidence which suggests that social support from teachers has improved. In fact,

many teachers report providing more individualized attention to students, being more available to their students through varying means (e.g., email, messaging services) and becoming more accepting of their students' lives (Newberry & Hinchcliff, 2024; Tackie, 2022). As teachers are identified as critical agents for providing social support to students, their insights can be used to better understand the ongoing consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for Black students. Through leveraging the perspectives of teachers, this study uncovers their interpretations of the pandemic's impact on Black youth and informed by their on-the-ground experience within schools, elucidates how schools have sought to foster resilience among Black youth.

After the wide range of responses enacted by schools, communities, leaders, and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, an essential question remains: *What comes next?* For many schools, the pandemic was the catalyst to uncover social inequities, reevaluate emergency responses, and generally "do better by kids" (Grooms & Childs, 2021). There remain ongoing efforts from educators and scholars to reinvest in education and learn from the lessons taught by the COVID-19 pandemic. One prominent example of this is from Darling-Hammond and Hyler (2020) who detail 10 key priorities for reinventing schools beyond COVID-19, which include

> (1) closing the digital divide; (2) strengthening distance and blended learning; (3) assess what students need; (4) ensure supports for social emotional learning; (5) redesign schools for stronger relationships; (6) emphasize authentic, culturally responsive learning; (7) provide expanded learning time; (8) establish community schools and wraparound supports; (9) prepare educators for reinventing schools; and (10) leverage more adequate and equitable school funding.

These assertions were similarly shared by Childs et al. (2023) who highlight the need for more attention to teacher training and preparation to create curricular equity, cultivation of stronger relationships with students and families, and recognition of the importance of collaborations within and outside of school. In a study on the resetting of education priorities, De Klerk and Palmer (2021) found that following the pandemic, the educational realities have "been laid bare" which has sparked principals to create opportunities for the broader school community and students themselves to be included in school decision making.

1.4. Understanding Black Youths' Wellbeing Post-COVID-19

To understand the ongoing social challenges Black youth face following the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw upon the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer et al., 1997; see Figure 1). Specifically, the PVEST is a framework for understanding the bidirectional nature of how youth interpret and make meaning of their experiences, their responses, and long-term outcomes (Spencer et al., 1997). Under PVEST, there are *risk contributors*, factors that predispose individuals to adverse outcomes, which can include varying social positionalities which shape Black youths' understandings (Spencer, 2021). Next, we focus on *net stress engagement*, which refers to the actualized risks that require responses. This net stress engagement can include normative racialized experiences such as experiencing discrimination, but in the context of this study, can include stressful life events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic marked disruptions for school, emotional and physical health, home life, and social events (Grasso et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021). We posit that together, the normative stress of everyday racism confounded with the stress from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to influence Black youths' *reactive coping processes*, which are problem solving strategies that are utilized to mitigate the negative impact of risk on outcomes. As Black youth have struggled to establish and/or maintain social connections within schools without the necessary supports, this has resulted in consequences for their *stable emergent identities*,

how individuals view themselves in and between their various contexts, with long-term implications for *life-stage-specific coping outcomes*, such as mental health and wellbeing, which we detail below.

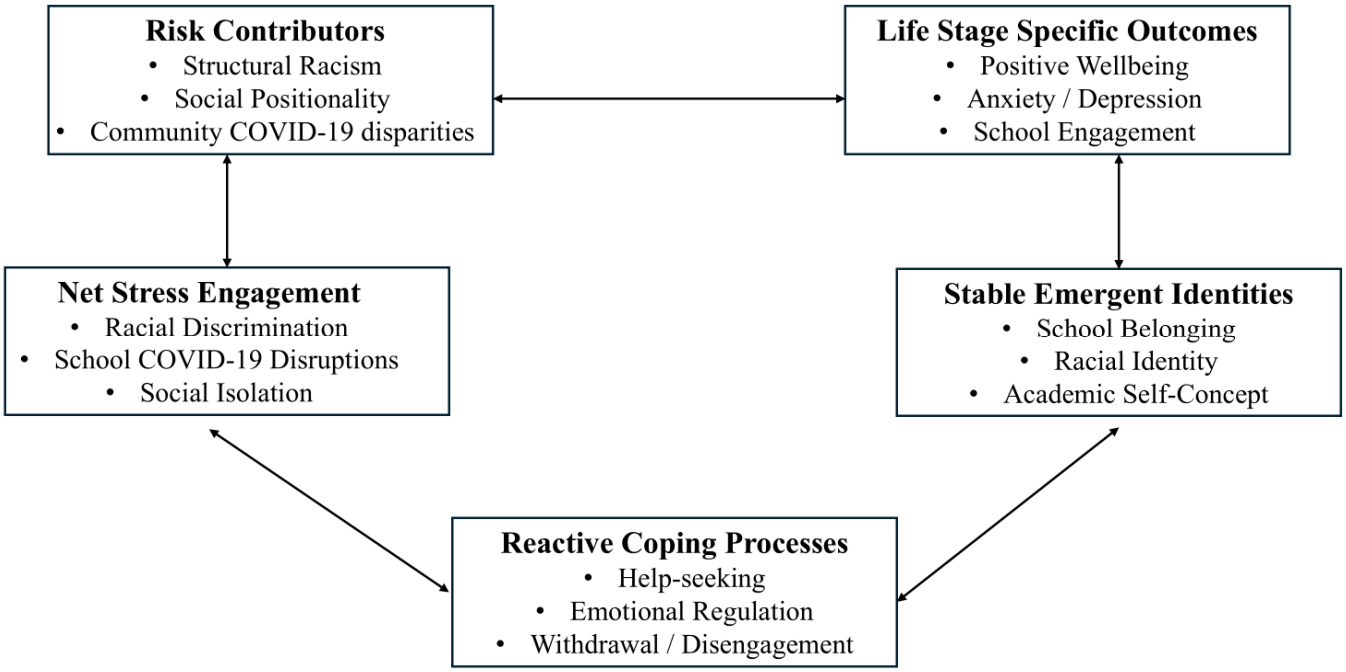

Figure 1. PVEST Framework Applied to Black Youths' Experiences Post COVID-19 Pandemic.

Considerable research has documented the disproportionate mental health challenges experienced by Black youth. In fact, studies on Black youth have found that nearly half experience a mental health disorder before the age of 18, they often report more suicide attempts, and between the ages of 5–12 years old their rates of suicide are two times higher than their White counterparts (Planey et al., 2019). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, these rates have only worsened, particularly as mental health service provision declined as the effects of the pandemic, social isolation, and racism increased (Douglas et al., 2023). Accordingly, evidence shows that following the pandemic, Black youth continue to experience increased stress, depression, and anxiety (Brouillette et al., 2025) and decreased concentration, motivation, and focus related to academic tasks (Parker et al., 2021). For example, in their study examining the intersecting influences of anti-Black racism and the pandemic, Osman et al. (2025) identified that Black youth experienced high stress levels and fear, in addition to anger and emotional fatigue from lack of shared, long-term solutions to the problems they faced. As the ramifications of the pandemic for Black youths' wellbeing continue to be documented, the time now is for solutions. Many are pointing to schools to increase individual supports and implement prevention initiatives that align with the needs of communities (Wright et al., 2023)

1.5. The Current Study

As of 2025, the pre-existing challenges brought to light from the pandemic, and those which were created by the pandemic, continue to persist. While many have proposed conceptual solutions for rebuilding connections in schools and supporting Black students' wellbeing, in the current study, we wanted to understand how these ideas are actually being implemented in schools today. Teachers are lauded as critical in supporting student well-being; thus, their perspectives may help to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for Black students and utilize the contributions of families and communities

to support students' needs. Using interviews with teachers, the current study examined the following aims: (1) Investigate the social challenges Black students experienced following the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) Identify school-wide efforts to support Black students' resilience. We underscore the importance of prioritizing school-wide efforts to strengthen resilience, rather than expecting individual teachers or students to shoulder the responsibility.

2. Methods

This qualitative study uses interviews with teachers to understand Black youths' experiences following the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing efforts from schools. Specifically, we sought to address the following aims: (1) Investigate the social challenges Black students experienced following the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) Identify school-wide efforts to support Black students' resilience.

2.1. Participants and Procedures

Data were collected from teachers whose schools participated in a statewide study of middle and high school–aged youth in Arizona. As part of a larger study of Black youth, schools were identified that reported at least 5% Black student enrollment. This threshold was chosen to reflect the overall proportion of Black residents in Arizona (5%) and to ensure alignment with the state's demographic composition. To obtain the study sample, purposive and snowball sampling were used where administrators were solicited to nominate teachers (Debnam et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Specifically, administrators nominated teachers they believe demonstrated excellence in supporting Black students. Nominated teachers were contacted via email and those who were interested consented and were screened for eligibility based on their age and current work status.

A total of 15 teachers were included in the study. Of these 15 teachers, 7 currently taught in middle schools (46.6%), while 8 were high school teachers (53.3%). A majority of the sample identified as female and reported at least 15 years or more of teaching experience (n = 8, 53.3%). Participants self-reported their race, where a majority identified as White (n = 10, 66.6%), 20% were multiracial (n = 3), and the remainder identified as Hispanic/Latinx (n = 2, 13.3%). All participants taught in schools in Maricopa County, which is the largest county in the state and reports a population of Black residents (5.4%). Table 1 includes participant pseudonyms and demographic information.

Table 1. Participant Names, Race, Grade Level.

Participant Name	Race	Grade Level
Allie	White	High School
Amber	White	Middle School
Alice	White	High School
Beth	Multiracial (Black, White)	Middle School
Daniel	White	Middle School
Desmond	Multiracial (White, Asian American)	Middle School
Jace	White	High School
Jacob	Latinx	High School
Kensli	White	Middle School
Kristopher	White	Middle School
Jasmine	Latinx	High School
Lisa	Multiracial (Black, White, Latinx, Native American)	High School
Mason	White	High School
Rachel	White	Middle School
Seth	White	High School

2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants completed semi-structured interviews via phone or Zoom between May 2022 and July 2022. The interview protocol was developed as part of a larger study understanding Black students' experiences of school belonging. As part of this study, participants were asked questions pertaining to how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their students', which was used for the current study. Specifically, participants were asked questions which included *How are your students talking about how COVID-19 has impacted them? What strategies or supports do you provide to help them still feel connected?* Probes were used to encourage teachers to think specifically about the experiences of their Black students (e.g., *Can you tell me about how this may impact Black students in particular?*). Participants were invited to ask clarifying questions throughout the interview. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min. Following the completion of their interview, teachers were invited to nominate colleagues who also demonstrated a history of supporting school belonging among Black students. All procedures were approved by the IRB at the author's institution.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine implicit and explicit responses that informed the generation of culturally responsive practices (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Transcribed data were analyzed with Dedoose software (Dedoose version 9.0, 2022). Two researchers engaged in the data analysis process and utilized a template approach to develop the preliminary codebook (Patton, 2002), additionally, interview notes and memos guided thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Throughout the coding process, as new codes emerged, they were included in the codebook. Upon establishing the codebook, we defined and refined all the codes. Consensus coding was used to promote consistency and trustworthiness in the application of codes between the author and research assistant. During coding, the researchers engaged in memo writing for each transcript to document their reflections about concepts, quotes, and ideas. Check-ins were held frequently to discuss coding assignments, meaning and contextualization of data, and points of clarification. Upon completion of coding all interviews, an iterative process of clustering codes into themes based on conceptual similarities and consensus was used (Braun & Clarke, 2021), then the two coders held a debriefing session to resolve discrepancies.

2.4. Research Team Positionality

Foundational in the research process is understanding researcher positionality. To fully engage in this process, Milner (2007) posits that researchers (1) understand ourselves, (2) understand ourselves in relation to others, (3) engage in reflection and representation, and (4) shift from self to system (p. 395). Accordingly, below we elaborate our individual and collective position as they relate to how we come to this research on Black students, social connection, and resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic. We write as a team of Black women researchers deeply committed to advancing mental health equity and supporting the collective uplift and well-being of Black students, educators, and their communities. Our conceptualization of this article is reflective of our rich and varying positionalities which shaped our own experiences of stressful life events, schooling, and resilience. Our individual and shared experiences, assumptions, and biases informed the research questions, analysis, and influenced our interpretations.

The first author is scholar of racism and school belonging whose experiences as both a former student and pre-service educator informed her understanding of how COVID-19 reshaped schooling, community well-being, and everyday educational practices. This positionality influenced her development of the interview protocol, particularly in the intentional framing of questions to elicit reflection on relationships, care, and systemic

conditions affecting Black students. During data collection, her identity as a Black woman researcher may have shaped interview dynamics where some teachers may have been more hesitant to discuss race, particularly given the majority White sample. While some participants may have possessed more colorblind attitudes, many framed their responses through equity-affirming narratives, culturally responsive practices, or engaged in heightened reflexivity regarding race and institutional barriers, potentially influencing what was shared, both emphasized and deemphasized, and left unsaid.

The second author is a Black woman, counselor educator-in-training, and practicing clinician who brings both clinical and educational perspectives to this work. Her positionality informed analytic attention to mental health language, emotional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the insights on Black youths' well-being. Her training also shaped sensitivity to how trauma, grief, and stress were discussed by teachers and how these accounts were interpreted within a systemic framework and the subsequent implications for youth and families, educators, and mental health professionals.

Throughout data analysis and writing, we engaged in intentional reflexive practices to mitigate confirmation bias and over-identification with teachers' or youths' experiences, particularly in light of our own lived experiences and positionalities which have been further shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. These practices included reflexive memo-writing following interviews, analytic journaling during coding to document assumptions (e.g., colorblindness) and emotional responses (e.g., surprise, excitement), and regular analytic check-ins between coders to interrogate emerging interpretations. Coding interpretations were used as opportunities for reflexive dialog rather requiring explicit justification for how themes were constructed, refined, or collapsed.

In this study, PVEST functioned as a framework that oriented attention to school and social contexts, stress processes, and meaning-making while allowing space for alternative interpretations to be considered and debated. We actively examined whether interpretations foregrounding systemic inequities could obscure other explanations (e.g., teacher burnout, school policies and resources), and themes were refined through iterative discussion to balance theoretical alignment with fidelity to the data. We also acknowledge that our positionality shaped what data were foregrounded and how meaning was constructed. Our commitment to centering Black youths' well-being and resilience influenced our prioritization of relational and systemic narratives over individualized or deficit-oriented explanations.

3. Results

In the current study, we used interviews with teachers to understand Black students' experiences following the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers described numerous social challenges experienced by their Black students, including worsening mental health, heightened disengagement, and struggles with resocializing in school. Importantly, teachers identified two practices implemented by schools to support Black students which included reinvesting in connection and embracing technology. Below, findings will be presented in alignment with each research aim, beginning with results related to identified social challenges Black students faced and followed by findings pertaining to school-wide efforts to support resilience.

3.1. Social Challenges Post-COVID-19

The findings indicated that post-COVID-19, teachers perceived Black students as experiencing three primary social challenges impacting their connections in school, which included: (1) Ongoing mental health problems, (2) Disengagement from school, and (3) Relearning how to socialize.

3.1.1. Ongoing Mental Health Problems

The first social challenge described by teachers was that Black students continue to experience ongoing mental health problems after the COVID-19 pandemic. Rachel, a White middle school teacher, stated that even once schools returned to in person learning students had fears about contracting COVID-19.

> Especially at the beginning of the year, a lot of my kids are really stressed because most of my kids ended up getting COVID-19 at some point. And they'd have to be gone from school for like a solid 10 days, which, that's a lot of school to miss. So, kids are really stressed at the beginning of the year.

This stress was a result of fear of contracting COVID-19 and coping with the loss of loved ones. This was a severe issue among Black students, as Amber, a White middle school teacher, stated, "The only thing my kids spoke about was they felt isolated. And my demographic [of students] lost a lot of family."

Unsurprisingly, these feelings of loss and isolation had a significant impact on Black students' daily behaviors. Jasmine, a Latinx high school teacher, described visibly seeing her Black students struggle, where "I think it's very telling just the observations that you can make and see that the kids are not okay. They are not okay. And I just, I let them be as much as possible." Similarly, Lisa, a multiracial high school teacher, shared, "They shut down in a lot of ways. And they don't want to be seen, you know, there's like this invisibility thing." Many teachers felt that these mental health problems had reached unprecedented levels after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a Jacob, a veteran Latinx teacher, asserted,

> I'm going into my 20th year as an educator, and never in those previous 19 years had I experienced the mental health issues that I experienced this past school year. Where like, I actually had very frank conversations with 15, 16, 17-year-olds about their mental health. It just had never presented itself as, as obviously, as it did last year.

3.1.2. Disengagement from School

Teachers in this study consistently remarked on how post-COVID-19, Black students were much less engaged and invested in school. Desmond, a multiracial middle school teacher, described this trend emerging in the early days of the pandemic during virtual learning and noted that it has persisted even with the return to in-person learning. For example, he stated,

> On average, we had about 4 out of 28 kids engaging per class with online learning. [The] rest of them just kind of disappeared, never heard from a lot of them again. By the time the next school year came, our enrollment was down about 300 kids, and we're only at about 1600. And so we had all these kids that were just missing, gone. We don't know if they transferred, or where they had gone. But I think it definitely, when we came back to the hybrid models, a lot of kids still chose not to, you know, come back, they wanted to, you know, stay at home, some of them that were attending virtually, literally would join me and then put you in your pocket, and then they'd be working. So they had other things they were doing. And school was not the priority. And so when they were forced to come back on the campus, the school year, or this last school year, full time, no hybrid, no virtual. They were so just as disconnected, like they were physically here, but they had no interest in being here.

From this account, although teachers recognized their students were physically present in school, it was obvious that they did not want to be there.

Across participants, the manifestations of students' disengagement from school were described in numerous ways. A major component of engagement in schools includes students' investment in learning and academics. Subsequently, the COVID-19 pandemic had serious implications for Black students' academic success, and Beth, a multiracial middle school teacher, stated,

> It [COVID-19] also further alienated a lot of students because so many students failed and that I know that was nationwide. And it was certainly true with you know, in our school and across the state across the country. So many students failed so many classes. I've never seen so many students behind this far ever in my teaching career. So it's further made a lot of students feel like they are failures. . . because they did fail classes. And they failed so many classes. So it's just yeah, it's in terms of belonging it has made, some of them want to belong more than ever, but it has made it harder, because for so many of them, they're, like now not on track for graduation, and for years, and it is making them feel, you know, more like, pessimistic about school. So I think it's had a huge negative impact.

This quotation illustrates how failing classes was only the start of the turn of events for student engagement. Even as students tried to cope with COVID-19, the educational ramifications were already in place. In turn, students began to have more negative views about academics in general.

In addition to Black students being disengaged from the academic components of schools, teachers also noted disengagement from extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are critical for student involvement and eliciting feelings of pride and ownership. In contrast, students who do not engage in extracurricular activities may miss out on the opportunity to develop these feelings. Kensli, a White middle school teacher, described how she noticed there was, "really more of a focus and a struggle working with young kids on campuses, getting them back involved in things, trying to get them to go out for sports again, or joining a club." She went on to describe the importance of encouraging extracurricular involvement for Black students,

> Because so many of them during that time became like parents reified. And so really, their job was to go home and take care of kids now, or they got a job to help pay bills. And so that's been really a struggle with getting kids back involved. The pandemic really kind of broke down that community that had been there. And now it's a process of building it.

Finally, teachers alluded to more general disengagement from school among students. Beyond failing academically or their lack of extracurricular involvement, students' disengagement seemed to be the result of simply no longer recognizing the value of education and/or the role of teachers. This was described by Jasmine who said,

> I think that with what happened with COVID-19, there's been a lot of a split. That divide where I think some people saw more value in teachers because they couldn't do it all on their own and everything. But then I think some people had some negative examples, or some bad things happened. And so now there's this like, well, we don't need education, we could do it this way, we can go online, we don't need the teacher.

The stress resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic led to what some teachers felt was a breakdown of trust in education and loss of value seen in the role of teachers, both of which are crucial for Black students' engagement. Teacher–student relationships are integral to fostering healthy engagement; however, it may be even more challenging to cultivate these relationships as a protective factor among students who are disengaged.

3.1.3. Relearning How to Socialize

The final theme related to teachers describing limited social skills among Black students post-COVID-19. It appeared that many students had grown comfortable with virtual learning and were struggling to cope amid expectations of in-person learning and socializing with peers again. This was described by Alice, a White high school teacher, who stated that the biggest challenge was students' needing,

> That sense of community again, and learning how to interact, especially for the younger crowd, you know, learning how to interact appropriately. Mostly, it's just a lot of immaturity. In some ways, I know, a lot of them are big seventh graders, and they didn't get some of that social interaction that was okay in seventh grade doesn't really fly in high school. And so sometimes that alienated a few of the students that I can think of that were kind of on the more immature side there.

Another teacher noted that the challenges with socialization were not only noticed by teachers but felt that students were also aware that they needed more support in orienting back to school. For example, Kristopher, a White middle school teacher, said,

> I think, now more than ever, *students* realize that they need the social aspect that comes along with being in a school. I think having these poor kids be isolated for so long, and not really be able to see their friends on the level that they were able to at school is huge.

Many teachers attributed students' socialization problems and lack of social connection to the noticeable increases in challenging or disruptive behaviors. Allie, a White high school teacher, noted an influx of fighting related suspensions at their school, where,

> The main things that students are being suspended for would be at this point would be fighting. And then just disrespect issues with teachers. And I mean, you kind of run into a problem of cultural differences. Like if I were to look at the racial demographics of the teachers that work at my school versus the students that we serve, there's probably a primarily white teacher, middle age versus our demographics of our school being Hispanic, Black. And so I think there's definitely some cultural differences there and how some cultures might talk or express to each other that is not necessarily transferred over well to another culture. And COVID-19 disproportionately affected, low income, and Black and Hispanic students. And I think we see that a lot at my school that they really are coming from a lot of trauma from the pandemic. And so that creates an issue when you've got to really amped up people talking to each other. There's not a lot of self-regulation present.

It was suggested that there was an interaction between socialization and race, where racially minoritized students appeared to have a harder time adapting back to school, which had major consequences. This interaction between race and socialization problems among students was similarly described by Amber, a White middle school teacher, who expressed,

> I wouldn't even say it's fighting. It's the name calling. And I have heard all three of them being called, you know, the white derogatory, the Hispanic derogatory, African American derogatory words, all being thrown out... But this year has been a big problem with it. I don't know if it's because they've been locked up with COVID-19, or what, but it's been a lot. The years before I never had a problem with the name calling.

To address these problem behaviors that increased after COVID-19, teachers felt they needed to resocialize their students on how to behave in the classroom. To facilitate this resocialization to classrooms required intentionality from teachers, like Lisa, who stated,

> They also have forgotten how to behave in a classroom setting. So, we've had to really explicitly teach behavior and skills like that. And review those behavioral skills multiple, multiple times. And just reinforce and stay on top of it. And that's where my consistency helps. Especially like, please raise your hand. This is not how we walked in the line. We're going to practice all those little things. This is where we walk in the classroom. This is the classroom traffic patterns, things like that. But there are reasons for every single thing I do. And I explained that, well, if you leave your chair, someone's going to trip and fall, most likely me. Yeah, and there are a couple of times where kids left chairs out, and someone tripped and fell. This is why we push in our chairs. But it's the socialization skills of that nature.

3.2. School Wide Efforts to Support Resilience and Foster Connection

Following teachers identifying the social challenges their Black students faced, they importantly discussed intentional ways schools sought to redevelop students' social connections. Accordingly, we detail teachers' accounts of school-wide practices for fostering resilience and connection. Teachers identified two initiatives utilized by schools: (1) Reinvesting in connection, and (2) Embracing technology.

3.2.1. Reinvesting in Connection

One way schools sought to help Black students was through intentionally reinvesting in connection. Under this theme, teachers asserted that there were unified and concerted efforts to demonstrate to Black students that they were valued. The first way schools reinvested in connection was encouraging students to confide in adults about concerns they were having. For example, Beth stated,

> I know a lot of teachers tried. And I have specifically been talking to them about their anxiety and specifically their social anxiety. Because these guys are just ramped up after like a year of hardly ever seeing anyone. Oh my gosh, like they're just like, the social anxiety is through the roof. So, I talk to my students a lot this year, and I'm sure I'll continue to have to talk to them about it next year.

Consistently, quotations from teachers highlighted the importance of students having a trusted adult in school. Teachers were aware that many of the bonds between teachers and students had been broken amid virtual learning. Desmond stated, "So I think we are in the midst of repairing that [relationship] and trying to do our best and no one really knows how but we're starting from you know, a relationship. Because that's what we can do." An important aspect to fostering connections was having a physical space to talk to students, and for many teachers, this meant having an open-door policy in their classroom. This was evident particularly when students were in crisis or feared punishment. Amber stressed ensuring her classroom was open and available for all students,

> I just let them come in my room and talk, you know, making sure that they understand that I'm here, and sometimes they'll come to me before admin, and they'll say, "Oh, my gosh, so and so wants to fight with me." And I'll be like, "Hey, I'll take care of it." So just understanding that I'm not just your teacher, but I'm somebody that you can come to. Another [student], she went to the bathroom, and another student came and ran into the classroom and gave her a vape pen. She freaked out. But she's not getting in trouble. She literally just told me like, "I'm gonna just tell you what happened." She got no punishment, because our philosophy is tell us the truth.

Part of reinvesting in connection was demonstrating to students that they could trust teachers. Another example of this was teachers implementing changes in their classroom practices and building moments to foster connection. For example, Rachel, a White middle school teacher, stated, "In general, there's been a lot of focus at the school on like social emotional learning and planning lessons entirely around that, just as students learn how to like interact with each other kindly again."

The second way schools reinvested in connection after the COVID-19 pandemic was through organizing structural supports in schools. At the institutional level, schools implemented mental health professionals at sites so students could work with adults with specialized training. At her school, Allie described,

> I know with kids that are in like the lower quartile that are struggling with school, and we try to put them in connection with adults and more of a one on one with academic interventionists. This coming school year, we'll also have a behavioral interventionist new position at my school and they're also starting a Dean of Students position where it'll be somebody that helps work with some of those behavioral issues and targeting students to help them kind of reacclimate to being a student.

Teachers demonstrated that reinvesting in connection required multiple mechanisms, which included teachers making themselves and their classrooms available to students, reinforcement through changes in the classroom, and structural supports.

3.2.2. Embracing Technology

The final theme we identified was that to support Black students' social connections, schools embraced technology to redevelop relationships. As part of this process, schools first recognized that during the pandemic, Black students had limited access to technology. For example, Jace, a White high school teacher, stated having to overcome the, "Level of having access to internet they [Black students] do, or having access to a computer or something that works. Though we were able to offer our students both of those things." In this instance, the school was able to provide students with these resources so they could still engage in learning and connect with their peers. Addressing this basic need then allowed teachers to utilize these resources to reach students. Beth described that using virtual spaces was especially effective for shy students. Specifically, she stated,

> I know that I wasn't the only one who we really tried to make the space for the students like, how are you feeling? Like what's going on? How are you feeling? What's happening for you? So we tried to do that virtually. And some students were ready for that, like they were very comfortable. Especially our students who are gamers, they were really comfortable, like just chatting. And that's their comfort zone. They thrived with that. They chatted, they talked, they really came out of their shell, because that was their comfort zone.

Instead of viewing students' reliance on technology as negative, she found the opportunity to level with them and connect over their interests.

Another example of schools embracing technology was that upon returning to in-person learning, schools retained components of virtual learning opportunities for students who missed school. Some teachers felt this was especially important for students who had challenges with discipline. Alice asserted that,

> We've actually done some good or at least heading in the right direction. One of the things is when we've had some discipline challenges, we now use technology because we had COVID-19. So we have a virtual meeting set up all the time. So that's definitely one thing that I think has been a step in the right direction, not

> perfect, but a step in the right direction. So the student who is in a discipline situation [out of school suspension], they're able to access their class. And we all have videos and all that technology because we had to have it with COVID-19. Anyway, we actually continue to use it, which I think is, you know, a step in the right direction.

He went on to describe that this really benefited students because, "a student isn't missing much stuff."

Finally, teachers embraced technology by exploring texting as a means of communication with their students. Seth, a White high school teacher, specifically described how they used texting to engage their Black students with limited English proficiency. For example,

> I try to do the best I can. I do text, and I've actually had a lot of success with text communication. Since then, you know if they can respond when they can, and it's also been incredibly vital with language barriers and texting has actually been super, super helpful. Especially when I had students who spoke Somali where we don't have interpreters anywhere on the campus. . . So I found that I think makes it a little bit more, receptive, even if it's Google Translate.

By embracing technology, teachers were able to open lines of communication and help students who may have once had limited access to the classroom and learning materials, start to feel more connected.

4. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic was and continues to be a period of collective stress, with disproportionate consequences for Black youths' wellbeing. In 2020, many designated teachers as frontline workers– supporting students' basic needs and emotional development. Years later, teachers remain essential for restoring social connection in schools and enacting school-wide changes to promote resilience. Accordingly, we used the perspectives of teachers to investigate the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for Black youth and identify school-wide efforts to support resilience and foster connection. Rather than framing resilience as an individual trait, which has been critiqued for contributing to deficit narratives around Black youth, we ground our study in PVEST, which examines the person and context as interconnected to understand resilience. Guided by the PVEST and leveraging the insights of teachers, we identified that following the COVID-19 pandemic, Black youth are experiencing ongoing mental health problems, more disengaged from schools, and relearning how to socialize. To restore social connections, teachers described that schools are reinvesting in connection and embracing technology.

4.1. Acknowledging the Ongoing Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Connections

As of writing this, although school doors have reopened and students and teachers alike fill classrooms, many have argued that the very fabric of education has been irrevocably changed (Harris & Jones, 2020). In fact, schools continue to report challenges with navigating new technologies, a lack of motivation from students, and social isolation among staff (Constantia et al., 2023). With this, the experiences of students, especially Black students who were already susceptible to different school experiences, remains changed. PVEST models that there are numerous risk contributors Black youth face, including structural racism and social positionality, which may contribute to these experiences. Before the pandemic, studies often found that Black students reported lower perceptions of belonging, safety, and positive school climate (Bottiani et al., 2017; Voight et al., 2015). As guided by PVEST, the COVID-19 pandemic represents actualized risks, or net stress engagement, that Black youth encountered. The findings from our study evidence that the pandemic likely exacerbated risk contributing processes, making it more challenging for establishing

social connections. Furthermore, during the pandemic, newly adopted grading policies were enacted in schools to offer students the opportunity to make up coursework without jeopardizing their grade point averages (Protonentis et al., 2021). Some have argued that disengagement may be explained by the lack of incentives to motivate students (Supovitz & Manghani, 2022; Vahle et al., 2023). Guided by PVEST, disengagement post COVID-19 may have been a short-term reactive coping process. However, over time as school social norms remain changed, this influences Black youths' stable emergent identities and long-term life stage outcomes. The implications of students' disengagement have also been seen in their involvement in broader school activities and social relationships. Teachers in our study described how the pandemic forced many Black students to take on family responsibilities which made it more difficult for students to get involved in school activities. Similarly, Koç and Koç (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic led to disruptions to extracurricular activities, which in turn, has led to students struggling to adopt school cultures, commit to school, and understand its value.

Repairing the broken bonds from social isolation remains an ongoing priority for supporting resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistently, research finds that social isolation has had significant psychological consequences on a global scale (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). For Black youth, this was coupled with rises in additional life stressors. In fact, Fuller-Rowell et al. (2024) found that during the pandemic, Black young people reported increases in discrimination and greater social isolation than their White counterparts, highlighting a racial disparity in these processes. This may explain our findings where teachers reported their students needing to relearn how to socialize and experiencing ongoing mental health challenges. Teachers described visible indicators from their students, ranging from looking withdrawn to sad and disconnected. Accordingly, repairing the social connections Black students had in school may be a two-fold process. First, teachers can recognize that the needs of their students have changed. Morris et al. (2026) emphasize the importance of this awareness among teachers, where teachers recognized that their students were in crisis and needed additional mental-health support to adjust to pandemic-related changes. This recognition motivated the teachers to pursue professional development. Teachers in our study similarly identified the severity of the mental health challenges their Black students were facing, and the lack of social skills since returning to in-person learning. Second, in addition to being aware of these problems, teachers and schools can reinvest in connection. As part of this, teachers may encourage open conversations about wellbeing in classrooms and prioritize trained mental health professionals in schools. Research has found that as the pandemic exposed longstanding social inequities in schools, school mental health professionals, particularly school social workers, may have the unique skillset for addressing these disparities, however, crucial to this process is that these professionals possess, "cultural and racial awareness, center the cultural wealth of communities of color, and address microaggressions and explicit racism within the education system itself." (T. M. Jones et al., 2021, p. 104)

4.2. Reimagining Connection for Black Youth

In addition to identifying the social challenges Black youth are facing following the COVID-19 pandemic, we examined schools' ongoing responses. Like many studies have found (see Marshall et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2026; Robinson et al., 2023), teachers reported feeling unequipped to handle the new challenges their students were facing. Arguably, to address the multifaceted needs of students for social connection requires coordinated, ongoing efforts to support schools and its community members. These whole school approaches require (1) active participation of community members and equal partnerships, and (2) supportive structures in schools (e.g., policies) that reflect the

values of the community (Rowe et al., 2007). Accordingly, crucial to this study's focus was school-wide strategies for building resilience, rather than relying on individual teacher adjustments or placing added expectations on Black students and families. Our findings illustrate that although teachers may be an important component to addressing the needs of Black students, more may be needed. This is especially important to consider given the juxtaposition of rising mental health problems among Black youth coupled with lower rates of mental health utilization (Banks, 2022; Douglas et al., 2023)

Our findings stress the importance of developing and disseminating services that are responsive to the needs of communities (T. M. Jones et al., 2021). For instance, the pandemic highlighted the opportunities, and potential disparities, in use of technology in education. Teachers described the use of technology as an ongoing opportunity to connect with their students. Similarly, studies have found that during the pandemic, teachers were able to use technology as an opportunity to give individualized support to students and described having deeper, more meaningful interactions (Newberry & Hinchcliff, 2024; Tackie, 2022; Vagos & Carvalhais, 2022). This leads to important questions around the use of innovative technologies, like artificial intelligence, in education as it relates to improving the social adaptability of students in the context of teacher–student and peer relationships (Xie et al., 2022). Furthermore, given that teachers described the disparities in access to technology experienced by Black communities, it is important that school systems not only work to address access, but implement initiatives to improve digital literacy—the ability to evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital technologies—to ensure these benefits are distributed among students equally (Ellison & Solomon, 2019).

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to the current study that must be considered alongside its strengths. First, this study only interviewed teachers, therefore, the perspectives of students, administrators, and other school staff were not used to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black youths' wellbeing, nor the efforts enacted by schools to support resilience. Future studies should use multiple reporters for triangulation of data to provide a nuanced understanding of schools as contexts for social connection post pandemic. Additionally, researchers may consider using policy analysis of school or district wide mandates following the pandemic and/or observational assessments to identify their subsequent enactment in schools and classrooms. Next, teachers were nominated based on their history of supporting Black students, however, no criteria were provided for nomination status. Considering their nomination status, social desirability or response bias, may have influenced responses. Furthermore, these responses may be based on teachers who are considerably more involved in supporting Black students; thus, they are not reflective of the experiences of all teachers. The racial-ethnic make-up of also Arizona impacted the racial demographic of teachers included in this study and the students they interact with daily. Future research may replicate this study among a sample of Black teachers to identify the subsequent effects of the pandemic on their social connections, and the impact this has on their ability to support this process among Black students.

Finally, in our application of PVEST, this study primarily focused on race, thus we did not examine other social positionalities (e.g., socioeconomic status) that meaningfully intersect with race and likely shaped Black students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, our intentional focus on Black American youth narrows the scope of the findings and excludes the experiences of Black youth in international contexts. We centered Black American youth because race and anti-Blackness are uniquely experienced in the United States (Bridgeforth & O'Neal, 2024), and although COVID-19 had global impacts, the U.S. response and its ongoing consequences for Black communities are distinct.

As a result, the insights generated from teachers speak most directly to Black American youth and American schools, thus should be interpreted within this specific context. Future research would benefit from examining how intersecting positionalities shape pandemic-related experiences, as well as incorporating comparative or international perspectives to better understand how schools across global contexts responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and supported Black students.

4.4. Implications

The findings from this study carry important implications for the educators and systems that shape Black students' daily experiences in schools. Youth and families, educators, and mental health professionals continue to grapple with the academic, social, and emotional fallout of COVID-19 and the surge in racialized stressors. Our findings highlight tangible ways practice and policy can better support Black students' social connections. By attending to the intersecting needs of Black students, the educators who teach and care for them, and the schools that serve them, these implications point toward more responsive, culturally relevant approaches that foster resilience. Below, we detail practice and policy implications for youth and families, educators, and mental health professionals.

4.4.1. Practice Implications for Youth and Families

For many Black youth and families, the COVID-19 pandemic did not simply interrupt daily routines; it reshaped relational patterns, cultural rhythms, and everyday practices that support youths' sense of stability, belonging, and identity. Adolescence is a developmental period marked by heightened sensitivity to peer relationships, autonomy, and social belonging, rendering disruptions to family and community connections particularly consequential. As schools and communities continue to recover, families may benefit from school- and community-based supports that assist in re-establishing rituals carrying emotional and cultural meaning, including shared meals, daily check-ins, and opportunities for open conversation about stress, grief, or loss. This need is underscored by teachers' descriptions of students withdrawing socially, struggling to reconnect with peers, and disengaging from familiar routines following extended isolation.

Existing research indicates that Black youth continue to experience elevated emotional distress due to the combined effects of racialized stress and pandemic-related disruption (Racine et al., 2021). Importantly, such responses reflect cumulative exposure to structural and interpersonal stressors rather than isolated reactions to pandemic conditions alone. Frameworks of race-based traumatic stress help contextualize these experiences by illustrating how chronic exposure to racism shapes emotional regulation, vigilance, and coping across development (Carter, 2007; Trent et al., 2019). Within this context, community-based programs that affirm cultural identity, belonging, and collective resilience may function as stabilizing spaces for youths navigating grief, withdrawal, or uncertainty as they attempt to re-engage socially.

These culturally affirming environments are particularly salient during adolescence, when identity development is closely tied to racial and ethnic socialization processes that support psychological well-being (Neblett et al., 2018). Caregivers may also benefit from guidance that helps them interpret changes in youths' social behavior, frustration tolerance, or peer engagement following prolonged isolation, as reflected in teachers' observations of students' withdrawal, irritability, and difficulty navigating peer interaction upon re-entry. These challenges are especially meaningful given that many Black families entered the pandemic already managing structural inequities, economic strain, and ongoing systemic stressors. When interventions recognize both the realities families experienced

and the cultural strengths they bring, youth may be better positioned to rebuild connection, strengthen coping strategies, and move toward healing.

4.4.2. Practice Implications for Educators

Educators play a central role in how Black youth re-enter and re-establish connection within school communities following extended disruption. During adolescence, relationships with teachers serve as important sources of emotional safety, structure, and academic motivation. Relational practices such as greeting students by name, engaging in regular check-ins, and pacing instruction to allow space for listening may help classrooms feel safer and more supportive during re-entry periods (Roorda et al., 2017). Teachers in this study emphasized that trust was rebuilt most effectively when classrooms functioned as places students could come to—spaces where honesty and help-seeking were met with support rather than punishment. Although such practices are not new, teachers' accounts suggest they have taken on heightened developmental and emotional significance in the post-pandemic context.

At the same time, many students are re-learning social and emotional skills that typically develop through sustained peer interaction. Teachers frequently described supporting students' emotion regulation, conflict navigation, and social confidence as they returned to in-person learning after prolonged isolation. This aligns with evidence linking adolescent social isolation to increased internalizing symptoms and disrupted peer functioning, underscoring the developmental importance of relational repair (Loades et al., 2020; Racine et al., 2021).

These relational demands occur as educators themselves continue to navigate post-pandemic fatigue. Accordingly, professional development in restorative practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and trauma-informed approaches may be most effective when embedded within broader systems of support rather than positioned as individual responsibility. Collaboration with school counselors, social workers, and community partners remains essential, as the scope and intensity of youths' mental health needs extend beyond what teachers can address alone.

4.4.3. Practice Implications for Mental Health Professionals

For mental health professionals, these findings highlight the extent to which the pandemic intersected with racial stress, grief, and developmental transitions for Black youth. Social withdrawal, disengagement, and emotional distress may reflect layered experiences shaped by systemic inequities and pandemic-related disruptions rather than individual pathology (Carter, 2007; Trent et al., 2019). School-based and community-embedded providers may therefore benefit from outreach-oriented approaches that engage students in familiar settings rather than relying solely on referral-based models. This aligns with teachers' descriptions of relationship-first, open-door practices as critical entry points to deeper support.

Collaborative care models that involve educators and caregivers may reduce fragmentation and promote continuity of care. Hybrid and telehealth services remain valuable tools, particularly given teachers' continued reliance on virtual platforms to maintain contact and instructional continuity with students. Data indicates that youths' utilization of telehealth screenings were impacted by various constraints and logistics, underscoring the developmental fit of these modalities when implemented equitably (Durante & Lau, 2022).

4.4.4. Policy Implications for Youth and Families

Policies designed to support Black youth and families should be informed by evidence demonstrating how pandemic-related disruptions intensified pre-existing structural inequities, shaping differential access to educational, technological, and mental health

resources. Many families continue to encounter barriers to stable broadband access, affordable mental health care, and consistent school communication, all of which influenced how youth experienced learning and social connection during and after COVID-19 (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). In this study, teachers described how access to devices, virtual platforms, and sustained communication supported continuity and connection, suggesting that policies which stabilize digital access may help preserve these relational and academic bridges beyond crisis periods.

Policy efforts that expand funding for culturally grounded mental health services and grief support are particularly important given the disproportionate health and economic losses experienced by Black communities during the pandemic (Hooper et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2021). Schools may also benefit from policies that promote authentic, culturally responsive family engagement rather than standardized outreach approaches that overlook linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences. Strengthening digital access and multilingual communication pathways may further support families' ongoing connection to academic and emotional resources in ways that are equitable and developmentally responsive.

4.4.5. Policy Implications for Educators

Educational policy must reflect the reality that schools are rebuilding in the aftermath of a collective and prolonged crisis. Districts may consider prioritizing investments in school-based mental health providers, behavioral interventionists, and cultural liaisons so that teachers are not expected to absorb the full burden of students' social and emotional needs (De Voto et al., 2023; Weist & Evans, 2005). These investments are particularly salient given evidence of elevated teacher burnout during the pandemic, which may limit educators' capacity to provide sustained relational support without systemic backing (Pressley, 2021).

Revisiting attendance, grading, and disciplinary policies may also help prevent punitive practices that disproportionately affect Black students who continue to navigate instability. Because teachers described using technology to maintain instructional access and connection during disciplinary removals, districts may consider formalizing continuity plans that pair restorative approaches with virtual access and structured re-entry supports. Such efforts may allow schools to maintain engagement while reinforcing connection rather than compliance (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Roorda et al., 2017).

4.4.6. Policy Implications for Mental Health Professionals

Policy efforts supporting mental health professionals should prioritize systems that are sustainable, equitable, and responsive to community needs. Expanded funding for school-based mental health positions is particularly important in districts where Black youth experienced disproportionate health and economic impacts of COVID-19 (De Voto et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2021). Policies ensuring reimbursement for hybrid and telehealth services may further reduce barriers related to transportation, work schedules, and caregiving responsibilities (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

States and districts may also strengthen policy by requiring culturally responsive training for clinicians working in school contexts, ensuring that interventions attend to racial stress, grief, and broader systemic inequities. Taken together, this study and its implications underscore the importance of recognizing the needs of Black youth and suggest that fostering their social relationships "post" COVID-19 may require coordinated, multi-level efforts that reinvest in relational connection rather than isolated interventions.

4.5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic and surge in anti-Blackness have exposed both the vulnerabilities and resilience of Black students, highlighting the social challenges they faced in

remote learning, isolation, and racialized stress. Drawing on teachers' insights, this study reveals not only gaps in support but also the promise of school-wide practices that foster culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and community-centered resilience. Restoring social connection in schools invites us to reflect on how education systems have historically overlooked Black students' needs and underscores the potential for schools to serve as transformative spaces that promote belonging. This study stands as a call to action for educators, administrators, and policymakers to intentionally design supports that address the unique challenges Black youth face, listen to their voices and those that support them, and commit to systemic practices that uphold equity and justice—ensuring schools nurture resilience and healing for all students.

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