Understanding the school environments that engage and motivate young adolescents

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Abstract

This study used a phenomenological study design to better understand the influence of school environments and structures upon student engagement. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and researcher memos, and analyzed using the methods established by the design model of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study focused understanding teacher perceptions and understandings of student engagement and the practices and structures that engender it. Participants included eight members of a middle school faculty from a small, urban, independent school located on the Upper West Side of New York City. This study used stage-environment fit and positive youth development to help answer the following question: How do middle level teachers in a small, urban, independent school understand the role of the environment in fostering student engagement and motivation? Secondary questions focused specifically on the way these participants defined and understood student engagement and strategies and structures that foster student engagement.

Findings from this study reinforce previous research findings demonstrating a lack of fit between the unique needs of young adolescents and the structures and environments of traditional secondary schools. The study makes an important contribution to the literature in its assessment that those working with young adolescents must first unlearn the traditional perceptions of secondary education. Findings suggest that environments and strategies that most effectively engage young adolescents (1) promote close relationships between teachers and students built on trust and care, (2) value the voices and identities of every individual student, and (3) stand in contrast to the traditional conceptions of middle school educations. Recommendations include establishing curricula that offer the opportunity to value and capitalize on student voice and autonomy, hiring and retaining diverse faculty who put the needs
of their students first, and re-evaluating the traditional practices of instruction and assessment almost universally employed in middle level education.

Key words: stage-environment fit, student engagement, positive youth development, middle school concept, implicit theories of intelligence, interpretative phenomenological analysis
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Understanding the school environments that engage and motivate young adolescents

Chapter 1: Introduction

The goal of education is not simply to learn content and perform on tests, but to become lifelong learners and literate, productive members of society. Thus, it can be concluded that traditional American education fails nearly two-thirds of its constituents. Current literature (Eccles, 2004; Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008) identifies a process of disengagement from school community and curriculum that occurs in many young adolescents beginning in grade four and becomes highly pronounced over the transition between primary and secondary schools. As such, it becomes paramount to understand the structures at play in that transition and the best way to support young adolescents in their journeys through school.

Problem Statement

The mission of a small, urban, private school in New York City states, “The school prides itself on being a diverse community in partnership with families who take an active role in their children’s intellectual, ethical, social, and emotional growth. The school offers a stimulating environment in which each child can become an articulate, confident, and responsible citizen of the world.” Now more than ever, the challenge to develop such citizens of the world relies on developing engaged and motivated critical thinkers. In order to effectively participate in the democratic processes and global markets that comprise today’s complex world, individuals must be able to not only decode, but construct new meaning and actively distill, analyze, and evaluate texts and information on a deeper level than ever before (Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012). However, even at such a school, devoted wholly to the individual, there remains a disconnect between the traditional structures of the school environment and the needs of the young
adolescents who populate the classrooms. As students transition between divisions, even in a school where those divisions are only a staircase away, they experience a marked shift in environment and expectations. Despite a closer focus upon the individual students, teachers and administrators recognize that the needs of all students are not being met effectively.

This problem does not solely exist in a single small, urban, independent school. In fact, the literature suggests that no matter the type, location, or socioeconomics of the school, many young adolescents struggle in their transition from the elementary to the middle school years. According to almost three decades of research, traditional middle school models do not provide structures and environments conducive to the unique developmental needs of this age group. In fact, typical middle level education struggles in providing a child-centered environment devoted not only to the communication of content but also to organically aiding individual identity, literacy, and academic growth. In doing so, the environment of a school must fit students’ needs for autonomy, relevance, and personal relationships. Instead, our current educational landscape defaults to standardization that lacks personalization, teachers as discipline-oriented experts, and instructional strategies that value the group over the individual (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; D. C. Berliner, 1989; Duffy, 1990; Eccles, 2004; Fraser & Fisher, 1983; Gottfried, 1985; Strauss, 2016). Simply, traditional middle school models serve only a few students well, while marginalizing the rest.

These challenges in instruction and development are not the deeper root but a symptom of the lack of fit between middle school environments and the developmental needs of young adolescents. During this time in life, young adolescents undergo significant social, emotional, and cognitive change. For many years, scholars and educators argued that the chaos and discomfort many people experience during adolescence was attributable to the onset of puberty
and hormonal change. While the pubertal transition does bring with it significant emotional and
cognitive turmoil, new comprehension of brain development has provided a deeper
understanding of the unique needs of this age group (Armstrong, 2016). These new
developments suggest that this time of life is critical in a child’s development of decision-making
processes, social interaction, and personal identity. As such, schools must establish
environments whose aim is not simply to provide content and standardized learning outcomes,
but also to support these unique developmental needs (Armstrong, 2016). Children who
experience positive engagement in middle school tend to do so as a result of increased levels of
autonomy, a focus on personal relationships between children and authority figures, and
intentional relevance between the learning outcomes and tasks to the unique lives and
experiences of these individuals (Allington, 2013; Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Guthrie, Alao,
& Rinehart, 1997; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000).

An important aspect of adolescent identity development is that children need to feel
responsible for their own choices and decision-making (Baer, 1999; Caskey & Anfara Jr., 2004;
Eccles et al., 1993). Young adolescents transitioning into typical middle schools in fact
experience fewer opportunities to make their own choices. Learning centers, independent
reading programs, and socially driven learning activities characterize instruction in primary
education (Armstrong, 2016). Conversely, secondary school structures revolve around lecture-
and textbook-based instruction. Teachers in these larger classrooms focus upon control and
management rather than individual student direction (Farrington et al., 2012; Holas & Huston,
2012). This directed focus not only removes student choice and voice from the classroom, it also
causes a further mismatch between adolescent and environment by actively suppressing the
social and emotional learning needed during this time of life.
The unique construction of the adolescent brain ensures that human emotions are more closely tied to identity and action during adolescence than at almost any other time of life. While the emotional systems of the brain reaches nearly full development by the onset of puberty, the rational and more inhibitory functions of the prefrontal cortex do not reach completion until early adulthood (Armstrong, 2016). Adolescents experience these raw emotions, particularly those hard-wired into the fight or flight responses, without the ability to regulate them (Caskey & Anfara Jr., 2004). As such, education aimed at this age group “must figure out what to do with all that bubbling emotion” (p. 80). During a time in life when humans seem primed to deeply and emotionally invest in their learning and environment, secondary school classrooms seem intent on focusing on the logical without the necessary focus on emotional development. Recent studies have shown that adolescent students perceive their learning environments to actively suppress emotional expression (Horner, Wallace, & Bundick, 2015), value the creation of “robo-students” who go through the motions with little retention or engagement (Conner & Pope, 2013), and provide teachers as authority figures who do not empathize with or care about their emotional development (Baer, 1999; Horner et al., 2015; A. M. Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

Finally, adolescence is an essential time in human identity construction. Studies of the brain have shown that while adults faced with a dilemma will typically activate portions of the brain related to memory and experience to guide their solutions, adolescents, who do not have the cause and effect of previous experience to guide them, rely on their self-reflective processing (Armstrong, 2016). Thus, adolescents require exposure to and practice in their ability to reflect upon and learn from their experiences. However, typical middle level learning values product and outcome over process and relies on content that is disconnected from the personal experiences of students (Baer, 1999; Fairecloth, 2012). In order to fully engage with the learning
process, current scholarship suggests that students be given opportunity to develop their capacity for self-reflection, which relies on processes closely related to their individual identities and experiences (Blakemore, den Ouden, Choudhury, & Frith, 2007; Burnett, Bird, Moll, Frith, & Blakemore, 2009; Faircloth, 2012).

Literacy instruction, which exists as a fundamental standard for every student, is a perfect example of mismatch between the structures of school and the needs of the adolescent. Instead of having the opportunity to choose what they read, read about experiences and situations that reflect their own lives, and empathize with what they read, textbook companies and standardized curricula remove the personal experience from learning. Ultimately, then, the problem exists not in one particular environment, discipline, or area. Instead, it revolves around a lack of fit between expectations of traditional middle school structures and the needs of young adolescents. Thus, the transition to middle school often goes hand in hand with a decrease in school engagement, learning motivation, and enjoyment in students.

**Significance of the problem**

Despite nearly a century’s worth of research, analysis, and attempts at reform, the backbone of the American school system remains largely unchanged from its industrial roots (Dewey, 1938; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In fact, much of the academic criticism over the last two decades has focused on the dehumanizing aspects of American schools. While there have been calls for reform for almost as long as there has been compulsory public schooling, recent research has revealed a stark divide between the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of adolescents and secondary school education. A large-scale national survey of middle and high school (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, 2014) students revealed that “more than half of all 10th grade students were bored in class and less than
half enjoyed being in school” (Armstrong, 2016, p. 27). Similarly, another survey of parental perceptions concluded that only 33 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys were seen as being active and engaged in school (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014). Finally, a national Gallup poll (Busteed, 2013) revealed that engagement drastically drops between elementary and secondary education. According to Busteed (2013), “If we were doing right by our students and our future…these numbers would be the exact opposite. For each year a student progresses in school, they should be more engaged, not less” (as cited in Armstrong, 2016, p. 29).

At the epicenter of this vast level of disengagement is the disconnect between our industrial model of education and what we actually know to be true about the organic processes of learning. When compulsory public schooling began in the late 19th Century, the primary goal was to produce competent factory workers, not literate and critical members of a democratic society (Cairns, 1998; Dewey, 1938; Doll Jr., 1993; Freire, 2013; Ravitch, 2010; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Within this, the invisible curriculum (Apple, 1996; D. C. Berliner, 1989) of American public schools was one that valued the ability to conform, perform in highly specified chunks of time, and follow directions. Littky and Grabelle (2004) contend that schools eliminate creativity, originality, and ultimately individual passion in service of state standards and federal mandates. In this context, the role of compulsory public school becomes one of maintenance (Apple, 1996). Rather than acting as a tool for social mobility and equality, schools communicate knowledge and practices that are deemed socially acceptable by those occupying positions of power (Freire, 2013; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Thus, those practices that are not seen as conforming to the normative expectations of society, which in this case read as white, heterosexual, and male, are viewed as maladaptive and must be eradicated in order to achieve “success” (Banks, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1999). The ultimate goal of education thus
becomes not personal development or social opportunity, but the ability to simply conform and move on to the next level of school.

Ultimately, middle schools take on a primary role in this industrial model. Middle level education must on one hand aid in students’ transition from learning to read to reading to learn while on the other hand prepare those same students to move on to and succeed in high school. Thus, nowhere is the academic treadmill of industrial education more prevalent than in the middle school years (Baer, 1999; Caskey & Anfara Jr., 2004; National Middle School Association, 2010). If the focus of middle school environments remains that of simple preparation and graduation, we will continue to perpetuate a system that does not build lifelong learners or serve the needs of every individual. In fact, this system will perpetuate the type of institutionalized racism and hegemonic thinking that so drastically and unequally serves students who do not fit the normed description of white, middle class, male, and heterosexual, which a standardized and disconnected curriculum seeks to produce. In this system, those who cannot conform to these expectations are quickly labeled as failures at best and aberrant at worse. As such, seeking to understand the environments that promote engagement, motivation, and learning enjoyment in adolescents is a necessary step in establishing an organic model of education that serves “one child at a time” (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

Research Questions

**Primary question**

How do middle level teachers in a small, urban, independent school understand the role of the environment in fostering student engagement and motivation?

**Sub-questions**
How do these teachers describe and understand engaging and developmentally responsive school environments?

What structures and strategies do these teachers identify that foster student engagement in academic areas across the curriculum?

**Positionality of the author**

This past January 2016, I accepted a job in a new school, located in New York City. While this school shares similar values with the one I was previously at, it also has a clear focus on diversity and identity work in adolescents. As both a graduate and undergraduate student, I was exposed to a number of authors and a variety of literature, ranging from the systemic understanding of institutional racism explored by Gloria Ladson-Billings to James Paul Gee’s examination of cultural identity at play in instructional discourse. However, professionally, I have spent most of my career, and in fact most of my life, in a primarily white, upper-middle class environment. Thus, I have not been able to use a lot of previous experience to inform my personal knowledge.

As a white male who comes from a middle- to upper-middle class family, and both worked and studied in affluent areas, it is clear that my predominant perspective is from one of power. Through good fortune and a lot of hard work from my parents, I have had access to the type of mainstream academic knowledge to which Banks (2006) consistently refers. I have recently found that my interactions with opposing viewpoints often do not utilize “cooperative argumentation.” When practicing such argumentation, despite holding opposing viewpoints, debaters assume and seek to find a common ground from which to build a new reality and solution, rather than insisting a single and solely held idea is best. Instead, in situations that involve conflict, I often find myself attempting to persuade “others of the inevitability of [my]
stance” (Takacs, 2002, p. 174). This comes at the expense of my ability to “question…assumptions and lower the barriers to be able to reach consensus” (p. 174). Having access to this type of power, supported by an education and experiences that are valued by the academic mainstream, I often can influence or shape an interaction without ever realizing what has happened. In fact, recognizing that I both occupy and am a product of the value-laden mainstream education system that equates matriculation from “brand-name” institution with intelligence and power provides me with a unique perspective to lead within this system.

While I have become increasingly aware of the power I hold due to the systems within which our institutions have formed, I have also begun to understand the power of seeking heretofore less visible ways of knowing and perceiving the world. Takacs (2002) argues that “when we encourage examination of our own knowledge formation processes, we develop habits of informed skepticism, of questioning the authority of all knowledge sources, including ourselves” (p. 174). Deliberately engaging with that skepticism and seeking thought partnerships with people of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and perspectives, we can enhance our affinity for positive learning and democratic outcomes (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin, 2002). However, in an effort to avoid conflict and possibly discomfort, I inadvertently shut myself off from the opportunity to question, evaluate and challenge the power systems I inhabit, benefit from and use.

I understand that change takes time, patience, and guidance. I also recognize that change cannot happen without engaging and building from the work of all involved, partly because constructing knowledge that attends to multiple perspectives is essential to developing a shared understanding and vision for the type of professional work that must be done in my new
community. Thus, I plan to use my dissertation research as a springboard for learning from and with the school’s faculty and administration.

Effective leadership relies on relationships and interactions. Leaders must be right in the trenches, willing to learn and grow alongside their colleagues. According to Fullan (2014), the role of the principal cannot simply be one of mandate and manager, but of a lead learner. Similarly, Spillane (2006) argues that the ideal of the heroic leader who assumes full control of a situation and saves a failing institution is a myth (Sinclair, 2011; Spillane, 2005, 2006). Instead, schools prosper when leadership and authority is stretched across a variety of stakeholders, depending on situation, expertise, and personality. According to Spillane (2006), the heart of the distributed model of leadership focuses not solely on the leader, but on the leadership practice and environment in which the practice is executed. Most importantly, distributed leadership theory positions leadership not in the hands of a single charismatic communicator, but in the interactions and relationships that comprise a particular organization.

Ultimately, understanding that school engagement in adolescents is as much a product of the content to be learned as the environment in which it is learned, the leader in such a school must be willing to travel alongside the faculty (Kvale, 1996).

**Theoretical Framework: Stage-environment fit**

There exists a large and growing body of literature examining the role school environment can play in the engagement and motivation of children (Ayala, 2014; Daniels & Steres, 2011; Deal & Peterson, 1990). At the same time, research suggests that these concepts of motivation and engagement can act as mediating factors in terms of academic performance (Alivernini, Lucidi, & Manganelli, 2008; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; C. S. Dweck & Leggett, 1988).
Simply, the more engaged and motivated a student is, the more likely he or she is to participate effectively and respond with resilience to challenges, and thus perform well in school contexts. However, that research seems to place a premium on the characteristics and traits of the individual. Studies interested in motivation and engagement often focus on the aspects of character that lead to feelings of engagement and empowerment. In contrast, the theory of stage-environment fit suggests that environments, specifically schools, can have a powerful influence on the extent to which an individual experiences engagement and/or motivation (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008).

This body of literature contends that there is a particular mismatch found in the transition to middle school. Eccles, Lord, and Midgley (1991) suggest that young adolescent development is characterized by an increase in (a) the desire for autonomy; (b) peer-orientation, self-focus, self-consciousness, and identity development; and (c) the “capacity for abstract reasoning” (p. 534). In fact, an analysis of students bordering on the transition between primary and secondary school in New Zealand revealed excitement for the new chapter their lives. The transition offered “new subjects to be studied, new friends to be made, and the chance for more independence” (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2004, p. 33). In contrast, the environments of traditional junior high schools differ significantly in reflecting the needs of young adolescents than those of traditional elementary settings. Students transitioning to junior high schools find classrooms (a) “characterized by a greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline, a less personal and positive teacher-student relationship, and fewer opportunities for student decision-making and self-management”; (b) centered around social competition and comparison based on “practices such as whole class task organization, ability grouping, and public evaluation of the correctness of work”; (c) “classwork, especially in mathematics” that “requires lower-level
cognitive skills” than can be found in the latter elementary years; and (d) teachers that “use a higher standard in judging students’ competence and in grading their performance” (Eccles & Midgley, 1989, p. 164).

**Student autonomy and teacher-student relationships**

A number of studies (D. C. Berliner, 1989; C. S. Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Eccles et al., 1993, 1991; Midgley et al., 1995) reveal that “middle level classrooms, compared with elementary classrooms, are characterized by a greater emphasis on teacher control and fewer opportunities for student decision making” (Midgley et al., 1995, p. 92). Yet, a primary characteristic of young adolescence is the desire to be recognized and trusted to make thoughtful and responsible decisions. During this time of life, children desperately seek the approval of the adults in their lives while simultaneously and somewhat oxymoronically desire to establish independence from these same adults. Moreover, the literature has established a clear link between academic achievement and engaging students in democratic decision-making, entrusting them with greater responsibility, and personalizing the academic content (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Martinez & McGrath, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Ryan and Patrick (2001) establish that a supportive teacher is essential in developing students’ abilities to effectively engage in democratic decision-making and effective collaboration. In environments where students viewed their teachers as engaged and supported, students’ “efficacy for communicating and getting along with their teacher increased and they engaged more in self-regulating learning.” Students also “engaged in less off-task and disruptive behavior in the classroom” (p. 454).

Central to this relationship is the requirement of trust. However, Eccles and Midgley (1989) present findings to suggest that “junior high school teachers” possess “a more custodial
orientation” than their senior high school counterparts (p. 165). If teachers feel they have to spend more time managing classroom behavior and maintaining order, they certainly will not exhibit the trust required to engage students in classroom decision-making processes. In a study of 356 sixth and seventh graders, Hagenauer and Hascher (2010) found that providing autonomy in the learning environment, coupled with teacher support and quality instruction were direct antecedents to learning enjoyment. McGee, Ward, Gibbons, and Harlow (2004) also suggest, “What students thought about a subject was dictated by what they thought about its teacher” (p. 33). It then stands to reason that when students feel trusted and supported, they enjoy the processes of learning. Naturally, children are more likely to engage in processes, even challenging ones, that they enjoy and when they feel safe and supported.

**Task orientation and competition in learning**

During early adolescence, children become acutely aware of their social positioning and develop perceptions of identity directly related to their peer group and their achievements. Early adolescents typically connect personal value to academic performance or social standing. They adopt a more static self-concept rather than seeing traits such as intelligence, friendliness, and likability as malleable. Thus, middle level classrooms should seek to be both more personalized and more focused on process over product (Carol S. Dweck, 2010; McGee et al., 2004). However, traditional middle level classrooms communicate performance-oriented motivation through the use of honor rolls, classes tracked by performance and ability level, and perceptions of teacher beliefs and efficacy (Church et al., 2001; Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1991; Hagenauer & Hascher, 2010; A. M. Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Two primary examples of such orientations occur in the widespread practices of grouping students by ability and relying upon standardized tests.
The effects of traditional structures found in the middle grades. According to Midgley, Anderman, and Hicks (1995), students experience more traditional and public forms of recognition, such as “honor rolls, honor societies, and special privileges related to relative ability,” for the first time in middle school (p. 92). Other firsts in middle school may include classes assigned on the basis of ability, a greater frequency and formality in assessment, and letter grades focused more on “relative ability and less on effort” (p. 92). Each of these forms of feedback can have a detrimental impact on a student’s self-concept.

One of the primary differences between primary and secondary classrooms is the orientation of the feedback and tasks provided. While elementary classrooms often adopt a mastery approach, secondary education seems increasingly interested in performance and outcome. A performance goal exists primarily as a way to measure one’s innate ability by measuring output against a previously established standard. Thus, a favorable result supports the intelligence or ability of the individual while a negative result reveals a deficit in innate talent. Conversely, a learning or mastery goal focuses on developing understanding and mastery by using information gleaned from outcomes to determine the best path when faced with a similar situation. People establishing performance goals will often avoid challenge or situations where they might struggle, because they take any input or output as an endorsement or indictment of their own abilities. In challenging situations, those following the performance goal orientation will likely exhibit negative coping behaviors, such as learned helplessness, a loss of motivation, and task avoidance (C. S. Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Ziegert, Kistner, Castro, & Robertson, 2001). Contrastingly, individuals who set learning or mastery goals will often strive for newer and more challenging circumstances. They view the same input and output as a way to develop and test their learning strategies not as a reflection of their innate
abilities or character. Adopting learning goals leads to the use of active coping strategies, such as increased persistence, a willingness to ask for help, and to attribute failures to factors within their control (Grant & Dweck, 2003; Ziegert et al., 2001).

**Standardized testing.** While utilized in the early grades, standardized tests not only become more prevalent, but also carry higher stakes in the middle grades. Under the framework established by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and carried on under the use of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), summative, end-of-year tests became the primary measure of both student academic progress and school instructional accountability. David Berliner (2011) points out that as a result of the combination of a requirement of such tests and typically restrictive educational state budgets, these assessments often take the form of “multiple choice, convergent, machine-scoreable items,” which are “the cheapest items to produce for mass testing” (p. 296). This practice establishes a troubling dynamic between instructional accountability and student performance.

High stakes multiple choice examinations offer a one-dimensional version of student assessment. Wiliam (2011) and Duckworth, Quinn, and Tsukayama (2012) explain that the content valued by such tests naturally exists outside the parameters of typical classroom instruction and can only be used as the measurement of a gap between performance and expected achievement. Relying upon standardized tests as a means of both evaluation and accountability means that students and teachers alike must conform to externally set benchmarks. However, test scores are not always objective measures of student progress; they “are not comparable to standard weights and measures; they do not have the precision of a doctor’s scale or a yardstick. Tests vary in their quality, and even the best tests may sometimes be error-prone, because of human mistakes or technical foul-ups” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 152). Further, tests are only a valid
measure of classroom instruction when they directly align to the curriculum and direction of the class (Minarechová, 2012). Evaluating student progress in relation to external yearly standards ignores the processes of individual learning and growth that comprise education and more specifically literacy development.

Wiliam (2011) focuses on examples when assessment can be utilized to further student learning and development as opposed to simply offering a measurement. He contends that an assessment can indeed be used to develop learning as opposed to simply measuring a gap between standards and performance when it covers two criteria. First, the assessment must generate data that is “instructionally tractable.” A low score on a mathematics test only shows that the student has not yet learned what was intended, whereas an assessment designed to evaluate “specific aspects of performance” would provide both teacher and student with actionable feedback. Second, the assessment requires student involvement and utilization of the feedback (p. 12). Schools deliver results of standardized tests in the context of statistical norms and percentiles. Students can do very little with this information but view their performance in terms of a divide between “current and desired performance” with no room for growth or development. Thus, the current assessment heavy culture of American schools places value on tests that only provide product-oriented feedback.

Taken in concert with these explorations, the performance-based structures of middle school can have a demoralizing impact on transitioning students. In fact, in a study investigating the influence of classroom practices on goal adoption, Church, Elliot, and Gable (2001) establish that “the perceived classroom environment influenced achievement goal adoption,” rather than that of mastery goal adoption, which “in turn directly influenced graded performance and intrinsic motivation” (p. 51). Thus, understanding that external praise or feedback has the power
to influence or manipulate an individual’s theory of intelligence or personality (C. S. Dweck & Legget, 1988; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Gunderson et al., 2013; Heyman & Dweck, 1992; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Yeager et al., 2014), it becomes clear that traditional middle school structures around ability, task orientation, and social competition offer a lack of fit for young adolescents.

A lack of cognitively challenging content

Finally, Eccles (2004) argues that the curricular content found in traditional middle school environments may actually be less intellectually stimulating than that found in the later elementary years. She cites evidence showing that “middle school students report the highest rates of boredom when doing schoolwork, especially passive work (e.g., listening to lectures) and in particular classes such as social studies, math, and science” (p. 133). Further, she suggests that the content taught in these schools “does not broaden to incorporate either important health or social issues that become increasingly salient” to young adolescents in their journey through puberty and identity formation” (p. 133).

Furthermore, the reliance upon high stakes testing, which again is more prevalent in the secondary level, leads to a lack of rigor and richness in the curriculum. Many argue that standardized tests, which serve the dual purpose of assessing student progress and holding teachers accountable, cannot by their very nature create atmospheres of academic rigor. Moon (2009) writes that using such dual-purpose tests establishes what is defined as a “default” philosophy of education, “where tests drive the curriculum and limit instructional innovations for the sole purposes of high test scores” (p. 278). Minarechová (2012) describes this practice as “teaching to the test” and Berliner (2011) refers to this phenomenon as “curriculum narrowing.” Teachers instruct only on the content and strategies required to perform well on the standardized assessments. Following the implementation of NCLB, instructional time devoted to English-
Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics in elementary schools increased on average by 47% and 37% respectively. Simultaneously, average time devoted to social studies, science, physical education, recess, and art and music all fell by 28% to 35% (p. 289-290). Diane Ravitch (2010) expands on this idea, presenting personal accounts from teachers in the New York City Public Schools, who

Told a journalist that they eliminated social studies, art, and science for a month before the state reading and mathematics tests to concentrate on test-prep activities. One teacher said her students don’t know who the president was during the Civil War, “but they can tell you how to eliminate answers on a multiple-choice test. And as long as our test scores are up, everyone will be happy.” (p. 108).

By focusing time and energy on performance goals specifically in Math and ELA, the general rigor and expectations of the curriculum have shifted from developing lifelong learners to making sure that schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Within this context, is it any surprise that the transition between elementary and middle school can lead to student disengagement and apathy? Of deeper concern is the idea that stage-environment fit theory, as established by Eccles and Midgley, “inadvertently” portrays adolescents “as some kind of homogenous category. They are not. Ethnic, racial, and social class differences abound” (D. C. Berliner, 1989, p. 331). Berliner (1989) goes on to question whether the transitional experiences of a recent Asian immigrant might be the same as a third-generation Hispanic in a southwestern mining town. He further reminds, “students’ perceptions are likely to differ as a function of their culture, ethnic, and social-class backgrounds” (p. 331). Thus, while stage-environment fit might provide a strong lens through which to view school
practices, it cannot discount the lived experiences of the individual constituents who populate a given environment.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Current literature (Eccles, 2004; Midgley et al., 1995; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008) identifies a process of disengagement from school community and curriculum that occurs in many young adolescents beginning in grade four and becomes highly pronounced over the transition between primary and secondary schools. A variety of different studies have found that students in secondary education report feeling bored (Armstrong, 2016), unchallenged (Bundick et al., 2014), and disconnected from their school environments (Busteed, 2013). As established in the paradigm of stage-environment fit, it is imperative that adolescents experience an environment that is reflective and supportive of their needs. When a lack of fit occurs, young adolescents experience a lack of engagement and motivation. This lack of engagement has been shown to lead to negative behaviors, such as depression, addiction, and dropout (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). As such, it becomes paramount to understand the structures at play in that transition and the best way to support young adolescents.

Transitions, engagement, and environment

There are a number of factors that play into the pace and depth of a child’s development and school engagement, including race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013; Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan, 2013; O’Connor, 2013; Pitzer, 2015; Reardon et al., 2012). It is difficult to develop classroom and school-wide interventions that effectively counteract the unchanging socioeconomic conditions of individual students. Schools cannot change the way that districts and states choose to spend their money, nor can middle level teachers effectively alter the previous literacy experiences of their students. However, hope is not lost.
Recent research examining reading motivation and school engagement suggest that a portion of struggling readers do not in fact enter middle school behind their peers (Allington, 2013; Guthrie et al., 2007; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). Instead, many students enter middle school and find the environment and culture to be a mismatch for their own developmental needs. Dating back for almost three decades, there has been an extensive examination of the role transitions play in adolescent development. The existing literature identifies two aspects of adolescent transitions: timing and nature (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The primary questions that arise revolve around seeking to understand whether transitions are particularly troubling due to the timing of the disruption or can be attributed more to the environment and circumstances surrounding the transition. For example, all children undergo a distinct change in cognitive, social, and physical development during their early adolescent years. In fact, the only other time a human being undergoes the same level of change is between the time of birth and three years old (National Middle School Association, 2010). Eccles and Midgley (1989) suggest that the struggles and difficulties that arise from such transitions can be mitigated by a variety of factors, including “a more facilitative environment (p. 140). However, it seems that the traditional structure of American education compounds the issues of pubertal transition by adding an environmental lack of fit in the transition from elementary to secondary school.

This transition between late elementary to middle school education proves to be a particularly challenging one for all groups of students. It is in this transition that the literature reveals “the beginning of a downward spiral” that leads “to academic failure and school dropout” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). Anecdotally, Ken Robinson has identified a decline in school enjoyment and student creativity as students progress through school (Robinson & Aronica, 2015), and there exists a body of literature suggesting a clear pattern of children developing
negative motivational constructs and academic behaviors during this time in life, including test anxiety, learned helplessness, achievement rather than mastery oriented task motivation, truancy, and school dropout (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The question logically arises: what is it about the transition to middle school that has such a detrimental effect on young adolescents?

**Understanding diversity within the context of school engagement**

Recognizing that school engagement occurs as a result of both individual and social interactions (Pang, 2014; Reardon et al., 2012; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000; Wynne, 2002), it is impossible to analyze aspects of motivation and engagement without looking at the dialogue around diversity and privilege in American education. Traditionally, many have viewed education as a vehicle through which individuals could fight social injustice and iniquity of opportunity (Delpit, 2002; Gilyard, 1991; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2002). At its core, the concept of social justice does not argue for equity of product, but for equity of opportunity. While a socially equitable society that is both capitalistic and democratic cannot promise wealth and success for every family, it can and should provide equal access to the discourses of social, economic, and political power. For example, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (EDEA) seeks to do so by stating that “states must ensure that poor and minority students are taught by qualified teachers at similar rates as other students” (Max & Glazerman, 2014). However, a quick analysis of the data clearly reveals that not all students have equal access to the requisite instruction, resources, and environments that engender positive literacy development and subsequent future success.

In 2015, only 15% of eighth grade students identifying as black achieved scores of proficient or advanced on the NAEP ("NAEP - 2015 Mathematics & Reading at Grade 12 -
Reading - National Results Overview,” 2015). Only 21% of Hispanic students in eighth grade only performed at proficient or advanced. Similarly, 19% of students eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch programs (FLP) earned scores of proficient or above. Reardon, Valentino, and Shores (2012) conclude, “Black and Hispanic students enter high school with average literacy skills three years behind those of white and Asian students; students from low-income families enter high school with average literacy skills five years behind those of high-income students” (p. 32). An evaluation brief produced by the National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance (Max & Glazerman, 2014) suggests that disadvantaged students have less access to “highly effective teachers” than their more privileged counterparts, which accounts for an instructional gap of approximately four weeks. This illustrates an educational landscape that favors students of a particular race and of a specific socioeconomic status. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand the history of this environment in order to seek to change it.

**Difference as deficit**

Over the last four decades, American classrooms have become increasingly ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse (Aja, Bustillo, Darity Jr, & Hamilton, 2014; Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Banks, 2006). While research shows that this increased diversity provides an opportunity for increased skill development in promoting democratic dialog, social understanding, and identity development (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Ramirez, Bromley, & Russell, 2009), current practices regarding the education of this diverse population fall on a wide spectrum of efficacy ranging from revolutionary to disenfranchising. While scholars such as Delpit (1988), Ladson-Billings (1995), Freire (2013), and hooks (1994), have written for decades about the importance of developing classroom and educative practices that
celebrate the diverse cultural experiences of the students inhabiting our classrooms, these efforts still seem to have met with resistance and stalled in turning theory into practice.

A primary factor in this resistance is the concept of hegemonic diversity. At the heart of this concept is the idea that those defining diversity actually identify difference as a deficit (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Brown, 2011; Swartz, 2009). In this understanding of diversity, any characteristic that does not fall within normed expectations—that is non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, etc.—becomes understood as problematic. Anybody embodying these characteristics immediately assumes an “othered” position, which can impede or deny access to privilege, discourse, and societally approved “official knowledge” (Banks, 2006; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

The literature suggests that much of the hegemonic practices found in schools derive as much from the invisible as the visible curriculum. Aja, Bustillo, Darity Jr., and Hamilton (2014) contend that even in Lyndon B. Johnson’s speech in 1965 touting the idea of “equality as a fact” over that of “equality as a right and a theory” engaged in language that problematized and normalized aspects of the African American experience. In Johnson’s speech, he identified the most important problem confronting African Americans as the “breakdown of the Negro family structure” (p. 39). The authors argue, “By defining the central problem facing the black community as not the deep-seated structures that perpetuate racism but rather deficiencies internal to blacks themselves,” Johnson transformed the societal and institutional problem of race in America into a pathology of the race itself (p. 39). This form of normative and hegemonic thinking removes the agency of individuals and in fact applies dangerous stereotypes and labels to whole swaths of populations. Further, it causes reform practices to focus not on critically restructuring the underlying patterns that cause the problems, but orients them towards helping
“blacks (and other subaltern communities, including Native Americans, Mexicans, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans and Vietnamese) reverse their self-sabotaging behaviors” (p. 39).

In this context, the cultural experiences that help to define the identities of all children become problematized in communities seen as different.

The dominant language, literacy, and cultural practices demanded by school fell in line with White, middle-class norms and positioned languages and literacies that fell outside those norms as less-than and unworthy of a place in U.S. schools and society. Simply put, the goal of deficit approaches was to eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities and to replace them with what were viewed as superior practices. (Paris, 2012, p. 93)

In this model of education, the goal is not celebration or personal enrichment, but acculturation and assimilation at the expense of the cultural history of the students.

A powerful and widely used tool in this practice of hegemonic and deficit understanding of diversity is normative language. According to Briscoe (2005), “Assigning universality to the characteristics of privileged groups marginalizes, disenfranchises, subordinates, and generally ascribes inferiority to characteristics” not seen in society’s dominant groups (p. 27). Dworin and Bomer (2008) go so far as to illustrate how pervasive and dangerous normative language can be in their deconstruction of a popular professional development text written by Ruby Payne. The authors explain “how the author enlists readers’ participation in deficit discourses about the poor” (p. 101). In short, Dworin and Bomer understand the fact that the meaning of a text lies somewhere between the words presented by the author and the interpretations and experiences of the reader (Gallagher, 1992). The authors argue that Payne utilizes language and practices that exploits the dominant stereotypical discourse already in existence in mainstream educative
situations. For example, “throughout the text, Payne employs categorical modality—that is, writing with few or no modal verbs such as ‘may’ or ‘might,’ or adverbials such as ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’” (Dworin & Bomer, 2008, p. 111). Thus, Payne presents individual experiences as categorical facts, defining an entire class through perceived norms.

In fact, Swartz (2009) argues that the term diversity in and of itself has become normative and hegemonic. This term has “become a code for referring to historically marginalized cultures and groups,” which in turn removes “all conceptualizations of duality,” collapsing “women and people of African, Latina/o, Asian, and Indigenous descents, including all marginalized and disenfranchised intragroup identities into a lumped, generalized, and ‘othered’ category” (p. 1048). Thus, educational institutions that “celebrate,” “teach to,” and “value” diversity while assuming the dominance of official discourse at the expense of these same marginalized populations in fact substantiate the institutional racism and classism that have defined the status quo of American educative practices.

**Cultural difference and cultural sensitivity: Multiculturalism and colorblindness**

Over the last three decades, theories and practices framing difference as a deficit have given way to more thoughtful, reflective, and culturally sensitive frameworks. These theories “reject the idea” that students of color, along with other marginalized socioeconomic groups, “have cultural deficits and believe that the challenge for the school is to try to find new ways to draw on the cultural strengths of these students and to make use of them in instruction” (Banks, 2006, p. 73). On the surface, the tenets of these frameworks and ideologies read as a positive evolution from the deficit paradigm of the 1960s and 1970s. However, practice does not always remain faithful to these ideals.
There is a growing criticism of educative practices that aim at a multicultural and inclusive approach but fall far short, ultimately landing in a world of “colorblindness.” A primary example of a multicultural, reconstructionist approach to education is the paradigm of Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999), a central author in the promotion of CRT, “CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction—deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p. 10). Any analysis of practices and structures through the CRT framework begins with the assumption that racism is permanent, which “suggests that racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). For Ladson-Billings and DeCuir and Dixson, racism pervades all aspects of American society. Thus, the goal of multicultural education is not simply “curriculum reform,” but also “changing attitudes and beliefs of all actors involved in the educational process” (Hachfeld, Hahn, Schroeder, Anders, & Kunter, 2015, p. 45).

**Colorblindness as anything but fair.** However, in the actual school environment, teachers, administrators, and school officials often adopt an ethic and a practice devoted to fairness and equality rather than critical evaluation. “Most teachers seem to believe that the best approach to diversity is to treat everyone the same in the spirit of fairness, and thus not change teaching practices to accommodate cultural diversity” (p. 45). The literature suggests that adoption of a colorblind ideology can be particularly harmful in an educative setting, as it promotes both ethnic and cultural stereotyping and homogeneous ethnocentrism (Anders, Bryan, & Noblit, 2005; Hachfeld et al., 2015; C. S. Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). Simply, those approaching marginalized populations seeking to promote absolute democracy
while not recognizing the cultural needs of the individuals inhabiting the school building tend to
gloss over, miss, or misunderstand the traits not accepted by the dominant discourse.

In the early grades, schools have adopted the practice of identifying students with limited
literacy experiences and patterns of discourse not reflective of mainstream expectations as
intellectually deficient. Both Stanfield (1985) and Howard (1999) argue that schools exist as the
primary distributor of “official knowledge,” which allows “those in power to selectively control
the flow of knowledge and inculcate into young minds only those ‘truths’ that solidify and
perpetuate their own hegemony” (Howard, 1999, p. 50). In analyzing the literacy development
of her daughter, Lisa Delpit (2002), an African American woman, gives voice to the effects of
such deeply institutionalized racism.

Having come of age in a racist society, we double-think every aspect of our beings—are
we good enough to be accepted by the white world? If it feels right, then it must be
wrong. We have to change our natural selves to just be adequate. (p. 55)

Wood and Jocius (2013) continue with this line of thinking, suggesting that schools do not take
into account the specific needs and interests of African American males. As a result, they fall
into a category of students who are seen as deficient. “Children with few experiences with books,
stories, and print are described with phrases such as at risk, unready, limited ability,
developmentally delayed, immature, slow and other terms that confuse limited literacy
experience with intellectual limitations” (Allington, 1994, p. 16). Discomfort or lack of
experience with society’s dominant discourses “often leads to wrongful placement in special
education programs…and teachers focusing on basic skill because of the desire to meet
minimum standards requirements” (Wood & Jocius, 2013, p. 662). As a result, schools send the
message almost immediately to African American students that they are different and that difference is a deficit.

That initial categorization can become insurmountable. Once a school has labeled a student as “at risk” or “intellectually slow,” it sets a student down a problematic path. There exists a significant and growing amount of research (Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Fives et al., 2014; Hall, 2005; Lim, Bong, & Woo, 2015; Logan, Medford, & Hughes, 2011; J. K. Smith, Smith, Gilmore, & Jameson, 2012) that correlates reading attitudes and engagement to the amount of reading children do, factors which directly contribute to future reading achievement. Yet, once students are labeled “struggling readers,” they spend more of their time with paraprofessionals than reading specialists (Allington, 2013), find themselves enmeshed in standards-based and skills-oriented texts that offer no points of entry or connection to students with “cultural backgrounds” (Allington, 2013; Wood & Jocius, 2013), and spend less time actually reading than their peers (Allington, 1994). According to Ladson-Billings (2006), “culturally relevant teachers envision their students as being filled with possibilities” (p. 31). However, it seems that schools hold the opposite belief. As such, “poor children and children of color are most likely to be penalized under the new standards movement” (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000).

Furthermore, adoption of this problematic colorblind mentality clearly cuts along racial and ethnic lines. “White youth are socialized to believe that ethnic minorities are no different from the majority White population and that making distinctions based on skin color is wrong” (C. S. Ryan et al., 2007, p. 618). Similarly, “when asked about their agreement with multicultural or colorblind beliefs, most non-minority White teachers report higher agreement with colorblind beliefs” (Hachfeld et al., 2015, p. 46). This suggests that schools and teachers that adopt a colorblind position, may in actuality promote racial stereotypes and racist practices
by “blinding all actors to overt discrimination and thus allowing it to increase” (p. 46). Finally, a recent study by the U.S. Department of Education (2016) found that diversity in the teacher workforce is decreasing.

Only 18 percent of public school teachers are individuals of color, even as nonwhite students now outnumber white students in U.S. public schools. Black male teachers are the most underrepresented group, with only 2 percent of teachers comprising this demographic. Teacher-retention rates are also higher for white teachers than for teachers of color. (Will, 2016)

As the profession becomes increasingly white and middle class, it stands to reason that the number of teachers, administrators and schools adopting a colorblind mentality will also increase.

**Multiculturalism: An idealized theory imperfectly practiced.** Many scholars contend that the positive alternative to a colorblind orientation is a multicultural one. Those adopting this stance do not “ignore group membership.” Instead, “adherents of multiculturalism believe that people should seek to understand, accept, and even embrace ethnic differences as a means of promoting social justice” (C. S. Ryan et al., 2007, p. 618). The literature reveals that teachers, educators, and researchers acting from a multicultural stance seemed more willing and capable in adjusting their teaching to the needs of their students (Hachfeld et al., 2015), more proactive in improving intergroup relations, and less likely to engage in ethnocentric and stereotyping practices (C. S. Ryan et al., 2007). In theory, the multicultural perspective seems better positioned than the colorblind one in promoting social justice and equality.

However, teachers entering the profession are variably prepared to engage in faithful multicultural practices. In an analysis of syllabi for pre-service teachers focusing on
multicultural education, Paul Gorski (2009) found most of this coursework fell short of the reconstructionist goal of multicultural education. In this analysis, Gorski rated courses along a spectrum of fidelity to multicultural theory, ranging from the lowest assimilationist goals to the highest social reconstructionist philosophies. In fact, 57.8% of the analyzed sample fell in line with what the author refers to as “liberal multiculturalism,” characterized by “(1) a tendency to frame multicultural education as respecting diversity; (2) a focus on sensitivity and self-reflection; and (3) a failure to connect either of these to educational inequities” (p. 314). Thus, a majority of the preparation pre-service teachers receive around multicultural education actually echoes many of the same ideals of colorblindness while eschewing the critical inquiry that most distinguishes between the two ideologies.

Similarly, even in cases where pre-service teachers experience liberating and reconstructionist approaches to multicultural education, the institutions within which they ultimately work can negatively influence the endurance of this initial training. In the case of Susan, an “older woman with a family who returned to college to get her degree in middle grades education,” Causey, Thomas, and Armento (2000) found a student teacher willing to re-evaluate her previously held beliefs. After working in an urban school as a student teacher, “Susan recognized dissonance between her prior knowledge and her new knowledge and experiences, she exhibited metacognition, she believed that she had changed and that that change would continue into her future” (p. 39). However, after working for three years in a highly diverse school, Susan’s practices were anything but multicultural. Recognition of marginalized communities was additive, as “she described reading African American stories in February for Black History Month,” and her “concern for equity seemed to have faded” (Causey et al., 2000, p. 40). Again, the authors note that Susan had adopted more of a philosophy of colorblindness,
professing her belief in absolute democracy and engaging in a variety of cultural stereotypes, which included suggesting that some of her better dressed students of color had earned the money for clothes from drug-dealing. While multicultural education exists as a theory devoted towards positive change and social justice, it often devolves into a perpetuation of the same official knowledge and dominant discourse that caused historically non-dominant populations to be marginalized in the first place. Within the context of the school environment, where Eccles and Midgley (1989) establish the need for a relevant, responsive, and supportive space, is it any surprise that adolescents from these marginalized communities begin to disengage from school by the middle grades?

**Engaging the whole child: Positive youth development**

Over the last two decades, prevention sciences and theories on child development have evolved to recognize the range of experience of childhood and adolescents. Moreover, these theories have grown from a negative stance—children exhibit problems to be managed—to a positive one—children should be supported in developing socially and developmentally valuable skills. As this shift has occurred, programs and research have moved from a stance of prevention and intervention towards a philosophy of Positive Youth Development (PYD). Much like stage-environment fit, the interactions between the individual and the environment exist at the center of the philosophy. This developmental model eschews “the reduction of individual and social behavior to fixed genetic influences,” while promoting “the relative plasticity of human development” along with the argument that human behavior can change “as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche” (Lerner, 2005, p. 11). Following this perspective, educators and scholars have
established a wide variety of PYD focused programs designed to achieve one or more of the following objectives: (1) promoting bonding; (2) fostering resilience; promoting (3) social, (4) emotional, (5) cognitive, (6) behavioral, and (7) moral competence; fostering (8) self-determination, (9) spirituality, (10) self-efficacy, (11) clear and positive identity, (12) belief in the future, (13) and prosocial norms; and providing (14) recognition for positive behavior and (15) opportunities for prosocial involvement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004, pp. 101–102). As such, programs focusing on PYD seek to reflect the values and experiences of the individual rather than intervene or prevent perceived deficiencies related to that child’s cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic background.

While much of the literature regarding PYD centers on the promotion of what authors refer to as the five Cs: caring, character, competence, confidence, and connections (Catalano et al., 2004; Larson, 2000; Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), the concepts of initiative and autonomy exist at the heart of the paradigm. A study conducted in 1991, which sampled 16,000 moments in the daily experience of “a representative sample of White, working- and middle-class young adolescents,” found that “these youth reported feeling bored for 27% (4,300!) of these random moments” (Larson, 2000, p. 170). A lack of engagement is often a precursor for negative outcomes and participation in risky behavior. Thus, in order to promote the positive development of all youths, the concept of initiative must be stressed. According to Larson (2000), “initiative is a core requirement for other components of positive development, such as creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement” (p. 170). Larson goes on to argue that the activities and tasks that promote the highest feelings of initiative and engagement marry aspects of intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement, and a temporal arc.
Ultimately, personal motivation and autonomy are essential components to developing engaged and resilient adolescents. Moreover, environments that provide personal connections, support, and respect adolescents as individuals rather than symptoms of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic conditions are more conducive to positive development. In analyzing the tenets of stage-environment fit in relation to the history of cultural understanding in educational institutions, it becomes clear that traditional secondary school structures can in fact be detrimental to the positive development of all adolescents, not simply those of color or from marginalized communities. Thus, a closer analysis of the highly traditional structures present in all forms of middle level education, may reveal an even deeper understanding of the effects of the environment upon individual adolescent development interaction” (Guthrie et al., 2007, p. 284).

**Connecting motivation to achievement: Implicit theories of intelligence and motivation**

As established earlier, standardized tests can establish long-term negative messages that take hold in students’ self-concept and influence their learning engagement. These tests lead to conditions in which students exhibit both physical and psychological symptoms of stress, tension, fear of failure, and a loss of self-confidence, including “an increase in blood pressure and the rate of respiration, elevated body temperature, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, difficulty sleeping, and muscle spasms” (Minarechová, 2012, p. 91). In a study analyzing the impact of failure on students, Kearns (2011) presents a number of compelling responses. In interviews with students who had twice failed the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, students reported feeling shocked, humiliated, degraded, and “a little less smart” (p. 119). These students also explain that the failures negatively impacted their own self-concept and caused them to reevaluate both their own literacy talents and their willingness to take on future
challenges in this arena. Firmin, Hwang, Copella, and Clark (2004) published a study analyzing the effects of failure on learned helplessness, which boils down to a willingness or lack thereof to engage in a challenging activity. This study found that early poor performance on tests does influence future results. In the face of acting erroneously without the context of feedback or advice, students simply anticipated failure and actively avoided questions and tests they perceived as too difficult. In all of these instances, researchers observed evidence of students presenting lack of motivation and engagement strengthened and supported by their poor performance on high stakes tests.

For approximately three decades, researchers have investigated the effects implicit theories of intelligence and ability can have on motivation, effort, and achievement. The theory of growth and fixed mindsets emerged from this work. Summarized by Carol Dweck in her book, *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, individuals possessing a *fixed mindset*, or entity theory, believe that intelligence or ability within a certain discipline is relatively static. Conversely, individuals adopting a *growth mindset*, or incremental theory, believe that the aforementioned traits are fluid and can be developed and improved through effort and specific learning strategies (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Gunderson et al., 2013; Mangels, 2006; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Yeager et al., 2014). More recent studies on the link between implicit theories and goal orientation have further delineated between performance and learning goals. While the research continues to support the existence of the mastery goal orientation, recent work (Bråten & Strømsø, 2004; Elliot, 1999; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002) establishes subdivisions within the framework of performance goals. Individuals may adopt performance-approach goals, in which tasks are undertaken to outperform others and receive
favorable feedback, or performance-avoidance goals, in which tasks are circumvented to evade the perception of incompetence.

The research presented is predicated on the fact that external praise or feedback has the power to influence or manipulate an individual’s theory of intelligence or personality (Bråten & Strømsø, 2004; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Gunderson et al., 2013; Heyman & Dweck, 1992; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Yeager et al., 2014). Within this context, having established that high stakes tests and assessments provide a specific type of feedback to students, these educative practices must have an important role to play in the development of student mindsets. Placing value on the product rather than the process could produce students who favor an entity theory of intelligence. These students would thus follow a performance goal motivational framework, and ultimately adopt negative coping strategies in the face of challenging circumstances. It stands to reason that a child who spends a majority of his or her academic life within a system that provides product- over process-oriented feedback will most likely be predisposed to developing a fixed mindset. If so, then according to Dweck’s theoretical framework, schools will likely produce graduates whose responses to adversity center around avoidance, learned helplessness, and reduced self-esteem.

Discussion

Whether examining adolescence through the lens of school engagement or social and emotional development, the constructs of initiative, motivation, and autonomy exist at the heart of positive progress. Children who feel personally invested and responsible for the success or efficacy of a task will persist longer and focus more thoroughly on the processes involved (Tough, 2012). In fact, the core values of both stage-environment fit and PYD suggest that environments most conducive for adolescent development are those designed to support and
foster the specific needs of the age group and individuals. Within this context, Guthrie, Alao, and Rinehart (1997) found that even the traditional task of reading, if offered in an environment devoted to intrinsic motivation and personal engagement, can foster feelings of self-efficacy, confidence, and identity development. Taken in concert, the ideals of stage-environment fit and PYD suggest that effective middle level education needs to provide so much more than simply an access to essential concepts and skills. The National Middle School Association (NMSA), which has recently renamed itself the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE), asserts that effective middle schools must be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 12). Thus, it is not enough to provide learning standards, goals, tasks, and outcomes. In order to develop into lifelong learners and active and informed citizens, schools must engage students and maintain and foster engagement through their formative years.

As students transition into middle school, a primary area where many students of all learning styles and cultural backgrounds experience a lack of fit is in the perception of a lack of agency and autonomy in their learning. For example, as the focus of literacy development shifts from learning to read to reading to learn, schools provide a decreasing level of autonomy and responsibility in the types of reading students can do (Allington, 1994; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008, 2010; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). As a result of this lack of agency in and decreasing enjoyment for the process of reading, students disengage (Hagenuer & Hascher, 2010; J. K. Smith et al., 2012).

Within this context, there seems to be a disconnect between current school structures and the needs of their students. Secondary schools, with their emphasis upon subject-specific courses, content-area teaching and learning, and highly standardized schedules and outcomes,
ensure that students do not have the time or means to effectively participate in engaged and sustained independent learning (Allington, 1994). Thus, many students report a loss of agency, interest, and relevance in the act of reading (Archambault, Eccles, & Vida, 2010; Eccles et al., 1993; Lenters, 2006; Strommen & Mates, 2004). This leads to reluctance, disengagement, and possibly failure and dropout. However, the literature suggests that cultivating a systemic school culture devoted to providing relevant content, intimate relationships based on trust, and process oriented environments is a simple counter to perpetuating this cycle of declining motivation leading to declining achievement.

Ultimately, both stage-environment fit and PYD position engagement and autonomy as essential to the development of adolescents. Further, both frameworks understand that character traits do not exist in singularity, but in concordance and relation to their environments and circumstances. Analyzing the traditional and essential structures of secondary education through the lens of engagement as posited by stage-environment fit and PYD offers a revealing perspective on the influence of school structures on adolescent development. Thus, the question becomes not why to develop a supportive environment that values individual identity, experience, and engagement in secondary schools, but how to establish a school culture that does so.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine and seek to understand how teachers at a particular urban, independent school perceive the structures of their school in regards to the engagement of young adolescents. This study is conducted within the context of a doctoral program, which emphasizes the construction of knowledge from a specific worksite. Moreover, this program contends that site-based research is essential in examining a specific problem of practice within the context of a given site. As a result, such a study must understand the role of the site in the lived experience of a given problem in order to enact systemic change (“Doctor of Education (EdD) Programs Online | Northeastern College of Professional Studies,” 2016).

Within the context of this program, this study seeks to position the voices and perspectives of teachers as expert in their ability to both experience and perceive the concept of student engagement in action. In doing so, the purpose of this study is to utilize the co-constructed knowledge gleaned from these teachers-as-experts to enact systemic and lasting change.

Primary question

How do middle level teachers in a small, urban, independent school understand the role of the environment in fostering student engagement and motivation?

Sub-questions

- What are the characteristics of an engaging and developmentally responsive school environment according to the teacher participants?
- How do these teachers describe student engagement in academic areas and in regards to identity development across the curriculum?
The evolution of the study. Upon embarking on this work, literacy development and engagement stood as the focus of the study. I had recently undertaken key initiatives in a school surrounding literacy and engagement, and I hoped that a study examining these practices would provide a useful and evaluative tool to understand the way we as a community thought about literacy and its role in education. During this process, which utilized the framework of engaged reading as proposed by Wigfield and Guthrie (2000), a more startling trend began to emerge. Many studies recognize a sharp decline in the progress of literacy development beginning at the end of primary school (Best, Floyd, & McNamara, 2004; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008). Simultaneously, in the realm of school engagement and child development, a similar trend of disengagement between elementary and middle school emerges (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Busteed, 2013; Conner & Pope, 2013).

At this time in the process, I had also accepted an offer to lead a small middle school in New York City. One of the core principles I hold as an educational leader resides within the conceptualization of distributed leadership. This framework suggests that in a complex institutional organism, such as a school, leadership cannot reside simply with one person. Instead, true leadership emerges in the thoughtful, purposeful, and trustful interactions that occur between all members of the community (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Camburn, & Stitziel Pareja, 2007). Moreover, educational leaders cannot simply lead by mandate or force of will. They must exist as the lead learner within their organizations, building a culture of caring and capacity building that elevates the performance of every member of the institution (Fullan, 2014). Within this context, while examining literacy remained important, it became clear that I could use this research as a fundamental building block in our shared work of building a reflective and meaningful community for all of our students.
As a result, the focus of the study shifted from an analysis of literacy development and instructional practices to a broader investigation of the school structures and environments that promote positive youth development and engagement. The framework of stage-environment fit (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989) emerged as an important mechanism through which to analyze this concept of adolescent engagement. This paradigmatic theory contends that human beings are vulnerable during times of transition. Young adolescents are particularly vulnerable in that they experience multiple transitions simultaneously, including emotional, cognitive, and social development, further understanding of identity, and typically an environmental change between elementary and middle school. At the heart of this framework exists the contention that adolescents who find the structures and values of their environment in line with their own needs will often engage and thrive. The opposite holds true when there exists a lack of fit between person and environment (Baer, 1999; Eccles et al., 1993; D. E. Hunt, 1975).

Ultimately, young adolescents require environments specifically designed to support their need for autonomy, personal relationships, and process-oriented tasks. As the executors of culture and community on a daily basis, teachers exist as the primary means through which the values and structures of an environment are enacted. As such, in order to develop an environment reflective of and responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents, it is essential to study, understand, and ultimately mobilize the unique experiences and perspectives of these teachers. Within this context, it is important to structure the study in a way that accommodates for and values the varied experiences, perspectives, and stories of these teachers. Thus, while there are studies that could seek to explore the essence of student engagement, the research question in this case revolves around the expertise and understanding of the teachers in the community.
Qualitative approach

In recounting the early resistance to recognizing and studying the relationship between environment and person an interactive one, it becomes clear that traditional methodologies were not suited for effectively measuring or understanding this relationship. Dating as far back as Lewin’s (1935) assessment of personality and extending into the writings of Hunt (1965) and D. E. Hunt (1975), scholars suggested that recognizing and studying the person in context was more complex than simply identifying traits and isolating variables. In fact, Mitchell (1969) and Murray (1938) call for specific methodologies that account not only for the interactions between person and environment, but also for the interpretations, perspectives, and biases of both subjects and researchers. According to Ryan, Coughlan, and Cronin (2007), “A phenomenon is more than a sum of its parts, and must therefore be studied in a holistic manner” (p. 738). As such, a qualitative and interpretivist approach, which attempts “not to generalize data to the population but to explore individuals’ experiences” (p. 738), stands as the logical and ethical methodological choice in a study such as this. Further, an approach that values and elevates the participants without evaluating their experiences, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), seems perfectly suited as a method for examining the fit between adolescents and their environments.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis focuses upon understanding how participants make sense of their experience, which is an approach that would allow the experiences of expert and veteran teachers to paint a specific picture of middle level education and student engagement. Further, IPA, grounded as it is in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), seeks to understand not the essence of a phenomenon but
“the first-person perspective from the third-person position” (M. Larkin, Eatonugh, & Osborn, 2011, p. 321). It concerns itself with “an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (J. A. Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). This approach particularly applies to this study. While other research has approached adolescent reading motivation and environment from a case study approach (Fisher, 2001; Francois, 2013), IPA positions the participants’ experiences and understanding as central to the study. Thus, in a study bounded by temporal and ethical limitations—the position of the researcher precludes using first-person interviews with students—IPA offers an opportunity to value the experiences of teachers, who are the primary communicators of instruction, achievement, and school culture. In doing so, it also allows the researcher, a new administrator in this school community, to co-construct an understanding of best practices and fit with his faculty for the students that populate the school.

**Philosophical underpinnings and overview**

IPA has its philosophical and historical origins in the phenomenological work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s work understands and builds on the concept that “consciousness is the basis of all experience” and it seems “inextricably linked to the nature of time itself” (Moran, 2000, p. 60). Thus, Husserlian phenomenology has its basis in transcendental thinking, which seeks to recognize, define, and describe the essence of objects or events. Vagle (2014) argues that central to phenomenological work is the concept of intentionality. Phenomenology defines intentionality not as “what we choose or plan,” but as “how we are meaningfully connected to the world” (p. 27). Husserlian phenomenology focuses upon understanding the essence, or conscious recognition, of a phenomenon by analyzing the directed and intentional relationship between a conscious subject and a particular object (Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle,
In short, “one is not studying the subject or the object, but a particular intentional relationship...between subject and object” (Vagle, 2014, p. 36).

While many credit Husserl as the father of phenomenology, the current literature recognizes Martin Heidegger’s work as moving beyond Husserl’s investigation of essences to a more interpretive phenomenological stance. In fact, “Heidegger claimed that what he gained from phenomenology was the practice of “phenomenological seeing” (Moran, 2000, p. 194).

Central to Heidegger’s work is the question of being. “Phenomena, in this case, are conceived as the ways in which we-find-ourselves-in the world—in love, in pain, in distress, in confusion” (Vagle, 2014, p. 38). While Husserl established what has come to be known as transcendental phenomenology, Heidegger’s work lays the groundwork for hermeneutic phenomenology.

Heideggerian phenomenology is even more inextricably linked to the co-construction of reality that is at the foundation of hermeneutics than its Husserlian counterpart. It posits that reality is in fact constructed not in a one-way interaction between subject and object, but is instead the result of intentional interactions between subject and object and vice versa. In this context, intentional directedness does not move in a single direction. “Phenomena are not directed from subjects out into the world. They come into being and in language as humans relate with things and one another...’in’ the world” (p. 39). Ultimately, the idea of the “lived world” and the importance of lived experience as a means of understanding the world remained constant in both the orientations of Husserl and Heidegger.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty further built the foundations of modern IPA as he sought to understand not only the concept of being, but also that of human being. For Merleau-Ponty, “consciousness is not pure transparency and self-presence...rather consciousness is lived in the body in a more complex and intimate way than previous philosophy...had understood” (Moran,
2000, p. 415). Merleau-Ponty’s work asserts the significance of sensation, sense, and expression as related to the physical construction of the human body. Thus, phenomenology does not simply concern itself with understanding relationships and interactions, but instead seeks to recognize the way in which subjects interpret their relationships and interactions. The literature (Michael Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; J. A. Smith et al., 1999; Vagle, 2014) refers to this orientation as a double hermeneutic, where the researcher seeks to understand how the participant experiences a phenomenon.

**Modern approaches to phenomenology and the origins of IPA.** Vagle (2014) categorizes much of the modern work in phenomenology into two subsets: (1) descriptive phenomenology, as posited by Giorgi in 2009, and (2) Max Van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology.

*Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenology.* According to Giorgi (2009), the primary goal of phenomenological research is to describe, “as accurately as possible, the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 5). Giorgi’s focus on description echoes the Husserlian emphasis on understanding the essence of an experience. That said, Giorgi’s recent works identified the difficulty of distilling human experience to universal essence. As such, he has adjusted his approach to “seek the structure of the concrete experiences being analyzed through the determination of higher-level eidetic invariant meanings that belong to that structure” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 100). Thus, Giorgi’s descriptive model seeks to find instances of similarity within a given context, which is still a step removed from Husserl’s philosophy of uncovering universal essence.

It should be noted that this approach to description and objectivity sits at the center of a current misconception regarding phenomenological work. “The primary assumption is that
phenomenological philosophers and researchers must be interested in determining universal truths that transcend time and space and which are also unaffected by social context, power, and agency” (Vagle, 2014, p. 29). In doing so, this method of phenomenology does not do its human subjects justice. Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) contend that one of the primary challenges facing IPA research is the ability to balance giving voice to its participants while simultaneously making larger sense of their claims from a psychological perspective.

**Van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology.** Hermeneutic phenomenology in fact directly addresses the critique that phenomenological research disregards the individual for the essential. For Van Manen (1990), phenomenological research seeks to understand what it means to be human. “In phenomenological research description carries a moral force…Phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (p. 13). Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to study the person-in-context, a concept which is central to IPA.

**The modern origins of IPA.** However, it is important to note that modern interpretation and application of IPA stands apart from the traditional phenomenological approach. Where Heidegger and, to an extent, Husserl sought to understand the essential nature of a given phenomenon (Vagle, 2014), IPA recognizes the importance of environmental context and experience, but focuses on the interpretation of the phenomenon itself. As such, IPA seeks not to generalize or reduce an experience to its core components, but instead “enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefine category systems” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). According to Joathan A. Smith (2011), IPA grew in popularity as a research methodology starting in 1996. IPA’s appeal comes from the fact that it draws upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.
**Phenomenology.** The IPA approach grounds itself in the theories of phenomenology in that it seeks to recognize, value, and understand the way individuals interpret and perceive their experiences. These understandings and experiences are “unique to the person’s embodied and situated relationship to world” (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 21). As such, IPA does not seek to separate the experience from the individual, but instead relies on the capacity of the research to remain interpretative and to focus upon individuals’ attempts to make meanings out of their activities and to the things happening to them” (p. 21). Ultimately, IPA seeks to study the “thing itself” in all its complexity by capturing the voices of those who experience and interpret it, rather than seeking to reduce it to preconceived core components.

**Hermeneutics.** IPA is grounded in hermeneutics in that it seeks to study interpretations, not given experiences. These interpretations in turn reveal a person’s relatedness to the surrounding world (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Of significant value to the practices of IPA is the concept of the hermeneutic circle, which posits, “To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 28). In the context of this study, the perceptions of the teacher participants in regards to engagement and environment exist as both the part and the whole. They provide a rich description of the environment and the concept itself, while simultaneously existing as specifically unique to the individual.

It is in its conception of and reliance upon hermeneutics as a critical construction of the world that IPA establishes itself as the most meaningful methodology for this study. At first glance, the hermeneutic stance of IPA provides an ethical framework in relation to working with participants who report directly to me professionally. Gadamer (1992) writes, “hermeneutics is a protection against abuse of method, not against methodicalness in general” (as cited in Kinsella,
By recognizing that sociological research seeks to understand not only the objective of a given phenomenon but also the social and interpretivist construction of that phenomenon, the researcher’s role becomes not one of an investigator uncovering and revealing a single universal truth but that of a co-participant actively constructing meaningful and socially situated knowledge (Bourdieu, 1989; Takacs, 2002).

Thus, the hermeneutic approach at play in this study is not simply one of understanding, but one of active and social construction. The purpose of this analysis of teachers’ perceptions of student engagement in a particular middle school at a particular time is “understanding rather than explanation” (Kinsella, 2006, p. 2). The approach also accounts for the assumption that “knowledge is treated as a social act with its underlying social relationships” (Giroux, 1980, p. 342). Dialogue exists at the heart of these social relationships, which in turn both seek to understand and construct meaning of the world. For Freire (2003), “To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it” (p. 88). This act of naming is the process of both interpreting the world and acting upon that interpretation. Moreover, “dialogue is the encounter of men, mediated by the world, in order to name it” (p. 88). As such, human interactions not only seek to understand and interpret the world around them, they actively and critically reconstruct that same world. Ultimately, Freire contends that the act of dialogue is a critical one, “which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than a static entity” (p. 92). Simply, the process of engaging, of truly listening to the voices and experiences of others, actively reconstructs and co-constructs reality. Moreover, Freire contends that the goal of research in the field of education should specifically impact practice (P Freire, 1998). It is in this critical space, as well as the connection between the theory and the practice, that the hermeneutics of IPA become essential to this study.
In its combination of hermeneutics and phenomenology, IPA exists as the most logical and most ethical methodology for a study such as this. In my role as a leader and member of the community in which the participants work, to enact a study that was evaluative, reductive, or essentialist would be unethical and put the participants in a compromised position. However, the phenomenology of IPA seeks to allow the researcher “to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant,” while recognizing that there exists a double hermeneutic, in that the study “becomes an interpretative endeavor for both participant and researcher. Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen” (p. 37). A study such as this requires the researcher to stand not above his participants, but alongside them, learning from the complexity of their experiences and understandings.

**Idiography.** Finally, IPA is idiographic in that it seeks to offer a detailed and nuanced analysis and understanding of the particular person in a particular environment. Idiography seeks to distinguish between a study of “specifics” and that of “things-in-general,” while IPA “often uses the term in such a way that it draws upon both these meanings, insofar as many of its exemplar studies concentrate on specific individuals as they deal with specific situations or events in their lives” (Michael Larkin et al., 2006, p. 3). Thus, while IPA focuses intensely on the individual, it slowly and tentatively seeks to find connection and consensus between cases and experiences.

Ultimately, the methodology of IPA directly connects and supports a study seeking to understand the perceptions of a small group of people in a given environment. Further, since it comes from a place of interpretative and phenomenological analysis, it establishes the participant and the expert and the keeper of essential knowledge. This works to sublimate the power of the
researcher, in that it becomes clear that neither the study nor the professional work of the researcher can be accomplished without the expertise and experiences of the participants.

Site

The Cathedral School of St. John the Divine (CSSJD) is a small, Episcopal, co-educational, independent day school located in New York City. Located on a large cathedral close, CSSJD stands apart from the typical urban school, in that students have access to a large campus that includes two playgrounds, large green spaces, and the largest cathedral in the world. It serves students of all faiths from Kindergarten to eighth grade. Graduates go through a structured and carefully constructed exmissions process that leads to their attending independent day schools in the city, specialized and screened New York City public schools, and boarding schools located primarily in the northeastern United States. Approximately 300 students are enrolled in the school with 135 populating the Upper School division, which comprises grades five through eight.

Originally founded at the turn of the twentieth century as a dormitory and school for the choir program of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the school has grown over its century in existence to recognize and value the unique diversity present in New York City. Alongside its primary mission statement, CSSJD has adopted a guiding diversity statement as well, which emphasizes the value of all people and establishes the development of a critical consciousness as it pertains to all aspects of identity as a central tenet of the school curriculum and culture. In this context, the school actively seeks to recruit and enroll students from families of all ethnicities, races, and socioeconomic status. Approximately 40% of the student body receives some form of financial aid. The population of the school primarily identifies as Caucasian; around 10% identify as African American, 7.4% as Asian American, 5% as Latinx/Hispanic American, 2%
as Middle Eastern American, and around 8% as multiracial. There exists a remaining 14% that chose not to identify in this way.

The school employs 43 full time and three part-time teachers. The faculty breaks down along similar demographic lines to that of the student body. The school’s administrative team includes the Head of School, the Chief Financial Officer, the Director of Admissions, the Director of Advancement, the Director of Community Engagement, the Head of the Lower School, and the Head of the Upper School. I currently hold the position of Upper School Head. My predecessor remains at the school as a sixth and eighth grade English teacher. He voluntarily chose to relinquish the role during the 2015-2016 school year. He played an active and integral part in the leadership transition of the school.

Heading into the 2016-2017 school year, CSSJD established and undertook a strategic enrollment plan designed to counteract some trends in admission and attrition that had been identified in recent years. As part of this plan, CSSJD employed an external marketing firm to help develop a clear and articulated branding platform. It also has committed itself academically to updating its pedagogical practices with an eye towards differentiated instruction. When this platform and plan were presented at the opening faculty meetings in August of 2016, the faculty responded enthusiastically. The faculty culture at CSSJD is one of caring and commitment to the individual students entrusted to them. As such, they have approached these recent initiatives both with curiosity and collegiality.

Participants

As mentioned above, the school employs 43 full-time and three part-time teachers. Twenty-two of these faculty members work in the Upper School (grades 5-8). Nine of those twenty-two teach in both the Lower and Upper School divisions, the rest are specific to the
Upper School. Approximately one-third of this Upper School faculty identify as male, while the remaining two-thirds identify as female. The faculty is predominantly white and includes a similar ethnic and racial demographic to that of the student body.

Participants were drawn from this pool of faculty members. IPA research calls for a sampling of participants that is purposive and homogenous (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In this sense, a sample size of seven to nine Upper School faculty members would not effectively represent the entire Upper School faculty, let alone that of the school or even teachers in urban independent schools. This sampling was conducted by through criteria sampling (Creswell, 2012). In this case, the primary criteria were that each participant work as teachers in the Upper School at CSSJD. Further, recognizing that the significant shared trait among all the participants is their work at CSSJD, their participation aligned closely to the IPA expectation of studying the person in context and simultaneously became essential to the greater work of the school.

Permission from the school has been obtained through a written letter of consent from the current Head of School. As the participants of the study were co-workers, the project was presented to potential participants initially via email. Participants were contacted through the Northeastern email in order to establish separation between the professional relationship and that of researcher and study participant. Nineteen email invitations were sent to members of the CSSJD Upper School faculty. Eleven total recipients showed interest. However, due to time constraints and other factors, only eight of these eleven formally participated in the study.

**Procedures**

Follow up occurred in one-on-one conversations that occurred during the workday at the work environment. In these conversations, the goals of the project were outlined, establishing the participants as experts essential to the work being done in the study and at the school. This
conversation focused upon acknowledging the position of power held by the researcher and outlining the rights of the participants to withdraw at any time. This conversation was also devoted to answering any questions and allaying any concerns. It was not an opportunity to convince those hesitant to participate, but instead to ensure that potential participants felt comfortable in their role. Informed consent forms were developed for this study (Appendix A). The informed consent form explained the details of the research, its importance, how data would be collected, managed, and stored, steps taken to ensure confidentiality, protection of privacy, and participants’ right to withdraw from the research at any time (Creswell, 2012). These were sent via email—again through the researcher’s Northeastern email account. Participants signed the consent form and verbally agreed to participating in the study.

However, as their direct supervisor conducted these interviews, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time at a number of times throughout the process, including during the introduction of the study, upon receiving their consent, prior to beginning the interview. Participants were also informed about the confidentiality of the data and how it might be presented in theses and journal articles. Only after all of these occurred did the researcher begin transcription of the audio recordings. Due to the unique relationship between researcher and participant, further ethical considerations will be covered below.

Approaching this work from a social constructivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) with a focus on phenomenological analysis, qualitative research design was considered the best method. Adopting the approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis permits the study to interact with the research questions on an idiographic level (Michael Larkin et al., 2006), while ethically providing the space to capture and elevate the voices and experiences of professionals in context. Similarly, adopting this model provided the opportunity to examine and understand the two main
aspects of this study: the participants’ “objects of concern” and their “experiential claims” (p. 111).

Data Collection

In conducting IPA research, the primary method of data collection comes in the form of in-depth research interviewing. Vagle (2014) and Smith (1999) suggest that these interviews should be semi-structured while providing room for the participants to express their stories. IPA studies “require small sample sizes. It is the quality, rather than the quantity of the data that permits insightful analyses to be developed” (Michael Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 104). Essential to any of these collection methods is “the establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy” (Lester, 1999, p. 2), while maintaining a role that is both “neutral and facilitative” (Michael Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 104).

In this context, data were gathered through one semi-structured interview conducted off of the work site at a location most convenient and comfortable for the participant. These interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants had the opportunity to review these transcripts before any analysis occurs.

Care was taken in ensuring that both the structure and language of the questions derived from a place of curiosity and aimed to elevate and understand the experiences of the participants. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) suggest that the “aim of an interview is to largely facilitate an interaction which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words” (p. 57). For example, questions nine and ten in the interview protocol (Appendix D) ask participants to describe times when they felt students were particularly engaged or disengaged with their environment. While this might initially read as an evaluative question, asking teachers to offer examples of times they felt successful and not, the sub-question asks them not to evaluate their
own practice, but to review the situation and explain describe the ways they knew students were engaged or disengaged.

In crafting this protocol and being aware of the researcher’s inherent power as both researcher and administrator, it was essential to position the teacher participants as “experiential experts on the topic in hand” (p. 58). In doing so, specific attention was paid to vocabulary and question structure (Michael Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Michael Larkin et al., 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 1999). For example, question six (Appendix D) asks the participant to evaluate the strengths and challenges of the current program. With the addition of the word “collectively” in the second sub-question, the implication is that the work of growing and improving as a school does not solely reside with any one individual.

Data Analysis

It is important to note, up front, that, contrary to traditional qualitative research, this IPA-oriented study is interested not in the essence of a given phenomenon, but in how teachers experience and understand that concept of engagement. As such, while the literature details specific processes that govern the data analysis in IPA research, it is important to first discuss the concepts of bracketing and/ or bridling that many authors, dating back to Husserl, establish as a prerequisite for phenomenological research. Phenomenology is not only double hermeneutic and idiographic in its approach, but it is also reductive. According to Vagle (2014), Giorgi’s transcendental phenomenological approach relies on that reductive nature to put aside and render the researcher’s past experience as non-influential. More modern approaches to phenomenological research recognize that data collected from interviews are often reflective and thus impossible to separate from the context of participant and researcher. Thus, the concept of bridling has come forth in recent years, which stands on two basic principles:
First, bridling involves the essence of bracketing in that pre-understandings are restrained so that they do not limit the openness. Second, bridling is an active project in which one continually tends to the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole throughout the study. (Vagle, 2014, p. 67)

Thus, bridling does not wholly remove the researcher from the process, but instead relies on the researcher to constantly refer back to the formation of a bigger picture. This process again assumes that no act, event, or object, even research data, exists without interaction between intentionally directed consciousnesses. In this study, this act of bridling is essential. It allows the researcher to stand alongside the participant, attending to the bigger picture later in the study.

In terms of the process of data analysis, IPA relies on a process that begins with a verbatim transcription of research interviews. This study takes the approach of what Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999) describe as an idiographic case study, where the participant interviews exist as the cases to be analyzed. Each interview was analyzed in full before moving on to the next one. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to typical IPA procedures. First-pass analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcript in order to summarize the participants’ experiences into patterns of meaning within a given account (J. A. Smith et al., 1999). Moreover, a process of initial noting was completed, which focused not only on the content of the interviews, but the semantics and language employed by the participants (J. A. Smith et al., 2012). After this primary analysis, the next level of analysis aimed to “list the emerging themes and look for connections between them.” Some were found to “cluster together” while others came to be regarded “as subordinate concepts” (p. 222). This level of analysis was completed in the coding software NVivo. As a third step in the analysis of the individual interview, I undertook the process of abstraction, where larger, higher level, super-
ordinate themes grew from these initial emergent themes. Again, these emerged in the NVivo software. As these super-ordinate themes emerged, I compiled transcript extracts in Word documents, which included the theme as title and fragments from the interviews that fall under that theme (J. A. Smith et al., 2012). Care was taken in each step of the process to separate the researcher’s personal and professional relationship with the participants from the data presented and analyzed. After these steps were completed, the researcher applied this hierarchy of themes as an analytical framework to the other interviews. After each transcript was analyzed in this way, a master table of themes was developed for the group, thus providing a central source of evidence and thematic analysis.

The research questions of this study derive from the theoretical frameworks of stage-environment fit and positive youth development in that they seek to understand a given perspective of the influence of environment on student engagement and literacy development. IPA methodology provides a strong framework for conducting an ethical study of this perspective. First cycle analysis aligns with the philosophies, values, and norms of IPA in the use of the method of bridling to separate the researcher from the participant. Second and third cycle analyses similarly attend to these values and norms as the researcher attends to the larger phenomenological themes and the bigger picture later in the study.

It is important to note that IPA methodology also asserts that there is no one singular method for establishing patterns and themes in data. Therefore, it will be essential that the researcher be open to the “discovery” of these at any time.

**Trustworthiness**

Unlike traditional quantitative research, this study takes a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the interpretations of individuals. Therefore, the reliability of the study rests in its
trustworthiness and internal validity rather than in its external validity (Creswell, 2012). In doing so, the researcher will employ member checking, providing thick description, and undergoing an inquiry audit along with the offering of an audit trail.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) offer the work of Lucy Yardley (2000, 2008) as a strong framework through which to analyze the validity of a qualitative IPA study. Yardley breaks this framework into four principles: (1) sensitivity to context, (2) commitment and rigor, (3) transparency and coherence, and (4) impact and importance.

**Sensitivity to context.** Sensitivity can be established in a number of ways, including an awareness to the participants’ current professional context and a focus upon the existing literature. The literature also suggests that the rationale to utilize IPA, as is the case in this study, reveals the understand of the need for “sensitivity to context through close engagement with the idiographic and the particular” (J. A. Smith et al., 2012, p. 180). Upon recognizing the potential vulnerability of the participants in a study such as this, the researcher decided upon IPA as a way to elevate the experiences of the participants and limit his own perceived authority and power. Further, by providing the detail associated with thick description of participant selection, the construction of the interview schedule and protocol, and the steps used in analysis, a deep level of transparency will be provided. In doing so, readers will have the opportunity to assess the process by which conclusions were reached, and determine what aspect of these conclusions might be useful to them.

**Commitment and rigor.** Similarly, the researcher recognizes how attentive he must be to the type of verbiage and space provided to the participant during the interview in order to provide a safe and comfortable arena to conduct the data collection. At the same time, it is necessary to attend to the data, while maintaining a “balance between closeness and
separateness” (p. 181). This study purposefully seeks a small sample size and a small research site in order to ensure commitment and rigor. Attending to the audit trail of the research conducted and the conclusions reached will also ensure the confirmability of the study.

**Transparency and coherence.** This study attends to the principles of transparency and coherence through a process of participant checking. Participants were able to test “data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions” as presented in the study (“RWJF - Qualitative Research Guidelines Project | Member checking | Member Checks,” 2008). More specifically, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts, data analysis, and final write-up to ensure that the researcher has maintained the integrity of their statements. Further, thick descriptions of participant selection, the construction of the interview schedule and protocol, and the steps used in analysis have been furnished to provide further transparency.

Coherence refers to both the study’s ability to present a clear and cohesive argument, as well as the degree of fit between the conducted research and the underlying theoretical framework. In this regard, the research questions derived directly from the analysis of literature around literacy development, engagement, and stage-environment fit. Further, the interview protocol shifted from a series of questions asking participants about their understanding of a phenomenon to prompts for teachers to share their stories and insight. These grew directly from the honing of the research questions as well as the IPA methodological approach. An inquiry audit reveals the dependability of this process.

**Impact and importance.** In examining and explaining the goals of a qualitative study, Maxwell (2013) delineates between a researcher’s personal, practical, and intellectual objectives. In this exploration, Maxwell asserts that personal goals often serve as the impetus of a study and can have a bearing and influence on the way a researcher accesses, collects, interprets, and
presents data. Similarly, intellectual objectives aim at understanding, while practical goals focus on “accomplishing something” (p. 28). Simply, practical goals justify the study and methodology.

In the case of this study, the practical, the personal, and the intellectual all intertwine. Modern theories of education recognize learning and development as uniquely personal and organic processes (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Simultaneously, concepts of stage-environment fit, reading engagement, and positive youth development all contend that effective education and programming cannot exist as a one-size-fits-all model (Allington, 1994; Eccles et al., 1991; Larson, 2000). As a result, in seeking to uncover the structures and environments that help students engage in school, it is important to understand that every aspect of the research site, from its policies and programs to the individuals who populate its walls are unique.

Almost a decade ago, the Association for Middle Level Education released a policy brief, titled *This we believe*, which established a series of best practices in working with middle level learners. However, recognizing that every classroom changes based on the students, teachers, and communities, this organization rarely presents one case as a simple solution. As Lerner (1982), Lewin (1935), and Murray (1938) all suggest, human beings are complex subjects that both influence and are influenced by their environments. This study seeks to understand how educators perceive the interactions between their students and their surroundings in the hopes of co-constructing a middle school that reflects and responds to the needs of every member of the community. In doing so, this research should provide insight to administrators and teachers regarding the ways in which school environments and structures can be designed to fit an organic rather than industrial model of education.
**Ethical Considerations**

While participants faced no potential physical harm in engaging in this process, the potential risk that these faculty members faced was the fact that the researcher holds a role of authority in the organization. In fact, the researcher acts as a supervisor to many of the faculty members who would engage in this study. Typically, human research seeks to avoid putting participants in such a situation (Creswell, 2012). This would avoid having the participants link their participation in the study to any performance evaluation or standing with regards to their employment situation.

All forms of contact, including email, conversation, and the interview protocol itself, reiterated that there was no penalty for either not participating in the study or in withdrawing should the interview feel evaluative. The student researcher had done extensive work examining his positionality and recognizing the roles implicit bias play in not only his work, but also in the language employed. While participants might appear vulnerable because of the professional relationship they have with the researcher, the presentation of the study as one deriving from their experience and expertise positioned them in the role of expert rather than those being studied. Recognizing that the role of a leader, particularly one in education, is to act as a lead learner and making that role clear to participants minimized vulnerability.

Similarly, the researcher actively looked for verbal and nonverbal cues of discomfort that might reveal an evaluative stance in the interview conversation. Participants also had a large role in ensuring the validity of the final study as the dissertation will undergo a participant check process, which again positions participants in the role of expert and authority, rather than as specimens to be studied and evaluated.
Audio from interviews were recorded digitally. These recordings were stored on the researcher’s home computer. Transcriptions and raw data were be stored on this computer and in a lockable filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. This housed all signed consent forms for up to three years after the completion of the study. Upon the completion of the study, the researcher transferred all digital raw data to a password protected external hard drive.

Though the size of the site and sample along with the nature of the participants’ relationship with each other and the researcher will make confidentiality among participants difficult, the researcher worked to maintain all aspects of personal confidentiality. The names of participants were changed. Similarly, the IPA process of data analysis described above helped to remove some of the researcher’s bias and to somewhat separate the participants from their interpretations. That said, the nature of an IPA study requires the researcher and participant to stand side-by-side in their co-construction of knowledge. As such, true anonymity between researcher and participants would not serve the greater purpose of the study.

**Potential Researcher Bias**

As a new administrator tasked with enacting change in the Upper School at CSSJD, I have worked for over a decade in middle level education. It stands to reason that I have entered into this work with preconceived notions around best practices in middle level education. In this regard, it would be easy to bring my own understandings to light in both the data collection and analysis in this process. As such, it will be important to consistently and intentionally attend to the philosophies of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and the conception of principal as lead learner (Fullan, 2014; Spillane et al., 2007). These frameworks position the role of educational leader as one focused on building capacity and enacting change through an established culture of collaboration and collegiality. True and meaningful change cannot occur without first
understanding the experiences of individual faculty members. By attending to and working through these lenses, I ensured that I would not overlay my own conception of middle school environments.

In fact, the role of the researcher in the organization plays an essential role in this study, as does the role of the participant. School environment and climate are such multifaceted organisms that a single person, no matter his or her authority, cannot hope to fully effect or understand them. Teachers have the most direct and consistent interactions with students and the most direct influence on the daily environment of a school. Understanding their perceptions, experiences, and expertise provides a unique lens into the daily life of the school. Recognizing the researcher’s dual role as both a doctoral student and a student of the work of the school, this study offers the opportunity for stakeholders of the school to co-construct a common vision, which will best serve the students.

**Limitations of the study**

Though on the surface there exists the limitation of small sample size and a single research site, it is important to note that IPA’s presentation of the hermeneutic circle establishes grounds for analysis of a phenomenon through study of the parts. Thus, while a small sample size of participants and a specific research site may seem to lack transferability, in reality these experiences can provide illumination and offer an entry point to deeper understanding of the concept of student engagement.

That said, this study seeks to understand the connection and relationship between adolescents and their school environments. Schools are inherently complex organisms, which encompass a variety of perspectives, experiences, and roles. Thus, the true nature of any phenomenon related to education cannot be fully captured by the investigation of a series of
traits or experiences. This study, according to the expectations of participant sampling under IPA, presents only the perspective of current teachers. While this does offer the ability to enact and effect change at this site, it requires teachers to interpret the experiences of their students. Similarly, the study does not include experiences of all members of the school community. Therefore, the resulting conclusions will be limited in scope. That said, these conclusions will be a snapshot of how a specific group of people understand this specific phenomenon of environmental impact upon school engagement. Thus, it can and should act as a resource that can help other educators learn and grow.
Chapter 4: Analysis

Introduction

This study sought to understand the role of the environment on student engagement at a small, independent, urban middle school in New York City. In doing so, the study presents teacher perceptions of both young adolescents and the environmental factors that enhance or prohibit student engagement. The researcher explored the way teachers described students, their relationships, and their work within the setting of the school. These accounts were analyzed as part of a process that particularly situates them within the life of the Cathedral School of St. John the Divine, a K-8 private school in New York City. Eight total individuals were interviewed, and these individuals provided detailed descriptions of their time working with young adolescents, their journey towards working with this age group, and their understanding of and experiences related to student engagement. Descriptions of these eight individuals follow:

Emily

Emily did not go to school to study education. Instead, her undergraduate studies focused on TV, film, and radio production. However, she did not find an affinity in the “unstable” work environment that such a path led to. The inconsistent hours and workdays did not speak to her sensibilities. At the same time Emily also did not find herself attracted to “boring office” jobs. Instead, throughout her time in college, she had worked as a swim instructor and always “enjoyed working with kids.” During this time, she also worked in an after school program, which she continued through her graduate studies.

Emily recognizes the unique nature of working with young adolescents, but also relishes the fact that her current job allows her the opportunity with students in both the elementary and
middle grades. She feels that this provides her the best of both worlds. In her role, combines a number of her passions, and finds herself in a “fun career.”

Emily recognizes that young adolescents can be challenging. “They'll just come right up and say what they want to be doing.” However, much of the difficulty comes from their social pressures and just the “desire to fit in.” Over almost a decade in this job, what she has found works for her is paying close attention to the relationships she builds with the students and finding ways to “mix up” her instruction that keeps the lessons fresh. Further, she feels most successful when she is able to turn over the responsibility of the lessons to her students.

**Tim**

Tim never thought about becoming a teacher. In fact, he “was the type of student who didn't like teachers.” When he explores this issue, he realizes that many of his early teachers did not take the time to let him know that his voice mattered. He described himself as a straight A student, but one who got in a lot of trouble. It was not until he found himself in a small charter school, where he found adults “who really, really give a crap.” That seems to have informed his career and philosophy as a teacher.

Tim began teaching in the lower grades, which he connects directly to his current practice in working with middle schoolers. He recognizes that lower school teachers innately “acknowledge the difference in learning in the room” and plan thoughtfully and intentionally to address it. This informs Tim’s decision when he crafts and presents his lessons to be explicit in the path of the journey he plans to take his students, whom he refers to as “my kids,” on. He describes his lesson planning as aimed at not only presenting content, but seeking to hook even the most “interest-driven kid.”
At the forefront of Tim’s teaching philosophy is the belief that teachers must care for their kids both genuinely and deeply. In establishing care, they establish trust; and in the middle school years, if kids trust you, you can take them anywhere.

Mike

Mike did not begin his studies intending to teach. Instead, he knew that he “wanted to write.” Following that inclination, he studied journalism and then creative writing. The latter experience led him to applying to a job at his “old high school,” which he intended to fill the gap as he applied for creative writing programs. Over time though, Mike “kind of fell in love with teaching, but it took a long time.” In his graduate studies, he realized that teaching was in fact “the best part of my experience in grad school” and he wound up going back to teaching full time.

During his career, Mike has worked in both upper and middle schools. He has served as both a classroom teacher and an administrator. In fact, it was his role as a department chair, where he had to teach a middle school class, that led him to discover the joys and challenges of working with young adolescents. According to Mike, these students are “more open, more moldable, more shape-able.” On top of that, he also describes them as “fun” and “engaging.” They “made me laugh a lot.” When reflecting on the age group, Mike finds their potential and capacity for change and growth to stand out. While he does still lament missing the “intellectual rewards” that come with working with older and more mature students, Mike seems to relish establishing the trust and relationship necessary to truly engage a young adolescent.

David

David did not pursue his degree with the intention to go into education. He hoped to work with young people within the context of a private practice, but never expected to find
himself in a school context. However, his internship work brought him into the world of independent schools, and from there, he found his way to Cathedral. For David, there is an “energy that feels sort of kind” that resonates within the walls of CSSJD and drew him to it. Having now worked there for more than a decade, David’s role at Cathedral consistently expanded to the point where he felt pressed and almost over scheduled, which felt like a detriment to his capacity to do his job to his satisfaction. This school year, Cathedral brought in Heather, who has actively partnered with David. He feels he has more time to plan and to reflect upon his work, and in the process feels an even greater “connection” to the work of the school and the community.

David finds himself drawn to adolescents, both in his desire to equate school with curiosity rather than tedium and in his own personal development. Having been “bullied and harassed in middle school,” David feels like his work with this age group is personally healing. The fact that he can “have fun” at a school dance in a “way that I didn’t in 7th and 8th grade” has helped him and also helps to establish a sense of community and family in the school environment. David refers to his colleagues as people who feel like brothers and sisters and recognizes that personal relationships and trust exist at the heart of any positive experience in middle school. And he considers himself particularly fortunate to be a part of this unique culture.

Heather

Heather just joined CSSJD in the fall of 2016. Heather went into her graduate studies knowing that she wanted to explore special education and working with students with disabilities. However, she found that the programs she explored focused primarily on “clinical psychology, all files, all cognitive. Heather realized, “I don’t want this. I want to work with
people. I want to work with children.” As a result, she pursued a program exploring applied behavioral analysis, which felt particularly at odds with her personal values. However, as she settled in, Heather recognized that “all the jargon, all of the terms we use, all of the trappings, it’s just good teaching.” That realization sparked her journey towards the more mainstream classroom.

For Heather, middle school students present the unique duality of existing simultaneously in both the worlds of childhood and adulthood. On the one hand, they are genuinely and acutely interested in what the world surrounding them presents, but on the other, they yearn for more authority, more control, and more responsibility. For Heather, balance is key. A teacher must balance authority and personal connection, personal relationships and structured routines, and release of responsibility and appropriate expectations. At the end of the day, Heather recognizes that schools are composed of a variety of individuals and that it is incumbent on the teachers and the school to recognize and provide multiple paths to multiple destinations.

**Brooks**

Brooks always knew that she wanted to be a teacher. From a very young age, she would set up an imaginary classroom that included “different students’ work and different handwriting and a white board and a black board.” Her experiences in college, teaching English as a foreign language abroad, solidified this desire, as she felt she found a perfect fit for her “personality” and “creativity.” Having spent a majority of her career working with high school students, Brooks recognized that “my students’ middle school teachers had done all the hard work and heavy lifting for them.” Desiring to enter an environment that felt “more like teaching and less like directing,” Brooks transitioned to CSSJD.
In thinking about her own desire to teach and what drives her work in this arena, Brooks contends that “the role of the teacher is sacred.” As her home life became “tumultuous,” she relied on her teachers to provide a safe and nurturing place. For Brooks, doing so is almost magical. In her transition to working with young adolescents, Brooks feels it is important to distinguish between the younger students in 5th and 6th grades and the older ones in 7th and 8th. She describes 5th graders as closer to her four year olds than to the high school students she has taught, and recognizes that they require a slightly different approach than students in the later grades.

For Brooks, humor and patience are essential in working with this age group. Humor allows for the type of personal connection that defines an organic and authentic relationship that she seeks to build with every student. Patience recognizes that her students sometimes need permission to be silly and permission to learn and grown from their mistakes. She also recognizes that transitioning into working with this age group can be challenging, as sometimes all she wants to do is remind a child that playing with his retainer in class is “disgusting.”

**Celia**

Celia loved being a part of the process of education from a young age. She was an only child for about nine years, and in that time, she would play school with her stuffed animals. She remembers her mom purchasing a chalkboard and “I would put my stuffed animals in front of the chalkboard and teach them.” As siblings entered the picture—first a younger sister, and then a step-brother—she assumed the role of “primary tutor,” the “person who looked out for [them] and check [their] homework.” However, in college, she eschewed this passion for a focus on “making money and seeing success as a financial thing.” As such, she pursued focuses in pre-med and economics, jumping from major to major, and yet finally settling on Spanish Literature.
and Psychology. Following college, Celia spent a number of years in event planning and fundraising and made a good living. However, “I was dreading going to work, I was dreading going to my meetings.” Having been volunteering at her old middle school, she found her way into the world of education. “As a teacher, I was excited go to work. I loved walking through the door. I loved seeing the kids.”

For Celia, the teacher plays an important role in helping young adolescents develop into the people they will be when they are older. The teacher must balance establishing clear and meaningful guidelines and expectations with the desire to establish deep and meaningful connections and relationships with the students. She recognizes that lessons must be both relevant and challenging, and that sometimes, a teacher of this age group needs to be clear that she will “take no BS.” In doing so, there emerges an environment of trust and safety where students feel free to take risks and share their ideas.

Kathy

While Kathy never intended to pursue a career in education, as she neared the end of her undergraduate studies, she recognized that finding the right community would allow her to further a number of her passions, including science and athletics. Having attended a boarding school as a day student, she felt that there was a “natural progression” for her to engage in a similar community. In fact, whether she speaks about her experiences at previous schools or at CSSJD, Kathy clearly values an atmosphere of community and family in her workplace. In reflecting on her time in high school, she speaks fondly about the fact that she was often on campus and part of a community from 7am to 7pm. The same holds true for her even at a day school like Cathedral.
In speaking about her transition from working with high school students to those in middle school, Kathy admits that she was apprehensive. However, sitting on the other side of this transition, she relishes working with this age group. She refers to adolescents as “delightfully energetic,” while recognizing that this energy comes with both opportunities and vulnerabilities. In thinking about the age group, she finds it important to delineate between the early years of 5th and 6th grade and the later ones of 7th and 8th. Further, Kathy brings her own personality and experience to the classroom. As a naturally shy individual, Kathy did not enjoy being put in the spotlight, whether she had the correct response or not. And in that context, she wants to make sure that students are never nervous coming to her class.

Participants recognized not only strategies and structures that elicit student engagement, but also recognized practices and environmental factors that could hinder such engagement. Moreover, there was an unspoken recognition that the unique needs of this age group did in fact produce a lack of fit between many individuals and their middle school environment. As these accounts were analyzed, three super-ordinate themes and ten subordinate themes emerged from the data. The three super-ordinate themes resulted from equal or similar statements made by a majority of the participants. These three super-ordinate concepts address the most meaningful requirements in developing an engaging learning environment for middle level learners. Each subordinate theme then establishes a specific segment of the higher level concept in practice, tracing its connection to the unique needs of young adolescents, its ability to work in opposition to student engagement, and the strategies employed that can effectively promote this level of work in schools.

The three super-ordinate themes in developing an understanding of and an environment devoted to school engagement in young adolescents are (1) meaningful relationships between
students and teachers, (2) a recognition and valuing of the individual, and (3) pedagogy and structures that challenge traditional perceptions of middle level education. In examining meaningful relationships three subthemes emerged: (1) relationships between students and teachers are genuine and authentic, (2) there is a foundation of trust and care between teachers and students, and (3) the school exists as a true community. The three subthemes that comprise the practice of recognizing and valuing every individual include: (1) giving authentic value and respect to every student voice, (2) specifically addressing the identity and identity development of young adolescents, and (3) establishing personal relevance for each student. Finally, the expectation that traditional perceptions of middle level learning must be challenged arises in three subthemes: (1) employing a variety of instructional methodologies, (2) balancing control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections, and (3) investing in growth and process, rather than, product-oriented tasks.

Meaningful Relationships

The first super-ordinate theme, meaningful relationships between student and teacher, captures the participants’ recognition that young adolescents require a personal connection to their learning environment. While that personal connection can and should often be an approachable and trusted adult, the content to be learned, as well as the learning tasks must also connect in a genuine manner to the adolescent learners. Participants made it clear that their experiences have helped them understand the importance of engaging in true relationships with their students. This leads directly to the first subordinate theme, genuine and meaningful relationships between students and teachers. Participants explained that students must feel safe in order to learn and that they must invest in the type of personal growth and examination that comes with being in a relationship with another person. Emotions such as anger and impatience,
though natural, can impede these relationships. Moreover, participants identified that experience working with this age group aids in the ability to develop these relationships. The second subtheme, *a foundation of trust and care*, illustrates the importance of establishing relationships built on the trust that adults have the best interests of the students in mind. Inherent in this is the balance between authority and personal connection, or as David puts it, “respect and intimidation.” The third and final subtheme, *the school exists as a true community*, identifies the ecosystem of a school as influential in providing positive models for student behavior.

**Genuine and meaningful relationships between students and teachers**

Many participants found that the duality of existing in the gray area between childhood and adulthood produces a wide range of emotional responses and experiences on behalf of their students. On one hand, the participants all recognized in their students a natural enthusiasm and curiosity. In attempting to define young adolescents, many participants used words, such as “eager” and “fun.” Kathy described them succinctly as “delightfully energetic.” Brooks observed an innate desire to engage in the learning process when she sees her students “honestly questioning and being super excited that they were grasping something that was totally new for them.”

Participants also recognized the flip side to that natural energy and enthusiasm. In one breath, Tim described his students as empathetic, insightful, catty, and impulsive. Mike depicted this age group as “up and down and all over the place,” and Emily recognized that her students tend to exist in the gray area between childhood and adulthood. “They definitely like to push the boundaries and see what they can get away with. They're still young, they just don't realize it. They think they know everything but they really don't…They're definitely trying to figure out
who they are.” With this, Emily voiced what many participants observed in their students: a liminal existence caught in a gray area between childhood and adulthood.

The speech patterns and descriptions of the participants also illustrated this gray area. In order to describe their students, David, Heather, Mike, Brooks, and Kathy all compared them to their older counterparts. For example, David explained, “There's a certain innocence that…allows middle schoolers to be more open and willing to talk than older kids.” At the same time, Brooks compared the fifth graders she works with more to her younger daughter, and observed in her students the value and desire to be silly and goofy. However, there exists a counterbalance that Celia offered.

I think a lot of my friends and family that don't teach middle school imagine them to be very difficult to deal with, sort of pains in the butts. And I don't see it that way. I see them as intellectuals, actually. Really starting to think about how the world works. And what their talents are and how to utilize them and what their purpose is…They're smart. They're not kids anymore. They're sort of in this gray area that's adolescence; they're not adults, they're not kids, but they're trying to figure it out, sort it through, so we have to be patient with them.

In this response, Celia captured the growing pains inherent in young adolescents. They begin to see themselves in the world and develop the cognitive structures to understand this place, but do not have the emotional experiences to fully occupy this space in the world. Instead, as Emily noted, they act a little crazy because “they're just trying to fit in so sometimes what they're doing it's really just trying to get the attention of someone else or just trying to fit in with a certain group.” This desire to fit in often leads young adolescents to perceive injustice and competition. Emily told the story of how she saw more engagement in physical education from the girls when
classes were separated by gender. Tim expressed a similar situation where social competition dictated the way individual students acted and perceived themselves. A team leader put “too much pressure on himself” and wound up performing poorly. Simply, the duality of the age group leads to feelings of empathy and social awareness that are coupled with deep insecurity about their own development and identity.

In this context, the behaviors of the teacher become a driving force to either engage or disengage a child. In recognizing that young adolescents might test limits and push boundaries to understand their places in communities, teachers have to respond with both command and patience. Mike explained, “Getting angry and frustrated, no matter how human and rational, that we all feel that sometimes, is not ever, ever going to have a positive effect.” Singling students out causes students to think, “Wow, that could happen to me. I could get called out and there could be no way to win.” Similarly, Kathy connected her own experiences with her own teaching philosophy:

It was my chemistry class in high school and constantly being called on. I would have everything written on my page but I got to the point where I was so nervous, I had nothing to say back to the class. I would have, whether it was a simple definition or if it was the name for a compound that I knew, but I was so anxious about blowing the class. In these instances, students become more concerned about their social standing with the group and their own emotional comfort and safety than they do with the material in front of them. David contended that engaging teachers are those who would rather be respected than be intimidating.

The participants as a whole identified genuine, caring relationships as the best vehicle to provide emotional consistency and stability. Doing so directly addressed this emotional
volatility with their students. While participants were sure to draw a clear boundary between “friend” and “teacher,” they each made sure to explain the importance of caring and listening. For Brooks, the relationship she builds with her students is akin to any other in her adult life. “This is a real relationship that we are in, just like a relationship with a friend or a colleague where we have to talk to each other…I think sometimes I can say okay we can move this, but sometimes I also say, I hear you, but you gotta toughen up for this one. So I think listening, making them feel heard is really important too.” Further, Tim’s experience as a middle school student who did not experience these relationships informs his own philosophy. He described his transition into a charter school as a middle schooler:

Even when I was a complete asshole, they showed they cared about me. They had the conversations with me. They told me when I was wrong, but they also told me when I was right to argue and be combative. They taught me to have a voice.

This experience allowed him to recognize that “there are teachers who really, really give a crap.” Similarly, Tim provided the same care to his students, as he explained in his work with a particular child:

I know what it feels like to be a kid from the Bronx to not feel seen and that's how he felt when he started, at least before I got there. And I think a lot of people didn't understand that and it's hard for people to get that… And his academics have improved because of that, because he knew he had teachers that cared…If a kid knows you care, you can teach him anything.

Celia told a similar story about a young woman with whom she specifically connected:

She stirred a lot of drama within the girl community at the school, and ... I had reached out to her even though I hadn't taught her…And we had some really touching moments,
she would cry and she would kind of fess up to what was going on. At the end of the day she just kind of wanted attention and didn't know how to ... see to that. And she thought by sort of ... by being the center of attention, by being the gossip, that was the way to go, which obviously it wasn't…By the end of the year, graduation, you know this is a girl who when I spoke to her at the beginning of seventh grade said she wanted to leave, said she didn't want to be there anymore because she had dug herself such a deep hole. By the time she graduated she was crying because she didn't want to leave.

In each of these instances, teachers connected to their students by simply being available. David used the word “approachable” regularly throughout the interview. They gave value and respected the voices of their students and showed that they “really, really give a crap.”

In establishing these relationships, the participants suggested that their students are more connected to the school writ large. Celia saw her student find a home at school and Tim’s mentorship and guidance helped to develop his student into a young man more confident and comfortable in his identity. Ultimately, genuine and personal relationships provide students with a connection to school, as they begin to invest and participate in safe, yet consequential relationships with adults.

**A foundation of trust and care**

The second subtheme, a *foundation of trust and care*, derives directly from the previous subtheme. Much like strong personal connections with teachers can help students feel known and can help them navigate through the work of developing identity, environments built on the trust that adults have the best interests of the students at heart provide the foundation for positive growth and development. However, in the context of having just explored personal relationships, it is important to delineate between that subtheme and this foundation of trust.
Trust and care in this context do not necessarily have to be synonymous with the types of personal relationships described by Celia and Tim. Instead, in an environment built on the foundations of trust, respect, and care, teachers provide structures, routines, and a balance between content expertise and personal connections that lead to a sense of safety and comfort.

The participants contended that providing an environment of trust is essential to meet the unique emotional needs of their young adolescent students. In looking at the challenges of working with this age group, Emily cited the variety of emotions, energies, and experiences that students bring to class.

Their emotions are up and down and...they bring it to class...Just the behind the scenes stuff that we don't really know about like the dating and stuff that happens online and the stuff that happens outside of school. Then it gets brought to school and...they talk about it in the bathroom and it comes out; that's discouraging. So it's stuff that's out of our control and then we have to try to figure out what's going on as it's happening. That's definitely challenging.

Further, like Emily, Brooks recognized that her adolescent students could not effectively compartmentalize the “outside stuff” and leave it out of the classroom or school environment. Because her students do not yet have the experience or wherewithal to “regulate themselves,” their “personalities that come out in a much bigger way.” Between the impulsivity and hyper-social awareness of the age group, school environments can feel intimidating.

The participants, particularly Heather and Mike, established trust and safety as essential to establishing engaging environments. “We know kids cannot learn unless they feel socially and emotionally safe” (Interview with Mike 2/10/17). Celia concurred: “If the kids don't feel safe they're not going to speak.” For Heather, “you need to establish trust. And not the trust the
kids have for their parents. It's a different kind of trust. It's a trust that this is an environment in which I can try something and I'm sort of going to be protected in making mistakes.” Similarly, Mike suggested that such a level of trust engenders some of the eagerness and willingness that participants recognized as characteristic of this age group. “In a setting where they feel safe…they are willing to go with any kind of dynamic set up.” This willingness builds from “trust in the adult that they know, that you're looking out for them and you care about them and that…we'll work through this, we'll meet, we'll figure this out, and we'll do better the next time.”

Establishing trust and safety as a starting point also allows the teacher to balance the need for authority and personal connection. In disciplining a student who tests boundaries or breaks a rule, beginning from a place of trust and growth allowed Mike to remain invested in and connected to his students.

You got to serve this consequence. It doesn't mean I consider you, you are not bad, I do not see you as bad, this does not define you as a person. This action, this behavior was not good, but this behavior, this action is not who you really are. If you can help them believe that, and recognize that, and see that, then I think you have created an environment where those kids can grow and learn.

In this instance, even in disciplining a student, Mike made sure to display his investment in the student and not the behavior, to communicate that there is room to grow even in failure.

Interestingly, though all participants spoke to this concept of building a trusting and safe environment, they did not all approach it in the same manner. Celia described it as presenting a persona of a teacher who “won’t take any BS,” while both Kathy and Mike suggested that trust can be built on faith both in the expertise and experience of the teacher.
I really try to do is balance that line between, especially in middle school, being someone that they can trust and someone that they're really comfortable with in the front of the class leading the class but also, someone when it's time, when someone's out of line, knowing that there's a structure to this class and you can't be outside of that, and there's a structure to how you conduct yourself at recess, or lunch and balancing being a disciplinarian and also being someone that they can trust. I think that's something everyone's always trying to make sure they're not too far to one side. (Interview of Kathy 3/1/17)

Brooks also spoke to crafting a balance between the personal connection and the ability to establish routines and structures. David gave voice to this balance:

You can be the world's expert on whatever, but if that isn't being demonstrated by your affect, in the classroom, the kids are going to feel like the class is more of a chore than it is a place where they are going to pick up something. I think the ability to be a little goofy, and play a little bit, without making sure it doesn't get out of hand creates a whole different energy.

In such environments, students can be comfortable in taking risks and even failing, but they also can learn from and grow in even the most challenging situations.

Ultimately, building from a foundation of trust and comfort, as established by clear routines, structures, and humor, provides stability and consistency for adolescents who typically experience anything but. In fact, ideally, “the role of the teacher is sacred.” Brooks offered her own experiences as support. “I think that no matter what I was going through as a child and then later on as my home became a tumultuous place, the teacher always had this magical way of creating an atmosphere that…made me feel safe.” Thus, while personal, genuine, and authentic
relationships are essential to engaging young adolescents, they must be balanced against the command and control needed to develop a safe and responsive environment.

**School as community**

The final subtheme, *school as community*, recognizes the unique ecosystem that is a school. Just as the students do not exist free from the context of their personal expectations, emotions, and experiences, nor do classrooms exist independently from the school environment. Looking back to the basic tenets of PYD (Lerner, 2005), two of the “five Cs” that promote positive youth development are character and connections. Participants spoke about the community developed at CSSJD as conducive to building connections and modeling positive character development.

As stated earlier, a primary force behind the learning done in educational institutions becomes a concept known as the hidden curriculum (Howard, 1999). Often, interactions that happen in the hallways and outside of structured time, as well as the types of materials and vocabulary employed, comprise the hidden curriculum, which in turn can communicate the values of an institution. In describing the aspects of the CSSJD community that they felt positively engaged students, participants spoke about the school’s commitment to establishing a community of learners.

For the participants, the development of such a community was evident in the collegiality between and interactions among the faculty. While a positive work environment is important, the participants note that the level of community and collegiality and community among faculty serves the higher purpose of connecting with students. For Celia, being able to communicate about her students with other teachers allows her to more effectively work with them as individuals:
It's very collaborative. Everybody works together, everybody looks out for one another. And we don't just talk about, I think we've got plans for how things are going to be executed. And how we're going to support this kid, how we're going to serve this situation. So I think that's key. I think that's really important, us being able to work together like that. And being able to work with parents, and being able to work with kids.

By providing time for a high level of communication, the teachers allow for the time and space to process situations in the context of that student in that specific time. Further, participants noted that these interactions tend to be action oriented. Kathy described her interview day at CSSJD:

I remember at lunch, I think I sat with [two teachers] and just seeing how they interacted with each other struck me in a very positive way that they're colleagues, they're friends. They, as I was leaving, Terry was talking about how could we do this for the 7th grade, something like that, to Sarah. That, I could really see myself. That's the kind of relationship that I wanted with my colleagues.

In building genuine relationships with and connecting to the age group, “kids can sense if you want to be there” (Interview with David 2/21/17). Developing a culture of collegiality and communication among the faculty serves that aim directly.

Further, participants also noted that the sense of collegiality and community among the faculty acted as a model for the character development of the students. In developing this point, Tim described a time that he was co-planning a lesson with another teacher.

I think about this moment when we were talking about electoral college earlier this year and all of a sudden, I'm meeting with [another teacher] and then, the [math teacher] comes in the room and [another math teacher] comes in the room and then, Brooks comes
in the room, and all of us are talking about, and then Mike’s sitting there, and all of us all of a sudden are talking about giving lessons on the electoral college and how to implement it into their individual classrooms and I'm thinking, the more we can model, we talk about being a community, when they see us being a community… I think that's those moments when they see us actually caring for each other, is a good model for them to also do the same. Those times that we can model being good colleagues and they see that, helps them to pick up with their friends, so maybe that's another piece to this.

In this instance, Tim illustrated the value of a collegial faculty. A simple lesson on the Electoral College during the election season of 2016 could have remained a singular social studies lesson. Instead, through the collaborative nature of the environment, teachers across subjects and grades discussed and implemented ways to connect to this topic in their own classrooms. Further, Tim expressed that modeling the behaviors of a caring and responsive citizen carries weight with the young people occupying the environment.

In an example of the converse proving the rule, moments where negative values are modeled carry just as much weight as the positive. In examining areas where she would like to see improvement, Emily noted procedures during lunch:

This is such a small thing but when the lights go out in the lunchroom for instance, it really bothers me that the teachers are still all talking. I get that there's nowhere for them to go where they can talk to other teachers, but I just think that sets a bad example, especially for the 8th graders who are all right there. They see us talking that it gives them a little bit of leverage if they're talking. They can say, "You guys weren't listening to the announcement." Not that they would say that but, well, some of them might.
All of these examples show the inherent power that adults have in these environments. Simple acts like discussing curricula, seeking help, or even talking when the lights are out at lunch carry powerful and resonant messages to the students.

Ultimately, schools must feel like families and be a place for connection and stability for students. Celia suggested, “You have to make it feel like community, you have to make it feel like a warm and welcoming environment, something that [the kids] feel comfortable going to five days a week.” David noted that CSSJD feels just like that. “I'll look around and just be amazed. I'll look at the different teachers who feel like brothers and sisters with kids to me and then I'll look up at the organ and get amazed at how I became part of this culture.” Through these interactions participants clearly noted that the school’s community values act as a form of positive engagement.

Every kid who leaves here is leaving this space and entering a new place where they are much better at valuing the people who are in that community. I only know that because when I hear from my alumni, they come back, they're like, "Kids in high school are mean." They notice the differences between the two. They went to school with polite kids. (Interview with Tim 2/3/17)

The recognition that a school exists as a community with unique values and specific roles for every member establishes the grounds for positive and meaningful school engagement.

Individually, each of these subthemes speaks to particular aspect of a school environment. Close relationships between teachers and students built upon safety, care, and trust innately connect young adolescents to the work of the classroom and the school. Simultaneously, participants recognized that in a vacuum, these environmental traits have less impact and influence than they might in the context of a true and established community.
Moreover, participants suggested that the establishment of such an environment must be a school’s primary goal in seeking to engage and connect young adolescents. This suggestion stands apart from our current educational landscape, defined by standards and accountability. At the same time that policymakers seem to emphasize measurable and observable academic metrics as means of tracking achievement, the teachers most directly involved in working with middle school students stress the value of what Tim refers to as a “relational approach.” Thus, there seems to be a stark contrast between the conceptualization of effective teaching at the middle level and the actual practice.

Valuing and Recognizing the Individual

The second super-ordinate theme, valuing and recognizing the individual, builds directly from yet stands apart from the previous theme of personal relationships. Stage-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989) contends that a significant challenge in the transition between elementary and secondary education derives from children encountering environments which do not respond to or reflect their unique voices and experiences. Nor do these environments support their individual passions. For Kathy, giving value and recognizing each individual supports their transition into and through the middle years. “Reaching out to every kid. We know where everyone's at and the phrase that is going around this year, going down to meet them where they are and really help them grow from wherever they're at, meeting them wherever they are.” In doing so, instruction and intervention are tailored to address the students and the situations. They are not prescribed from the top down, but develop from the ground up.

In identifying the importance of giving value to the individual, participants described three subthemes. The first subtheme, giving authentic value and respect to every student voice,
recognizes the importance of voice, autonomy, and experience in identity and academic development. Participants suggested that students who felt that their feelings were not heard or valued were the ones most likely to disengage from the school environment. The second subtheme, specifically addressing the identity and identity development of young adolescents, focuses on the individuality of the students, particularly in relation to aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and ethnicity. The final subtheme, establishing personal relevance for each student, illustrates the need for students to feel both intellectually and emotionally connected to their learning.

Throughout the analysis of this theme, the conception of students as individuals with specific and unique needs, passions, and talents drove the participants’ reflections. Most importantly, this recognition of unique perspectives also produced the most variability in terms of the participants’ description of engagement. For example, Brooks suggested that engagement meant that students would be actively asking questions and physically invested in a topic at hand, while Tim contended that he can sometimes tell when a student is engaged despite the fact that his head is down or that he is “picking his hair.” Similarly, Kathy noted that even students who may actively take notes, may not be engaged in the dynamics of the class. Heather summarized this potential variability, “This is hard to measure; for some kids they're more engaged when they're not taking notes. For some kids, the note taking is an escape.” Ultimately, David spoke to the recognition that engagement does not look the same for every individual.

I think that different things engage different kids so it's hard to generalize in that way. There are some after school kids and 8th graders who get really engaged when they are working with the kindergartners and there are others who really don't want any of that.
In this context, the willingness to work with, recognize, and value every individual student becomes paramount. Without that commitment, it would be difficult to even describe student engagement, let alone influence it within a school environment.

**Giving authentic value and respect to every student voice**

In reflecting on times where they either witnessed or experienced disengagement in or as students, many participants described situations where they felt the conversations students had with adults were authoritarian and did not provide space for student voice or student autonomy. According to Tim, having meaningful and genuine interactions with teachers was all he wanted as a student:

I wanted an adult to talk to me and rationalize with me in a way that didn't make me feel dumb, or make me feel any younger than I actually was. Very rarely did I find adults as teachers who were just going to have a conversation that seemed like, not that they were on an even playing field, but that they were actually listening.

David also recounted a time in his academic career, where he needed to have a voice and a connection, but the teacher did not allow for it.

My worst teacher, Mrs. Eisman, 6th grade social studies. She literally stood at the podium and read from the textbook, page to page, and we read with her. It was my worst, absolutely my worst subject and I couldn't do well in that class.

In both instances, the participants noted that loss of authentic communication led them to either emotionally or academically disengage.

Further, many participants recognized the importance of authenticity in valuing the individual voices of their students. Mike noted, “When I first got here I was really concerned about a lot of yelling at kids.” He equated yelling with teachers asserting authority and
command in disciplining students. Often, this type of discipline arose from students’ nonconformity. Tim mentioned a teacher he used to work with, “She used to tell the kids you can't eat or drink in my class, but she would eat and drink in the class.” Much like an earlier example from Kathy, by acting outside the expectations that they themselves had imposed, teachers stood apart and above rather than alongside their students. Thus, their relationships and their command felt inauthentic.

Conversely, participants noted positive engagement in their students when they recognized the autonomy and maturity of their students. For Tim, that starts with the physical space of the classroom:

Let them feel comfortable in the room…It's their homeroom. It's their space…Let them be who they are, whether there's that physically, emotionally, academically, and they'll produce the work you want them. That physical space has to be a place where they can grunt, especially in middle school, where they can sass you a little bit…But letting them feel like they can do that and then, correct it. Instead of, he's the one with the strict set of rules and not really explaining to them why there's a strict set of rules out there because I want them that way. There's room to share.

With this, Tim valued the voice and the needs of his students. He suggested that the most conducive environment to growth and learning is the one where students can “be who they are.” He went on to say, “I shouldn't want anything anyway in that space. We should want the space to be a certain way because we're all in it together.” Thus, there exists a balance between the individual and the community.

By recognizing the value of the individual in the community, participants illustrated the importance of student agency. First, student disengagement became clear and most pronounced
when “there's straight delivery of information, which students feel no connection, or part of, or necessarily the need or importance to learn, even if the importance is for a test of whatever it is” (Interview of Mike 2/10/17). Heather also suggested that a primary challenge she felt occurred in trying to convince students to complete tasks “that were imposed from different departments that needed to happen during advisory.” Similarly, David described proctoring a class where students did not feel intrinsic motivation or a personal connection:

I would be alone in a class with 12 kids and mostly I would feel like I was babysitting more than like I was facilitating anything. I would walk around and make sure kids were working, help them if I could, but most of them knew what to do. The idea that I was babysitting didn’t sit well for me.

In each of these instances, participants gave voice to the idea that the structures and routines did not provide agency or value the voices of the individuals. The loss of agency led to a feeling of inauthenticity, which again connects to disengagement.

Conversely, participants recognized the value of providing choice and ownership in respecting the individual voices of their students. In identifying a particularly engaging environment, Mike described an elective class where students have developed and implemented a role-playing game.

The gaming kids…they are fully completely engaged in that activity. [One student] is a great, in some ways, educator slash facilitator. They have complete confidence in him, they trust his rules, the game he creates, the setup, and they follow along and have a lot of fun.

Mike identified a specific student who the others trust and follow. This game actually arose in the context of a chess club, but instead of shutting it down, the teacher allowed it to progress.
Kathy also described a specific strategy she employs in class to increase student ownership. I used to say, "Let's spend 15 minutes on this or let's spend about 10 minutes on this," but giving times like 11 minutes where we're going to stop at 8:27 instead of 8:30. The kids take more ownership in it and I can write that on the board. They know. I'm like, "You guys, it's 8:26. You have one more minute." They take it more seriously because it's such a specific time.

By giving students specific tasks, or providing structures for them to own something as seemingly immaterial as a transition from task to task, Kathy gave over her own authority to that of the class.

Emily has used a similar model on a grander scale. She allowed students to take on authentic roles in small groups. In these instances, she noted that the “class kind of runs itself… It's not me having to tell everyone what to do.” Similarly, Brooks described the ownership her classes have taken in preparing a performance.

It's such a group experience and the kids in both classes owned up to their roles so quickly and learn their lines so quickly and learned each other’s lines. They just show up everyday 100 percent ready to do it and to tackle … they don't want to just perform it but they want to understand what it means. On so many levels, as a group experience, as an intellectual experience, it's just awesome.

Brooks used words to suggest student responsibility, such as “owned,” and did so by delineating between simple performance and a deeper understanding of meaning. Ultimately, by increasing the opportunities for autonomy and choice, teachers recognize that their voices and needs must
be subservient to those of their students. In such environments, students are more likely to feel connected to their school and learning.

Addressing the identity and identity development of young adolescents

The second subtheme, specifically addressing the identity and identity development of young adolescents, builds from recognizing the individual voices of students to understanding the unique experiences and perceptions that comprise their identities. Participants described a disconnect between school and the unique nature of different aspects of identity, most specifically race and gender. For Emily, there exists a clear tension in co-educational athletics and physical education. In these settings, Emily has heard her female students say that “the boys don’t pass to them enough or don’t take them seriously.” When she observes these students in a single gender athletic setting, “I feel like the girls really enjoy it and they’re not as inhibited. They like it because they pass to each other, they can be a little more aggressive.”

While gender can play a role in engagement and enjoyment, other factors of identity can also impact engagement. Celia reflected on her own academic disengagement in secondary school:

Fifth grade I was miserable. I was bored, the courses were easy, I was always getting in trouble for talking and stuff but it was because I had nothing better to do, there was nothing else that was really interesting. And I think the other piece that I started to realize was ... there was a time in high school where I felt that way also, where I would disengage and I finally got engaged after a certain period of time. And the reason I was disengaged was because it was English class. Ninth grade, tenth grade ... we were reading a lot of literature by white authors. And that was fine, you know, like I'd read
Shakespeare and all that kind of stuff, but I was starting to realize I'm not reading anything that I can relate to, and this is getting really boring.

Celia drew the connection between her own engagement and the content’s alignment to her own identity. Without that hook, without her experiences being valued, she was “miserable,” “bored,” and “always getting in trouble.”

Tim also cited his own experience in school, recognizing that aspects of his own identity made it hard to connect to his environment.

I know what it feels like to be a kid from the Bronx to not feel seen…When I went to boarding school, I used to tell people I'm not from the Bronx, I'm from New York because I didn't want them to know.

In this circumstance, Tim’s school environment forced him to close off and conceal an aspect of his upbringing that he now wears with pride as an adult. He noted that he did not feel like he had the same voice in this community as he did in middle school.

Along the same lines, Brooks, who is not a person of color, in reflecting on two students whom she admits to struggling to engage with, identified two young men of color. In particularly thinking of one of these young men, she recognized “it's been harder to build a relationship because the two of us are so different from each other and I don't know what inroads there are ... it's not obvious to me.” Having already established that relationships are crucial to engaging young adolescents, Brooks’s admission reveals that despite her best intentions, differences in identity and experience can be a hindrance to her ability to engage every student.

Participants also noted that middle school environments do not always consider the level of maturity of the individual students. Mike noted disengagement when students “feel like
they're not being treated with respect and maturity. When they're not given something that's complex and has multiple sides to it” (Interview with Mike 2/10/17). Celia’s perception of the age group aligned with Mike’s:

I think these kids are much smarter than the average person who's not in education would think they are. They think they're ready to have more grown up conversations about integrity, about courage, about passion for learning, and all those sort of things… I think that will help them internalize it a lot more than making a poster.

Much like failing to respect an individual’s voice and experience causes disengagement, an environment that does not reflect and respond to the identities of those who inhabit it will often produce a lack of fit.

In addressing these areas of tension, a majority of participants suggested that one-to-one dialogue and active listening promote a personal understanding of the individuals in their classrooms. By establishing a relationship where each person feels listened to, Brooks suggested that there is then a foundation to build upon:

Really appreciating the class ... almost as an individual that you are in a friendship or relationship or some kind of working contract with. You have to talk to them and you have to listen to them as much as you want them to listen to you, and I think that's where the trust comes from.

Mike also explained that one of the most important strategies was “listening to the kids, asking them what works, getting feedback from them, whether in a formal or an informal way.” Doing so, “brings people to the table” (Interview with Tim 2/3/17) in a way that allows the teacher to listen and react appropriately. In fact, in describing a time she felt successful in engaging her class, Heather presented a lesson that she herself admitted “wasn’t quite a lesson”: 
It was more of discussion. It ended up feeling very cathartic to be able to say these things. A teacher heard them and wrote them down. So maybe it wasn't a lesson but I did not expect this conversation to sort of get wings the way that it did. I think I was pleasantly surprised about sort of what a lively conversation we were able to have about it. And a lot of folks who had difficulty engaging in group conversations were able to engage. So I think that speaks to the investment piece and not anything I particularly did. This was more of a tell me what you think, let's talk about this, let's air it so we can start talking about how to communicate better. That was big.

When young adolescents feel recognized for who they are, either in maturity, gender, race, or ethnicity, they respond from a place of understanding and connection. When they do not feel that connection, they no longer feel tethered to the environment.

Establishing personal relevance for each student

Recognizing that every student has unique experiences and perspectives that help to construct their identity, it becomes paramount that the learning feels relevant and meaningful. In reflecting on times where students felt disengaged, participants often cited instances where the task set forth felt like “work for work’s sake” (Interview with Tim 2/3/17). In those situations, students do not feel the intrinsic need to invest or engage, because the environment feels inauthentic. Tim described one of his students who specifically responded to her individual passions rather than the imposed expectations.

She doesn't often participate when she's cold called and I don't try to cold call her because it puts her on the hot seat and actually takes away from her participating… She never will participate on her own. So, with someone like [that], you have to find her interest. You want to get her engaged, find what she's interested in.
For the participants, relevance does not have to come directly from content. David, Brooks, and Mike all described moments when they had to deliver content that might feel dry or disconnected, but the surrounding environment engendered a personal motivation:

As much as the kids groan when I tell them to take out their subject predicate packets ... when I ask for a volunteer to come up and diagram a compound subject sentence, like all their hands fly up and they want to come to the front of the room. (Interview with Brooks 2/23/17)

For Kathy, this disconnect seemed to come when the learning, as Brooks described it, takes a backseat to necessity:

I see disengagement the most when there's, say we have a test coming up in a week and we haven't finished the material yet, and it's just I need to get this to you so this class won't be as entertaining. It's just going to be I'm putting the notes on the board, we're going to talk about it, but there's little room for discussion. There's little room for a demo. It's you need to get this down now so we can discuss it next class. That's obviously, something that I try to avoid but it happens.

In those situations, young adolescents who, as has previously been established, require an emotional connection either to the task or the person do not have a personal tether to the learning in the room.

Therefore, participants noted the importance of making the content or the delivery of content relevant and accessible to their students. Mike, Brooks, and David all spoke about being able to reflect on a “dry” lesson and acknowledge its dryness in a human and humorous way. Tim suggested that relevance does not have to come from the content, but simply from personal interest.
If they know you even give a little bit of a crap, whether it's, "Yeah, you do ballet," or "You're in roller derby? Sweet, tell me more about roller derby." I don't actually have to care about roller derby, but I showed an interest. That's something that it takes to be able to have them come down and be like, "Yeah, I want to see you during Academic Support."...I've had kids that I've had a half an hour conversation with them about what they're doing for a weekend and all a sudden, they're like, "All right, I want to come to you."

That said, Tim also expressed that it is important to plan with the individual interests of the students in mind. Going back to the student he described before, Tim detailed the ways he tried to engage her:

You see her standing up there and she's hashing about transgender rights and gay rights. That's a student who has passion and she's an interest driven kid. She doesn't like math, she doesn't like French...I put her in the small groups to look at one of the articles for the Trump executive order and she's right there with me...We did the teenage wasteland activity, she's questioning me and she's like, "No, you can't make that law because you're not thinking about all these other younger kids," and because I know she's such a big sister, this is going to - she loves being a big sister. She shares a room with her little sister. This is going to particularly hit home for her.

By understanding his students, Tim tailored his instruction and approach to fit their needs. He did not try to force them to fit his “system.”

Similarly, Celia described a time where she looked to connect the learning in her classroom to that of the real world.
I had the kids learn how to budget. And I gave them a family and I gave them an income, and I gave them pets possibly, some had zero, some had two. I gave them this whole scenario and they had to learn how to manage their money, and they had to write a report to me about how they managed their money on a weekly basis. I mean those are real life things...And they were genuinely interested because they know, "My parents do this. Now I understand, and now I get why they're so frustrated all the time."

In this scenario, Celia connected a variety of the subthemes. She established work that was personally relevant while building complex expectations that respected the maturity and experiences of her students. While not every task or lesson can do so, establishing an environment that values student agency, voice, identity, and interest lays the foundation for positive engagement.

Again, taken individually, each subtheme addresses an important aspect of adolescent development or education. However, taken as a whole and in context with one another, the fact that middle school teachers recognize the importance of valuing the authentic voice, identity, and interest of every student stands in stark contrast to the current philosophy governing American education. While policymakers seek greater gains in the movement for standards and accountability, which in turn leads to greater emphasis upon homogeneous populations and acculturation, teachers working with young adolescents recognize the importance of treating every child differently. Interestingly, the structures and approaches that middle level educators value and find effective stand almost in opposition to those being touted and put in place in the general landscape of American education.

**Pedagogy and Structures that Challenge Traditional Conceptions of Middle Level Education**
The final super-ordinate theme, *pedagogy and structures that challenge traditional perceptions of middle level education*, synthesizes the previous two themes by recognizing that traditional and expected structures do not serve every student. While there are groups of students for whom a traditional model, in which teachers provide information in a lecture format and assess learning through in-class tests and essays, works, the evidence clearly shows that this does not engage every student. Thus, participants recognized that in order to maximally engage young adolescents, teachers must (1) **employ a variety of instructional methodologies**, (2) **balance control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections**, and (3) **invest in growth and process, rather than, product-oriented tasks**.

Before investigating each subtheme, it is important to understand the participants’ description of traditional structures. Both Mike and David saw this traditional model of learning in a particular class. Mike described the teacher’s methods as “really someone speaking at kids.” David observed the feeling in a particular classroom:

I think there is a subset of kids who get it and love it and really appreciate his teaching style because he comes to the classroom with the kind of passion we were talking about but we wouldn't say that he's got a sort of welcoming, safe, consistent demeanor. I think a lot of kids wind up being intimidated more than they are curious and the result is that there are some opportunities that get lost in terms of the kids being able to grasp the material.

Conversely, Mike contended that the personal passion of the teacher can bring along student engagement.

The vast majority of the kids, even when they're sitting there, with the book in front of them, he's up there. There's a certain charisma about him and he'll ask a question and
you'll get, you know you've seen him, a whole bunch of hands shoot in the air. Their engagement can take a lot of different forms in a lot of the classes, but there is a certain passion on the part of the teacher that inspires it.

Nevertheless, both agree that there exists a clear one-way dialog. The teacher holds the authority and the knowledge while the students are expected to sit quietly, raise their hands, and have the right answer.

At the same time, as in any institution, there exist unique yet communal preconceptions about what is expected in a middle level classroom. Being a K-8 institution, CSSJD stands apart from many independent schools that offer the full K-12 or a 6-12 experience. As a result, the Upper School, as it is known at CSSJD, takes on the image of the “big leagues” (Interview with Tim 2/3/17). Mike expanded on this, suggesting that the absence of older, more mature adolescents, sometimes leads faculty to view their ten to fourteen year olds as more mature than they might actually be.

There could be a feeling of somehow thinking of our seventh and eighth graders, as sophomores, and juniors, and seniors in high school, and the expectations of them, and saying, "As a seventh grader, you should know how to organize your materials and a seventh grader should be ... No. As a tenth and eleventh grader you should be able to be.. There have been times over the years where I have felt that those expectations are a little bit not age appropriate. I think that is simply a ... I think people not seeing upper school students and their own chaos and issues sometimes trickles down to middle school.

Thus, many participants cited a particularly heightened stress among the school’s eighth graders, and they often attributed that stress to the process of applying to high schools in the highly competitive atmosphere of New York City independent and screened public schools.
Moreover, many participants felt that in order to truly connect to their students, they had to first dispel their own notions of teaching in the Upper School at CSSJD. Tim gave a unique summary of this experience:

I had such an impression of what I thought middle school teaching was… I was like, "Oh, I'm in the big leagues now. In the big leagues you sit at your desk, put up the notes. They take them and then they have to answer questions."… I was so much starting to teach at some middle school construct that I thought my middle school teachers taught like and I was like, "Wait, that's not how I ever taught. I never used to teach like this." So, it took me some time to get over that in my first year.

Tim recognized that he had constructed an image of an ideal middle school classroom, which was very unilateral. Students sat at their desks, took notes, and answered questions. Kathy described a similar challenge in making her transition from teaching in high school:

Classroom management, it's something I really never had to deal with. I would start talking to high school students and they would just stop and listen, and take notes but with middle schoolers, they might not even know that I'm talking. I could ramble on and it would just all go over their heads… I seem to take it as a sign of disrespect but it's just constantly telling myself, "They don't even hear you right now." I have to do something to get their attention and then they're great… I give myself little reminders that they're not disrespectful. It's just where their minds are at.

Thus, participants demonstrated that their traditional construct of a teacher-centric model was not always the most effective in establishing positive student engagement.

**Employ a variety of instructional methodologies**
The first subtheme, *employing a variety of instructional methodologies*, illustrates that a singular strategy or approach will never effectively engage a classroom or environment composed of a variety of unique and individual experiences, passions, identities, and learning styles. In this context, every participant spoke to the need for flexibility and to make sure that students are not just sitting and listening. Heather succinctly argued that the traditional classroom “isn't necessarily set up to allow students to take a variety of paths to engage with the material.” Instead, teachers must try different approaches. Many participants used the terminology “mix it up.” For Kathy, this took the form of frequent transitions in style and structure:

I don't want to be having them take notes all class. I don't want them to be at a computer all class. Varying instructions so that we'll spend 20 minutes doing this and then 20 minutes doing this, and then a five minute recap or a five minute intro. Just to keep them occupied.

For Emily, mixing up instruction included “having something for them to look at, then having them talk for a little, then having them move around a little bit.” This helped to keep students “on their toes a little bit.”

Further, many participants recognized an active and participatory aspect of engaged learning. Mike noted engagement when students were doing labs in science, activities that get “them doing, and moving, and thinking, and actively working.” David cited a particular project he observed in Celia’s class:

I think of that fashion show that Celia did when they were doing their section on clothes. Those are fun, out of the box things that gets kids engaged. Kids that might not otherwise be engaged are going to be into this.
And Brooks recognized a unique engagement with material when her students must act out a literary scene.

Whatever it is that turns literary analysis into dramatic action. That's sort of abstract but having ... I think the way the kids are questioning the play right now, like should I be smiling here? Should I move to the right? Should I move to the left? There is a level of engagement with literature because they own it.

In each instance, participants noted that action engendered ownership and involvement on a different level than simply sitting and listening. A fashion show engaged the creativity of students, while performing a work of literature forced students to see more than just the words on the page.

That said, in order to provide time and space for this type of work, participants also contend that flexibility in the face of authentic feedback is key. Mike established this in his own practice:

Being willing to be flexible and recognizing that, okay, the last 10 minutes of my English class today were really deadly boring, so the lessons I've got are probably similar with what I'm doing with the class on Monday, let's think of a different way of doing it, because you're getting none engagement at times. They are gonna be bored. Our job is to try to them figure out, be willing to try out different approaches. Having people around them who are willing to be flexible and to try different things and to recognize when things don't work the way you want them to work, is really helpful for creating an engaging environment... To sort of bluntly put things out there and be willing to hear the answers.
This suggested that humility exists as a primary driver for teachers. Being willing to accept when a lesson does not land, acknowledging that to his students and actively adjusting allowed him to offer those paths to engagement Heather mentioned earlier. Celia explained how this affects her own planning and preparation:

So for example I'll do my lessons for the week but those aren't set in stone necessarily. If something comes up in the middle of a class I might have to ... I might push things back because I want to teach kids about the cultural piece that someone had mentioned. I don't feel like it has to be so rigid. Like it has to go with the personality of the group that year. Again, Celia gave voice to the concept that lessons and curricula should be designed with the individuals in mind, building from the bottom up rather than the top down.

This personalized planning opposes the traditional conception of the middle school classroom. As Tim pointed out, middle school students are traditionally expected to conform to a model of standardized learning. However, he finds the most success when he uses the same strategies with young adolescents that he did in working in early childhood education.

Some of the classroom management stuff I used when I taught kindergarten and first grade, I still use...It's no different. Honestly, the way I manage my room is very, very much the same as when I taught kindergarten a few years ago. There's a lot to be learned about teaching, in terms of being explicit with directions, and being very concrete about what you expect in the classroom....Lower school teachers, I think, really acknowledge the difference in learning in the room. It's so evident at an elementary school age. I think kids disguise it a bit differently in middle school. It's harder to figure out what they need. Whereas in kindergarten, you know this kid can't do this or can do this. Being able to say,
"Okay. How can I help the kids that can do this, do things better? The kids who can't do this, how can I make them do it?"

Nevertheless, that level of personalization and management ensures that instruction and content are delivered in an accessible and meaningful way to every student in the classroom.

**Balancing control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections**

The second subtheme, *balancing control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections*, builds from prior understanding of the needs of young adolescents. Given that students with varying experiences, emotions, and maturity populate every aspect of a school environment, engaging middle schools must strike the right balance between establishing and maintaining appropriate expectations and guidelines with being open and approachable. As explored previously in the analysis of trust, the participants clearly identify the need for safety and comfort in a middle school environment. However, where the establishment of trust relied on the teacher enacting an approachable interpersonal demeanor, safety and comfort arises from an environment built from clear and appropriate expectations.

Participants clearly asserted that structure and routine provide a level of comfort to their adolescent students. Celia established that structure by presenting it as a core expectation in her classroom.

One of the things that I've always had in my syllabus is we're going to respect one another, we can laugh with each other but we're not going to laugh at each other, and anytime I've even seen the slightest bit of that I've kind of nipped it in the bud. It's not happening. And I think kids see that. They see that there's a teacher ... excuse my language, who doesn't take any BS. Then they feel like, "Okay, I can be myself here
because she's going to let me and she's not going to let anybody sort of judge me and make me feel like a fool." So I think that's very important.

Interestingly, Celia asserted that structures and limits allow students to be themselves. On the surface, this may seem antithetical, as popular argument suggests that institutional laws and structures are designed to subvert and curb the baser instincts of human beings. However, participants recognized that students at this age are “socially squeamish” (Interview with Brooks 2/23/17) and are more interested in “fitting in” (Interview with Emily 2/2/17) than being themselves. Limitations and structures, as established by Celia, allow them to feel safe to be “naturally…silly and goofy” (Interview with Brooks 2/23/17) without fear of social reprisal.

Similarly, providing clarity of structure and routine allows young adolescents to step outside of the particular moment, which can feel overly important and dramatic. As Mike explained, “every moment and every experience that happens is the biggest thing.” Kathy described a situation where her students were so caught in the exact moment, they could not patiently wait another split second:

This is just the other day. They came in, they currently have the mint mobiles going on now and it was a question they had on the board. I wrote "Terrariums" and it was, "Oh, no. We're not doing mint mobiles today?" I forget who it was. Someone was like, "No. We're doing terrariums first." I just hadn't written mint mobiles underneath it yet.

Thus simple structures like previewing the upcoming class help to remove the mystery and stress from these big, dramatic moments. For Brooks, that meant beginning and ending class in a similar way every time. For Kathy and Tim, that meant establishing an agenda:

Just knowing, having the agenda set out on the board, they know what's coming next.

They know that when they finish A, they can move onto B…If I didn't tell them what we
were going to do that day, even they would, I think, not take that as free-rein but
transitions would be much longer. Having that structure so they know what's coming
next, I think it makes them even if they don't know it, feel more comfortable and
engaged. (Interview with Kathy 3/1/17)

Tim also provided the preview for even the oldest members of the community, again pushing
back against the perceptions he had of middle school teaching:

When I taught kindergarten, you come in, you let the kids know, this is what we're doing
today and that's what settles them down…Part of me got away from that, to be like,
"Okay, class is starting. Get to work." It's like, no, no. Let me tell them what the agenda
is today and in between each one of these agenda items, be very explicit about how we're
transitioning…My lesson planning's different, obviously, but my approach still needs to
be the same…So, that's something that I've learned to also approach it in a way that is
more comfortable for me. Also, comfortable for them, like they need - they're fourteen,
thirteen - they need the preface. They need to know what's happening.

Structures and routines elicit trust in students that they will be safe, that “this is an environment
in which I can try something and I'm sort of going to be protected in making mistakes”
(Interview with Heather 2/16/17). While doing so may feel like strategies reserved for younger
students, in reality, there was recognition of the duality of the age group. While cognitively,
students may be ready to navigate abstract concepts, they will never be able to fully engage if
they feel emotionally uncomfortable. Thus, it is incumbent on the teacher to balance the
conceptions of authority and approachability.

**Investing in growth and process rather than product-oriented tasks**
The final subtheme, *investing in growth and process, rather than, product-oriented tasks*, reveals the participants’ desire to step away from the traditional constructs of grades and name-brand matriculation as the ultimate definitions of success. In her own classes, Kathy clearly delineated between working with students in the younger middle school years and those in the older grades. While she saw fifth graders as more “in the moment” and intrinsically motivated, for seventh grade, the question of “is this going to be graded?” could be “the question of the year.” Participants noted that when grades and product drive motivations and expectations, students feel stressed and overwhelmed. Tim saw this in looking at the test calendar that the faculty at CSSJD shares:

“I feel like when I look at the test calendar, I'm like they had a quiz and they have another quiz this week. Are they actually going to learn this then? I see them memorize their vocabulary, but is it content driven?”

Heather also expressed this delineation between process and product in assessing the typical nomenclature that teachers should establish high expectations in their classrooms.

“I think you need clear and appropriate expectations. I stopped just short of setting high expectations because high sets a bar that seems very unreachable and what I think we need are appropriate expectations for sort of behavior, for attitude...People like to talk about high expectation and rigor. The bar will be set high if you know where your students are and you push them. And it's not the expectation that student A is going to get to where student B is by the end of the year. The expectation is that student A will progress, will move forward. And that there are lots of paths to that place.

This gave voice to the need for young adolescents to see growth and process rather than to identify learning as simply an end result.
In that context, there existed recognition on the part of the teachers that students will experience “low moments” (Interview with Mike 2/10/17), that they will struggle, and that they might fail, but that growth can occur in those times. David expressed the idea that these times are the ultimate test of middle level education.

If we do our job optimally, we have the ability to correlate curiosity with what it means to be in school. I feel like if middle school isn't done right, then you're correlating school with tedium and burden and if it's done right, now you're correlating school with hopefully some sense of curiosity.

However, structures of standardization, tests, honor rolls, awards, and grades promote the conception of learning as both competitive and product-oriented. In relating a challenging experience with a student, Tim described a time when he did not give an award to a player on his team who desperately wanted it.

He came to me in tears probably two days after that. Crying and asking me, "Why didn't I get it? Why didn't I get it? I scored points, Coach." I felt terrible about that. I never wanted him to feel that…What I always stressed: whatever is bad can always be changed to good and that you have the opportunity to work at whatever goal you got. After graduation, he sent me an email and says, "Coach, I want to make Poly Prep's varsity team. What do I need to do?" I said, "Are you committed to actually wanting to do that? This is a good basketball team. You're really going to have to work this summer." He goes, "Tell me what I need to do." He met with me five days a week to play basketball and work out…The kid's on the varsity team at Poly. He's playing, which is hard for a freshman there…It takes a little hard work, but challenges are what makes you better.
Recognizing that motivation and effort correlate more highly to success than innate ability leaves an indelible impression on young adolescents.

For Kathy, scientific exploration and design is a perfect vehicle for this message of learning through setback and revision.

Having the opportunity to fail is really important and that also fits in nicely with the STEAM curriculum, especially the engineering process, "Try, try again. If you fail, you have more work to do." I had a lot of 7th grade questions today. They had to write a hypothesis before our corn seed lab. They said, "Oh, could I go back and change my hypothesis because I was wrong?" I was like, "No, but now you have even more to write about. You can write about why your hypothesis is wrong."

In reflecting on times he felt particularly successful, Mike took the long view, recognizing moments of long-term growth, rather than short-term achievement.

Growth. When I can witness growth, in any way possible. The student, the eighth grader, who could not control himself emotionally in sixth grade, part of seventh grade, but by eighth grade, has found a maturity and may suddenly be about to sort of go into the moment, but just needs a calm reminder, hand on the shoulder, and suddenly will be with it. The fact that that happens, feels incredibly rewarding.

Ultimately, correlating learning with process rather than product laid the foundation for more meaningful long-term growth, but at the same time acted in contrast to the normative expectations of traditional middle level learning.

This final theme synthesizes the previous two perceptions that the traditional conceptualization of secondary education does not effectively meet the needs of our modern understanding of adolescents. In fact, many participants suggested that that same traditional
conceptualization seems to have undermined their initial transition in working with the age group. In order for them to consider themselves effective teachers, these teachers first had to shed themselves of their preconceptions of what it meant to be a teacher of young adolescents. Many participants spoke about their individual journeys, but highlighted that at some point on their path, they put their students and the progress of their students at the center of their practice. While this group of participants is only a small handful of educators who work in a small school, this realization holds value in its clear opposition to current educational policy. Both surprisingly and interestingly, these teachers felt they best engaged their students when they entirely reconsidered their roles as teachers and sought to shift their professional paradigms. Thus, the ultimate question becomes how can schools balance this paradigmatic shift while existing within the larger cultural context of American education?
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to seek to understand teacher perspective on the role environment plays in promoting school engagement among middle school students. In order to do so, the study sought to comprehend the ways in which teachers observe and describe student engagement while identifying strategies and structures that promote or suppress this construct. The theoretical framework employed in this study, stage-environment fit (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), recognizes the importance of interaction between person and environment. This framework builds from previous research of persons in context (Berliner, 1989; Fraser & Fisher, 1983) and engagement and motivation (Berliner, 1989; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). At its core, the framework contends that human development is characterized by transition and change, which can be destabilizing. During these times of change, a person’s environment can play a crucial role in attending to the unique needs of the individual and in doing so offering consistency and stability that promote engagement. Stage-environment fit focuses on the many physical, emotional, and cognitive transitions that occur during young adolescence and suggests that the move from elementary to secondary education leads many students to experience a “lack of fit” (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The work of Sanacore and Palumbo (2008) recognizes this lack of fit in the academic achievement of students as they move from the lower to middle grades, which they define as the “fourth grade slump.” Studies and surveys have shown that students feel increasingly bored and disconnected from their school settings as they progress in their schooling (Armstrong, 2016; Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014; Busteed, 2013). Engagement and motivation research suggests that as students feel less inclined to engage in the school environment, they
will feel less motivated to fully participate in the learning and interactions that comprise that community (Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2013; Conner & Pope, 2013; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Pitzer, 2015). Thus, lack of motivation leads to a lack of enjoyment and practice, which can directly contribute to decreasing performance and achievement (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Logan, Medford, & Hughes, 2011).

Stage-environment fit seeks to understand the person in context. As a result, the researcher employed a qualitative research methodology in this study (Creswell, 2013). Given that this study was conducted within the context of a doctoral studies program which values the construction of knowledge in the workplace (“Doctor of Education (EdD) Programs Online | Northeastern College of Professional Studies,” 2016), the researcher sought to study the experiences and understandings of teachers in his professional environment. Due to the researcher’s unique position as a new administrator at the research site, IPA emerged as the most logical and ethical methodology. In this model, the researcher had the opportunity to adopt the persona of lead learner (Fullan, 2014) and stand alongside his participants rather than adopting an evaluative or judgmental stance (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

As demonstrated in the review of the literature and the presentation of the theoretical framework, engagement and motivation are multifaceted constructs. While there exists a plethora of research on both middle school environments and the construct of engagement, studies often do not fully bridge the gap between analyzing the environment and studying individuals. Much of the research on engagement and motivation links these concepts to individual personality traits (Haimovitz, Wormington, & Corpus, 2011; Kinlaw & Kurtz-Costes, 2007). Simultaneously, Berliner (1989) critiques the framework of stage-environment fit by arguing that Eccles and Midgley (1989) treat young adolescents as a “homogeneous group”
while unintentionally disregarding the differences among individuals that comprise this age group. By employing the framework of stage-environment fit in a specific place and time, while utilizing and elevating the voices and experiences of teachers who work with this age group, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical research of a group in an environment and practical analysis of individuals.

Thus, the findings of this study seek to elevate the experiences and perceptions of teachers while recognizing the need to respect and value individuals in a community. The participants for this study were eight teachers in the Upper School at the Cathedral School of St. John the Divine. Four had begun working at CSSJD in the previous two years, while the rest had longer tenures at the school. Two participants had recently transitioned from working with older students to working in the middle level environment, and one had previously taught in early elementary education. Besides their individual paths to working in middle school, participants differed in terms of their identification of race, gender, and sexuality. Three themes emerged from this study and aligned with the participants’ understanding of young adolescents, pedagogy, and strategies as components of developing a learning environment that promotes engagement.

The super-ordinate themes included (1) meaningful relationships between students and teachers, (2) a recognition and valuing of the individual, and (3) pedagogy and structures that challenge traditional perceptions of middle level education. The theme of meaningful relationships between students and teachers yielded the subthemes of (1) relationships between students and teachers are genuine and authentic, (2) there is a foundation of trust and care between teachers and students, and (3) the school exists as a true community. The three subthemes for a recognition and valuing of the individual included (1) giving authentic value and respect to every student voice, (2) specifically addressing the identity and identity
development of young adolescents, and (3) establishing personal relevance for each student. And subthemes of (1) employing a variety of instructional methodologies, (2) balancing control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections, and (3) investing in growth and process, rather than, product-oriented tasks corresponded to the super-ordinate theme of pedagogy and structures that challenge traditional perceptions of middle level education.

The following section intends to elaborate on the themes resulting from the research findings. The thematic findings and data are compared to the existing literature, leading to the presentation of the conclusions of this study. The final sections offer recommendations both for practice and for future research.

**Thematic findings**

While analysis of the data revealed three unique themes related to establishing engaging learning environments, (1) meaningful relationships between students and teachers, (2) a recognition and valuing of the individual, and (3) pedagogy and structures that challenge traditional perceptions of middle level education, it is important to note that an overriding message across all interviews was the unique nature of every individual student. Thus, while participants offered insight and experience, they also often established the caveat that “engagement looks different for everybody” (Interview with Tim 2/3/17). As a result, there is not a singular formula for developing a school environment that engages every learner. Instead, every aspect of the school’s environment, from the curriculum and the materials used to the personalities of the teachers and to the lunchroom routines, influence student engagement.

Nevertheless, themes did emerge that provide strong and consistent starting points. Developing genuine personal relationships between teachers and students allows for there to be dialog and trust. Recognizing and valuing every individual student sends the message that
students have agency, have voice, and have a place in their community. Challenging the traditional expectations of the middle school classroom requires teachers to be responsive to their students, rather than requiring students to conform to a system. Ultimately, there is no one theme that if put into practice would automatically connect with or hook every student. Instead, as Mike explained, it is the job of the school to put people, routines, and structures in place that provide the most paths to engagement and success.

**Meaningful relationships between students and teachers**

The literature around stage-environment fit and PYD suggest that young adolescents must feel personally connected to their environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Larson, 2000). The work of Armstrong (2016) and Eccles and Midgley (1989) reveal that students in middle school feel that their teachers often assume the role of caretaker, custodian, or “babysitter” (Interview with David 2/21/17). Doing so shuts down open dialogue and the personal connection that students require in order to be positively engaged. The data, emerging from the research question *how do teachers describe and understand engaging and developmentally responsive school environments?* reveal that teachers in the Upper School at CSSJD recognize the need to develop positive and genuine relationships with their students. In addressing both the previous question and the main research question of *how do middle level teachers in a small, urban, independent school understand the role of the environment in fostering student engagement and motivation?* and the sub-question of *what structures and strategies do these teachers identify that foster student engagement in academic areas across the curriculum?*, three subordinate themes emerged from the participant interviews. These themes were (1) relationships between students and teachers are genuine and authentic, (2) there is a foundation of trust and care between teachers and students, and (3) the school exists as a true community.
**Relationships between students and teachers are genuine and authentic.** Studies and reviews conducted by McGee, Ward, Gibbons, and Harlow (2004), as well as Wentzel & Wigfield (1998), reveal that in the transition from primary to secondary schools, students often experienced a lack of fit between their expectations of the relationships they might form with teachers and their realities. Eccles and Midgley (1989) posit that this lack of fit causes a demotivating mindset for young adolescents as they feel less cared for and safe during a time in life when they become hyper-aware of their social circumstances and place in the world (Armstrong, 2016). Participant responses gave voice to the importance of building relationships as well. In fact, Tim’s responses were particularly illuminating, having worked in both primary and secondary classrooms.

Participants noted the establishment of positive and genuine relationships—where they recognize and understand the individual aspects of their students—as a baseline for establishing engaging environments. Further, participants who spoke of particular challenges in activating and promoting engagement in their classrooms noted that they had not found connections or inroads with specific students. The data reflect the theories of Eccles and Midgley and connects directly to the findings of McGee, Ward, Gibbons, and Harlow (2004). Participants established that by building and planning from a place of authentic respect and understanding, they developed an environment where young adolescents felt safe and valued.

Promotion of bonding with a caring adult stands as a primary focus of PYD. Positive and meaningful relationships with adults lay the groundwork for a trust in others and the self that is essential to engagement.

Positive bonding with an adult is crucial to the development of a capacity for adaptive responses to change and for growth into a healthy and functional adult. Good bonding
establishes the child’s trust in self and others. Inadequate bonding establishes patterns of insecurity and self-doubt. Very poor bonding establishes a fundamental sense of mistrust in self and in others, creating an emotional emptiness that the child may try to fill in other ways, possibly through drugs, impulsive acts, antisocial peer relations, or other problem behaviors. (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004, p. 102)

All of the participants recognized that bonding by showing a real interest in their students and the experiences of their students, they understood ways to connect them to both the school environment and content to be learned. By planning ways to interest every learner at a grassroots level, teachers sought to establish an organic learning environment that provided, as Heather defined them, multiple paths to success.

**Foundation of trust and care between teachers and students.** While the data corroborate the literature in its suggestion that meaningful relationships can positively engage young adolescents, participants were quick to delineate the line between “teacher” and “friend.” Thus, many argued that while genuine and personal relationships were essential, they could not come at the expense of a feeling of trust and security, which did in fact derive from some measure of teacher authority and control in the classroom. Aspinwall and Taylor (1993), Armstrong (2016), Guay, Marsh, & Boivin (2003), and Ireson and Hallam (2009) all establish that secondary school environments promote social and academic competition while valuing certain academic voices over others. In this context, individuals develop specific concepts of themselves and their abilities, which in turn influence their desire to engage in learning tasks. Simply, if students feel that they are “bad” at a specific task, they will avoid it. By avoiding that task, they do not practice and thus do not progress. Thus, self concept affects motivation, which
can in turn influence achievement and perpetuate a lack of progress (Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Guay et al., 2003).

Reflecting this argument, participants recognized that building personal connection and relationships with their students could not come at the expense of establishing a caring and trusting environment. Within this environment, the data illustrate a clear need for the establishment of structure and routine. Many participants gave voice to the idea that understanding that a teacher will not take “any B.S.” provides an air of care and trust that students are free to speak up and risk failure (Interview with Celia 2/21/17). Thus, building a foundation of trust and care speaks to an environmental perspective rather than a personal one.

While the data and literature suggest that teachers must first establish personal relationships, by developing a classroom where structures and routines establish a promotion of personal competencies, teachers offer a path to engagement. Catalano and his colleagues (2004) argue that PYD develops from atmospheres that encourage development of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competencies. Supporting this contention, participants noted that students needed to feel free to be themselves, to make mistakes, and be naturally “goofy.” Thus, at a time in life when they are “socially squeamish” (Interview with Brooks 2/23/17), structures and routines that engender trust and care become a necessity.

**The school exists as a true community.** Ultimately, the most engaging learning environments offer opportunities for personal connections in the context of safety and trust, while also developing a larger institutional feeling of community and family. In such a community, institutions value the power and role of every individual. The data offered two sides to the establishment of meaningful community. Participants noted that adults in a school community have immense power in enacting and promoting the values of the school. In
environments where young adolescents recognized hypocrisy in and were not provided agency
by adults, they felt a lack of fit (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Midgley,
Anderman, & Hicks, 1995; Pervin, 1967). Conversely, the theory of PYD posits that such
disengagement can be ameliorated by a positive connection to community and a focus on the
development of moral competence (Catalano et al., 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).
Participants spoke at length about the feeling of collegiality and care that they felt among the
faculty at CSSJD. The participants suggested that this feeling of kindness and caring, which they
saw enacted both organically and in structured meetings, positively modeled the community
expectations.

Further, participants noted the power of feeling like a tight-knit community and family.
The data offer insight into the presentation of prosocial norms and involvement. Participants
suggested that they often recognized engagement in students who felt connected to the larger
community. This again supports the work of Catalano et al. (2004), who suggest that positive
youth development derives from programs that build individual character through modeling,
connections, and offering a positive vision for the future. In the end, making school a place
where students want to be and feel responsible to each other and to the values of that school
promotes positive engagement.

Discussion. The data uncovered from these themes are not unique. In This we believe,
the Association for Middle Level Education (National Middle School Association, 2010), along
with a significant amount of research from scholars such as Larry Ferlazzo, has identified the
centrality of relationships and emotional comfort in middle level education. Further, the
literature surrounding PYD identifies the need for personal connection and community (Catalano
et al., 2004; Larson, 2000; Lerner, 2005) and stage-environment fit recognizes a lack of these
components in many traditional middle school settings. Nevertheless, participants recognized the power building an environment founded on personal relationships, trust, and community has on their students. One participant teared up in talking about the personal investment he makes in his students. Other participants identified feeling successful not when their students earned good grades, but when they felt they had developed a positive relationship. Similarly, the participants identified moments and instances of challenge and struggle when they had not been able to build such a connection.

Unique to this theme became the concept of authenticity. Participants noted that their students could quickly and innately tell when interactions and tasks felt unnecessary or false. As will be further explored in discussion of the next theme, this feeling of inauthenticity often derives from a place of mis-matched expectations, ignorance of personal maturity, and a lack of agency.

**Schools recognize and value the individual**

While developing personal connections and a genuine community lay the foundation for positive engagement, establishing an atmosphere that respects and values the experiences and identities of every individual student promotes connection and growth. In presenting stage-environment fit, Eccles and Midgley (1989) contend that traditional middle school environments do not offer the necessary autonomy craved by young adolescents, present tasks and expectations that do reflect students’ maturity levels or identities, and fail to provide content and experiences that directly relate to the passions and interests of the individual students. The data supported this proposition, as participants recognized the importance of valuing individual voices of students, recognizing and reflecting the identities of students, and establishing personal relevance in material to be learned and skills to be acquired.
Giving authentic value and respect to every student voice. Participants all agreed that a primary aspect of student engagement and growth comes from being heard and respected in their community. For some participants, valuing student voice meant giving them the floor and engaging in meaningful and authentic dialog. For others, it meant providing agency and autonomy to students, so that they felt responsible for their environments and learning. Simultaneously, still other participants spoke about their own experiences as young adolescents and how acutely they experienced moments when teachers did not respect their voices or their maturity. The literature surrounding stage-environment fit and school engagement and motivation clearly suggests that students feel disconnected from environments which feel sterile and prescribed (Baeten et al., 2013; Berliner, 1989; Hall, 2005; Pervin, 1967; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). In contrast, personal agency has developed into a central tenet of PYD (Larson, 2000). Thus, it stands to reason that the more young adolescents feel as though their voices count for something, the more likely they will be to use those voices.

Participants identified a number of ways they sought to value student voices. The strategies ranged from establishing classroom rules and routines that promoted a feeling of communal ownership to allowing students to drive the actual organization of the classroom experience. On the whole, participants noted deeper cognitive and emotional involvement with the learning when they perceived students taking ownership of the learning and their environments. These conclusions support the work of Lerner (1982), who connects intrinsic feelings of agency and efficacy with motivated action and engagement. Further, establishing concepts of self-efficacy and autonomy have shown to positively enhance motivation in a variety of academic arenas, including literacy development (Allington, 2013; Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, & Barbaranelli, 2011; van Dinther, Dochy, Segers, & Braeken, 2014;
Thus, the findings in this study again affirm the supposition that students must be actively involved in the construction of their learning and that teachers of young adolescents in particular must be aware of the voice and experience of every learner in the community.

**Addressing the identity and identity development of young adolescents.** Along with recognizing individual voices, the data reveal an emphasis upon recognizing and supporting the unique identity of every student. Many participants described their students as young people engaged in the process of understanding themselves, their relationships to their peers, and their places in the world. They also explained that this process of identity development existed as a primary reason for many social and disciplinary problems amongst their students. According to the data, because young adolescents are still in the process of forming their unique identities, they often feel insecure about an aspect of their personality or lack the experience to fully comprehend their ability to impact others in the community. In such a context, it becomes easy to insult a peer or lash out to cover a deeper vulnerability. Armstrong’s (2016) presentation of the adolescent brain acknowledges these deep-seated insecurities and vulnerabilities, while recognizing the lack of cognitive and life experience that these young people are working with. Further, Ryan and Patrick (2001) establish that students transitioning from primary to secondary education often struggle to understand their role within a community of learners, especially as they are forced to navigate, for the first time, a variety of classroom environments established by a variety of teachers.

In response, PYD contends that positive programs for adolescents must provide opportunities for positive identity development. “If the adolescent or young adult does not achieve a healthy identity, role confusion can result” (Catalano et al., 2004, p. 106). Two
participants spoke about their own experiences in secondary education. In looking back on these experiences, they noted that aspects of their own identity were not reflected in their middle and high schools. Wood and Jocius (2013) posit that students of color often disengage from literacy development due to the fact that the prescribed curricula and literature do not reflect their own experiences. Similarly, there exists significant research on the role gender and sexuality play in identity development (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Lorde, 1995). In response, the data clearly illuminate the need for providing opportunities for students to explore their unique identities within the context of their school community.

The data also reveal that in order to respect individual voices and experiences, school environments must also respect the maturity levels of their students. The literature regarding school engagement and motivation suggests that many students feel bored and unchallenged as they transition from elementary to middle school (Bundick et al., 2014; Busteed, 2013; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008). In examining this, various studies have presented a number of reasons. McGee et al. (2004) offer student voices who feel that the work is too easy. Allington (1994) and Hall (2005) both suggest that struggling readers do not receive the necessary guidance or opportunity to build their skills as readers. And Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007) recognize the negative impact that unrealistically high expectations can have on student feelings of self-concept and efficacy. In support of this work, participants noted particular disengagement during tasks that either did not feel complex enough to challenge students or regarded the social and intellectual maturity of the students as higher than they actually were.


**Establishing personal relevance for each student.** Finally, the data indicate a need for students to feel personally invested in and intrinsically motivated to engage in the work of the school. Participants explained that they noted high levels of student engagement when tasks built from individual student interests or provided students with experiences mirroring those they might contend with in the “real world.” In these moments, participants recognized an emotional investment in the work of the class, along with a real dismay when the class period would end. Similarly, there exists a plethora of research that ties personal relevance to intrinsic motivation and resultant positive achievement (Gottfried, 1985; Logan et al., 2011; Shields et al., 2008).

Littky and Grabelle (2004) present the Big Picture schools, which have successfully developed around the progressive model of capitalizing upon and organizing learning around student interest and “real world” experiences. In *Creative schools*, Robinson and Aronica (2015) offer a number of case studies in which schools have eschewed traditional curricular design and assessment for more progressive and organic models that again place student interest at the center of the learning. Similarly, existing literature suggests that when students have choice in what and how they learn, they often experience higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Guthrie et al., 2007; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Viljaranta, Tolvanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2014).

**Discussion.** Within this context, the data affirm that students must feel a connection not only to the teachers, but also to the content and skills to be learned. Whether that connection derives from personal interest, a reflection of a student’s unique identity, or “real-world” experience, the concept of authenticity again arises. Participants recognized that moments of disengagement often occurred when there existed a lack of fit between their expectations and the needs of their students. Engagement more naturally and organically arose during situations when lessons or experiences were planned with the needs and passions of the individuals in mind.
This reflects tenets of both stage-environment fit and PYD, which suggest that when the structures and atmospheres of a school send a message that certain people do not fit or are not welcome, then they actively disengage (Catalano et al., 2004; Eccles et al., 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Larson, 2000). Thus, environments that value the needs, voices, identities, and passions of the individuals are paramount in establishing positive engagement.

**Pedagogy and structures that challenge traditional conceptions of middle level education**

Apart from connecting to and valuing the individuals in the community, the data reveal the need to treat and perceive middle level education differently. In their responses, participants clearly delineate between their perceptions and expectations prior to entering the middle school environments and their subsequent understandings and revelations after working in these environments. The findings in this super-ordinate theme derive directly from the conclusions of the previous two. If positive student engagement relies on connecting to and valuing the unique individual, then the traditional one-size-fits-all model (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Robinson & Aronica, 2015) of secondary schooling does not work. Thus, the findings suggest that engaging school environments must **employ a variety of instructional methodologies, balance control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections, and invest in growth and process, rather than, product-oriented tasks.**

**Employ a variety of instructional methodologies.** The findings of the study suggest that students often displayed the greatest levels of disengagement when they were expected to passively receive information in a specific format. McGee et al. (2004) present findings that suggest a primary cause of disengagement is the assumption that “all students will benefit from doing the same thing in the same way at the same time” (p. 5). Similarly, in contrast to their previous experiences in elementary school classrooms, students experience content delivered
primarily through “large amounts of expository (or informational) text and related vocabulary” (Hall, 2005, p. 68) and whole-class instruction in the traditional middle level classroom (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001). The data indicate that many participants held these notions of the middle school classroom as they moved into these environments as well.

However, as a result of extended experience with the age group, the data reflect that participants recognize that straight delivery of content does not actively engage all learners in a classroom. In regards to these strategies and structures, participants referred often to establishing opportunities to have students move around, be boisterous, and engage in a variety of activities devoted to both content and skill development. These types of strategies all reflect recommendations made in a variety of arenas by Allington (2013), Church et al. (2001), and Wentzel & Wigfield (1998). Moreover, This we believe (National Middle School Association, 2010) asserts that scaffolding, flexibility, and a variety of teaching and pedagogical methodologies are integral to developing an effective middle school community.

Moreover, a number of participants noted that as they grew more comfortable and experienced with young adolescents, they often felt comfortable employing strategies typically associated with working with different age groups. Two participants recognized that they often utilize the type of agenda setting and clarifying routines that would be seen in an elementary school classroom. Another participant recognized that engagement can certainly occur in a traditional, lecture-based classroom as well. In line with these findings, Robinson and Aronica (2015) present a case study of The Grange, a school which successfully rebuilt its model of secondary education by learning primarily from primary school structures. These findings reflect the duality of the age group and the recognition that every class and every student has
different needs. Thus, the more teachers employ a variety of methods and structures, the more likely they will be to engage all members of their classes.

Balance control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections. In eschewing traditional perceptions of the secondary classroom, the subtheme, balance control and appropriate expectations with establishing personal connections, speaks to the need to maintain an ordered and safe classroom while remaining open and approachable. Eccles and Midgley (1989) suggest that students transitioning into middle school often feel that teachers are more interested in maintaining control and establishing a custodial relationship than they are in personally engaging with them. Simultaneously, Ryan and Patrick (2001) found that when students felt that their teacher was supportive of and invested in them, they “engaged in less off-task and disruptive behavior” (p. 454). Along the same lines, according to PYD, promotion of bonding to trusted adults and school “are essential aspects of positive development into a healthy adult” (Catalano et al., 2004, p. 102).

The data reflect these arguments found in the literature as participants noted the need to be a stabilizing and consistent emotional force with their students. According to one participant, young adolescents can feel the difference between intimidation and respect. Further, many participants explained how damaging they felt angry behaviors, such as yelling or singling out students, could be to young adolescents. While participants understood that they needed to maintain order and structure to promote a safe environment, but still needed to show that they genuinely appreciated and loved being with their students. Further, participants were very clear in delineating between an open and approachable relationship and friendship, revealing an understanding that a modicum of authority was needed to establish the type of engaging environment they hoped to produce.
**Invest in growth and process, rather than, product-oriented tasks.** Finally, in seeking to challenge traditional notions around middle level education, the findings suggest that promoting process- rather than product-minded task orientation promote positive engagement. A majority of participants spoke about the importance of recognizing and celebrating growth instead of focusing upon grades and awards. The participants also described that students tended to grow more product-oriented and grade- and award-conscious as they moved into the older grades at CSSJD. This reflects the work of Eccles and Midgley (1989), which clearly connects extrinsic and standardized rewards, such as grades and honor rolls, with a process of disengagement among young adolescents.

Further, the literature shows that environments that value standardized measures to reflect learning often send product-oriented feedback. Masters (2014) suggests that final grades do not often reflect distance traveled or growth. Instead, they only communicate where a student performs in relation to a specific standard or expectation. Studies conducted by Blackwell et al. (2007) and Dweck and Leggett (1988) contend that this sort of achievement-oriented feedback reinforces a static rather than incremental theory of intelligence or ability. In doing so, students who do not perform up to standards often adopt a negative self-concept, which results in a decline in motivation and subsequent achievement (Bråten & Strømsø, 2004; Brown, Harris, & Harnett, 2012; Dupeyrat & Mariné, 2005; Retelsdorf, Köller, & Möller, 2011; Russell, 2008). In this context, participants recognized the importance of investing in and communicating positively to their students about growth.

**Discussion.** Ultimately, in seeking to personally connect to and actively value the individual students in a given school, it stands to reason that traditional conceptions of a middle school environment do not fit that model. Instead, the findings suggest that teachers, as they
grow more accustomed to working with young adolescents, bring a variety of strategies and structures into the classroom. Doing so allows room for individuals to explore different interests and communicate their understandings in a variety of ways. Further, by balancing the need for authority with an open demeanor and clearly providing growth oriented feedback, teachers establish an environment that promotes bonding, fosters resiliency, and promotes a positive vision of the future (Catalano et al., 2004).

Ultimately, as previously noted, the findings reinforce the notion that engagement is not a singular, unified phenomenon. Instead, it is presented and perceived uniquely by every individual. As a result, these findings suggest that there is no one true formula to establishing an engaging school environment.

**Conclusion**

This study was guided by the primary research question: How do middle level teachers in a small, urban, independent school understand the role of the environment in fostering student engagement and motivation? Sub-questions included: (1) How do these teachers describe and understand engaging and developmentally responsive school environments? And (2) What structures and strategies do these teachers identify that foster student engagement in academic areas across the curriculum? Through these questions, this study sought to explore the perceptions and understandings of current teachers in a particular school setting. The researcher applied a qualitative interpretative analysis (IPA) research design, which sought to interpret participants’ experiences working with young adolescents. The study also sought to position the researcher, an administrator at the school, in a place of learning and understanding, which could allow for participants and researcher to stand together to co-construct an engaging educational environment.
In the context of the literature review and theoretical framework established for this study, several key findings remained consistent. The rich data offered from interviews of participants in this study identified a variety of causes that young adolescents might experience a lack of fit between their needs and their middle school environment. These included a lack of personal relationship built on care and trust with the adults in the building (Eccles et al., 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Larson, 2000; Lerner, 1982), institutional values that prioritize programming over the individual voices, identities, and interests of the individuals in their communities (Catalano et al., 2004; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; McGee et al., 2004; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Wood & Jocius, 2013), and traditional approaches to education that emphasize the passive reception of content and understanding assessed by standardized means (Berliner, 1989; Brown et al., 2012; Dupeyrat & Mariné, 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Masters, 2014; Ravitch, 2010).

Moreover, the data elicited in this study help to bridge the gap in scholarship regarding engagement and motivation between environmental structures and individual personality traits. By situating the study in a specific place and time, the perspectives presented depict both a personal and an institutional understanding of the concept of engagement and environmental influence. Most importantly, the common thread running through the data is the recognition that engagement is a highly personalized and multifaceted concept. Thus, teachers interpret engagement differently. Simultaneously, students exhibit it differently. Finally, different environmental traits will trigger variable levels of engagement. The findings support Berliner's (1989) initial critique of Eccles and Midgley (1989) that young adolescents cannot be treated as a uniform block.
Similarly, the data indicate that the perception of authenticity stands as a fulcrum in engaging young adolescents. Words, such as genuine, honest, and authentic consistently abounded in every interview suggesting that young adolescents innately delineate between contrived and real structures and relationships. Whether they were speaking about building relationships with students, respecting student voice and identity, or establishing learning tasks that did not correlate with traditional conceptions of secondary education, participants placed emphasis on the authenticity of these constructs. While the findings of this study do more to support the existing theories and literature than extend them, they do offer concrete implications for practice and future research, which are discussed below.

**Recommendations for practice**

The study examined teacher understandings of the interaction between environment and student engagement in a small, urban, independent school. In doing so, the study analyzed vulnerabilities and opportunities in regards to student engagement, while investigating the strategies and structures teachers recognized as helpful and harmful in promoting school engagement. While the scope of the study is limited to a particular place and particular time, and the findings of the study itself emphasize the variable and individual nature of engagement, that variability in and of itself provides an excellent foundation for phenomenological extrapolation. In the current educational landscape, defined by externally imposed standards and accountability, the results of the study clearly identify the most positive results in instances where teachers showed genuine interest and care for the unique needs of the individuals in their classes. These data reveal the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all academic programs and experiences. Participants recognized that planning and preparing with individual students in mind often led to higher
levels of engagement and achievement. Thus, the concept of flexibility, in terms of planning, grouping, and assessing, should stand at the center of an engaging program.

Moreover, the thematic findings of the study reveal the need for teachers who work with young adolescents to undergo a type of unlearning. Many participants gave voice to the idea that their traditional perceptions of teaching at the middle level did not serve their practical realities. Some participants expected the students to respond to a sense of structure, discipline, and authority. Others gave voice to the notion that their students were not capable of higher level, abstract thought, and thus enacted curriculum and instruction that ultimately led to student disengagement. Simultaneously, the data and literature suggest that the traditional notion of secondary education, where the teacher holds the authority of both knowledge and power, does not actually serve a large portion of students. Instead, young adolescents respond to personal relationships, opportunities to explore and express their own voices and identities, and a level of autonomy that secondary schools typically do not offer. As such, while these findings may be limited by place, time, and sample size, they carry implications not only for the researcher and his role at the research site, but also on a larger and more generalizable scale.

**Implications for the scholar-practitioner.** One of the defining messages delivered at CSSJD is the concept that the school’s philosophy and environment straddles the line between progressive and traditional education. However, while the school offers a comprehensive identity curriculum devoted toward providing authentic learning through “interdisciplinary subject-matter, activities, and projects,” and the promotion of “democratic, social living” (Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2011, p. 6), the classroom environment of the Upper School does tend toward the more traditional. While philosophically, the school recognizes and values a progressive approach to education, teachers, myself included, often return to the means and
methods they find comfortable. Thus, while a participant will note how engaged her students are when they are moving and actively participating in the lesson, she will simultaneously note that there are some classes and lessons that she simply has to “get through.” Further, as a scholar practitioner, I am acutely aware of the dangers of what Freire (1998) identifies as the “banking model,” where “the word, according to the naturalistic concept of consciousness implicit in the primer, must be ‘deposited,’ not born of the creative effort of the learners” (p. 482). This practice stands in contrast to the understanding that “the act of knowing involves a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action” (p. 486). Thus, students and teachers alike must work as partners to construct knowledge and understanding. Yet, as an administrator, there are times when I will accept the lesson that deposits knowledge rather than engages in dialogue. In my role at a school such as CSSJD, I often find myself split between the progressive ideology and the comfort of the traditional execution. I have found my own educational philosophy to be more essentialist: students must have access to and mastery of essential content, skills, and explicit instruction in traditional values (Ornstein et al., 2011). Thus, while I always seek opportunities to provide authentic learning through “interdisciplinary subject-matter, activities, and projects,” and the promotion of “democratic, social living” (Ornstein et al., 2011, p. 6), there are times when the traditional methods of Socratic seminars or lectures may win out. If anything, the findings of this research continue to inform my own philosophy and practice. If I want to make sure that we work with engaged adolescents at CSSJD, there must be a consistent push to more carefully and reflectively examine our instructional and assessment methods. Moreover, in the context of Spillane's (2006) model of distributed leadership, it becomes essential that I consistently establish this vision of student engagement through authentic learning, autonomy, and voice.
Similarly, the data indicate that the experience of students in seventh and eighth grades at CSSJD differs significantly from that of those in fifth and sixth grades. Many participants perceived this difference most pointedly in goal orientation. While participants suggested that fifth and sixth graders often felt freer to make mistakes and revise their work, seventh and eighth graders were characterized as highly motivated by grades and performance. Much of the data attributes this to the process of applying to high school in the highly competitive landscape of New York City independent schools. That said, the literature does establish that this increase in grade orientation exists in a variety of environments that are not solely K-8 educational institutions (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Guay et al., 2003; Viljaranta et al., 2014). In this context, it becomes paramount to consistently and clearly communicate the values of what Dweck (2006) refers to as a growth mindset. While the environmental structures of a K-8 environment such as CSSJD might make the removal of grades and standardized testing impossible, establishing clearer institutional value for personal goal setting and growth while building an institutional vocabulary around these concepts could provide a unique opportunity for more positive engagement in the later grades.

Moreover, the unique nature of the K-8 environment reveals both challenges and opportunities for a new administrator. In his interview, Mike gave voice to the idea that without high school students in the environment, teachers sometimes lack context in working with eighth graders at CSSJD. Thus, seeing the eighth graders as senior members of the school community, they hold the same expectations of thirteen-year-olds as they would for eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. A surface-level analysis of this practice could reveal a number of difficulties. Most notably, teachers of eighth graders at CSSJD note a marked decline in engagement during the
spring of the students’ eighth grade year. Simply, they recognize a form of “senioritis” in their young adolescents.

The findings of this study reveal a number of unique insights that might counterbalance this trend. Most notably, during a time when young adolescents would feel a natural tendency to disengage from their school environment, the environment should shift to more authentically fit their needs. If “senioritis” comes from the feeling that the students no longer have a connection to the expectations of the school, stage-adolescent fit argues that that the expectations of the school should evolve. In this context, recognizing that autonomy, interest, and personal identity drive engagement, the development of a capstone project to be completed in the spring of the eighth grade year at CSSJD seems appropriate. According to the work of Thomas, Wong, and Li, (2014), effective capstone experiences provide students with the opportunity to (1) synthesize and integrate a variety of content knowledge and skills that they have developed; (2) transition from one stage of life to another, e.g. middle school to high school; (3) reflect upon what they have learned; and (4) experience closure on a meaningful stretch in their lives. In the authors’ study, they found that students who participated in such projects reported greater inclination towards recognizing and utilizing all of the aforementioned skills. Similarly, participants experienced greater capacity for critical thinking, communication, ability to pursue lifelong learning, building interpersonal relationships, and readiness for employment than did non-participants. In support of these findings, Buzzetto-More (2013) presented “a survey of 422 graduates who had completed a capstone experience,” which “found that most (>75%) of participants reported developing skills in public speaking, research, writing, interviewing, planning, time management, and interpersonal communications” (Egelson, Harmon, & Bond, 2002 as cited by Buzzetto-More, 2013, p. 83). As a result, while it may be impossible to start
from scratch and build an entirely new program in the contexts of CSSJD, such a process provides a valid start for moving a traditional community towards a more progressive outlook.

**General implications for practice.** The findings of the study emphasize the concept of authenticity in building positive relationships, caring communities, and challenging the conceptions of traditional secondary education. Many participants gave voice to the notion that experience with the age group provided them with a unique perspective not only concerning young adolescents, but also concerning their own perceptions regarding middle level education. As a result, the research suggests that the most engaging environments for young adolescents will be populated with teachers and adults who truly understand the unique needs and duality of the age group. However, this recommendation in no way suggests that there exists a single archetypal middle school teacher, because, as established above, there is no single archetypal middle school student. Thus, there can be no single archetypal middle school teacher or even middle school program. Middle level teachers must consistently plan their lessons, assessments, and curriculum with their individual students in mind. Thus, the notion of national standards, assessed and enforced by externally applied standardized tests cannot establish effective and engaging learning environments. Thus, building level administrators must establish hiring, evaluation, and retention practices that attract and retain teachers with a variety of personalities and backgrounds. Further, curriculum and materials should be consistently examined with an eye towards finding opportunities to reflect and value the identities and voices of every student. District level administrators, as well as policymakers, should seek to understand the needs of every district. Recognizing that the students in an urban district will have very different needs and experiences than those found in a rural one stands in contrast to our current practices centered on national standards and standardized assessments. Breaking from these practices and
offering a variety of paths and experiences seems like a logical path of action that aligns with this study’s notion of unlearning traditional perspectives of secondary education.

**Implications for future research**

As mentioned earlier, this study began with my own interest not in student engagement, but in reading engagement. Thus, a logical next step for my own study would be to return to this area of exploration. A large amount of literature exists regarding literacy development and engaged reading, yet literacy learning remains a highly traditional structure, both in instruction and assessment, at many secondary institutions. The same holds true for mathematics education. Applying stage-environment fit to theories of literacy development and mathematical learning in the context of an idiographic case study could provide a unique understanding of the two subject areas most closely related to the standards and accountability movement defining the educational landscape.

Similarly, in order to inform work around a capstone experience for students in eighth grade, I would absolutely delve more deeply into the literature examining senior projects. However, most senior projects work with seniors in high school rather than eighth graders. Conducting action research around a relatively unique experience such as an eighth grade capstone experience might be revelatory for my own philosophy and practice.

The majority of studies regarding motivation and environment often skew either to examining programs holistically or the personality traits of individuals. In this context, the researcher recommends future studies that investigate the individual perspectives of environmental influence upon engagement at CSSJD.

Most notably absent in this study about student engagement is the voice of the students. While the researcher employed the hermeneutics of IPA to ethically navigate conducting human
research with direct reports as participants, a natural progression of this work might be an
embedded and idiographic case study that captured the voices of a number of stakeholders in the
community. Such a study might offer a broader contextual understanding of student
engagement.

Future research might also seek to understand how individual perspectives on
engagement influence institutional practices. A comparative case study of two schools might
offer insight on the ways in which engagement can be interpreted and how that corresponds to
the establishment of an educational environment. Such an exploration might reveal more about
the environmental and variable nature of engagement.

**Final thoughts**

Ultimately, this study sought to understand the ways in which middle level educators
interpreted and understood the role school environment played in student engagement. Both the
data elicited from the participants and my own positionality establish that these educators have a
strong philosophical and ideological understanding of how to engage young adolescents.
However, in order to achieve this understanding, many had to unlearn their own preconceptions
regarding this age group and education in general. As a result, practices do not always reflect
philosophies. Compounding this challenge, the structures that make up current educational
environments, such as standardized testing and both high school and college admissions
processes, reinforce traditional practices and pedagogy. Nevertheless, the findings of this study
reinforce the idea that the best practices in education are the ones that engage the most students.
And, simply, the practices that engage the most students are the ones that begin not from
establishing standards from on high, but by understanding and valuing the needs of every
individual student.
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Appendix A

Permission to conduct research from the Head of School

December 2, 2016

To whom it may concern,

My name is Marsha Nelson. I am the Head of School at the Cathedral School of St. John the Divine. I give my permission to Joshua Deitch, a Doctoral student at Northeastern University, to conduct his study in my school. I am giving Joshua Deitch the permission to do the following:

1. Provide a description of the school environment.
2. Recruit teachers from my school (according to the teachers’ willingness to participate).
3. Conduct interviews with the school’s teachers.

Sincerely,

Marsha Nelson
Appendix B
Recruitment email

Dear Upper School Faculty Member,

As you may know, I am pursuing my doctorate at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts and I am writing to ask for your help and participation in my current research. I hope to use the work involved in the crafting of my dissertation to be both a better learner and a better leader. In that regard, I invite you to share your experience and expertise.

I am particularly interested in the aspects of school engagement in young adolescents as I feel this is directly related to the work we do in middle level education. I am currently working on my dissertation, which seeks to understand the ways teachers experience and interpret the role of the school environment and structures in student engagement. I am hoping to interview faculty, as the primary executors of school culture and climate, in the hopes of developing a clearer understanding of how engagement is perceived and experienced at our school.

I am looking for volunteers to be interviewed one time, off school property. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not volunteer for this study, you will not hear from me again regarding it.

If you are interested in volunteering to participate in this study please contact me

Any emails received in any other accounts must be deleted without response per Northeastern University IRB. Any interviews I conduct will be under stringent university protocol, which give the interviewee the right to withdraw at any time and to remain anonymous if they wish.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Besides my student email, I can be reached at:

Cell: (914) 406-0090.

I would be grateful if you let me know your decision whether you choose to participate or not.

Thanks again.

Sincerely,

Joshua Deitch
EdD Candidate
Northeastern University
Boston, MA
Appendix C
Signed consent form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Jane Lohmann - Principal Investigator; Joshua Deitch - Student Researcher
Title of Project: Understanding the school environments that engage and motivate young adolescents

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to take part in this study because you work in the Upper School at the Cathedral School of St. John the Divine.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to understand how teachers perceive student engagement in the context of the middle school environment. The hope is that by developing a co-constructed understanding of this multifaceted concept, we may be able to continue to develop an environment that meets the perceived needs of our students.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in one semi-structured interview.

This interview is meant to be investigative and exploratory, not interrogative or evaluative. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or judged, it will have been my mistake and not yours. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time in the process, be it in the middle of the interview or in the last stages of writing and editing the dissertation. Doing so will not affect the outcome of the study, nor will it affect our professional relationship.

You will have the opportunity to review and approve all aspects of the data gathered from this interview including the transcript of the interview itself, the analysis of the transcript, and the ultimate write-up of the study.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview should take between an hour and ninety minutes. You will have the opportunity to choose a location that is comfortable to you, which should be off school grounds and outside of the school day.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
While there is a vulnerable position, where that evaluation could be conflated with this research, human research
seeks to avoid that type of situation. As mentioned above, should you feel any discomfort in the work we do, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty or repercussions.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to your participation in this study. Potential benefits to others include the participation in the act of co-constructing a vision of the workplace at CSSJD that directly and positively impacts the students enrolled in the school.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Audio from interviews will be recorded digitally. These recordings will be stored on the researcher’s home computer. Transcriptions and raw data will also be stored on this computer and in a lockable filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. This will also house all signed consent forms for up to three years after the completion of the study. Upon the completion of the study, the researcher will transfer all digital raw data to a password protected external hard drive. None of this data will be stored on work computers.

Though the size of the site and sample along with the nature of the participants’ relationship with each other and the researcher will make confidentiality among participants difficult, the researcher will strive to maintain all aspects of confidentiality. The names of both the school and participants will be changed. Similarly, the IPA process of data analysis described above will help to remove some of the researcher’s bias and to somewhat separate the participants from their interpretations. That said, the nature of an IPA study requires the researcher and participant to stand side-by-side in their co-constitution of knowledge. As such, true anonymity between researcher and participants would not serve the greater purpose of the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

You may choose not to participate in the study at any time. If you decide to participate and then change your mind, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of the school.
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Jane Lohmann, the Principal Investigator.
Email: J.Lohmann@neu.edu
Phone: (617) 756-3237
Or
Josh Deitch, the student researcher
Email: deitch.j@husky.neu.edu (contact only this email address. Contact made about this project to any other address must be deleted by university regulations.)
Phone: (914) 406-0090

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

Participants will not be paid for their participation.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There are no costs associated with participation in this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

_________________________________________________  ____________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                     Date

_____________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

_____________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D  
Interview Protocol

Interviewee:  Date:  
Interviewer: Josh Deitch  Location:

**Introductory Statement**
Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. The doctoral program I am enrolled in focuses on the development and training of scholars in practice, who make use of existing and original research in the workplace. One of my core beliefs is that it’s my job to lead by learning. As a result, I see myself not only as a student of the work in my doctoral program, but a student of the work in our school. The skills and concepts I’m learning through my doctoral work provide me new ways to be a learner and foster collective learning in this professional context.

Due to my authority within the school and the ways that could seem risky to people I supervise, I want to assure you that I’m doing this research because in order to be effective in this leadership role I rely on your expertise and perspectives about the work we are doing. Your perspectives and experiences and are invaluable, and I hope we will be able to use this conversation as a springboard for our continued work together. Remember that your answers have no bearing on your work here at the school. Also, remember that you can skip any question, or quit entirely at any time with no repercussions.

This is meant to be an exploration and not an interrogation. In that regard, if at any point this conversation feels otherwise, feel free to opt out. In those instances, it will be my mistake, not yours. I assure you that choosing not to participate will not in any way affect our professional or personal relationship. I have the utmost respect for what you do and your philosophy and do not want to put you in a vulnerable position.

For my research, I am interested in learning as much as possible about your thoughts and experiences related to middle level education. I am focusing on young adolescents because research reveals it to be a critical period in a child’s life and development. We currently work together in a middle school setting, which offers us a unique opportunity to use this research project to craft a collective understanding about what we do and where we want to go with this work.

This interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. During that time, I will use specific questions to structure our conversation, but there will be room for us to follow different paths.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Tell me about the journey that brought you to working in education and particularly to working in middle school.

2. Describe an interaction you’ve had as a teacher that you think captures working with this age group.
a. What is it about this story that stands out?

3. If you had to describe middle schoolers to someone who doesn’t do this work, what defining characteristics come to mind?

4. Describe a time that you felt particularly challenged in your work with this age group?

5. What about a time when you felt particularly successful?

6. Following up from these experiences, what are some of the essential components that you’ve identified in building a learning environment with middle school students?

All programs have defining strengths and challenges.

7. What do you think this school does well with regard to supporting middle school students?

8. What are some areas that you’d like to see us collectively improving, developing, or thinking about in order to improve what we’re doing?

One area of child development in school settings that I’m particularly interested in is the concept of engagement. At the same time, there are different ways to think about what it means or looks like.

9. How do you think about student engagement and what do you think it means? Could you tell a story of a time you felt that a child was particularly engaged at school?

10. Conversely, describe a time when you felt like you witnessed disengagement – which we’ve certainly all faced as teachers.
   a. What about the interaction or student(s) did you witness that suggested students were disengaged? How did you know?

11. What structures or strategies do you find most important in creating an engaging learning environment?

Closing the Interview:
I am finished with my questions at this point. Is there anything that we did not discuss that you think would be important to add at this time?

I thank you again for spending this time with me. Your participation in this study has been very helpful. I will be back in touch with you when I have your transcripts and you can review them at _______.

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