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“Middle Schoolers are Just This Special Kind of Human Being”: Middle School Teacher Perspectives on Creating Hope for their Students and Themselves

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‘‘Middle Schoolers are Just This Special Kind of Human Being”: Middle School Teacher Perspectives on Creating Hope for their Students and Themselves

by

Sheeba Jacob

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I am who I am because of who came before me.

Amma, you of gentle spirit and fierce love.
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You needed no accolades; you embodied service.

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You raised your voice and imagined another future.
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.

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Mekhai, sweet bub,
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to hope for more
both for the world and for ourselves.
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ABSTRACT

*"*Middle Schoolers are Just This Special Kind of Human Being*":* Middle School Teacher Perspectives on Creating Hope for their Students and Themselves

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Anxiety and depression have increased for adolescent youth, particularly since the pandemic. For certain students, this anxiety and depression connects to trauma because of inequity and bias in schools. This qualitative study examined successful urban middle school teachers and their perspectives on conditions they created for hope in their classrooms and ways they created hope for themselves. Eight middle school teachers who taught humanities shared their insights through semi-structured interviews. Findings aligned with pedagogical practices the teachers used that centered hope and voice for students: culturally responsive practices, relational practices, and justice-oriented practices. These specific teachers cared deeply about their students and worked to create classrooms that were safe and grounded in community. Participants also cultivated specific personal practices as a way to remain hopeful.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Middle school students are at a specific age in their development: where they need guidance as they navigate a multitude of new changes instead of seeing their behaviors as problematic. This age group is in search of not only positive interactions with adults, as they navigate uncertainty in their lives, but also independence (Fraser-Thill, 2021). This developmental phase is a time where adolescents experience profound hormonal and physical changes. They simultaneously are searching for answers about their own identities and their place in the world (Allen-Lamphere, 2021). These specific needs were amplified by the pandemic and school closures and continue to be impacted in the aftermath of students returning to school. Bishop (2021) explained how adolescent mental health became increasingly at risk for many reasons: there was less contact with classmates, more frustration and boredom during virtual learning, a lack of space at home, and family loss. The pandemic increased depression and anxiety among adolescents (Field, 2021; Hoffman & Secord, 2021; Molano, 2021). Because young adolescents were forced to stay home, they spent less time engaging with peers and supportive adults. As a result, they had less opportunity to build autonomy and explore the world, which negatively impacted their well-being (Field, 2021; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022).

COVID-19 also had specific impacts on communities of color where for example, the Latinx community reported that 84% of parents could not work from home. They were essential workers and as a result, contracted COVID-19 at five times the rate of non-Latinx communities (Rivera, 2021). Academically, data collection of over 5 million students between third and eight

grade revealed that gains in math and reading were lower for Black and Hispanic students. Additionally, Black and Hispanic students were absent at far higher rates than hite students in multiple states due to a number of factors related to housing instability, exposure to COVID-19, and lack of transportation (Gee et al., 2023).

Disengagement from school, particularly among middle and high school students, was already a problem before the pandemic (Hargreaves, 2021). In 2006, only 29% of 6th–12th graders surveyed believed that school provided a caring environment (Darling-Hammond & Cook Harvey, 2018). Priorities of public school principals changed dramatically during the *No Child Left Behind* (2001) era, 2002 to 2015. During this era, schools emphasized academic goals over more holistic needs of students (Lee & Lee, 2020). Instead of focusing on the whole child, *No Child Left Behind* (2001) emphasized the importance of high test scores in reading and math.

Teachers' implicit biases can also negatively impact engagement in school. Implicit biases were associated with racial disparities in student achievement (Dhaliwal et al., 2020). For example, White teachers showed cultural misunderstandings or even indifference towards Black students that result in teachers' negative attitudes about their students' achievement (Douglas et al., 2008). Biases and misconceptions put students at a disadvantage and decrease interest in school. These biases start early in a child's school career: "Black children represent 18% of preschool students, but account for 48% of preschool suspensions" (Flannery, 2015, para 13). Hernández and Darling-Hammond (2022) added that schools are not emotionally or psychologically safe for students and that one in five students between ages 12 to 18 report being bullied.

A powerful school experience for students would require teachers to both celebrate the whole identities of students and acknowledge the brokenness of the world around them (Block, 2016). Block asserted that schools can be places where students' strengths and assets are elevated and brought forward and where relationships are emphasized between teachers and students, between students, and with community members. When teachers elevate student voice and help students to see they are part of a classroom community, school community, and outside community, school can become a safe haven, which makes academic success possible (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Middle school classrooms can also be spaces where students think deeply about the larger world around them, reflect on the many injustices of this world, and reimagine another kind of world.

This chapter presents the problem, purpose, and research questions guiding this study and presents critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) and healing justice (Ginwright, 2016) as the theoretical frameworks. The chapter concludes by providing a sketch of the methodology and research design for the study.

Statement of the Problem

The crisis of hope among adolescent students is an educational problem of practice. This crisis is shaped by many different factors, including dehumanizing practices in school and the increasing mental health issues and trauma students experience, particularly for students of color. Miller (2021) argued that specific types of mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety are diseases of despair. Often, these mental health issues can be diagnosed at the level of the individual, but the reality is that more than half of teens are reporting feeling moderate to severe levels of depression. In fact, on December 7th, 2021, Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a new

Surgeon General's Advisory that focused on the mental health crisis impacting the country's youth (Richtel, 2021). Between 2009 and 2021, the percentage of American high school students who persistently felt sad or hopeless increased from 26% to 44%. Increased social media use, decreased social connections, increased global stressors, and less time with parents or guardians have been some of the related factors (Thompson, 2022). The Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey issued in 2021 by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as cited by Gilligan (2022) found that 44.2% of adolescents experienced persistent sadness or hopelessness. The numbers were even higher for specific marginalized groups. For example, 45.5% of those who identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native and 66.3% of students who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) (Gilligan, 2022) reported experiencing sadness or hopelessness.

Hopelessness is defined as negative expectations about oneself and the future. It inhibits one from being able to envision possibilities about the future (Stoddard et al., 2010). It has been connected to outcomes such as depression, substance abuse, and violence. While young people have struggled with hopelessness and thoughts of suicide in the past, these issues have increased at alarming rates over the past few years. With the disruption in school learning and the lack of social support available in schools, the well-being of students, especially the most marginalized, became much more at risk. Many students from historically marginalized communities of color, for example, did not have access to online learning for an extended period (Merrill, 2021; United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).

As Allen-Lamphere (2021) asserted, middle school can be a time of upheaval where students are trying to figure out who they are, their place in the world, and what independence

looks like to them. The racial and health issues of the last few years have increased trauma and mental health issues for adolescents. Strauss (2021) asserted, "Middle-schoolers, studies confirm, are experiencing more trauma and mental health issues than ever before. Horsford et al (2021) found that there was a disproportionate and traumatic impact on Black students and their families because of both COVID-19 and systemic racism. Black communities across six urban areas reported they had lost trust in schools and public institutions because of responses to police brutality, COVID-19, and the insurrection.

Schools have incorporated many interventions throughout the years such as one-on-one counseling, social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum and programming, restorative practices, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) in order to improve the well-being of youth. SEL promotes mental health by creating safe environments in school and helping youth cultivate positive relationships (CASEL, 2022). At the same time, the pandemic surfaced many student needs, and teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to meet these needs in the classroom (Newberry, 2021).

Schools have also been sites that have contributed to the increased hopelessness and trauma for students (Acosta et al., 2022; Venet, 2021). Love (2016) spoke to the concept of spirit murdering developed as cited by legal scholar, Williams (1991, as cited in Love, 2016). As Love (2016) asserted, spirit murdering takes away the dignity and humanity of people while leaving spiritual pain and can happen to youth in classrooms where teachers are unable to see the humanity of their students; particularly Black and Brown students. Spirit-murdering can result in pedagogies that can cause immense trauma and include racist teaching practices, punitive school cultures, and narrow curriculum (Hines & Wilmot, 2018).

Trauma for students is both an individual problem and a structural problem. Racism, heterosexism, Islamophobia, transphobia, anti-semitism, and other kinds of oppression that can happen in schools are apt to increase trauma (Venet, 2021). Educators have particularly demonized Black students because of anti-Blackness in schools (Hytten & Stemhagen, 2023). Therefore, zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools, stop-and-frisk policies outside of schools, and structural violence can increase hopelessness (Ginwright, 2016). As Duncan-Andrade (2019) stated,

> Too many of us try to create classroom spaces that are safe from righteous rage, or, worse, we design plans to weed out children who display it. The question we should be grappling with is not how to manage students with these emotions, but how to help students channel them. (p.109)

Relationships between teachers and students in these instances become transactional instead of transformative; and punitive instead of restorative (Ginwright, 2022). As adolescent students experience increased hopelessness, research asserted that educators can support them in belonging and feeling purpose. Interventions such as SEL have potential, but critical to any intervention is the ability for classrooms to be grounded in equity (Lin et al., 2023). Lin and colleagues wrote, "Humanizing others as part of an SEL practice allows educators to get to know students as complete beings with cultures, languages, and histories, including the intersecting systems of privilege or oppression that may shape their lives" (p. 9).

As Ginwright (2016) shared, typical teacher training does not address how teachers learn to see the humanity of all their students. Teachers often learn technical, rather than relational, skills. Teacher training that would help teachers see their students as humans would necessitate doing inner work and developing a cultural critical consciousness of the world (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Additionally, helping students to see purpose in their lives, acknowledging where they

come from and honoring who they are is tantamount to their livelihoods. For teachers to provide students the ability to deeply connect with each other in the classroom, find purpose, engage in the world around them, and develop hope, they must have their own set of practices. While research on hope (Strikwerda, 2019) has been done in the middle school classroom, the ability to create hope and healing for both students *and* teachers in middle school is a topic that is not widely discussed, especially after the pandemic. Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2011) spoke to the little research done on teachers and their personal hopefulness. Additionally, Duncan-Andrade asserted that there is a lack of teacher-development programs that focus on hope (2022). The following sections speak to the opportunity to fill in some of those gaps.

Research Questions

Increased hopelessness of adolescent youth can contribute to their decreased mental health and wellness. It is critical to learn more about spaces where teachers are humanizing the school experience for students. Through this study, I intended to look more closely at how teachers do so by answering the following research questions:

1. How do middle school teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in classroom practices that are consistent with critical hope?
2. What kinds of personal practices do successful middle school teachers cultivate in order to create conditions for hope in their classrooms?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the pedagogical practices of urban middle school teachers who intentionally work on cultivating dispositions related to critical hope in their classrooms. Duncan-Andrade (2009) defined critical hope as hope that is material;

providing quality and relevant instruction, socratic; navigating injustices with students, and audacious hope; collectively struggling alongside students (p.186). The aim was to capture the specific work they do in order to shine a light on what works when it comes to helping students of color see that there is a world beyond themselves that they can contribute to, have a voice in, and feel connected to as they navigate the beginning of their adolescent years.

A secondary purpose of this study was to look closely at the personal, inner work middle school teachers employ to develop their own sense of hope and healing. I used semi-structured interviews to gather this specific data. Understanding the practices of teachers can help to operationalize and provide empirical support to inform what can help students thrive in the classroom and beyond. Understanding a teacher's personal practices can help to codify mindsets and beliefs that can help to create positive and hopeful classroom sites for all students.

Significance of the Study

With a mental health crisis that affects our collective adolescent community and the increased impacts of trauma post-pandemic on students of color in schools, educators are at a critical inflection point. Learning the best ways to support adolescent youth is a necessity in public education. As Darling-Hammond and Harvey (2018) argued, schools that do not create caring and purposeful environments for students can increase disengagement and drop-out rates, particularly for students of color. Critical hope can be a way to counter the hopelessness adolescent youth can feel when witnessing oppression and tragedy in the world around them and in their own lives. It dignifies their realities and lived experiences while also providing them with the moral imagination to envision a world of justice for the future. Hope can be biologically suppressed or biologically encouraged when one feels a sense of safety (Grain, 2022). As Grain

added, “Anything that creates a barrier to hopefulness also creates a barrier to individual and even systemic change.” (p.143).

Theoretical Framework

I drew on the frameworks of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) and healing justice (Ginwright, 2016) to analyze teacher practices and dispositions. The frameworks include themes related to teacher-student relationships, collective well-being, personal growth, and transformative justice.

When integrating critical hope and healing justice into the classroom, instead of looking away from the many injustices happening in the world, teachers address what is happening. Instead of looking away from the child and their many identities, teachers create spaces where students can show up in whole ways.

The healing justice framework (Ginwright, 2016) looked specifically at work done by educators and the practices they use within the classroom. The framework is broken into four practices that are both internal and external: transformative organizing, restorative justice, healing circles, and contemplative practices. As Ginwright (2016) stated, “Building hope among youth of color in urban schools requires that educators rethink what is most important and come to recognize that healing and well-being are critical social justice ingredients” (p. 5). Critical hope and healing justice are therefore inextricable. For teachers to walk alongside students and address injustices, to see students as whole beings, and to help students envision a hopeful future, requires that they have not only the technical ability to teach, but also the ability to value and see each student. They also need to have a sense of hope for themselves.

Research Design and Methodology

In this study, I employed a qualitative methodology centered on phenomenological research in order to understand humanities teachers' perceptions, pedagogical practices, and personal connections to hope. I found participants through the professional networks that she has developed over the past twenty years as an educator.

This study focused on the thick descriptions of highly recommended language arts and social studies middle school teachers from urban public schools who humanized their classrooms and worked on cultivating hope in the students of color that they served. I interviewed these eight teachers to learn more about their specific practices in the classroom and the personal practices they cultivated that allow them to create meaning for all students in the classroom and conditions for hope. I used qualitative semi-structured interviews for data collection. The semi-structured interviews allowed teachers to share insights and reflections and allowed me to collect meaningful insights.

Positionality Statement

As an educator who supported other educators during the pandemic, I have witnessed its impacts on school leaders, teachers, students, and families. Racial trauma, food insecurities, health disparities, and economic instability all channeled into the lives of students who brought these realities into schools. As an educator who has taught courses on both classroom management and social studies methods to pre-service teachers, I have engaged teacher candidates and myself in reflection on how best to meet Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student needs while elevating the teacher-to-student relationship and allowing the humanity of both to evolve together in a classroom. As an educator who works with adult

English language learners from Central and Latin America, I have seen first hand the power of the sacred relationship between educator and learner where we both learn from each other and whose humanity is bound together. As a former urban middle school teacher, I have seen all the possibilities for students if we can bear witness to who they are as human beings. As a mother, I have wondered about the best ways to instill in my son a sense of purpose and care about the world around him. As a daughter of South Asian immigrants and granddaughter of a freedom fighter and an incredible grandmother, hope runs through me. My focus centered on middle school–a time of profound changes for young people and a time of great potential to understand the world around them. I believe this research will contribute to the field of teacher education in a way that gives dignity to both the teacher and the student.

Definition of Key Terms

BIPOC: An acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

Critical Hope: Witnessing oppressions and naming them while also developing the practice of moral imagination (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1993; Grain, 2022).

Dehumanization: The denial of one's full humanity

Healing: Recognition that harm results in a psychological, spiritual, or cultural injury (Ginwright, 2016).

Hope: "The perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (Snyder, 2002, p. 249)

Hopelessness: The feeling that one will not experience positive emotions (VandenBos, 2007).

Humanizing pedagogies: Pedagogies that "build on the sociocultural realities of students' lives, examines the sociohistorical and political dimensions of education, and casts students as critically engaged, active participants in the co-construction of knowledge" (Salazar, 2013, p. 128)

Purpose: A stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that at once holds personal meaning and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self (Adolescent Moral Development Lab at Claremont Graduate University, 2018).

Trauma: Response to life-threatening events, harmful conditions, or dangerous environments (Venet, 2021).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 laid the foundation of the study, identifying the research problem as it relates to a crisis of hope for early adolescent learners, the research questions, and a broad overview of the methodology of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on the topic. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this study in more specific terms. In Chapter 3, I lay out the setting and participants of the study, discuss methods of data organization and analysis, and present the criteria for trustworthiness. Chapter 4 reports the findings of this study, including the participants and their experiences in the context of the theoretical framework. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the findings in light of the research questions and the extent to which the research may impact further study and praxis, specifically in urban middle schools.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aimed to explore the ways middle school teachers understand and cultivate critical hope as a means to decreasing hopelessness in adolescent youth of color. As such, this literature review begins with an overview of middle school, including the intended purpose versus the real experience for certain students with a focus on harmful policies, dehumanized spaces, and the consequence of increased hopelessness. The review examines the background of social-emotional learning as a way schools have attempted to improve student well-being and presents a critical analysis of this intervention. The review then focuses on promising pedagogical practices that can create conditions for hope for middle school students. The review continues by examining the types of inner work teachers do to create humanized classroom spaces that are sites of hope. Finally, the review provides an overview of the two frameworks guiding this research: critical hope and healing justice.

The Middle School Classroom

The History of Middle Schools

The middle school movement began in 1963 as a need to give more attention to students between the ages of ten to fifteen years old. Dr. William Alexander, who originally fostered the idea of middle school, critiqued what were junior schools at the time and called for middle schools. Alexander stated that middle schools should, “stimulate in the child a love for learning, an attitude of inquiry, a passion for truth and beauty, a questioning mind” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.5). Schaefer and colleagues (2016) examined the literature over the next several decades about historical trends of middle schools. During the 1970s, more and more educators began to

state the need for effective strategies and approaches for early adolescent education. By the mid-1970s, there were 4,060 middle schools in the United States. In the 1980s, research on middle school emphasized a meaningful and responsive curriculum and focused on specific kinds of practices and strategies at the middle school level. During the 90s, the literature focused on advisory, cooperative learning, teaming, and engaging students. High-stakes testing in the early 2000s forced middle schools to focus on improving literacy and math scores, rather than integrating curriculum (Schaefer et al., 2016). As Brown and Knowles (2014) indicated, content became more important than best practices and as a result there was a tension between the research and what was actually happening in the classrooms.

The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) was one of the first organizations dedicated to middle school topics (Schaefer et al., 2016). Over time, the AMLE has worked to develop characteristics of successful middle schools with a focus on culture and community; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and leadership and organization. As they stated,

> [A]ll young adolescents deserve schools that help them become competent and confident individuals who feel a sense of agency, are proud of who they are, are optimistic about their future, feel connected to those around them, and are prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world. (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.4)

Inequity in Middle Schools

Responsive middle schools, however, are not accessible to all youth (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). In America, the purpose of school has never been the same for all students. John Dewey, a leader in the progressive movement of education, believed the purpose of school was to create thoughtful, reflective individuals who could contribute to a democratic society (Hargreaves, 2021). However, inequality manifests in teacher quality, curriculum, and leadership (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Inequality also manifests in the ways certain students are treated and

disciplined within schools. In a study done in a Mid-Atlantic school district, Del Toro and Wang (2022) found that African American adolescents were overrepresented in rates of school suspension over minor disciplinary infractions. Twenty-six percent of Black students received one suspension for minor infractions (cell phone use, language, or dress code violations) over three years while only 2% of White students did.

Love (2019) contended that because of the systemic racism of zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline, "Black children are dehumanized and criminalized from the moment they enter the school doors" (p. 2). Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2019) did focus groups with 40 middle school students across two middle schools. Black and Brown students revealed how they often felt picked on by teachers, were more often disciplined harshly than other students, and received intimidation tactics from teachers. Entrenched in this discipline of students of color was a mix of culture, identity, power, and privilege. Teachers' implicit biases and other deeply held unconscious beliefs about different students have led to different kinds of treatment based on race and deficit views of those different from their own background (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2002).

Unfortunately, middle school students who are suspended more often are four times as likely to be convicted of a crime and tend to be placed in remedial classes (Pulkkinen, 2021). Emdin (2022) argued that schools have been a failed experiment for socializing Black people and have instead upheld White middle-class norms. Although there is rhetoric related to equity, justice, and cultural relevance in schools, Emdin (2022) continued by explaining these cannot be enacted when teachers are unable to see the whole child.

Policies (both in schools and outside of schools) can also contribute to dehumanization. While classrooms become increasingly diverse, teachers continue to remain predominantly White, female, and mono-lingual (Milner et al., 2018). These demographic norms contribute to instructional practices that do not necessarily reflect the culture of students nor come from an asset-based lens. Policies where high-stakes English-only testing and English-dominant practices exist perpetuate the erasure of immigrant students. Macedo (2017) contended that teachers have the power to counter the harmful, xenophobic socio-cultural environment by moving beyond English-only instruction. As he further explained about honoring the voices of multilingual students,

> there is little in school curricula that enables immigrant students to make sense of the ambivalence of their fractured souls that yearn to make meaning out of the bittersweet existence of the diaspora…on the contrary, what the curricula offer is a forced assimilatory process reflecting society's dominant values. (p. 87)

Middle School Teacher Preparation

Middle school teachers seldom receive training that supports them in teaching young adolescents. Ochanji and colleagues (2016) examined the middle school-specific preparation teacher education programs provided middle school teachers. Only 25% of 1,324 institutions across the country supported middle school teachers specifically. Middle school teachers, especially those who work in urban settings, benefit from targeted preparation, and there is not much literature dedicated to how teacher education programs can fulfill this unique role.

Ochanji et al. (2016) wrote that adolescence is where the most growth happens to children outside of birth to five years old, adding, "It is an injustice to young adolescents when they do not have teachers prepared for all the demands of adolescence and middle school (p. 11). Puberty can have an impact on the cognitive thought patterns of young adolescents (Morton,

2022). As Morton described, the prefrontal cortex just begins to form at this age, which means the middle school brain might rely more on the animalistic amygdala. If teachers understand who the adolescent child is and why emotional regulation might be more challenging, they can support students in critical ways. Without this understanding, what might be a developmental change in a child could be seen as defiance towards a teacher.

With the onset of the pandemic, the United States has seen an upswing in funding for social-emotional learning as one way to address the mental health crisis impacting the country's youth (Meckler, 2022). This next section looks closely at SEL as an intervention and also questions how effective this intervention can be if teachers do not see all students as equal and deserving.

Background of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-emotional learning is one approach in which states, districts, and schools have channeled funding efforts to improve the well-being of students. Since the onset of the pandemic, funding sources have increased for emotional learning opportunities. Take, for example, The American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund, which made $122 billion available for this specific issue (Committee for Children, 2021). Additionally, between 2019 and 2021, SEL spending increased by 45% to $765 million (Meckler, 2022). Part of the rationale for promoting SEL has been to create protective factors (such as positive relationships and safe environments in schools) in order to promote mental health (CASEL, 2022).

SEL initiatives in the United States have collectively existed since the early 1990s. In 1994, practitioners at the Fetzer Institute defined the SEL as "the process of acquiring a set of

social and emotional skills" (Hoffman, 2017, p. 3). In 2001, the National Conference of State Legislators passed a resolution related to social-emotional skills in schools. Illinois was the first state to develop K–12 SEL standards for students (Hoffman, 2017).

SEL programs in schools range in implementation from being incorporated into advisory to being included in core subjects. Advocacy efforts have been able to link SEL with academic improvement and overall well-being through several research-based studies. Currently, all 50 states have SEL competencies incorporated into their preschool curriculum. Eight states have SEL standards for K-12 students (America Succeeds, 2021). In 2019 alone, 200 pieces of legislation referencing SEL were introduced (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). As more evidence proves how SEL can have a positive impact on students, there is also the necessary caution that one size of SEL does not fit all students (Jagers et al., 2019). One only has to look at the history of education initiatives and their implementation to understand how much local and community context matter.

Critiques of SEL

While SEL has been a widespread intervention to support the well-being of students, there have been several critiques. SEL competencies developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (America Succeeds, 2021). Some critiques of SEL centered on how policies and initiatives can simplify what these competencies mean and become a checklist of ways to "do SEL" in the classroom. As Hoffman (2017) stated,

> Despite a rhetoric of caring and holistic values such as community and democracy, when the focus is ultimately on skills, measurement, and results, there is a chance that the less quantifiable and perhaps more genuine aspect of emotionality in schooling that in here in human relationships may be neglected. (p. 8)

Additional critiques of traditional SEL programs are that they focus on individual self-control as opposed to how the child relates to others within the classroom community. Lessons may focus on self-regulation instead of why the child might be acting in a certain way and how to best support them. Developing a caring classroom community is often reduced to establishing rules and getting students to behave accordingly (Hoffman, 2017). Simmons et al. (2018) identified specific kinds of barriers to high-quality SEL for students of color and the most marginalized students: barriers at the systemic level (poverty); at the institutional level (exclusionary discipline practices and policies and a lack of trauma-informed practices) and at the individual level (implicit bias of school staff and educator stress and burnout). Cipollone and colleagues (2022) added that SEL programming focuses on being kind in a neutral way. However, SEL programming that focuses on kindness without addressing power and oppression is negligent. They wrote, "By prioritizing niceness over doing the right thing, we teach children to not speak up and challenge their oppression while simultaneously reifying fragility and bystander tendencies in dominant groups" (Cipollone et al., 2022, p. 25). Camangian and Cariaga (2021) also shared that an ahistorical approach to SEL does not support the well-being of communities of color and in fact, perpetuates inequity.

SEL has come to be associated with well-being, mental health, trauma-informed practice, and self-care (Chu & DeArmond, 2022). This wide framing has made implementation and definitions unclear. While some schools integrate SEL into their mission and vision, for example,

others make it an isolated event. Other barriers have included inadequate resources for teachers such as ongoing coaching and teacher training and a lack of teacher buy-in (Vera, 2022).

Specifically at the middle school level, there has been a critique that there has not been enough developmentally appropriate SEL programs that help to support skills like active listening, conflict resolution, and compromise. Out of 11 evidence-based middle school programs studied, seven only report on outcomes related to problem behaviors and academic scores. Only focusing on these outcomes does not align with adolescent needs related to agency and identify development (Rosen et al., 2022).

SEL with a focus on Equity

Several researchers have focused on ways to center equity in learning. Jagers and colleagues (2018) developed the concept of Transformative SEL that not only looks at the dispositions of SEL but also incorporates a socio-historical context in support of the most marginalized students. He posed the question: "How can SEL be leveraged to help youth from historically marginalized race/ethnic socioeconomic groups to realize their fullest potential as contributing members of an increasingly complex and diverse global community?" In practice, this means the SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making shift from a focus on personal responsibility to a communal orientation toward transforming society. The competencies include additional foci such as a focus on identity (race/ethnicity), well-being, asset-based instruction, and engaged citizenry. This represents a shift away from a neoliberal approach to learning toward one that is rooted in critical democracy centered on collectivism, productive interactionism, and authentic engagement (Jagers et al., 2019).

Simmons and colleagues (2018) asserted that specific policies, programs, and initiatives that can help to make SEL more relevant include school racial and socioeconomic initiatives, restorative justice practices for school discipline, trauma-informed system interventions, and culturally competent and equity-literate educators. Legette et al. (2020) further contended SEL is well-intentioned as an initiative, but it does not address the dehumanization of Black students. The critical place to rectify this dehumanization is in the relationship between teacher and student. However, in order for teachers and students to have meaningful relationships, teachers also need the skills necessary to address dehumanization. "Black students need their teachers to possess a social awareness that accounts for the socio-historical and political realities that shape their daily lives outside of school, to ensure teachers are equipped to meaningfully support students in school" (Legette et al., 2020, p. 283).

Similarly, most SEL programs do not center on the needs of indigenous populations (Sun et al., 2022). In a three-year qualitative study, Sun and colleagues co-created an SEL program with an indigenous community for students combining aspects of transformative SEL and TribalCrit. What surfaced as critical to this program was building a space to dream, acknowledgement of colonization, reclamation and celebration of indigenous identity, navigation of the sacred, and survivance as a path to wellness. This research honored the specific community instead of enforcing a packaged program. This is particularly critical to a successful SEL program as "a failure to adopt program content to the specific needs of the students can result in curricular interventions lacking face validity and cultural relevance" (Vera, 2022, p. 2). The Abolitionist Teaching Network (2020) developed Abolitionist SEL, which counters Eurocentric SEL and focuses more on healing, joy, and community. Instead of an isolated

program, this type of SEL would be integrated into an ethos of teaching and relationship building.

Simmons et al. (2018), Jagers et al. (2018), Jagers et al. (2019), Legette et al. (2020), The Abolitionist Teaching Network (2020), and Sun et al. (2022) all indicated that there are critical pieces of SEL at the systemic level, the teacher preparation level, and the implementation level that fail to humanize BIPOC students. Promising practices include collaboration with communities in the co-creation of curriculum, increasing the competencies of teachers and their ability to both humanize themselves and their classrooms, and trauma-informed policies such as restorative justice at school sites. The Abolitionist Teaching Network (2020) spoke specifically about the importance of "cultivat[ing] relationships and community by consistently reflecting on and honoring students' full humanity" (p. 5). There is an opportunity, then, to fill in a gap in the current iterations of SEL and to deepen the work in order to truly address the well-being of middle school students. Classrooms that focus on a student's humanity and center hope have the potential to do so. The next section will look closely at middle school pedagogies that can center hope.

Middle School Pedagogies that can Center Hope

Schools can be places where students find meaning and purpose and connect to a larger community. Adolescence is a developmental time in which youth feel the need to contribute and feel connected. Kessler (2000) spoke to adolescence being a time in which the classroom can be a place for students to cultivate deep connections so that their existence is more than fragmented, ordinary, and material. As Kessler stated

> Just imagine if every student in the United States were provided a safe place to switch with a small group of their peers and reflect on their lives . . . such experiences not only

> nourish students' spiritual development, they also help them transcend prejudice, increase academic motivation, improve focus and cooperation, foster creativity, and keep more kids in school. (p.159)

Hope in the classroom can predict how students will perform in school. Both cognitive (agency and pathway thinking) and behavioral hope (self-regulation) have been linked to positive academic outcomes (Bryce et al., 2020). In more than fifty studies that closely looked at hope and academic performance, hope connected to student success in addition to other variables, such as engagement and optimism (Lopez, 2013). Purpose has also been linked to feelings of optimism and hope, and adolescence is seen as a particularly important time when young people actively work on what they want in life and what they value (Adolescent Moral Development Lab at Claremont Graduate University, 2018). Fuligni (2019) stated that "the motivation and capacity to contribute and have an impact on others have identifiable neural and biological correlates" (p. 8). And while the research on adolescents has often focused on risk and the supports young people need, there is power in thinking about the ways they can contribute to society as their brains show a remarkable desire to do so (Miller, 2021). The adolescent brain is highly dynamic and plastic; ready to learn. It is also a sensitive period that is open to learning (Field, 2021; Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). In fact, neural networks related to prosocial behaviors and the desire to make contributions are particularly strong throughout adolescence (Fuligni, 2019). As science advances our understanding of what can motivate middle school students, practices lag behind due to the demands of daily teaching and middle school preparation programs that do not integrate this kind of neuroscience (Field, 2021).

Pedagogies that are culturally sustaining, integrate justice, and are relational have the potential to create conditions for hope in the middle school classroom. Research indicates the

importance of middle school teachers understanding who their students are and the developmental phase of students (Brown & Knowles, 2014; Cook et al., 2016; Ruppert, 2020; Bishop & Harrison, 2021). In a qualitative study that interrogated the mindsets of successful middle school teachers, Ruppert (2020) discovered that specific mindsets included the belief that this age inspired hope and passion; that teachers could learn from students; that teachers must collaborate to help students find their purpose; and that hope, commitment, and joy led teachers forward. The following sections look specifically at what these mindsets look like at a pedagogical level.

Cultural and Community Responsiveness

Culturally relevant pedagogy incorporates the ideas of academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political/critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It evolved out of Ladson-Billings' observations of eight teachers who were inspiring, thoughtful, and demanding in their practice with African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In 2014, Ladson-Billings expanded upon her original pedagogy, emphasizing that the focus was on academic achievement, not classroom and behavior management; cultural competence, not cultural erasure; and sociopolitical consciousness, not school-based tasks.

Ladson-Billings's (1995) work was the foundation for several pedagogies and frameworks all developed with a focus on asset-based thinking (Jackson et al., 2021). These kinds of asset-based pedagogies provide a solid foundation upon which schools can center students' experiences. The National Middle School Association (2010) came out with characteristics of successful middle schools and emphasized how critical it was that teachers elevate students' lived experiences in their classrooms. Oftentimes the cultural background of the

teacher is different than that of the students and critical to their development is understanding culturally responsive pedagogies (Kratz & Davis, 2022). Unfortunately, throughout the 20th century, there were countless ways in which schools devalued the cultures of those who did not fit the White middle-class norms (Paris, 2012). When speaking of culturally-responsive pedagogy, Hammond (2015) asserted teachers needed to know the sociopolitical of students in order to respond to their learning needs best.

Paris (2012) further built upon culturally relevant and responsive curriculum by developing the idea of culturally sustaining pedagogies. Overall, the purpose of culturally sustaining pedagogies was to ensure the language, literacies, and identities of students were honored and sustained instead of being erased. Specifically in urban contexts, using culturally sustaining pedagogies means teaching a combination of content and skills and meeting students where they are (Kratz & Davis, 2022). This is counter to the agenda of traditional classrooms which can be to "replace students' language patterns, aesthetic tastes, literacy practices, and composing practices with those of a dominating culture" (Bomer, 2017, p. 12). Duncan-Andrade (2022) added to the importance of educators understanding the culture of students in connection with their specific community instead of essentializing a culture based on race.

Responsiveness in the Humanities Classroom

The middle school humanities classroom has the potential to honor students' experiences. Weaver and Wilding (2013) advocated supporting students in exploring their own lineage and history, understanding their local communities, and seeing a life larger than themselves through service, literature, and understanding current events. Teachers providing such opportunities in the classroom create material hope for students.

Classrooms can center growth, healing, and self-expression (Sieben, 2018). Structures like literature circles and dialogic journals help to support such expression. Classrooms can also foster resilience and resistance (Fisher et al., 2020) through the books and assignments students engage in. Buchanan-Rivera (2022) wrote that the classroom can be a site for students to explore and learn about their identity and about humanity, strengths, and justice. Acosta and colleagues (2022) added that literacy teachers can integrate racial trauma literacy into their classroom and create healing spaces by learning deeply about the communities their students come from and the cultural dynamics at play.

Writing about challenging personal experiences or reading mentor texts to which students can personally relate supports students in the validation of their own experiences (Akos & Shields Kurz, 2016; Fisher et al., 2020; Sieben, 2018) and helps them "gain insight into feelings of despair, loss, sadness, optimism, and hope" (Sieben, 2018, p. 22). There is also immense power in students being able to read about different characters and develop an understanding of multiple perspectives (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Fisher et al., 2020). Not only is there power in seeing oneself represented, but there is power in seeing different worldviews, "Students need time to find themselves in books, to meet people they would not be able to meet on their own, engage with ideas that challenge their thinking, and acquire new information" (Fisher et. al, 2020, p. 48).

Teachers can create pedagogical spaces in humanities classrooms that can cultivate hope These spaces could look like class discussions about characters and their journey to hope, classroom action projects related to civic participation, writing assignments in which students reflect on hopeful moments, analysis of historical figures who acted on hope, and celebration of

students and the personal stories they share about resilience (Akos & Shields Kurz, 2016; Massey et al., 2022).

Helping Students Find their Voice

Middle school is a time when students are attempting to find their voice. Adults can support youth voice by starting to ask what their opinions are on certain kinds of problems (Mitra, 2006). Youth voice can elevate to another level when they are able to directly impact school policy and instruction. Before students are seen as stakeholders, student voices must be accepted as legitimate (Mitra, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). "Students need to feel they are not only a part of the school community, but that they also are competent individuals who are in control of their learning" (Steinberg & McCray, 2012, p. 1).

DeMink-Carthew (2018) discussed the critical nature of student voice and its connection to democratic education. She viewed practicing student voice in the classroom as a chance to prepare students deeply for what it means to live in a democracy. Youth social action is a way to bring meaningful learning to the classroom and provide students a chance to make decisions about how they learn, "creating space for student voices to be heard in school-based decision-making as well as the design of their learning experiences is especially critical to democratic education since in its absence, students are being implicitly taught to be passive members of their learning community" (p. 5).

Traditional classrooms do not always allow for these voices to surface. Factors such as mandated curriculum and accountability measures can lead to less opportunity for students to share their authentic opinions. Neuroscience demonstrates that students are looking for meaningful connections and active learning experiences due to the hypergrowth of dendrites in

their brains (Brown & Knowles, 2014). Meaningful curriculum that helps students develop habits of mind and intellectual inquiry can engage students and give them the tools to use their voice. Nelson (2022) believed that when teachers did allow for voice, this looked like "enabling conditions, building capability and promoting students' belief in their own agency" (p. 138).

The ability to examine injustices in the world while developing skills to address these injustices empowers students, grounds them in purpose, and develops their agency. Early adolescence is a time when students deeply care about what is fair and just (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Brown & Knowles, 2014). Early adolescence is also a time when students are ready to engage in a meaningful curriculum that is purposeful, exploratory, and relevant. Students engage when they see that they can make a difference. Youth-adult partnerships, youth participatory research, and personalized learning are all ways to increase their engagement (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Coffey and Fulton (2018) examined a curriculum created specifically for middle school English Language Arts students to investigate issues they care about in their communities. This curriculum came to be known as the Responsible Change Project (RCP). This pilot provided a group of 8th-grade students from a Title I middle school specific skill sets, including critical literacy, agency, inquiry, and empathy. The larger outcomes related to this relevant curriculum included engaging students as participants in a democracy. Concerns that students named that they wanted to address were gun violence, hunger and poverty, and human trafficking. Over the course of six months, students learned skills like how to send emails, how to ask for donations, and how to find the right people to contact. As a result of the study, the teachers learned that "students develop as literate beings who value and see the purpose of reading, writing, speaking,

and listening when they can use those literate practices for their own self-interests and with the purpose of enacting change" (p. 24).

Other studies looked closely at the ways curriculum helped students both examine their own identities and find purpose in social action. Rupenthal and Furuness (2020) examined the ways in which middle school teachers built a yearlong curriculum dedicated to students taking action on an issue that they cared about. They examined questions relating to adolescent inquiries grounded in the work of Beane (1990): Who are we? What can we be? What should we do? The curriculum the teachers created explored civics issues and supported the development of student voice. The course moved from personal identities to collective identities with the end goal of creating students who were passionate about an issue and whose identities developed into agents of change.

Hendrix-Soto (2021) examined how two teachers used critical literacies in their classrooms to foster joy, care, and action. Two White co-teachers looked closely at their own practices to ensure they were providing meaningful youth participatory action research (YPAR) in their classroom of Black and Latinx students. The cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which protected young immigrants from being deported and increased United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids during this time impacted the reserves of hope that students had in creating meaningful change. The two teachers created a Young Equity Agents (YEA) project with 25 students during which they learned about systemic racism and resistance, shared critical concerns with each other, and investigated how to alter the education system in their school. This project included components like community circles, critical inquiry projects, museum visits, mentoring, and guest speakers. One outcome of

this project was the realization that youth need to not only surface social justice issues in their local communities and develop their voice, but also access moments of joy, hope, and imagination.

Curricula that give middle school students the skills to contribute to a larger purpose and develop their voice can help them develop a sense of agency. In order to help students meaningfully speak about topics like justice and fairness, teachers must first build relationships within the classroom.

Relational Pedagogies

Meaningful relationships with middle school youth allow them to feel seen and heard. *No Child Left Behind* (2001) had negative consequences on the relationship between teachers and students as high-stakes test scores became the highest priority (Love, 2023). *No Child Left Behind's* (2001) impact on curriculum, instruction, structure, and organization was greatest in middle schools. Content became far more important than pedagogy (Brown & Knowles, 2014). However, research indicated how much middle school students appreciate that their teachers care about them and that they feel a sense of connection to adults (Cook et al., 2016; Hanover Research, 2018; Steinberg & McCray, 2012).

Noddings (2005) developed a theory of the ethics of care in which a teacher could be motivated to be with and do for the sake of the child. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) further examined care and developed the radical care framework which included five components for leading justice in urban schools: adopting an antiracist stance, cultivating authentic relationships, believing in the excellence of everyone in the building, leveraging power strategically, and adopting a stance of radical hope.

In a qualitative study, Steinberg and McCray (2012) asked 15 middle school students about what was most important to them at school. They reported that having teachers who cared about them and wanted to work with them as individuals was most significant. This kind of care could look like active listening, helping students meet goals, participating in activities, or asking what students care about (Brown & Knowles, 2014). According to Fisher and colleagues (2020), strong positive relationships with students happened through relating with students, providing structures and boundaries, providing student autonomy and choice, demonstrating hope in students, and giving emotional support.

Strikwerda (2019) examined teachers' ability to manifest critical hope in their middle school students. This qualitative research included interviews with 10 classroom teachers about their ability to use critical hope in the classroom. The themes that emerged were building trust and caring relationships, setting high expectations, advocating and empowering students, and confronting hopelessness.

Bishop and Harrison (2021) also spoke to the critical need for educators to respect and value young adolescents and the multiple identities they have ranging from age, race, gender, and religion to dis/ability, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Middle school was about far more than just teaching content. When teachers took the time to get to know their students, respect them, care for them, and listen to them, students experienced positive outcomes, including increased engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Fisher et al., 2020).

Direct and explicit instruction about what Chapman and Miller (2022) called "relational spirituality," wherein students see the sacredness and inherent value in each other, helped

students develop dispositions related to civics. Schools could decrease isolation and hopelessness and instead "prepare whole students to continue to feel relational love and interconnectedness rather than distance, division, or oppression—once they leave for the wider world" (p. 8). Buchanan-Rivera (2022) advocated creating intentional spaces for listening and dialogue where students and teachers can see each other. Active listening allows individuals to see each others' strengths and humanity.

Relationships with students can also go beyond conversations, and happen through specific actions such as tutoring students, providing food and school supplies, facilitating legal and medical support, and providing tools to address stress (Barnett, 2022; Bryce et al., 2020).

Healing Instead of Disciplining

Because of the many developmental changes adolescents experience, they may be prone to demonstrate impulsiveness and have trouble with emotional regulation. This can be exacerbated when they experience trauma (Crosby et al., 2018). Ginwright (2016) asserted that supporting young people means not just teaching them knowledge, skills, and behaviors, but also providing spaces for care, love, hope, joy, and faith with healing as an outcome of learning. Since the pandemic, schools have seen an increase in trauma and mental health issues among early adolescents (Strauss, 2021). Restorative practices in the classroom that allow students to build healthy relationships with each other and their teacher along with working to repair those relationships when there is any kind of injustice or harm done can help to create safe communities where students can build authentic relationships and trust with each other (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Fisher et al. (2020) saw class meetings as powerful opportunities to improve skills like showing respect and building community.

Teachers can then create safe classrooms where they work to understand who their students are, apply their knowledge of the neuroscience of the middle school brain, and create the routines and structures necessary for students to excel (Crosby et al., 2018). Fisher et al. (2020) argued that intentionally choosing literature and crafting meaningful assignments can help address the emotional needs of students, "We can turn our classrooms into liberating spaces that allow students to ask questions, make decisions, and become aware of themselves and their ability to heal with others (p. 57).

Moreover, Rogers (1951) as cited in Venet (2021) developed the concept of unconditional positive regard. In practice, this concept means communicating the following: "I care about you. You have value. You don't have to do anything to prove it to me, and nothing's going to change my mind," (p. 99). Walls (2021) conducted a qualitative study in two middle schools that revealed that stable and meaningful relationships between teachers and students became a source of resilience and motivation for students, particularly those who got into trouble more often. According to students, the emotional substance of the classroom—whether or not the interactions between teacher and students were caring—mattered far more than structures and routines.

In order to intentionally create spaces where students feel hope, belonging, and interconnectedness, teachers must personally develop dispositions and mindsets that help them do so. The next section explores different ways teachers develop personal practices that help them create hopeful conditions in their classrooms.

The Inner Work of Teachers

Teachers' ability to examine their inner lives to better serve their students is a critical skill in teacher development. Steiner (1996), the founder of the Waldorf Schools, posited that teachers cannot be effective if they focus only on what they do, rather than on who they are. Palmer (1997) added to this sentiment contending that teachers teach who they are, projecting the nature of their soul onto their students. He believed that good teaching is a result of three aspects of a teacher's inner life: the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual foundations that make them a whole person. Much of what is taught in pre-service education programs focuses on the intellectual: best practices and pedagogy, curriculum and instruction, and theory. However, what does not surface is the emotional and spiritual work of teaching. The pedagogy of the soul, according to Palmer, is possible when teachers have the professional abilities and personal strengths to allow the souls of students to surface in the classroom.

In a letter to teachers, Freire (1998) wrote about the qualities democratic educational practice requires, ranging from humility and armed love to the joy of living. Humility as a virtue in teaching is not often discussed but is an entry point into more possibilities for student voice in the classroom. Darder (2012) posited that teacher education is reductionist, focusing only on teaching itself: "[F]ew public-school teachers are able to envision their practice outside of the scope of barren classroom settings, lifeless instructional packages, bland textbooks, standardized tests, and the use of meritocratic systems for student performance evaluation" (p. 3).

Teachers finding equilibrium by paying attention to their inner lives makes it possible for students to do the same (Lantieri, 2001). hooks (2003) contended that when a teacher does not bring their whole self to the classroom (including their joy and pain), the classroom becomes

sterilized and the teacher cannot be fully present. When teachers are unable to bring their whole selves, students may be at risk of not bringing their whole selves either.

C**ultivating Critical Consciousness**

Freire (1970) believed that teachers and students must develop a critical consciousness that includes critical analysis, a sense of agency, and critical action. Darder (2012) described how teachers from the dominant culture can show up in solidarity with students as they challenge inequalities. Teachers who do so create the ability for students to have a voice and power in the classroom. What Freire (1970), Darder (2012), and other scholars suggested requires deep reflection and understanding by teachers. This kind of inner work decenters the technical aspects of education and centers human relationships and historical context. Through this kind of deep work, Darder (2012) contended that critical educators create opportunities for students of color to be their authentic selves. Ginwright (2016) described these teachers as soul rebels, "embarking on their own journeys that allow them to discover practices that heal and transform classrooms, organizations, and communities" (p. 5). These teachers can ultimately create strong relationships with young people as they constantly create opportunities for self-exploration and the ability to articulate a clear purpose for their work grounded in a socio-political vision. Nojan (2020) argued that, the more teachers' self-reflection and content knowledge grow, the more they make meaningful connections with their students and honor their identities (see also Eren & Ravitch, 2021). As Eren and Ravitch stated,

> Students deserve educators who are truly equipped to honor, uplift, and sustain their cultural backgrounds and who are willing to transform their own consciousness in order to be able to deeply understand the complexities of identity and equity and their relationship to marginalizing pedagogical practices. (p. 15)

Bishop and Harrison (2021) shared specific questions that teachers can ask themselves to address biases,

> How do stereotypes shape the way I see students, families, and the local community? What assumptions guide my interactions with students, families, and the local community? How do my own experiences and privilege limit my understanding about students, families, and the local community. (p. 15).

Teachers can also work on how to love themselves so they can love other people's children (Muhammad, 2023). The ability to transform one's own consciousness is the inner work that, as discussed earlier, goes much further than instruction and pedagogy.

Cultivating Well-Being

Building social-emotional competencies in teachers has become an important part of the educational discourse in recent years. Garcia (2019) asserted about the power of such competencies in teachers,

Socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as role models for respectful and appropriate communication and prosocial behavior. (p. 73)

Teachers who engage in practices like meditation or mindfulness have the capacity to increase their compassion and their ability to be a caring, relational teacher (Ginwright, 2016; McCaw, 2021). As Ginwright stated, "Practices like meditation, mindfulness, and yoga all prepare to strengthen individuals' capacity to stay centered in turbulent times in order to make decisions, and lead from a place of compassion and love" (2016, p. 32).

Teachers engaged in their own social-emotional learning can help other teachers recognize their own humanity as well as the humanity of the students before them (Ieva & Beasley, 2022; Legette et al., 2022). This kind of learning is not just about emotional regulation, but about confronting one's own internalized white supremacy, implicit biases, and identities. Teachers can then truly create safe spaces for students as they personally work on understanding the historical and political realities that their students face. Specific practices include: examining identity, exploring emotions, cultivating compassionate curiosity, orienting towards optimism, and establishing balance and boundaries (Ieva & Beasley, 2022).

> For teachers to nurture these competencies within their students, they must first understand the nature of dehumanization (i.e., the role of White supremacy and anti-Black racism to strip Black people of human virtue and desire), and confront this phenomenon head-on. Doing so facilitates a learning environment that recognizes and honors students' humanity. (Legette et al., 2022, p. 7)

Barthelus (2023) asserted that, in order to allow students to thrive, schools need to prioritize the health and well-being of educators. Creating community, practicing mindfulness, and increasing access to resources are a few ways to do so.

As Ginwright (2016); Garcia (2019); McCaw (2021); Legette et al. (2022); Ieva and Beasley (2022); and Barthelus (2023) all indicated, an important part of teachers' inner work that connects them to students is recognizing their own biases and cultivating their own emotional regulation in order to demonstrate love and compassion towards their students.

Cultivating Hope in Self

Little research has been done on teachers and their sense of hope (Birmingham, 2009; Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011, 2012). An important aspect of believing all students can learn is hope in oneself as a teacher. Those with higher hope report having higher self-esteem and greater

optimism (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). Teachers must couple the belief that students are capable of learning with a belief that they can play a role in this learning (Birmingham, 2009). In surveys Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2011) distributed to both pre-service and in-service teachers, they discovered that both groups of teachers were highly hopeful people. Creating conditions within the school can help to sustain this hope, especially as teachers support students through trauma. "[A] key to maintaining a teacher's hopefulness and sense of calling," Bullough and Hall-Kenyon concluded, "is creating work conditions that allow teachers to teach as they know they can, to be supported in doing their best work rather than finding themselves having to work against institutional policies and practices to teach well" (p. 11).

In another study done with teachers who were deemed highly committed, Bullough & Hall-Kenyon (2012) used the Hope Scale to study teachers. They wanted to explore the degree of hopefulness of teachers who were called to the profession.

> Those who view teaching as their calling in life display significantly greater enthusiasm and commitment to the idea of a teacher career, are more mindful of its potential impact on other people, are less concerned about the sacrifices that such a career might entail, and are more willing to accept the extra duties that often accompany the teacher's role. (Serow, 1994 as cited in Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012, p. 8)

They discovered that there was a strong but not causal relationship between a sense of calling, commitment, and hope.

Nolan and Stilzlein (2011) added that, because hope can be somewhat abstract for teachers, it's important to make the practice of hope pragmatic. The reality for teachers is that there is a high rate of burnout and other factors that contribute to challenges in teaching. The onus has been on teachers to remain hopeful while there is not much support on what that means.

Habits of hope, developing great practices in the classroom, developing confidence through obstacles, and working collectively on hope has the potential to sustain hope for teachers.

Other specifics Nolan and Stilzlein (2011) offered for teachers include developing meaningful friendships that foster hope, coming together to collectively problem solve, and looking beyond a local context to see global connections. As they shared, "Given the pervasiveness of high anxiety and low morale across the teaching field today, engaging in large-scale conversations with peers elsewhere may work against feelings of isolation, debilitation, or insurmountability by uniting secluded efforts in an empowering coalition" (p. 8). Ginwright (2016) spoke to the power of teachers becoming soul rebels amidst the status quo in schools where they can embark on their own journeys of healing and transformation as they help their students do the same in their classrooms. He added that collective hope can emerge in communities that provide meaning and purpose, where groups can collectively imagine what freedom, peace, and justice look like.

As cited in Roselle et al. (2022), Glickman and Burns (2021) stated, "92% of teachers report teaching is increasingly stressful citing issues of teacher burnout, retention, emotional and intellectual health, and professional development and satisfaction" (p. 2). They named specific practices that integrated hope, including being affirmed, reestablishing community, and prioritizing self-care.

Barnett (2022) added that principals can support teachers in cultivating hope in students through professional development that develops teachers' ability to help students with goal setting, develop agency in students, and strengthen pathway thinking, a form of thinking that allows individuals to see different paths.

The following section speaks to the two theoretical frameworks that apply to both classroom practices that create conditions for hope and the personal practices that make it possible for teachers to cultivate hope in all of their students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Both the theoretical frameworks of critical hope and healing justice are appropriate when analyzing teacher practices and dispositions related to hope. The frameworks include the importance of teacher-student relationships, collective well-being, and transformative justice. Both provide specific ways in which teachers can work both within their classrooms and personally to foster a collective sense of hope.

Critical Hope

Freire (1970) described the need for teachers to adopt what he called *critical consciousness* wherein teachers engage in a deep analysis of problems in the world while simultaneously looking at their own practices, biases, and beliefs. In 1993, Freire wrote *Pedagogy of Hope* and shared, "There is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain" (p. 2).

Duncan-Andrade (2009) expanded on Freire's (1993) ideas by critiquing certain kinds of hope: hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred. *Hokey hope* is the idea that individuals can achieve the American Dream through sheer optimism. *Mythical hope* is a hope grounded in false equal opportunity. *Hope deferred* happens when educators become overwhelmed by the material conditions of what they see students experiencing and lose hope. Duncan-Andrade (2009) asserted that critical hope is a kind of hope that counters hopelessness. He argues that a teacher has the power to control the conditions of their classroom and cultivate hope. This kind of hope

can be broken down into three categories: material hope, the ability to provide quality and relevant instruction to youth; socratic hope; the ability for teachers to examine the painful aspects of an unjust society and pave a way forward; and audacious hope, the ability for teachers to struggle alongside students in collective ways. This kind of hope can be in direct opposition to policies that demand high test scores and other accountability measures. According to Duncan-Andrade (2009), there is a real opportunity for retraining urban educators so that they can bring critical hope into the classroom.

Zemblayas (2014), as cited in Grain et al. (2016), stated:

> To say that someone is critically hopeful means that the person is involved in a critical analysis of power relations and how they constitute one's emotional ways of being in the world while attempting to construct, imaginatively and materially, a different lifeworld. (p. 13)

Bishundat and colleagues (2018) add to this sentiment by stating that critical hope begins with educators. If the educators are not cultivating hope in themselves, they are unable to do so with others. While Bishundat et al. (2018) spoke about what education leaders can do to cultivate critical hope in their practice, what they identifed applies to what teachers can do too: foster accountability, share power with students, and develop an understanding of the past to impact the present and healing.

Grain (2022) put forward seven principles of critical hope based on Freire (1993), Duncan-Andrade (2009), and other researchers' work: hope is necessary, but hope alone is not enough; critical hope is not something you have; it is something you practice; critical hope is messy, uncomfortable, and full of contradictions; critical hope is intimately entangled with the body and the land; critical hope requires bearing witness to social and historical trauma; critical hope requires interruptions and invitations; and anger and grief have a seat at the table. In an

interview with Edwards (2023), both Duncan-Andrade (2009) and Grain (2022) spoke about critical hope. Duncan-Andrade shared how, in education, things can often be sanitized, but instead of "ducking, dodging, and denying the mess," it is important to work through it and imagine something else (Edwards, 2023, 6:32).

Taken together, Freire (1993), Duncan-Andrade (2009), Bishundat et al. (2018), and Grain (2022) defined and operationalized critical hope as a type of hope rooted in action that is both introspective and external. Both internal and external ways of cultivating hope serve as ways to best meet the needs of students.

Healing Justice

Outside of education, healing justice has been a framework used by activists, healers, and social workers to collectively heal trauma caused by injustices (Langhout et al., 2021). As Langout and colleagues stated, "A healing justice approach is powerful because it is designed by and for communities of Color and working-class communities to enable the simultaneous holding of trauma, hope, care, and action, which supports the complex personhood of these groups" (p. 250).

Ginwright (2016) described healing justice approaches that allow teachers to create hopeful spaces for their students. He speaks to the many ways that oppression can lead to a decrease in hope and argues that healing is critical to the building of hope. The healing justice framework for teachers focuses specifically on transformative organizing, restorative justice, healing circles, contemplative practices, faith-based practices, cultural and indigenous practices, and activist art. While mindfulness may help with focus and awareness, mindfulness without justice does not elevate issues of racism and inequality. While learning addresses emotional

regulation and grit, programs do not tend to place it in a larger context (Ginwright, 2016). For teachers to provide humanizing experiences for their students and address issues of justice, bridging healing with justice is critical. The interior work of teachers is then a springboard for the work they do in their classrooms.

Ginwright (2018) expanded on the idea of healing justice by discussing healing-centered engagement. As opposed to focusing just on trauma and what is wrong with the student, teachers can focus on what is right with the student. In addition to supporting young people, Ginwright asserts the importance of healing-centered engagement for adults themselves. Venet (2021) speaks about the power of teachers to stand up with students and make real changes in their community, as well as the kinds of agency students develop through developing skills like how to research or how to engage in debates.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As illustrated in a review of the literature, there has been ample research done on learning to support the well-being of youth. However, this intervention only goes so far if teachers do not ensure safety, belonging, and hope for every student in their classroom. Fisher et al. (2020) asserted there is not enough instruction for teachers on motivation, belonging, and identity. Less research has been done on the specific practices middle school teachers use to create conditions for hope in the classroom and on the kinds of personal practices they cultivate in order to do so. Adolescents are facing a crisis of hope (United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2021). Identifying what teachers are already doing to create conditions for hope in their classrooms is a first step toward addressing this issue on a larger scale. As Duncan-Andrade (2022) stated,

> Such educators deliver us from false hope by teaching in ways that connect the moral outrage of young people to actions that relieve the undeserved suffering in their communities. The spread of this kind of educational practice in our schools adds to hopefulness because it develops a transgenerational capacity for long-term, sustainable, critical hope in communities. (p. 182)

This chapter outlines the research design, data collection, and analysis that was used for this study. First, the chapter will provide an outline of the study's research questions, the rationale for a qualitative approach, the method used, and the participants. Next will be a discussion of the data collection and analysis plan. Finally, the chapter will culminate in a look at the limitations of the study, the validity, and a timeline of what remains to be done.

Research Questions

To understand the practices of middle school teachers who create conditions for hope in their students and the inner work they do, this study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How do middle school teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in practices that are consistent with critical hope?
2. What personal practices do successful middle school teachers cultivate in order to create conditions for hope in their classroom?

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

In order to answer these questions, I did a phenomenological qualitative study. The qualitative design afforded a close look at the teachers' subjective experiences and the kinds of processes they used for meaning-making (Leavy, 2017). Qualitative research also allowed for specific kinds of field notes that captured a depth of understanding. These field notes included thick descriptions, "highly detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and activities observed" (Leavy, 2017, p. 137) and reflexivity notes; notes that require a researcher to look back at how the research may have been influenced by one's actions and assumptions (Galletta, 2013).

Method

To answer the research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight language arts and social studies middle school teachers. I chose these specific subjects because the humanities classroom creates a context for exploring what it means to be a human being through the study of literature and history. There were natural opportunities for teachers to integrate themes of oppression, power, justice, hope, and agency through this content (Fisher et

al., 2020). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to ask open-ended and theoretically driven questions (Galletta, 2013). The beginning portion of the semi-structured interview was intended to capture information, "deeply grounded in the participant's experience and angle of vision" (Galletta, 2013, p. 48). The middle section was focused on questions related to the research study. The final section was an opportunity to return to unexplored areas with the participant.

The study's methodological approach was phenomenological. The goal of this methodology is not to generalize, but instead to focus on the lived experience as a story. With a focus on how teachers were creating conditions for hope in the classroom and in themselves, grounded inquiry was a way to honor the ways they have come to understand meaning and purpose. Therefore, "the core ethical procedure is to work collaboratively in the entire process, rather than just justifying the research with a signed consent form" (Gavidia & Adu, 2022, p. 3).

Participants

The unit of analysis for the semi-structured interviews was the individual language arts or social studies middle school teacher who worked in an urban public-school setting. I selected teachers based on the recommendations of other educators and, in one case, based on my own experience working with the teacher. Galletta (2013) spoke to a research design being most faithful when there are formulated criteria for participants. Urban middle school teachers were selected based on the following criteria: they developed strong relationships with students, used a powerful and exploratory curriculum, created learning that was active and purposeful and created meaningful and inclusive environments. Purposive sampling was used to identify these specific teachers. I reached out via email to my different educational networks, which included teachers,

school leaders, coaches, consultants, and professors. This kind of sampling focused on the deliberate selection of participants since "the goal or purpose for selecting the specific instances is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data--in essence, information-rich" (Yin, 2016, p. 93).

The Context

The unit of study was urban middle school settings. All recommended teachers ended up coming from the Pacific Northwest and Southern California. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) defined urban settings as both metropolitan and suburban:

> While the inner ring generally have more resources than their metropolitan counterparts, research has shown, Black and Latinx families within these communities have limited access to these resources, much like their counterparts in larger cities. I therefore use the term urban to describe both the metropolitan and suburban communities where Black and Latinx students are in the majority. (p. 7)

Humanities teachers were chosen as these specific content areas allow teachers to address topics of justice, race, and inclusion directly through literature and historical events. The teachers in this study came recommended by school leaders and their abilities as teachers were in alignment with how Bishop and Harrison (2021) defined successful teachers as doing the following:

- Enjoying being with young adolescents,
- Speaking up for and standing by youth when social injustices happen, and
- Paying attention to and learning about the beliefs, values, and norms of students.

In seven of the eight schools included in the study, 75% or more of the students were students of color. Moreover, six of the eight schools served a student body that comprised 75% or more students from economically disadvantaged households.

Procedures

Once teachers were recommended to me, I contacted them to determine their interest in the study. If they expressed interest, I sent them an eight-question survey (see Appendix B). If they completed the survey and fit the criteria, I sent them an electronic consent form that outlined the study and risks. After completing the consent form, I scheduled interviews via Zoom (www.zoom.us) with each teacher. Ten teachers were contacted and eight teachers ended up participating.

I engaged in a semi-structured interview lasting a total of 90 minutes with each of the eight teachers. The interviews were recorded on Zoom and later transcribed. Semi-structured interviews begin with questions that ground experience, proceed to questions of greater specificity, and close with an opening narrative for theoretical connections (Galletta, 2013). A specific interview protocol was created to ask participants questions.

The interviews focused on practices the teacher employed to cultivate hope and meaning in the classroom, examples of how they demonstrate care, and their own practices that opened the possibility for hope in the classroom. The questions were designed to allow participants to speak about moments that had profound significance and meaning for them, rather than limiting what they share to what is significant and meaningful to the researcher. They were also designed using both theoretical frameworks. The questions were connected to the purpose of the research and had a natural progression, "toward a fully-in-depth exploration of the phenomena under study" (Galletta, 2013, p. 45).

Instrumentation

I created the interview protocols (see Appendix A) based on the two theoretical frameworks used for this research study: critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) and healing justice (Ginwright, 2016). After I developed the research protocols, I piloted the protocols with two peers who were educators. I was able to refine the protocol after doing these specific pilots. The beginning questions were broad in scope, the middle questions were more specific, and the interview concluded with a closing question that invited participants to discuss anything else they wanted to share (Galletta, 2013).

Data Analysis

I recorded all the interviews on Zoom and used a transcribing service to transcribe each interview. After each interview, I took 30 minutes to take notes on the themes, ideas, and questions that came up for me. I documented my reflections in a Google Document (www.google.com) and came back to these notes before I started to analyze data. I stored all the data in a safe place on my computer. I analyzed the data by hand using deductive coding for the first research question and inductive coding for the second research question (Yin, 2016) to identify patterns with specific words or concepts that demonstrate relationships between the text and the subject area. The data were then coded for emergent themes. I interpreted data by reading transcripts a minimum of three times to ensure the themes aligned with the data and the research questions. This ability to read the transcripts multiple times connects me more to the participants' lived experiences (Galletta, 2013). Galletta posited, "Identifying code, where it came from, and what ideas it puts forth, and, over time, how it relates to other codes, is central to the analysis" (p. 123).

After reading and coding the transcripts, I compiled short narratives about each participant related to what inspired them. A few questions in my protocol allowed participants to share specific stories about themselves. As Berry and Cook (2019) stated, the narrative inquiry is a method based on the assumption that "stories give meaning to people's lives and those stories are treated as data" (p. 87).

Overall, the goal of the interviews was to examine the specific pedagogical practices teachers put into place within their classrooms and the ways they aligned with critical hope. An additional goal was to learn more about mindsets and dispositions that would help reveal what teachers believed was important when engaging with middle school students. The critical hope and healing justice frameworks helped to guide the conversation and delve into specific conversations related to justice, hope, and care.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations to this study. First, the sample size of eight teachers was small. Conclusions drawn from the data of this sample size cannot be generalized however, findings can suggest implications for future research and classroom best practices. Another limitation was that there were no interviews with students. Student voices could have added significant depth to the study by showing us how their teachers' practices directly impacted them. Finally, the timing of the study was a shorter two-to-three-month period. This time period was a small window into the lives and experiences of teachers and students. Finally, this was a study that centered on urban public schools within the United States. This was a specific context for the study, and teachers' practices might look very different in suburban and rural contexts.

Validity/Trustworthiness

To increase the validity and trustworthiness of this research study, I put the following into place: member checking, sharing study findings with the participants in the study (Yin, 2016); portraying the researcher's authentic self in the study (Whittemore et al., 2001); and providing consent forms so participants were clear about the purpose of the study. I approached the study, as described by Yin (2016), with a "triangulated mind" ensuring the participants had lived experiences applicable to the study and that the literature accurately represented the broader topic while referencing direct observations as a practitioner (p. 87).

Additionally, as a former middle school humanities teacher, I was able to build credibility and trust when listening to the stories and responses of the participants. I could engage and empathize as they told stories about challenges they faced or their students faced. I often related to what they shared and this connection allowed me to safely probe in ways that were particular to the middle school context.

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study was that it was particular to middle school teachers and not elementary or high school teachers. The study also focused on humanities teachers specifically in urban areas as these areas tend to serve students of color. Finally, the study was about successful teachers and their specific perspectives and insights.

Summary

This qualitative study examined middle school teachers' pedagogical practices and the ways they aligned to critical hope in addition to their personal practices that helped to create conditions for such hope. Eight semi-structured interviews gave participants the opportunity to

respond to questions in rich and meaningful ways. Chapter 4 will share the findings and themes that surfaced from these interviews.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Study Background

The purpose of this study was to look closely at the practices that allowed teachers to create conditions for hope in their middle school classrooms. A secondary purpose was to look at what kinds of interior practices teachers cultivated to maintain their own sense of hope as a way to humanize their classrooms. Teachers responded to semi-structured questions about how they cared for students, how they created a community, and how they developed a meaningful curriculum. I also asked them to reflect on what their purpose as educators and the ways they practiced hope and healing in their personal lives. Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in practices that are consistent with critical hope?
2. What personal practices do successful middle school teachers cultivate in order to create conditions for hope for their students?

To answer the questions, I interviewed eight middle school humanities teachers from urban public and public charter schools via Zoom whose demographic information can be found in Table 1. Participants had to be recommended by either school leaders or educators who worked with them, such as teachers, coaches, and professors. They fit specific criteria: they were language arts or social studies teachers, working in an urban public or public charter school, who fostered hope and community in their classrooms, and developed meaningful relationships with their students. Each participant engaged in a 90-minute semi-structured interview on Zoom.

Table 1

Study Participant Demographic Descriptions

Participant Pseudonym	Pronouns	Race/Ethnicity	School Setting	Region	Grade	Subject	Number of Years Teaching
Maya	she/her	Filipina Asian	Public	West coast	6th grade	Language Arts	4
Jasmine	she/her	White European	Public Charter	West coast	6th and 7th grade	Language Arts	2
Felix	he/him	Samoan Pacific-Islander	Public	West coast	8th grade	Language Arts	10
Olivia	she/her	Jamaican Black	Public	West coast	6th grade	Language Arts	20
Sabrina	she/her	Chicana Latina	Public	West coast	6th-8th grade	English and Language Arts for multilingual students	18
Camila	she/her	Mexican Latina	Public Charter	West coast	6th grade	Language Arts, History, and Music	7
Brenda	she/her	White Armenian and European	Public	West coast	7th grade	Social Sciences	7
David	he/him	White Jewish	Public	West coast	8th grade	Language Arts	18

Organization of Chapter

This chapter begins by providing larger context about the challenges of middle school according to participants and what inspired each of them to teach middle school. The purpose of opening the chapter with what inspired participants is to elevate and capture what fundamentally gave them hope when working with this age group. The chapter then provides a conceptual framework and then leads into the research findings from data collected during the semi-

structured teacher interviews; the findings are organized by research question. The first research question is structured by using coded data according to the preexisting headings found in Duncan-Andrade's (2009) Critical hope framework and Ginwright's (2016) Healing justice framework. The second research question themes were found by using in vivo coding.

The Challenges of Teaching and Supporting the Middle School Student

Middle school can be a challenging time for a variety of reasons. Students go through developmental changes and the structure of school they have been familiar with since the elementary grades change dramatically. Fisher et al. (2020) discussed the upheaval this age can bring for students, even those most secure. Several participants spoke about the emotional challenges students faced and how emotional regulation or the lack thereof, impacted their focus on academics. Some of the emotional challenges were due to physical changes and others were due to the increased trauma they experienced. As one participant, Camila, shared, "If they don't know how to deal with their emotions, it becomes their whole life." Brenda added that the mix of emotional development and social dynamics they bring into the classroom made teaching content feel like it was tertiary. "What I'm trying to do is just create that safe space for them and then create a trusting space and then create or prompt their curiosity and then finally get to the learning." She added how she wanted to ensure that she honored the challenges students faced personally while at the same time engaging them in something meaningful in the classroom.

A few participants spoke about some of the systemic challenges that come with teaching at their schools. For example, Maya shared that many teachers who did not teach at her school said that her school is one of the hardest schools to work at, but, for her, it was the reason she

wanted to be there. The challenge, however, was that teachers had to take on extra burdens to support their students without much support from the school or district.

David also reflected on the challenges of being a teacher within a larger system. He shared that, even if a particular teacher creates a safe space for a student, the student still had to travel from class to class:

> I think that teachers have an idealistic notion that somehow a school or a classroom is safely tucked away from the forces of racism and capitalism, you know? And you can get some like-minded social justice-minded teachers and say, oh, we'll do this, we'll do that. But what's really deeply challenging is just how ingrained the powers of society are in schools.

From the way middle school students are constantly changing on a physical and developmental level, to the way those who try to teach in equitable spaces have to deal with oppressive traditional systems, the challenges in middle school are real. Hope is grounded in both understanding this unique moment of a child's development and the dedication to this specific age group. The following section looks closely at what inspired participants to work with young adolescents.

What Inspired Participants to Teach Middle School

Middle school teachers are unique in who they work with and what they teach. Ruppert (2020) identified three specific mindsets that are particular to being a successful middle school teacher: the belief that working with early adolescents inspires hope and passion, that teachers can learn from their students, and that teachers need to help students find their purpose. Ultimately, hope, joy, and commitment are what help middle school educators persist. The motivations for why the participants in this study teach middle school align to these mindsets and are an important foundation for hope.

Maya's Motivations

"Middle Schoolers are Just This Special Type of Human Being."

Maya identified as a Filipina-American woman. She was a 6th-grade language arts teacher. The school in which Maya worked included 66% BIPOC students and 33% White students. 28.9% were Hispanic/Latino, 10.5% were Asian or Asian Pacific Islander, 10.3% were two or more races, 7.9% were Black or African American, 7.9% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and .6% was American Indian or Alaska Native.

She had always wanted to become an educator. She became a mom at a very young age, so she put the dream aside. She started to get back into the classroom initially as a volunteer in her children's classrooms and then as a paraeducator. As a paraeducator, she tended to work closely with students from marginalized groups who were considered tough to work with, according to other teachers. She then discovered an alternative route to certification and received her credentials. She was drawn to upper elementary and middle school students especially because, she said, society tended to forget that they were still children:

> It's almost as if after you hit fifth grade or sixth grade, there's just this expectation or assumption that you know how to be a successful student, that you know how to be a classmate or friend. There's a lot of learning there. And so as I was applying for teaching positions, I really wanted to be in fifth or sixth grade…It's like, such a magical and awful and surreal time. It's like middle schoolers are just this special kind of human being where they're still young and make mistakes, but they want to grow up and they have to figure out how to navigate that. And I just feel so happy that I get to be a part of that figuring it out for them.

Jasmine's Motivations

"I Just Really Value that I Get to Work With Those Students."

Jasmine identified as a White woman. She taught 6th and 7th grade language arts. She began her teaching career with Teach for America. The school in which she taught was 99.6%

BIPOC. 98.8% of students were Hispanic/Latino, .4% were White, .4% were two or more races, and .4% were American Indian. Her students came from a predominantly Latino background and many were English learners of varying degrees. She spoke about how middle school is a special and unique place to be as a teacher because, "it is a foundational time to hammer home the importance of academic responsibility and kind of owning your own personal academic journey." She valued the power of English language arts because students can think independently and be creative with their learning,

> But I think English, especially in a community with a lot of either first-generation students or EL students, is especially important. And I just really value that I get to work with those students and develop such important skills when they're still so young and able to develop their own opinions and thoughts.

Felix's Motivations

"What Inspires Me to Teach at the End of the Day is My Community."

Felix identified as a Samoan man. He was an 8th grade language arts teacher who teaches in the community where he grew up. The school in which Felix taught was 91.9% BIPOC students. 48.5% were Hispanic/Latino, 22% were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 10.9% were Black or African American, 8.1% were White, 7.8% were two or more races, 1.5% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 1.3% were American Indian or Alaska Native. He began his teaching career through Teach for America. He spoke about how he initially wanted to teach high school, but there were no positions so he taught middle school and fell in love with this age group. He shared that he would not be teaching if it were not within his community. He cared about everything in connection to his community and Pacific Islanders, "[Teaching] is the tool that I'm using, I think for me to achieve my means or my ends. And teaching is the means. What inspires me to teach at the end of the day is my community."

He also spoke about the freedom he was given to teach language arts. There was so much that fell under the umbrella of the topic. If a student expressed interest in something, he could turn that into a lesson of sorts. He gave the example of how a few of his students were interested in drill rap: "I could easily take that apart and be like, "hey, these are the beautiful metaphors. . . . Also, let's analyze and take a critical look at the hyper-masculine misogynistic characterization." It could all be language arts. I love the freedom."

Olivia's Motivations

"You Have the Power to Change the World."

Olivia identified as a first-generation Black, Jamaican woman. She taught 6th grade. The school in which Olivia taught was 89% BIPOC students. 51.9% of students were Hispanic/Latino, 14.5% were Black or African American, 11% were White, 7.9% were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 7.9% were two or more races, 6.6% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and .2% were American Indian or Alaska Native. She initially thought she would teach younger students, but a 6th grade position opened up. Others thought she was a middle school teacher before she became one. She taught for half a year and ended up loving this age level. Olivia graduated from the high school her middle school students would go on to attend and knew the community well. She spoke about how reading gives you the power to imagine differently:

> Like, if I could read about it and I can imagine it, I can change it. I can make it my own. I could fight a battle based on all of these things I read. If I can write about it, I can write and I can battle, I can change policy. I could change someone's mind. There is power in literacy and words. And I like to give my students that power cuz they don't have it, right? Like they've spent 11 years learning from everyone and being a kid, you know? And this is that age where it's like, you're really not, you know? You're really not. You have the power to change the world really at this age, and they don't know it.

Sabrina's Motivations

"Literacy is a Way for us to Share Our Stories."

Sabrina identified as a Chicana woman. She was a multi-lingual (ML) teacher who taught literacy to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. The school where Sabrina taught was 72.6% BIPOC students. 27.4% of students were White, 26.7% were Hispanic/Latino, 20.3% were Black or African American, 12.2% were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 11.7% were two or more races, 1.2% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and .5% were American Indian or Alaska Native. She originally thought she would teach high school, but was offered a position in middle school. She shared how much she loved reading and writing and identified as a lifelong learner who learns so much from her students. She added how literacy is in everything: math, social studies, and history. It is everywhere and it's contextual. "So you, you have to learn how to read and write in order to be a human and communicate. And literacy, to me, is also about speaking and listening. So literacy is a way for us to share our stories and who we are and our identity." Sabrina added that she cares deeply about teaching her students about ethnic studies: "Ethnic studies is about justice. And so it's justice for these little humans that are gonna eventually be bigger humans."

Camila's Motivations

"History Repeats Itself."

Camila identified as a Mexican-American woman. She initially taught elementary grades and then shifted to teaching middle school history, language arts, and music when the district told her she was needed there. The school in which Camila taught was 97% BIPOC students. 90% of students were Hispanic, 4% were White, 3% were Black or African American, 3% were

Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. She was excited to teach middle school because she majored in history and she had excellent middle school teachers. It was an opportunity for her to teach the way she learned. She realized that her teachers gave her the skills and habits necessary to be a successful student:

> I feel like I had a great education as far as my teachers were awesome, and my history teachers in particular, you know, they pushed me and they challenged me because it wasn't really something that I was interested in when I was in middle school. But eventually, it was something that I grew to love. And so because of the way that they taught and the way that I learned and the different experiences that I had in the classroom, I wanted to try doing middle school.

She was inspired particularly by history because of the ability to look at how history repeats itself and the ways students could compare events today to events that happened in the past. Even on a personal level, she enjoyed looking back at who her ancestors were and her family history. “I think that passion that I have for the past and what we can learn from it is what inspires me to teach history.”

Brenda’s Motivations

“I Try to Set up my Class in Terms of Wanting to Honor their Curiosity and Inquiry.”

Brenda identified as a White Armenian-European woman. Out of college, she had a career in international business as a marketer. She shifted and joined a charter network that provided teacher residencies. She began her career teaching high school but made her way to middle school. The school where Brenda taught was 96.5% BIPOC students. 83.4% were Hispanic/Latino, 7% were Black or African American, 3.5% were White, 2.8% were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% were two or more races, and 1.3% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. She shared that she was very passionate about teaching the social sciences specifically to this age group: “I love the idea of being able to prompt that curiosity and really

engage students at early ages to be thinking about those big questions of who we are, where did we come from, how have we adapted, how are we similar and how [are] we different." She added that she loved teaching middle school because of the balance of nurturing students and supporting them in their academics: "I love being able to provide that for them; create a warm, safe space that just brings that energy and enthusiasm that can make them feel excited to learn."

David's Motivations

"At Middle School Age, They are Still So Open and There's a Possibility of Transformation, Mutual Transformation."

David identified as a Jewish-American man. He taught 8th grade language arts for 18 years. The school where David taught was 53.4% BIPOC students. 46.6% of students were White, 14.7% were Hispanic/Latino, 14.6% were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 13.9% were two or more races, 9.7% were Black or African American, .3% were American Indian or Alaska Native, and .1% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. He began teaching middle school later in his career. He always loved literature and was passionate about sharing this love with his students. His plan was not to become a middle school teacher, but after teaching middle school students, he realized how much he enjoyed the age group. He soon realized the content was part of teaching, but he also appreciated working with this specific developmental age for students: their emotions, their sense of humor, and their energy. He said:

> I think that middle schoolers are at a place where they're trying to find out who is, who they are to other people, relationships, and literature has got all that. And you can really teach, especially eighth grade, more like baby theory like how we're impacted. Our social identity is impacted by the forms and expectations of society. You can begin to introduce elements of race, gender, culture.

A Conceptual Framework for Hope and Healing

Teaching requires more than technical skill; it also requires socioemotional connection, commitment, the ability to affirm students, and powerful learning opportunities, all of which are linked to the development of critical hope. Unfortunately, critical hope and healing justice are not the frameworks underlying contemporary teacher training, despite long-standing critiques of teacher preparation as divorced from humanizing practices. Freire (1993), Palmer (1997), Darder (2012), Ginwright (2016), and Duncan-Andrade (2022) spoke about the limitations of teacher training that solely focus on technical and intellectual training. This research centered on hope in the classroom, and the findings indicated that teachers need more than technical skills to create conditions for hope.

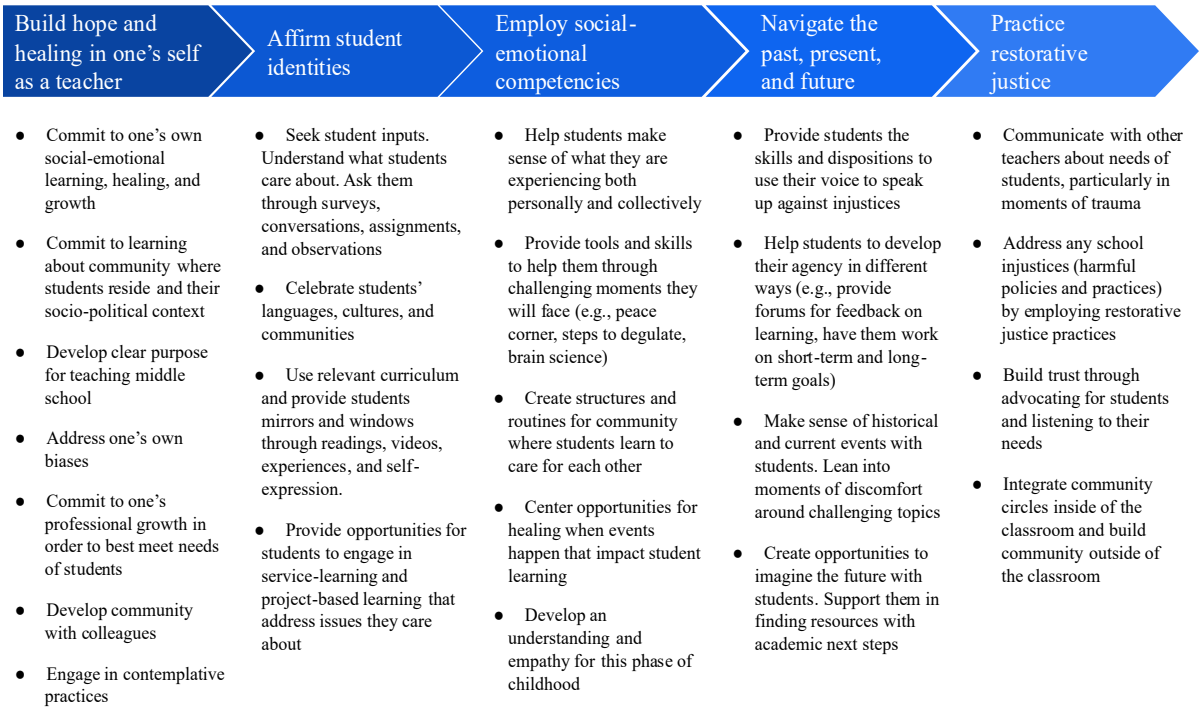
Oakes et al. (1993) specifically analyzed dimensions of change that could happen in middle schools through a combination of technical, normative, and political practices that are iterative and intertwined with each other. Technical practices related to structure, strategies, and knowledge. Normative practices were those that help create an effective middle school and support student growth. Political practices related to addressing—and possibly transforming—-who held power, resources, and decision-making ability. A teacher who engages in hope building in their classroom integrates these practices iteratively. Cultivating hope and providing spaces for healing, therefore, is not a checklist, but a way of developing practices.

Teachers must build hope not only in the classroom but also within themselves. This kind of personal work humanizes classroom practices. It includes addressing implicit biases and addressing one's own capacity to keep hope present despite challenges and uncertainties (Eren & Ravitch, 2021; Garcia, 2019; Ginwright, 2016; Ieva & Beasley, 2022; Legette et al, 2022).

Figure 1 provides an overview of five sets of teacher practices for centering hope and healing in the middle school classroom that were evident in both what the participants shared and the research on best practices. The first set requires that teachers build hope in themselves. Only when teachers have built hope in themselves can they operationalize it in the classroom. For teachers to walk alongside students and address injustices, to see students as whole beings, to help students envision a hopeful future, and support them in healing, requires that they have not only the technical ability to teach, but also the ability to value and see each student. They also need to have a sense of hope for themselves. The next set of practices are honoring student identities and voice, committing to their social-emotional growth, navigating the past, present, and future, and practicing restorative justice.

Figure 1

Teacher Practices for Centering Hope and Healing within the Middle School Classroom



Note. Adapted from. J. A. Beane, 1990; *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, by P. Bishop & L. M. Harrison, 2021, Association for Middle Level Education, copyright 2021 by AMLE; *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know,* by D. Brown & T. Knowles, 2014, Heinemann, copyright 2014 by Heinemann; "Middle Grades Democratic Education in Neoliberal Times: Examining Youth Social Action Projects as a Path Forward," by J. Demink-Carthew 2018, *Middle Grades Review, 4*(2), 1-7. https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol4/iss2/8, copyright 2018 by Scholarworks @UVM Institutional Repository; "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete," by J. Duncan-Andrade, 2009, *Harvard Educational Review, 79*(2), pp. 181–194. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w, copyright 2009 Harvard University; *Teaching hope and resilience for students experiencing trauma: Creating safe and nurturing classrooms for learning,* by D. Fisher, N. Frey, & R.S. Savitz, 2020, Teachers College Press, copyright 2020 Teachers College Press; *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*, by S. Ginwright, 2016, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, copyright 2016 Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group; "Student Voice in Pedagogical Decision-Making: Nexus of Transformation and Problematic Alliance," by E. Nelson, 2022, *The Australian Educational Researcher, 49*, 135–154, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00419-3, copyright 2021 by Springer; "Advocating for the Affective: Writing Hope Into School Spaces," by N. Sieben, 2018, *Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 3*(2),pp.20-27. https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2177, copyright 2018 by Scholarworks@GSVU.

Research Question 1:

How Do Teachers Who are Perceived as Successful Ground Their Work an Practices That are Consistent With Critical Hope?

In order to address the first research question, I developed questions aligned to Duncan-Andrade's (2009) Critical hope framework and Ginwright's (2016) Healing justice framework.

When reading through the transcripts, I, therefore, used specific a priori codes. The following themes and subthemes are based on Duncan-Andrade's (2009) and Ginwright's (2016) frameworks. These themes include material hope, audacious hope, socratic hope, and humanizing hope.

Material Hope: Affirming Student Identities

Duncan-Andrade (2009) spoke about how teachers can provide material hope to students—quality and relevant instruction. Participants reflected on the power of curriculum in which students can relate to the content and the ability for students to openly express themselves. They also gathered student inputs.

Using Relevant Curriculum

Several participants spoke about incorporating content that was relevant to their students. There was intentionality in how they planned content with a specific focus on ensuring student identities were honored. Some shared the importance of incorporating lessons in which students could share personal stories and talk about what they cared about. This approach was about giving students the agency to choose topics for projects that reflected who they were. These identities ranged from cultural, ethnic, youth, linguistic, geographic, and gender-based identities.

Camila spoke about a board game project she assigned in which students created their own board game in small groups. The directions she gave were both in English and Spanish. The requirements for creating the board game included providing instructions on the objectives, rules, and how to win; a game board that guided players through the game, and 20 questions or cards for game play. The class divided into groups of their choice and chose a topic they were

interested in for the game. One group of students created a game based on migrating across the border:

> One of the groups created a jumping-the-border game. Which is really good because actually, the majority of those kids jumped the border. They shared their experience through the board game. And I let them do that. That's their life. That's what they experienced. The characters were, you know, typical immigrant characters…One of them spoke about in his writing at gunpoint, how they had to leave his country and crossing the border, going through the mountains and things like that.

She added that, in learning these students' experiences, the class as a whole developed respect for each other's perspectives and experiences. Like the majority of her students, she was of Latinx descent, and so, she said, "I was able to make connections from my own personal life and the home life of my students. When I wanted students to understand at their level, I would use my real-life personal examples as analogies for students to better understand."

Olivia shared similar sentiments about how projects provided students with opportunities to share parts of who they were with their classmates. She integrated monthly projects into class when students returned from distance learning. For example, students read *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) and then had to create their own suitcases, like the one the character Bud carries, deciding what they would carry in the suitcase that was important to them. For another project, she spoke about how she had students from many different cultures and had them all speak about the different ways they ate rice:

> And the second one [project] they did was a video in which they talked about how their family made rice. And so every family made a video of themselves making rice and how they serve it and how, and then we, I had some families volunteer to bring the rice in and we all like had like a mini like, meal of rice and different things and we had sweet rice and savory rice. And it was really cool to sit down in community.

For each project that Olivia spoke about, she described how students were able to learn more about each other and also get the chance to speak about their identities. She thought these

projects were an important addition to her classroom, since during distance learning, students were not able to engage in these kinds of meaningful ways.

Other participants spoke about the power of intentionally incorporating content that reflected students' identities. The intentionality behind how they chose texts and developed lessons was key. Brenda, for example, emphasized that, when teaching social studies, "I'm always just looking for those modern-day connections and tie-ins to help them feel the relevance of it, and to just also change the narrative." Sabrina discussed how she integrated ethnic studies into her classrooms as a way to empower her students of color and respect their many different cultures. She wanted to make sure her curriculum integrated topics like identity, agency, liberation, power, oppression, and indigeneity. She spoke about the intentionality of how she chose what to teach to her students:

> We are very intentional with the books that we order or the games that we order or the stories that we read, or the videos that we watch, and it takes extra time and planning, but it's worth it because it's meeting the needs of the students in the room and trying to highlight their diversity, while also showing them windows and mirrors into the lives of those around them.

She reported working to get to know the different parts of students' identities and guiding students to reflect on texts as windows and mirrors: "It's a great entry point to say something like, 'Even though ___ is a window, I noticed that in both our cultures ___is a mirror.'"

Maya described how she chose texts that humanized her students of color instead of tokenizing them. She believed doing so created hope in her students:

> The main inspiration for me is to find relevant texts, like culturally relevant texts for my students where they can see themselves in the characters and not in a tokenistic way, but more in a humanizing way. So for my students of color to see really strong heroines in books and for my students who are from different cultures to see that their classmates are going through similar things as them. . . . Language arts is the most humanizing and it allows for students to see themselves, make connections with other people, and to realize

> that we're deep down, all the same. We hurt, we feel joy and we're not alone. And I think that's kind of where you can start to weave in hope for students too, through these texts.

It was important to Maya to plan a curriculum that centered on humanity. Additionally, she used poems and texts from different languages because of the linguistic diversity of the school.

Felix emphasized the power of asking students what they liked or appreciated and how he could incorporate this knowledge and make it relevant to students:

> When you ask them, what are the types of things that inform your identity? Now they're not gonna be able to answer that. So I start off class with like five posters and I'm like, "What's the music you listen to? I want to know the artists and songs. Who? What TV shows do you watch? Artists?" I put books in there. But you know, that's a long shot. I mean they read books. And the big one that I think folks probably in this day and age miss out on is YouTube [www.youtube.com] channels and Instagram [www.instagram.com] pages.

Providing Opportunities for Student Expression

In addition to using relevant curriculum to foster material hope, several participants reported high engagement among students when they were given opportunities to express themselves in class. Expression came in many forms. Camila spoke about how she tried to plan activities and create lessons that interested her students. These lessons were hands-on and allowed students to move around. Her students, for example, loved the unit about ancient Egypt. The class broke out into different groups: artisans, priests, government officials, scribes, and peasants. Each group had to create their own props and then do a presentation:

> They have to make their own props. So if there are peasants, they have to talk about what types of crops they grow, and the tools they would use. And then they would describe that to the audience. This is our life, this is the song that we chant while we're working in the fields and we're growing this, you know. They give details about their group, their social class, and they have a lot of fun doing that and preparing their props. It's something that we work on for at least three to four weeks: planning and preparing because they also, as the group presents, the audience is taking notes on the other groups

> that they did not learn about or read about, but they're learning through the dramatization. That's a really fun activity. Our kids dress up as mummies and you know, they find out a lot of interesting things that they didn't know about before.

Brenda also described a unit in which her students engaged meaningfully with the content. This 7th-grade social studies unit centered on the continent of Africa. Students learned about natural resources in North and West Africa, how they were historically used, and the impacts of globalization. Her students participated in Socratic Seminars related to the pros and cons of globalization, and as she shared, "They came armed with a variety of both historical sources that we've looked at and then current modern-day sources that they can tap into. And that's where they get to incorporate their observation, their opinions, their perspectives, I think most openly." She added that she provided scaffolds and structures that helped them connect to the content and participate in meaningful ways. Overall, students had the ability to express themselves, learn deeply about a historic moment, and learn within specific structures that guided their understanding of the topic.

A few participants mentioned how incorporating music and poetry engaged their students. For example, Jasmine learned that her 7th grade students loved hip-hop. She had them analyze the history of hip hop and rap with a focus on artists from their neighborhood. She appreciated how students could connect music and poetry back to the academic standards:

> I was also really happy to see how much students bought into the creative writing aspect of that unit. So a lot of students that would typically be kind of like withdrawn, like, oh, I don't really want to, when they were given the freedom to really just express themselves any way that they want through writing and through poetry especially like through free verse. And I think that after that unit, a lot of students really started to buy into the activities we were doing and really start to make those connections.

Felix described how watching students' TikToks (www.tiktok.com) and listening to specific music that they liked built a connection: "So on some level, when you can appreciate

what it is about the things that they like are likable, they, in turn, are open to understanding why the things that you like are likable. I mean, it becomes a shared experience." Felix added how incorporating diverse authors into language arts classes made the content more accessible and how that made a difference. But he likened the learning to students still having to eat their vegetables and shared how the texts and curriculum that his schools used could be problematic. He shared, "The curriculum is by no means liberating, you know, or pedagogically groundbreaking in terms of teaching marginalized communities how to take power."

For other participants, just giving students the ability to express themselves by sharing their opinions felt important. David spoke about how he learned to "keep his mouth shut" when students spoke. He added how easy it was for adults to just speak, but instead, he wanted to lift students' voices,

> So I try to lift up what someone is saying so it's communicable to the whole class and not just one person's opinion. And while also like, valorizing that opinion or that uniqueness of that perspective. I think some kid wrote at the end of the year a note to me. I forgot exactly what it said, but it was something like being accepting of all opinions, even weird opinions.

Brenda also spoke about how important it was that all her students could share their opinions comfortably in class. The Do Now question, the first question students answered after they came in, was either a review question or a preview question. The preview question was always open-ended and allowed them to share their opinions. Brenda said, "Every time I do the student surveys at the end of the unit, kids will always say, our Do Nows really helped me. It helps me get into a class mindset. I like hearing from my classmates. I feel no pressure." She wanted to ensure that her students felt safe sharing their own perspectives because she believed

that was the purpose of social sciences, living in a world with multiple perspectives and learning about different points of view.

All of these activities and practices allowed students to express themselves through authentic learning experiences. They made connections to their personal lives, expressed themselves on stage, and worked with other students to represent a specific era in history.

Seeking Student Inputs

Sabrina described the ways she gathered feedback from students in order to change units. She asked questions such as: What are you proud of? What did you do well? What was challenging? What would you change about this unit? She integrated changes to units based on student responses and feedback. Brenda also spoke about the ways she gathered feedback from her students. She would give them a survey at the end of every unit and use their feedback to make changes to subsequent units throughout the year.

Participants learned that these kinds of learning experiences mattered to students by either surveying them or having conversations with them and integrating what they learned about their students into the classroom context. When asked why her students loved the unit on ancient Egypt, Camila shared, “Being able to work as a group, acting out, creating things like their props, just being somebody they’re not. So being in a role where they’re acting out, playing a part—that’s something that interests them.”

Teacher Identities

Several teachers shared proximity to students because of their specific identities. Olivia, who identified as Black and Jamaican, and Felix, who identified as Pacific Samoan, grew up in the communities in which they taught and had connections to the culture, geography, and

histories of these places. Camila, who identified as Latina, grew up close to where she taught and had ethnic and linguistic commonalities with the majority of her students, as 89.7% of students came from Latino/Hispanic backgrounds. She spoke about how both students and parents confided in her and put their trust in her. She also shared how she could use specific personal examples that her students related to when teaching content.

Sabrina moved to her community when she was 13 years old. She shared linguistic commonalities with her Latino students and spoke about how fortunate she was to be able to speak with students and families because of being bilingual. Maya shared ethnic/racial commonalities with over 15% of her students. Sabrina implemented Ethnic studies in her class and was also an advocate for statewide implementation and worked with a non-profit that supported teachers with Ethnic studies integration in their classrooms.

Participants cultivated material hope in the classroom by integrating purposeful learning that was relevant to students, giving them the chance to express themselves, and using resources and knowledge to support student learning.

Audacious Hope: Practicing Restorative Justice

Duncan-Andrade (2009) spoke about how teachers can foster in their students' audacious hope—a kind of hope grounded in collective struggle. Ginwright (2016) argued that healing is a critical component in creating hope. Restorative practices bring these two concepts together. Community circles, for example, allow teachers to struggle alongside students to collectively heal. When teachers collectively struggle with their students, they love their students and recognize that they will experience challenging moments in their lives and they will make mistakes and do not fault them for doing so (Schwartz, 2018).

Building Trust

A few participants spoke about the importance of building community in the beginning of the year and how that community helped to develop a shared sense of trust and belonging in their class. Maya focused heavily on building community and relied on advice from a former principal who told her to go slow in the beginning of the year by building community first in order to go fast in then being able to teach content. Maya devoted about a month at the beginning of the year to a community unit in which she and students created the classroom rules together. As a class, they discussed what it feels like to be seen, heard, and respected and what was needed in order to feel like that in the classroom. She also asked each student how they wanted her to handle conflict in the classroom:

> One thing that I did add this year was I asked my students to tell me how they want me to respond when they're having a hard time, like following instructions. "How do you want me to, when we have a conflict, you and I, how should we deal with that? Like, individually?" So I give them a note card and ask three questions like how do you want me to respond when this happens? And then they're very specific. And so every time or any time something happens, I just pull it out. I'm like, okay, okay, so and so this is what's gonna work for them. And then we just have that. And I feel like it's worked, like it's been such a game changer for me and my students.

Camila also shared how she engaged her students in community-building in the beginning of the year where they set norms together:

> In advisory we created the norms or our classroom rules based on how we thought. And when I say we, it's mainly the students, how they thought the classroom should run, like what's expected in a classroom for us to be able to learn. And so I would take those rules and then with the next class, we would go over those rules and see, "Is there anything that you would like to add to this list? . . . Okay. Now we're gonna sign this sheet of paper."

Camila added that when creating these community norms, she could laugh with her students and, at the same time, hold them accountable. She thought her students respected the balance of both being strict and having a sense of humor.

While a few participants built norms and agreements together with their class, Brenda spoke about how she set up the class by letting students know that, as a subject, the social sciences do not dictate what is right or wrong, but instead create an opportunity to explore different perspectives. She used the content that she taught as a springboard to building community. She wanted to set a tone of curiosity and inquiry in class and provided a lot of opportunities for open-ended questions and class discussions in which students could feel safe to share their responses. She gave an example of how she shared the TED talk *The Danger of a Single Story* (Adichie, 2009) at the start of the year in order to discuss the idea of biases with students:

> And we're going to do our best here to combat [biases] to explore alternative perspectives and to just crush this idea of bias and look for other ideas and opinion. . . . And I do feel like they feel more comfortable just sharing because there's no risk of being wrong.

Jasmine added how she engaged students in community-building activities in the beginning of the year and requiring them to sit near students they would not normally sit near. What she appreciated about her students is how they accepted each other:

> And I think that really speaks to the accepting nature of that class and how even if this student is like speaking in Spanish and they need help translating or this student needs to rock and verbalize during an activity, no one is gonna be bothered by that and people are gonna let him have his space and do what he needs to do to learn. I think that really shows that even though there's still issues in that class and there's strong, there's strong characters and there's strong personalities, I think all the students in that class do a really great job of fostering a sense of community and making sure that all students are really incorporated into the sense of like a whole classroom environment.

For participants, restorative practices typically consisted of building community in the beginning of the year and getting to know students. A couple of participants shared that they had been to restorative justice professional development in the past at their school, but it was not something the schools explicitly spoke about now.

Community Circles

Several participants spoke about how they engaged their students in community circles on a routine basis in their classroom. Community circles are a kind of restorative practice in which students sit in a circle and are given the opportunity to express themselves. As Wachtel (2016) stated, "Circles give people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, decorum and equality" (p. 8). Community circles were an opportunity for students to learn about each other's identities and lives outside of school. Some participants also took community circles as an opportunity to address issues that came up during the school day between students.

Olivia shared that she had a structured routine for some kind of circle at the beginning and end of each day. She spoke about how they would do different activities such as turn and talks, drawing together, or affirmations. The circles typically ended with a question of "who filled your bucket today?" Students would have a chance to show each other gratitude for making them feel good or seen in class or school. She also spoke about the danger of telling students that what they bring from their own life experience is not valuable:

> You're working with a human, right? And, a child that has room to grow. And then who also is someone that has life experience already. So they come into your classroom with life experience. You can't just expect them to forget all that. You can give them [the] opportunity and teach them what it's like to learn in a community. But you can't completely derail their life by telling them everything they learned before is wrong or

> incorrect. It's like, value where they come from, value the things that they value and then teach them and harvest the idea of being in a community.

Sabrina also discussed her weekly community circles. Sometimes she asked questions that were very silly, like if they would rather eat fruits or vegetables. Other times she would ask them more serious questions. She had different stuffed animals students could choose as the circle piece:

> I have a collection of stuffed animals in the room. And the children get to pick which stuffed animal is the circle piece. And it sits on a stool because, gross and wash your hands. So they don't touch it. It sits on the stool. And you know, we've got a mushroom, a shark, a duck, hot dog. So when they're done sharing, they say one of the stuffed animals and they know it signals the next person. They can share in any language they want. It doesn't have to be in English, it can be in whatever. And I have a student who shares in Vietnamese every Wednesday. And I'm like, "yes, get it queen. That's beautiful." Whatever it says. And then I just use my translator and I look at, you know, in her notebook later just to actually see what she wrote. Because I also want to be able to, I write comments in all their notebooks.

She had students respond and write to prompts in their notebooks, and she wrote back to them, even leading to mini conversations they had with each other where she could learn more about each of her students. Comments like "Yes, get it queen" were a way to motivate her students to build community when they would open up.

Camila also engaged her students in community circles. As time passed, they felt comfortable sharing about a range of topics, from their experience crossing the border to funny things like how they thought their house was haunted. Like Sabrina, she gave students the chance to share silly things about themselves, as well as more serious things. She seemed to value levity and as they built more trust in class, students could share more about themselves.

Camila added that, if anything transpired during the school day, she would address it during class time:

> So we would have those conversations, even if it was history class or music class, we'd stop and, [say] "Hey, like, this happened during lunch. Let's talk about this. I don't like what this is leading to." Then we would have those conversations. This year was a little bit tougher because I had a lot of students that were very inappropriate as far as cursing, especially towards girls. A lot with like boys, the way they interacted was inappropriate. Yep. So I had a lot of conversations this year with them where [I would say] "that's not how we treat each other. You know, we don't talk to each other that way. I mean, if your mom was standing right here, would you be saying that?" Yep, so I mean, by the end it was getting better, but it was like a tough year of, of just, you know, me thinking of different ways to approach this and then having those conversations where we sit in a circle and say, you know, why, why are we saying this?

It was important to a few participants to not ignore events that happened during the school day, especially because these events impacted students. Being able to openly speak about such events allowed students to be open about their feelings and think proactively about solutions.

Felix provided a different perspective on community circles. He recognized the importance of a routine like community circle but did not necessarily think it was effective to require everyone to pay attention to each other in a structured, systemized way. He spoke about how, in his culture, the audience controlled the story and their response is what gave the speaker power. His advisory group was predominately made up of Pacific Islander students whose background matched his own. Because he wanted to bring his students together, he offered culturally relevant adjustments to circles:

Community circles have fundamentally shifted the culture of the classes I have used them in to bring kids together. Students do get time to be listened to and share in a structured way, but I also offer less structured circle time, still in a circle, but with a more popcorn back-and-forth communal way.

Building Community Outside of the Classroom

Several participants spoke about the ways they connected with students and built community outside of the classroom. Each emphasized the power of seeing students in different ways after school.

Felix grew up in the community in which he taught, and, in addition to being a classroom teacher, he was the head coach for the wrestling team and made it a point to attend other games as well. "I am the super fan. . . . I want them to be the best at everything, I tell them. It doesn't matter what you do—artistically, athletically, academically, I am your biggest fan." He said that his students "just need to know that they're not numbers in a classroom."

Olivia also spoke about how she got involved in activities outside of class in order to see her students in different contexts. She spoke about how coaching stomp gave her a chance to teach something that was non-academic that students cared about:

We've had like 14 performances around the district and all have been multicultural nights. And so being able to go visit the other schools that feeds me. It's so cool. Like the look on their faces when they've successfully done it, it's like immediate gratification, whereas, yes, school isn't.

Similarly, Camila discussed the power of being able to see students out of the classroom. She was the social media guru and attended volleyball, basketball, football, and soccer games so she could cheer for her students and to take photographs:

> Most of them were my students, and seeing me there brought them joy. I enjoyed being able to share more than just classroom activities with students and got to learn more about them outside of school —their true personalities, meet their families, make connections.

Building trust; engaging in community circles, as a way to both get to know each other in the classroom and address issues that surfaced; and building community outside of the classroom were all ways for teachers to understand students on a deeper level in order to practice audacious hope.

Socratic Hope: Navigating the Past, Present, and Future

Socratic hope is the ability for the teacher to examine injustices with students while also imagining alternative futures (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Several participants reported feeling comfortable addressing the past, present, and future with their students—whether that meant making connections between current events and past historical events, helping students to make sense of an injustice that happened within school, or providing students opportunities to imagine what the future could look like in hopeful ways.

Making Sense of Current and Historical Events With Students

A few participants spoke about how they were able to talk to students about injustices happening in the world and connect these events to students' lives. Typically, students would bring these events up to teachers, and teachers would support them in making sense of them. Participants used frameworks and tools within their class to support student understanding of these events.

Camila spoke about how her students had many questions about what was happening in Ukraine. She spoke with them about the idea of how history repeats itself and reminded them about the Holocaust and Japanese Internment. Students made connections between people fleeing Ukraine and immigrants who were also fleeing Central and South America to come to the United States. They also spoke about the imbalance in media coverage where there was more

sympathy given to those trying to cross the border into America who came from Ukraine versus those who came from Central and South America. This conversation gave students the opportunity to speak about their personal experiences immigrating to the United States and even opened the door to conversations about how their community demonstrated racist behaviors towards other groups in the United States:

> So we talked about, "what has your family said about Asian Americans? What has your family said about, you know, African Americans? So we ourselves, you know, sometimes have those ideas in our head as well about other races or cultures. So we need to change that. We need to be able to see the person as who they are and not where they come from and the color of their skin."

Brenda's students felt the impacts of COVID and a few were particularly concerned about the Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) hate happening as a result of people putting blame on Asians for spreading COVID. She supported students in understanding why this injustice was happening by sharing news articles, discussing why biases against Asian cultures exist, providing context, and introducing what she called "activism opportunities." For example, if students were ever to witness any kind of hateful language, they could ask themselves, "What can I do to counteract or what can I do to interrupt these interactions if I see them, if I hear them?" She shared that, because she taught social sciences, she could often connect a current event to something students learned about history. She specifically spoke about how she started to see buy-in from her students when she could make those connections and honor what they brought up. Giving them the space to voice their opinions or share their reactions was an important part of class.

Felix reflected on his identity as a teacher of color and the power of choosing topics that connected to what he and his students are experiencing within their community. If he gave them

a text about gentrification, for example, he applied the text to what was happening with their own community. “If there’s a text on Black experience, the Latino experience, we are debriefing what that means for us and how it impacts us as a community.” Speaking about current events was a way to practice socratic hope as teachers gave students an opportunity to ask questions and make sense of how these events impacted them.

Addressing Injustices

Several participants spoke about how they assisted students in navigating challenging situations with other teachers. Trauma within school was real, and participants named it for students and validated their thinking. Several participants alluded to the fact that students felt comfortable coming to them and opening up to them about what happened with other teachers. For example, Maya shared a specific time when a teacher caused students harm. She said that her students knew that she was a safe person and that they could share anything that happened to them. As she described the teacher, “She was much older and very much set in her way of thinking. And so there was a lot of harm done by her to students who didn't look like her.”

Maya spoke about the difficult balance of listening to her students and respecting her colleagues. As she explained about this specific situation:

> I was sort of like a mentor for them, and sort of like a guide through this hard time, and so they knew that I was always there, and that I had their best intention at heart. And I think it made a really big impact because that educator is no longer with us at our school.

She continued to speak about how she generally supported her students and the injustice of them sometimes having to take on the responsibility that adults should be taking:

> And then we talk about, for some students, they have to, unfortunately, be the bigger person in a situation. Hopefully one day we won’t ever have to say something like that to students. I feel bad saying it, but I feel like the way, like where we are in the world right

> now, it, you know what I mean? And so we talk about how that's a huge injustice to students to have to shoulder this burden when really it should fall on the adults. And then I would give my students a toolkit to use, like, if you feel like this is happening, find an adult you trust and share with them what's happening. Share with your grownups what's happening because they're also a support system for you. And then we walk through the process: 'So now what you need to do is you need to speak your truth. And how you're going to do that is email this person in the building with what happened. That's one way to make change is to use your voice anytime that you feel something is not right. Your truth is your truth.' Who am I to say that that is not happening?

Overall, Maya addressed harms and advocated for her students. As a result, there was also healing and hope for her students. These moments allowed her to build trust with her students.

Sabrina shared how students came to her to tell her about other teachers. Similar to Maya, she made it very clear to her students that they could talk to her and her other co-teachers about anything. She also made it clear that she is a mandated reporter so they understand the significance of what she would need to do in specific situations. She told all her students they needed a safe adult at the school. She had them identify one and write their name in their personal notebooks:

> And then when students have told me those things like, I am the safe adult, then it depends on the injustice. So some of the things are very simple and it's like, well, this is a contractual thing. I saw a teacher do this in the contract. Teachers aren't allowed to do that. I have 48 hours to report it. So I just have to communicate that to the student. You know I also, I've helped facilitate conversations between the teacher as well or the staff member. It was last week. I had to have a conversation with a teacher about something a student reported. And I was just like, Hey, I'm giving you a heads up as a colleague, I wanted to let you know I got a report about this. The conversation went really well. And I let the student know, 'Hey, I talked to the teacher, I reported it.' And the student was like, 'All right, cool.' So I think it's important for the students to get that follow up as well because yeah, if they don't feel like there's been a process, then they're gonna lose faith. They're gonna lose trust. And that's so important because injustice happens and it happens often. It happens all the time. And so if it's school related and there's something that I can do about it then, then I do. And I like to be very clear in the process.

Olivia spoke about navigating injustices around the different identities her students carried and the assumptions people made about them without even knowing them. These assumptions could be related to their status as middle schoolers, their gender presentation, or their racial background. She shared what she learned from her students:

> Because I actually learned something really big this year, which was, you know, you often tell your students, “treat others the way you wanna be treated.” And that actually doesn’t work anymore. You have to say, “treat others the way they would like to be treated.” And the reason why you say that is because there are a growing number of students that just don't care. Like, they’re like, what? I’m just messing around and they don't understand. It makes somebody sad and you’ll never get to that healing place. Whereas you need to figure out how that person wants to be treated. And if they are sad, how do you heal that? And how do you make sure that oh yeah, that’s not, that doesn’t make you feel comfortable. I shouldn’t use those words or that is offensive. You don’t know that because it isn’t offensive to you. And so I just think for, you know, our time of existence, we’ve been doing it wrong. Like telling people to treat them the way they want to be treated. My students this year definitely taught me the opposite of that.

Camila shared that students would visit her even when she was no longer their teacher and would let her know how much they missed her classroom. Students would tell her that they wished they were in her classroom because she cared about them. She explained, , “I have to be civil and say, no, I'm sure your teachers care about you too. Nah, they don't care about me. Like they don't even know I'm gone. Look, I'm talking to you. I'm like, oh, that's true.”

Imagining the Future

Many participants spoke about the ways they helped students imagine futures that they may have not even thought of before, an important aspect of cultivating socratic hope.

Olivia reported sharing statistics with her 6th graders about who tends to graduate and who tends to drop out and go to prison. She talked to them about how they can change those statistics. She invited guest speakers who were successful in life and doing positive things in their community. Some had college degrees, others did not. Guest speakers included the mayor,

legislators, a former WNBA player, police officers, and the superintendent. She explained that, at the beginning of the year, she would ask more questions to guest speakers, but, by the end, her students were able to ask questions in powerful ways: “We had one [student] who was transitioning through COVID and she asked the mayor, what are your thoughts on transgenders? Amazing. I was like, you just asked the mayor that. Yeah, sixth grade. I was like, I love it.”

Participants spoke about how students did not necessarily know about the options they had available to them in the future. Jasmine talked about how she helped students to understand the different options they had with going to college. Initially, her students told her they did not plan to attend college. She spoke to them about merit-based awards, scholarships, and community college options:

> And I think a lot of students were really surprised by that information. They just kind of knew the general consensus that college is expensive and it's not a place for students of color, especially poor students of color and I think kind of realizing that that’s not always the case and that it’s something that can be accessed was really cool to see for them because they realized for the first time probably a lot of them that that could be a possibility and something that they could attain.

Similarly, Felix spoke about how he brought a career counselor to class to speak to his students. He shared with his students how college was one of the most liberating moments for him in his life. One of his students told him that nobody from their community would go to Harvard. He told her that somebody actually did get into Harvard. He told her it was possible and even started to call her *Harvard*. He shared his belief about the resilience of the people within his community.

Addressing injustices from the past and present with students while also imagining the future were ways in which teachers practiced socratic hope.

Humanizing Hope: Employing Social-emotional Competencies

Ginwright (2016) asserted that supporting young people means not just teaching them knowledge, skills, and behaviors, but also providing spaces for care, love, hope, joy, and faith with healing being an outcome of learning. Participants were not teachers who just focused on the content. They took the time to understand who their students were and how they could support them.

Supporting Students Facing Personal Challenges

Several participants described moments when they took the time to understand a situation instead of ignoring it or punitively responding to a student who may have been overreacting because of personal trauma. A few participants spoke about how they integrated SEL into their classrooms; whether it was through a SEL curriculum used in advisory or through consulting with someone dedicated to supporting SEL in the school. Others spoke about routines they put into place that demonstrated care for their students.

Brenda spoke about the structures she set up to check in on her students before class started, during class, and after. She greeted every student before class, which would give her insight into how each of them was doing. Two or three times a week, she would notice a student needed to take a pause before entering the classroom, and she would tell them that she would check in on them. “And then I’ll come back outside and they’re breaking down crying and something is going on that isn’t related to my class. It’s something that has happened outside the classroom, either socially or at home that they’re just carrying with them.” In these moments, she would ask students what they needed and give them a few options. Because she regularly took the time to check in on students, Brenda’s class was the one to which students felt comfortable

coming before school and during lunch. She noted that other teachers have shared they do not feel comfortable filling this role for students.

For Camila, supporting students was also paying attention to what students were telling her non-verbally. She shared a time when her students were working on a writing assignment. One of her students began to fill in her graphic organizer with different kinds of trauma in her life: abuse she experienced, her mom leaving her family, and her dad and her not having a very good relationship. Camila pulled the student aside and pointed to the place in her graphic organizer where she wrote about abuse and asked her if the abuse was still happening,

> I said, "is that still happening? Is that something that happened in the past?" And she's like, 'yeah, like it, it happened in the past.' And I said, 'do you want to talk to someone about that?' And she said, "yeah." So I mean, even to this day, she loves going to counseling. She's going to counseling and she received the help that she needed because of that interaction with me.

Camila added that if she had not looked at the graphic organizer, her student would still be struggling with the issues she spoke about, but because she paid attention, her student could seek counseling and begin communicating with her dad.

Maya described how she helped a student by navigating the larger middle school ecosystem and advocating for him. There was a time during the school year when a student had a very challenging day. She had built trust with him at the beginning of the year. On this day, she supported him by finding an adult he could speak to and letting other teachers know what was going on. She let him cool off before her class and, she said, "I made sure to let him know that I'm here and I care and I want him to be well and safe."

Olivia spoke about a student who was having a challenging time in her class and making some negative choices. She shared how she would tell her stories about her own life and how she

tried to stay focused when friends would try to influence her. This student had a few episodes throughout the year that were tough, but she explained how she would not give up on her. When she was able to do something great in class, Olivia would make her go tell the teacher she identified as her safe teacher. The student wrote her a note that she keeps with her. It said, “I know how much you care about me and I thank you for the many chances you give me. And I thank you for trying so much to push me in the right direction. I thank you for keeping going and pushing me back to be the best version of myself.”

Believing in Students' Potential

Several participants shared how they deeply believed in the potential of their students. They wanted to provide students a sense of agency and belief in what was possible, whether as changemakers or as academics.

Maya spoke about a writing unit on persuasive essays that helped students to see that they had a voice. For this particular unit, students chose a topic that they were very passionate about. They were asked questions like, “What is something you’re really good at? What is something you know a lot about? What is something that really frustrates you?” Maya discovered that, while students initially were just completing an assignment, they ultimately learned they had a voice and could stand up for themselves.

She encouraged her students to be open and courageous when writing and “to put their heart out there.” Many wrote about the impact of COVID and the types of mental health issues they were dealing with. She acknowledged how brave they were to do so and how important speaking out was: “They realize that they can stand up for themselves, they can stand up for what

they believe in, and they just end up feeling more confident and knowing that sometimes the change is small, but that's still change."

Expectations also came up for a few participants and the importance of setting high expectations for students that they knew they were able to meet. A few participants spoke about how teachers are the ones that set the foundation for a child's belief in themselves and hope for the future. They needed to be the ones who demonstrate belief in every student so that students can then believe in themselves.

Camila joked about the fact that some of her students told her that they were being lazy about an assignment for which they would have to give a presentation. She pushed back and told them they could do it—they could give the presentation. "The kids know I'm not going to give up. . . . They start encouraging each other, especially the newcomers amongst themselves. Yes, you can do it in English." She continued by sharing how the teacher's expectations of the student is what the student will feed off of in class. She spoke about her belief in her students: "Yes, you can do this. I know you can, you know. They haven't learned it yet, you know, the power of *yet*. I think that gives them hope that they can do better in the future."

Believing in students' abilities was also what helped Brenda's students believe in themselves. Brenda spoke about a time when she helped a student who recently immigrated from Peru. Initially, he was discouraged by his struggle to learn English. She described how she provided him support and explicitly celebrated the small things he was doing to improve. She also made sure to call him at the end of each unit and show him directly how he was improving in his writing. As she described,

> Over the course of the year, I mean his attitude, it was probably one of the most dramatic shifts I've seen in a student. I was like, gosh, you just need a little bit of that nurturing

> and encouragement and positivity to give you the confidence and to change the story that you see for yourself.

A couple of participants spoke about seeing their students as family. Mathew spoke about how one student felt like a nephew to him and how he referred to him as *mi hijo:* It's like, you know, it's like these kids are all somebody's nephews or nieces. They're all somebody. And so I would, with R and others, the special kids that I love, I would feel like, what if their family was here?".

Olivia also spoke about the importance of believing in all the students in her classroom. She explained how she treated her students like they were her children:

> You're literally borrowing people's kids during the day. I've said that to other teachers. I'm like, you're a mother. Every kid in that classroom is your child. Like you have to have those high expectations and hope. Don't you hope that your kids are gonna do better? Don't you hope that your kids are gonna pass that test? Don't you have hope for them? You do. You do for your own kids. So why is it different when somebody else's kids walk through the door? Why do you think they're gonna fail? Why do you think they're gonna make bad choices? Why do you think you think that? And now they think that. And so that's not okay because it's easier to just, if a teacher doesn't believe in you and doesn't think you can do it, it's easier just to not do it, right? That is so much harder than to go against the teacher and now your own self and now your friends and now you're everything else. But when a teacher's like, man, you got this, what do you mean? That's easy. You can do it. You got this. They're like, wait, I can.

Empathy for Middle School Students

Many participants expressed empathy for students who were in this developmental phase of their life. They were aware of the significant changes and transitions for students. For Brenda, she spoke about how much her students thrived from being in a nurturing environment and how much she wanted to create that space for her students: "I love being able to provide that for them, create a warm, safe space that just bringing that energy and enthusiasm can make them feel excited to learn." From the beginning of the year, she wanted to ensure her students also felt safe

to share ideas, even if they had perspectives that were different from others. That meant that she would practice being non-judgmental when she heard ideas that were not the norm.

David also described just spending time listening to students when they shared information with him. He resisted lecturing or correcting them and instead worked on validating them. He described how he would listen and tell his students in one-to-one conversations what he was hearing. “You know, you’re 13 or 14 and I’m in my fifties and I want to just tell you how I’m getting this. And put a little spin or perspective on it and see does that connect with how you’re experiencing it?”

Maya spoke about how middle school is often a time that is misunderstood, and, as a society, “we tend to forget that they are still children and have a lot of learning and growing to do.” She took into consideration the transitions students had between classes as a middle school. For the first five minutes of class, she implemented, ‘What I need time.’ A routine she learned from a neural education institute seminar. She would tell students that she knew the school was big,

> And so you might’ve come all the way across the other end of the school and you might just need to catch your breath and settle down. You might be tired, so you might need to just kind of practice some breathing exercises or like put yourself in a place where you can, I don’t know, energize yourself in five minutes. . . . Or if you need to catch up with a friend, you can chat with a friend.

She just wanted to make sure students had those first five minutes to see where they were so that they could focus on the rest of class.

Sabrina designated a physical space in her classroom the peace corner. She said, “Something that I like to incorporate is just having little signs posted up about relaxation techniques and reminders about how to utilize the peace corner. So you’re not just getting up and

hanging out there for 20 minutes when you're bored, but you're coming to the space when you're overwhelmed or you need a break taking five minutes and returning." She also emphasized her personal philosophy of resetting her slate every day with no hard feelings about anything that happened the day before, "You can't expect people to respond well if you're not giving them a fair shake each time. But again, also, they're middle schoolers so you kind of have to take everything they say and do with a grain of salt."

Research Question 2: What Personal Practices Do Successful Middle School Teachers' Cultivate in Order to Create Conditions for Hope in Their Classroom?

The second research question focused on participants' personal practices as a means to cultivating hope for students. Palmer (1997) wrote that good teaching is linked to three parts of a teacher: their intellectual, spiritual, and emotional foundations that make them whole. Ginwright (2016) described how teachers can be "soul rebels" who engage in their own journey in order to build hope for their students. This research question was a way to go beyond the intellectual foundations of the participants and to understand a little more about them spiritually and emotionally.

Building Personal Hope: Inner Practices

All participants shared a deep purpose for why they taught. This higher calling connected to why they were invested deeply in the work they did. For some, this higher calling had to do with their personal experience of suffering with the educational system. For others, their calling had to do with a commitment to social justice based on what they witnessed in their life. Some shared how spirituality or religious practices grounded them. A few shared the work they did to make sense of injustices they witnessed or experienced.

Teaching as a Calling Grounded in Justice

What was evident throughout conversations with the participants was that they did not just choose teaching as a job, they were called to teach because they saw a larger purpose. As Camila stated, “I’m not there just for a paycheck. I’m there to help these students learn.”

A few of the teachers of color spoke specifically about wanting to be the kind of teacher that they did not have in their own education. They spoke of how they were silenced or not seen in schools and how they wanted to contribute to the community they now belonged to in their adulthood. Maya shared,

> When I was growing up, I didn’t have a single educator that looked like me, and I didn’t have a single educator that really cared enough to inspire me to be brave and to trust my voice as an individual. I was just very shy and very quiet.

She said that her purpose is to help her students to see that their voice is powerful and that they can be brave. Similarly, Olivia added that her purpose is to help students know they can make a difference. She emphasized how strong she believes her students are

> Some of the things these kids are going through, adults would wither and cry. But I like to tell them, imagine the type of adult that they’re going to be because they’ve gone through things that adults can’t even say they’ve gone through.

Sabrina wanted to ensure that students felt like they had a sense of justice and because of that, she wanted to continue to evolve as an Ethnic Studies educator. She shared her love of learning and her desire to keep attending professional development to grow as a learner. She also engaged in self-reflection and identity work in order to better support her students. She described,

> Within myself, I have been able to do that in a really positive way. Like take these, these oppressions that have happened to me, to my family, to my people, and use it and learn from it into taking action towards justice. If that’s not hope, I don't know what is.

Felix created a mission statement for himself: “the liberation of our community so that every person, family, and student has the agency to do any of the things they want to pursue athletically, academically, or artistically.” He shared that he is part of an alumni group from the local high school—called “Conquer the World”—that focuses on building their community. Teachers who were White spoke to why teaching was a calling for them. For Jasmine and Brenda, they both wanted to pursue something meaningful. Jasmine explained that she wanted to contribute and make a difference: “I can’t imagine if I was making four times as much as I’m making now, if I didn’t have any sense of meaning or connection to the work, I would just at the end of the day be like, what’s the point?”

Brenda shifted careers because she wanted to find purpose. She explained,

> So I went into international business, did marketing for about 10 years. I kind of hit this point where I was just not feeling the meaning in my work. And I always had that kind of voice in the back of my head saying, you’ve always wanted to be a part of education, to try teaching, to be an educator.

Part of being an educator for Brenda was being a positive adult in a students’ life and somebody they felt safe engaging and interacting with.

Spiritual and Religious Practices

A few participants spoke about how they had a specific spiritual or religious practice that helped to ground them. Camila spoke about how she attended church every Sunday and how having faith in a God brought her hope and belief, “that there is something better out there. There’s good people out there still.”

Felix talked about how he attended two churches, a White church in a wealthier part of town where he felt invested in helping them to be a better community and another church in which his aunt is a pastor dedicated to feeding and clothing people. He said that it was

challenging to intentionally ground himself but that church helped him to refuel and recenter things. While he does not consider himself religious, church can provide spiritual moments for him to pause and ask himself intentional questions.

For a couple of other participants, personal meditation and prayer helped them. Maya shared how she started meditating during the pandemic and, as it was for Felix, the quiet reflection time was helpful. She also found power in reading books and finding quotes or ideas that spoke to her. She would think to herself, "This book is speaking to me, how did it know that I needed to hear that in this moment" Centering joy was very important to her too, and so she was intentional about things that brought her joy such as baking, traveling, and reading books.

David explained that imagination and spirituality helped him to remain hopeful. He enjoyed creating art, whether writing or painting. He also prayed in the morning and in the evening before going to bed. He specifically mentioned two prayers he took from the twelve-step program and a third prayer, the Serenity Prayer.

Therapy

Participants shared how their own work to emotionally heal themselves helped them show up better for their students. Camila specifically spoke about how dealing with her emotions was important in order to overcome them. She learned to do so through therapy and therefore could help her students by "teaching the students about emotions, what they look like. I would put cards out there, like facial expressions and we'd have to describe what emotion it was and what makes you think that's the emotion."

Sabrina explained that seeing a therapist was critical because she had witnessed trauma that her students experienced. She said it was important to speak to someone in order to process these traumas:

> And so having sometimes a professional who can go over those things with you and work through those things is, is really, really important because, you know, we have to do things like call the police and call CPS and report things that nobody should ever have to say out loud.

As Brenda shared, "The job is so demanding, just so demanding emotionally, mentally, physically…There's just all these things that really require some downtime, some decompression time."

Jasmine talked about how she had chronic anxiety that occasionally manifested in panic attacks. Her school team knew about these attacks and were compassionate about allowing her to take a step back from teaching when she needed to and have her assistant teacher take over. She felt a sense of security and shared that, if for some reason she was not able to receive accommodations, she would have burnt out or quit. She emphasized that hope in the classroom can happen through strong community, relationships, and being able to take care of oneself as an educator. She explained, "Students should be able to take a break and have a moment for themselves, as should teachers. I think that's really important to remember and consider."

Building Personal Hope: Exterior Practices

Making Sense of Injustices

Participants spoke about the ways they personally made sense of and navigated injustices in the world. Their ways of doing so revealed how they thought about hope.

A couple of participants spoke about needing to learn more about an injustice. Brenda, for example, shared that when she started to feel hopeless after learning about an injustice, she

wanted to make sure she understood, researched, and educated herself on what was happening. She thought being in the dark was too difficult to handle.

Similarly, Maya spoke about how, first, she might have a really strong emotional response like sadness or anger. After she felt that feeling, she said, she wanted to understand what was happening and why. This could look like reading about the topic and having conversations with others. Finally, she would see what was in her sphere of influence: "Then I ask, how can I change this? Or what is one thing I can do to make a change with this injustice or with the system that is wrong?" Maya discovered this became her process during the pandemic, when so many events started happening so close to each other like George Floyd's murder and the insurrection.

Sabrina and Felix spoke more about how community building either in the school or outside was a way to navigate injustices. Sabrina felt it was imperative to have other educator friends with whom she could process injustices and spoke about the very strong and positive relationships she had with others in her school. Felix spoke about the importance of collective agency in order to create strong foundations for the community.

Working With Children

Participants spoke about their purposes as educators. These comments often highlighted the fact that working with children made them hopeful. Brenda shared that, ultimately, working with kids was a very "hope-giving role." She was happy to be a part of their development. She said,

> I feel hopeful when I see generations or even just classes of kids who are thinking well and who are helping themselves and helping one another, and that is what gives me hope is just being around them and my own kids too.

She added that she was literally buzzing with excitement throughout the day and emphasized how much fun she had interacting with her students. Julie shared a similar sentiment, noting that "being around children makes me smile, makes me happier. That brings me hope." Olivia shared how much she loved when her students who graduated would come back to visit her.

Maya spoke about the unexpected joy that happened in the classroom when she was able to "see the beauty of humanity like when students step up and do something really kind for somebody else." She gave an example of a very shy student in class who still wore his mask and how two girls in the same class told Maya it was their goal to make this student smile and laugh. They ended up becoming a group of friends, "and it was recently his birthday and they brought him birthday presents…and it's just so sweet that they care so much about this student."

Creating Community

A few participants spoke about the power of community with other educators. Sabrina shared how a joy of hers was writing curriculum and being able to share this curriculum with her colleagues,

> and seeing other teachers in, in our school across different grade levels and content areas, using stuff that our department has given a PD about or you know, shared. It's wonderful. I love seeing that. I love sharing, I love collaborating. I don't, I don't like to feel isolated in my job or my profession.

She described just how amazing her colleagues were. She recalled that teacher education programs emphasized that teachers should build relationships with their students, but she saw a missed opportunity in these programs when they did not share that teachers should also build relationships with teachers. She said,

> We need community building too. It's one of the main reasons that we can't retain teachers of color. It's why teachers of color quit. It's why teachers in general quit

> without, you know, five years or less. If relationships matter so much to students and families, why would it be any different for staff?

Brenda also shared how empowering it was to have a friend recently come to the same district as her. She was a social justice educator and Brenda found that she could always reach out to her to share ideas and create lessons:

> And so having a co-worker and a colleague like that to really just always be reaching out with. "Hey, what do you think about this? Do you think we could design a lesson around this?" And having somebody to have those conversations with and to bounce ideas off of and to create lessons around has been huge.

For others, surrounding themselves with community helped them feel hopeful. Maya spoke about how she realized she needed to surround herself with a group of people who could help support her and whom she could help support:

> And I know that just how my students need a safe community, I need one for myself. And so I'm a part of an educators of color group, and it's nice to be in a space like that because you don't have to worry about anything else. Like, you don't have to shoulder any other burdens because everyone else in that space gets you. Yeah. And then you can be authentically you.

Felix also spoke about authentic spaces where he engaged with his community. He shared how he often saw his students out in public because he knew their parents.

> When I'm out in public, the kids, there's this two-way street of community that they see me participating [in] that I love partaking in because I love to see them outside of school, hang out with them. Yeah. Be involved with them, be involved with their families. It changes how they perceive me in the classroom. Especially to be on peer relationships with people that they think are cool, their older siblings or their, you know, parents or their, the people in the community, their mentors.

He added that, when he grew up in the same community, success "was always framed in a concept of whiteness," but now his students could see him and others succeed and see a pathway to success that was rooted in their community. He loved participating in cultural events and anything that the community put on. This allowed him to symbolically represent the fact that he

was still the same person, but he was able to get a college degree and not be boxed into what the statistics said. It was grounded in this larger vision of him seeing his community as resilient and full of possibility.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to answer two questions:

1. How do middle school teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in practices that are consistent with critical hope?
2. What personal practices do middle school teachers cultivate in order to create conditions for hope in their classrooms?

Participants for this study told many stories and shared examples about the practices they used in their classroom. In many respects, these practices aligned with and were consistent with critical hope. Other practices that surfaced were grounded in empathy for and love of students. The interior work around purpose and hope was the teachers' "why" and the exterior work were specific personal practices that grounded them in the "how." Their purpose and hope as educators grounded them in their classroom practices.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Increased hopelessness can contribute to the decreased mental health and wellness among youth. Classrooms have the potential to be places that cultivate hope. As Buchanan-Rivera (2022) stated, “The classroom can be a space that nurtures intellectual capacity, promotes joy, and fosters a sense of community” (p. 2). Therefore, it is important to understand spaces where teachers are humanizing the school experience, particularly for students of color. Duncan-Andrade (2022) referenced a colleague of his, Tiffani Marie Johnson who shared with him the idea of hope dealers, “battling the dope dealers competing for the hearts and minds of our children” (p. 83). Duncan-Andrade (2022) continued by describing how dope dealers are metaphors for toxic school climates and cultures, media that pushes children to hate themselves because of their identities, and the textbook industry. Hope dealers have the potential to be a strong force in a student’s life.

The purpose of this study was to look more closely at middle school teachers’ practices by answering the following research questions:

1. How do middle school teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in practices that are aligned to critical hope?
2. What personal practices do successful middle teachers cultivate in order to create conditions for hope in their classroom?

In order to answer these research questions, I conducted a qualitative study with eight humanities teachers in urban settings. The participants in my study were referred by a variety of educators including school leaders, coaches, and professors. These teachers were recommended

because they were considered successful middle school educators. Each participant engaged in a 90-minute semi-structured interview where they spoke about the reason they became a middle school teacher, the practices they use in their classroom, and the personal practices they uphold to maintain hope.

I conducted interviews via Zoom and transcribed the participants' responses using a combination of Zoom's AI transcription tool and my own manual transcription. For the first research questions, I used deductive codes drawn from Duncan-Andrade's (2009) critical Hope framework and Ginwright's (2016) healing justice framework. The data for the study was collected via Zoom, using the video feature. After the interviews were done, the data was transcribed and coded. The first research question was coded descriptively with pre-existing headings that came from Duncan-Andrade's critical hope framework (2009) and Ginwright's healing justice framework (2016). I coded the second research question using in vivo coding based on participant responses. This chapter discusses the findings from Chapter 4, recommendations, limitations of the study and implications for future research.

Discussion of Findings

Employing Social-emotional Competencies

Creating conditions for critical hope in the classroom demanded that teachers themselves had social-emotional competencies. Garcia (2019) posited that social-emotionally competent teachers set the tone for the classroom in positive and supportive ways. To provide quality learning, to walk alongside students, and to help them navigate injustices, teachers need to demonstrate an unwavering empathy and love for students. Without love or care, practices rooted in critical hope would not matter. These practices included understanding the context of middle

school students, putting routines and structures into place that created safety for students, believing in all of their students, understanding student identities, and nurturing them. For the most part, participants integrated competencies into their practice on a continual basis. They facilitated community circles, checked in with students before class, listened to student concerns, and demonstrated their unwavering belief in students.

Some participants noted that within their school context, they were the only teachers implementing practices grounded in social-emotional learning. The reasons for this varied. As Brenda shared, several veteran teachers at her school felt uncomfortable taking on support for their students and did not see themselves as needing to fill that role. This is similar to Brown and Knowles's (2014) findings on middle school teachers:

> Many professional educators struggle daily with choosing to either use research-based, developmentally appropriate teaching strategies or accept a philosophy that pedagogically sound teaching can't be used because the consequence for doing so negatively impacts their students' test scores and teachers' performance evaluations (p. 65).

While a couple of participants implemented a social-emotional learning curriculum, others integrated competencies into their practice to check-in on students. Several participants spoke about specific examples of when they cared for students. This care aligned to the research on an ethics of care, radical care, and unconditional positive regard for students (Noddings, 1984; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Venet, 2021). In Chapter 4, Olivia shared how she had a particularly challenging moment with a student and would not give up on her. Camila spoke about how she paid close attention to the writing students did in class and what that revealed about a particular trauma a student experienced. Maya described how she learned about students'

lives in the beginning of the year and would give them opportunities to regulate their emotions when she knew they were having a particularly hard day.

Showing care was one important social-emotional competency participants demonstrated. Alder (2002) examined how middle school students noticed teachers' ways of caring for them. This care took different forms: good teaching, listening carefully, and engaging with families. These findings connected with the ways teachers described caring for their students. Punitive responses and zero tolerance discipline were never mentioned as a part of their practice.

Several participants shared about how they engaged in their own learning practices ranging from seeking therapy to working on their biases. Camila, for example, spoke about the skills she learned in her own personal practices and how she taught students those skills: "Like teaching the students about emotions, what they look like. I would put cards out there, like facial expressions and we'd have to describe what emotion it was and what makes you think that's the emotion." Research demonstrates that teachers engaged in their own work helped them to see their own humanity as well as the students in front of them (Ieva & Beasley, 2022; Legette et al., 2022).

Affirming Student Identities

Teachers were intentional about the ways they affirmed student identities. They implemented curriculum in which their students who were of different races and ethnicities could see themselves, they honored student stories, and sought inputs. Teacher proximity to student identities, in addition to their commitments to social justice, made teachers advocates for powerful student learning in which they fostered voice and affirmed identities. As a result, they created material hope through relevant and meaningful instruction. For some, this instruction was

through ethnic studies curriculum. For others, it was ensuring students saw themselves in asset-based ways in texts. As Maya shared in Chapter 4,

> Language arts is the most humanizing and it allows for students to see themselves, make connections with other people, and to realize that we're deep down, all the same. We hurt, we feel joy and we're not alone. And I think that's kind of where you can start to weave in hope for students too, through these texts.

For many participants, this proximity to their students was because of their linguistic, racial, and ethnic commonalities. Many were teachers of color themselves. As discussed in Chapter 3, the schools at which the participants worked served a student body that was majority students of color. In seven of the eight schools included in the study, 75% or more of the students were students of color. Moreover, six of the eight schools served a student body comprised of 75% or more students from economically disadvantaged households.

The teachers' deep commitments to teaching students of color and students with low socioeconomic status were evident; for teachers of color who shared linguistic or cultural commonalities with their students, these commitments were strong and personal. Felix for example, emphasized how his mission was to uplift his community, both within and outside of the school. Research has demonstrated the importance of cultural match among teachers and students; however, teachers of color remain outliers in most states. In the states represented in the present study, Washington and California, 85% and 60% of teachers, respectively, are White (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.; The Education Trust, 2022).

Blazar's research (2021) cited in Will (2022) examined the positive impact of teachers of color on students' social-emotional, academic and behavioral outcomes and based on the study, discovered that teachers of color tended to engage in increased culturally responsive teaching.

As Camila shared in Chapter 4, both students and parents confided in her and put their trust in her. Language and culture appeared to have significantly helped with this relationship.

Maya and Sabrina were highly intentional about honoring the identities of their students and working to increase the agency of their students. Bruno (2021) detailed what building agency in the classroom looked like: students took responsibility for their learning and teachers giving them the information they need to make those decisions. As Maya shared in Chapter 4,

In contrast to the literature, Brenda, who identified as White and Armenian and who did not share cultural, linguistic, or geographic identities with her students, still demonstrated a proximity to her students. She reflected on the empathy she had for this particular age group:

> I have a deep sense of empathy for the parents of my students. It is a huge responsibility to be a trusted adult for kids. I value and respect each student in a way that I would want my own children to be treated. Lastly, I care about my students because they are literally the future. They learn by seeing and experiencing, so I know that I have a special opportunity in their life to model not just academic thinking, but also a sense of global citizenship, equity, and justice. I hope that they feel my care for them so that they navigate their own futures with similar values.

Brenda spoke to the personal work she did to ensure she understood who her students were. This work included addressing her own biases, taking the time to learn about the different cultures her students come from, and prioritizing ways to connect and learn about their cultures. Therefore, because of this personal reflection and work, she gained a proximity that allowed her to connect with her students.

Redding (2022) contended that many teachers report that they enter the teaching profession because they want to make in difference in students' lives. This calling is intensified for those who decide to return to the communities where they grew up, and their connection to these communities helped them foster hope. At the same time, there is promise for those who do

not com from the same communities and cultures. What is necessary is ensuring all middle school teachers learn bout the importance of affirming all of their students, cultivating empathy for them, and guiding them toward future goals.

Practicing Restorative Justice

Restorative practices were a way to build socratic hope in the classroom. These practices helped to create authentic relationships between teachers and students (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Participants engaged in a number of restorative practices with the intention of creating a community within the classroom. As Maya indicated in Chapter 4, her goal was to go slow at the beginning of the year by building community in order to go fast with the rest of the year. As she reflected later in the interview, building trust with students and seeking to understand their contexts in the beginning of the year allowed her to support a student with specific challenges later in the year.

Community circles, team building in the beginning of the year, and connecting with students outside of class were the routines and structures participants named. As Camila shared, she was able to use community circles when harm happened between students. She could use the structure to facilitate authentic conversations that helped students address what happened in open and honest ways.

Through the interviews, it became clear to me that participants were positive adults in the lives of their students. I was struck by the way teachers talked about trust between themselves and their students and how often students would confide in them. Many participants spoke to the fact that several students came to school with trauma and how creating community was key in helping them to heal. At the same time, a few mentioned the increased needs of students and the

lack of support (additional counselors, other teachers who understood them, community support) to help them to completely thrive. Venet (2021) shared that teachers are not meant to do this work alone. Shifts in bell schedules, student-teacher ratio, and structures to support relationship building are key to making supports for students school-wide instead of dependent on isolated teachers.

The structure of school allowed for teachers and students to create authentic connections but within specific limits. The data revealed strong relationships between teachers and students. For example, Camila reported that students would go directly to her when they needed support, even if they were not in her class anymore. In addition, teachers who coached sports or participated in activities alongside students outside of school hours noted increased connection with their students. For example, Olivia, whose step coaching was discussed in Chapter 4, shared that she was able to understand students on a more holistic level when she interacted with them outside of school.

Within the school day, it was more difficult to find time for connection due to the demands of curriculum, schedules, and state testing. As Medina (2021) emphasized, schools can often be highly transactional places that focus on knowledge and productivity. Felix mentioned the reality of having 30 students for 56 minutes. As he shared, "I think every curriculum and every class period should have a 15- to 30-minute buffer period at the end of any objective lesson just to talk." The pace for the school day did not align with the needs of middle school students.

Navigating the Past, Present, and Future

Throughout the school year, several participants built audacious hope as they actively worked with students to navigate the past, present, and future. They were not just concerned about the content of the subjects they taught. They wanted to center their students' identities and concerns in their instruction. These practices honored students and were counter to what is more often present in classrooms. As Salazar (2013) noted, "[A] superficial and uncritical focus on methods often privileges whitestream approaches aimed at assimilation, ultimately robbing students of their culture, language, history, and values, thus denying students' humanity" (p.124). Camila, for example, described how her board game assignment created an opportunity for her Latino students to share their personal experiences of migration. As she shared, "One of the groups created a jumping-the-border game. Which is really good because actually, the majority of those kids jumped the border. They shared their experience through the board game."

Throughout several participants' classes, students had the space to speak about Black Lives Matter, the conflict in Ukraine, Asian hate crimes during the pandemic, and gender fluidity. These events that happened outside of the classroom impacted students on a personal level and teachers were not afraid to open up class to conversations.

Camila majored in history in college, Brenda majored in international relations, and Sabrina worked with an ethnic studies committee at the state-wide level. Their deep knowledge of historical events supported them in having challenging conversations about social issues, history, and current events. Participants also had skills and courage to engage students in challenging conversations. The combination of knowledge, skills, and dispositions align to what Hadley-Dunn (2022) called "days after pedagogy," or pedagogy teachers employed in the

aftermath of major international, national, or local events. The key parts of this pedagogy included a commitment to justice and equity; student-centered, humanizing interactions and spaces; risk-taking; adaptability and flexibility; sociopolitical awareness; and vulnerability (p. 13).

When injustices occurred, participants were proactive in taking the time to personally understand what happened and the event's root causes. Brenda, for example, shared how she would start to feel hopeless after learning about an injustice. She wanted to make sure she researched and ultimately understood what was happening. Developing a deep understanding of injustices likely helped teachers frame injustices with their students. They did not shy away from difficult histories or current events; in fact, they made it a point to attend to these so that students could develop a deeper understanding of the world around them.

Teaching as a Calling Grounded in Social Justice

Participants' hope was partially grounded in their inner purpose, a calling to teaching and a belief in children's capacity to learn. For a few teachers in particular, their calling was linked to humanizing their students and giving them the agency to believe they could make a difference. For a couple of participants, this rationale was connected to how they were dehumanized in some manner in their own educational experience and made to feel invisible. As Maya shared, "When I was growing up, I didn't have a single educator that looked like me, and I didn't have a single educator that really cared enough to inspire me to be brave and to trust my voice as an individual. I was just very shy and very quiet." Bishop and Harrison's (2021) assertion about what students deserve in middle school is aligned to uplifting, rather than silencing, student voices:

> All young adolescents deserve schools that help them become competent and confident individuals who feel a sense of agency, are proud of who they are, are optimistic about their future, feel connected to those around them, and are prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world. (p. 4)

Every participant noted that their commitments were grounded in their strong sense of purpose. Some participants also shared that they had a religious or spiritual practice, such as attending church, praying, or meditating. In Chapter 4, Camila described how her belief in God helped her maintain hope and believe in people's humanity. I was struck by the fact that although everyone did not have a religious practice, the majority of participants were bound to their profession by a sense of calling and higher purpose. As Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012) indicated, those who saw teaching as a calling were more willing to engage in extra roles and more commitments to the profession.

Seeking Support to Help Maintain Hope

Participants also spoke about the different ways they sought support. A few participants received therapy to address what they witnessed in their schools and for personal well-being. As Sabrina shared in Chapter 4:

> And so having sometimes a professional who can go over those things with you and work through those things is, is really, really important because, you know, we have to do things like call the police and call CPS and report things that nobody should ever have to say out loud.

Others had strong connections to their community. Sabrina said she appreciated her teacher community, both within her school and throughout the state, and the many ways she was able to collaborate with them. Felix had strong connections to his community and worked with others to create new possibilities for youth both in and outside of school. Adler (2002) argued that the ability to care for others required a commitment to care for oneself. Participants who

engaged in an active and engaged hope on a personal level have that much more potential to create hope in their classrooms.

The personal work teachers did to cultivate hope was important to their commitments to the career; however, as will be discussed in the recommendations, teachers should not have to solely do personal work to maintain hope in the profession.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Currently, adolescent students face a crisis of hope born of mental health challenges and trauma. Strauss (2021) indicated that middle school students face more trauma and mental health issues than ever before. Venet (2021) emphasized that, for certain students, this trauma happens directly within their schools. Schools must transform into places where purpose is infused into the relationships between teachers and students, between students, and with community members.

The findings of this study and the conceptual framework both speak to the practices middle school teachers can enact both in the classrooms and for themselves. This work cannot be limited solely to the personal work of teachers. There is a need for multi-faceted solutions to systematically increase hope and healing in our schools. Schools cannot rely on one empathetic teacher to be the "hope dealer" Duncan-Andrade (2022) wrote about. In fact, schools need to be hope dealers. This section discusses recommendations at the school level on how to activate critical hope and integrate healing justice.

Offer Job-Embedded Professional Development

Middle school teachers need job-embedded professional development that provides tools and resources for creating spaces where all students feel a sense of hope, belonging, healing,and

purpose. This kind of professional development could help teachers engage with middle school students in authentic ways through community circles, powerful and relevant learning experiences, and relationship building.

Adolescents in middle school deserve opportunities to feel connected to classmates, be proud of their identity, and feel optimistic about the future (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Throughout the interviews with participants, I discovered just how much participants were committed to creating trusting relationships, developing students' sense of belonging, and providing multiple opportunities for students to feel hopeful. This trust grew from teachers' proximity to students, the practices they implemented that increased trust, their skillful ability to address injustices, and their love for their students. Maya, Felix, Sabrina, Olivia, and Camila spoke directly about their desire to ensure their students of color felt seen.

Building teachers' skills in learning how to navigate injustices, both around the world and that students face personally, could help them in creating strong connections with students where students feel seen and validated. Teachers need professional development that aligns with Dover and colleagues' (2019) notion of "critical professional development," an approach that stands in opposition to traditional, politically neutral forms of professional development for teachers. As Dover and colleagues explained, critical professional development supports teachers in examining socio-political contexts of their students and developing their social justice fluency. The more teachers can develop this knowledge, the more they can learn to support middle school students in critical hope.

Part of professional development could then focus on building the skills of middle school teachers so they could create community; build critical hope; developing advocacy skills to stand

for students; implement excellent methods, structures, and routines; and engage in community responsiveness. As Haddix (2015) contended, “The goals of teacher education must evolve beyond the teaching of strategies and methods toward a process for beginning teachers' critical interrogation of their social locations and the ways they engage with the realities of teaching and learning” (p. 1). Teachers who are from their students’ communities could co-facilitate learning about those communities. This would help ground those not from these communities in the specifics of the context.

Build Community

While running clubs or coaching sports after school are powerful ways to build authentic connections with students, not every teacher is able to dedicate this time after school. Schools should think creatively about ways to integrate meaningful time in the middle school schedule so teachers can learn about students and develop authentic relationships with them. While the structure of the school day provides small moments of connection, it focuses more on academic outcomes. However, positive relationships with peers and adults are one of the most critical aspects of success in middle school. Community circles, mentoring programs, changes in bell schedules, and clubs scheduled during school hours are all ways of creating more opportunities for connection between adults and students. This recommendation aligns with what Hernandez & Darling-Hammond (2022) speak about in relation to purposeful communities of care and consistency. They add, “implementing consistent routines, such as regular community meetings and norms for positive greetings and dialogue, can support students in managing stress while empowering them to have a greater sense of inclusion” (p. vi).

Creating opportunities for staff to also build community and connection with each other will help them find purpose both in the classroom and within the school. As Sabrina shared about teacher collaboration in Chapter 4, “We need community building too. It’s one of the main reasons that we can’t retain teachers of color. It’s why teachers of color quit. It’s why teachers in general quit without, you know, five years or less. If relationships matter so much to students and families, why would it be any different for staff?” Creating a school climate where teachers trust each other, learn with each other, ground collectively in a purpose, and come together to support students can create more hope for teachers too.

Provide Space for Collective Healing and Hope

The kinds of hope and healing participants cultivated depended on their personal actions and practices. While some participants described developing meaningful relationships with colleagues, they did not mention school leaders or districts supporting them in cultivating hope or implementing healing practices. Teachers sought out their own therapy and emotional support. As Venet (2021) asserts, teacher wellness should not be in isolation. As more students face trauma and increased mental health challenges, teachers need the skills to address these traumas while also taking care of themselves.

A couple of participants described the practices they put in place to keep from burning out. Camila for example, shared how she called a friend to tell them one positive thing that happened each day. Brenda spoke about how spending time with her family helped her. As Maya shared, her burnout had nothing to do with the students and everything to do with the larger system in place. One teacher at a school site cannot be the only one who is known to care for

their students. Hope needs to be a systemic initiative and a best practice in middle school instruction.

From supporting students who have lost loved ones to gun violence to helping them leave dangerous home situations, teachers witness trauma on a regular basis. When teachers support students facing trauma, they can develop secondary trauma. This kind of trauma can be experienced as compassion fatigue and secondary trauma stress (Baicker, 2021; McMakin et al., 2022). The National Equity Project (NEP; n.d.) defined different levels of healing ranging from individual and interpersonal to institutional and structural. As they stated, "Healing at an institutional level involves an intentional, shared, and explicit commitment to creating a more loving, just and resilient system." (para 6). While teachers can personally develop ways to heal, schools can be sites of hope for teachers where they can process challenging events collectively to heal while also learning best practices to support students who have faced traumas. Baicker (2020) shared ways in which schools can address secondary trauma stress and create spaces where teachers have access to counseling services, teacher appreciation events, and activities that help to relieve stress.

Provide Schools with Site Based Coaches

Social-emotional learning (SEL) as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the process of learning specific skills and dispositions that "develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals" (2023, para 1). Over the past decade, districts have pushed to integrate SEL into classrooms, but the implementation has been uneven at best. Beyond buzzwords and packaged curriculum, the ability for teachers to fully see and affirm students requires that teachers must be able to have

social-emotional competencies and address implicit biases in themselves (Simmons et al., 2018). As Garcia (2019) argued, socially and emotionally competent teachers can support students in being socially and emotionally competent. Leonard and Woodland (2022) found that "compartmentalized, episodic, and expert-delivered sessions that typify teacher PD are unlikely to lead to changes in teacher mind-sets and practices needed to bring about positive SEL outcomes for students" (p. 213). Instead, they posited that professional learning related to SEL needed to integrate discourse, teacher self-awareness about their identities, and job-embedded professional learning communities. Principals can support school sites with authentic and transformative (Jagers et al., 2019) SEL integration by providing schools a coach who helps facilitate professional learning communities. In such communities, teachers would work collectively to develop self-awareness, identify ways to build meaningful relationships with all students, address their own biases, and learn about ways to create hope in their classroom. They could also go beyond traditional SEL lessons with what McGovern et al. (2023) referred to as stretching SEL towards social justice with, "supporting students in their learning about social injustices and their development of skills for addressing them in ways that are affirming of their identities and respectful of their capacity for active participation in their communities" (p. 9). By dedicating resources to initiatives that support these competencies, districts can make this kind of transformative learning of their school community a key priority.

At a time when hope is in crisis for adolescents, there are no simple solutions. These systemic recommendations require multiple stakeholders—students, teachers, principals, coaches, faculty, and the school community—to come together to provide what all students deserve: the ability to imagine a future of possibility.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study looked closely at eight urban middle school teachers' insights into the ways they create conditions for hope in their classroom and the work they do to create hope for themselves. Teachers came from two areas on the West Coast. Based on the findings from the study, there are many possibilities for future research.

Qualitative studies that include interviews with both highly recommended middle school teachers and their students would be a powerful next step. This would allow us to understand not only teachers' practices but also young people's perspectives on those practices. Classroom action research studies could give teachers opportunities to implement critical hope practices.

Future research could examine a pilot of the kind of professional development described above. This pilot would focus on critical hope and healing justice practices that help teachers to build community, create relevant and purposeful learning experiences, and build connections in the classroom. The professional development would go beyond implementing curriculum and address the brain science of early adolescence, healing centered practices, and ways the teacher could both elevate hope for their classroom and themselves. The study would ultimately look at the impact of this professional development on both teacher practices and student outcomes.

Finally, future research could examine urban middle schools that have successfully integrated hope into the school mission, professional development, and classroom practice. Such research would illuminate what hope looks like classroom to classroom and across a school. This kind of study could examine what schools do to successfully support teachers in their collective practice to create conditions for hope.

Limitations

This study was limited because of the small sample size**.** I contacted 12 teachers and eight agreed to participate in the study. While participant requests were sent throughout the United States, the participants who ended up in this study were based on the West Coast in Southern California and the Pacific Northwest. A larger qualitative study with more geographically diverse participants could have illuminated a wider range of practices.

Another limitation was that teachers were the only participants chosen and they self-reported on the practices they used to create conditions for hope in their classroom. The study did not include the voices of students and the kinds of practices that helped them to remain hopeful about the future.

A final limitation was that participants came from districts that did not have Critical Race Theory (CRT) legislation that prevented them from speaking about racism, inequality, or LBTQIA+ content. As more districts around the country enact legislation that make such content illegal to discuss in classrooms, there would be a real opportunity to add more nuance to how to do so when met with such polarizing responses.

Conclusions

Currently, adolescents face hopelessness at much higher rates due to a variety of factors: the pandemic, increased traumas, and technology overuse (Thompson, 2022). For students of color, hopelessness can be a combination of trauma both outside of school and inside of school (Venet, 2021). This qualitative study examined the practices middle school teachers implemented to create conditions for hope in their classrooms, particularly in urban school

settings with students of color. As adolescents continue to face increased hopelessness, understanding what successful teachers are doing to generate hope is important to understand.

While much of the discourse in the last few years has revolved around learning loss, the conversation must shift to the resilience of students and the tremendous healing and emotional growth they did over the last few years (Berger, 2021). Classrooms could be authentic places where students know they trust each other and their teachers. Where teachers understand how to collectively struggle with students and not ignore what happens outside of the classroom. Classrooms also have potential to be places where students can experience the full range of life: wonder, compassion, moral outrage at injustices, respect, confidence, and courage (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). Therefore, taking the time to understand how incredible educators worked to create conditions for hope as opposed to ways they addressed learning loss in their classrooms was important to distill.

This study found that teachers created such conditions by honoring student identities, listening to and cultivating student voice, creating space for community building, and empathizing with the unique challenges of this age group. These teachers were not afraid to address injustices within the school and around the world. Several were also comfortable in discussing current events and issues that impacted students, ranging from students crossing the border, gentrification in their local communities, APIA hate, and Black Lives Matter. At the same time, the challenges students faced and the constraints of the school day were real barriers.

The findings from this study revealed what the research continues to emphasize: middle school does not have to be a time when teachers solely center academics, nor should it be. As Block (2016) asserted, schools and classrooms have the potential to affirm what it means to be

human. Middle school can be an opportunity for both teachers and students to engage in questions about hope and possibility, as Beane (1990) posited, and to collectively ask: Who are we? What can we be? What should we do? Teachers and students can also ask, How do we do this together, and what do we need in order to do so?

Schools need more teachers practicing audacious, socratic, material, and humanizing hope. Teachers also deserve to learn about the best practices for nurturing these kinds of hope in both their students and themselves. Palmer (1997), Freire (1998), Darder (2012), and Ginwright (2016) all spoke to the power of teacher practice that goes beyond technical methods. School leaders and teachers have the potential to collectively contribute to creating hope and healing in our schools.

APPENDIX A

Teacher Referral Communication

Dear Educator,

I am beginning to gather participants for my research study. My research study aims to explore the practices of successful middle school teachers who cultivate hope, purpose, and meaning in their classrooms.

Do you know of great language arts middle school teachers who teach in urban school districts and:

- develop strong relationships with students
- use powerful, exploratory curriculum
- create learning that is active and purposeful
- create meaningful and inclusive environments

If so, I would love to learn more about their practices! Feel free to connect me directly to the teachers if you know them. If you think school leaders would be able to recommend, we can chat too.

Let me know if you have any other questions,

Sheeba Jacob

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured Interview Questions

These first questions ask about your background:

1. Can you tell me about why you became a middle school teacher?
2. Tell me about what inspires you to teach middle school English or Social Studies?
3. What is challenging about teaching middle school?

These next set of questions focus on how you create a classroom grounded in hope, healing, and purpose:

1. Can you tell me about a unit or curriculum you taught that was purposeful and created meaning for your students?
    a. Did you develop the unit on your own?
    b. How did students respond?

2. Can you tell me about a time you helped students navigate injustices either they experienced or witnessed around them?

3. Is there a particular story you could tell me about how you demonstrated care for one of your students?

4. Can you speak about routines or rituals that you use to foster community in your classroom?
5. Traditionally when we speak about classroom management, we think about rules, discipline, and consequences. How do you approach classroom management?
    a. Does restorative justice play a role in your practice?
6. Can you speak about a time you have helped students imagine a hopeful future?

These last set of questions focus on how you create meaning and hope in your personal life:

1. How do you define your life's purpose as an educator?
2. Do you have habits, rituals, or routines that you practice that help to center this purpose?
3. How do you make sense of injustices that you either experience or witness?
4. Are there any specific practices that you have that help you to sustain hope?
5. As an educator, what helps you to heal?

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