

YOUTH TRANSFORMATION: EXPLORING THE POWER OF SOCIAL
EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR EQUITY

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, (“Youth Transformation: Exploring the Power of Social Emotional Learning for Equity”), has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Dedication

To all my students—past, present, and future—you are hope, purpose, and joy. You deserve the best this world has to offer—and this is why we continue the work.

This dissertation is dedicated to you.

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First, my family. The source of endless love, support, and humor from the beginning, my safe homebase, the birthplace of my love of learning. I could not ask for a better group of humans to share genes with. Dad: I miss you every single day. I hope I'm making you proud (and laugh).

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Linking Document

“Youth should be radical. Youth should demand change in the world. Youth should not accept the old order if the world is to move on.”

-William Allen White

“Young people, when informed and empowered, when they realize that what they do truly makes a difference, can indeed change the world.”

-Jane Goodall

Overview of The Dissertation

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront of our national consciousness the depth of inequity and injustice in the United States, created and perpetuated by deeply entrenched systemic oppression. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and the Children’s Hospital Association (CHA) declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health last year arguing that they have witnessed “soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality” among youth that will have long-term negative impacts on them, their families, and their communities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021, para. 3). The U.S. Surgeon General responded by issuing an advisory, explaining that the pandemic exacerbated challenges already faced by America’s most vulnerable youth (Health and Human Services, 2021). He argued that the pandemic has most deeply affected

those who were vulnerable to begin with, such as youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas, youth in immigrant households, youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, and homeless youth. (para. 5)

One would hope that schools would be a place of safety and support for marginalized youth during this particularly difficult time. However, it is apparent that not only are our schools

not meeting their increasing needs but actually serving as enforcers of systemic oppression. Youth of color report cultural erasure in curriculum and gatekeeping that keeps them from accessing important opportunities (e.g., Leath et al., 2021), while LGBTQ+ youth experience homophobia and prejudice daily in school (McGuire et al., 2010). One of the starkest examples of systemic oppression being enacted in schools is disproportionality in school discipline, which refers to the over-selection and over-sanctioning of students of color compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Gregory et al., 2010). Annually, 18% of Black boys and 10% of Black girls receive one or more out-of-school suspension, while only 5% of White boys and 2% of White girls do the same (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Victims of the discipline gap face greater risk of academic underachievement (Morris & Perry, 2016), increased likelihood of dropping out of school, and increased likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Hess, 2019), continuing the cycle of disadvantage. While shocking, this data barely scrapes the surface of the experiences and impacts of discrimination students of color experience in schools by the time they reach adolescence (e.g., Howard, 2008)—a reality that the pandemic has surfaced and exacerbated.

Between 2019 and 2020, the average student gained only 67% of math and 87% of reading learning as compared to what their peers would have learned in a typical year (Dorn et al., 2020). In schools that predominantly served students of color, the gain was only 59% and 77%, respectively. Chronic absenteeism affected 8 million students before the pandemic, and the number is now being estimated to be triple that, with even higher rates for marginalized youth (Blad, 2022). Even with school districts receiving billions for academic recovery, students from marginalized families are falling behind their more privileged peers and struggling to find the tutoring that would help them catch up in their classes (Jacobson, 2021). Even as the entire

country—and world—suffers with the pandemic, it is those who are already on the margins who are bearing the brunt.

Youth Transformation

While our marginalized youth are indeed experiencing unprecedented challenges, roadblocks, and violence against their mental and physical selves, they are not only still growing and learning, but many are actively fighting against the status quo. Indeed, on most metrics of civic efficacy and engagement, young women of color outpaced young White women and, in most cases, youth overall (Hayat et al., 2022). Young Black and Latina women were more likely to believe combating violence against people of color should be a priority for the country and to feel an urgency to do this work. So much so, these girls were also more likely to say they took concrete action for racial justice in 2020 (Hayat et al., 2020). From climate change to Black Lives Matter to mass shootings in schools, youth are on the front lines demanding change. According to Taft, for every Greta Thornburg and Malala Yousufzai, there are thousands more youth working for causes like racial and gender equality (McNulty, 2019). Taft states: “Children and youth are not on the sidelines. They are protagonists in the fight for their rights and their wellbeing” (para. 15). Whether we use the terms youth activism, dissent, or social justice, each contributes to what I consider *youth transformation*.

I conceptualize youth transformation as the envisioning, acting upon, and working to transform the world into a more equitable place: one in which safety, justice, and opportunities to thrive are valued human rights and therefore available to all. While similar to concepts like youth activism, I argue the uniqueness of youth transformation lies in its integration of adolescent development, social emotional learning, and critical socio-political development (SPD). Taken together, we can better understand all the components that lead to and make youth

transformation possible. Indeed, it is our task to not only understand how youth are accomplishing this, but to find ways to support them in this critical work.

To understand and support youth transformation, I suggest the following key elements. First, we must explore adolescent development, particularly the development of marginalized youth in America. To do so, I argue for the important of developmental differentiation and exploring the simultaneity of both the micro- and macrocontexts. Next, we will dig into equity-elaborated social and emotional learning (SEL), and how this elaboration of traditional forms of SEL creates opportunities to understand the mindsets and skills behind youth transformation. Finally, we will explore critical sociopolitical development (SPD), which I believe is one of the closest conceptualizations of youth transformation. Finally, in an overview of my three-paper dissertation, we will explore how each of these papers work together to add important understanding to youth transformation, including best practices in supporting its development.

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is typically understood to occur roughly between ages 10-18 (grades 5-12; Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Described often as the second sensitive developmental period, adolescence is a time of rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional changes (Crone & Dahl, 2012). Early-adolescence is the pivotal beginning of this developmental period, and typically lies between 5th and 8th grade (ages 10-14; Arnett, 2013). This period is marked with a great deal of biological, social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Biologically, early adolescents are experiencing the hormonal and physical changes of puberty. Enhanced cognitive abilities (e.g., abstract thinking) allow them to reflect more deeply on themselves and others (Weil et al., 2013), engage in more complex decision-making, and critically analyze the impact of their choices (Blakemore & Choudhry, 2006). As social relationships become increasingly important, early

adolescents explore not only their individual identities (e.g., personality), but their group identities (e.g., racial-ethnic groups; NASEM, 2019). With all these changes, youth also begin to explore their purpose, question how societies and institutions function, and note the unfairness and injustice occurring within those societies and institutions (Malin et al., 2014; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Developmental Differentiation. While some aspects of social and emotional development are expected to be the same across all youth, there is a great deal of racial, ethnic, and cultural variation. García Coll and colleagues (1996) were some of the first to offer alternatives to the deficit-based understanding of the development of youth of color, presenting a framework that not only acknowledged the universality of development, but highlighted the unique differences youth of color experience living and learning in the United States. They argue that development:

is largely a function of the dynamic interaction between the child and both proximal and distal ecologies. As such, understanding the normal developmental process of children of color requires more explicit attention to the unique ecological circumstances (e.g., the pervasive influence of racism) these children face. (García Coll et al., 1996, p. 1893)

Their model incorporates the context of youth of color and is made up of seven components: 1) social position variables (e.g., racial identity), 2) racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression, 3) segregation, 4) promoting and inhibiting environments, 5) adaptive culture, 6) child characteristics, and 7) family. García Coll and colleagues brought to the forefront the unique challenges facing minoritized youth *and* their unique strengths. For example, racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression are a collection of individual, interpersonal, and institutional acts of dehumanization and violence that youth can experience through inhibiting environments, such as schools functioning under oppressive paradigms (e.g., punitive control

and discipline practices). In response to this lived reality, families of these youth develop adaptive practices, including community care, support, and resistance.

It is this shift in focus and understanding that is crucial to this study for a few reasons. First, it is crucial to understand the contextual influences marginalized youth are developing within (more on that in the section below). Second, marginalized youth and their families have positive, adaptive responses to survive and thrive in this lived reality. Finally, it is those positive, adaptive responses that we as a field need to understand and include as strengths when trying to better understand and support marginalized youth.

Developmental Contexts. Many developmental psychologists rely on the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to understand developmental processes. Unfortunately, research often prioritizes the individual within their microcontext, ignoring the effects of the macrosystem (Rogers & Way, 2021). Onnie Rogers and colleagues (2021) proposed *m(ai)cro* context to continue García Coll and colleagues' call to address the influence of the macrosystem and microsystem. They argue that the *m(ai)cro* helps to “conceptualize the simultaneous and transactional macro-as-micro processes” in human development (2021, p. 270). Scholars have argued that to center individuals and microsystems in theory and practice obscures the ways in which the macrosystems such as the pandemic but also racism, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, and capitalism shape human development (e.g., Adams et al., 2019; Rogers & Way, 2018). Their call is for researchers to center not just the individual in their microcontext, but the larger systems they are developing within—to shed light on the ways the pandemic, racism, sexism and other forces are having very real impacts on youths' lives. To focus on the *m(ai)cro* allows us to not only acknowledge the lived reality of marginalized youth but helps us to better

understand how that lived reality fuels the desire to enact transformation—and therefore, how we can support this process through concrete practice and creating the right context.

Transformation Mechanisms

Social Emotional Learning. SEL is understood as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2022). Over two decades of research show that social and emotional skills are crucial for learning, positive development, and success in school and life (Jones & Kahn, 2017), and promote a range of other short- and long-term benefits for all students (Taylor et al., 2017). In Taylor and colleagues’ study, there were significant positive effects for all youth including those of marginalized identities (low-income, students of color). Unfortunately, the positive effects were lower than their White, higher-income peers. Indeed, recent scholarship raises the importance of not grouping marginalized youth in with their more privileged peers but shifting the lens to focus on their growth and wellbeing (Castro-Olivo, 2014).

García Coll and colleagues stated that developmental competencies have historically leaned on need to be adjusted to better suit youth of color:

Notions of competence also must be expanded to include a broader range of adaptive responses beyond the traditional areas of concern and to incorporate *additional and alternative abilities* [emphasis added], such as the child’s ability to function in two or more different cultures, to cope with racism, subtle and overt discrimination, and social and psychological segregation....Competency for children of color involves a wide range and multiple levels of abilities that are intertwined and cannot be defined by any one single index, indicator, or measure. (1996, p. 1907)

Indeed, while there are competencies that all youth benefit from possessing, youth of color have unique needs, priorities, and skills to survive and thrive in a country steeped in historical and contemporary racism. One way to do this is through equity-elaborated social emotional competencies.

Equity-Elaborated SEL. Equity-elaborated SEL is the elaboration or expansion of social emotional learning that attempts to better reflect, value, and support the development of skills and wellbeing of youth of color. Rather than ignoring systemic racism or adopting a color-evasive stance, equity-elaborated SEL actively engages with the systemic issues and the way they show up in youths' lives.

One of the most promising equity-elaborations is Transformative Social Emotional Learning (TSEL). (Note: I use the term "equity-elaborated SEL" as a reference to Jagers and colleagues' [2018] revisions to traditional SEL competencies via Transformative SEL.) Jagers and colleagues (2019, p. 163) explain: "The concept of *transformative* SEL is a means to better articulate the potential of SEL to mitigate the educational, social, and economic inequities that derive from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally." This mitigation is made possible through the expansion of traditional social-emotional learning competencies (as García Coll and colleagues required) to gain insight into some of the assets that students develop as they adapt to their lived reality. While the five categories stay the same (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making), they each have equity elaborations. Self-awareness, which includes "understanding one's emotions, personal and social identities, goals, and values" (Jagers et al., 2019; p. 167), was expanded to also include recognizing bias and understanding personal and collective histories and identities. Self-management is no longer just about the skills and

ability to regulate emotions and behaviors, but now includes agency and the ability to address personal and community challenges. Social awareness includes empathy, but equitable empathy requires “the critical historical grounding to take the perspective of those with the same and different backgrounds and cultures” (p. 167). Relationship skills prioritizes the need to connect and work collaboratively with others of different backgrounds, and responsible decision making requires caring and constructive choices that support personal and collective health and wellbeing (as opposed to an individualistic focus). Jagers and colleagues (2019) explained that the expression of these competencies can be seen in four main outcomes: identity, agency, belonging, and engagement. This process of equity-elaboration has shifted social and emotional competencies to better reflect the unique needs and skills of marginalized youth and to create contexts in which students can flourish.

Critical Sociopolitical Development. Critical sociopolitical development (SPD) is defined as “efforts to influence or transform communities and societal systems to be more equitable and just” (Anyiwo et al., 2020). According to Watts and Flanagan (2007), includes three components: critical reflection (or critical social analysis), political self-efficacy, and critical action. According to Watts and colleagues (2011), critical reflection is defined as “social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities, such as social, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities that constrain well-being and human agency” while political self-efficacy is one’s own belief in their ability to effect sociopolitical change. Critical action refers to individual or collective action taken to change injustice in society and includes a broad view of activism (pp. 46-47).

A large body of research has found that high levels of sociopolitical development are predictive in marginalized adolescents of several key outcomes including resilience and wellness

(Ginwright, 2010; O’Leary & Romero, 2011), academic achievement (Cammarota, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2017), enrollment in higher education (Rogers & Terriquez, 2013), professional aspirations (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008), and civic and political engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts et al., 2011). Following the proposal of Arizona’s Senate Bill 1108, the “anti-ethnic studies bill,” O’Leary and Romero (2011) found that Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicano/a students were experiencing high levels of stress due to the bill. Those who actively engaged through learning more, discussing it with family and friends, and partaking in activism like petitions or rallies maintained high self-esteem, even with these increased levels of stress. Together, equity-elaborated SEL and critical SPD offer a holistic understanding of youth transformation.

Dissertation Overview

The three papers of my dissertation contribute to a body of work striving to identify answers to these three youth transformation questions: 1. How are children and youth experiencing a world rife with inequality and injustice? 2. What skills do they have and need to not only navigate but dismantle these oppressive systems? 3. How can we as educators support them in navigating and dismantling these oppressive systems? I address these question in three papers that describe students’ perspectives of what they can and indeed doing. In paper one, we explore civic efficacy: *I can and should make a difference*. Paper two explores empathy: *I can see and respond to the humanity of others*. Paper three explores the skills contributing to critical reflection: *I can see the world as it is and hope for something better*. I provide an overview of each of the three papers and how they address these three questions and therefore provide insight into youth transformation below.

Paper 1. In paper 1, *Empowering Community-Changers: Developing Civic Efficacy in Elementary Classrooms*, I examined the effects of two types of engagement (behavioral and social) and classroom supportiveness on the development of civic efficacy for 4th graders in science classrooms. This study enrolled 815 students (48% female) across 39 classrooms including 31 fourth-grade teachers at 25 schools in a large urban school district in the South Central U.S. 19.7% were English Learners, and 47.96% were economically-disadvantaged. The sample was ethnically diverse; 36.2% Black / African-American, 34.9% White, 23.1% Latine / Hispanic, 6.2% Asian, 0.5% American Indian, and 0.3% Pacific Islander. In this study, civic efficacy was defined as students' belief that children are not only capable of making a difference in their community but also feel a responsibility to do so. Using stepwise regression, we discovered that while behavioral engagement and classroom supportiveness did predict civic efficacy, it was social engagement that accounted for the greatest amount of variance. This allowed us to conclude that classroom environments and practices that offer opportunities social engagement with others contribute to students' development of civic efficacy.

By focusing on the civic efficacy of children, this paper pushed us to see children as young as 4th graders (pre-adolescents) as active change agents. It showed us that not only do these children see the problems in their community, but with the right support (i.e., providing a supportive classroom and opportunities to engage socially), they can imagine and enact solutions. Perhaps most importantly, this paper helped us to understand the importance of self-belief in pursuing transformation.

Paper 2. In Paper 2, *"I Stood by Her Side": A Qualitative Exploration of Empathy in Two Middle Schools*, I aimed to build our understanding of not only how empathy is developed in early adolescence, but what challenges youth face in practicing empathy in their daily lives. I

used a series of semi-structured interviews with 16 sixth grade students and conducted constructivist grounded theory analysis. Seven identified as white females, five as white males, one as white non-binary, one as a Latino male, one as an Asian female, and one as a Black female. They each attended one of two public schools in a small Northeastern city. For the components that make up empathy, there were two major themes: recognition and response. Challenges to practicing empathy included emotional expression, relational distance, boundaries, peer pressure, and listening non-judgmentally. Findings allowed us to conclude that for empathy to function as a tool for equity, students first need safe, supportive, and affirming school environments where empathy is the norm, not the exception. Students also need explicit support in developing the interrelated skills required for empathy and understanding inequality and systemic oppression and their role in reimagining a better world.

By focusing on the experience of empathy in middle schools, this paper helped us to see that empathy can indeed be used as a tool for transformation. Youth were able to identify the critical components of empathy—not only recognizing another but responding to their humanity in a prosocial way. They also pushed our understanding of how better to support their development of empathy by explaining the barriers that prevent them and their peers from practicing empathy. Additionally, this study helped uncover that educators can help youth overcome barriers and create a school and classroom culture that is foundational for equitable empathy to occur.

Paper 3. For Paper 3, *“There’s a Lot of Things to Fix in The World”*: *Social and Emotional Competencies and Critical Reflection in Middle School*, we aimed to explore adolescent student self-perceptions of their social and emotional competencies (SECs or SE competencies) and the relationship between these and critical reflection, the first step of critical

consciousness. Participants were selected via purposive sampling using a two-phase process. Fifteen student interview participants included seven 5th graders, five 6th graders, one 7th grader, and two 8th graders. One self-identified as male, twelve as female, and two as questioning. Ten of these students identified as Latine, three as mixed race, and two as White / Arab. When asked about their SE strengths and areas of growth, students identified *emotions* (73%), *relationships* (73%), *problem solving* (67%), and *empathy* (60%). When asked what problems they would like to fix in the world, students identified *ending bullying* (33%), *ending COVID-19* (27%), *ending injustice* (20%), *ending violence and hate* (20%), *expanding and protecting human rights* (20%), and *other* (13%). Closer analysis revealed that all students shared a critical reflection theme that aspired to end the suffering of others; 53% focused on a *global* level and 33% on the *local* level.

By relying on student self-reflection to report on SE competencies, this paper shed light on important leverage points for powerful SEL support and intervention in the middle school years. By connecting these competencies to the outcome of critical reflection, we helped contribute to the ways in which educators can support the development of critical reflection and, in doing so, help empower youth to envision a transformed world.

Significance

Youth transformation is hope, agency, and change. It conceptualizes the power and potential of youth to see the world as it is, imagine the world as it could be, and to transform it. This three-paper dissertation combines adolescent development, social emotional learning, and sociopolitical development with equity. It draws a line through these related but different fields, creating a new and important understanding of what is occurring and what, if harnessed widely, could shake the skies. Perhaps most importantly, it contributes to practice and policy: offering

concrete ways in which we can better support our youth as they navigate and change society for the better.

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Empowering Community-Changers: Developing Civic Efficacy in Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of behavioral and social engagement and classroom supportiveness on the development of civic efficacy in fourth-grade science classrooms. We define civic efficacy as children and youth's beliefs that they are not only capable of making a difference in their community but feel a responsibility to do so. This study enrolled 815 students (48% female) across 39 classrooms including 31 fourth-grade teachers at 25 schools in a large urban school district in the South Central U.S. Stepwise regression showed that behavioral engagement, social engagement, and classroom supportiveness in science class all positively predicted civic efficacy, and social engagement accounted for the greatest amount of variance in civic efficacy. Findings suggests that social engagement is a stronger driver of civic efficacy than behavioral engagement and classroom supportiveness, pointing to the importance of collaboration and teamwork in the science classroom. We discuss implications for elementary classroom practices.

Keywords: civic efficacy; engagement in science; behavioral engagement; social engagement; classroom supportiveness

Empowering Community-Changers: Developing Civic Efficacy in Elementary Classrooms

Concurrent pandemics of COVID-19, racism, the climate crisis, and internal and external threats to the United States' democracy have brought civic action to the fore of the national consciousness. These threats have deepened the value and urgency of civic learning, including the development of civic efficacy. Civic efficacy is a transformative social and emotional learning (SEL) competency that can be understood as the “cognitive belief that one can make a difference in one’s community” (Mitra & Serriere, 2012, p. 748). Bandura, the originator of the concept of efficacy, notes that addressing great social problems requires people “willing to endure in pursuits strewn with obstacles and uncertainties,” who will “persevere against tough odds” (Heald, 2017, p. 10). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine necessary social change without the presence of civic efficacy.

Unfortunately, opportunities to develop civic efficacy are not only limited but inequitably distributed. In a national survey, less than one-third of youth (29%) reported that they often used their learning for real-world problem solving in the past year (Levy & Sidhu, 2013). Moreover, there are persistent and increasing racial and socioeconomic disparities in civic engagement that speak to systemic causes (Levinson, 2010; Schlozman et al., 2012; Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012). Economically marginalized youth of color are less likely to have access to the civics learning that would begin to address the inequities they face (Gould et al., 2011).

Further contributing to the gaps in civic efficacy is the limited understanding of *how* to support youth’s development of this crucial belief. One limitation is the curricular focus on social studies. While social studies curricula explicitly address civic education, the issues facing our youth are multidisciplinary and complex, requiring transferable skill development. Exploration of civic learning in other subjects, such as science, offers an opportunity to hone

students' skills in a new way. Many children and youth care deeply about topics such as air quality, water quality and wildlife (Chanse et al., 2017; Merritt et al., 2021); scientific investigations exploring these topics can be an entry point for the development of civic beliefs and engagement.

While there is a great deal of literature on strategies for fostering civic engagement (e.g., Angell, 2004; Rubin & Jones, 2007), little research has explored the development of civic efficacy (e.g., Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Rivas-Drake et al., 2021). When a student has high civic efficacy, they believe their voice, knowledge, and action can make a difference and therefore, they act (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Supporting students in the development of this belief may have profoundly positive effects on their future civic engagement and action. Multiple studies have shown strong association with positive developmental outcomes, including higher educational plans and aspirations, grade point averages, academic self-esteem, intrinsic motivation toward schoolwork, and overall wellbeing (e.g., Johnson et al., 1998; Wray-Lake et al., 2017). One review indicated that civically engaged youth tend to have an increased sense of their own competencies, be more internally driven to get involved in prosocial activities, and have higher self-esteem (Yates & Youniss, 1996). They were also more likely to have a higher internal locus of control and show greater comfort in solving social and interpersonal problem. Another study found that adolescent civic engagement is related to higher life satisfaction, civic participation, and educational attainment for youth of color, while reducing risks of involvement with the prison system (Chan et al., 2014).

Given the importance of civic learning and development in adolescence and early adulthood, the National Academy of Education (NAEd) calls for research to help better understand civic development in childhood (Lee et al., 2021). Younger children demonstrate

knowledge of political events, and thus it is suggested that civic development begins prior to adolescence (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Patterson et al., 2019). In fact, some scholars suggest that the “window of wonder” is often ignored, and that “the early grades represent a critical opportunity to lay a foundation upon which civic knowledge, skills and dispositions can grow” (Chi et al., 2006, p. 5; Serriere et al., 2011). Indeed, it is important to understand what growth and learning needs to occur before this period to better set up students for success.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013, p. 6),

Now more than ever, students need the intellectual power to recognize societal problems; ask good questions and develop robust investigations into them; consider possible solutions and consequences; separate evidence-based claims from parochial opinions; and communicate and act upon what they learn.

Not only is it the right of children and youth to take part, be informed, and be involved in their communities and world, but it is crucial to the future of our country and world to support their development of civic efficacy. By knowing more about how we can support them, we are fulfilling the promise Dewey made in the first half of the 20th century: schools are not meant to simply teach students facts, but to prepare them to be active citizens of the world (1916). This study, by focusing on the classroom experiences that contribute to the development of civic efficacy in 4th grade science classrooms, offers a crucial step in this direction.

Engagement in Science

Engagement in learning forecasts academic success (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015; Sinatra et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016). Unfortunately, research shows a steady decline in students’ engagement, beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school (Wigfield et al., 2006). These declines in engagement raise important questions for schools striving to create meaningful learning experiences. Studies have uncovered a multitude of pedagogies that foster student engagement, from inquiry-based and cooperative (e.g., Barron &

Darling-Hammond, 2008) to culturally relevant and responsive learning (e.g., Museus & Yi, 2015).

While engagement is a crucial outcome in and of itself, it is also one of the key factors potentially contributing to civic efficacy. Science class, in particular, offers a unique academic setting in which to support this engagement. The integration of science and civics into classrooms can lead to improved student engagement in both areas (Condon & Wichowsky, 2018). Science classes lend themselves well to civic efficacy development as they tend to involve more inquiry-based approaches and hands-on learning, which in turn sets the stage for more mastery experiences and vicarious and social learning—crucial ingredients for developing efficacy of any kind (Bandura, 2000; Bartos & Lederman, 2014; Sandoval, 2005).

According to Edgerton and Schulman, the type of engagement matters: Students can be engaged in a range of effective practices and still not be learning with understanding; we know that students can be learning with understanding and still not be acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are related to effective citizenship. (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002, p. 3)

Science engagement is comprised of five interrelated categories, including behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic, and social (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015; Sinatra et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016). Social and behavioral engagement are important factors in this study. We define behavioral engagement as student participation, effort, attention, and persistence (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2016). It includes behaviors such as trying hard and listening carefully. Social engagement, sometimes referred to as “task-related interaction,” is defined as the quality of prosocial interactions during instruction, including whether students help other students learn and share their ideas with other students in class (Patrick et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). This form of engagement includes behaviors such as answering questions, explaining content, and helping their classmates. This form of engagement aligns with both Piagetian (De Lisi &

Golbeck, 1999) and sociocultural theories (Hogan & Tudge, 1999) of cognitive development, focusing on the critical role of social interactions in learning.

A point of note is that it is often easier to create conditions for behavioral engagement in the classroom, while it requires a more complex approach to instruction to create opportunities for social engagement. Behavioral engagement may be evident in teacher-centered or learner-centered environments, while social engagement is much more likely to be present in learned-centered environments. The difference in these conditions raises an important question: is behavioral engagement (essentially, participation in class) enough to produce civic efficacy? Or do teachers need to set up their science classrooms in ways that give students an opportunity to engage with one another in meaningful ways to support the development of civic efficacy? While behavioral engagement is a crucial requirement for individual student success in the science classroom, social engagement speaks to the need of teamwork and community-based action. Accordingly, behavioral engagement measures an individual's focus and persistence and social engagement measures their ability to focus outward and engage with their peers. We hypothesize these two forms of engagement play distinct and essential roles in the development of civic efficacy, but that social engagement will be more important to the development of civic efficacy.

Classroom Supportiveness

Researchers have in recent decades shifted away from focusing solely on student-level factors to explain engagement and have instead begun to focus on context (e.g., Patrick et al., 2007). The NAEd stated the importance of school context: "Students are motivated to learn in an environment where they feel emotionally safe and valued (by adults or by each other), and where they are supported to engage in authentic and meaningful ways" (2021, p. 279). According to Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory, schools and other settings that promote caring

relationships, positive connections, and that build competence, confidence, and character increase students' positive contributions to community (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005).

For this study, we define supportive classrooms as caring and supportive interpersonal relationships, the presence of common goals, and a sense of belonging (Battistich et al., 1997). This includes perceptions of community care and a culture of kindness and respect. Supportive classrooms such as these have innumerable benefits, including supporting the development of civic efficacy (Serriere, 2013). This development is cultivated in environments that include physical and psychological safety, opportunities to belong, supportive relationships with adults, appropriate structure and boundaries for youth, skill development opportunities, and support for efficacy and self-esteem (Benson, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The NAEEd reported specific ways in which this is accomplished, including discourse: engaging students through pairs and small groups and setting norms for respectful discussion (Lee et al., 2021). According to Johnson et al. (2010), this and other forms of collaboration can benefit students' social-emotional well-being by reducing anxiety, improving self-esteem, and promoting positive feelings toward classmates. Further benefits include a sense of collective efficacy. Recently, a study by Gallay and colleagues (2020) described how characteristics of effective groups (e.g., mutual respect, responsibility, and communication) can cultivate students' support for the environmental commons.

Development of Civic Efficacy

As defined earlier, civic efficacy is a single component of youth development and is defined as not only the belief that one can make a difference in the world, but the feeling of responsibility to do so (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). The construct of efficacy stems from a social-

cognitive psychology perspective that an individual internalizes a belief that they can make a difference to others and to the world and that this belief can be measured (Bandura, 2000; Pajares, 1996). Civic efficacy is an outcome often assessed to gauge the effectiveness of civic education initiatives (e.g., Conway et al., 2009).

According to Mitra and Serriere (2012), civic efficacy is developed through two main components: social consciousness and social responsibility. Social consciousness is defined as the awareness of needs in the greater community. This can start as awareness of classmates and expand to a school or neighborhood. Social responsibility refers to a shift from simple awareness to the feeling of responsibility to address a need of that community. In their study, these two concepts came together for the students, providing a eureka moment when they realized they could indeed make a difference in their school (i.e., civic efficacy).

According to Mayes' and colleagues (2016) study of a 5th grade classroom, civic efficacy was developed through opportunities to practice skills within the microcosm of the classrooms. This included class discussions where student were active agents of change, and answering questions posted on the walls such as "what's going on, why do I care, who is affected?" Students helped to co-create the classroom space and had a year-long civic project through which they practiced extending their skills outside the classroom.

Civic efficacy is highly complex because not only does it require social consciousness, social responsibility, and practice, but also the development of social-emotional skills. Jagers and colleagues (2019) contribute to our understanding of the complex developmental process of civic efficacy by housing it under the SEL competency self-management. Competence in self-management is described as requiring "skills and attitudes that facilitate the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors," including the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control

impulses through problem-focused coping, and perseverance (p. 167). As discussed above, these components coalesce to support students in their agency in addressing challenges and achieving both personal and collective goals. While primarily aligned with self-management, civic efficacy, especially when understood as collective, requires other competencies as well, including relationship skills. Relationship skills include clear communication, active listening, and working collaboratively; all of which are crucial to community change.

The Current Study

In this study, we examine the roles behavioral and social engagement and classroom supportiveness contributing to civic efficacy in 4th grade science classrooms. Our research questions are as follows: 1) To what extent does behavioral engagement contribute to children's development of civic efficacy? 2) To what extent does social engagement contribute to civic efficacy, over and above behavioral engagement? 3) To what extent does classroom supportiveness contribute to civic efficacy, over and above a students' behavioral or social engagement? We hypothesize that, due to the critical learning, skills, and beliefs required, all three of these factors will play a unique role in the development of civic efficacy.

This study uses data collected as a part of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of Connect Science, a project-based learning curriculum designed to support instruction in Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) in a way that integrates social and emotional skills and service-learning. All classrooms were in a district that was increasingly striving toward state science standards that closely resembled the NGSS, but most classrooms were early in implementation. Fourth grade teachers from a large school district were assigned randomly into the intervention versus waitlist control condition for a study of Connect Science. In both intervention and control conditions, the instruction focused on the use of different resources for energy production, and

how energy production impacts the environment. The intervention group teachers received materials and professional development on Connect Science, a 12-week project-based learning unit for upper elementary students. In Connect Science, teachers and students explore topics of energy and natural resources using NGSS-aligned lessons. Teachers guide student learning on what it means to be an engaged citizen and on the social and collaborative skills needed to take action in the community. The unit culminates in a service-learning experience related to energy use focused on changing policy (e.g., a school policy on energy use), educating others (e.g., an energy fair) or taking direct action (e.g., making commitments to using less electricity). Results comparing intervention and control conditions on teacher and student outcomes are published elsewhere (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2021). The purpose of this paper is to use the full sample of fourth grade teachers and their students to understand processes that explain the association between engagement, classroom supportiveness, and civic efficacy.

Method

Participants

IRB approval was obtained from the University of Virginia (protocol number 2611). The study enrolled 815 students across 39 classrooms including 31 fourth-grade teachers at 25 schools in a large urban school district in the South Central United States. Teachers and therefore classrooms were randomly selected into intervention versus waitlist control groups. Students in the 39 classrooms were invited to participate resulting in a sample of 425 boys (52%) and 390 girls based on student self-identification. On average, 24.2% of 4th graders were “proficient” in science, 19.7% were English Learners, and 47.96% were economically-disadvantaged. The sample was ethnically diverse; 36.2% Black / African-American, 34.9% White, 23.1% Latine / Hispanic, 6.2% Asian, 0.5% American Indian, and 0.3% Pacific Islander.

Of the 31 teachers, 28 (90%) self-identified as female, 17 (55%) were in the intervention group, 81% had master's degrees, and 85% reported yes to having professional development in SEL in the last three years.

Procedures

Data were collected in 2018, before, during, and after the Connect Science intervention and at corresponding times as the waitlist classrooms engaged in the energy unit in science. (See Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2021 for a full description.) Data were gathered from three sources: (a) school-level district data, (b) teacher-report surveys, and (c) student-report surveys. District data were received from the Office for Research and Evaluation. For teacher-report and student-report surveys, three data collection windows were established. Window 1 occurred during a 3-week period prior to intervention for the intervention group and at the same time for the control group. Window 2 corresponded to the program midpoint (8-10 weeks into the year), during which behavioral engagement, social engagement, and class supportiveness were reported. Window 3 occurred at the endpoint (14-22 weeks after completing CS or the energy unit); civic efficacy was reported at this time. Survey collection windows matched across intervention and control groups.

Measures

District data. School-level demographics were ascertained from district data resulting in values indicating the percentage of English Language Learners (ELL %) and economically disadvantaged (ED %) students at each school. Students were designated the economic disadvantage category via the district as members of households receiving federal assistance (e.g., SNAP, TANF).

Teacher data. Teachers reported on education (master's) and training (Recent SEL PD) in Window 1. SEL professional development was considered recent and recorded if it was completed within the past three years.

Behavioral engagement in science. Students reported on their *behavioral engagement* using a five-item measure asking questions such as "I pay attention in science class" and "I work as hard as I can in science class" which they rated on a four-point scale (1 = no, not at all true to 4 = yes, very true) (Skinner et al., 2008). These items were found to be reliable ($\alpha = .72$).

Social engagement in science. Students reported on their *social engagement* using a five-item measure asking questions such as "In science class I help other kids learn" and "I share my ideas and materials with other kids in science" which they rated on a four-point scale (1 = no, not at all true to 5 = yes, very true) (Patrick et al., 2007). These items were found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .83$).

Class supportiveness. Students reported on overall *class supportiveness* using a 14-item measure asking questions such as "Students in my class work together to solve problems" and "Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends" which they rated on a four-point scale (1 = disagree a lot to 4 = agree a lot), (Binfet et al., 2016). These items were found to be acceptable ($\alpha = .66$).

Civic efficacy. *Civic efficacy* was a composite measure, mirroring the complexity of the concept. Students reported on their *civic skills* using a three-item measure asking questions such as "How well can you communicate your ideas about something you think is important to other people?" and "How well can you work on a team with other students to make decisions about a school or community problem?" which they rated on a four-point scale (1 = not at all to 4 = very well) (Center for Youth and Communities, 2011). To measure *efficacy*, students completed a

four-item measure with questions such as, “I can make a difference in my community” and “I feel responsible for helping others” which they rated from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree (Caswell, et al., 2011). The two scales were highly collinear; scale validation analyses showed better model fit by treating them as a single scale ($\alpha = .67$).

Data Analysis Plan

Standard assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and normality were assessed through visual examination of histograms, residual plots, and quantile–quantile (Q–Q) plots of the residuals produced by the component regression models. Consistent with the assumption of linearity, standardized residual values appeared uncorrelated with standardized predicted values of the outcomes as evidenced by a lack of curvature in the plots. Supporting the assumption of homoscedasticity, standardized residual values were equally distributed across predicted values of the outcomes. Q–Q plots demonstrated normal distribution of the residuals. Finally, histograms revealed that individual variables were also normally distributed. Although the residuals for behavioral engagement, social engagement, classroom supportiveness, and civic efficacy showed evidence of skewness, none of the residual distributions were sufficiently non-normal to warrant concern about the assumption of normality.

Associations among the three predictor variables (behavioral engagement, social engagement, and classroom supportiveness), the outcome (civic efficacy), and the covariates were examined to identify patterns of correlations. To test the primary hypotheses, we conducted four-step hierarchical regression models that accounted for the nesting of students within classrooms, as described below. Step One included only covariates (e.g., school ELL %, school ED %, CS condition, gender, master’s degree, and recent SEL PD) and the outcome, civic efficacy, providing a baseline model. Step Two added the predictor behavioral engagement,

followed by social engagement (Step Three), and classroom supportiveness (Step Four).

Incremental changes in the explained variance for each step were computed.

In the analyses described above, the student-level predictors of behavioral engagement, social engagement, and classroom supportiveness were group-mean centered. All models were estimated through R version 4.0.3. Standard error adjustments for the nesting of students within classrooms was facilitated through robust cluster standard errors in the “miceadds” package. All reported coefficients are reported in unstandardized form and estimates of effect sizes are presented as the amount of variance accounted for at various steps of the model (ΔR^2). No covariates had any missing data. The outcomes variable, civic efficacy, was missing 16.2% of its data, while the predictors were missing approximately 13% of their data (12.5% for behavioral engagement, 13.0% for social engagement, and 13.1% for classroom supportiveness). Analyses (e.g., “missing_pattern”) suggested that data were missing completely at random. Coefficients were obtained using multiple imputation (MI). Multiple imputation creates several versions of the data set, each of which contains different estimates of the missing values. The regression analysis is then performed with each of the data sets, and the estimates and standard errors are pooled into a single result (Enders, 2017). We employed 20 imputations in estimating our models. Results for the regression analyses can be found in Table 3.

Results

Unadjusted descriptive statistics for all investigated variables can be found in Table 1. The means and standard deviation for the dependent variable shows that on average, students reported civic efficacy on the high end of the scale (i.e., 3.28 on a 1 to 4 scale). For social engagement, on average, students were near the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 3.72 on a 1-5 scale), whereas for behavioral engagement and classroom supportiveness, students averaged at or

slightly above a value of 3.5 on the 4-point scale. The patterns of correlation show moderate correlations between types of engagement (.55) and small correlations between types of engagement and classroom supportiveness (ranging from .37 to .38). The correlations also show that civic efficacy is positively associated with social engagement, behavioral engagement, and classroom supportiveness (.47, .37, and .32 respectively). Further, although the correlations were small (.13 to .08), civic efficacy was greater for students in schools with higher percentages of ELL students, for female students, for the CS condition, and in classrooms with teachers with a master's degree. (See Table 2).

Step one of the hierarchical regression analyses revealed that students attending a school with a higher percentage of English Language Learners reported higher levels of civic efficacy ($p < .05$), while students at schools with a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students reported lower civic efficacy ($p < .01$). If teachers reported they held attended recent PD in SEL, their students reported higher civic efficacy ($p < .01$). Female students were significantly more likely than their male classmates to rate themselves higher in civic efficacy ($p < .001$). The total variance accounted for (R^2) was .04.

Step Two of the hierarchical regression analysis revealed that higher behavioral engagement related significantly to higher civic efficacy ($p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .10$). At Step Three, social engagement was also significantly associated with civic efficacy in a positive direction ($p < .001$), explaining more variance than behavioral engagement alone ($\Delta R^2 = .07$). At Step Four, classroom supportiveness was also significantly and positively associated with civic efficacy ($p < .01$), explaining slightly more variance above and beyond the two types of engagement ($\Delta R^2 = .02$). The final model accounts for 23% of the total variance in civic efficacy.

Using the unstandardized betas allow us to understand the contribution of each variable on civic efficacy. A one-point increase in behavioral engagement was associated with a .12 increase in civic efficacy, controlling for social engagement and classroom supportiveness. A one-point increase in social engagement was associated with a .17 increase in civic efficacy, after controlling for behavioral engagement and classroom supportiveness. When controlling for both types of engagement, a one-point increase in classroom supportiveness was associated with a .08 increase in civic efficacy.

Results from the correlation analyses showed 30% overlap in variance between behavioral and social engagement. We decided to conduct exploratory analysis to examine whether one or the other type of engagement was a more important contributor to civic engagement. We reran the analyses, switching the order of behavioral and social engagement to size up the contribution of each variable on its own on civic efficacy. Based on the findings shown in Table 3, behavioral engagement (with covariates) contributes 13% of the variance and social engagement contributes an additional 9% of variation. When we reversed the order of entry, we see that social engagement contributed 21% of the variance, but behavioral engagement added only an additional 1% of the variation beyond that which was attributable to social engagement. That finding suggests that social engagement is a stronger driver of civic efficacy than behavioral engagement, a point worthy of discussion.

Discussion

This study explored the classroom experiences that contribute to the development of civic efficacy in fourth grade science classrooms in an urban school district. Three main findings emerged. First, student perceptions of their own behavioral engagement were predictive of civic efficacy. Second, student perceptions of social engagement were predictive of civic efficacy,

above and beyond that of behavioral engagement. Third, classroom conditions mattered as well; students' perceptions of their classroom as a supportive learning space contributed to civic efficacy, over and above both forms of engagement.

For children and youth to experience civic efficacy, all three components are important. Students who perceived themselves as being behaviorally engaged in science reported working hard, listening carefully, and participating in class discussions. Behavioral engagement represents the most basic level engagement and can occur even in didactic, teacher-centered conditions. It requires self-regulation including management of attention and behavior but shows only slight resemblance to the skills needed to take action in the community. Students who perceived themselves as being socially engaged in science reported helping others with their work, sharing ideas and materials, and answering questions. Social engagement suggests a deeper level of engagement between students and the materials and experiences in science. For students to be socially engaged, teachers need to enact learner-centered science instruction that gives students opportunities to work together on a scientific issue. If students take up these opportunities, they help each other learn and share materials and ideas with others in science class, which involves cooperation, listening skills, and emotion regulation. These socially engaging experiences offer opportunities for deep level processing of science materials but also the collaborative problem solving that more closely resembles the activities needed to take action. Finally, it is crucial to note that a students' engagement reflects not only their individual attributes, but relational context as well. Students who perceived their classroom as being supportive reported a culture of helping one another, caring about one another, and being kind. Environments like these offer the necessary ingredients for practicing and fostering civic efficacy. Feelings of safety, connection, and community are necessary for any form of learning

to occur but may be especially those that push students to engage deeply with important issues. According to Hammond, it is the responsibility of educators to “create an environment that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing so it can relax, let go of any stress, and turn its attention to learning” (2015, p. 50). In such an environment, children and youth are able to safely develop the crucial skills of civic efficacy.

Now more than ever, teachers are constrained in the time they have and what they can offer in their classrooms. This raises the question as to whether both behavioral engagement or social engagement are equally important in predicting the development of civic efficacy. According to our findings, while behavioral engagement is necessary, it is insufficient in and of itself to promote civic efficacy. For that reason, the authors recommend a prioritization of social engagement. Additionally, it is likely that a classroom that promotes social engagement through opportunities to collaborate and engage with peers is also likely promoting a supportive environment.

This study contributes to the field in several ways. First, this research answered the call of civic efficacy scholars to highlight the importance of developing not only civic engagement, but civic efficacy (Jagers et al, 2019; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Serriere, 2013) in creating citizens who are ready to answer the call of our ever-changing world. The work helps close the gap in understanding not only what contributes to the development of civic efficacy, but within an elementary school science classroom (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; NAEEd, 2021; Rivas-Drake et al., 2021).

Additionally, this study contributes to our understanding of the ways in which the integration of NGSS with service-learning and SEL, can impact the development of civic efficacy. Most of the classrooms in this study were in the process of adopting the NGSS

Standards and shifting their curriculum to match these standards. The NGSS Science and Engineering Practices link in interesting ways to social engagement and the importance of supportiveness in the classroom. For instance, *Asking Questions* involves understanding that science is about discovering new information, not just learning what is always known (NGSS, 2012). Learning how to ask effective scientific questions takes practice and students are much more likely to develop these skills in classrooms where they feel supported to take intellectual risks. *Planning and Carrying out Investigations* requires routines and procedures in the classrooms so students can work individually or in groups; when successful, engagement in these practices contributes to social engagement. *Engaging in Arguments from Evidence* often takes the form of reasoning about scientific evidence with others in class. Engaging in this practice offers opportunities for social engagement. The practice is even more likely to flourish in socially supportive contexts.

Finally, the racial-ethnic and socio-economic diversity of our sample provides a compelling example of how to support marginalized youth in the development of civic efficacy. Too often, the experience, knowledge, interests, and skills of marginalized students are not honored, welcomed, or even recognized in the classroom (Jagers et al., 2019). As mentioned previously, economically marginalized children and youth of color are less likely than their white peers to receive civics learning that would help them to address injustices (Gould et al., 2011). If, however, civic efficacy was prioritized through an engaging, meaningful, and supportive science class, these students would have access to crucial civic efficacy learning and development.

As we look ahead to the future of education, we need to prepare students with knowledge and skills that can be applied to the practical and pressing challenges that surround them. The crises that youth are facing—climate change, racism, inequitable systems, and threats to

democracy—contribute to a rising mental health crisis, especially for youth deeply affected by those systems (e.g., Priest et al., 2019). While only part of the needed solution, one of the most important ways we can support youth is by supporting their feelings of empowerment and being able to impact change (e.g., Sanson et al., 2019; Suyemoto et al., 2022). These pressing challenges create opportunities for teachers and students to design and implement solutions together.

Limitations

There are two limitations that require mention. First, without other individual identity markers beyond gender, our analysis was limited. This prevented us from conducting intersectional analysis that speaks to the unique needs of marginalized youth, including but not limited to students of color, those who are economically-disadvantaged, or those with dis/abilities. While our sample was diverse, it would be helpful to utilize these identity markers in the analysis. Second, the measures of behavioral and social engagement were student-reported measures and the internal consistency reliability of these measures was lower than expected. Additional data from teachers or classroom observations would have strengthened validity. Although student report-measures had disadvantages related to validity, the choice to use students as the source of data was a deliberate decision in order to emphasize student voice.

Implications

Teachers play an important role in engagement. Part of this work is creating an environment where there are as few barriers to engagement as possible (as explored above). According to Ross Greene, it's not that "kids do well if they want to," it's "kids do well if they can," (2008, p. 161). For teachers eager to support students' development of civic efficacy, we recommend that educators create opportunities for meaningful learning that fosters their

individual participation and social engagement with others. One way to accomplish this is to engage students in service-, project-based, or other whole-child learning experiences given research showing that hands-on, authentic, and relevant instruction increases engagement for all students (e.g., Kuo et al., 2018; Quint & Condliffe, 2018).

Classroom environments play an important role in students' development of civic efficacy. Educators can take important steps to help encourage students' behavioral and social engagement and feelings of classroom supportiveness. First, findings here match numerous studies have shown that feelings of safety, belonging, and social connection (e.g., classroom climate) are crucial to engagement in learning (e.g., Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Martin & Rimm-Kaufman, 2016). Teachers can prioritize building relationships with each of their students. By learning about their backgrounds, values, and interests, teachers can not only find similarities that help build genuine connection (Gehlbach et al., 2016) but learn more about what topics that can create genuine engagement in classroom material. Second, teachers can create a classroom culture of support, collaboration, and care. Co-creating community agreements, modeling and coaching prosocial behavior, and incorporating social emotional skills into the curriculum are great ways to equip students with the skills needed to contribute to a safe and affirming learning environment for all.

Classrooms and schools are complex, interconnected systems. We cannot expect teachers to take sole responsibility for creating classroom conditions conducive to the development of civic efficacy. To create the opportunities for all students to develop civic efficacy, teachers need to experience alignment and support from their school, administrators, state leaders, families, and community members. Providing funding, training, and readjusting limiting systems and structures are important first steps in making this crucial shift possible.

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Table 1*Descriptive Statistics for Variables*

Variables	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Range</i>
	<i>n = 815</i>	
Civic Efficacy	3.28 (.46)	1 - 4
Social Engagement	3.72 (.91)	1- 5
Behavioral Engagement	3.50 (.48)	1.4 - 4
Class Supportiveness	3.58 (.80)	1.08 - 5
English Language Learners (ELL) %	19.65% (16.12)	0.64 - 55.51%
Economically Disadvantaged (ED) %	47.96% (19.43)	7.1 - 79.05%

Table 2*Correlation Matrix for Key Variables (N = 815)*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Civic Eff.										
2. Social Eng.	.47**	--								
3. Behav. Eng.	.37**	.55**	--							
4. Class Supp.	.32**	.38**	.37**	--						
5. ELL %	.10**	-.01	-.02	.04	--					
6. ED %	-0.05	-0.11**	-0.06	-0.13**	0.45**	--				
7. Female	.13**	.08*	.08*	.02	.05	0.01	--			
8. CS Condition	.09*	-.01	-.05	-.07	.30**	-0.15**	.03	--		
9. Master's Deg.	.08*	.03	.07	.07	.21**	.13**	.05	.04	--	
10. Rec. SEL PD	.06	.09*	.07	-.06	-.21**	.13**	-.00	.08	.00	--

* $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed) ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed)

Table 3*Four Step Regression Model Results Predicting Civic Efficacy*

Variables	b (SE)	R ²	ΔR ²
Step 1			
ELL %	.00 (.00)*		
ED %	.00 (.00)**		
Female	.11 (.03)***		
CS Condition	.00 (.04)		
Master's Degree	.07 (.04)		
Recent SEL PD	.14 (.06)**	.04	
Step 2			
ELL %	.00 (.00)*		
ED %	.00 (.00)**		
Female	.09 (.03)**		
CS Condition	.00 (.04)		
Master's Degree	.07 (.04)		
Recent SEL PD	.14 (.05)**		
Behavioral Engagement	.32 (.05)***	.14	.10
Step 3			
ELL %	.00 (.00)*		
ED %	.00 (.00)**		
Female	.05 (.03)		
CS Condition	.00 (.05)		
Master's Degree	.08 (.04)		
Recent SEL PD	.14 (.06)*		
Behavioral Engagement	.14 (.05)**		
Social Engagement	.18 (.03)***	.21	.07
Step 4			
ELL %	.00 (.00)*		
ED %	.00 (.00)**		
Female	.05 (.03)		
CS Condition	.00 (.05)		
Master's Degree	.08 (.04)		
Recent SEL PD	.14 (.06)*		
Behavioral Engagement	.12 (.05)*		
Social Engagement	.17 (.03)***		
Class Supportiveness	.08 (.03)**	.23	.02

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .00$ Note: Values were rounded to two digits but the valence of the associations were determined from the full output.

“I Stood by Her Side”: A Qualitative Exploration of Empathy in Two Middle Schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to build our understanding of how empathy is developed in early adolescence, and what challenges youth face in practicing empathy in their lives. Through this analysis, we hoped to explore empathy's potential to function as a key building block of equity. Sixteen 6th graders participated. Seven identified as white females, five as white males, one as white non-binary, one as a Latino male, one as an Asian female, and one as a Black female. They each attended one of two public schools in a small Northeastern city. We used constructivist grounded theory to analyze the semi-structured interviews. We followed IRB protocols obtained from the University of Virginia (protocol number 2318) in order to protect our participants. Exploring the components of empathy, there were two major themes: *recognition* and *response*. Challenges to practicing empathy included emotional expression, relational distance, boundaries, peer pressure, and listening non-judgmentally. In order for empathy to function as a tool for equity, not only do students need safe, supportive, and affirming school environments where empathy is the norm, but explicit support in developing the skills required for empathy and understanding inequality and systemic oppression and their role in reimagining a better world.

Keywords: empathy, adolescence, adolescent development, equity, prosocial behavior, middle school

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The concurrent pandemics of racism, xenophobia, and COVID-19 have brought to the forefront of our national consciousness the depth of division and inequity in the United States. The country is more politically divided (e.g., Dimock & Wike, 2020), schools are more segregated (Orfield & Lee, 2007), and Americans are more distrustful of each other than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2019). Activist and scholar Antionette Carroll sees a key cause and cure: “The lack of empathy creates harm, creates trauma, and creates negative systemic impact. Just like an abundance of empathy creates safety, creates confidence, creates power, creates systemic impact” (Wilson, 2021, p. 223).

Empathy is defined as “the capacity to comprehend the minds of others, to feel emotions outside our own, and to respond with concern, kindness, and care to others’ suffering (Stern & Cassidy, 2018, p. 1). There are many definitions of empathy, but we chose this definition because of its holistic nature; it preserves both the meaning and importance of empathy. Existing work describes several types of empathy: a) cognitive empathy (often called perspective taking or mentalizing), b) affective empathy (experience sharing or empathic concern), and c) responsive prosocial behavior (sometimes referred to as empathy-related responding; Eisenberg, 2000). Empathy is a process through which individuals connect with and support one another. It is a necessary ingredient for interpersonal relationships just as it is crucial for the functioning of communities and greater society.

Empathy also has the potential to function as a key building block of equity. There is a series of existing studies that have found that empathy can reduce bias and discrimination against others (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2011). For instance, one study found empathy was associated with reduced anti-immigrant attitudes among children and youth (Miklikowska,

2018). In a highly diverse middle school, a short empathy intervention for teachers reduced discipline referrals by over 50% (Okonofua et al., 2016). These studies exhibit the ways in which empathy promotes equitable beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

To better understand the role empathy plays in equity, we must first understand how empathy is developed. Scholars believe that empathy begins in infancy through the child-caregiver relationship and continues throughout the lifetime. Adolescence is a particularly crucial period; both empathy and justice are key developmental tasks of this period (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006; Malin et al., 2014; NASEM, 2019). To truly harness the power of empathy for equity, we need to better understand the experiences of adolescents as they learn, practice, and receive empathy. Our study contributes to the field by providing an in-depth exploration of early adolescents' experiences of empathy, and the roadblocks that get in the way. Understanding youth's lived experiences of empathy is essential to open the door to teaching, learning, and practicing empathy for a more equitable world.

Literature Review

Importance of empathy

Individual benefits. Empathy's benefits are far-reaching. On the individual level, empathy supports stress management (Wagaman et al., 2015) and helps to prevent burnout (Sapolsky, 2004). As a result of our evolution as social mammals, empathy helps foster the social connection that supports well-being and health (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Hämmig, 2019; Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017). Indeed, loneliness, or a lack of social connection, carries with it mental and physical health risks, including increased risk of cardiovascular disease, depression, dementia, and early mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; 2015; Murthy, 2020). Empathy is critical for survival.

Societal benefits. Empathy is also crucial at the community and societal levels. It improves interpersonal decision making; facilitates ethical decision making and moral judgements and enhances prosocial and altruistic behavior (Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017). Empathy is a key component in relationship and community repair through restorative justice (e.g., Barton, 2003; Wallis, 2014). Empathy has also been found as an answer to refugee crises: following the second civil war that left Ivorian refugees fleeing to Liberia, researchers found that empathic concern increased while bias between different ethnic groups decreased, encouraging altruistic behavior such as hosting more refugees for longer, regardless of group membership (Hartman & Morse, 2015). The authors hypothesized that it was the exposure to violence the Liberians had experienced previously that increased their empathic capacity for Ivorian refugees fleeing similar violence in their own country.

Empathy promoting equity. Complementing findings in Liberia, there is a series of existing studies that have found that empathy can reduce bias and discrimination against others. Researchers discovered that perspective-taking reduces automatic racial bias in adults (Todd et al., 2011), while other research on intergroup contact in adults found that empathy is a crucial component that makes the outcomes of reduced prejudice, greater trust, and forgiveness of past transgressions possible (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Studies focusing on intergroup bias (Skinner & Meltzoff, 2019) and anti-immigrant attitudes (Miklikowska, 2018) among children and youth also found perspective-taking and empathic concern to be preventative in nature. In a school-based study, Wink and colleagues (2021) found that high teacher cognitive empathy was associated with more positive mindsets about student behavior, greater competence in handling problem behaviors, increased use of effective problem-solving strategies, greater relationship

closeness, and lower levels of job burnout (Wink et al., 2021). Taken together, these studies show the critical importance of empathy in motivating equitable beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Limits of empathy and equity. While many studies find a clear connection between empathy and equity, there is some disagreement among researchers about whether and by what mechanisms empathy may impact equitable behavior. On one hand, some researchers have referred to empathy as a “moral force” (Zaki, 2018) due to its “substantial implications for moral behavior” (Tangney et al., 2007). They have argued this status for three key reasons: 1) empathy to others’ distress often brings about feelings of concern for the other (Batson, 2009); 2) empathic concern often elicits behavior aimed at helping the other (Eisenberg & Miller; 1987), and; 3) feelings of empathy help inhibit aggression and other antisocial behaviors (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). On the other hand, some researchers have argued that while empathy and moral behavior are inextricably linked, the relationship is complex and too often oversimplified (e.g., Decety & Cowell, 2015). For instance, one study found that cognitive empathy and empathic concern predicted sensitivity to justice, while affective empathy did not (Decety & Yoder, 2016). Still others have found an “empathy gap,” or a difficulty empathizing with members of other racial groups (e.g., Cikara et al., 2011; Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2010; 2012). One study found that this gap is due to learned prejudice and bias (Chiao & Mathur, 2010), while another found that putting forth effort overcomes this gap (Schumann et al., 2014). The seemingly conflicting findings around empathy and its relationship with equity call for further investigation. One promising way is through a developmental lens.

Adolescent Development

While the groundwork for empathy is set during childhood, adolescence is a crucial developmental period for this and many other social-emotional skills that will serve that

individual and their communities for a lifetime. Adolescence is typically understood to occur roughly between ages 10-18, or grades 5-12 (e.g., Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Described often as the second sensitive developmental period, adolescence is a time of rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive changes (e.g., Crone & Dahl, 2012; NASEM, 2019). Adolescence is defined as the maturational period that begins at the onset of puberty and ends with a transition to adulthood. The onset of puberty occurs at different ages for different individuals, and the process varies greatly across racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, we focus primarily on sixth grade students to understand the experience and challenges of empathy during early adolescence.

Early-adolescence is the pivotal beginning of this developmental period. Young people explore their individual and group identities, expand social relationships, explore new interests, and become increasingly aware of systemic inequities (Malin et al., 2014; NASEM, 2019). Enhanced cognitive abilities allow them to reflect on themselves and others more deeply (Weil et al., 2013), engage in more complex decision-making, and critically analyze the impact of their choices (Blakemore & Choudhry, 2006). In short, improvements in abstract thinking and social emotional changes (e.g., increased emotion regulation abilities) promote empathy and prosocial tendencies (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

Development of empathy. Too often, literature on adolescents focuses on anti-bullying efforts (e.g., Evans et al., 2014). While an important topic, these studies focus on intervention in or prevention of negative behaviors and outcomes, not promotion of positive behaviors and outcomes. This is a great loss, considering that adolescents with higher empathy report more prosocial goals, high social competence, and less aggression (Eisenberg et al., 2009). They have more positive and supportive peer relationships, are liked by their peers, and are more likely to

help others. In fact, empathy and other skills even contribute to academic success (Brackett et al., 2011).

But it is not just the presence, but the way that empathy and prosocial behavior is developed in adolescence that has long-term effects on outcomes in adulthood, according to a study by Allemand and colleagues (2015). In a 23-year study, they analyzed not only the influence of adolescent empathy levels on adult outcomes, but the *change* in youth-reported empathy during adolescence. They found that both empathy level and changes in empathy in adolescence predicted prosocial behavior in adulthood. Youth with high empathy during adolescence in turn had high empathy in adulthood and reported more constructive communication patterns in their relationships. Those who saw the greatest increases of empathy in adolescence, felt the most socially integrated as adults. Finally, becoming less empathetic during adolescence was a serious risk factor for loneliness and its negative mental and physical health effects in adulthood.

Rather than focusing on *preventing* antisocial behavior, a number of studies instead focus on *promoting* prosocial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This approach opens up the positive potential of empathy development in adolescence. For example, Van der Graaff and colleagues (2018) explored empathy and prosocial behavior (e.g., response behavior) longitudinally in a large adolescent sample. Interestingly, they found that perspective taking only increased prosocial behavior indirectly through empathic concern. In other words, empathy-related responsive behavior (e.g., helping) occurred when not only perspective taking (e.g., cognitive empathy) but also empathic concern (e.g., affective empathy) were present. This speaks to the cruciality of focusing not only on the cognitive aspects of empathy, but the emotional, too.

Malin and colleagues (2014) focused on youth purpose from early adolescence through emerging adulthood. They defined purpose as having three components: intention (what they hope to accomplish), engagement (engaging with the goal), and beyond-the-self (what am I offering to the world?). The authors found that in early adolescence, youth identified their primary purpose to be empathy. For example, one student mentioned concern for suffering people, including teased classmates and homeless people. In middle adolescence, the primary purpose was still empathy, but it had developed into the role that they individually could play to help make a difference. For example, one student described volunteering at a daycare and the empathy she felt for the children based on her own experiences. She spoke about her desire to go into a career that allowed her to care for abused children. Interestingly, the authors found that in both developmental stages, it was through the support of adults that these students grew over time to learn better how to help those in need and fulfill their purpose.

Developmental supports. Social relationships among peers and caring adults are key to developing empathy. One way to measure the presence of these positive relationships is through school climate. Barr and Higgins-D'Alessandro (2007) explored empathy and prosocial behavior in schools with varying levels of positive school climate. Their findings demonstrated that positive social relationships between peers and with teachers were highly correlated not only with positive school climate, but also with empathy. Put simply, it is social relationships that make a school climate positive or negative, and it is through those same social relationships that empathy is cultivated. Interestingly, Barr and Higgins-D'Alessandro (2007) found that it is not just youth's relationships with adults, but also their relationships with peers that affect empathy development. Because normative changes in social relationships, social behaviors, and social values occur in tandem with increases in autonomy during adolescence, adolescents have greater

opportunities to show prosocial behaviors like empathy-related responding (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Other researchers who have looked more broadly at student socialization in elementary school classrooms have found that the social-emotional functioning of teachers and peers both influence relationships and interactions in the classroom, which are further associated with emotion-related student outcomes including social competence (Valiente et al., 2020). With regard to young adolescents, Kathryn Wentzel (2002) has similarly found that different dimensions of teacher behavior (i.e., fairness, negative feedback, high expectations) are associated with middle school students' prosocial behavior, further supporting a link between classroom-based relationships and student prosocial outcomes.

SEL curriculum. Social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum and programming is one of the most common ways to support empathy development in adolescence. SEL is understood as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2022). There is over two decades of rigorous research that demonstrates that well-implemented SEL programming promotes a broad range of short- and long-term benefits for students (e.g., Taylor et al., 2017). On average, students participating in SEL programs have better social skills than 76 percent of comparison-group students (Payton, et al., 2008). This, in turn, positively impacts the school culture at large. A meta-analysis found that students who received SEL skills instruction had improved attitudes and behaviors, including a greater motivation to learn, improved relationships with peers, a deeper school connection, and improved academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Curricular integration. One unique way to teach SEL and empathy is through curricular integration. There are a wide range of programs available, including Facing History and Ourselves and Sky Schools. The Listening Project (Way & Nelson, 2018) is one such program, designed in partnership between a middle school English teacher and two researchers at New York University, which aims to disrupt stereotypes by inciting curiosity and connection through transformative interviewing. By relying on semi-structured interviewing and the science of human connection, the program designers hoped that by helping students learn about others in meaningful ways, students would see and connect with others' full humanity. They supported students' abilities to "thickly engage with, and ask and answer questions of, each other and the world, build strong communities, and contribute to it in meaningful ways" (Way & Nelson, 2018, p. 276).

Through the process of interview training, practice, conducting their own interviews, and reporting on their findings, students reported a transformation in how they saw not only themselves, but those around them including but not limited to those they interviewed. They expressed feeling more connected to peers, teachers, and family members, being more interested in relationships and feelings, and experiencing more confidence in connecting and building relationships with others (Way & Nelson, 2018). While this exploratory study was not explicitly studying the development of empathy, the increases in listening skills and deeper connection identified by the researchers reflect skills and outcomes that are related to the practice and development of empathy.

While each of these studies has clear implications for morality, justice, and equity, there is still a great deal more to understand about the development of empathy and equity in adolescence. This brings us to the purpose of our study.

Current Study

In this qualitative study, we use a purposive sub-sample of two middle schools from the nine schools enrolled in the EL Education project, a quasi-experimental study comparing ethical character development in EL Education and control schools. The two schools (one EL Education [School A] and one control school [School B]) are located in a small city in the Northeastern U.S. and were selected based on three criteria. First, they display commitment to social, emotional and character development in their students as evidenced by commitment to social and emotional learning and the development of empathy and prosocial behavior. Second, both schools showed commitment to addressing issues of equity within their own community. Finally, due to a recent influx of Eastern African refugee families, both school communities were actively grappling with the best ways to serve and support these new students. These two schools offer a microcosm of society as a whole—highlighting the need of empathizing with those who have different identities, needs, and experiences from our own. Although this sample is drawn from a quasi-experimental study, the aim of the study presented herein was not to compare the two schools, but to use data from the two schools combined to understand the practice of empathy as it occurs in middle school classrooms.

This study utilizes a constructivist grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to provide one of the first explorations and conceptualizations of the experiences of empathy in early adolescence, and the challenges students face in practicing empathy. In this study, we ask one guiding research question: what do the student examples of empathy in two middle schools teach us about the components and challenges of practicing of empathy and its implications for equity?

Methods

Design

Due to the nature of the research question and the current gaps in the literature, a constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted, guided by the work of Charmaz (2014). The main features of constructivist grounded theory are: 1) the researchers are active ‘architects’ of a specific understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Willig, 2013); 2) interviews as mutual interactions between the participants and the researchers, where data can emerge (Mills et al., 2006) and experiences can be explored and validated (Charmaz, 2014), and; 3) theories are developed within the context of “historical, social, and situational conditions” (Charmaz, 2020, p. 34). Perhaps most importantly, constructivist grounded theory is well suited for critical inquiry, addressing issues of power, inequality, and injustice.

Participants. The two schools in our sub-sample are two of three public middle schools in a small Northeastern city. School A’s incoming 6th grade class in Fall 2019 was 176 students. According to the 2017-2018 Civil Rights Data Collection, 31% of their students are English Language Learners, with the most common languages spoken at home being Somali, Portuguese, French, Spanish, and Arabic. School B’s incoming 6th grade class in Fall 2019 was 165 students. According to the 2017-2018 Civil Rights Data Collection, 17.9% of their students are English Language Learners. The most common languages spoken at home are Arabic, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Somali.

Our purposive sample of students from these schools included those rated as having high, medium, and low empathy based on a baseline survey. We used purposive sampling based on a procedure described by Palinkas and colleagues (2016). Students who completed Window 1 baseline surveys of ethical character in September - October 2019 were categorized into high/middle/low categories for empathy based on their responses to those measures at baseline. Specifically, a student would be classified as “high” on empathy if their score fell at or above the

75th percentile in the sample. They were classified in the “middle” range if their score was within the 50th percentile (i.e., above the 25th and below the 75th percentiles) and in the “low” range if their score fell at or below the 25th percentile. Next, we examined the race and gender of each student to ensure that we were recruiting a diverse and representative sample.

Recruitment efforts led to 10 6th grade student participants at School A and 8 at School B. Table 1 lists each participant’s pseudonym and a description of their self-identification. Their gender and racial identities will also be included in the text (WF = White female, WM = White male, WNB = White non-binary, BF = Black female, LM = Latino male, AF = Asian female).

Interview Protocol. Student interviews were conducted in-person in January 2020. All participants were asked various questions about empathy, including questions about how they define empathy, examples of empathy they have experienced or witnessed, and situations where they have seen missed opportunities for empathy (see Table 2 for interview questions). Using a semi-structured interview protocol, interviewers were able to ask additional follow-up questions based on the flow and content of the conversation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews typically lasted 30-60 minutes.

The Research Team. Researchers’ identities, experiences, and roles influence the process and outcomes of research (Evans-Winters, 2019), and so we offer insight into our social positionalities as scholars and our roles in the current project. The lead author is an advanced doctoral student. She identifies as a white, cisgender female from a low-income, rural background. After attending college on a full scholarship, she became a teacher and college advisor for first-generation students. Through this experience, she developed a deep understanding and appreciation for social-emotional learning with the goal of disrupting inequities in the education system. She is first author and led the analysis and writing. The

second author engages in research related to social and emotional learning in elementary and middle school students. Her work focuses on teacher-student interactions and the ways that those interactions shift as a function of programs and interventions. A primary driver of her work is to identify practices that contribute to improved school experiences for students from historically marginalized groups. Originally from a rural area outside of a small town in the midwest, she identifies as a white, cisgender female who has spent much of her life as a Jew in non-Jewish spaces. She is the project co-principal investigator and participating in the analysis and editing process. The third author is a professor of education and developmental scientist with a focus on adolescence. She identifies as a white, Jewish, cisgender female from a middle class, suburban background. She has spent the bulk of her career studying settings and relationships that support positive youth development and within her research, professional roles, and personal life is deeply committed to issues of social justice and equity. She provided expertise as an experienced qualitative researcher. The fourth author is an assistant professor of school psychology. She is the project co-principal investigator, and she identifies as a white, Greek American, cisgender female, from a middle-class suburban background. Her research focuses on teacher-student interactions and teacher well-being, and she is committed to understanding ways to improve the classroom experience for students and teachers from diverse school settings.

Data Analysis

Following verbatim transcription of interviews by an outside company, the 3-person coding team built familiarization with the data through initial coding in August 2020. Focusing solely on mentions of empathy, this entailed line-by-line coding which helped the team become aware of categories grounded within the data (Charmaz, 2006). After reviewing all transcripts, the coding team met to review all selected statements and reach exclusion or inclusion consensus

on each data excerpt. A running log of inclusion and exclusion criteria was created and updated on shared drive for reference.

Next, focused coding helped us to cluster ideas and identify emerging core categories. Each member of the coding team generated a list of domains that represented prominent findings from the data, in accordance with suggestions by Hill (2012) on developing a codebook. The team then met to compare lists and define codebook domains. Upon reviewing the independent domain lists, the team organized the codebook by categories: 1) empathy definitions, 2) examples of the presence of empathy, 3) examples of the absence of empathy (i.e., examples of times empathy did not occur but could or should have, according to students). Once these domain codes were entered into Dedoose, coding assignment began. From September to April 2021, the team met collaboratively and discussed any uncertainties throughout the coding process. Constant comparison of the assigned codes helped refine and collapse sub-categories, as well as generate new sub-categories when necessary. This iterative analysis continued until the team reached a consensus that the codes were accurate and concise reflections of the data and were accurately assigned to each excerpt. To conclude the process, the team returned to every coded transcript to double-check the accuracy of our final codes.

Finally, theoretical coding enabled a shift into the analytical and interpretive, allowing for the team to develop theories from the data. This process was iterative and included reading and rereading excerpts and memoing intriguing findings and patterns, creating tables, and writing up initial and subsequent findings. The main author noted patterns and outliers, paying close attention to alignment and divergence. Memo writing was used throughout the process, capturing coding choices, explanations, reflections, and links to existing literature (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003).

Rigor

Rigor was ensured through maintaining an audit trail (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988) and engaging in regular internal and external audits. Credibility was addressed through the use of constructivist grounded theory and following its guidelines (Charmaz, 2006; 2014), consulting with an experienced qualitative researcher throughout the entire process (Holloway, 1997), providing author reflexivity statements, and using the participant's own words (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In addition, the research team members were deeply engaged in the schools, via multiple timepoints of data collection across the larger study, providing strong contextual knowledge that helped to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the use of multiple researchers across the data analysis process provided opportunities for continual reflection and feedback about the credibility of the findings.

Results

Our guiding research question asked: what do the student examples of empathy in two middle schools teach us about the components and challenges of practicing empathy and its implications for equity? We answered this question by first exploring the landscape of empathy as it was defined by the youth and then zooming in on what empathy looked like in the youth's experiences. Mirroring the interview process, we began with the definitions of empathy according to our participating youth. In their responses, students focused on the *recognition* of "the other" (i.e., the person who is the object of the youth's empathy), followed by a *response* that communicates that recognition.

We then analyzed the examples of empathy shared. This included empathy they themselves practiced, empathy shown to them, times they wished someone had shown them empathy, and times they regretted not showing empathy themselves. From these examples

emerged the same two major themes and six subthemes (see Table 3). Within the theme of *recognition*, three subthemes were identified: *noticing and checking in*, *listening non-judgmentally*, and *relating and perspective taking*. For *response*, three further subthemes were identified: *helping*, *emotional support*, and *kindness*. The results are explored in further detail below, calling upon verbatim student responses. Most subthemes have examples of the presence and absence of empathy. To prevent blaming and to validate the very human moments of not practicing empathy, we focused on the challenges limiting the practice of empathy in instances where empathy appeared to be absent. We believe that both the presence and absence of empathy are crucial to deepening our understanding of the components and challenges of practicing empathy.

Theme 1: Recognition

Recognition includes *noticing and checking in*, *listening non-judgmentally*, and *relating and perspective taking*. Taken together, these three components make seeing, understanding, and accepting the other person possible.

Subtheme 1: Noticing and checking in. Students from both schools said *noticing and checking in* is a crucial first component necessary to empathize. Put simply, one cannot recognize another person without truly seeing and connecting with them. Noticing others allows adolescents to gather initial understanding about another's feelings or needs and checking in creates space to learn more. Nicolas (LM) explained that his teachers would notice him displaying signs of sadness and check in: "They show empathy because they always are there for you, like if you're ever sad, they will say like, 'Are you okay? Do you need any help? Is something wrong?' And they don't ignore you." By first noticing and then checking in with Nicolas, his teachers signaled that they recognize him, his feelings, and his needs.

Sadie (WF) explained that there are challenges to *noticing*: "... some people you can tell about they're a little off, some people don't notice and they're acting normal..." According to Sadie, it is not always possible to tell someone's feelings based on their demeanor or behavior. The difficulty in "reading" someone's feelings from their behavior can lead to missed opportunities for empathy. Nicolas (LM) explained that sometimes he does this, even with his friends: "Sometimes if I'm in an argument and then we fix it, but I get hurt and my feelings get hurt, I don't really show it but I kind of feel it and then I don't act my true self and sometimes they don't realize or they don't understand." He felt that he could not be his "true self," and that prevented his friends from noticing his hurt feelings and repairing the hurt. He also noted even if they had noticed, they wouldn't necessarily understand how he was feeling. (This challenge will be explored more in subtheme 3.)

Two students explained the challenges of *checking in*. Ava (BF) shared experiences when she regretted her lack of empathy: "When I notice people are sad, but I don't talk to them, because I'm like ... either I don't really know them well, or I'm scared to talk to them, or I think they should just be better off alone, I don't." She explained that while she noticed when others were sad, she didn't check in. She further explained that not knowing these classmates made checking in difficult. Emma (WF) had a similar experience when asked if there was a time she wished she had shown empathy:

Maybe kids usually don't talk to as much because I might talk to them and not know how they're feeling. So, I'd really want to understand how they're feeling before I have a conversation with them or something.... It's normally kids who are very quiet and like to be just by themselves and stuff. Then I don't really know them because they don't kind of go out and break out of their shell and just talk to other people... [If I knew what was bothering them], I would try to help them in any way possible.

Emma names that she would like to help her classmates in any way she could, but she is hesitant to check in because of how little she knows about them and what they're feeling (e.g., their lack of relationship makes noticing more difficult).

Subtheme 2: Listening non-judgmentally. After *noticing and checking in*, students talked about not just the importance of listening, but *how* to listen. Kayla (WF) explained that when someone is sharing their experiences, feelings, or perspectives, it's important to *listen non-judgmentally*. Kayla explained:

I show them when I'm listening and if they say something right away, I won't just be like, "Oh no, that's terrible. Like that's so dumb. I would do it like that." I would be like, "Oh, okay. I'm not really a big fan of that but I could understand why you like it."

It is not important to Kayla that she agree with the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of the person she is listening to. Her priority is to accept them as they are, holding as much weight and value as her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Samantha (AF) explained how she also practices *listening non-judgmentally*:

Just to be understanding and not be like, "Wow, that's nothing to be mad about or sad about or anything." It's just to be understanding and be like, "Yeah, I could see how you feel like that," and just be all around nice.

A few students explained the challenges of listening in this way. Avery (WF) spoke about her struggle to show empathy to her friend:

...sometimes if I misunderstand what's happening. Like if my friend's being not the nicest to me, it may not be because she doesn't want to be my friend. It could be because she's going through something, and I just don't realize that. Then sometimes I can show them more empathy, but I don't realize it before it happens...I'm kind of slow to realize, because they probably just don't want to talk about it. So, it's kind of hard for me to just realize on my own that they're going through something, because my automatic response in my head is just that they don't want to be my friend or that they're just, I don't know.

In this case, her friend was communicating that she was having a hard time by not being "the nicest." For Avery, it activated her fear that she was going to lose her as a friend and this fear

then prevented her from empathizing with her friend in the moment. The heightened importance of peer relationships and the cognitive awareness of how one is perceived by others in adolescence (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018) may have made Avery more likely to interpret her friend's behavior as a response to her rather than to initially empathize with her friend and recognize that she was "going through something" else.

Subtheme 3: Relating and perspective taking. Youth expressed that *relating and perspective taking* are both necessary to practice empathy. Some students practiced *relating* through reflecting upon their own experiences. Natalie (WF) explained how she supported a friend going through a similar situation she had experienced: "One of my friends was having trouble with another friend and I stood by her side and helped her through the whole thing because I had gotten into an argument with my friends in the past and so I know what it felt like." Calling upon her own friendship trouble, she was able to relate to her friend's feelings and be there for her.

Avery (WF) explained her process of *relating*:

I try to walk in their shoes, and try to see what they're going through, and if I've gone through anything similar. Like, what helps me to try and see what they're going through. That's kind of just how I, when I'm having a bad day, how I like to be treated. So, I just want them to have the same experience, so that's how I just automatically react.

Recalling her own similar experiences allows her to better understand her friends. She then uses this to inform her behavior, offering her friends the kind of support she appreciated when facing similar situations.

While calling on one's own experiences is a powerful tool for empathizing with others, some students practiced *perspective taking* by imagining themselves in a similar situation. Emma (WF) explained how she used this to empathize with her classmates:

...say math class and they are having a really hard time trying to figure out this math problem, then you may help them because you don't want...If I was having a hard time figuring out that problem and I don't want someone just move away from me and be like you can't do this, then I would help someone. So, because I would want them to help me.

While she did not have an experience of being ignored when she struggled in math, she was able to imagine how she would feel in that situation. This allowed her to respond with empathy to her peers.

This crucial component of empathy ensures that individuals feel seen, heard, and understood. Unfortunately, this is often difficult to do. Maxim (WM) shared how, from his perspective, some people struggle to relate or perspective-take: "Some people are just mean in some ways as in like I don't think they understand what I'm going through, which is okay because I understand that they're going through something, too. We all are." Interestingly, he used *perspective taking* to better empathize with those who he saw as being unable to do the same. Similarly, Dakota (WNB) named a similar phenomenon in which they sometimes wished they could empathize with others, but simultaneously didn't: "...the people who are kind of mean, I don't show any empathy to them. Even though they might have a bad backstory, maybe sometimes I wish I showed a little bit of empathy, but sometimes I wish I didn't." Dakota names the conflicting desire to empathize with those with a "bad backstory." In this case, Dakota could have been struggling with the boundary between empathy and self-care—while understanding that others could be going through a difficult time, they still decide to keep their distance.

Theme 2: Response

The second theme is *response* to the recognition of the other. This theme includes three subthemes: *helping*, *emotional support*, and *kindness*. All three of these subthemes are empathic response behaviors that are possible only after first recognizing another.

Subtheme 1: Helping. The first subtheme under *response* is *helping*. When sharing examples of empathy, students often shared issues where they, their friends, or their classmates faced problems. A form of *response* was to address that problem directly. Samantha (AF) explained her issue and how her friends helped address it:

I was really stressed out from my schoolwork, and I was super upset. Like very stressed out with my pencil and just kind of writing things down. And my friends were sitting at the table, and they offered to help, and they showed me what I could do that was easier so I could understand this. And it really helped me feel a lot better.

Noting Samantha's distress, they offered to address the problem by *helping* with her schoolwork. This in turn helped her feel much better. Another example came from Maxim (WM) when he explained how a teacher noted his students' stress levels around the holidays: "I told him that I couldn't turn my assignment because it was December and he said that he had moved it to January because it was a really busy time of the year." Maxim believed that his teacher recognized his students' stress-levels and responded by *helping* them out and moving the deadline. Finally, Levi (WM) shared an example of a classmate addressing the problem he faced missing a day of school: "I wasn't here so he told me what my homework was that I missed so I didn't have to figure it out from the teachers because that's stressful...because you don't have the same teacher for all your classes." In each of these examples, students and teachers used their own knowledge, skill, and power to address the problem facing others.

A few students shared examples of when they wished they had helped. Maxim (WM) told a story about a new student and the pressure that prevented him from helping:

In fifth grade there's this one student who had just moved here from California. She's really popular right now, but when she first came, a lot of people were not being very nice to her, and I remember we were allowed to work with partners that one day and she was left alone and I really kind of wanted to ask her to join the group, but my friend didn't want to. So, I didn't and I kind of regret that.

Maxim identified that the new student was being left out and wanted to help by asking her to join their group. But due to the pressure of his friend, he didn't. Maxim weighed his desire to help and the potential fallout from his friends. The heightened awareness of social status in adolescence (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018) may make it difficult to show empathy in situations where it goes against one's friend or the broader peer group.

Subtheme 2: Emotional support. The second subtheme in *response* is *emotional support*. This is when the response behavior is that of addressing the emotional state of the other, often with the hope to help manage a negative emotion or replace it with a positive one. Samantha (AF) explained how she *emotionally supported* her friend feel better when she was upset in class:

...my friend started crying because we had a sub [substitute teacher], and the sub didn't really know a way to help her. And she was getting really upset because she didn't understand. I think it was our reading assignment, and she couldn't figure out what to write down for a book review, and she was getting really upset. And I went and I calmed her down.

Her empathetic response was to offer her friend external support in regulating her emotions.

Sophie (WF) explained how she supported her classmates through their negative feelings about their math grades:

Sometimes people don't really feel like they can do a math problem, 'cause sometimes they want to get higher than a two or two plus and they feel like, oh well I've got a two, I'm a horrible person... And saying all these things and saying, well, I got a two too and it's fine because it shouldn't let you down. It should bring you back up, 'cause you want to get higher. You shouldn't bring yourself down.

Sophie recognized that her classmates were feeling like "horrible" people because of their math grades. Instead of addressing their math assignment (the problem), she addressed their feelings.

She related (she had received a similar score) and helped them see that they were not alone. She

also gave them an alternative way of understanding the situation: one that would provide them more hope and self-compassion.

Another example came from Melody (WF), whose friend's love of dance was being criticized at school:

Well, when another one of my friends, she was really sad because I think it was because someone was being mean to her because she was talking about what she does, and someone was saying you shouldn't do that. Then I was telling her that it was okay. She dances and that I sometimes like to dance with her too. When I go to her house and stuff, people were saying how it's not... Like she shouldn't be doing, that's still silly and stuff like that. Then I told her, 'It's okay. Dancing's cool.'

Her response was to validate her friends' interest in dance. Regardless of the peer pressure that dancing was "silly," she knew how important it was to her friend and validated her.

In each of these examples, students empathetically responded to their peers by addressing their feelings. A few more students spoke about times when they were not able to do this.

Melody (WF) had a friend who was feeling poorly about their grade: "When my friend did really bad on a test and I didn't really say that much about it, and I didn't try to make them feel better...and I felt like I should've...But I wasn't in a good mood that day." While she wanted to in retrospect, that day Melody did not have the emotional capacity that day to offer the emotional support her friend needed.

Isaiah (WM) explained when he was not empathized with: "...when the kid bullied me, and then none of the kids around there on the bus did anything about it, and they showed no feeling of sadness." In this case, Isaiah witnessed others withholding the empathy he needed in that moment. As noted above, the developmental focus of young adolescents on social status and peers (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018) can make it more difficult for young people to respond empathetically in these situations. Ryan (WM) shared a story of peer pressure that prevented him from *emotionally supporting* a classmate:

One time I was walking in the halls with all my friends, we were in a giant group, one of my friends tripped a person walking. I was in the middle of a conversation with my friend, and I saw it happen. But I looked back, and they kept on walking, and after I felt bad...Because I knew that they could've gotten really badly hurt. Or one of my friends, or someone was picking on them. I just felt bad after that I didn't help them.

This provides us the perspective of a bystander who chose not to act. While he felt the desire to *emotionally support* the student who was tripped that day and weeks later, it was the pressure in his friend group that kept him from turning back.

Subtheme 3: Kindness. The last form of *response* is *kindness*. While varying definitions of kindness include both helping and emotional support, this category of *kindness* addresses a unique phenomenon. Youth might not always know or be able to directly address the problem (*helping*), or the emotions (*emotional support*) others are facing, but students spoke repeatedly of the importance of *kindness* as a response behavior that could always be used (e.g., when in doubt, be kind). Samantha (AF) explained the idea behind this:

Kind of like if somebody is like mad or upset, they could feel like you have to be a little more cautious, and you have to feel kind of feel how they might be feeling at the moment. You could accidentally say something that might upset them, or something that might make them more upset than they already are. And you kind of have to feel out the situation and what's going on, to make sure that you can either make them happier or not make them more upset.

She describes a sensitivity to the other person and a desire to help them feel better or at least not make them more upset, even if she doesn't know exactly what they're facing or how they're feeling. She suggests being extra kind when someone is struggling.

Sadie (WF) told a story about how she helped a friend who couldn't share what the problem was she was facing: "Well, my friend, the other day, she was crying and stuff because of this thing that happened to her that's private, I don't know. Then I was helping her out and stuff." In this case, Sadie didn't fully understand the problem or the precise emotions but knew

her friend was having a hard time. She responded to her friend's needs by being there for her through acts of kindness throughout the day.

Jayden (WM) explained how he noticed a classmate was having a hard time: "One day in math class there's this kid and he wasn't really having the best day; he was a little down and tired. So, I helped him out with his math." In this case, the issue facing the student likely wasn't their math—it was something larger that was affecting their whole day. Because Jayden didn't exactly know the bigger problem, he did what he could: he helped them with their math.

Kindness is particularly important because it allows for a prosocial response even when faced with limited understanding or power to address the root cause or emotion. By focusing on *kindness*, youth found a way to empathetically respond to others even when faced with challenges.

Discussion

The ongoing crises of racism, xenophobia, and COVID-19 have exposed the inequities plaguing the United States. Empathy has been found to not only promote caring, concern for others, and helpful behavior, but has even been found to combat prejudice, bias, and discrimination (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2011). We believe that empathy is a crucial building block of equitable beliefs and behaviors. Interviews with adolescents in two racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse middle schools help us to better understand the components and challenges of practicing empathy for equity.

Components of Empathy

Our participants provided a clear picture of empathy not as a singular emotion, but as an entire process that begins with identifying and ends in action. Their vision aligns with that of Tangney and colleagues: "Empathy is not a discrete emotion. Rather it is an emotional process

with substantial implications for moral behavior” (Tangney et al., 2007, p. 362). Indeed, our youth’s vision of empathy accomplishes something greater. In this study, two major themes of empathy emerged: *recognition* and *response*. As students described the processes of recognizing and responding, it became clear that this is a valuing, humanizing experience. When the students recognized others, they recognized their shared humanity. They recognized the very human need to be noticed, listened to, and understood. When they responded to others, they were responding to their full humanity. They recognized the importance of caring for and supporting fellow humans through whatever they faced. To call upon Maxim’s explanation of the importance of empathy: “I understand that they’re going through something too. We all are.” While learning environments are often dehumanizing for Black and other marginalized youth (Coles, 2020; Dumas & ross, 2016; McArthur & Muhammad, 2020), researchers find hope and potential in promoting relationships and empathy through social-emotional learning skills (Legette, 2020). Indeed, some researchers argue that shared humanity accessed through empathy and related skills is the antidote to all the division, fear, and hatred permeating our country (Brown, 2021).

Recognition: When one notices and acknowledges shared humanity with others, this can be understood as *recognition*. It is a process of rehumanization (i.e., reversing the damage of being dehumanized); one that scholars have argued is a crucial component of relationship building, especially for marginalized youth (e.g., Legette et al., 2020) Students expressed the importance of really seeing their peers through *noticing and checking in, listening non-judgmentally, and relating and perspective taking*.

Noticing and checking in. Noticing and checking in can be described as the initial step of empathy, in which one sees, acknowledges, and connects with another. The full process of empathy is not possible without this first step. The importance of noticing has been documented

in previous studies focused particularly on teachers. Yu and colleagues (2018) defined this concept as noticing a students' presence and needs inside and outside the classroom. This is not only a hallmark of positive and empowering student-teacher relationships but also remarkably similar to attunement, or an adult's "capacity to respond flexibly to youth verbal and nonverbal cues by taking into account youth needs and desires" (Pryce, 2012, p. 292). While the literature focuses primarily on teachers or other adults noticing and checking in, this study offered a look into youth's practice of noticing and checking in as the first important step of empathy.

Listening non-judgmentally. Adolescents in this study spoke of the importance of listening without judgment and accepting other's stories, perspectives, and experiences as they are, even if they disagreed with them. This aligns with Wiseman's (1996) second attribute of empathy: staying out of judgment. Brown (2021) describes this practice simply: "Just listen. Don't put a value on it" (p. 122).

Relating and perspective taking. Youth in this study added nuance and clarity to the related processes of relating and perspective taking. Students defined relating as calling on their own similar experiences and feelings in order to better understand others. This worked well in close friendships when they experienced similar challenges (e.g., losing a friendship) but less so when they did not share these same experiences (see more on this in the challenges section below). They defined perspective-taking as imagining themselves in a new situation that matched the others (e.g., imagining what it's like to struggle in math class). Examples helped to elucidate this important step of the empathy process.

This study adds new understanding to the developmental trajectory of relating and perspective taking. From the student examples, both are necessary steps to learn how to empathize. We can see the development of their skills, from relating only when they shared a

similar experience to using imagination to visualize a similar experience. First, youth must be able to walk in another's shoes by relating ("That happened to me!") and then perspective taking ("I imagine I'd feel this way if that happened to me.") Then, they must be able to listen to another's experience of walking in their own shoes ("I hear what you're saying and I'm right here with you"; Brown, 2021). These steps are crucial to arrive at a place where they are able to empathize with those who have not only different experiences from their own, but different feelings about those experiences. Some scholars have argued that relating and perspective taking in this way limits empathy. Indeed, if empathy is focusing on the other, these forms of connecting are self-focused. This is not a tension when we understand empathy as *connection* between two people. This developmental trajectory helps youth develop those crucial connection skills.

Response. The second major theme our students described was *response*. *Response* is the behavior following the *recognition* of another. While some scholars argue that empathy ends before behavior happens, the adolescents in this study experienced them as inextricably linked. The subthemes of response included *helping*, *emotional support*, and *kindness*.

Helping. *Helping* is addressing the problem facing others as an empathetic response. Many of the student examples involved stress or feeling overwhelmed at school due to difficult assignments or tight deadlines, and the helping responses addresses those stressors. This is an exceptionally powerful empathetic response, as it goes straight to the source, so to say. Often these examples included *helping* the student address the problem, which not only empowered the student to take on the stressor, but to navigate their own emotional process.

Emotional support. The second form of response was *emotional support*, which can be understood as emotional coregulation. Coregulation is the process through which others,

typically adult caregivers, help children develop emotional regulation skills (Bath, 2008). Peer emotional coregulation increases during adolescence (Waller et al., 2014), as we saw in the examples students shared. Examples of coregulation strategies in this study included reminding another that they are not alone and validating their emotions or passions. In fact, this empathetic responding is a powerful antidote to the shame some of the participants were feeling (Brown, 2021). Not surprisingly, social emotional regulation has been often found more effective than independent emotional regulation in different situations (Sahi et al., 2020).

Kindness. *Kindness* in this study is understood as the response (help, emotional support, or other prosocial behavior) aimed at caring for another when the source of the problem or the emotions are not fully understood or easily addressed. Students described being there emotionally for others when they knew they were struggling but didn't know exactly why, while others picked out a concrete helping action (e.g., helping with classwork) when they recognized a peer was feeling down. This finding addresses one of the main criticisms of empathetic response behavior: even if one is limited in their understanding, knowledge, or skill, they call always choose to be kind.

Challenges of Empathy

One of the tremendous contributions to the field is the naming of the very real challenges facing these students and their peers as they try to empathize with those around them. Knowing the challenges of community culture, relational distance, the difficulty of listening non-judgmentally, establishing healthy boundaries, and peer pressure is crucial to improving the ways in which we teach and practice empathy. Below, we will frame each of these challenges as opportunities for adults and school communities to meet the developmental needs of adolescents.

Emotional expression. The first challenge students shared was the pressure to “act normal” or hide their emotions. Based on these interviews, some students more freely and openly express their emotions, allowing others a clear opportunity and incentive to check in. But according to the literature, for many other youths, and especially those who have been historically marginalized, “acting normal” or hiding their true feelings is more socially acceptable and even safer in environments where they may experience disproportionate discipline (Huang, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014), and perceive overall lower quality school climate (e.g., Bottiani et al., 2017; Debnam et al., 2021; Konold et al., 2017). This is a special opportunity for schools to focus on their community norms and doing the work necessary to make the environment safe and supportive to the whole child, including their emotions. It is every person’s decision to share what emotions they feel comfortable with, but the goal is to create spaces where it is safe to do so. According to Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory, empathy and other crucial prosocial skills are cultivated in environments that include physical and psychological safety, opportunities to belong, supportive relationships with adults, appropriate structure and boundaries for youth, skill development opportunities, and support for efficacy and self-esteem (Benson, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Relational distance. The second challenge students faced was a kind of relational distance, or a lack of close personal relationships with others (e.g., classmates versus friends). Studies have shown that it is often easier to empathize with those we have close relationships with than with strangers (Meyer et al., 2013), but it is never impossible. Some students in this study found their own solution: when in doubt, show kindness. Other potential solutions according to the literature include actively supporting positive peer-to-peer relationships within the school setting. The National Academy of Education (NAEd) reported specific ways in which

this is accomplished, including discourse: engaging students through pairs and small groups and setting norms for respectful discussion (Lee et al., 2021). According to Johnson et al. (2010), this and other forms of collaboration can benefit students' social-emotional well-being by reducing anxiety, improving self-esteem, and promoting positive feelings toward classmates.

Listening non-judgmentally. Another challenge students faced was listening non-judgmentally. One student named her friend's unkind behavior and how it triggered her fear of losing her friend, which prevented her from empathizing with the struggles she was facing. Listening non-judgmentally can be difficult even when someone is clearly and kindly explaining how they're feeling. When the expression of feelings takes form as hurtful behavior, it is no surprise that listening non-judgmentally is difficult, if not impossible at times. (This situation also speaks to boundaries, which will be explored next). Listening non-judgmentally is a crucial skill to develop and has been found to indeed be learnable. One method is practicing meditation which not only increased non-judgmental listening but also increased empathetic accuracy (Jones et al., 2019). Researchers at New York University have also created an intervention in which youth are trained in transformative interviewing, which is built upon the idea of non-judgmental listening (Way & Nelson, 2018).

Boundaries. The next challenge students brought to light was boundaries. Two students named their difficulty in empathizing with others who didn't treat them well. To empathize when we are on the receiving end of harm is to choose others over ourselves. An antidote to this is boundaries. One way to set boundaries was explored in a groundbreaking study by Hodges and Biswas-Diener (2009), as they explored a response to the cost of empathy argument (e.g., empathy costs the empathizer energy, time, etc.; Szuster & Jarymowicz, 2020). Their argument is that most of the cost of empathy is avoided if we learn to properly "calibrate" the level of

empathy in each circumstance. For instance, when a student is in a good place mentally and his close friend is struggling, he might choose to go all in with his empathy. But if he too is struggling and stressed, he might modulate his empathy. This does not mean he withholds kindness or care, but he instead protects himself, too. This adjustment of empathy can also help to balance the unequal expectations of empathy placed on girls (e.g., girls are socially expected to prioritize others' feelings over their own; Kite et al., 2008).

Peer pressure. The final challenge students presented was peer pressure that prevented empathetic response. Studies have explored the calculations people make when deciding whether or not to act prosocially (e.g., Cameron et al., 2009), and according to the adolescents in this study, negative peer pressure is one of the main costs. Indeed, when the awareness of social relationships is at an all-time high for adolescents, it's not necessarily fair to expect them to throw caution to the wind and ignore potential fallout (e.g., fear of being the next bullying victim; Coloroso, 2005). Rather, we need to meet them where they are and use developmentally aligned approaches to promote empathy. Young adolescents are particularly attuned to social rewards and risks (NASSEM, 2019), and thus peer pressure can be employed to motivate *positive* behaviors, including empathic response, just as it can be towards negative behaviors. Like previous challenges, schools can address this issue by working to change the culture of their school into one that upholds and celebrates care and concern for others while denouncing bullying or mistreatment of any kind. Indeed, one study found that context, including salient experiences and norms of the space, is weighed heavily when individuals are deciding whether to act with empathy (Rand et al., 2014). School-based interventions that focus on shifting norms of behavior can be especially powerful in using peer pressure for empathy.

Limitations

Several limitations require mention. First, longitudinal data and triangulation of data sources (e.g., observations of empathy experiences) were not possible due to resource limitations and travel restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we had difficulty recruiting students from refugee families, despite extensive efforts including working directly with school staff, translating recruitment materials into eight languages corresponding to those most frequently spoken at home, and offering interviews in those same languages. As a result, the sample included in this study was not precisely representative of the entire school population and we did not conduct interviews with students from refugee families. Finally, while not within the scope of this study, further exploration of these students' experiences of empathy would help elucidate the strengths and challenges facing this school community.

Implications

Positive, safe, and affirming school climate can only be achieved through school-wide effort and a culture of continuous improvement. This culture is all-encompassing: it is the big and small messages students and staff receive every day about what is valued and how things are done. It includes the ways staff interact with each other and their students, how students engage with their friends and classmates, and how the school handles discipline, particularly around interpersonal conflict (e.g., Rudasill et al., 2017).

Social emotional skill development and opportunities to practice will help students calibrate their empathy, learn to better listen non-judgmentally, and understand better how to support their peers while protecting themselves, too. Above all, it's important that staff are role-models and practice what they preach. Youth learn through observation: they are more likely to do as you do, not as you say. Young adolescents are also particularly open to influence from their environments (NASEM, 2019). There are many options for SEL training and support—but

they are all seeds. It is crucial to provide the fertile ground (school climate) and cultivate those seeds through community buy-in and commitment to a common set of values.

Finally, empathy is indeed a tool for equity, but only when used as such. As educators guide youth to better understand themselves, their communities, and the world around them, we must ensure that those views are not limited by avoiding discussions of power, privilege, and oppression. To deny these realities is to deny the lived experiences of some students while stunting the growth, understanding, and empathic capacity of all. Transformative social emotional learning (TSEL) has come to the forefront as a promising expansion of SEL that prioritizes the strengths and needs of students of color, promotes collective wellbeing, and encourages community action (Jagers et al., 2019). Jagers and colleagues presented a vision that expands the five SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. In particular, empathy requires “the critical historical grounding to take the perspective of those with the same and different backgrounds and cultures” (p. 167). This is a crucial first step of harnessing the power of empathy for equity.

Schools are microcosms of larger society and herein lies the opportunity and responsibility. Here, we can provide youth a safe environment where they have opportunities to acknowledge, explore, question, and process the world as it is. Here, they can get the necessary support to develop the beliefs, mindsets, and skills needed to not only imagine a better world, but to build it.

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Table 1*Participants (N = 16)*

Student Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	School
Natalie	White	Female	A
Sadie	White	Female	A
Avery	White	Female	A
Nicolas	Latino	Male	A
Ryan	White	Male	A
Kayla	White	Female	A
Maxim	White	Male	A
Samantha	Asian	Female	A
Melody	White	Female	B
Dakota	White	Non-Binary	B
Emma	White	Female	B
Sophie	White	Female	B
Levi	White	Male	B
Ava	Black	Female	B
Isaiah	White	Male	B
Jayden	White	Male	B

Table 2*Student Interview Questions*

Questions

What do you think it means to show others empathy?

What do you think it means to have empathy or to be empathetic?

Tell me about a time you showed someone empathy.

Tell me about a time someone showed you empathy.

Tell me about a time you wished you showed someone empathy.

Tell me about a time someone didn't show you empathy.

Table 3*Themes, Subthemes, and Examples*

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Quotes
Recognition of shared humanity	Noticing / checking in	Noticing others allows adolescents to gather initial understanding about another's feelings or needs and checking in creates space to learn more.	<p>“They show empathy because they always are there for you, like if you're ever sad, they will say like, ‘Are you okay? Do you need any help? Is something wrong?’ And they don't ignore you.” (Nicolas, LM)</p> <p>“... some people you can tell about they're a little off, some people don't notice and they're acting normal...” (Sadie, WF)</p>
		The challenges facing noticing and checking in include misinterpretation or relational distance	<p>“Sometimes if I'm in an argument and then we fix it, but I get hurt and my feelings get hurt, I don't really show it but I kind of feel it and then I don't act my true self and sometimes they don't realize or they don't understand.” (Nicolas, LM)</p>

(e.g., a lack of close relationship). “When I notice people are sad, but I don’t talk to them, because I’m like ... either I don’t really know them well, or I’m scared to talk to them, or I think they should just be better off alone, I don’t.” (Ava, BF)

“Maybe kids usually don’t talk to as much because I might talk to them and not know how they’re feeling. So, I’d really want to understand how they’re feeling before I have a conversation with them or something.... It’s normally kids who are very quiet and like to be just by themselves and stuff. Then I don’t really know them because they don’t kind of go out and break out of their shell and just talk to other people... [If I knew what was bothering them], I would try to help them in any way possible.” (Emma, WF)

Listening non- judgmentally	By listening without judgment, youth accept others as they are, holding as much weight and value as	“I show them when I’m listening and if they say something right away, I won’t just be like, ‘Oh no, that’s terrible. Like that’s so dumb. I would do it like that.’ I would be like, ‘Oh, okay. I’m not really a big fan that but I could understand why you like it.’” (Kayla, WF)
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their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

“Just to be understanding and not be like, ‘Wow, that’s nothing to be mad about or sad about or anything.’ It’s just to be understanding and be like, ‘Yeah, I could see how you feel like that,’ and just be all around nice.” (Samantha, AF)

The challenges facing non-judgment can include unclear or difficult communication.

“...sometimes if I misunderstand what’s happening. Like if my friends being not the nicest to me, it may not be because she doesn’t want to be my friend. It could be because she’s going through something, and I just don’t realize that. Then sometimes I can show them more empathy, but I don’t realize it before it happens...I’m kind of slow to realize, because they probably just don’t want to talk about it. So, it’s kind of hard for me to just realize on my own that they’re going through something, because my automatic response in my head is just that they don’t want to be my friend or that they’re just, I don’t know.” (Avery, WF)

Relating and perspective taking	To better understand a person's experience, perspective, or feelings, students call upon their own similar experiences. If they have not experienced anything similar, they can use their imagination to put themselves in the same situation to empathize with others (perspective taking).	"One of my friends was having trouble with another friend and I stood by her side and helped her through the whole thing because I had gotten into an argument with my friends in the past and so I know what it felt like." (Natalie, WF) "...I try to walk in their shoes, and try to see what they're going through, and if I've gone through anything similar. Like, what helps me to try and see what they're going through. That's kind of just how I, when I'm having a bad day, how I like to be treated. So, I just want them to have the same experience, so that's how I just automatically react." (Avery, WF) "...say math class and they are having a really hard time trying to figure out this math problem, then you may help them because you don't want... If I was having a hard time figuring out that problem and I don't want someone just move away from me and be like you can't do
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this, then I would help someone. So, because I would want them to help me.” (Emma, WF)

The challenges facing this step include limited skills in this area and being on the receiving end of unkind behavior (e.g., need for boundaries).

“Some people are just mean in some ways as in like I don’t think they understand what I’m going through, which is okay because I understand that they’re going through something too. We all are.” (Maxim, WM)

“...the people who are kind of mean, I don’t show any empathy to them. Even though they might have a bad backstory, maybe sometimes I wish I showed a little bit of empathy, but sometimes I wish I didn’t.” (Dakota, WNB)

Response behavior or acknowledgement of another’s humanity	Helping	Students named helping by addressing the problem facing others as an important response.	“I was really stressed out from my schoolwork, and I was super upset. Like very stressed out with my pencil and just kind of writing things down. And my friends were sitting at the table, and they offered to help, and they showed me what I could do that was easier so I could
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understand this. And it really helped me feel a lot better.” (Samantha, AF)

“I told him that I couldn’t turn my assignment because it was December and he said that he had moved it to January because it was a really busy time of the year.” (Maxim, WM)

“I wasn’t here so he told me what my homework was that I missed so I didn’t have to figure it out from the teachers because that’s stressful...because you don’t have the same teacher for all your classes.” (Levi, WM)

A challenge facing this component can be peer pressure.

“In fifth grade there’s this one student who had just moved here from California. She’s really popular right now, but when she first came, a lot of people were not being very nice to her, and I remember we were allowed to work with partners that one day and she was left alone and I really kind of wanted to ask her to join the group, but my friend didn’t want to. So, I didn’t and I kind of regret that.” (Maxim, WM)

Emotional support	This is when the response behavior is that of addressing the emotional state of the other, often with the hope to help manage a negative emotion or replace it with a positive one.	<p>“...my friend started crying because we had a sub, and the sub didn’t really know a way to help her. And she was getting really upset because she didn’t understand. I think it was our reading assignment, and she couldn’t figure out what to write down for a book review, and she was getting really upset. And I went and I calmed her down.” (Samantha, AF)</p> <p>“Sometimes people don’t really feel like they can do a math problem, ‘cause sometimes they want to get higher than a two or two plus and they feel like, oh well I’ve got a two, I’m a horrible person...And saying all these things and saying, well, I got a two too and it’s fine because it shouldn’t let you down. It should bring you back up, ‘cause you want to get higher. You shouldn’t bring yourself down.” (Sophie, WF)</p> <p>“Well, when another one of my friends, she was really sad because I think it was because someone was being mean to her because she was talking about what she does, and someone was saying you shouldn’t do</p>
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that. Then I was telling her that it was okay. She dances and that I sometimes like to dance with her too. When I go to her house and stuff, people were saying how it's not... Like she shouldn't be doing, that's still silly and stuff like that. Then I told her, 'It's okay. Dancing's cool.'" (Melody, WF)

Challenges facing this response can include limited emotional capacity, self-preservation, and peer pressure.

"When my friend did really bad on a test and I didn't really say that much about it, and I didn't try to make them feel better...and I felt like I should've...But I wasn't in a good mood that day." (Melody, WF)

"...when the kid bullied me, and then none of the kids around there on the bus did anything about it, and they showed no feeling of sadness." (Isaiah, WM)

"One time I was walking in the halls with all my friends, we were in a giant group, one of my friends tripped a person walking. I was in the middle of a conversation with my friend, and I saw it happen. But I looked back, and they kept on walking, and after I felt bad...Because I knew that they could've gotten really badly hurt. Or one of my friends,

or someone was picking on them. I just felt bad after that I didn't help them." (Ryan, WM)

Kindness	Youth might not always know or be able to directly address the problem (<i>helping</i>), or the emotions (<i>emotional support</i>) others are facing, but students spoke repeatedly of the importance of <i>kindness</i> as a response behavior that could always be used (e.g.,	<p>“Kind of like if somebody is like mad or upset, they could feel like you have to be a little more cautious, and you have to feel kind of feel how they might be feeling at the moment. You could accidentally say something that might upset them, or something that might make them more upset than they already are. And you kind of have to feel out the situation and what’s going on, to make sure that you can either make them happier or not make them more upset.” (Samantha, AF)</p> <p>“Well, my friend, the other day, she was crying and stuff because of this thing that happened to her that’s private, I don’t know. Then I was helping her out and stuff.” (Sadie, WF)</p> <p>“One day in math class there’s this kid and he wasn’t really having the best day; he was a little down and tired. So, I helped him out with his math.” (Jayden, WM)</p>
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when in doubt, be

kind).

“There’s a Lot of Things to Fix in the World”:

Social and Emotional Competencies and Critical Reflection in Middle School

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Abstract

Critical consciousness has been identified as an important outcome for youth, yet little is known about how students' social and emotional competencies (SECs) shape how they read and change their world. This constructivist grounded theory study explores student self-perceptions of their SECs and the relationship between these and critical reflection, the crucial first step of critical consciousness. Fifteen middle schoolers in a large midwestern city participated in the study. When asked about their SE strengths and areas of growth, students identified *emotions* (73%), *relationships* (73%), *problem solving* (67%), and *empathy* (60%). When asked what problems they would like to fix in the world, students identified *ending bullying* (33%), *ending COVID-19* (27%), *ending injustice* (20%), *ending violence and hate* (20%), *expanding and protecting human rights* (20%), and *other* (13%). Closer analysis revealed that all students shared a critical reflection theme that aspired to end the suffering of others; 53% focused on a *global* level and 33% on the *local* level.

Keywords: critical consciousness, critical reflection, social-emotional learning, middle school, adolescence

**“There’s a Lot of Things to Fix in The World”:
Social and Emotional Competencies and Critical Reflection in Middle School**

American youth of marginalized identities are facing exceptional challenges in their daily lives due to systemic oppression. Yet it is often these same youth who are on the front lines disrupting and reimagining these systems. Studies report that Black and Latine¹ students continue to perform below White students in most measures of school success (reading and math scores, AP or IB course-taking; NCES, 2019) and receive discipline at two to three times their share of total student enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Girls of color report policing of their clothing and voices from adult staff in schools, cultural erasure in curriculum, and the gatekeeping of important after-school opportunities (Leath et al., 2021). Youth organizers across the nation have responded by petitioning for new discipline policies, equitable school funding, culturally-responsive curriculum, and policies that respect queer and trans rights (Kirshner, 2015; McMillin, 2023; Moses, 2022; National Equity Project, 2021).

Too often, psychological research focuses solely on the difficulties, deficits, and losses experienced by marginalized youth (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2014; Silverman et al., 2023). While all these challenges are very real and require urgent collective and systemic change, too often these students are framed solely as victims. Not only is this false, but this framing is dehumanizing and counterproductive. It prevents us from seeing these youth as the powerful agents they are—both currently and becoming. They are the ones who are already imagining the world as a better place and taking the steps to make it so (Anyiwo et al., 2020; O’Brien et al., 2018).

¹ “Latinx” is widely used in academic circles as a gender-inclusive term to refer to people from Latin American backgrounds. Many Spanish speakers find the term difficult to pronounce (e.g., De Onís, 2017). Therefore, the authors use “Latine,” a term commonly used throughout Spanish-speaking Latin American countries.

While youth activism is often thought of as large international movements like Black Lives Matter, the pathway to challenging systemic issues like racism begins with learning and developing the social and emotional competencies (SECs or SE competencies) that help marginalized youth identify and collaborate to solve problems in their communities and world (e.g., Carey et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2018, 2019). Through a partnership with a middle school in a large midwestern city, this study explores this pathway. Relying on constructivist grounded theory, the authors investigate marginalized youth's social and emotional competencies, their critical reflections on their world, and the relationship between these constructs. The goal of this study is to elucidate the pathways our students are on as they not only navigate unjust systems but work to change them.

Literature Review

Social and Emotional Competencies (SECs)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (n.d.)

Social and emotional competencies (SECs) are the outcomes of SEL and include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.). Self-awareness includes identifying emotions and developing interests and a sense of purpose; self-management includes managing one's own emotions and demonstrating agency; social awareness includes demonstrating empathy and identifying diverse social norms; relationship skills include resolving conflicts constructively and seeking or offering help; and responsible decision-making includes identifying solutions to problems and evaluating personal,

interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts (CASEL, n.d.). These interrelated competencies are essential to academic learning, positive development, and success in school, career, and life (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017) and positively impact the entire school climate and community (Aspen Institute, 2018; CASEL, 2017).

While SEL is undeniably important, two critiques stand out. First, SEL programs have been found to be most effective in elementary schools and have had less promising outcomes in middle school (e.g., Heckman & Kautz, 2013). Yeager (2017) argues that this may be due to the “scaling up” of elementary school programs to middle schools that ignore the unique developmental needs of adolescents (e.g., need for autonomy, respect, and belonging). Second, recent scholarship raises questions about whether many SEL programs effectively include, validate, and support the development, needs, and wellbeing of youth of color (e.g., Castro-Olivo, 2014) or those attending schools in urban districts (Castro-Olivo, 2010; Farahmand et al., 2011). According to Berg and colleagues, “context and culture—and the social interactions young people have within them—can affect which competencies young people exhibit, how they exhibit them, and which competencies are reinforced” (2019, p. 1). According to Jagers and colleagues (2018; 2019), new equity elaborated forms of SEL are one response to this problem. By promoting humanizing relationships, resistance, and collective efficacy, equity elaborated SEL prioritizes student voice and the development of key competencies such as critical consciousness. Both critiques uncover a need for better understanding and alignment with the specific needs, strengths, and goals of communities, such as urban middle schools (e.g., Wigglesworth et al., 2016).

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness, or conscientização, was developed by Freire (1970) as an educational pedagogy aimed at liberating the masses from systemic inequality. Put simply, he aimed to help Brazilian peasants develop literacy of the written word and their world. Freire believed that if people did not see the inequity or work against it, systems would remain unchanged (Jemal, 2017). This initial definition has created a pathway for contemporary understandings of critical consciousness.

Today, critical consciousness is a framework for understanding how youth see, understand, and work to challenge oppression. According to Watts and colleagues (2011), critical consciousness is comprised of three components: critical reflection (awareness and rejection of oppression), political efficacy (belief in one's ability to affect change), and critical action (action taken to enact change). Existing research has found that critical consciousness is associated with several key outcomes for marginalized youth including resilience and wellness (Ginwright, 2010; O'Leary & Romero, 2011), academic achievement (Cammarota, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2017), and civic and political engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts et al., 2011).

Critical reflection, the first component of critical consciousness, is theorized to be a prerequisite for activism against oppression (Diemer et al., 2016; Smith & Smith Lee, 2020). Indeed, it is important to be aware of and reject societal inequities before one can act effectively to challenge them. According to Watts and colleagues (2011), critical reflection is complex. It is "a social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities, such as social, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities that constrain well-being and human agency. Those who are critically reflective view social problems and inequalities in systemic terms" (Watts et al., 2011; p. 46). Simply put, critical reflection has three key components: social analysis, moral rejection, and systemic framing. Seider and colleagues expand on the systemic framing, explaining that

critical reflection includes the “ability to name and analyze forces of inequality, including their root causes and preservation in societal structures and institutions” (2020, p. 758). As a part of critical consciousness and on its own, critical reflection is a key outcome of interest in building understanding of how marginalized youth work to change their communities and world.

Adolescent Developmental in Context

Described often as the second sensitive period in development, adolescence is a time of rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive changes (e.g., Crone & Dahl, 2012). Biologically, adolescents are experiencing the hormonal and physical changes of puberty. Enhanced cognitive abilities (e.g., complex and abstract thinking) allow them to reflect on themselves and others more deeply (Weil et al., 2013), engage in more complex decision-making, and critically analyze the impact of their choices (Blakemore & Choudhry, 2006). As social relationships become increasingly important, adolescents explore their individual and group identities, expand social relationships, and engage in other-oriented prosocial behavior (NASEM, 2019; Telzer et al., 2022). With all these changes occurring, youth also explore new interests and even their purpose in life (Malin et al., 2014).

Crucial to adolescent development in general—and social and emotional competencies and critical consciousness in particular—is context. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), humans develop in multi-layered and interacting contexts. These contexts include the microsystem (immediate environment including home and school), the mesosystem (interactions between the microsystems, such as parents interacting with teachers), the exosystem (social structures that influence the microsystem, including neighborhoods or parents’ workplaces), the macrosystem (cultural elements, including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status), and the chronosystem (changes that occur over the lifetime, including transitions or traumatic events).

While developmental psychologists argue for the importance of all levels of context, it is difficult to conduct research that addresses more than one level simultaneously. Due to the accessibility of the microcontext, this is often the most consistently explored, to the detriment of the field (Rogers et al., 2021).

To center microsystems in theory and practice obscures the ways in which the macrosystems of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, and capitalism shape human development (e.g., Adams et al., 2019; Rogers & Way, 2018). To address this issue, Onnie Rogers and colleagues proposed a new term, *m(ai)cro*, to “conceptualize the simultaneous and transactional macro-as-micro processes” in human development (2021, p. 270). Their call is for researchers to center not just the individual in their local context, but the systems of oppression at work.

Middle school is an important *m(ai)cro* context for adolescents. Middle school is not only the setting in which adolescents spend a good deal of their waking hours each week, but it is also the space in which they are often learning and practicing social and emotional skills. Further, early adolescence, the time when youth are in middle school, is a period fertile for the development of critical reflection (Guillaume et al., 2015). Youth begin questioning how societies and institutions function and the injustices that occur within them (e.g., Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Focused on fairness, youth become increasingly aware and intolerant of systemic inequities (NASEM, 2019). Thus, middle school is a prime context for young people to develop a greater understanding of the ways in which larger oppressive systems show up in the world and their local contexts.

Current Study

This study explores the social and emotional competencies that marginalized youth possess and the ways in which these competencies relate to the first step of critical consciousness, critical reflection. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. How do middle school students describe their social and emotional competencies (SECs)?
2. What problems do these students identify as needing to be solved in the world?
3. In what ways do middle school students' self-assessments of their SECs relate to the type of problems they identified?

Positionality Statements

Researchers' identities, experiences, and roles influence the process and outcomes of research (Evans-Winters, 2019), and so we offer insight into our social positionalities as scholars and our roles in the study. The lead author is a doctoral candidate, and this is the third paper of her dissertation. She identifies as a white, cisgender female from a low-income, rural background. After attending college on a full scholarship, she became a teacher and college advisor for first-generation students. Through this experience, she developed a deep understanding and appreciation for SEL with the goal of disrupting inequities in the education system. She led the study, including the data collection, analysis, and writing. The second author is a professor of education and developmental scientist with a focus on adolescence. She identifies as a white, Jewish, cisgender female from a middle class, suburban background. She has spent the bulk of her career studying settings and relationships that support positive youth development and within her research, professional roles, and personal life is deeply committed to issues of social justice and equity. She has experience conducting research in youth-serving settings in the city where this school is located, including with youth from similar, historically

marginalized sociodemographic backgrounds as the students in this study. She provided a connection to the school, with which she was working as part of another project and drew on her expertise as an experienced qualitative researcher to provide input into the project plan, data analysis, and writing.

Methods

Design

Researchers must constantly ask themselves whether our research practices are responsive to the needs of marginalized communities or if we are contributing to their marginalization because our practices do not adequately address the systemic oppression experienced by these communities (Artiles, 2015). For a qualitative analysis approach that pays close attention to injustice, we adopted constructivist grounded theory, guided by the work of Charmaz (2014). The main features of constructivist grounded theory are: 1) the researchers are active ‘architects’ of a specific understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Willig, 2013); 2) interviews are mutual interactions between the participants and the researchers, where data can emerge (Mills et al., 2006) and experiences can be explored and validated (Charmaz, 2014); and 3) theories are developed within the context of “historical, social, and situational conditions” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 34). Constructivist grounded theory serves as a guide to explore the key issues of this study while prioritizing the voices and strengths of youth. This allows us to listen closely to students’ stories and hopes while holding awareness of the realities of systemic oppression.

Participants. The middle school grades (5-8) of a PK-8 school in a large midwestern city participated in the study during the 2021-2022 school year. The school year was the most disrupted and challenging year of the pandemic for this community. Entire classes of students

were being sent home due to positive COVID tests, abruptly shifting them to online learning. Veteran staff reported high levels of burnout and an increasing frustration with the lack of understanding and support from the mayor concerning COVID-19 safety, culminating in a teachers' union strike in early 2022. Community, typically a large component of the practices and policies of this PK-8 school, were tested by these limitations. It is within this context that the study took place.

Of the 558 total students enrolled at this school, 66.3% were from families with low income according to district standards, 7% received special education supports, and 34.6% were English language learners. Of the student population, 73.8% identified as Hispanic, 18.8% as White, and the remaining as Asian (3.6%), Black (2.3%), and Other (1.4%).

A purposive sample approach was used to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (i.e., students volunteering time for interviews; Patton, 2002). Additionally, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) noted the importance of availability and willingness to participate (i.e., interest survey question) and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions clearly. There were two phases to the sampling process. First, all 5th through 8th grade students completed a short paper survey in December 2021, resulting in a sample of 199 students: 24% were in 5th grade, 25% in 6th grade, 28% in 7th grade, and 22% in 8th grade. 56% identified as Latino, 13% identified as mixed race, 13% identified as "other", 9% identified as White, 3%, 2%, and 1% identified as Asian, Black, and Native American, respectively. 45% of students identified as female, 48% as male, 3% as non-binary, 2% as questioning, 2% as "another identity", and < 1% identified as transgender. The last question of the survey asked, "Would you be interested in participating in an interview about your experience?" (Note: "experience" was left intentionally broad to encompass experience

with the SEL curriculum but also the school year.) While this survey was beyond the scope of this analysis, it allowed us to purposively sample students for interviews.

Second, all interested students ($n = 40$) were given consent forms to bring home to their guardians. After three weeks, 15 students were fully consented and scheduled for interviews. The fifteen student interview participants included seven 5th graders, five 6th graders, one 7th grader, and two 8th graders. One self-identified as male, twelve as female, and two as questioning. Ten of these students identified as Latine, three as mixed race, and two as White / Arab. See Table 1 for student demographics and pseudonyms.

Interview Protocol. Interviews were conducted in February 2022, having been delayed by winter break and a teachers' union strike. All interviews were conducted via GoogleMeets and coordinated by school office staff. The purposively selected sample of these students participated in semi-structured interviews, beginning with verbal assents, and lasting approximately 30 minutes each.

To uncover how students assessed the status of their own SE competencies, the lead author briefly described CASEL's five competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) and asked: "Which of these do you feel really good at?" and "Which would you want to grow in or get help getting better in?" These questions created space for students to think about themselves holistically and make assessments of their strengths and aspirations for growth.

Students were also asked the question: "If you could fix any one problem in the world, what would you fix and why?" This open-ended question allowed for students to share not only what felt most important to them, but to describe their ideas for change free of limitations. For a full interview protocol, including questions not included in this paper, see Appendix A.

Analytic Approach

Following verbatim transcription of interviews by Rev, qualitative analysis began in September 2022. As recommended by constructivist grounded theory, the lead author began with initial coding (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Initial coding aims to create as many codes as possible, staying close to the data (i.e., the words of the students). Focusing solely on responses to the interview questions addressing SE competencies and critical reflection, this entailed line-by-line coding which helped build awareness of categories grounded within the data (Charmaz, 2006). Next, the lead author shifted to focused coding. Focused coding allows the researcher to select core categories from the initial codes, seeking data saturation. The lead author generated a list of domains separately for the SECs (strengths and areas of growth) and critical reflection that represented prominent findings from the data. This was an iterative process, during which the lead author met with the second author bi-weekly to discuss the themes, check assumptions, and receive feedback.

Theoretical coding began in November 2022, making a shift to the analytical and interpretive. At this point, the lead author began to develop theories from the data. This process included analysis first within and then between questions. SEC themes were analyzed on the group level, as were critical reflection themes. For the next phase of analysis, we split students into two groups based on their critical reflection themes (see description below). Within each of the two groups, we then analyzed the SE strengths and areas of growth. This allowed greater insight into the features, similarities, and differences in these groups. Theoretical coding was iterative and included reading and rereading excerpts, memoing intriguing findings and patterns, creating tables, and writing up initial and subsequent findings. The lead author noted trends and outliers, paying close attention to alignment and divergence. Extensive memo writing was used

throughout the process, capturing coding choices, explanations, reflections, and links to existing literature (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). The first and second authors continued to meet bi-weekly to discuss and refine findings throughout this final phase.

Because we were interested in students' perspectives of their social and emotional competencies, interview excerpts were coded based on student assignments of strengths versus areas of growth, rather than on the researchers' interpretations or assumptions. For instance, if a student named something as an area of growth but then described what the researcher might name as a strength, the excerpt was categorized as an area of growth to reflect the student's perspective. Student SECs were also coded expansively: if a student named a skill as one theme (e.g., relationships) but the researcher also identified another theme within the excerpt (e.g., empathy), the researcher then double-coded the excerpt. This decision was made to ensure as many student competencies were highlighted as possible, regardless of students' use of a precise label. For critical reflections, we also coded expansively. This meant that student responses were categorized non-exclusively (e.g., if a student gave a response that included *bullying* and *COVID-19*, that response was counted in both themes).

Rigor

Rigor was ensured through maintaining an audit trail (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988) and engaging in internal and external audits. Credibility was addressed following the guidelines provided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2014), consulting with an experienced qualitative researcher throughout the entire process (Holloway, 1997), providing author positionality statements, and reporting findings using the participant's own words (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Results

Our first two research questions explore how middle school students described their own social and emotional competencies, and then their critical reflections on the problems they would like to fix in the world. The third research question combined these findings, allowing us to explore in-depth the relationship between SE competencies and critical reflection. We present the findings in three corresponding sections.

Social and Emotional Competencies

The first research question asked how students described strengths and areas of growth in their social and emotional competencies. Results revealed four major themes: *emotions*, *relationships*, *problem solving*, and *empathy*. *Emotions* and *relationships* were the most common themes, with 73% of students identifying these as strengths and/or areas of growth. These were followed by *problem solving* and *empathy* (67% and 60%, respectively). Overall, all but one of the themes appeared more often as strengths than areas of growth (e.g., *problem solving* was identified as a strength by 60% of students while only one student identified it as an area of growth). *Empathy* stood apart as not only the most evenly split SE competency but as the only skill where more students identified it as an area of growth than a strength (i.e., 33% of student identified *empathy* as a strength while 40% identified it as an area of growth). See Table 2 for the prevalence of themes and Table 3 for student excerpts that are explored in more detail below.

Emotions. Identifying and managing *emotions* was named by a total of eleven students (73%). This skill falls under the CASEL core competencies of self-awareness and self-management. Nine students (60%) identified *emotions* as a strength. Strengths in identifying and managing *emotions* often included a kind of problem solving around those feelings: identifying the source, self- and co-regulation strategies.

One student, Sabrina, described her ability to identify her own emotions and her common response behaviors as a strength:

I can tell when I'm happy and when I'm sad because I can tell... When I'm happy, I either call my friends and say what happened. And then when I'm sad, I usually I tell my dog, 'cause she's my comfort person...

Sabrina's answer identified two common emotions (i.e., happiness and sadness) and how she often responded when feeling them. She felt drawn to share the experience when feeling happiness, but sadness was a feeling that was more private (i.e., brought to her dog or "comfort person"). Both hint at potential co-regulation strategies.

Another student, Jacinta, explained that *emotions* were a strength due to her ability to identify their source. She explained:

I think maybe figuring out my emotions... I think I'm not really good at managing them, but I think I'm really good at figuring out whether I'm angry at someone or if it's just something that made my day go the wrong way.

Understanding not only what emotion she was feeling but the source of that feeling was important for Jacinta. Her response also hinted at an area of growth within *emotions*—which will be addressed below. Ines added on to Jacinta's response—not only did she feel identification of emotions was a strength of hers, but the subsequent management of those emotions:

I think I'm really good at emotions because sometimes when I get really upset or something, I really try to pull myself back, really try to calm myself down, when it's a test or something and I'm stressed out because I don't really know this question. I feel like I'm going to fail. And so sometimes I take a really big breath or I tell my teacher, can I go for a quick walk? And I go for a quick walk. I go straight into my work and like that, I know the question... I just thought of it.

Ines was able to identify that stress was preventing her from thinking clearly on her test, and then enacted self-regulation strategies (i.e., taking breaths and going on a walk). These strategies were highly effective for Ines to manage her emotions and answer the question.

Finally, another student, Kai, also named managing emotions as a strength. For them, they leaned on self-regulation strategies like listening to music and gaining perspective:

... I know I don't get mad easily. Okay, I could get mentally mad, but I don't show it and I manage it... Usually I just listen to music... I always think, "Tomorrow's another day. I'll be fine. I don't have to die because of this."

While Kai still experiences emotions like anger "easily," they rely on their strategies to manage that anger. Their perspective that "tomorrow's another day" helps Kai to remember that not only does nothing last forever, but tomorrow offers a fresh start.

Six students (40%) identified *emotions* as an area of growth. Areas of growth in this theme often included wanting to improve in emotional reactivity and self- and co-regulation strategies. One student, Anisah, explained:

My emotions I think is one I would try to get better at, yeah... Because sometimes I get mad easily and it's something I would want to work on, especially... Usually just breathing, that's really it. Or listening too, if I'm at home, usually music helps a lot.

Anisah wants to reduce her emotional reactivity, similarly to Jacinta. Jacinta explained why this is important to her:

I think my managing my emotions, because sometimes I [learned] relationships [are] how you treat other people. So maybe if I learn how to manage my emotions, I won't take my anger or something can cause me to do something else.

For Jacinta, reducing her emotional reactivity is important because of the impact her anger could have on her relationships. Jacinta spoke specifically about the interconnection between her emotion management skills and her relationships, a connection that was commonly mentioned by her peers as well.

Another student, Emilia, shared a unique perspective. She spoke about her love of reading and how she identified with a character who kept his emotions to himself:

Basically, I don't know how to handle emotions very well. Especially when it comes to dealing with them since I mostly depend on music, drawing, books, and a bit of

entertainment but that feeling still doesn't go away... The way [the book character] feels like he has to carry everything is on him, he doesn't want to burden other people, I can relate to that since I never usually like sharing my problems, so especially showing how you feel ... Whatever you feel, you keep it inside and you let it all out to a certain point when nobody is around.

For Emilia, she found a lot of her strategies (i.e., music, drawing) did not get rid of the emotion she was feeling, and she felt similarly to the book character who waited until he was alone to let out everything he was feeling.

Relationships. Building and maintaining *relationships* was named by a total of eleven students (73%). These competencies fall under CASEL's relationship skills. Eight students (53%) identified *relationships* as a strength. Strengths in *relationships* included building and maintaining relationships with people in their lives through friendliness, kindness, generosity, and including others.

Gemma explained that her strength in *relationships* was due to her friendliness:

I feel like maintaining and building relationships. I'm very open to people and I'm just very out there. I'm very [extroverted]. You know? So I always talk to people. I probably get it from my dad. He's very like that too. And I have a ton of friendships because of it. And I have a ton of just like relationships from the stuff I do from him... Yeah, I'm good at maintaining relationships, because even if we don't talk for a while, I still care deeply about you and I will message you and be like, Hey, what's up? It's okay for not the best friends, but I keep them as good friends... So I think that I'm pretty friendly with people.

She described extroversion and friendliness as a trait that she gets from her father that makes *relationships* as strength of hers, while also sharing behaviors she practices such as being open, caring, and communicative. Maliha explained a similar strength to Gemma:

I feel that I'm really good at connecting with friends... I feel like I'm good at those connections, because whenever there is a new student, they would be playing with me and they feel very nice and active at the first day. So I feel like I'm good at making friends.

For Maliha, a key component of her strength in *relationships* is her ability to welcome new students and to make new friends.

Adelina accomplishes inclusion through her kindness and generosity: “The relationship one... I have good relationships with my friends, my classmates... I always try to be kind. I always try to be giving. And if someone’s left out, I always try to include them.” Adelina, just like Gemma and Maliha, identified the importance of relationships with all kinds of people, especially those who are new or excluded.

Anisah’s strength in *relationships* was apparent across her friendships and family relationships:

I think relationships with people is definitely one. Yeah. That’s a big one to me... Well, I’ve had a bunch of friends throughout my life and some have left, some are still here. I’m really glad I have the ones that are here. And my family’s also a really big one too. We always get gifts for each other, at the holidays, especially. And also today I also gave gifts to my friends for Valentine’s Day.

Not only does Anisah value her relationships, but she exchanges gifts as a way to communicate that feeling.

Three students (20%) identified *relationships* as an area of growth. These included emotional reactivity, interpersonal conflict, and social skills. Jacinta, in her *emotions* excerpt above, explained how emotional reactivity can damage relationships, demonstrating the ways in which various SE competencies interact. Juan, explained the conflict he and his sister experience: “... me and my sister, we always fight... Sometimes I get on her nerves, sometimes she gets on my nerves and we both hate that we get on each other’s nerves.” He went on to explain the ways in which his cousin supports them in their conflict, but this is still an area of growth for him.

Ines explained that she would like support in her friendships in particular:

A little bit of friendship because I’m not really good at talking to people that much. When it’s with my friends, I don’t really know what to start because sometimes we talk about something and I don’t know it. And then I try to say what are you guys talking about and stuff. So I really want somebody to support me in friendship... And also, sometimes my

friend, sometimes I don't really know what to say if I want to make a new friend. So, I just like zone out for like a quick second. I don't know what to say.

Ines described concern about how to talk with her current friends and how to make new friends as her area of growth in *relationships*.

Problem Solving. *Problem solving* is defined as navigating and managing problems and was named by a total of ten students (67%). This skill falls under the CASEL competencies of relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Nine students (60%) identified *problem solving* as a strength. Strengths in *problem solving* include providing help, coming up with solutions, seeking help, and supporting others to navigate interpersonal conflict.

Emilia explained that *problem solving* is a strength for her, but added a caveat:

Problem solving, I can come up with solutions, I'm just not sure how to put it in place. I get a solution but I sometimes just stay quiet to see if anybody else comes up with something different. Just something better. Then if nobody comes up with anything, that's usually when I speak up.

While solving problems is a strength, Emilia described waiting to see if any of her peers come up with solutions first before she would share her own.

Shared above in *empathy*, Katalia's strength in *problem solving* relied on seeking support not only *for* her friends, but *from* her friends, identifying help-seeking behavior and relational support. Alejandra explains how her problem solving includes addressing interpersonal conflict:

I feel like I'm the best at, not really the best, but I'm really good at problem solving. Because if there's a problem, I always try to find a plan to fix it. And if one of my classmates are mad at each other or something like that, I always try to help them stop being mad at each other and be friends again. I try to hear both sides of the story and then I just try to understand what's happening. And then I always try to find a problem and I try to fix it with whatever. Like I try to find a problem and I just ... I can't really explain it. It's just, I just try to fix it as much as possible.

While she downplayed her skills in problem solving, Alejandra explained her process of listening to both sides in a conflict to better understand the problem and offer her support. She also mentioned her skills as finding problems and attempting to solve them.

Interestingly, Ana started by explaining that *problem solving* was an area of growth for her, but upon describing her strategies, decided it was a strength:

And so I think that I'm not the best problem solver because most of the time when I have problems with another person, or I feel frustrated with something for someone, I go to my friends and my family, because they give the best advice to me. And so I sometimes go to my teachers and my principals for help with things that help in school. Yeah. And yeah, I just, I think of myself as a good problem solver, but not the best.

Ana described herself as “not the best” but “good” when it comes to solving problems. In particular, she named relying on others for advice as an area of growth in *problem solving*, identifying what the authors believe is a strength: help-seeking behavior.

One student named *problem solving* as an area of growth. For Kai, this was due to overthinking. They explained: “I’m an overthinker; I overthink things. I’m like, ‘What do I do? Do I do this? Do I do this?’ I try to find the most simplest way.” For Kai, it is the process of thinking through and deciding on a solution that they would like to grow in.

Empathy. *Empathy* was named by a total of nine students (60%) and falls under the CASEL core competency of social awareness. Five students (33%) identified *empathy* as a strength. This included understanding others by identifying the emotional states and perspectives of their friends, peers, or fictional characters and often responding with helpful or comforting behavior.

Kai explained that they are especially attuned to others’ emotions: “I could always tell when other people are sad and I just go comfort them. I’m very good at just understanding

others... It's mostly my friends." This understanding of others followed by comforting behavior was also shared by Sabrina as a strength:

I get to when my friends are sad... I always try to make her, is she sad? I'll try to make her feel better. Because I always say, oh don't let this person ruin your day because that's just, that's not right.

For both students, their strengths in *empathy* lay in identifying and understanding others' feelings and offering comfort and care.

Similarly, Jacinta explained how understanding others is tied to her helping behavior: "Maybe understanding other people. I really try to understand what they're going through and maybe helping them if they ever need help." For Katalia, this includes checking in on her friends and seeking help if needed: "I have really good relationships with my friends. Like when they're sad, I always talk to them to see if they're okay." Later, she explained: "And if there's a problem, I'll tell the teacher for them." Katalia's response indicated that in situations with her friends, both comfort and problem solving were important empathetic response behaviors and the reasons she identified *empathy* as a strength.

Finally, Emilia shared a unique response about her *empathy* skills: "I say understanding people, people in real life, no, but in books, yes." For Emilia, she finds her ability to understand characters in books to be a strength, but she finds that she struggles to do the same in real life.

Six students (40%) identified *empathy* as an area of growth. Areas for growth in *empathy* includes the desire to better understand others' emotional states and perspectives to prevent harm, understand motivation, and help.

Alejandra explained that she would like help understanding others' feelings to prevent hurting them:

I think I would need a little help supporting, I need a little support with that [being in their shoes] because I'm not always on the right track with how they're feeling.

Sometimes I might say something that I don't...I didn't even know I said it and sometimes it might do something to them, and without me knowing. So I think I would need like a little help with that.

Alejandra identified that it is possible to inadvertently hurt another's feelings and believes that growing in *empathy* would help to reduce that likelihood. Maliha also hoped to grow in *empathy* to better understand why some people hurt others:

Because sometimes some people are just hating people and I want to know why they do that and what happened? Why are you guys doing that? Did they do something to you guys? Sometimes they're being mean and I don't know why and they never tell me why, sometimes they're pranking me, so that's why I want to know why.

Maliha named a desire to understand feelings and motivations, especially behind unkind behavior. Her description revealed her own practice of empathy when she thinks about what could motivate someone to behave in that way.

Katalia shared the importance of improving in *empathy* in order to be more helpful: "Because I'm not very good at it, 'cause I sometimes want to help them [classmates] but I don't really know how to understand them. How they feel sometimes." Katalia explicitly named the goal of helping others and how this can be accomplished through better understanding another's feelings through *empathy*.

Critical Reflection

The second research question asked what problems students wanted to fix in the world, tapping into critical reflection. Results revealed six themes: *ending bullying*, *ending COVID-19*, *ending injustice*, *ending violence and hate*, *expanding and protecting human rights*, and *other*. *Ending bullying* was the most common theme, mentioned by five students (33%), followed by *ending COVID-19* by four students (27%). *Ending injustice*, *ending hate and violence*, and *expanding and protecting human rights* were all named equally (i.e., three students or 20%

each). The least common theme was *other* with only two students (13%). See Table 4 for more details on the prevalence of themes and Table 5 for all excerpts from each theme.

Ending Bullying. Five students identified bullying as the problem they wanted to fix. Adelina explained: “This is kind of a hard question...There’s a lot of things to fix in the world. I don’t know. It’s really hard...Maybe I would fix a lot of people get bullied, stop the bullying.” She went on to include fixing bullying in the world (included below in *ending violence and hate*). Sabrina spoke about why bullying needed to end: “Maybe like to stop people bullying other kids...’Cause like if you bully someone, it might make their life worse because you don’t know what they are going through.” Sabrina noted that bullying makes life “worse” for people and that people do not often know what burdens others are carrying. Maliha offered an alternative to bullying: “I would fix bullying each other and not to bully and to be kind. So people that are really mean, to be kind to somebody and not do bad things to each other.” Rather than bullying, being mean, or behaving in harmful ways, Maliha wanted there to be more kindness.

Ending COVID-19. Four students chose the COVID-19 pandemic as the problem they would like to fix. Almira said: “In the world, I would probably stop the virus” and Katalia concurred: “Probably if COVID wasn’t a real thing.” Most students in this group did not offer further explanation as to why this was the problem they wanted to fix, perhaps due to the reach and impact of the pandemic, feeling this was explanation enough.

Ending Injustice. Three students chose problems that addressed issues of injustice, specifically addressing issues of -isms: racism, sexism, and homophobia. Jacinta addressed racism: “Maybe I would say racism towards other like races and skin colors, because I think that affects a lot of people. And I just think that it’s unfair, that there’s a different way that people get

treated.” She pointed out that not only is racism widespread, but it is unfair because it leads to disparate treatment. Similarly, Emilia pointed out the injustice of both sexism and homophobia:

I want to say sexism since there’s a lot of people who are just like, “A girl can’t do this” or “a girl can’t do that” and then they fall to stereotypes. I’m like, I might not have the motivation to do this but I know other people for a fact could accomplish this. I’m not saying nobody can or only males can. It’s just like females can. It just needs to be shown more. I’d say one of the great ways to do that is the vice president right now. That just proves to show how far women can go too, especially when it comes to politics and everything. My old social studies teacher went to go pursue law, so a lawyer and then I’m really going to miss her, because she was also like a mother figure to me but that just proves to show that anybody can do what they can...I also think that people need to start respecting the LGBTQ more, since ... If you don’t like it, just move on. Nobody is asking for your input. If you don’t like it, just don’t say anything, just continue about your day.

Emilia argued that sexist stereotypes place limits on what girls and women believe they can accomplish and shared the successful examples of both Vice President Kamala Harris and her own social studies teacher. She added that it is important to respect people in the LGBTQ community and that rather than sharing harmful opinions, it is better to not say anything at all.

Gemma similarly brought up racism, homophobia, and misogyny as problems she wanted to fix in the world:

Probably like the hate or like racism, homophobia, like all that kind of stuff. It’s just stupid—like the misogynistic stuff in the world. Because it’s all stupid. It’s there for a reason. Like why are you hating on it? You know?

Gemma argues that racism, homophobia, and misogyny is “stupid” because these identities exist “for a reason.” While Gemma did mention hate, she specifically called out racism, homophobia, and misogyny. The next theme, *ending violence and hate*, deals with similar issues in more broad terms.

Ending Violence and Hate. In this category, three students wanted to solve the problems of violence and hate. Addressing violence, Anisah shared: “So that violence isn’t as normalized as it is today.” Building on, Alejandra said:

I think I would want like everyone to just be kinder to people, because there's a lot of violence and hateness going around and I think it would be more peaceful if everyone was just kind to each other.

Rather than just reducing violence and hate, Alejandra would replace that behavior with kindness. Adelina noticed a similar problem. After reflecting on how she would like to see bullying end, she explained: "And I know a lot of people in general, in the real world, they'll be mean to people for no reason, to stop that too." Drawing a connection between what she sees in her local community and the world at large, Adelina would solve the problem of bullying and mean behavior across the world.

Expanding and Protecting Human Rights. Three students identified problems that fall under the theme of *expanding and protecting human rights*. These students want to solve the problems of homelessness, hunger, and other important unmet human needs. Ana explained:

World hunger, because I feel like people who don't have food to eat or are homeless. It kind of just makes me sad. And, you know, my mom always says, we have to be grateful for what we have, because there's some people in the world who don't have it. And so I try to donate as much money as I can to like food and stuff and just, I don't like seeing people suffer. It's kind of sad to me.

Ana describes being saddened by others' suffering and would solve issues of hunger and homelessness. She tied this to her mother's reminders to be grateful for what she has.

Anisah explained similar problems she would like to fix in society:

There are a lot. That's a really hard one... Well, obviously people who are homeless or need shelter, definitely that. And food too, so basic life necessities. And any of those who don't have an education is also one I like and basically social justice and peace in the world.

Anisah explained that she would want everyone to have "basic life necessities" including education and for there to be both social justice and world peace. Further expanding on human rights, Kai explained:

I would fix gender. I would fix the fact that schools don't really have gender-neutral bathrooms. I know my school does, I go there, I love it. We have GSA meetings, Gay and Straight Alliances, and we just talk. It feels like there's a whole community here; very nice school. I would want that to be in other schools as well.

While one might expect to categorize this excerpt under *ending injustice*, Kai named that they would fix gender through ensuring other schools provide gender-neutral bathrooms, Gay and Straight Alliances, and a feeling of community. For this student, this is a right that they personally benefit from and want other students to experience as well. This focus on expanding of good things for the LGBTQ+ community rather than ending bad things makes this excerpt a unique contribution to our understanding of *expanding and protecting human rights*.

Other. This theme captures two responses that did not fit into any other themes. After naming the COVID-19 pandemic, Almira wanted to solve the problem of her brother's lactose intolerance, naming that she was worried about the pain he felt. The second student, Juan, also after talking about COVID-19, explained that he wanted to break his habit of calling out answers in the classroom.

Local and Global Reflections

Analysis across the problems students identified to solve revealed that each student chose at least one problem that would reduce or end the suffering of others, be it close relations or strangers across the world. Upon further analysis, it became clear that this aim of reducing suffering differed for students—while some focused on their local community and context, others named the suffering of people across the country and world. This led us to analyze these problems through a *local* and *global* lens.

Twelve of the fifteen students identified *local* and/or *global* problems. The five students who were categorized as *local* explored the problems of bullying in their own school and local community. The eight students who identified *ending injustice*, *ending violence and hate* or

expanding and protecting human rights as problems to solve were categorized as *global*. To be categorized as *global*, students needed to name problems that were larger than themselves and their local community. Most often, these students addressed widespread issues seen across the nation and even worldwide. One student, Adelina, is in both categories, due to her response addressing bullying on the local level and then expanding it to bullying behavior we see in the world. This was noted in the first two sections.

Students who identified *COVID-19* or *other* were not categorized as either *local* or *global* due to their responses not clearly aligning with either category. Students under *COVID-19* generally did not provide context as to why this was a problem they would like to fix—whether it is how it affects them personally, their local community, and/or the world at large. One student under *other* hoped to fix her brother’s illness (the only excerpt that was focused on a specific person) while the other focused on their own behavior in class (the only excerpt that was self-focused). For these reasons, students in *COVID-19* and *other* were not included in this part of the analysis.

The *local* group was mostly sixth graders (60%) while the *global* group was mostly fifth graders (63%). Both groups were predominantly female (80% and 88%, respectively), and both groups had one student who identified their gender as “questioning.” Most students in both groups identified as Latine (80% of the *local* group and 63% of the *global* group), with the remaining students identifying as Arab (one student per group) or multiracial (two students in *global* only). See Table 6 for more details on this student sample’s demographics.

Local Trends. Students in the *local* group are more attuned to mean or bullying behavior than their *global* peers. As shared above, Sabrina explained how she helped her friends feel better after someone hurt their feelings, while Maliha explained that she wants to grow in

empathy so she can understand why people act in unkind ways. This finding was also evident when *local* students spoke about *relationships*. In fact, three students named inclusion as key to their strengths in *relationships*. As explored above, Adelina, who was in both groups, explained how she is kind, giving, and always tries to include those who are left out.

The problem identified by the *local* group—*ending bullying*—also exhibited additional skills not shared in their SEC reflections. Most importantly, social awareness was demonstrated through their practice of empathy and concern for others' feelings, relationship skills mindsets came through in their desire to stand up for others, and responsible decision-making was demonstrated through evaluating interpersonal impacts (e.g., unkind behavior affecting wellbeing; CASEL, n.d.).

Global Trends. There were three key trends within the *global* group. First, these students tended to be far more attuned to *emotions* as both a strength and area of growth (75% overall) and explicitly tied *emotions* to *relationships*. These students named the importance of identifying and managing emotions to prevent taking those emotions out on others. As explored above, Jacinta named how she figures out the source of her emotions and wants to get better at managing them to prevent damaging her relationships. Additionally, two *global* students named the ways in which they deny their emotions to avoid burdening others. Emilia spoke about hiding her emotions until she is alone and can let them all out, and Gemma explained how she does not know how she is feeling:

I kind of just don't talk about my emotions a lot. I don't speak up about that much... But I don't talk much about how I'm feeling, I guess. Kind of just bundle the reasons why inside my brain. I can't even speak about it because I don't know what I'm feeling and it's kind of just like, okay. It's kind of just a more self thing where I'm like, I should probably talk about this more... I'm trying to, because with everyone, I kind of just, I always ask people if they're okay or if they're struggling and they can always talk to me. People talk to me all the time about this stuff and I never really talk to others about it, like my stuff.

Later in the interview, Gemma explained that she is the person her friends and classmates turn to for support, but that she has trouble asking for the same in return.

The second trend in the *global* group was self-awareness and self-criticality. For instance, three of the *global* students who named *problem solving* as a strength also qualified their responses. As explored above, Emilia said that she waits to see if anyone else offers a solution before she shares hers and both Alejandra and Ana said they were good but not the best problem solvers. Additionally, *global* students were overall more likely to report an area of growth than their *local* peers. There were 11 excerpts addressing areas of growth for *global* students, compared to only three from the entire *local* group.

Finally, the problems identified by the *global* group—*ending injustice, ending violence and hate, and expanding and protecting human rights*—exhibited additional skills not shared in their SEC reflections. In particular, social awareness came through in their empathy and concern for others' wellbeing (e.g., facing unfair treatment), relationship skills mindsets came through in their desire to stand up for the rights of others (i.e., access to gender-neutral bathrooms), and responsible decision-making came through by their choice of problems to solve (e.g., far-reaching injustices), elucidating their ability to evaluate community and institutional impacts (CASEL, n.d.).

Discussion

This constructivist grounded theory study explored not only middle school students' self-assessments of their social and emotional competencies and critical reflection, but the relationship between these two constructs. The SE competencies students identified helped provide insight into how students saw themselves, while their critical reflections provided insight

into how they see their world. Together, they provide new and unique understandings with implications for the teaching and learning of SEL and critical reflection in urban middle schools.

Social and Emotional Competencies

The pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues amongst children and youth (e.g., Samji et al., 2021), and marginalized communities are more likely to have faced additional stress but have also shown incredible resilience (Garcini et al., 2021). The prevalence of *emotions* as both a strength and area of growth reflects exactly that. What is particularly impressive is that these students were reporting their awareness of their own struggles and strengths and simultaneously named strategies they use to protect themselves and the people around them. This focus on others—particularly *relationships*—was not only developmentally appropriate (NASEM, 2019) but aligned with gender (Gilligan, 1982) and cultural value socialization (e.g., Knight et al., 2016; Ruvalcaba-Romero et al., 2017). This emphasis on relationships is the inroad through which these adolescents are developing themselves and their skills: through connection with others.

Students largely identified *problem solving* as a relational skill. The high level of their reported efficacy is inspiring, particularly during a time of such stress and conflict. Additionally, even when students identified their own *problem solving* skills as “not the best,” they showed other important skills that we believe are indeed strengths (e.g., Ana’s help-seeking behavior).

Finally, closely tied to *relationships*, *empathy* was the only theme where more students named it as an area of growth than a strength. This speaks greatly of students’ desires to better understand and support those around them, and the very real challenges of practicing empathy in adolescence (see Pfister et al., 2023). Empathy has been found to be a crucial skill for all students and has implications for positive relationships into adulthood (e.g., Allemand et al.,

2015). Students in this theme also named a desire to understand others' motivations, which taps into students' desires to make sense of their world and the people around them. This is particularly important when thinking about empathy as a tool for understanding across differences (e.g., Miklikowska, 2018; Skinner & Meltzoff, 2019)—a value referenced in the school's mission.

Overall, students exhibited an impressive self-awareness and reflectivity—they were not only keyed into their unique strengths but showed honesty and hope around their areas of growth. This is exemplified by one student, Ana, who shared a story about how conversations with her principal helped her to see how her behavior impacted her community and inspired her to grow. Ana said:

And after that, I kind of started becoming more nicer and treating people how I want to be treated. And so that really changed me as a person... My parents told me how proud they were in my change and how I...turned into a better person and the kind of child, they kind of really wanted a child that really was kind. And treated others the best that they could. And so they were really proud at my change and they were really proud that I could make the change.

Through all of these results the thread of *relationships*. This was seen throughout interactions with the school community. Surveyed students reported a consistently high sense of belonging and when asked how they feel when they are in school, Maliha responded: "I feel like I'm part of a family." When asked how they would describe their school, Jacinta explained: "I really like my school. I think they're a really nice community, and they're all really united."

Critical Reflection

When asked what problems students wanted to solve in the world, each student identified at least one problem that would end the suffering of others. Further, 53% of these responses had a *global* focus (the largest group) and an additional 33% had the same focus (i.e., ending suffering) for the local community (i.e., *local*). These findings challenge one of the most

common stereotypes about adolescent youth: that they are self-centered (e.g., Telzer et al., 2022). Instead, these students revealed themselves to be not only other-focused, but also hoping for a kinder, more equitable world. The *local* group imagined a middle school context free of bullying and filled with kindness, while the *global* group imagined a world that was free of inequality and filled with kindness, as well. This orientation can be seen in the school’s vision (“we all strive to make a positive and dynamic impact on our world,”) and mission (“Think critically and globally. Care about community and respect diversity”). It is clear by students’ responses that these values are not just words but are indeed alive in this school.

Local. The volume of research on bullying—particularly during adolescence—is staggering. And there is good reason: strong evidence causally links bullying victimization to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide ideation (Moore et al., 2017). Risk of bullying victimization and negative outcomes are exacerbated for LGBTQ+ youth (Mittleman et al., 2019; Mueller et al., 2015; Reisner et al., 2014), first-generation immigrant youth (Pottie et al., 2015), youth of color (Galán et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020), and religious minority youth (Sapouna et al., 2022), making it an equity issue.

While the students in the *local* group may not have cited the above studies, their responses signaled a clear rejection of bullying behavior. Sabrina exhibited a particularly keen understanding of the danger of bullying when she said: “it might make their life worse because you don’t know what they are going through.” Sabrina and the rest of the *local* group were focused on protecting their peers and the entire school community from the harm of bullying; they showed that they are living their school’s mission of caring about their community. In fact, this school does not have anti-bullying programming but instead relies on Second Step for social-

emotional learning skills, so it is our hypothesis that these *local* students' desire to address this issue came from their practice of skills like empathy and care for others' wellbeing.

Global. Global students brought to life the school's vision of striving to create a positive impact on the world. As defined by Watts and colleagues (2011), *global* students exhibited key important understandings of critical reflection, particularly the "social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities, such as social, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities that constrain well-being and human agency" (p. 46). Further questions to reveal whether these students understood the cause of these social problems in "systemic terms" were not asked, but the authors do not see this as a limitation. The openness of this question tapped into an additional concept: political imagination (Scott, 2022). Political imagination is "the cognitive process and space where people consciously distance the present moment to engage, explore, examine, and (de)construct sociopolitical worlds or realities" (p. 18). Indeed, Wiley (2016) argues that each new social order or structure emerges from the political imagination of the people building it. According to Scott, political imagination is the potential link between adolescents' critical analysis and critical action and helps to support critical hope that change is possible (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). This political imagination offers an important possible pathway to developing critical reflection.

Implications

Local to Global. The presence of *local* and *global* focus showed how adolescents can tap into global problems through their local context and, in doing so, accessing the m(ai)cro context. For example, Adelina took what she was seeing in her school (bullying at the *local* level) and noticed similar behaviors out in the world (bullying at the *global* level). Not only does this practice of connecting *local* to *global* align with culturally responsive pedagogy (i.e., all new

learning must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge to be learned; Hammond, 2015), but it similarly aligns with institutional ethnography, a qualitative method that calls on the experiences of everyday life as entry-points to understanding the role of institutions (Devault; 2006; Smith, 2005). Therefore, we argue that one promising pathway to support the understanding of global issues is through the local context and calling on the social-emotional skills that make that leap possible (e.g., *emotions, relationships, empathy, and problem solving*). For example, if an educator is addressing immigration policies (a *global* perspective) with the class, a potential inroad can include conducting interviews with community members who immigrated to the U.S., bringing in a *local* perspective. By tapping into these stories, educators can call on students to bring what they learned about their interviewees experience to the discussion of national policies and their impact of real people.

SEC to Global and Local. Connecting social and emotional competencies to critical reflections offered further insight. Students in the *local* group were more deeply attuned to their peers and bullying when they spoke of SE competencies and areas of growth. Students in the *global* group were more likely to focus on *emotions* as key to *relationships* and showed higher self-awareness and self-criticality. Responses from both groups exhibited social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These findings encourage us to think not of one group being better or more developed than the other, but the ways in which these two foci can be connected for the betterment of all. Locally focused students would benefit from learning to better understand their inner worlds from their *global* peers, and those *global* peers could learn to be a little less self-doubting from their *local* peers. Together, perhaps with the guidance from Adelina, they could work together to see the connections between their *local* community and the *global* community, and better uncover the systemic causes as the points of leverage for change.

Importantly, it is through leaning on each other's strengths—of *emotions, relationships, problem solving, and empathy*—that makes this possible. Whether through learner profiles or other reflections that allow students to think about their SE competencies and areas of growth, educators can build student groups for projects that not only allow students to step into their strengths but provide opportunities to develop. Educators can facilitate this by including SE competencies reflections at the end of work time and even including practice of those competencies in the rubric.

Limitations

Four limitations require mention. First, while we opened interviews up to all students, the sample was largely girls. While this didn't allow us to include boy's voices, it did allow us to deepen our understanding of adolescent girls' beliefs. Second, longitudinal data and triangulation of data sources (e.g., observations, teacher report) were not possible due to resource limitations and travel restrictions posed by the pandemic. Instead, we intentionally focused on student report, holding their perspectives and experiences as valuable and important. Third, the interview question about SEC areas of growth could potentially have brought up the threat of social desirability (e.g., Fisher et al., 1993). Beginning with SEC strengths first and then thoughtful phrasing of the question (i.e., "what would you like to grow in or get help getting better in?") primed students to think about their skills in a growth mindset and one in which they can receive community support for. Finally, due to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to visit the school these students attended until after the study ended.

Concluding Points

This study contributes to the field in a few key ways. First, the use of self-reflection to report on SE competencies allowed us insight into student perception of their own skills and

development. Middle school social and emotional learning programs are some of the least successful (e.g., Yeager, 2017), and students' self-reflections on their SECs can shed light on important leverage points for powerful SEL support and intervention. Secondly, the focus on critical reflection provided perspective on what these students, unfettered by limitations and challenges, hoped to see changed in the world. While important in and of itself, this also helps educators gain insight into the issues most important to students, and they can therefore adapt learning experiences to incorporate them (e.g., Hammond, 2017). Thirdly, this is one of the first studies that connects SECs to critical reflection in an exploratory way. Implications for practice include learning about global perspectives via local understanding (and vice versa) through important social emotional competencies. Fourthly, it is not often that the voices of Latine and Arab adolescent girls are highlighted in studies. This study allowed for a deeper, more holistic understanding of students who are too often overlooked in psychological research, missing out on the richness of their experiences, values, and hopes. Finally, much of what is being researched and reported on in recent years is centered around pandemic learning loss (e.g., Engzell et al., 2021). This study offers a unique and encouraging perspective of how a group of adolescents continues to learn, grow, and hope even in the context of these unprecedented challenges.

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Table 1*Student Participants (N = 15)*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Grade
Jacinta	Latina	Female	5th
Anisah	Arab	Female	5th
Almira	Multiracial	Female	5th
Juan	Latino	Male	5th
Kai	Multiracial	Questioning	5th
Emilia	Latina	Female	5th
Gemma	Multiracial	Female	5th
Alejandra	Latina	Female	6th
Ana	Latina	Female	6th
Juliana	Latine	Questioning	6th
Ines	Latina	Female	6th
Maliha	Arab	Female	6th
Adelina	Latina	Female	7th
Katalia	Latina	Female	8th
Sabrina	Latina	Female	8th

Table 2*SEC Themes: Prevalence (N = 15)*

	Strength	Area of Growth	Student Count
Emotions	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	11 (73%)
Relationships	8 (53%)	3 (20%)	11 (73%)
Problem Solving	9 (60%)	1 (7%)	10 (67%)
Empathy	5 (33%)	6 (40%)	9 (60%)

Note. Student responses were categorized non-exclusively (e.g., if a student gave a response that included empathy and relationships, that response was counted in both themes). Within a theme, students are not double-counted (e.g., if they named an emotions strength and area of growth, they were only counted once under the student count).

Table 3*SEC Themes and Examples (N = 15)*

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
Emotions	Strengths in identifying and managing emotions often included a kind of problem solving around those feelings, which included identifying the source, self- and co-regulation strategies.	<p>I can tell when I'm happy and when I'm sad because I can tell... When I'm happy, I either call my friends and say what happened. And then when I'm sad, I usually I tell my dog, 'cause she's my comfort person...(Sabrina)</p> <p>I think maybe figuring out my emotions... I think I'm not really good at managing them, but I think I'm really good at figuring out whether I'm angry at someone or if it's just something that made my day go the wrong way. (Jacinta)</p> <p>I think I'm really good at emotions because sometimes when I get really upset or something, I really try to pull myself back, really try to calm myself down, when it's a test or something and I'm stressed out because I don't really know this question. I feel like I'm going to fail.</p> <p>And so sometimes I take a really big breath or I tell my teacher, can I go for a quick walk?</p> <p>And I go for a quick walk. I go straight into my work and like that, I know the question... I just thought of it. Like I have to calm myself down, take a few breaths. And then I told my teacher, because it was the last test. I got really frustrated. So I told my teacher, can I go for a</p>

walk? And she's like, yes. And so I went for a quick walk. I went back, I refreshed myself. I went to my seat, I grabbed my test and I got, and I looked at the question and I got it right.

(Ines)

... I know I don't get mad easily. Okay, I could get mentally mad, but I don't show it and I manage it... Usually I just listen to music... I always think, "Tomorrow's another day. I'll be fine. I don't have to die because of this." (Kai)

<p>Areas of growth in identifying and managing emotions often included wanting to improve in emotional reactivity and self- and co-regulation strategies.</p>	<p>My emotions I think is one I would try to get better at, yeah... Because sometimes I get mad easily and it's something I would want to work on, especially... Usually just breathing, that's really it. Or listening too, if I'm at home, usually music helps a lot.</p> <p>(Anisah)</p> <p>I think my managing my emotions, because sometimes I [learned] relationships [are] how you treat other people. So maybe if I learn how to manage my emotions, I won't take my anger or something can cause me to do something else. (Jacinta)</p> <p>Basically, I don't know how to handle emotions very well. Especially when it comes to dealing with them since I mostly depend on music, drawing, books, and a bit of entertainment but that feeling still doesn't go away... The way [the book character] feels like</p>
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he has to carry everything is on him, he doesn't want to burden other people, I can relate to that since I never usually like sharing my problems, so especially showing how you feel ... Whatever you feel, you keep it inside and you let it all out to a certain point when nobody is around. (Emilia)

Relationships	Strengths in relationships included building and maintaining relationships with people in their lives. Students named friendliness, kindness, generosity, and including others.	I feel like maintaining and building relationships. I'm very open to people and I'm just very out there. I'm very [extroverted]. You know? So I always talk to people. I probably get it from my dad. He's very like that too. And I have a ton of friendships because of it. And I have a ton of just like relationships from the stuff I do from him... Yeah, I'm good at maintaining relationships, because even if we don't talk for a while, I still care deeply about you and I will message you and be like, Hey, what's up? It's okay for not the best friends, but I keep them as good friends... So I think that I'm pretty friendly with people. (Gemma) I feel that I'm really good at connecting with friends... I feel like I'm good at those connections, because whenever there is a new student, they would be playing with me and they feel very nice and active at the first day. So I feel like I'm good at making friends. (Maliha)
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The relationship one... I have good relationships with my friends, my classmates... I always try to be kind. I always try to be giving. And if someone's left out, I always try to include them. (Adelina)

I think relationships with people is definitely one. Yeah. That's a big one to me... Well, I've had a bunch of friends throughout my life and some have left, some are still here. I'm really glad I have the ones that are here. And my family's also a really big one too. We always get gifts for each other, at the holidays, especially. And also today I also gave gifts to my friends for Valentine's Day. (Anisah)

Areas of growth in relationships included emotional reactivity, interpersonal conflict, and social skills.	... me and my sister, we always fight... Sometimes I get on her nerves, sometimes she gets on my nerves and we both hate that we get on each other's nerves. (Juan)
	A little bit of friendship because I'm not really good at talking to people that much. When it's with my friends, I don't really know what to start because sometimes we talk about something and I don't know it. And then I try to say what are you guys talking about and stuff. So I really want somebody to support me in friendship... And also, sometimes my friend, sometimes I don't really know what to say if I want to make a new friend. So, I just like zone out for like a quick second. I don't know what to say. (Ines)

Problem Solving	Strengths in problem solving included providing help, coming up with solutions, seeking help, and supporting others to navigate interpersonal conflict.	<p>Problem solving, I can come up with solutions, I'm just not sure how to put it in place. I get a solution but I sometimes just stay quiet to see if anybody else comes up with something different. Just something better. Then if nobody comes up with anything, that's usually when I speak up. (Emilia)</p> <p>And if there's a problem, I'll tell the teacher for [my friends]... When I need help, I go to my friends seeing if they can maybe help me. (Katalia)</p> <p>I feel like I'm the best at, not really the best, but I'm really good at problem solving. Because if there's a problem, I always try to find a plan to fix it. And if one of my classmates are mad at each other or something like that, I always try to help them stop being mad at each other and be friends again. I try to hear both sides of the story and then I just try to understand what's happening. And then I always try to find a problem and I try to fix it with whatever. Like I try to find a problem and I just ... I can't really explain it. It's just, I just try to fix it as much as possible. (Alejandra)</p>
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And so I think that I'm not the best problem solver because most of the time when I have problems with another person, or I feel frustrated with something for someone, I go to my friends and my family, because they give the best advice to me. And so I sometimes go to my teachers and my principals for help with things that help in school. Yeah. And yeah, I just, I think of myself as a good problem solver, but not the best. (Ana)

Areas of growth in problem solving included overthinking.	Actually, maybe that's my least one, problem solving. I always, I'm an overthinker; I overthink things. I'm like, "What do I do? Do I do this? Do I do this?" I try to find the most simplest way. (Kai)
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Empathy	Strengths in empathy included understanding others by identifying the emotional states and perspectives	<p>I could always tell when other people are sad and I just go comfort them. I'm very good at just understanding others... It's mostly my friends. (Kai)</p> <p>I get to when my friends are sad... I always try to make her, is she sad? I'll try to make her feel better. Because I always say, oh don't let this person ruin your day because that's just, that's not right. (Sabrina)</p> <p>When [my friends] are sad, I always talk to them to see if they're okay...(Katalia)</p> <p>And if there's a problem, I'll tell the teacher for them. (Katalia)</p>
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of their friends, peers, or fictional characters and often responding with helpful or comforting behavior.	Maybe understanding other people. I really try to understand what they're going through and maybe helping them if they ever need help. (Jacinta)
	I say understanding people, people in real life, no, but in books, yes. (Emilia)

Areas for growth in empathy included the desire to better understand others' emotional states and perspectives to prevent harm, understand	I say understanding people, people in real life, no, but in books, yes. (Emilia)
	I think I would need a little help supporting, I need a little support with that [being in their shoes] because I'm not always on the right track with how they're feeling. Sometimes I might say something that I don't...I didn't even know I said it and sometimes it might do something to them, and without me knowing. So I think I would need like a little help with that. (Alejandra)
	Because sometimes some people are just hating people and I want to know why they do that and what happened? Why are you guys doing that? Did they do something to you guys?

motivation, and help.	Sometimes they're being mean and I don't know why and they never tell me why, sometimes they're pranking me, so that's why I want to know why. (Maliha) Because I'm not very good at it, 'cause I sometimes want to help them [classmates] but I don't really know how to understand them. How they feel sometimes. (Katalia)
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Table 4*Critical Reflection Themes: Prevalence (N = 15)*

Theme	n (%)
Ending Bullying	5 (33%)
Ending COVID-19	4 (27%)
Ending Injustice	3 (20%)
Ending Violence and Hate	3 (20%)
Expanding and Protecting Human Rights	3 (20%)
Other	2 (13%)

Note. Student responses were categorized non-exclusively (e.g., if a student gave a response that included bullying and COVID-19, that response was counted in both themes).

Table 5*Critical Reflection Themes and Examples (N = 15)*

Theme	Description	Quotes
Ending Bullying	Students want to solve the problem of bullying.	This is kind of a hard question...There's a lot of things to fix in the world. I don't know. It's really hard...Maybe I would fix a lot of people get bullied, stop the bullying. (Adelina) Maybe like to stop people bullying other kids...'Cause like if you bully someone, it might make their life worse because you don't know what they are going through. (Sabrina) I would fix bullying each other and not to bully and to be kind. So people that are really mean, to be kind to somebody and not do bad things to each other. (Maliha)
Ending COVID-19	Students wants to solve the problem of the Coronavirus.	In the world, I would probably stop the virus... (Almira) Probably if COVID wasn't a real thing. (Katalia)
Ending Injustice	Students want to solve the problems	Maybe I would say racism towards other like races and skin colors, because I think that affects a lot of people. And I just think that it's unfair, that there's a different way that people get treated. (Jacinta)

of racism, sexism, and homophobia. I want to say sexism since there's a lot of people who are just like, "A girl can't do this" or "a girl can't do that" and then they fall to stereotypes. I'm like, I might not have the motivation to do this but I know other people for a fact could accomplish this. I'm not saying nobody can or only males can. It's just like females can. It just needs to be shown more. I'd say one of the great ways to do that is the vice president right now. That just proves to show how far women can go too, especially when it comes to politics and everything. My old social studies teacher went to go pursue law, so a lawyer and then I'm really going to miss her, because she was also like a mother figure to me but that just proves to show that anybody can do what they can...I also think that people need to start respecting the LGBTQ more, since ... If you don't like it, just move on. Nobody is asking for your input. If you don't like it, just don't say anything, just continue about your day. (Emilia)

Probably like the hate or like racism, homophobia, like all that kind of stuff. It's just stupid—like the misogynistic stuff in the world. Because it's all stupid. It's there for a reason. Like why are you hating on it? You know? (Gemma)

Ending	Students want to	So that violence isn't as normalized as it is today. (Anisah)
Violence and	solve the problems	I think I would want like everyone to just be kinder to people, because there's a lot of
Hate	of violence and hate.	violence and hateness going around and I think it would be more peaceful if everyone was just kind to each other. (Alejandra)
		And I know a lot of people in general, in the real world, they'll be mean to people for no reason, to stop that too. (Adelina)
Expanding and	Students want to	World hunger, because I feel like people who don't have food to eat or are homeless. It kind
Protecting	solve the problems	of just makes me sad. And, you know, my mom always says, we have to be grateful for what
Human Rights	of homelessness, hunger, and other important unmet human needs.	we have, because there's some people in the world who don't have it. And so I try to donate as much money as I can to like food and stuff and just, I don't like seeing people suffer. It's kind of sad to me. (Ana)
		There are a lot. That's a really hard one... Well, obviously people who are homeless or need shelter, definitely that. And food too, so basic life necessities. And any of those who don't have an education is also one I like and basically social justice and peace in the world. (Anisah)

I would fix gender. I would fix the fact that schools don't really have gender-neutral bathrooms. I know my school does, I go there, I love it. We have GSA meetings, Gay and Straight Alliances, and we just talk. It feels like there's a whole community here; very nice school. I would want that to be in other schools as well. (Kai)

Other	Student wants to solve the problem of her sibling's illness.	...in my family I would probably stop my brother, because he had, last time I feel like he is lactose intolerant because he was drinking milk and he called me on my phone and he told me and he was crying and he told me to come and bring my mom too because his stomach started hurting. And I was scared because he was, it looked like he was in so much pain, but he's feeling better though. (Almira)
	Student wants to solve the problem of his behavior in class.	For me not to make trouble or anything for me, not to talk out loud when the teacher's speaking. She was asking, my teacher, she was asking a question and I got it real quick. I just said it out loud and then I hate when I do that. (Juan)

Table 6*Students in Global or Local Themes (N = 12)*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Grade	Category
Jacinta	Latina	Female	5th	Global
Anisah	Arab	Female	5th	Global
Kai	Multiracial	Questioning	5th	Global
Emilia	Latina	Female	5th	Global
Gemma	Multiracial	Female	5th	Global
Alejandra	Latina	Female	6th	Global
Ana	Latina	Female	6th	Global
Juliana	Latine	Questioning	6th	Local
Ines	Latina	Female	6th	Local
Maliha	Arab	Female	6th	Local
Adelina	Latina	Female	7th	Both
Sabrina	Latina	Female	8th	Local

Table 7*SE Competencies by Global and Local Problems: Prevalence*

	Global Problems (<i>n</i> = 8)			Social Problems (<i>n</i> = 5)		
	Strengths	Areas of Growth	Total	Strengths	Areas of Growth	Total
Emotions	4 (50%)	6 (75%)	6 (75%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	3 (60%)
Relationships	4 (50%)	1 (13%)	5 (63%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
Problem Solving	4 (50%)	1 (13%)	5 (63%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	3 (60%)
Empathy	3 (38%)	3 (38%)	5 (63%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	3 (60%)

Note. Due to her response encompassing both global and local problems, one student, Adelina, appears in both groups. Her responses are counted in both global and local.

Appendix
Student Interview

1. I would love to know more about you!
 - a. What is something you are really good at?
 - b. Who is someone you really care about?
 - c. If you could fix one problem in the world right now, what would it be and why?

2. In the survey we asked you questions about your school. I would love to learn more.
 - a. How would you describe your school?
 - b. How would you describe your classmates?
 - c. Your teachers?
 - d. How do you feel when you're in school?

3. In the survey, we asked you a lot of questions about your character strengths and skills. There are a few main buckets: understanding emotions, handling emotions, relationships, understanding the world around you, and problem-solving / making things better.
 - a. Which of these do you feel really good at?
 - b. Can you give me an example of this?
 - c. Which do you want help getting better in?
 - d. Can you give me an example of this?

4. Is there anything else you'd like to share? Do you have any questions for me?