

Cultivating hope in uncertain times: middle school teacher practices for students and themselves

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight research that examines the ways that urban middle school teachers create conditions for hope in their classroom and for themselves, particularly since the pandemic. In the past few years, there has been a confluence of both issues at the domestic and international level that have increased epidemics related to polarization, divisiveness and loneliness. This paper includes a combination of literature, qualitative interview responses from teachers and a conceptual framework related to hope and healing in the middle school classroom. This study ends with a personal reflection from the author about the ways she found hope as an educator.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper is a result of the author's dissertation. This qualitative study examined eight successful urban middle school teachers and their perspectives on conditions they created for hope in their classrooms and ways they created hope for themselves. Urban middle school teachers who taught humanities shared their insights through semi-structured interviews. Two research questions that drove this study included: How do middle school teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in practices that are consistent with critical hope? What personal practices do successful middle school teachers cultivate to create conditions for hope in their classroom?

Findings – The findings of this study align with pedagogical practices the teachers used that center hope and voice for students: culturally responsive practices, relational practices and justice-oriented practices. These specific teachers cared deeply about their middle school 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.

Originality/value – This research adds to the existing research on hope for students while also situating the understanding of this concept within the pandemic and post-pandemic classroom. This research also makes a connection between the hope of students and the hope of teachers.

Keywords Hope, Student voice, Healing, Culturally sustaining pedagogies, Middle school, Humanizing

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Anxiety and depression increased by 25% around the world during the pandemic. Women and young people were most impacted (WHO, 2022). Adolescent mental health became increasingly at risk for many reasons: less contact with classmates, frustration and boredom during virtual learning, lack of space at home and family loss (Bishop, 2021). For students between the ages of 10 and 14 years, these disruptions in learning were coupled with their unique cognitive and socioemotional development needs as middle school is a time when



peer interactions and socialization are key. 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 and Shirley, 2021).

Middle school is already a challenging time where students are trying to figure out who they are, their place in the world and what independence looks like to them (Allen-Lamphere, 2021). The racial and health issues throughout the pandemic increased trauma and mental health issues for this age group and in more significant ways than other time periods studied (Strauss, 2021). While the pandemic surfaced many student needs, teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to meet these needs in the classroom (Newberry, 2021).

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 to improve the well-being of youth. SEL, in particular, promotes mental health by creating safe environments in school and helping youth cultivate positive relationships (CASEL, 2022).

At the same time, schools have also contributed to the increased hopelessness and trauma for students (Venet, 2021). Love (2016) speaks to the concept of spirit murdering developed by legal scholar, Patricia Williams. 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. Spirit-murdering can result in pedagogies that can cause immense harm and include racist teaching practices, punitive school cultures and narrow curriculum (Hines and Wilmot, 2018). Often, disciplinary policies can also make schools places that criminalize students, especially Black and Brown students.

Trauma for students is both an individual problem and a structural problem. Racism, heterosexism, Islamophobia, transphobia, antisemitism and other kinds of oppression that can happen in schools are apt to increase trauma (Venet, 2021). As a result, schools can become a divisive place for particular students where they are not fully seen or valued. When students are not seen, they may not be able to engage with others in ways that are purpose driven or service oriented. However, as Rogers *et al.* states, “For young people to participate meaningfully in a diverse democracy, it is essential that they are able to join with others from different backgrounds to identify shared problems, build complex alliances, and take action for the common good,” (p. 18).

A powerfully positive and affirming school experience for students requires teachers to both celebrate the whole identities of students while acknowledging the brokenness of the world around them (Block, 2016). 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 and Cook-Harvey, 2018). 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 focus can provide purpose for adolescents and a sense of belonging. This focus can also help with giving them the tools and mindsets to effectively collaborate with each other and problem solve together, even across differences.

Helping students to see purpose in their lives, acknowledging where they come from and develop a strong sense of self 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. The

ability to create hope and purpose for both students *and* teachers in middle school is a topic that is not widely discussed. Little research has been done on teachers and their personal hopefulness (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon, 2011). Additionally, there is a lack of teacher-development programs that focus on hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2022).

Increased hopelessness of adolescent youth can contribute to their decreased mental health and wellness. Increased hopelessness for teachers can contribute to burn out. Educational spaces then suffer from a hope crisis. Learning more about spaces where teachers are humanizing the school experience for students and for themselves is critical to then thinking about ways to address this crisis. Through my research study (Jacob, 2024), I intended to look more closely at how teachers do so by answering the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do middle school teachers who are perceived as successful ground their work in classroom practices that are consistent with critical hope?
- RQ2. What kinds of personal practices do successful middle school teachers cultivate to create conditions for hope in their classrooms?

This article provides a snapshot of my findings based on RQ1 and RQ2. I share a conceptual framework I developed that is grounded in both participants' voices and best practices in the field for hope and healing in middle school spaces.

Research positionality

My focus centers on middle school – a time of profound changes for young people and a time of great potential to understand the world around them. As the world continues trending in a divisive manner, what are ways educators can instill hope and belonging in their classrooms? As we face a mental health crisis, what are ways educators can find hope in themselves? I currently serve as the Director of Middle School Design within a charter network dedicated to creating engaged and empathetic citizens who care about the world around them. The network's mission is to create intentionally diverse spaces where students learn how to engage across lines of difference and as the founder states, "We think you actually have to design in ways that ensure that children are working together, and that you're talking about those interactions, talking about collaboration in a way that strengthens the ability to develop the skills to work across lines of difference" (Potter, 2018).

As an educator who supported other educators during the pandemic, I witnessed its impacts on school leaders, teachers, students and families. Grief, trauma, food insecurities, health and racial disparities and economic instability all channeled into the lives of students who brought these realities into schools. As a former middle school teacher, I see all the possibilities for early adolescents when we can bear witness to who they are and foster opportunities for hope-building. As a mother, I wonder about the best ways to instill in my son and daughter a sense of purpose and care about the world around them while doing the same for myself. As a daughter of South Asian immigrants and granddaughter of a freedom fighter and a humble, powerful grandmother, hope runs through me. As a songwriter and a creative, I trust beyond what we see in the normal and daily life.

Theoretical frameworks

For my research study, 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 multiple identities, teachers create spaces where students can show up in whole ways. [Duncan-Andrade \(2009\)](#) defines critical hope as hope that is material; providing quality and relevant instruction, Socratic; navigating injustices with students and audacious; and collectively struggling alongside students.

The healing justice framework ([Ginwright, 2016](#)) examines 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. Having a sense of hope in themselves is foundational.

Methods

I engaged in a phenomenological qualitative study to look at teachers’ subjective experiences and the kinds of processes they used for meaning-making ([Leavy, 2017](#)). I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight language arts and social studies middle school teachers. I chose these specific subjects intentionally. As a former middle school language arts teacher, I knew humanities classrooms created a clear context for exploring what it means to be a human being through the study of literature and history. There are clear opportunities in which teachers integrate themes of oppression, power, justice, hope and agency ([Fisher et al., 2020](#)).

Participants were teachers in urban, public-school settings. They fit specific 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. I used purposive sampling to identify specific teachers. I reached out to my different educational networks, which included teachers, school leaders, coaches, consultants and professors to gather recommendations. This kind of sampling focused on the deliberate selection of participants, as “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 chosen teachers aligned with what [Bishop and Harrison \(2021\)](#) identified as traits of successful middle school teachers. They enjoyed being with young adolescents; they advocated for youth; and they paid attention to and learned 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. Six of the eight schools served a student body that comprised 75% or more from economically disadvantaged households. Teachers came from diverse backgrounds: five identified as people of color and three identified as white.

Findings

Teaching requires more than technical skill; it also requires social-emotional connection, the ability to affirm students’ multiple identities and powerful learning opportunities that activate purpose, all of which are linked to a deeper ethos of hope and healing. Teachers also deserve space and time to reflect and make sense of who they are and how their practices impact students. Unfortunately, critical hope and healing justice are not the frameworks underlying contemporary teacher training in middle schools, despite long-standing critiques

of teacher preparation as divorced from humanizing practices. There are limitations when teacher training solely focuses on technical and intellectual aspects (Freire, 1993; Palmer, 1997; Darder, 2012; Ginwright, 2016; and Duncan-Andrade, 2022). In the current context we are living in, for example, students are at risk of losing their ability to empathize. Community and connection are key parts of a classroom that need to be cultivated (Berckemeyer and Campbell, 2025). This research centered on hope in the classroom, and the findings indicated that teachers need much more than technical skills to create conditions for hope.

What resulted was a conceptual framework (Figure 1). This conceptual framework combines best practices related to the aforementioned theoretical frameworks of healing justice and critical hope in addition to those grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogies. There were five practices that were evident in both what the participants shared in my interviews with them and the research on best practices. Through additional research and my current work across multiple middle schools, I have added another part of the framework that I will speak to further below: developing authentic academic confidence.

The first component of the framework requires that teachers work on building 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

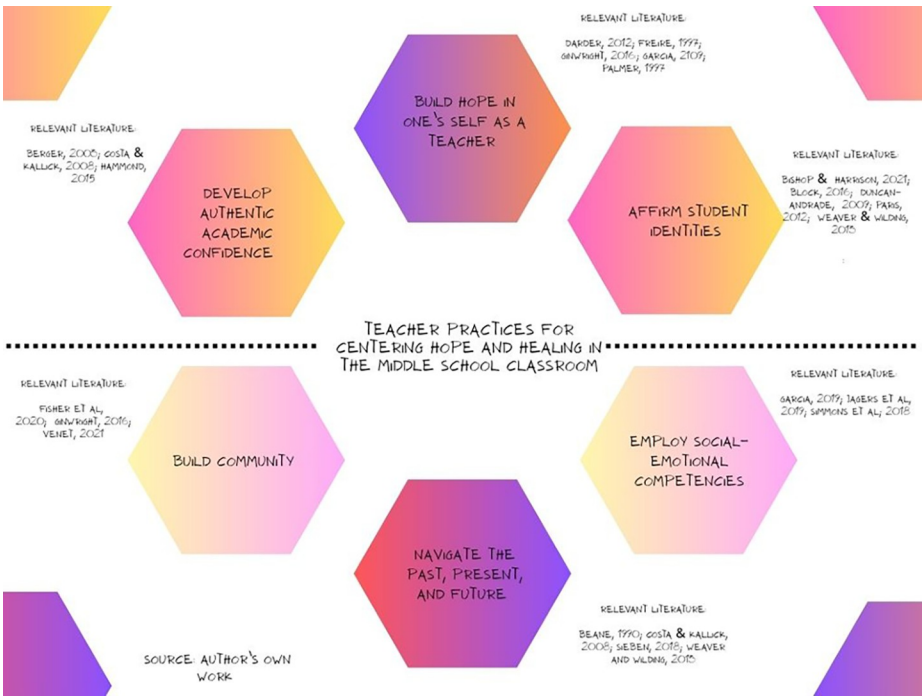


Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Source: Author's own work

see each student. The subsequent practices are honoring student identities and voice; committing to their social-emotional growth; navigating the past, present and future; building community; and developing authentic academic confidence. The findings shared below align with these particular practices in [Figure 1](#).

Building hope and healing in one's self as a teacher

My second research question focused on participant's 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 to build hope for their students. This research question was a way to go beyond the intellectual foundations the participants had and to understand more about them at a spiritual and emotional level.

All participants spoke about how they had a deep purpose for why they taught. For many, teaching was a calling grounded in justice. A few of the teachers of color spoke mentioned wanting to be the kind of teacher that they did not have in their own education. They shared how they were silenced or not seen in schools because of their specific identities 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.

Different kinds of interior practices such as going to therapy or engaging in religious or spiritual practices also helped participants. Some shared how external practices such as building community. Maya, for example, explained:

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.

Brenda spoke about the power of having a co-worker to bounce ideas off of:

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.

Affirming student identities

There are a number of ways teachers can affirm student identities: from celebrating successes and milestones to helping students feel seen through curricula and through opportunities for expression. 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 feedback to better the learning experience.

Participants used relevant curricula and pedagogies that honored their students' diverse identities (Paris, 2012). There was intentionality in how they planned content with a specific focus on ensuring student identities were honored. Some shared how they gave space for students to share personal stories and talk about what they cared about in connection to the curriculum. 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.

Maya spoke about the power of language arts as a medium to help affirm her student identities:

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.

Camila 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 spoke Spanish. 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."

Other participants spoke about the power of intentionally incorporating content that reflected students' identities. 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 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.

Using social-emotional competencies

The research on middle schools has historically focused on the importance of relationships and meaningful learning. During the 90s, the literature focused on advisory, cooperative learning and engaging students. Unfortunately, high-stakes testing in the early 2000s shifted that focus and content became the most important priority, specifically math and literacy (Brown and Knowles, 2014; Schaefer *et al.*, 2016). However, content without social emotional foundations is not effective when considering the developmental needs of middle school students. Practices like creating routines for students to meaningfully engage in community and helping students make sense of what they are experiencing personally can have huge impacts on the classroom culture.

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 shared 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. She shared, “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. As Brenda was an adult students trusted, they felt comfortable coming in to speak to her during lunch or after school. She shared this was not the norm for all teachers.

Navigating the past, present and future

Middle school teachers who are adept at navigating the past, present and future lean into discomfort of the past and into discomfort with current events. They are also able to provide students the ability to envision a future and help them with both short- and long-term goals. They celebrate identities. They are also not afraid to address hard truths about history and the present. 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 instead of not addressing them, teachers would support students in making sense of them. Some participants used frameworks and tools within their class to support student understanding of these events.

Camila shared 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 USA. 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 USA and even opened the door to conversations about how their community demonstrated racist behaviors toward other groups in the USA:

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.

Felix shared how he would do things like bring a career counselor to his class to speak about the future. He added how he told students that going to college was one of the most liberating moments in his life. One of his students told him that nobody from their community would ever go to Harvard. He told her a student actually did and subsequently began calling this student “Harvard” to help her see that vision.

Building community

Middle school teachers who build strong communities both in the classroom and at the school can become a trusted adult for students as they advocate for their needs. Research

indicates how much middle school students appreciate knowing that their teachers care for them and appreciate having a sense of connection to adults in the building (Cook *et al.*, 2016; Hanover Research, 2018; Steinberg and McCray, 2012).

Participants shared 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 to go fast in then being able to teach content. She spent a month developing norms with her students. As a class, they discussed what it feels like to be seen, heard and respected and what was needed 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.

Olivia had a structure for a circle at the beginning and at the end of each day. She would ask students questions like, who filled your bucket today? She also spoke to the dangers of making students feel less than because of their life experiences:

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.

Developing authentic academic confidence

Developing authentic academic confidence aligned to participant reflections on ways they structured learning in their classroom, so students could engage in deep comprehension and skill development. Building academic confidence is a way to cultivate hope in students. This confidence happens when students thrive in their core academics. It goes beyond scoring well on tests, but happens when they can engage in authentic learning experiences where they are able to experience deep learning, reflection and demonstration (Berger, 2003). Coffey and Fulton (2018), for example, developed a Responsible Change Project with their eight-grade students. Students wanted to address issues like human trafficking, gun violence, hunger and poverty. Over the course of six months, they engaged in deeply purposeful learning and developed critical skills while also seeing the value of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Frameworks such as Habits of Mind (Costa and Kallick, 2008) speak to the powerful ways students cultivate resilience that provides them the tools to be successful. These habits range from thinking and communicating with clarity and precision and finding humor to thinking flexibly and remaining open to continuous learning. Deeper learning where students are authentically engaging in knowing and doing provides foundations for hope building as students become stronger thinkers and learners.

Brenda described a seventh-grade social studies unit that focused on the continent of Africa. Students engaged meaningfully in the content and learned about natural resources in North and West Africa, how they were historically used and the impacts of globalization.

Students engaged in academic discourse through talk structures like Socratic Seminars where they spoke about the pros and cons of globalization. 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 used. And that’s where they get to incorporate their observation, their opinions, their perspectives.” Through the scaffolds and structures she provided in her classrooms, students could articulate their thinking, challenge each other and learn deeply about a historic topic.

Conclusions and implications

There has been ample research done on learning how to foster 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. Teachers learn about motivation, belonging and identity (Fisher *et al.*, 2020), but 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 to do so. The reality is that adolescents are facing a crisis of hope (US Department of Health and 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.

The findings of this study and the conceptual framework both speak to the practices middle school teachers can enact 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. Middle schools cannot rely on one empathetic teacher to be the “hope dealer” (Duncan-Andrade, 2022). In fact, middle schools need to be hope dealers. The kind of support needed that schools could offer include: offering job-embedded professional development on how to foster relationships with students, supporting teachers in how to develop the whole child, understanding the neuroscience behind middle school development, building authentic community in schools, providing facilitated spaces for collective healing and hope amidst an uncertain world and providing space for students to work across differences and develop social-emotional competencies.

Classrooms should be authentic places where students know they can trust each other and their teachers. Teachers have the power to create incredible community and spaces in the classroom where students can experience the full range of life: wonder, compassion, moral outrage at injustices, respect, confidence and courage (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2021). Taking the time to understand how incredible educators worked to create conditions for hope as opposed to just focusing on ways they addressed learning loss in their classrooms was important to distill.

This study found that teachers created such conditions by engaging in highly responsive practices such as honoring student identities, creating learning opportunities that reflected students and structuring learning so students could engage deeply in content. Additionally, they also engaged in hopeful and healing practices by listening to and cultivating student voice, creating space for community building, repairing harm and empathizing with the unique challenges of this age group. These teachers were also 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 immigration and gentrification, to hate crimes and activism. Many of these teachers also took the time to understand students on a holistic level as to meet their specific needs in the classroom providing them a vision for future success and the ways they could reach that vision. At the same time, the challenges students faced and the constraints of the school day were real barriers that need to be addressed so that hopelessness is not the norm.

An implication for future research is how to support schools and districts in collective learning about how to create these kinds of conditions in middle school classrooms. Another implication is to not silo this work to specific subjects but to ensure all middle school teachers develop the skills and mindsets to support their students' whole selves.

At this very moment in history, humanity is divided. In this very moment in history, humanity is in need of more ways to remain interconnected. At a granular level, middle school can be a place where both teachers and students can engage in questions about hope and possibility that this age group is primed to address. As Beane (1990) posited, schools can collectively ask: Who are we? What can we be? What should we do? Schools can ask, how do we do this together and what do we need to do so? This kind of work requires deep intentionality, and with the right conditions, structures and spaces, we can foster imagination and possibility for all. Working collectively with and for young people to create pathways to hope will be mutually symbiotic and powerful.

A post script

"There's a sacredness in each one of us that is dormant. Can we light it with a little dignity," (Jacob, 2024).

Over the past few years, I was particularly interested in what teachers were doing to cultivate hope in themselves and for their students. This question is one that I personally have had to ask myself repeatedly amidst so much crisis and loss in the world. As I reflect on over two decades of being an educator and the particular ways I address hope in myself, I realize that similar to the participants I interviewed, grounding myself in the why of being in educator is critical.

Like so many, I have been hopeful, hopeless and all the feelings in between. Typical conversations that elicited consistent rage or sorrow did not help to heal me nor did it create possibilities for my children. Meaningful literature, film, music and poetry was what grounded me and allowed me to understand and imagine. The arts have always given me a voice and given me a way to imagine. Therefore, as I interviewed teachers and researched hope, I simultaneously composed songs that helped me make sense of collective and personal loss, activism, how we see each other and our humanity and, ultimately, love. Creativity, whether it be through song or poetry, constantly returns me to being my most whole and human self. We are capable of returning to the whole, even in the most divisive of times and I want to continually consider the essential question for our classrooms: what are the most powerful school experiences that have the potential to create our most whole young people and our most whole teachers?

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