

Bodies of Knowledge (and Knowledge of Bodies):
Performing, Maintaining, and Troubling the Discursive Sites of the “Middle School Teacher”

Kyle Ralph Mitschele

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Teachers College, Columbia University

2022

© 2022
Kyle Ralph Mitschele
All Rights Reserved

Abstract

Bodies of Knowledge (and Knowledge of Bodies):

Performing, Maintaining, and Troubling the Discursive Sites of the “Middle School Teacher”

Kyle Ralph Mitschele

Middle school is discursively positioned as a problem to be solved, largely because middle school students are fixed with a gaze that produces them as at-risk, and in need of advice, guidance, and role models to ensure a healthy and productive adult future. Middle school students, as “early adolescents,” are positioned as youth at a particular stage of development that has fundamental needs, linked to assumptions about their bodily, cognitive, and emotional development. Middle school teachers come to embody the hopes and fears positioned on and through middle school students, and are discursively produced themselves as “bodies of knowledge” who are said to know the bodily needs of middle school students—in turn, positioned to all be rooted in the “nature” of their development.

This study seeks to trace and open up the “rhizomatic assemblage” of “middle school,” particularly as it makes certain practices, knowledges, and discourses (un)available or (im)possible to “middle school teachers.” It does so by exploring through a qualitative study of three independent school middle school teachers, along with the auto-biographical “sketches” of the author, ways in which particular bodies come to know and be known as “middle school teachers.” As the bulk of the data was being collected in the 2019–2020 school year, the global COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning in the United States that emerged from the murder of George Floyd both provided important new contexts to explore in terms of implications for intersectional, embodied experiences of “middle school” after March 2020. Consequently, the

study explores discursive shifts and (in)stabilities across pre-pandemic and “early” pandemic contexts, particularly in remote teaching and calls to embrace and embody anti-racist practice as middle school educators. It is hoped that the exploration of discourses, discursive practices, and embodiment of “middle school” open up space and possibility in middle schools, for middle school teachers and students alike.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	i
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
DEDICATION	viii
PREFACE	1
CHAPTER I - THE PROBLEM WITH MIDDLE SCHOOL: MIDDLE SCHOOL IS A PROBLEM	12
Background of the Problem	12
Statement of the Problem	21
The “Child” as Construct and Reflection of Society	26
Rationale for the Study	28
Research Questions	32
Significance of the Study	33
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	35
Researcher Role/Positionality	39
CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	42
Performing a “Body of Knowledge”	42
“You Want to Be a What?”	44
The Middle School	45
Turning Points	47
Teachers as Instrumental Turning Points	49
Healthy Middle Schools (and Students? And Teachers?)	52
The “Nature” and “Needs” of Early Adolescence/Adolescents	53
The “Middle-ness” of the Middle School, Its Teachers, Its Students	56
Normative Characteristics of the “Middle School Teacher”	57
The Negative as the Norm: “You Want to Be a What?” Take Two	59
“Knowing” Students: Teacher-Student Relationships	60
Authority and the Body of the Teacher	64
Mismatched Parts	66
Knowing...Becoming...Knowing the Teacher “Self”	68
Called Upon to Remember a Time “Best Forgotten”: Surviving Being (with) “Creatures”	71
A Time Best Left Forgotten? Memory Interjections	76
Mobilization of Memories	77
Discipline and Biopolitics: The Body in Middle School	80
Movement/Confinement and the (Re)Negotiation of (Classroom) Space	84
School Bodies	86
Gender, Sexuality, Race and Students	86
Gender, Sexuality, and Schools	90
Gender, Sexuality, and Teachers	96

Particularity: The Counter to Claims of Universality.....	97
CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY.....	100
Overall Research Design	100
Multiple Case Studies: The Initial Design, and the Decision to Change “Cases”... 102	
Case Selection & Contexts of Sites	102
Research Site: Cedar Day School.....	103
Proposed Second Site	105
Second Case: Same Location, New Case	108
Participant Recruitment and Selection	109
Selected Participants: Partial Sketches	112
Dominic	113
Holly	117
Insider/Outsider	124
Multimodal Texts as Conversational Prompts.....	129
Why Not Participant Observation.....	130
Shades of Autoethnography.....	132
Representation of the Data	135
Writing as Method and Use of Layered Text	137
Self-Reflexivity	143
Methods of Data Analysis	144
Listening for Silences	146
Limitations.....	148
Attempts at Analysis and Resisting Universality or Generalization	149
CHAPTER IV – THE MIDDLE SCHOOL MUSICAL: THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION AND EMBODIMENT OF SCENES AND ROLES AS “MIDDLE SCHOOL”	151
You’re Being Such a Middle Schooler Right Now: The Middle School Musical.	151
Other Scenes in the Musical	153
The Appropriately Inappropriate	153
“Ms. Z., Is Your Underwear Pink?”	156
Why Middle School? Age.	158
Middle School Bodies Are the Worst.....	162
The Worst Bodies (Shouldn’t) Interact	164
Bodies to Be Guided.....	166
Role Models: Embodying and Modeling What a “Cool Human” Can Be	167
Embodying Role Model.....	170
Filling the Role of Role Model.....	173
Cultivating Personality	176
Melding into One: the Silly Transformer Middle School Teacher.....	182
My Face as Part of the Middle School Teacher Transformer.....	183
CHAPTER V – MIDDLE SCHOOL BODIES: DISTANT, REMOTE, AND THREATENING	189

Lost Physicality, Lost Pleasure: Lost Middle School.....	192
Lost Bodies = Lost Docility, Lost Teaching, and Lost Learning	194
Muted, (Not) Docile	198
@BlackatCedar.....	206
Voices from @BlackatCedar.....	207
Malik’s Body	208
Malik, Hiding Behind My Wall.....	214
Interlude: I Scared You!	215
(Mis)Connections Over the Distance	220
CHAPTER VI - STANDING ON THE EDGE: EMBODYING THE BEST AND THE WORST, THE CRAZY AND THE SCARY.....	225
Embodied Minds in the Middle.....	227
Middle School as Embodied Minds in Space.....	229
Bodies as Middle School Students and Middle School Students as Bodies.....	233
Middle School Bodies and Biopower.....	236
Embodied Minds Feeling Middle School.....	238
Intersectionalities and the Middle School Teacher.....	240
Addressing Cedar Day as an “Elite” School & Implications for “Middle School”	244
Future Embodiments: Possible Directions and Questions for Further Study	247
Reimagining/Refiguring Middle School Teaching: Focusing on the Here and Now	252
REFERENCES	255
APPENDICES.....	269
Appendix A: Interview Protocols.....	269
Appendix B: Call for Participants, Site 1	278
Appendix C: Proposed Call for Participants, Site 2	280
Appendix D: Participant Questionnaire.....	282
Appendix E: Focus Group Protocol.....	284

List of Figures

Figure 1, “The Month of Mitschele”184

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the work of many years, a good number of starts and stops, reboots, and revisions, and the patience, guidance, and encouragement of countless people. I am concerned about the prospect that trying to count those people right now will leave too many out. To those people, I apologize, and I am certain that you would very well have made into any version of these acknowledgments.

This work would most definitely not exist at all without the enormous contributions of my advisor, Nancy Lesko. Nancy, you have pushed me through in times when I lost sight of possibilities or the various paths I could take to successfully complete this work. You constantly provided wise counsel, endless intellectual encouragement and nurture, and a good dose of necessary, “Have you considered...?” Many of the truly considered questions and possible answers provided herein are undoubtedly because of your wisdom.

Any of the other paths explored and in any way meaningful are then due to Dani Friedrich. Dani, you often provided critical feedback in ways that forced me to consider new questions and lenses previously unexplored. A more full “embodiment” of research was only made possible with your counsel.

Stephanie McCall was only roped into this work officially in its closing stages, but she provided so much encouragement in its earliest phases that I am truly honored to have had Steph’s investment and engagement in my work for a significant period of time. Steph, I thank you for agreeing to “come back” to this work and see it through to its conclusion.

A good number of other folks at TC provided important contributions along the way. Along with Steph, Rebecca Stanko and Bessie Dernikos were major forces in helping to shape my thinking and writing in the early phases of this work. Their thinking on discourse and gender were enormously impactful. Thanks, Becky and Bessie. Professor Mariana Souto-Manning played a tremendous role when I defended the proposal of this study, forcing me to (re)consider the implications of silences along racial lines. Moving towards a more intersectional approach was in no small part because of her critical reading of my work, and I hope that the manuscript that follows is more full, even in its partiality, as a result.

As this work is about teachers, I must acknowledge teachers who have played a huge role in my schooling, my teaching, and my doctoral work. It is this paragraph that will most suffer from being incomplete, I fear. Know that if this manuscript reaches you, and I was once your student, you helped shape me in some way that helped produce this. A short list, though: Tom Keating, Norman LaValette, Dean Sluyter, Susan Dineen, Barrett Hazeltine, Luther Spoehr, Matt McGarrell, Bil Johnson, thank you.

To my colleagues at “Cedar Day,” thanks for your support and encouragement, even if that encouragement was usually in the form of, “Aren’t you done with that yet?” To Dominic, Holly, and Zadie in particular, I wish I could properly name you here, but I can’t. But you know who you are. Clearly, there would not be much of a dissertation without your time and generosity, so thank you. I hope to have represented you each in your fullness and your spirit fairly and well.

To my parents and sisters, thanks for presenting and supporting the opportunities that made my educational path to and through graduate study possible. Your love and support obviously allowed this to happen.

And finally, to my “family unit,” Kate and Jane. I have been working on this study for the duration of your life, Jane, so you only know a daddy that has had to give up time here and there (maybe not enough in total for writing purposes, but always too much to pull me away from hanging with you) to work on this study in some form. Thanks for not missing me *too* much when I had to disappear for a bit to read or write, or re-write. You’re why I hope some piece of this work might help make middle schools a place where more people can be seen and celebrated and known more fully. Kate, I know that there is absolutely no way this would have happened without you. Your encouragement took countless forms over a ridiculous period of time, but there is clearly no way it would have made it to the finish line without you. I am inspired by your courage and honesty, your curiosity and your compassion. This is as much a product of my typing as your love.

Dedication

To Kate and Jane, always

Preface

In the back of a small cafeteria, a small cluster of ten-year old boys munch on a snack of goldfish, washing the cheesy, salty crackers down with glugs of chocolate milk, bits and drops of both wiped away intermittently by sleeves. The chatter is vibrant and high-pitched: it's the first full day of school, and these boys—and the girls talking excitedly at tables near them—are fifth graders. In this school, that means they are newly-minted “middle schoolers.” Several tables closer to the front of the cafeteria, high school students gather in more subdued conversations over their bagels and coffee. Among these high school students are a couple of boys, siblings of boys at the back tables of fifth graders. Without much build-up—at least to us fifth grade teachers in the middle of the scene—chaos seems to have broken out extremely quickly. Suddenly, boys—old and young, new and old, but “boys, definitely boys”—are saying, and then yelling, back and forth, and progressively louder, a particular part of their anatomy:

“Penis.” ... “Penis!” ... “Penis!!” ... “PENISSS!!!” ... “PEEEENNNIIIISSSSS!!!!”

This game of seeing who can out-shout (until becoming embarrassed or interrupted) that “most important” of anatomical features for males has reared its ugly head in the lap of innocence: young, impressionable fifth graders (who seemed to know what the game was all about without any prompting from the high schoolers who participated with them). The relatively quick reaction of teachers (other than me) has sent high school students scurrying, and the fifth grade students wishing that they could do the same.

At this point, I am called forth by the most veteran fifth grade teacher—referred to as the “mother hen” by some behind closed doors—to “have a talk” with the fifth-grade boys about the inappropriateness of the game.

It was my first full day of my first full-time teaching assignment. It was my first full day as a “middle school teacher.” It was my first day with fifth graders, the early adolescents in my “care.” And it was first day performing a role, or many roles, as it would turn out. Sometimes those roles coincided, the lovely middle of a Venn diagram. More often than not, though, those roles conflicted, at least to me. Or, maybe when I thought I figured out my place in the diagram, the ovals shifted and the lines blurred.

How would I teach social studies from a social justice stance, which I had been so carefully groomed to do in my MAT program, while also enacting the authoritarian-disciplinarian? And it seemed like my own “maleness” was being brought to the fore in this moment; it seemed the only clear reason for the *way* more experienced teachers, who happened to be women, to be turning over the issue (what was the issue, again?) to me to deal with. If it wasn’t clear to me then—or, prior to that moment, in my interview, when I was asked whether I could be a good disciplinarian—or after that in various other moments, it has become clear to me since: I was hired at least as much to teach fifth grade social studies as to teach and regulate bodies and souls (Popkewitz, 1998), if not more so the latter. And here I was being asked to regulate a great deal: language, bodies, and the interaction between the two.

It was a scene that Foucault (1978) might analyze as the management of sexuality through the regulation of the discourse surrounding it. If simply saying a body part is made taboo—taboo enough to make it an interesting game to see who can outlast the other party in shouting it progressively more loudly (no one was shouting “fingernail!”)—then the disciplining at hand would only make it more so. This then underlies the greater significance and taboo of the actual anatomical part itself, not to mention all that it represents, including at least some nod to the speakers as emerging sexual beings.

In this instance, I was being asked as the male (as much was said to me by the “mother hen” teacher, later to become my first real on-the-job teaching mentor, who summoned me) to regulate the proper use of the word penis: if nothing else, it was not a word for public consumption and certainly not at a cafeteria table. Of course, the risk and the pleasure of the game rely on the fact that the players *somehow know* this fact already. To summon the fact that “penis” was not a word for public usage or broadcast was to state the obvious. Presumably, though, it was my role as the faculty member who had the closest link to the word through presumed (thankfully, there was no strip search involved in determining my suitability to the task) biological sex to actually make the regulatory, disciplinary statement. My body became simultaneous to and complicit with a particular power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980): my white male body was read as most suited to the disciplining of the male bodies uttering male sexual anatomy. No one thought this consciously at the time. At least, I doubt it. At most, my guess is that it would have been categorized more as my first foray into enacting the “preconfigured,” “masculine” role of authoritarian and disciplinarian (King, 2000).

Or was it more about these students being new to the middle school, and needing different expectations and disciplines? This is decidedly how it was couched in the “moment of summoning,” if you will. The aforementioned “mother hen” gave me my tactic: in short, that I should talk with the boys about how this was not “proper behavior for middle school students.”

My only teaching experience to that point was student teaching in a high school, and I had certainly not ever been asked to deal with students in the manner I was being asked to in that moment in the cafeteria. In fact, in my student teaching, it was my body more likely to be regulated. My one foray into the cafeteria a few weeks into my student teaching I was mistaken

for a freshman, and consequently yelled at by an assistant principal for being at the wrong lunch, as that was a time for the juniors and seniors.

Over the course of the six years I was to work with the same teachers in the fifth grade, it was made clear to me, both explicitly and implicitly, that I was asked to perform in particular ways in my capacity as the singular male teacher in the grade, and chief among these responsibilities was enacting a stern, disciplinary role. In fact, I would lean heavily on discussing self-regulation and modulating my voice to ever-deeper registers in order to achieve my message on the particular incident of "penis" utterances and many more occasions in the years that followed. I was acutely aware of how my actions, my utterances, my stance, my patrolling of the classroom—how all would be cast in particular lights and read as my fulfilling (or not) the role of a middle school teacher in this school. At some level, I recognized that in the cafeteria, I was being thrust into that role by my colleagues and assessed for how well I could perform it *through* my regulatory and disciplinary words and gestures.

And, with absolutely none of these things in mind on that sunny day in September, I strode over to the table, furrowed my brow, said, "Now, gentlemen..." and pretended I knew what I would say next. I liked that I had said gentlemen, and not boys; it added a certain weight to both my speech, the actions they had chosen, the consequences that would follow, and their further and future embodiment of what it would mean to be a "middle schooler" in my school. I knew I would not use the word "penis," though, because I thought at the time that it would simply give the word more power. And I thought that I would blush. Not to mention that the combination of my blushing and the word said *again* would simply meet with a bunch of stifled giggling. Or pointing and laughing, and I feared being pointed and laughed at. Especially in front of colleagues. Blushing, laughing, pointing, collegial disapproval...all were somehow

simultaneously on my mind. I was most certainly terrified, trying hard to look anything but, and almost certainly sweating a good bit. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, a version of the scene played out where I was being giggled, pointed, or laughed at, and the result was that I was replaced by one of the other teachers, who could handle the situation “properly,” or, at least, to orderly effect. I did not want that to happen.

So, instead, I spoke sternly about such things as proper conduct in shared spaces, such as a cafeteria, and also about the new expectations that we would have of them in fifth grade, now that they had entered the middle school. I had very easily picked up on that as a thread of speech carried by the other teachers on the team with the fifth graders earlier that morning, so I leaned on that. To act maturely was to be a middle schooler, and to act maturely meant not shouting sexual anatomy—which is to say nothing of the high school students who started the whole thing. And, to discipline was the realm of “masculine” performance. After all, the male body in front of them was performing this show of discipline — feet shoulder-width apart, eye contact made with all in the crowd, finger assertively wagging, voice deeper than my more everyday speaking timbre — and the three veteran, female-bodied teachers were waiting in the wings. Thus, not only was my speech composed of a lesson, but so too was my body, and the bodies of all of those present for my speech to the fifth grade boys.

When I first began my student teaching, the feedback from my coordinating teacher was peppered with comments about my youth and, as he described in my semester-ending performance summary, my “cherubic countenance.” My position as a white male I imagine seemed, to my reading of the outside world, unnoteworthy. I was one white male among many white males. (This is to say nothing of what might have been assumed by students or colleagues about my sexuality.) Thus, when I interviewed for my first full-time position as a fifth grade

teacher at an independent school, it was very interesting to me to have my male-ness so carefully brought to the fore, as it was during my interviews with various teachers and administrators at the school. My whiteness was not brought to the fore.

I distinctly remember being asked about my experience with disciplining students, as it was something about which I remember feeling happy that I had a somewhat prepared example to bring to the table; in an interview at a school previous to this one, I had felt unprepared for this question, and had to stumble to think of an example, which happened to involve me suspending a member of a club that I had served as president of in college. Coming “full circle,” here, on that first full day of classes, I was being called to issue discipline by a colleague. And I used stance, tone of voice, gesture, and particular word choices to try to assume a role of discipline in what I thought would be a “proper” way, though I had no overt training or guidance on this matter. This “proper” way could simultaneously be taken as a stereotypical “masculine” manner of disciplining: stern voice, pointed gestures, and a volume and tone to my voice used to convey that I “meant business.” I leaned on a belief that certain actions and words would hold meaning—all without particularly consciously weighing my words or actions. The active use of particular words and manners to convey discipline thus took on a much more slippery guise of it all coming naturally to me because those words and manners were delivered by a male body.

The fifth grade was the first year of the middle school at my first full time (and current) teaching job, so the issues of dealing with adolescent bodies became much more prominent in the school’s estimation of needs for “good” fifth grade teachers. My being male, it seemed, put me in a position vital to the stability of the grade, and a position of power: I needed to become the “heavy,” maintaining a firm hand with the young adolescents in my charge. King (2000) writes about the idea that men in elementary schools are simply filling and enacting women’s positions;

it seems that largely *because* the fifth grade was the beginning of middle school, there was an explicit need to have a man fill a “masculine” role on the grade level team. After all, through stories and documents of lesson plans and handouts in my classroom files, it was clear that at least the three teachers preceding me in the position were male; when I moved into seventh and eighth grade teaching at the same school, the two teachers brought in for interviews for the fifth grade position I was vacating were men, and one of them held the position for eight years himself. And now, twenty years removed from the first day of school, there is subsequently another male in the social studies position in fifth grade, and he additionally holds the title of “Dean of the Fifth Grade,” making official the mantel of discipline of the newest middle school students.

But past that explicit role-filling, there were echoes of Jones’ (2001) discussion of the discourse of pleasure and masculinity. Jones writes of a training that takes place to regulate how a man can self-regulate his masculinity in a way to “legitimately ‘be’ with children” (p. 1). I was told before I actually took my full-time position that I was never to be one-on-one with a student behind a closed door. Interestingly, this is one of the examples Jones notes when describing the experiences of preservice teachers and the explicit advice they were given with respect to touch (“All touch is out.”) and being with students (“Don’t be alone in the classroom with them.”). Further, and less explicitly, it was certainly suggested that physical contact would be less than appropriate; the suggestions of pleasure (McWilliam, 1999) in connection with touch—even just the simple touch of a shoulder, or the connection brought through a hug—were certainly unspoken but well communicated taboos.

And so, there were ways of being a “proper” middle school teacher that I began to adopt: I would not allow students, particularly the girls, to hug me. I even moved so far as to align desks

in rows at the beginning of my second year, at the recommendation of a teacher with whom I worked, to “focus the attention on [me].” That attention, then, could simultaneously remind of my position of authority and knowledge. Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) write about the “voices” of the teacher bodies, and what those bodies communicate. Among other things, they note the authority spoken by the teacher body, as it is “[teachers’] bodies that pupils first pay attention to” (p. 704). My colleague had been acknowledging that and offering that knowledge as advice to me in order to be seen as a more commanding and in-control teacher.

The rows also helped to maintain and regulate distance between me and the students, as well as between the students themselves; I had for much of my first year set the desks and chairs into a circle or smaller groups. The “control” that I lacked in that arrangement (an observation made by more than one adult in my building) I thought I was regaining by moving to rows, and it allowed me to show, at a glance, that there was clear regulation in my room, something that was expected of me. And those expectations made me self-regulate, and expect those things of myself. After all, if I did not enact and exact that control of the bodies in my classroom, how could I possibly be considered to be a good middle school teacher, an identity I strive for to this day in my teaching, and something I was constantly aware of in particular measure in the earliest stages of my career? Ultimately, the pleasure I might have taken from being on the receiving end of a student’s hug was replaced by the pleasure I trained myself to take in being seen as a professional who maintained responsible distance from the students and orderly rows of desks and chairs—and bodies in those chairs and behind those desks.

On the first day of the beginning of my second year, in order to “set the right tone,” I also requested that the other teachers in the grade allow me to speak to the grade about respect and signs of showing respect. I used the forum to show the students that I had and used authority, and

could regulate their actions; I interrupted myself in order to ask students who weren't paying attention to retrain their silent focus on me. And I was performing not only for my students, but also for my colleagues: I was filling the role for which I was initially seeded. It was an essentialized "masculine management" akin to what Mac an Ghail describes (1994). I had to be the authority, the knower, and the manager, to offer a firm path through the beginnings of "troubled adolescent" times.

It was in that same year that students began to push back in interesting and some less-than-anticipated ways, particularly around the idea of touch. Most interesting was the insistence of a number of girls to touch my arm or make moves to hold my hand on the way to recess or lunch. I was able to use "mature"-speak to let the girls know that this was no longer lower school, and that they should no longer need to hold hands with each other or their teachers in order to move through the halls. Several girls went unimpeded through the school year, constantly attempting to make that physical connection with each other and with me. And it felt very bizarre, because there was a clear, overt discipline in place *not* to touch, but a desire to do so. It was a fulfilling moment when, in the end of the year, a small guard could be let down, the front of proper behavior and body regulation set to the side, and the girls who had wanted to do so all year could finally hug me (in the hall, in front of my female colleagues, whom they had already hugged). Some of the literature around middle school—for example, the critical *Turning Points* report (Carnegie Corporation, 1989)—calls for teachers to foster and develop "intimate" or "close" relationships with the students, in order to help them through their "early adolescence." While I don't know what their experience of that moment was, it was probably, to my memory, one of the first times I had felt that I had created any kind of "close" relationship

with a student. Perhaps it was those rows and all of that proper regulation of my “self” and my body, perhaps not. Probably more so in spite of those things.

I would like to think that I have shifted in some ways and complexified the spaces for myself to operate in in order to be known as a middle school teacher, and not simply as a male disciplinarian. How much of “being” a “middle school teacher,” though, was wrapped up in that performative (e.g. Butler, 1993) making the subject—me, as “middle school teacher”—known? Ultimately, I try to dance between appropriating the normative discourses at work in middle school to be “known” as a middle school teacher, but I also hope to make ruptures in the ways in which I enact certain discursive subject positions, and question some of the taken-for-grantedness of the ways in which discourses of early adolescents and their intersectional embodiments are utilized to “make” the middle school. In the first handful of years, this meant that I worried less about overt signs of discipline and regulation and found ways to do much of what King (2000) suggests were “replacement” behaviors, such as giving praise in place of hugs, in order to communicate the love I had for my kids without traversing the taboo of touch. I tried desperately to maneuver within a borderland of age, gender, and “proper” practices, and there is much left to uncover, unpack, and trouble, not least of which is the situation I now find myself in.

I now teach in the seventh and eighth grades: the “upper” half of the middle school. In this space, for the first several years, my male-ness never seemed to me to be overtly questioned, mentioned, or applied (save for being assigned to the “boys” floor of rooms in a hotel on an overnight trip). This has led me to wonder, through that silence, whether this is because the space of the seventh and eighth grades might be somehow more discursively configured to be more “masculine.” Over the years in this new space of seventh and eighth grades, though, I also began

gravitating towards friendships with male colleagues and after a few years, found myself in a position where the assistant principal, a woman with whom I had worked particularly closely in the fifth grade, mentioned that she—and some of her female students in the eighth grade—had noticed and discussed the existence of a “boys clique” in my classroom.

These personal recollections bring me to the questions of my study. Is there something about being a “middle school teacher” that makes these questions surface in particular ways? Is there a particular—or even peculiar—dance of bodies and knowledge, that happens through the discursive production of the “middle school teacher”? In what ways are certain discourses available and others foreclosed? How does any middle school teacher come to be recognized as one? What does the student’s body (or the student body, collectively) mean for a middle school teacher?

Background of the Problem

At best, the task of stating “the problem” is ironic and, at worst, nearly impossible. “The” problem is circular, shifting, and wholly tied to discourses that both remain static and shift in nearly invisible ways, making it quite problematic to try to isolate a singular problem. Middle school as a concept is itself “annoyingly nebulous” (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005).¹ It is ironic, too, because at least some element of the “problem” is that one of the threads of discourses at work in/upon the “middle school” is that at the core of that institution is the early adolescent, so often the site of societal fears and concerns (Lesko, 2001) *and* simultaneously labeled “at-risk” (i.e.: Carnegie Corporation, 1989). At least in part, an element of the problem is this assumption that so grounds the subject-position of the early adolescent: fragile, curious, and naturally “at-risk.” The health and welfare of the early adolescent is tenuous, something to be carefully guarded and nurtured, because with the health and the welfare of the adolescent go the health and welfare of the state (Lesko, 2001). Combine this with the founding motto-of-sorts of middle schools: Donald Eichhorn, often called one of the “fathers” of the middle school movement in the 1960s, stated, “The middle school is an organic whole with all of the relevant factors focusing upon the growth of the child” (Eichhorn, 1966, p. viii). The middle school is defined by its mission to address the needs of a group that is *itself* seen as a problem to be solved. The conceptual and

¹ Pendergast and Bahr (2005) use the phrase “annoyingly nebulous” not to critique middle school per se, but, rather, the ways in which “middle school” is taken up as a concept to mean many different things. Ultimately, they find that the “middle school” is, no matter how employed, a school organized around certain aged students who constitute “early adolescents.”

organizational shift from junior high school to middle school, at least in terms of the writing on the subject, was that the student was now at the forefront of the thinking creating the school; the middle school itself grew out of the problem of the young adolescent student, while also addressing the perceived problem of the junior high school. If the middle school is the institution set up to “solve” (or at least stifle, or abate) the “problems” associated with “being” an “early adolescent,” and early adolescence is defined as natural, or, in Eichhorn’s wording, the very growth of the child, then middle school is constructed by, for, and around the very problem of *nature*. The movement from junior high schools to middle schools was to address the purported needs of the early adolescent, rather than what the junior high schools already in existence at the time were meant to do, which was merely to train students to prepare for the “rigors” of high school.

The analysis of middle schools and middle school teachers, then, must begin with the discursive site that they are literally “built” upon: the [early] adolescent. One of the singular things that middle schools are and all involved can agree to is that they are “consistently constructed as being about rethinking education that meets the needs of young people in a changing world” (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). The beginning of the problem to be studied then is that middle schools, by definition, are seen as responsive to the “needs” of middle-school aged students. That age range—students from ten years to fourteen years of age—comes with its own assumptions and needs, predominantly propelled by the concept of the adolescent, or, in the case of the middle school students in particular, the “early adolescent.”

These assumptions, though, rely on a naturalized and reified notion of the adolescent as fueled by the physical, emotional, and intellectual development that “naturally” comes with this “stage of human development.” Physically, then, adolescents are situated as pre-pubescent or

pubescent, their bodies undergoing enormous changes as they move through the biological shifts linked to puberty. Among these changes is the development of their sexual organs—a key facet of almost any discussion of puberty—and with that development, many handbooks and guides suggest that this then begets development of (arguably) their sexuality. Further, their emotional development comes to be shaped largely by interactions with and relationships with their peers, as well as the adults in their lives. Here, it is often noted that the adults of a middle school then play vital roles in becoming role models for the youth in their charge (e.g.: Brown & Knowles, 2007; Carnegie Council, 1989; Eichhorn, 1966; Powell, 2011; Wiles, et al., 2006). Intellectually, middle school aged students are seen as making the transition from being concrete to being more abstract thinkers, but ones who also do not typically think through the long-term consequences of their actions. For this reason, combined with their naturally emerging sense of “identity” as defined by their independence from parents and their emergence within a peer group as well as the changes in their bodies that propel them to adult-like behaviors (i.e.: use of alcohol and/or drugs, or engaging in sexual intercourse), adolescents are often seen as a group “at-risk” of dangerous behaviors (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005; Lesko, 2001; Lesko & Mitschele, 2013). All of this, though, stems from an unquestioned, unproblematized set of assumptions about the “natural development” of young adolescents along all of these facets of growth (Lesko & Mitschele, 2013).

Middle schools are primarily concerned with curricular, instructional, and management practices that somehow address the “needs” of early adolescents. Teachers in middle schools are in fact positioned as people who not only teach students, but also advise them, and, in both of these capacities, they are to engage in “meaningful relationships” with their students, engaging their students in ways that respond to these needs. At the forefront, then, are the group of

assumptions about the needs of early adolescents *as defined by their “natural development.”* By meeting the needs of early adolescents—who are at times deemed “unique, fragile, and ever changing” (Wiles et al., 2006, 51), “difficult, disruptive, and almost impossible to deal with” (Wiles et al., 2006, 38), or amidst a time of life that is of “great complexity and confusion” (Eder et al., 1995, 1)—the operating assumption has to be that these needs are coming from these deficit perspectives. If early adolescents are always “becoming” (Lesko, 2001), it seems that they are also always about to *become a problem*. To stand a chance, the literature seems to suggest, a teacher has to have a handle on the “nature” of the early adolescent.

This knowledge, though, is meant to be at a distance. The knowledge of bodies invoked here is a sort of biopolitics (Foucault 1997/2003). The “adolescent”—the middle school student—is meant to be known and meant to have their bodies known only in as much as the teacher is meant to know what is characterized as typical, natural development for “all” bodies. This gaze at the adolescent body is not meant truly as a meaningful or personal exchange, but rather as a supervisory, regulatory gaze. Recognizing and understanding the singular adolescent body for a teacher is to see it within its place along the supposedly “normal” arc of development that is said to take place for all adolescents at this time in their lives. By knowing this “natural” development, a teacher should better know a student’s needs and address them in lesson planning and in interpersonal interactions, among other times and spaces.

The adolescent was coined as a stage, a phase of nature that acts on all universally, while it is anything but. Much of the discussion of the “developmental needs” of early adolescents rests on the notion that all go through the same stages, these stages happen in roughly the chronological age time frame, and certain behaviors, beliefs, actions, and other otherwise “unexplainable” actions of middle school students can be explained by the science of

developmentalism. The assumptions of this developmentalism, in turn, are that these stages are so universal that they cut across culture, an assumption that neglects the historical grounding of the beginnings of developmentalism. Those beginnings were themselves grounded in a hope of assimilation and the regulation of bodies into one particular “normal,” which was defined through the use of studies of middle-class white youth (Lesko, 1996). And so, early adolescents are regulated and taught modes and means of self-regulation based on the assumptions inherent in the discourse of the early adolescent. The stage acts to inform regulation (by teachers of students, by students of themselves), and thus operates as a “technology of power.” This, though, is removed from the actual engagement with the real, lived bodies of students in any particular teacher’s classroom. Knowledge of the scientific body does not equal knowledge of the body of the student (or the “student body,” in another sense). This shift, often articulated in the silence of the body of students or teachers in literature or the taboo of touch (Mac an Ghail, 1994; McWilliams, 1999), is critical. One way in which bodies are typically engaged in the literature of teaching and learning in middle school is as objects to be managed through “classroom management.” There is danger in the mere suggestion that a teacher might have real, lived knowledge of a student’s body, so there is a real and palpable tension in suggesting that teachers have knowledge of students’ bodies in anything more than a developmental, scientific, dispassionate sense. Even the moment of offering a kind hug or an encouraging hand on the shoulder can be seen as riding the border of appropriate possibilities for touching the bodies of students. The knowledge and the manner in which knowledge is demonstrated of a student’s “natural” needs, then, is a critical component of “being” a middle school teacher.

Circulating around and through this knowledge of bodies is a discourse of emergent sexuality. One of the most cited concerns about adolescents is that they are going through

puberty. “Processes of biological and behavioral change are seen as germane to youth: so much so that their particular qualities are said to comprise their essential nature” (Seaton, 2012, p. 24). Besides this further propelling the “at-risk” construction of this “stage of development” in people’s lives, it also raises the specter of the students suddenly needing to be viewed, treated, and perhaps feared, as sexual beings. One could argue that the fact that students of this age go through puberty becomes a bit of a preoccupation of those who study early adolescents, and at least in part, it comes to shape how these students are known and meant to be known by the people teaching them. Along with this preoccupation, though, there is much writing about how “healthy lifestyles” begin at this point, including some aspects of sexual health. Often in middle school, health curricula are offered, and a component of the curriculum is often a unit on sex. This, then, contributes to an overwhelmingly heteronormative discourse around the possibilities for health and, perhaps, desires (Fields, 2008), largely because the teaching of sex is purely about heterosexual, vaginal sexual intercourse and its role in leading to reproduction. In fact, the realm of health—along with other fields, including science—tend to conflate the binary of (only) two sexes having intercourse with the (only) two genders as the only possible configurations for healthy, “normal” relationships (Lemke, 2010). There is no particular “beginning” point to these discourses, but health, sexuality, and gender all swirl around the discursive site of the adolescent—and I will argue, the middle school—to make only certain subject positions for students and teachers possible or known as “normal.” For instance, in the middle school where I teach, for years there existed Dean of Boys and a Dean of Girls, but only in the seventh and eighth grades. And, one of the features of policing the girls for the dean is to enforce the dress code, including making sure the shoulders and midriffs are covered and if a student is wearing leggings, that the top she is wearing covers her posterior. One reason often noted is that the girls

should not be “distracting” to others. I would argue such a concern and the policing of such a concern is an intersectional conflation of gender, sexuality, race, and the operation of bodies in the middle school space.

Butler (1994) notes, as she unpacks the discursive construction of gender that relies on and is built on the construction of a binary of biological sex (masculine/feminine stemming from man/woman), that “... ‘the body’ appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. ... ‘the body is itself a construction...’” (p. 12). The body takes on a natural and essentialist quality, despite the fact that “the universal truths of the body are also beholden to the productions of scientific and social epistemologies” (Seaton, 2012, p. 27). A passing glance at a handbook for the education of pre-service and beginning in-service middle school teachers (i.e. Brown & Knowles, 2007; Powell, 2011) shows the construction of middle school students’ bodies as sites of fear and concern to be managed by the middle school teacher. That fear and concern is directly related to the “science” and the “development” of those students’ bodies, as well as the teachers’ bodies. The bodies of students are then meant to be guided towards, as noted above, “healthy” development. The bodies of the teachers, meanwhile, are meant to be the markers and bearers of the site of what it means to be a healthy adult, worthy of being seen as possible “role models.”

Meanwhile, the discourse of school itself presents a constructive, conservative technology upon teachers and what it might mean to be known and seen as a proper adult and a worthy role model. Of course, to be clear, I am not saying that the power is operating from the institution of the school or administrators, but more diffusely and more pervasively through the language and practices of middle school itself. Specifically, the bodies—marked by their

presumed biological sex—of teachers are meant to embrace particular gender roles to become intelligible. “[T]he structure of gender relations is one of the major social forces shaping education, so patterns of femininity and masculinity are an important part of the personal context of teaching” (Connell, 1985, p. 153). Connell goes on to describe how gender not only colors the shaping of the job and its expectations, but how individual teachers make sense of the job and fit their “self” into “being” a teacher. Teaching, as a profession, was long relegated to the position of one of only a few possible paths for women; short of becoming a professional wife and/or mother, teaching was seen as a viable, acceptable option for women who wanted to do something out of the house (Lortie, 1975). Despite the increased, hard-won expansion of women’s rights in the workplace in the latter half of the twentieth century, teaching is very much constructed as a feminine profession within the dominant/masculine discourse. Given this discursive gendering and construction of the act and profession of teaching as feminine, there are limitations for ways that we discuss, evaluate, and imagine the work of the teacher. Teaching and schools become highly gendered discursive and performative spaces, and spaces in which to examine the construction, maintenance, interplay, regulation, and negotiation in, around, and through these discourses. This examination may, in turn, lead to ways to question and interrupt those dominant discourses while seeking to enact alternatives to the dominant performances.

Teachers are ... divided by the two great structures of social relations, gender and class. The structure of gender relations makes a primary division between women and men ... Men as holders of authority—certainly of most of the promotion positions—commonly supervise women; women in turn find it hard to gain authority and are faced with extra difficulties and complexities in exercising it (Connell, 1985, p. 165).

And, beyond assuming offices of authority, male teachers themselves are often called upon to act differently, to regulate students and student behavior differently—put simply, to *be* differently. My opening day, described in the preface, would seem to fit this analysis. Richardson (2012)

details numerous ways he observed male elementary school teachers function, particularly in light of what was called the “boys club” of the administrators, to particular expectations for their lesson planning, their interactions with students, and their interactions with colleagues.

Moore (2004) points to the fact that the concept of "the good teacher" is variable and mutable:

Even in terms of the individual practitioner, the concept [of the "good teacher"] is clearly subject to development and change, and that change is itself linked to the historical, social, and political situation within which the teacher positions themselves at any given point in time and space (p. 17).

Some, perhaps most, of this “development and change” is decidedly outside of the regulation of the individual teacher; the “teacher” is at all times something more than just an individual, just as “being,” say, a male or a female is something more than an individual’s decision making or “agency” at work (i.e.: Butler, 1989). While the “subject” of the study is the “middle school teacher,” undoubtedly, many teachers in any grade or division of school strive to be, in their own ways, “good.” And being “good” while enacting the teacher may mean something very different depending on the gender the teacher is seen as “being.” Given the many discourses that are available to take up—and *must* be taken up at different times and in different situations—in “being” a “good teacher,” it is little surprise that teachers rarely align themselves with any one dominant discourse, even when there may be financial or professional ramifications (Moore, 2004).

The concept of the good teacher cannot sit “outside” or untouched by the larger social conversations, situations, ideologies and purposes within which it is situated: it cannot easily, therefore, make claims to “universality,” despite what documents such as lists of required “standards,” ... seem to suggest to the contrary (Moore, 2004, p. 36).

Today’s middle school teacher has to negotiate some aspect of the dominant discourse surrounding the larger teaching profession, including the regime of standards and testing that

oppress the field in so many public districts. This is undoubtedly an aspect of the “problem” of middle school teaching today, though not particularly a unit of analysis for the forthcoming study. Perhaps, though, the power of the pull of “good” or even “professional,” when taken with the discourses of accountability and standards, will begin to slip into the possibilities for the teachers to become role models or mentors, key aspects of middle-school-specific teaching discourse. Further, I anticipate that there is a possibility that there will be tension between the concept of the “middle school teacher” being foremost a responsive guide of early adolescents to healthy, productive young adult outcomes (i.e.: putting “early adolescents’ needs first”) and the need to heed the rigorous and stifling gaze of standardized learning outcomes and testing.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the writing around middle schools, or middle level education, or the schooling of “early adolescents” revolves around the notion that early adolescents have particular needs and that particular institutions (middle schools) and particular adults (middle school teachers) need to be trained particularly in order to deal with the adolescents’ particular needs. It’s a neat and tidy argument that creates relatively neat and tidy subject-positions through which the people involved (students and teachers) are meant to act, through which the gaze of others operates to judge and to ab/normalize, and ultimately these “types of humans” (Hacking, 2006) are supposed to operate and “be.” “Middle school is more than institutional arrangements for meeting the needs of adolescence or improving engagement; it is simultaneously a time, place, and subjectivity” (McLeod, 2012, p. 48). There is also an anxiety about adolescents/adolescence which breeds an anxiety about the types of adults put in their charge, meant not only to supervise, but to somehow mold and shape into “proper” beings fit to become “healthy” adults and “productive” citizens.

Erica McWilliam (1999) uses a chapter in her *Pedagogical Pleasures* to examine how bodies, both of teachers and students, operate to form a sort of gaze, one upon the other, at knowledge and pedagogy. She notes, for instance, that in the uninterrupted gaze of a room full of students, the body of the teacher becomes the body of knowledge, and, as such, the body and knowledge are both made asexual by the mechanics of schooling. She notes that simply discussing with teachers the delivery of a lesson to “some body” as opposed to “somebody” is enough to elicit discomfort in student teachers. Acknowledgement of the bodies in the classroom, both the bodies of students and the body of the teacher, has a certain taboo.

Jen Gilbert (2014) points to an example in work by Jessica Fields (2008): a female teacher named Jill sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding a diagram of the reproductive system of a woman between her legs, teaching that reproductive system to a room of female students. In that moment, her body becomes sexualized—a real life representation of the diagram being displayed, and a marker of her own female sexuality. Fields describes being uncomfortable, wanting to tell Jill to move the diagram, wondering if she could possibly know what she was doing, for what Jill was doing was completely different from other sexual education teachers that Fields had observed in other schools, who used pointers, distance, and posture to communicate a marked divide between their own female bodies and the diagrams of sexual organs that they were using for instruction. McWilliam (1999), Gilbert (2014), and Fields (2008)—among many others—point to a problem: despite the fact that, in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom, the act of teaching and learning requires the presence of the bodies of teacher(s) and student(s), the mere acknowledgement of the body as a presence in the room (and possibly a body that bears with it sexuality) causes discomfort in teachers and students. And yet a central role of a teacher,

as emphasized in some way in most every “how-to” on teaching, is in classroom management: the management of bodies and the actions of those bodies in the classroom.

McWilliam (1999) notes, too, that the gender of the teacher body plays a notable role in making “gendered rules about what counts as the *sight* [emphasis original] of knowledge” (p. 112). The teacher, the deliverer of the lesson and the plotter of the learning experiences to be had by the students, can be seen as “the body of knowledge” in the room. This has major implications for how knowledge is understood *as knowledge* in the classroom by the student bodies. McWilliam asserts that when students describe a woman teacher, the images and words used to describe her exclude sexual power or identity. She, the woman teacher, becomes wrapped up in what McWilliam calls a “virgin mother” image. In stark contrast to the woman as a “dedicated” presence in the classroom, she notes language and popular images used in descriptions of the male teacher as “powerful,” “heroic,” and “towering figures” (p. 113). McWilliam does not clarify other aspects of the teacher body in defining an image of knowledge, such as age, ability, size, and race, but there is in her description a stark contrast in the gender of the teacher, something worth continually exploring. While McWilliam does not elaborate in this way, it would seem fair to say that this can provide another lens into a problem: if the reading of the biological/assigned sex of the body of a teacher by students begins to make certain characterizations of that body as a teacher possible (i.e.: a male teacher as “powerful”, a female teacher as merely “dedicated”), the ways in which a teacher would in turn take up certain actions and discourses in order to “fit the mold” could become extremely limited.

Undoubtedly, in “reading” the body as a site of knowledge, one on which gender comes to be understood, it begs the question of what other subject positions come to make those knowledges un/known, un/identifiable, or in/valid. Much recent work in gender studies pushes

interpretations of the performative construction and maintenance of gender to be seen intersectionally. Intersectionality (e.g.: Carastathis, 2016; May, 2015) is a shift in attempting to find difference in the interwoven discursive production of subject-positions along the lines of multiple identifiers, instead placing the emphasis on their interconnectedness. Carastathis (2016) points out that a major shift in gender studies that is represented by (and analyzed through) an intersectional lens is that its goals, rooted in an emancipatory Black feminism (drawn from and grounded in the work of Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw 1991), are largely to keep the interconnectedness of racialized gender, or gendered performances of race, precisely that: interconnected. The analysis takes their combination as a given. Intersectionality rejects approaching different categories of identity in an additive method. It is not just gender “plus,” but “gendered racism” or how “gender is racialized” (May, citing Bailey, 2009).

Ellingson (2017), in discussing embodiment as a research focus, calls attention to the fact that seeing bodies through an intersectional lens opens new questions and raises possibilities for research that are ignored when focusing upon only one identifying category. She points out: “Intersections are places of activity and interface where structures, discourses, bodies, and actants come together, and often form a site of struggle” (p. 62). “Ideally, intersectionality resists essentialism in research” (p.63).

In utilizing an intersectional lens, I want to honor one of its overarching components in particular. This is not to say that I actively choose *not* to honor others, but, rather, the scope and research questions taken up in this study simply point the way to some particular uses of intersectional theorizing, analysis, and critique, while others may not feel as well integrated into the study. For instance, one of the components that scholars point to that is critical in intersectionality is to seek out, utilize, and honor the voices of people who have been

marginalized in many ways, and, among those ways, within research literature. While I do seek to hear from a variety of voices in this study, to claim as one of its primary purposes the goal of seeking out marginalized voices as an end *per se* would be false. Consequently, I am not putting a particular focus on only including participants from historical disadvantaged or silenced communities. Rather, I see the project as elucidating the voices of several, paying particular and deep focus on ways in which embodied realities merge with, shift within/out, and slide along the contours not only of identifying categories—as these clearly have everyday, real implications for the bodies in and out of this study—but how the complexities of these bodies come to be known easily, less easily, or even impossibly, as “middle school teachers.” The emancipatory end of this project, then, would be to call attention in particular measure to ways in which bodies make the reality of being a middle school teacher im/possible. An intersectional lens not only helps make this possible, but it demands it as necessary (May, 2015).

An intersectional disposition requires actively orienting ourselves, and expressly developing interpretive inclinations, modes of being, and political commitments in ways that disrupt, trouble, and fundamentally depart from mainstream logics, ontological habits, and perceptual practices. Intersectionality’s both/and orientation encourages developing and honing the capacity to exercise ruptures with hegemony and to embark on (coalitional) journeys towards each other’s worlds/selves/histories/meanings/imaginaries (May, 2015, p. 227).

Another possible fault in this work is that there are undoubtedly times when the focus of the design of the study, the literature review, and the conceptualizing will focus more particularly on gender and, as gender often unearths interconnected discourses of sexuality, sexuality as well. This is not meant to be a silencing of race as an interest in the research, or a tacit claim that race is somehow unimportant in the lived experiences of teachers and students in middle school. Race as a determinant of subject positions available to teachers and students in schools has had an overwhelming part to play in a myriad of ways in American schools. Its history is long and

complicated and I do not mean to underplay it in the moments that it is not herein addressed. Rather, the literature suggests that “middle school” as a discourse operates upon teachers and students in ways that highlight gender and sexuality in particular. Obviously, though, intersectionality, among several of the tools used to theorize and conduct this study, is a reminder that, in looking at the complexities of teachers embodying their roles and their selves as middle school teachers will not leave all of their selves, including their races, at the door of their classroom only to become sites of gendered discourse. It is, though, my theory that gender and sexuality will play a slightly more explicit factor in the discourses of “middle school teacher” than will race.

The “Child” as Construct and Reflection of Society

The role of school teaching is nominally to educate children, setting aside momentarily what the aims of that education might itself be. Thus, while the focus of this study is not particularly on children, their presence—in body, in spirit, in soul, and in discourse—is essential to a teacher’s work, and, as noted extensively above, the early adolescent student—the “middle schooler”—is the foundation upon which assumptions in middle schools and middle school teaching rest. Above, it was mentioned that the regulation of students’ bodies becomes a critical component of “managing” a classroom. Central, too, to the study will be interrogating the “needs” of the early adolescent child and how the discursive construction of those needs reflects much more heavily on the society at large than the actual needs of children, while casting a lens through which we view the teacher. Levander and Singley (2003) introduce their collection of studies on the child by noting: “...the child is not only born but made—not only a biological fact but a cultural construct that encodes the complex, ever-shifting logic of a given group and therefore reveals much about its inner workings” (p. 4). Lesko (2001) more specifically draws

attention to the early twentieth century construction of the adolescent, and the operation of the adolescent as a discursive site for the fears and concerns of a nation in a critical moment of growth and social change. Language around the middle school and the major reform movements surrounding them often begins with the concept that a middle school should be organized in a manner to “meet the needs of early adolescents.”

If, then, the child can be seen in this manner—as a discursive site upon which the fears and desires and needs of adult society act in order to shape their counterpoint (the child as “the innocent”)—we can see the role that the teacher would play in en/acting upon these children both the hopes and fears of a society. As such, the discursive site of the teacher may be viewed as a battleground. If a society has hopes for children and they go unachieved, the teacher has failed them. If a society has fears of what can be done to children, and they occur at the hands of the teacher, then the “imagined” fear has been realized. The only way in this teacher-as-problem construction that a teacher may be viewed as good is if they conform not only to the society’s view of a good teacher, teaching what “needs” to be taught, but also to society’s broader culture, ethics, and ethos. If the child is the construction and the site of the future of society, the teacher deviating from society’s norms or somehow threatening that safety makes that teacher a threat.

Ultimately, the problem is that much of this often goes untroubled through the discourse of middle school. The knowledges that produce the position of middle school confine it to a point in time, space, and continuity (McLeod, 2012). Middle school teachers, then, are located in a position defined by a “nature” that is discursively produced and consistently reified as simply part of “natural development.” On one hand, it would seem that the work of a teacher in this positioning is minimal: how does one guide or shape something that will naturally occur on its own, in due time? It can also be seen as a losing battle: one of the characteristics of the “nature”

at play in an early adolescent's development is "storm and stress," rooted back to the conceptualization of adolescence in the early twentieth century (Lesko, 2001). There's also an unresolved tension between the knowledge that is meant to be deployed to a student's benefit (of a "natural course of development" for an early adolescent) and the taboo of closeness with particular students. And all the while, the body of the teacher stands in for and deploys power/knowledge: of right and wrong, of worthwhile behavior, of desirable learning outcomes, of ways to interact with people of a landscape of gender, sexuality, racial, and other identifiers. What gets taught in these circumstances? What gets masked, obfuscated? What gets made im/possible?

Rationale for the Study

May 10, 2016. Erin and I are leading a discussion of twenty faculty members about curriculum development. She and I have introduced the plan for the meeting, what we hope to accomplish, and just set about the first task for the group. After she finishes the introductory piece, I state and restate the directions and, as the faculty begin to write their thoughts down, I turn to the whiteboard to write another version of the directions, making sure that our "students" have access to the information in another form. As I write, Erin leans into my left ear and whispers playfully, in a way that the smile behind the words is heard without having to see it, "You're such a middle school teacher." Confirming the smile behind the words, she chuckles.

My first thought (not said): Why on earth is writing directions (and repeating myself a couple of times) "such" a middle school teacher thing to do?

This study seeks to identify, open, and trouble the subject-positions that are taken up by teachers who enact the "middle school teacher." When I am "such" a "middle school teacher,"

what does that mean? In the above moment, why am I any more a middle school teacher than just a teacher, or an elementary or high school teacher? Are there actions taken up, assumptions made, performances enacted, stances taken that are “middle school teacher”? Are there peculiarities, oddities, or curiosities of “middle school” that the teacher believes make middle school somehow different from other types of teaching? How do these positionings create some and forestall other possibilities for what it means to be a “middle school teacher”? In what ways do I come to embody knowledges of “middle school”? As these are unearthed, we can see, then, the multiple “selves” necessary to enacting the “middle school teacher” in one’s teaching practice, by being able to not only take up a given subject-position when the situation calls for it, but also to be able to contextually shift between these roles in order to maintain the stance of “middle school teacher” no matter what the situation and who is casting the gaze upon the teacher. Of course, it cannot be overstated, given the prevalence of calls for more “self-reflective” teachers (i.e., Fenwick, 2003), that this gaze actually begins with one’s self/selves. This self-reflexivity is an important technology of power that circulates and makes possible different subject-positions and performativities (Foucault, 1980; Foucault 1995). The gaze then continues with that felt not only by him/herself, but the gaze taken up by the students in the room with the teacher, and the gaze of those operating outside of the classroom space, such as administrators, colleagues, and parents, perhaps even the specter of past teachers or prevalent images of the “middle school teacher.” One such image, to be examined further in Chapter II, is that of the middle school teacher as an “accident”—the professional who wanted another job, but slipped into middle school because it was the opening available in the district. (See, for instance, Powell, 2011.) The supposition goes that the jobs in middle school are the least desirable: “real” teachers of an academic subject/discipline want high school jobs, while “real” teachers

concerned with the whole child desire elementary school jobs. Few people, at least in their right mind, would want to work with the “creatures” roaming the middle school halls and classrooms. Authors even note that some of the teachers in this situation seem to be “stuck” in the middle. The term middle itself will be explored in more depth in relation to middle school teachers’ positionalities in Chapter II.

It seems important to examine the discourses at work within and upon a person enacting the "middle school teacher" to see how such a role is constituted in this particular historical time and in a particular sociocultural position in order to help open up new pathways of enacting the middle school teacher and, perhaps, in opening up new possibilities for this subject position. There is an important consideration about how the discourse of the community, school, and classroom setting play in constructing the teacher's own understanding and enactment of what middle school or middle school teaching can or should be. The gaze of others, not the least of whom are the students in a teacher's classroom, construct and limit in important ways the possibilities for enacting a “teacher” in a particular setting (Moore, 2004). Thus, participants will be asked about their conceptions of how others expect them to take on and enact the role of the middle school teacher, and how they respond to these expectations in their practice and in their own conceptions of what it means to “be” a “middle school teacher.”

Given the historical construction of teaching as a gendered profession, the conception of “middle school teacher” is inextricably intertwined with discourses of gender and the performance of dominant, hegemonic gender roles. One example, taken up at greater length in Chapter II, is the construction of teaching as a profession that was “naturally” fit for women, given the need to be “nurturing and caring” to students; the assertion was clearly that the properly gendered woman was, if fulfilling her “natural” role and duty as a mother, able to utilize

naturally her “mothering” abilities to be “nurturing” to students. To carry the example forward, are female teachers currently expected to be nurturing and caring? How, if at all, is this different for a male teacher in a similar teaching context? Is it more or less dangerous for a male to enact oneself as “caring and nurturing” as a teacher? And, beyond the expectations that the teachers feel are being made of them, how do teachers then perform both their assumed gender roles and their roles as “middle school teacher” together? What tensions surface? What do the discourses of the “middle school teacher” and gender make available to different actors?

Teachers of middle school years offer a discursive site of opening the (dis)junctures between gender, gender performativities, and teaching. If teachers of these grades are primarily thought of first as teachers and not school subject deliverers, and the profession as feminine and not masculine, I theorize that the site of their own classroom teaching, interactions with students and colleagues, and reflections on teachers, teaching, and their own reasons for being involved in teaching, may help to begin to help see the ruptures and slippages between performances of being a “good teacher” and being a “good man” or a “good woman.” This goes in line, too, with the preoccupation with normative gender roles and emerging normative/heteronormative sexuality: the middle school teacher must be a good role model, so that young adolescents can take up “proper” ways of being, theoretically modeling such behaviors and beings after their adult-role-model teachers. Further, though, if the teaching context is one in which the school subject/discipline is put forth as of greater concern than, say, the “nurturing” discourse of schooling found often in earlier school grades than a teacher whose gender is read as female may prove to be a site upon which discourses collide and rupture, as well. One way in which this theory might carry out on its face, at least, would be a situation in which, a school community might question if a “male” teacher is “too good” a role model, while not being questioned for the

delivery of subject-matter lessons—while a “female” teacher might be positioned as “too good (or demanding)” at mastery of the academic subject/discipline, while not being questioned at all for her role (or not) as a role model/mentor.

As posited earlier, if one can only know oneself through the positioning of oneself against and within normative discourse (Butler, 2005), asking how these teachers come to “know” themselves as teachers may help to trouble the gendered discourse of teaching in that same normative discourse. “If I am constituted by norms that are not of my making, then I have to understand the ways that constitution takes place” (Butler, 2004, 15). Further, as the bodies of the teachers in the study come to differ from those supposed norms in other ways, for instance, race and sexuality, those norms begin to have more and more limiting and constraining constitutional power.

Research Questions

Through the study, I aimed to explore the following:

1) What do discourses of “middle school” make im/possible for being a middle school teacher? How do middle school teachers position themselves or get positioned within the discourses, knowledges, and memories of “middle school” and “early adolescence”?

2) How do bodies circulate in the discourse of and the discursive production of middle school teachers? How do knowledges about the bodily needs of middle school students make certain expectations, interactions, or relationships im/possible for middle school teachers?

3) How do participants embody the position “middle school teacher”? When and in what ways does “middle school” make bodies—of teachers and of students—in/visible? When does the presence (or absence) of a teacher’s or student’s body make something im/possible for

teaching in middle school? In what ways are the complexities of the bodies of participant teachers read within or against the discourses of middle school?

Significance of the Study

Schooling produces, among many other things, a set of binaries that make possible or make good certain behaviors or identity positions (Youdell, 2006). The construction and maintenance of the “middle school teacher” as a static identity actually means taking up and fluidly moving between a number of different discourses, including being a “proper” role model, being one who embodies knowledge (i.e. one who has a “mastery of content”) and being one who can wield appropriate knowledge of and discipline of bodies. Further, in questioning the discourses of “middle school teacher,” questions about young “adolescents/adolescence” inevitably emerge for disruption. This is an opportunity ripe for critical thought and further possibility of questioning (Vagle, 2012).

Teachers’ performative gender roles help set the school culture around gender and, consequently, sexual roles. According to Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000),

While the spectrum of “acceptable” gender behaviors has expanded for girls, female sexuality and desire are still downplayed and undervalued. Similarly, yet conversely, the spectrum of “acceptable” gender behaviors has not expanded, and while male heterosexuality is encouraged, acceptable, and valued, homosexuality is not. (p. 99)

Further, Mandel and Shakeshaft show that in middle schools, masculinity is defined by a boy enacting *antifeminine* behaviors and denouncing anything that might be perceived as the embrace of the feminine (in other than a sexual way). Richard Friend (1993) asserts: “A homophobic label is used to enforce a sexist arrangement and functions to try to keep all students, heterosexual and homosexual alike, from violating what is expected of them in terms of gender-role behaviors” (p. 232, as cited in Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000). This is echoed in studies of students in elementary school (Walkerdine, 1990; Mac an Ghail, 1994) and high school

(Pascoe, 2007), as well. Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) assert “We need to challenge administrators’, educators’, and students’ beliefs and behaviors about what it means to be male and female, which often go unquestioned” (p. 100). This is a vital concern, particularly in middle school contexts in which enacting a more complex and broad casting of “proper” gender roles can lead to ridicule, bullying, and, possibly, physical and/or emotional harm. Further, there is a very large, often untroubled, assumption that early adolescents—the “target audience” of a middle school—must develop with the heavy guidance and leadership of adult role models. Much of the model of the middle school is developed from this working assumption, thus, what comes to be defined as the good role model of the middle school teacher is as much about the delivery of subject/discipline knowledge as it is about the “proper” roles of the adult in a community. Here, then, the roles enacted by the teacher to position themselves in a “proper” way are crucial, and interactions with others in the school setting will be the sites of constant renegotiation of “proper” and “good.” Further, "It has been widely argued that schooling supports the dominance of men in society first by exaggerating those characteristics that distinguish male from female gender and then by gradually establishing success norms that favor males, linking their achievements and world view to ideologies that dominate both the economy and the state" (Grumet, 1981, p. 175).

Knowledge—pursuit of it, having it, creating it, recognizing it—is itself gendered by and through schooling. It is the docile bodies (Foucault, 1977) that are meant to be absorbing or “banking” (Friere, 1996) knowledge that is delivered by the adult teachers; and those bodies are met with and disciplined by the curricular gaze of the teacher’s body (Walkerdine, 1990). Mellor and Epstein (2006) assert, in turn, “that schooling can, in no way, be divorced from the bodies of

either pupils or teachers or from gendered (ethnic, classed, etc.) versions of sexuality” (p. 381).

Butler (1989) asserts that

[A]ny uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized...The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented. (p. 17)

Let us apply that association to one of the central differences of primary versus secondary schooling: in primary school, bodies are taught and “play” is emphasized, through role-play, or physical play on a field or court. In secondary school, “minds” are taught academic disciplines, while bodies are disciplined into knowing (im)proper uses and pleasures. Perhaps one stem of the gendered discourse of teaching comes from and is reproduced by this body/mind construction. How, then, will discourses of teaching, gender, mind, and body collide and compete in particular middle school settings?

Other researchers have called for greater inquiry into the discourse of gender as it effects school, and certainly there is much to be suggested about the impact gendered discourses circulating in and through “middle school teacher” discourse might have on school lives in and out of the classroom, on gender roles, and on the conceptualization of and possibilities for being a “middle school teacher” beyond what one’s body might enact as a sign for others.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Bronwyn Davies (2000), in describing the power and purposes of using feminist poststructural theory, says “Feminist poststructuralist theorizing, in particular, has focused on the possibilities opened up when dominant language practices are made visible and revisable” (p. 179). Further, “within poststructuralist theory, language is understood as the most powerful constitutive force shaping what we understand as possible and what we desire within those possibilities” (p. 181). In this study, then, I believe it is necessary to employ a feminist

poststructuralist lens in order to “make visible and revisable” the discourses at work in constructing and making knowable how teachers embody what a "middle school teacher" is and can be. And, given the power of discourse in making the possible seen and known as such (i.e.: Foucault, 1995; Butler, 2004; Butler, 2005), the primary lens of this study will be upon ways in which participants speak about “middle school” in ways that constitute the possibilities for themselves as teachers and for their students, and the means through which participants take up various performativities and discourses to help make these in turn more recognizable and imaginable. Further, as the body is explored as a discursive site, a feminist poststructural lens can open up the “taken-for-granted nature of categories such as race, gender, and heterosexuality” and can “foster a powerful critique of existing knowledges and the hierarchical power relations they defend” (Collins, 2000, p. 41).

To center and clarify how I intend to use and work with the concept of a discourse, I lean on the definition offered by Nancy Lesko (2001) in *Act Your Age!* “A discourse can be initially identified as knowledge with specific vocabulary and syntax. Discourses typically rely upon identifiable sets of ideas, metaphors, stories, and feelings that are meaningful, repetitious, and take on the banner of truth or goodness” (p. 15). It is this “banner of truth” that waves often with the discourses to be examined in this study. The repetitions that help form the truth in the question, including in the stability of the subject and the body as natural and seen by some as outside of discursive production, are instead quite fundamental in the formation of the notion that the subject and the body can be seen as stable. Weedon (1997) extends a definition of discourse and its constitutive powers for the body by exploring what Michel Foucault meant by discourse.

Discourses ... are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of

the subjects they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation, but the ways in which the discourses constitute the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases (p.108).

Judith Butler's concept of performativity is crucial to operating in this framework. She defines performativity “as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names...this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation...” (Butler, 1994, p. 33). It may otherwise be described as the idea that “there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, 1990, p.142) or “that discursive practice that enacts or produces what it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 13). Rasmussen and Harwood (2003), in drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity for their own analysis of “Performativity, Youth and Injurious Speech,” summarize:

To be more specific, the labels people deploy do not describe the performance of a sovereign subject; rather, they constitute students and teachers, and can act as powerful mechanisms of exclusion. In short, performativity calls on us to consider how subjects are continuously constituted through various practices (p. 28).

How does a middle school teacher come to “be” “through the deed”? What various practices constitute the middle school teacher?

Further, points of slippage—moments when the discourses upholding a “neutral,” “rational,” or “objective” identity of the “middle school teacher” come into conflict with themselves and, in so doing, begin to show themselves as constructed and instable—serve as points of analysis in the data collected. As I write in Chapter III, these are the sorts of moments when I write my own experiences, tracing along autoethnographic lines. I note that within the context of middle school teaching, there is a vast array of times and situations when “middle school” is employed as a type of place holder (as above, when I was called “such a middle school teacher,”) but I was particularly drawn to journal and interrogate those moments when

there was some instability (or, at least, some presumed stability that goes uninterrogated) to be questioned.

Some critiques of poststructural analysis hold that it is an end-game unto itself. Careful analysis of the power of discourse to constitute what is possible, feasible, and imagined can mean that, in the end, as there are no actors or subjects, but only those taking up performativities and subject-positions, there is no power to be gained, no agency at the end of the analysis. Collins (2000) notes that a fundamental critique is that much of the intellectual agenda of postmodern thinking—in questioning, interrupting, and deconstructing discursive and binary constructions of knowledge that prop up particular power dynamics in favor of dominant, hegemonic paradigms—owe that very questioning to the groups that the power dynamics of those paradigms oppress. And then, despite the original political nature of the questioning, “the main ideas that grow from these struggles have been appropriated by a class of intellectuals who keep the language of resistance yet denude the theory of actual political effectiveness” (Collins, 2000, p. 67). Collins, though, reclaims the possibilities of the power inscribed in the “powerful analytical tools” of postmodern analysis “to challenge not just the results of dominant discourses but also the rules of the game itself” (p. 67).

Bronwyn Davies’ explanation also helps remind us that there is purpose and power in poststructural work: “[T]he power feminists have found in poststructuralist theorizing is precisely in its opening up of possibilities for undermining the inevitability of particular constitutive force of discourse visible and thus revisable” (Davies, 2000, 180). Lesko (2001) provides a similar defense of the use of poststructural theorizing: opening up new spaces and ways of looking at relationships between binary terms and relationships allows for movement “toward counter-hegemonic meaning” (p. 17). It is, thus, this revision that brings power and

possibility, but the troubling of the dominant and uninterrupted discourses must happen first. I aim to see the means through which middle school teachers are (re)constructed in powerful and powerless ways (Coffey and Delamont, 2000), and what discourses seem to shape the “body of knowledge” of the “middle school teacher.”

Researcher Role/Positionality

Of course, this analysis suffers from the same discourse-space limitations from which it seeks to break. As Butler (1989) notes, “limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (p. 12). In part, then, by suggesting that teaching and teachers are essentially a part of this binary structure assumes such a binary structure’s possibility, thus empowering it by making its very existence within discourse possible. Ultimately, though, because much of the discourse on teaching, teachers, and learning *is* effectively controlled in popular, “commonsense” discourse, further controlling the means through which such popular discourse and the knowledge/power that is valued in schools are framed, the first step in breaking the cycle needs to be acknowledging its existence.

Another important limit to this analysis is my subjectivity and positionality; as a white male, I am positioned within the privilege of operating within a set of hegemonic discourses that automatically makes me, by way of these “unmarked” markers of identity, one from which rationality and knowledge/power are assumed to be structured. Collins notes that some of the interruption of the “rational” thinking in science is simply in interrupting the assumption that a white, male academic tradition is synonymous with simply being “human” (Collins, 2000). There is the distinct possibility that I am unable to extricate myself from these discourses to enter into one that properly situates feminist poststructural thought in an analysis of educational

discourse. I could, in fact, be positioning such discourse simply on top of or within the dominant modes of discourse, rather than breaking out of them. Butler (1989) herself acknowledges the need to trouble the ability to make new discourses and imaginings possible within the structure of our masculine-discourse-built grammar; there are simply limits to what can be made possible in this discourse-space. It is important to the work done here that I acknowledge the fixedness even within my own attempts to fracture and make subjective my analysis here; without doing so, I simply reinscribe the feminine as masculine and co-opt/colonize the discourse to hegemonic, singular uses. Jeffrey Kuzmic (2000) suggests, though, that a man's role in taking up feminist critiques is not necessarily untenable, though it is necessarily problematic. "[W]hile problematic, given men's privileged position in public and scholarly discourse, it is important that men not only support such efforts, but engage in the political and theoretical struggle to decenter men and masculinity" (Kuzmic, 2000, 106). This is in good part what I intend to do: interrupt and decenter masculinity and its normalizing regime through dominant discourse. Also, it is important to realize that a quick dismissal of a man engaging in feminist work would simply reinforce and reinvigorate the existence of binary understandings of sex and gender that so much of feminist work and feminist poststructural theorizing hope to question, interrupt, and destabilize. Further, though, I hope to open spaces of multiple masculinities and femininities to be taken up in the enacting of the middle school teacher.

I also intend to include "shades" of autoethnography, which undoubtedly changes my researcher role somewhat. Foremost, though, I seek to bring myself into the research not to privilege my knowledge or experience, but to bring it to light both for myself (in my roles as teacher and researcher) and my reader. Richardson (2000) suggests that the act of autobiographical writing is in keeping with feminist practice. While the primary goal will be to

explore my status as insider/outsider in the study (see Chapter III for more detail on this), there will be occasions when I will utilize my position as a middle school teacher to offer moments when bodies seem particular in/visible in my practice and moments when “middle school” is brought forward in a noteworthy way. There is no doubt that I will bring myself into the analysis of the data gathered, so it is my hope, though adding my own data to the work, that readers will be better able to interrogate and analyze my own subject-positions and critique the work with this in light. Of course, I do not hold that doing this alone will make the work more valid or reliable. Rather, I seek to open up some of the questions that come from this kind of work to further discussion and analysis, not some kind of panacea.

Engaging in the research in this way, too, I hope to show the value in theorizing my experiences. I hold this to be a critical function of the work to be done in this study, as I hope to have begun showing through the kinds of theorizing and questioning in the preface. Also, I hope that this level of making my subject-positions knowable to the reader—limited of course to whether or not they are first known to me or not—will also help to counter a line of criticism, valid though it is, around my appropriation of feminist poststructuralism as the critical lens through which I hope to design and begin this study. My aim is to work in as “visible” a way as I can, so that I do not succumb to the possibilities of patriarchal appropriation of this field, working in a sort of privileged omniscient researcher role. Certainly, a critic could counter that foregrounding my own voice in the research so obviously will negate my cause, but I aim to engage in my participation as honestly and as openly as possible, to cast my “middle school teacher” subject position(s) in as complex a way as possible. In so doing, I hope to answer these possible criticisms and, instead, open up new ways of producing the “middle school teacher.”

Chapter II – Review of the Literature

A primary purpose of this study is to unpack the discourses and the embodiment of “middle school teacher.” What is the swirl around bodies of teachers and students, the knowledges of “middle school” and “middle schoolers” that make certain things un/known? What are the surieties? The investments? What are the implicit knowledges, the contours of worry and fear drawn along the body of both teacher and early adolescent at once? In tracing those roots and contours, sites of interruption will be offered as possibilities for opening new spaces in which the “middle school teacher” can be known. MacLure (2003) suggests that a possible, tenuous definition of discourse-based research in education might hinge on a reader/researcher being able to “suspend your belief in the innocence of words and the transparency of language as a window on an objectively graspable reality” (p.12). Here, I hope to question the innocence of words and the transparency of language. There are a number of different threads of the discourse to unpack, unravel, and trouble to begin to open up and make room for broader understandings of “middle school teacher.” This chapter seeks to position the proposed study amongst these discourses and the literature already produced that analyzes, questions, interrupts, and/or ruptures these same discourses.

Performing a “Body of Knowledge”

In unraveling some of these discourses, it becomes necessary to find a foothold in the language, if for no other reason than to give the reader (and writer!) something to latch on to and question themselves. While every attempt will be made to make the work transparent enough that not only can the normative discourses themselves be questioned, but so too can my authorial choices in the presentation of those discourses be interrogated. Ultimately, what follows is a

representation of my readings and interpretations of others' work. That representation, while so fluid and shifting in my mind, must hit the page in a way that makes it static and linear. It also makes it seem concrete and knowable, something durable and lasting.

I raise this because I am troubled by the idea that my writing will somehow rest on this page with a surety, a certainty, and a clarity that makes it seem like I have somehow mastered and harnessed this knowledge in a particular way. And, of course, in a way I have; it does appear on this page. I raise the idea, though, that this chapter and this study more broadly, like the discourses entailed in this review, are really *performances* of knowledge and understanding, rather than a display of mastery. As Popkewitz (2012) notes, "The regulation of research is also thus political. The rules and standards order the (im)possibilities of what is thought, acted on, and hoped for" (p. 59). The preparation of this chapter conforms to (or attempts to, at least) particular standards to make the work knowable as a "proper" dissertation literature review. At the same time, the "body" of the literature I cite is itself (im)possible as an articulation of an endlessly shifting and shaping "body." My own (re)construction of this research is itself a creation of a "body of knowledge" while undoubtedly leaving behind parts of the very body that I seek to (re)present.

With these particular limitations in mind, the following review proceeds by un/weaving together discourses of the "middle school," "middle school teacher," and "early adolescent/adolescence." Knowledges of each beget knowledges of the others. Possibilities of each make im/possible certain aspects of the others. Again, though, this must be represented in some linear fashion. The argument will proceed with a brief glimpse of the opening assumptions of middle schools: why do these institutions exist in the first place? As we come to find, without

the “early adolescent,” there is no “middle school,” and, of course, no “middle school teacher.” The opening analysis, then, begins with a question:

“You Want to Be a What?”

There is a commonly told and retold anecdote deployed by and about middle school teachers. It appears frequently in the introductions of middle school teacher handbooks (e.g. Knowles & Brown, 2007; Powell, 2011). It goes a little something like this:

The teacher is out and about, in some public setting. Maybe a market, a mall, perhaps even a cocktail party. Some old acquaintance comes along, or simply an inquisitive passer-by. The teacher and acquaintance/passer-by then exchange that most mundane of pieces of information: what they currently do for a living. The middle school teacher reveals: “I teach middle school.” The other person reacts with: shock/horror/incredulity. This is then followed by declarations that the teacher must be a: saint/immensely patient person/glutton for punishment. In my own personal experiences as a middle school teacher, the most common response I believe I have gotten over the years is simply “wow.” (Generally speaking, the tone of the “wow” would not be compared with the “wow” I imagine I would receive if I said that I was, say, a nuclear physicist, U.S. Senator, or enormously rich hedge fund manager. It’s probably more comparable to the “wow” that I would get if I said I hunted for extinct species at the bottom of shipwrecks in the Indian Ocean, or moonlighted as a semi-professional MMA fighter.) People assume particular things about your patience (you have a lot) and sanity (you have not so much) when you are positioned as a “middle school teacher.”

And so goes, so often, the beginning of the tale of the “middle school teacher.” Powell (2011) begins with a joke that middle school teachers tend to hold an “MSBA degree”—teachers who trained either as elementary or secondary teachers, but wound up in middle school by

accident, hence, the “joke” about the “Middle School By Accident” (MSBA) degree. This notion was even echoed in a recent *Middle School Journal* article as a possible barrier to the mission of finding educators specifically qualified to teach “young adolescents” (Irvine, 2013). In their book on middle school teaching, Brown and Knowles (2007) begin the first chapter, which is entitled, “You Want to Be a What?” with a metaphor of the middle school teacher as a skier riding down a slope, facing both exhilaration and fear, control and a lack thereof. Commonly, images swirl in people’s heads of the “nature” of the students as well as the qualities of the adults who find themselves teaching those students; the repercussions go beyond writing about middle school teachers for middle school teachers. WNYC produced a radio series on “Being 12” in March 2015; the piece focusing on middle school teachers was entitled “Meet the Teachers Crazy Enough to Teach Middle School” (Collette, 2015). The opening of the piece brings together the crazy with the opportune: “It turns out middle school teachers disliked middle school as much as the rest of us.” Collette notes the three main reasons teachers go on to teach in middle school, and the first, just five sentences after the opening line, notes: “It’s where the jobs are.” Caldwell and Frame (2016) share a brief story of a middle school teacher whose job invokes sympathy from fellow party-goers. The “middle school teacher” becomes constructed discursively by these images, as well as the constituent emotions they seem to call forth: fear, concern, wonder, awe, pity, shock, sympathy.

The Middle School

A brief genealogy of the middle school will help the analysis of “middle school teacher.” The middle school movement rose in the 1960s as a response to the perceived need to better meet the needs of early adolescents who were, it was widely believed, not being well served by the junior high school (Andrews, 2013). Junior high schools, which began taking hold in the

United States in the 1920s after a call in 1918 to better serve the needs of young adolescents, were often organized as their name suggests: high schools “junior” in size and stature to their “senior” counterparts. While founded with the needs of young adolescents in mind, the junior high school, typically arranged in grades 7-8-9, became more and more a training ground for high school, meeting the needs of the educational system and adults more than the needs of the students. The middle school movement was a reclaiming, of sorts, of the original mission of the junior high school while also a shift in the grades to a younger segment of the schooling population, segmenting the school around grades 6-7-8, and in some cases, 5-6-7-8 (Howard & Stoumbis, 1970). Indeed, the junior high school had been seen by 1970 as something in desperate need of reform. In that year, Charles Silberman wrote in a report for the Carnegie Corporation that “the junior high school, by unanimous agreement...is the wasteland—one is tempted to say cesspool—of American education” (Silberman, 1970, p. 324).

The shift from junior high school to middle school, beyond a belief in a better understanding of the needs of young (now “early”) adolescents, was in the concept that middle schools would structurally be more flexible and responsive to students. Alexander et al., (1968) called for “emergent” middle schools to, among other things, “provide optimum individualization of curriculum and instruction for a population characterized by great variability” (p. 19). That “great variability” is undoubtedly a nod to the variability of students’ development physically, emotionally, and intellectually, which the text goes on to describe shortly thereafter. Curriculum and instruction in middle school, then, are *meant* to go hand-in-hand with the development of young adolescents by being “flexible.”

Interestingly, there is a slip in the “individualization” of the curriculum. Notions of individualization often mention giving the student some role in crafting work of interest to them,

but much more time is spent in middle school texts discussing the creation of structures in curriculum and instruction that respond to the *supposed* needs of young adolescents, and those beliefs always rest in the “knowledge about the learner,” to be based in “behavioral sciences” (Alexander, et al, 1968, p. 23). This is to say, of course, that the knowledge about the learner is truly a knowledge of adolescent bodily development, not the individual learner and their academic (or other) desires. And it is the institutional embodiment of this knowledge upon which the middle school movement is predicated (e.g.: Eichhorn, 1968; Alexander, et al, 1968).

Turning Points

There are several texts considered seminal in the literature on middle school, but any subsequent study of middle school structure, administration, curriculum, instruction, organization or reform leans heavily on the highly influential *Turning Points* report, authored by The Task Force for the Education of Early Adolescents created under the auspices of the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1989. In considering discourses of “middle school,” it is critical to turn to this report. Many influential politicians, educators, and businesspersons were involved in producing the findings in the report, including then governor of Arkansas and soon-to-be President, Bill Clinton. The report makes eight core recommendations for the improvement of middle grades education, and many of these are focused on the organization of the school, as well as the creation of a “core of common knowledge” to be the foundation of the curriculum.

The *Turning Points* report (Carnegie Foundation, 1989) calls for massive reform of middle grade schools, continually coming back to the fact that the authors of the report find the early adolescents who attend these schools to be set against a plethora of social, developmental, and biological factors that put them both at flux and in danger. Ultimately, then, it becomes the authors’ view that the school and the adults in it are the main forces that can help protect students

from this societal danger. “Middle grade schools ... are potentially society’s most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, and help every young person thrive during early adolescence” (p. 8). This image of the school as “capturer” of “adrift” youth is certainly a vivid and compelling one, and one that clearly establishes the site of the adolescent as one of inherent risk and almost inevitable danger (Lesko, 1996b; Lesko, 2001). One of the many factors that leads to the “production” of “at-risk” youth is identified as the fact that, within “massive, impersonal schools...[m]illions of these young people fail to receive the guidance and attention they need to become healthy, thoughtful, and productive adults” (Carnegie Foundation, 1989, 13). The structure of the report further highlights the perceived need for middle grades reform: before the suggestions for reform comes a chapter detailing the behaviors of “at-risk” youth, heavy with statistics of teenage pregnancies and illicit drug use. And so there is belief that if the structure and supports of the middle school are put in place correctly, the “needs of early adolescents” can be properly addressed, so that they may be brought back from being “at-risk.” The needs, then, are tied simultaneously to a belief in developmentalism (Lesko, 2001; Kirchgasser, 2013; Vagle, 2012) and the fact that adolescents are *by the nature of that development* “at-risk.” The basic string of logic seems to be that this period of development naturally produces variables in a young person’s life that are shifting and in flux: physical, emotional, and cognitive changes are all happening during this period and all of this change naturally, in turn, makes them at-risk. And, though it is a natural developmental stage (and as such *could* be read as a stage from which youth would *naturally* emerge in a healthy, well-adjusted state) it requires active intervention in the form of adult guidance to achieve a positive outcome. This logic will be interrogated more to come.

Teachers as Instrumental Turning Points

Two of the recommendations for reforming middle grades education in *Turning Points* (Carnegie Corporation, 1989) specifically deal with the qualifications of the teachers who should administer this education. The first is to “[e]mpower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students [emphasis original] through creative control by teachers over the instructional program linked to greater responsibilities for students’ performance...” (p. 9). The authors link this suggestion heavily with the concept of teaming in middle grade education. Essentially, the suggestion is that existing middle grades schools are often too large and too impersonal, so students should be assigned to a team of core teachers who would be, together, responsible for a group of “no more than 125” students. The report emphasizes, at various times, the description of the teacher as one who is empowered to work with other teachers to provide a flexible, responsive environment that has the feel of a small community; one who has the opportunity to “understand and teach [students] as individuals;” and one who has time and access to a small number of students and would serve as a mentor of sorts. In this mentoring or advising capacity, students should feel as though they have a connection with an adult who could speak “about academic matters, personal problems, and the importance of performing well in middle grade school” (p. 37). The root of the argument relies on the same thinking as that which began the middle school movement: create more flexible, responsive environments in order to respond best to the students’ (perceived and/or real) needs.

The second recommendation speaks largely to this need to somehow guide or model appropriate adult behaviors (i.e.: of learning, of thinking critically, of behaving civilly, of engaging in “healthy and appropriate lifestyles” and of contributing positively to the community). Interestingly, though, the ability to do this is rooted not in the teacher’s own

qualities—as these are largely taken as “natural” parts of the job—but, instead, in knowing the needs of the early adolescents in the classrooms and the hallways of the schools in which they work. The authors of *Turning Points* suggest: “[s]taff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents [emphasis original] and who have been specially prepared for assignment in the middle grades” (p. 9). Further:

Dramatically improved outcomes for young adolescents require individualized, responsive, and creative approaches to teaching that will occur only when teachers are able to use their *intimate knowledge of students* [emphasis added] to design instructional programs (p. 54).

Critical, then, to the success of the schools and the success of adolescents, is a teacher’s knowledge of his/her students. The “intimacy” of this knowledge, though, will come up for further examination in due course. The hinge of the argument is, though, critical: it is not that the knowledge of students helps form a better connection with those students on an interpersonal level (which would lead to easy questioning of the “intimacy” of this knowledge), but, rather, that the knowledge of students’ *supposed needs* would lead to better-designed lessons and better outcomes—emotionally, intellectually, and physically (i.e., “health”) for the young adolescent students.

The authors of the report also carefully outline the fact that teachers need to be able to have the power to control the course of their teams and curricula, *so that* the authority to make decisions allows them to create courses and structures that respond to the needs of their students; this “contract” of sorts—more power over instruction and daily operations to teachers for some measurable, quantifiable student “success”—is a critical piece of broader discourse around teachers. There is another aspect, too, which seems to be an enactment of a confluence of the teacher as a role model, and mentor, and a visible symbol of the “future-as-adult”:

More importantly, students who witness teachers making decisions and discussing important ideas can envision what it is like to participate in decision making. ... The empowerment of school staff is a necessary and desirable step in creating a transformed middle grade school that produces *responsible, ethical, and participating future citizens* [emphasis added] (p. 54).

This subtle shift in the discourse of success for a middle school student must be noted: *more* important than the actual empowerment of teachers and the decisions that those teachers and other adults might make, is the ability for students to *envision* that adulthood comes with empowerment. Whether or not adulthood actually comes with empowerment, of whether or not the teachers have the power to make decisions is less important than sending a message, and perhaps creating an illusion, of empowerment as an adult. The shift is not described or elaborated upon, and so a conflation seems to exist between the teachers being empowered to deliver lessons based on adolescent needs and the certain end of these lessons: the adolescent delivered away from the “storm and stress” of adolescence to the sound shores of “responsible, ethical, participating future citizen[ry].” Surely, though, a well-planned and executed lesson in a middle school classroom would not instantly deliver on this promise, nor would most of the content required of middle school teachers to be taught necessarily on its face lead to this end.

This is a critical move in the normative discourse that constructs “middle school” and the “middle school teacher”: early adolescents, adrift on their own sea of “at-risk-ness,” need to be saved from themselves and the vices made more easily available to them in their early teenage years. The saving comes not either with empowerment of students themselves (though that is suggested here and there in the report) or necessarily the full empowerment of teachers, as any power that a teacher in a middle grades school should have comes only for the “needs” of the early adolescents and with measurable results on the other end, but rather with the promise of a future that *looks like* it bears with it some power (or at least some stability) away from the

“raging seas” of adolescence. This promise then would seem to be responsible for the production of “*responsible, ethical, and participating future citizens*” and their envisioned role would be based off of the models provided for them by the “middle school teacher.” This sets up, in turn, the discourses and performativities of the middle school teacher to be embodied as proper. These roles will be explored further in the literature, but a foundational discourse is that of the middle school teacher as role model. This will be explored in more depth later in the chapter, but the “role model” position of a middle school teacher flows in and out of other middle school discourses.

Healthy Middle Schools (and Students? And Teachers?)

One other discourse of the successful middle school, heavily emphasized, is health: teaching health, reinforcing health, modeling health. While the suggestion of the Commission is to develop a health and life skills curriculum, the discourses in the report are of health, healthy lifestyles, and prevention of at-risk behaviors. There are a number of people whose work examines this discursive link between adolescents and health (i.e.: Lesko, 1996a, 2001); this proposed research does not delve deeply into the “health” discourses at work on adolescents and the people who work with them. However, it is vital to note because I will argue throughout that the significant investment of resources (monetary and otherwise) into making education at the middle grades better is often entangled with these health discourses. Further, when taken together with the notion that adults are serving as “healthy” role models for the adolescents in their charge, the roles that they enact are vital in setting the “norm” for what is and is not healthy behavior and social interaction. (And, consequently, how to be a proper “future citizen,” as noted earlier.) As a consequence, the discourses through which teachers enact themselves *to be viewed by* students, colleagues, and administrators as a “proper role model” are critical to understanding

the interplay not only between all of these stakeholders and the teacher's own discursive production as a subject, but also the larger gaze of society.

The hopes, fears, and concerns of the society as a whole all play out in how a teacher takes up the work of a being an adult role model to future citizens when those future citizens are viewed to be, in this stage of their lives, "at-risk." Indeed, the historical context of the *Turning Points* report is that it was authored—by business leaders and politicians, primarily—in a time of economic upheaval and a shifting and increasingly diverse population (Lesko, 2001). The discursive spaces and performativities of the middle school teacher, as the role model, advisor, and (perhaps) "savior" of the "at-risk adolescent" must be interrogated for what allows the assumptions underpinning the subject of the teacher to remain in some ways "stable" and in other ways "in flux."

The "Nature" and "Needs" of Early Adolescence/Adolescents

Dear Middle School Families:

I hope this letter finds you in the midst of a superb summer vacation. August is upon us, and in a few short weeks, the 2015-2016 school year will commence. Our hallways will once again be filled, as they should be, with the energy of almost 300 middle schoolers—the Middle School is, above all, about the students. (Opening of a letter from my principal to our MS families, cc'ed to MS faculty, 8/7/2015)

Pendergast and Bahr (2005) offer a handbook in which they seek to disrupt some of the deficit perspective on adolescence and middle schools, giving Australia's educators a perspective not only on middle school teaching, but also what comes to define that teaching. They unite, though, with less critical readings of middle school and its grounding assumptions, both in Australia and in the United States. In a chapter on the "philosophy of Middle Schooling,"

Chadbourne and Pendergast (2005) offer: “The literature clearly emphasizes that middle schooling should be defined as formal education that is responsive specifically to developmental needs, interests and characteristics of young adolescents” (p. 23).

The belief in developmental needs rests squarely on the assumption that adolescence is a fixed state of human development, inalterable in its inevitable path. Seeing adolescence as a particular stage of human development is rife with complications. Further, there is little acknowledgement in deploying these discourses of development that much of the thinking around the science of development stems from Hall’s studies at the turn of the 20th century, and his look at adolescents privileges white, middle-class, male, heterosexual adolescent development (Lesko, 2001). G. Stanley Hall, who coined the term, used as his evidence for the “universal” stage of adolescence data from a number of middle-class, white teenagers. Not only were conclusions drawn that were then meant to be applied to all people as the “natural” course of development, but the goal in seeing this particular development as universal was laden in fears of the racial Other, and good, healthy development was connected to the health not of people, but the future growth of Western nations (Lesko, 2001). A highly racialized, fear-laden, agenda-driven “science” loses that particular grounding and simply becomes the “natural development of an adolescent.”

This “natural” development is further seen from a deficit perspective. Hall asserted in the early 20th century that “storm and stress” is just as inherent in the development of adolescent as physical changes to the body. A normative belief goes something like: the only thing that changes in adolescence is how long it takes a person to go through and when it might begin; the only thing that is certain is that it will happen, and it will be something driven by, in Hall’s phrasing, “storm and stress” and raging hormones (e.g., Powell, 2011). In fact, so tied together

are these assumptions that the youth going through them come to be almost solely defined by not only the changes taking place in their body, but also the assumptions that those changes inevitably provoke trouble, stress, trauma: something to be protected from and insulated against (Lesko, 1994, 1996b, 2001). It is part and parcel of a belief that youth—young adolescents being a part of this subject position—need protection and become a site for societal fears to play out and take on urgency (Lesko, 2013). The changing body of the student becomes: the need to structure a new space, the need to provide structure, the need to provide role models. Ultimately, as Vagle (2013) succinctly points out, in echoing Lesko’s (2001) work, “While [developmental traditions] can help the teacher make sense of changes their young adolescents might be experiencing, these traditions can also become dangerous when they are treated as definitive determinations of young adolescents” (p. 756).

Ultimately, though, the “nature” and “needs” of young adolescents are entirely wrapped up and in large part defined by the “science” of their “development.” Young adolescents are defined by the biological, emotional, and intellectual changes attributed to the life stage of adolescence. Young adolescents are seen as the products of their hormonal changes, their physically changing bodies, their “emerging” sexualities, their “need” for peer acceptance, their “natural” challenging of authority: their “becoming” adults.

The regime of “age-appropriate” is synonymous with the largely unchallenged science of developmentalism. What is seen as “age-appropriate” because science has deemed certain developmental stages normal at certain times and others abnormal, gives both of these terms—and the constituent gazes on adolescents as they “develop”—the weight and goodness of unquestionable “truth.”

The “Middle-ness” of the Middle School, Its Teachers, Its Students

2.10.16. Excerpts from two different parent-teacher conferences mid-year, both for eighth grade students.

Parent 1: “I have been pleasantly surprised. We have been through Lower School, but until [student], we had not had experience with the Middle School. I was fearful. Hesitant. You understand. I was just hoping [gesture to student] he would come out unscathed and healthy. All the better if he learned something and was ready for high school.”

Parent 2: “Look, let’s be honest. You know it as well as I do. I have a child that’s in college, and another who’s out of college. This year doesn’t count. It’s next year that matters.”

In Vagle’s (2013) chapter in “Contextualizing Middle Grades Teachers,” he points to three tensions for middle school teachers. In describing them, he notes, echoing Smyth and McInerney (2007), that middle school teachers are often “caught in the middle.” Indeed, one of the critical tensions is simply the concept of the “middle.” Smyth and McInerney (2007) point to teachers being “*caught*” in the middle of administrators and parents on one side and students on another, between being given policy directives and needing to implement them, between the skill set of elementary school teachers and high school teachers. Lesko (1996b) conceptualizes adolescence’s position liminally, stuck in and somehow representative of past, present, and future at once. Stevens, et al (2007) posit that the adolescent is a discursive subject defined by its very “in-between”-ness, being “effectively illegitimate,” sandwiched between the innocent child and the fully-formed adult. In the conclusion of a book outlining types of middle schools and middle school teachers, Hargreaves (1986) uses a Dickens metaphor to discuss the middle school of the past, the middle school of the present, and middle schools yet to come. In the “depressing” vision of the “ghost of Middle Schools Yet to Come,” Hargreaves warns “Here, we can envision

middle schools, in their eagerness to please and anxious wish to survive, continuing to react, reflex-like, to the crises and pressures of the moment. We can see middle schools reacting to change, never shaping it; responding to other peoples' purposes and agendas, never their own" (1986, p. 219). McLeod (2012) notes, "Adolescents have historically occupied an in-between time, and this is amplified in the construction of a middle-school identity. Above all, middle school and adolescent identities confound simply binary frameworks. They are the quintessential subject in-process" (p. 48). The teacher, student, and school all get constructed in this way, again and again, in much of the literature on middle schools, middle school teachers, middle school students and early adolescents.

The middle becomes a site of tension, a site of im/possibility between what were binaries: elementary school versus high school, a prescribed curriculum versus personalized, self-directed learning, and the needs of children versus "more mature adolescents" or "fully-formed" adults. It gets inscribed and reinscribed by narratives of adolescents as frozen in time, in a stage to be pulled, marshaled, and guided through. Middle school teachers are often seen as in the middle in a very passive way: either there by accident (Knowles & Brown, 2007; Powell, 2011), by being "locked" into place (Garrick, et al., 2012), or by being "found" by the middle (Irvine, 2013), and so on. The term "middle" helps stabilize and reify the subjects of the "middle school teacher" and the "early adolescent," so inextricably woven together, in profoundly, consistently, and durably predictable, deficient ways.

Normative Characteristics of the "Middle School Teacher"

The tensions—many of them stemming from this "middle"-ness cited above—Vagle (2013) describes frequently resolve into foundational expectations, which he draws from a literature review by Beane and Brodhagen (2001). Vagle (2013) pulls together *Turning Points*,

This We Believe, and the Beane and Brodhagen (2001) review to identify these five expectations for middle school teachers:

1. Teachers should have a ***thorough understanding*** [emphasis original] of adolescents with whom they work.
2. Teachers should participate in collegial teaming arrangements.
3. Teachers should act as affective mentors for young adolescents.
4. Teachers should use varied teaching and learning activities.
5. Teachers should use curriculum approaches beyond the traditional separate subject approach. (Vagle, 2013, p.754)

In order to accomplish these fairly static, normative expectations, teachers are also expected to have been trained in or otherwise simply “have” particular characteristics, as well.

A primary assumption of middle school proponents, supporters, and scholars is that middle school teachers should have different qualities, characteristics, and training than either “purely” elementary or “purely” secondary teachers (though frequently middle school teachers still have training in either of these fields and not expressly “middle grades” training). Consider what one middle school teaching handbook has to say. Definitively entitled *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* (Brown & Knowles, 2007), each chapter has at various points interspersed text boxes that remind the reader that it is “Time for Reflection.” In the first chapter, the questions are: “Why do you or did you want to be a middle school teacher? What characteristics do you think a middle school teacher needs to have?” (Brown & Knowles, 2007, p. 4). Setting aside, temporarily, this call to reflection, I will delve briefly into what the authors go on to identify as their own answer to the second question:

As a middle level teacher you will need:

- A sense of humor that you share with students regularly
- Flexibility that you demonstrate in your instructional and curricular planning and delivery
- The ability to actively listen to your students
- The ability to show unconditional caring for young adolescent students
- A contagious passion for learning
- A willingness to move beyond the boundaries of your subject area

- A philosophy and action plan that places students at the center of the learning process
- A belief in the process of collaborating with students regarding instruction and curriculum
- The confidence to guide students on their path to learning
- An awareness of adolescent health issues, and a willingness to address these issues with students
- A strong sense of your own identity
- A wealth of knowledge about young adolescent development
- A belief in all students' ability to succeed
- Knowledge and skills to help all students achieve success. (p. 7–8)

Many of these characteristics are reflected again and again in other literature, as well (e.g., Powell, 2011). The highlighted key for the authors, though, is developing relationships with students that encourage, facilitate, and support learning, but go “beyond” these goals. “[Middle school] is a place where students experience the support of caring adults who provide liberal amounts of prodding, encouragement, understanding, and celebration to the experiences that young adolescents encounter. A true middle school is a place where students are genuinely valued—not merely in words but in the very way they are treated” (Brown & Knowles, 2007, p. 170). It seems that the supposition is that young adolescents *especially* need to feel valued.

The Negative as the Norm: “You Want to Be a What?” Take Two

The chapter opened with the concept of the middle school teacher as, among other things, a contested site, ending in an ultimately negative construction, mirroring the frequently negative discursive construction of the early adolescent (i.e.: Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Vagle, 2012) students they are teaching, advising, and guiding. As stated earlier, the teacher is stuck, an accident, perhaps out of control of mental faculties because of the (in)decision to teach young adolescents.

Pendergast and Bahr (2005) point to a set of studies done about the terms that teachers, both pre-service and in-service, used to define themselves. They cite the five “top terms” used by

pre-service middle years teachers in Australia as: organized, knowledgeable, caring, patient, and creative. The in-service teachers used the terms: tired, frustrated, stressed, caring, overworked (p. 14). Smyth and McInerney (2007), in trying to question and “reclaim” the discussions over middle schools and middle school reform, still refer to the normative conception of the discursive space and site of “middle” as a “wasteland.” Indeed, they explicitly invoke “images of a desolate landscape or lifeless environment” (p. 5) to describe this “wasteland.” This echoes one of the founding assumptions of the key reform proposals in the *Turning Points* report: that everything about the middle school is in need of overhaul and purpose.

“Knowing” Students: Teacher-Student Relationships

Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000) contains a separate chapter in its report to explore “Organizing Relationships for Learning.” The opening assertion of the chapter is that the achievement and motivation of students to learn stems from building “close, supportive,” “strong,” “nurturing” relationships (pp. 121-123); these relationships are a “precondition” to creating “a learning community” (p. 124). Jackson and Davis focus primarily in this chapter on explaining the virtues of the organizational patterns (small schools and team teaching) that they believe lead to an environment that fosters the relationships they see as central to learning and success. While it is not particularly revolutionary to suggest that the structure of an environment will have an effect on the development of the people within it, the authors of *Turning Points 2000* appear to rely on an easy and untroubled causal connection between setting up the structure of an environment and that necessarily leading to “close” relationships. This seems to go back in part to the history of the middle school movement: the initial move was organizing a school structure (either grades 5-8, 6-8, 7-9, or some variation thereof) that would focus less on the “junior high” thinking of previous decades, but rather, as noted before, centering the school on

the needs of early adolescents. Thus, the beginnings of middle schools were primarily based on making this link of organizational structure and meeting the supposed needs of the age groups of the students in that structure (Eichhorn, 1968; Lounsbury, 2013). The structures follow so closely the assumptions of the needs of the students in the building or the classroom that they happen both simultaneous to each other and in a completely untroubled, unquestioned way (Lesko, 1996a). Lesko (1996a) offers the example of homerooms and counseling: if young adolescents need close relationships with adults, create actual times and spaces for those relationships to happen. The creation of homerooms, then, is untroubling and untroubled; it's a "natural" extension of a "natural" need.

Perhaps, though, this is not the actual assumption at work—but instead, that adults in close proximity and in charge of supervising young adolescents will necessarily become role models for the students. Somehow the collision of bodies, space, and time will unite in instant and natural adult-to-young adolescent modeling and mentoring. This seems to be much of the logic around the teacher-as-advisor. The notion of building a time ("i.e. advisory period"), space (often the "homeroom"), and program for advising students grows out of the concerns for the "needs" of adolescents (i.e. Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Advising is seen as a critical component of middle school teaching and is seen as fulfilling the affective needs of adolescents in moving towards the "safe harbor" of adulthood. It is through the advisory period that the teacher takes on the overt role of adult role model.

The role of the role-model is often repeated, but rarely interrogated. This can be read as the fact that there needs to be no training in being a role model: to be a good, strong middle school teacher is to "be" a role model. The assumption is that it is completely natural. The qualities of simply "being" a good role model are imbedded in the normative construction of the

“qualities of a middle school teacher” represented earlier (e.g.: Brown & Knowles, 2007; Powell, 2011). And being a role model in a middle school would not be enacted solely on the basis of one’s delivery of lessons, but instead on how one interacts on a personal level with students and advisees. And these interpersonal interactions are the vehicle through which one is assuring that students feel connected to adult role models and are led from their otherwise naturally “at-risk” selves. Eichhorn, one of the primary figures in articulating and refining the middle school movement in the 1960s, notes:

In society, the transescent develops toward maturity through interaction with the cultural environment. ... As democracy’s medium for the transmission of cultural values, education must alter basic patterns, if it is to carry out its inherent role effectively. Alterations must be based on the nature of the learner as well as on the expectations and demands of society. Therefore, the educator must consider (1) that the physical factor of maturing at an earlier age has created personal needs challenging youth’s security, and (2) that the impact of a significantly changing culture has put tremendous demands on youth which cannot be met, as in the agrarian society, simply by learning a body of facts (1966, pp 56-57).

Eichhorn goes on to suggest that through the organization of a school in which teachers are attuned to the “nature of transescence,” their needs will largely be met because of the increased intimacy and attention paid on those needs—simply by starting them off in the same building with one another. Note, too, that the body of knowledge to be utilized is not the “learning [of] a body of facts” but, instead, building the institution from a knowledge of the needs of the adolescent body.

The concerns of the “risk” of early adolescence as a stage and the early adolescent as a body at risk continue to play out in critical middle school reform literature. In *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), a follow up reform document published under the auspices of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the needs of adolescents are described:

There is a crucial need to help adolescents at this early age to acquire a durable basis for self-esteem, flexible and inquiring minds, reliable and close human relationships, a

sense of belonging in a valued group, and a way of being useful beyond one's self. They need to find constructive expression for their inherent curiosity and exploratory energy, as well as a basis for making informed, deliberate decisions — especially on matters that have large and perhaps lifelong consequences, such as education and health” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. ix).

The emphasis on “durable...self-esteem,” “a sense of belonging,” and “making informed, deliberate decisions...on matters that have large and perhaps lifelong consequences” makes clear the concern that *without* the development of these skills and knowledges, the adolescents will be doomed, and their “at-risk” status will become a permanent label, rather than a transient label applied to all early adolescents as a matter of course. In case it was not emphasized enough in the preface, Jackson and Davis (2000) bring it home in the opening pages by way of summarizing the Carnegie *Turning Points* report as finding “early adolescence to be a period of enormous opportunity ... yet fraught with vulnerability and risk” (p. 2).

Wiles et al. (2006) paint a bleak picture of the early adolescent against the backdrop of the “shifting America” and make the tenuous, questionable link to shifts in parenting techniques and the consequent increased “parental” responsibilities of middle school teachers. The reader is presented with nearly ten pages of the many forces in society that might make students at risk. While there are a number of things presented, there is a striking table labeled “A Changing America” which highlights the marital status of parents, noting that twelve percent of children are born out of wedlock and 41% are born to parents who divorce before the child turns eighteen. (p.43). This, among a number of other statistics, casts clearly the fact that students do not have parental or societal help in making good decisions and developing “strong character.” Both stated and unstated is the reason behind the statistics: young adolescents need guidance, they do not get it at home or “in society,” so middle schools must take on this role. “Even though a considerable body of knowledge proves that success in school, and indeed success in life,

depends on what happens to preadolescent and early adolescent students, this group is the least understood, the least cared for, and the most fragile in our society” (Wiles, et al, 2006, p. 38). Middle school teachers are then positioned, in the “role model” or “advisor” stance, to be the adults that can provide that guidance and keep students from being “at risk.”

Authority and the Body of the Teacher

The “body and appearance” are the first thing about a teacher that conveys knowledge and authority (Braun, 2011). A teacher’s body is what “pupils first pay attention to...one who is watched and ‘the figure that they copy’” (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003, p. 704). According to Cushman and Rogers (2008), students constantly negotiate and renegotiate their image of the teacher and the authority the teacher has over the student. Interestingly, Cushman and Rogers note that some of the questioning of this authority is related to the body of the student and the body of the adult:

[Students] regarded the authority in the classroom as coming from behind the teacher’s desk. But starting in the middle grades, authority stops being so simple. For one thing, by the end of the middle school years, many of the students will be as tall as their teachers, or taller. This alone causes them to reconsider the basic premise of adult authority. (Cushman & Rogers, 2008, p. 41)

At least in this configuration, the height of bodies relative to one another implies power—and the power of the teacher, prior to middle school, can be seen as a figureless, shapeless entity “coming from behind the teacher’s desk.” This configuration of power is evocative: prior to middle school, the teacher (but the teacher not embodied, but as an “authority” “behind the desk”) is the authority, but once the body becomes known, by becoming comparatively slight in relation to the student, this opens up a space to question the “basic premise of adult authority.” Authority then is simultaneously embodied and *disembodied*. This recalls some of the tension I reported feeling on that opening day of school in 2001 in the preface: somehow my positioning

and gesturing might be able to help me convey authority, while my fears about my possible blushing and vague recollections of the “cherubic countenance” comment from my coordinating teacher were certainly fears about a loss of that authority. These came, in a moment, crashing together.

Connell (1993), as cited by Smyth and McInerney (2007), raises a new image of “embodiment” for/of the teacher:

Being a teacher is not just a matter of having a body of knowledge and a capacity to control the classroom. That could be done by a computer with a cattle-prod. Just as important, being a teacher means being able to establish human relations with the people being taught. Learning is a full-blooded, human social process, and so is teaching. Teaching involves emotions as much as it involves pure reasoning. (Connell, 1993, p. 63 as cited in Smyth & McInerney, 2007, p. 153)

Setting aside the assumed replicability of a teacher for “computer with a cattle-prod,” it seems that the embodiment of being a “full-blooded” fellow human in the room *is* what helps separate teacher-as-content “computer” with teacher-as-emotional, “full-blooded” human.

Braun (2011) notes, though, that the embodiment of teachers in their professional roles, and the bodies of teachers more generally, are largely absent from the research literature. In fact, her own findings on the theme of embodiment in British postservice student teachers came as an unintended consequence of a study on gender and gendered performativities as teachers beginning the profession. She had not sought embodiment out, but it emerged as a theme. And, as it emerged, it emerged along largely gendered lines, and the feeling of always trying to fit a role by appearing a particular came through, particularly for the women. One female teacher that Braun draws from noted her role of “walking yourself around as a teacher” (p. 282). And professional appearance, as several of the participants noted, helped “command respect” and show that you as a new teacher were to be taken “seriously.” Echoing Cushman and Rogers

(2008), she also draws from several participants noting that parts of their bodies beyond their dressed appearance, most notably height, helped to convey (or not) a sense of authority.

Mismatched Parts

It is compelling that, in discussions in two different handbooks for middle school teachers, the chapters on physical development of adolescents *both* took very interesting turns. Brown and Knowles (2007), in exploring the topic of “the growth spurt” as the first of many subtopics in their exploration of the physical development of adolescents, say: “Girls’ growth spurts peak about two years earlier than boys’. Attend a middle school dance, and you will observe this phenomenon firsthand: five-foot-five-inch girls dancing with five-foot-one-inch boys. Suddenly girls are taller, stronger, and more mature than most of the boys their age” (p. 14). Powell (2011) has a similar turn in her first subsection of the physical development section, a subsection entitled “Mismatched Parts” (a term to be interrogated on its own later). She, too, begins by describing growth spurts here, saying: “Girls generally experience rapid growth a year or two before boys. Remember middle-school dances when the tall, gangly girls giggled in one corner while shorter, ‘cutie-pie’ boys taunted each other to ask for a dance—only to find that their faces often matched up with developing breasts?” (p. 26).

Several pieces of these discursive turns are interesting. First, they begin with the notion of the growth spurt, inevitably leading to the discussion of girls, on average, experiencing their growth spurt earlier in age than boys. However, within each text, the next sentence offered turns the reader to the “familiar scene” of the middle school dance. In this scene, we are meant to read so much, but perhaps meant to be understood most of all is the ease and “natural” quality not only of the authors to turning to this middle school trope, but the fact that these metaphorical dancers are a boy and a girl. Suggested, then, is the need to read all of the science of

development not at face value, then, but to question the messages taken as those meant for “good middle school teachers” to know and act upon. Further, what does the constant reinforcement of certain beliefs about the “natural” development of the body being linked with certain other behaviors, i.e., a boy and girl dancing in what can only be seen as a rite of heterosexual and heteronormative passage mean for all of the binding and constitutive discourses of the middle school? This is to say that, if the assumptions of the middle school pedagogy continually rest upon unspoken or unquestioned “norms” such as heterosexuality, or the constituent “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1989) that follows, or particular performances of “proper adult role models” that lean on discourses of gender, class, and race in untroubled ways, there are a number of normative values and hegemonic discourses that are appropriated and re-appropriated all in service of the “needs of the early adolescent.” And these needs are all viewed through, understood through, framed by, and shaped along the contours of the bodies of adolescents. “On the terrain of adolescent bodies is a struggle for what will count as an adult, a woman, a man, rationality, proper sexuality, and orderly development” (Lesko, 1996b, p. 455). When orderly development is considered to be the awkward embrace of a boy and a girl at a seventh grade dance, many things are normalized in the performances of these bodies—and, importantly, in the bodies of those who are “role models” of proper behaviors—and many things are made impossible. Certain bodies will be outside acceptable parameters—whether for their performances of genders, their development beyond “normal” timelines of middle school, or their enactment of not-so-awkward embraces.

The middle school dance offers a discursive site upon which we see the regulation of bodies and sexuality and a normalizing gaze at particular bodies and heterosexuality. At once, they can be read as the space for *innocence maintained*: boys and girls seen as highly awkward,

unable to navigate not only their own bodies—clumsy, ill-fitting—but also how to negotiate a space with other bodies. When it comes time for dances that seem fitting for people to “pair off,” the innocence can still be seen as maintained: boys and girls not knowing how exactly to regulate themselves in time with the dance and the rhythms of another person’s movements. Further, the view that, even in dancing with the more physically developed girls, a boy can still be seen as “a cutie-pie.” That *lack* of sexual knowledge (here, experience) then is innocence. The pairing of a boy and a girl is unquestioned and seen as the “norm.” At the same time, we have “proper” adulthood being mimicked. Given the concerns of the adolescent as a site of “at-risk” behavior, any behaviors that can be read as being on a path to normal development towards being a fully participating citizen and a well adjusted adult can be taken as positives.

At the same time, though, these steps cannot clash with a popular conception of childhood as a site of innocence and one in need of protection from particular adult forces (Luttrell, 2003). Further, there is a silence in such images as Brown and Knowles (2007) and Powell (2011) put forth in their “innocent but awkward” dance scenes: would all bodies be seen as equally “innocent”? Would students of color be read in the same way in the same scene? Further, what of two differently sized boys? Would a scene imagined of two same-sex bodies or trans- bodies be as “innocent”? Certainly, given the dominant discourse around “proper” and “natural” behaviors, it would seem that in many eyes, such scenes would not be read in quite the same way.

Knowing...Becoming...Knowing the Teacher “Self”

There is a clash of “self” for the middle school teacher. As with most teaching research, there is a reflexive/reflective quality that is seen is highly valuable. One must be able to reflect back on one’s lesson to establish what worked and what did not, so to maximize the former while

minimizing the latter in order to better reach students and affect their learning. Part of the “self,” then, must look back on one’s self, seeking improvement. A neo-liberal discourse of a “good teacher” in *any* level of K-12 schooling is one who engages in, seeks out, and self-regulates one’s own professional development (Fenwick, 2003). This is a piece of a larger technology of power operating on the “teacher”: the “pastoral power” that causes an inward gaze to have a teacher’s self act as its own regulator, at once making the teacher known to one’s “self” and knowable to others in its operation in “normalcy.”

There is within this construction a belief in a singular, identifiable, self. Middle school, meanwhile, is constructed as a time and place for “young adolescents” to “begin to discover themselves.” This is why so much is seen as staked upon the adult role models in a middle school building: the young people in their charge are “at risk” of self-destructive, unhealthy behaviors which may imperil them in the present or set them up for unproductive, unhealthy, or irresponsible futures. This is the heavy-handedness of reform efforts like *Turning Points*: the early adolescents in middle schools are not the only things in danger, but, “more” gravely, the future of the society. With such stakes, much is pinned to a responsible “self” being discovered (or, at least, in a recognizable process of being discovered) in those middle school hallways and classrooms. This is furthered still by the belief in a singular self, a singular identity. In believing the self to be a fixed entity to be discovered (perhaps *uncovered*) and built at this particular life stage, the stakes are made even higher. The insistence on a unified, unitary, essentialized “self” makes impossible multiple subjectivities and helps reify normalized conceptions of the proper identity development of the young adolescent (Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003). It was Hall’s (1907) belief that this was fundamentally what was at stake while he defined this life stage; he saw the individual development of an adolescent as akin to the development of civilization.

Hence, the needs of a civilization now get funneled upon, read, inscribed and acted out upon the discursive site of the “adolescent” (Lesko, 2001).

Enter the middle school teacher: the adult responsible for developing intimate, deeply knowledgeable relationships with students, in order to guide them to (or at least model for them) responsible adulthood. The mere presence of these adults helps position them in authoritative roles not simply by managing class lessons or the mechanics of a school day—taking attendance, distributing lesson materials, etc—but by being the adults who help guide adolescents to discovery of self, and establishment of healthy futures. As Lesko (1996) notes, “Adults are people who *are*, adolescents *will be* in the future” (p. 465 [Emphasis original]). Adolescents’ own state of being is read as a time-shift, a time out of and yet subsumed within time. They can not “be” unless they are read as developing along the “normal” path they are guided on by the adult role models, their teachers.

Middle school teachers are at least partially defined as having a strong sense of “one’s own identity” (Powell, 2011). At the same time, though, this sense of self in the teacher can be seen as itself in flux. Smyth and McInerney (2007) position the middle school teacher “self” as something in constant negotiation and construction to the benefit of early adolescents.

Yet another way of thinking about teachers as being “in the middle” is in terms of making sense of and reconstructing their own identities in working with young adolescents. We think these teachers are so unique that it is not unreasonable to describe them as literally reinventing themselves for young people. (Smyth & McInerney, 2007, p. 7)

To recap quickly: adolescents need adults with a strong sense of self and an identity that will provide a role model for adolescents who, by their nature, require these role models, lest they become scourges in society. One of the reasons they need this is because they are attempting to figure out who they *will become*, as their sense of “self” grows. *But* those role models, in order to

be good middle school teachers, must remain flexible and constantly “reinventing themselves” on behalf of the early adolescents in their charge. In this reading, a middle school teacher may be “becoming” (Lesko, 1996) in the same manner as the adolescents in their charge; they may not actually be fully “adult” in the same way other adults may be seen. This works, in at least one way, to continue to support a rigorous development of regulatory practices and “accountability” discourses for teachers, so to further support their eventually having to “become” professional.

Seen another way, Smyth and McInerney (2007) may be echoing a bit of what Vagle (2012) and Hughes-Decatur (2012) (in utilizing Lesko, 2001) might be saying about space and possibility being opened by practicing what Lesko (2001) refers to as a “contingent and recursive” view of adolescence. This concept, of breaking adolescence and adolescents from a linear and static view of adolescence as a singular, unified human life stage, and opening them to the possibility of particular qualities and a cyclical growth over time, offers a way to see middle school students as a site of possibility and opportunity, rather than constantly and consistently beginning from a deficit, at-risk perspective. To see middle school teachers in this same way: as reinventing themselves to better model and position themselves to work with (rather than always upon) students, opens up possibilities for challenging static conceptions and constructions of what it means to be a “middle school teacher.”

Called Upon to Remember a Time “Best Forgotten”: Surviving Being (with) “Creatures”

December 4, 2016. I'm at a concert being put on by a number of musicians and music educators to benefit a local charitable organization. We're in the auditorium of a local public middle school. The organizing music teacher is at the piano, mic suspended above the keys. She's introducing herself.

“I was an elementary music teacher in the district for...a lot of years! I don’t want to date myself! Now I’m here at Lee Middle School. [A few cheers, from some students in the crowd. A few others make some other noises, and a few chuckle.] Yeah. 6th, 7th, and 8th grade chorus. It’s great, but it’s hard. You know, middle school is tough. Well, the adults in the crowd remember middle school. It can be tough. But the kids are good. They work through it. This song will be for them...”

Another trope of “middle school teacher” is that, to be one, not only do we have to understand the experiences of the middle school students, but also we should be able to empathize with them. Our ability to empathize with them, as it often goes in the writing of handbooks, is called forth by a reminder that we, too, went through middle school. A number of books on middle school teaching, in their introductions, while mentioning the characteristics of early adolescents, will call upon just that memory: you were one, too (Brown & Knowles, 2007; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Powell, 2011). Of course, in the same moment, we also are reminded that these are times we think of as best forgotten (see Brown & Knowles, 2007; Powell, 2011).

Perhaps selections from the Powell (2011) text will position the interplay between our forgotten memories, the development of student adolescent bodies in the classroom, and the positioning of the teacher:

For many of us, it’s a time best left in the past. But we are survivors! ... At this point, if you are thinking, “I’m supposed to teach these creatures subject-verb agreement and the Pythagorean theorem?” you are beginning to get the picture of some of the challenges involved in middle level education! ... Many changes occur in puberty. Hair growth develops under arms, on legs, in pubic areas, and on the face. The voice changes as the larynx grows larger. Girls’ voices may become more mellow, while boys’ voices may go through those embarrassing falsetto-crack-bass-crack-falsetto moments. Oil and sweat glands may begin to function, resulting in all kinds of potentially embarrassing situations. Acne medication, shampoo, and deodorant appear on shopping lists, while longer, more frequent showers become part of the daily routine. So, you think you want to spend your

career behind closed doors with as many as 30 of these creatures at a time? Read on! (p. 26)

The teacher is positioned as not only the sole adult in the room, a bodily and temporal position many teachers would suppose and assume of a teaching position (job), but seemingly as the only human being in the room, surrounded by creatures. These creatures are made fearsome and foreign as a consequence of one of the very things teachers are to remember about them to better respond to their needs: their physically developing bodies. But it is those very bodies that make the adolescents in the room something Other (Lesko, 1996b). By remembering one's own experience in middle school, it is supposed, it will make the creature-ness of the bodies in the classroom somehow more palatable or manageable, if perhaps not any more human. Later in the same text, while discussing the importance of a middle school teacher's role in creating a "positive, productive learning environment," Powell (2011) brings us back to this idea:

People who wince at the thought of teaching middle school don't do so because we study ancient civilizations in sixth grade or learn about the Pythagorean theorem in seventh grade or read *The Outsiders* in eighth grade. They wince at the thought of being the lone adult in a room full of young adolescents. Memories of themselves and classmates, perhaps visions of their own 10- to 15-year-olds, and the general portrayal of middle grades kids as disturbed links between sweet childhood and maturing adolescence all contribute to the maligning of this wonderful age group. Sure, some of it is justified. There's no denying that teaching middle grades kids is an extraordinary adventure. Young adolescents want parameters. They want their teachers to manage the environment so they can safely learn and grow. (p. 294)

In calling forth the memory, we are asked to empathize so that we, as the reading audience of middle school teachers or to-be middle school teachers, can guide the students to safe, responsible adulthood (as, theoretically, the readers would position themselves within that "life stage"); create safe learning spaces and opportunities; and not over-react when the students seem to be acting in less than desirable ways. "You were there, too, remember!" Beyond this act of engaging empathy through memory—a memory that the reader/teacher may or may not have—

we are brought to the idea that teacher, as knower, savior, and (given the above narratives) lone adult human being in the room is the one who can guide *through the creation of parameters and the management of their bodies and minds*.

Other texts echo Powell (2011):

To prepare yourself to work in the midst of early adolescent drama, think back on your own experience in the middle grades. If you can remember how you felt with a sense of humor, you probably will have an easier time with your students. You will understand that their inconsistencies do not reflect a failure on your part. You may remember, too, that you paid more attention to the size of your feet than to the height of Kilimanjaro, or that you worried more about who liked you than you did about who was president in 1812. (Cushman & Rogers, 2008, p. 11)

There's a tangling of discourses and messages: to know yourself as a teacher, remember yourself as an early adolescent (which is probably something you would rather forget), and use the memory to better engage with your students and know that their failings are not necessarily your own (but that, perhaps, not having "knowledge" of your students and their bodies might, in fact, be a failing as a middle school teacher). Tangled, too, is the knowledge of bodies within any of these discourses of middle school.

Read the previous excerpt, for instance, for the mechanisms of bodies. As a student, knowledge of your own body ("your feet") or someone else's body ("who liked you") might come before the prescribed curricular body of knowledge ("the height of Kilimanjaro" or "who was president in 1812"). The message continues: to prepare yourself for the drama that comes with teaching early adolescent students, know the drama that naturally comes with this age and remember the drama that you as a teacher presumably experienced (naturally) as an early adolescent, too. The assumption above is that the universal experience of a middle school student (or of a middle school teacher in training as a middle school student) would be a concern with one's own body (feet) and others' bodies and their attraction to "you." We are reminded as

readers of this text to have knowledge of our own bodies at that past time in our lives, how we may have acted as objects of desire (or longed to), and that all of this will come to make any “real” curricular aim in the classroom moot. This reminder of and call to attend to the bodies in the classroom is to help us somehow situate ourselves—the teachers—within a student’s changing body and remember these fears, desires, and dramas. It is through this memory work and through a recollection of drama (real or presumed) that we are meant to better connect with and empathize with students.

In most cases, it would seem that the implication of trying to call forth a memory of something intentionally forgotten is the work of fighting through a trauma of some kind. Trauma even seems to be implied in the language used above: the image of being alone with “creatures” in a room, the lone adult dealing with children who might be “disturbed links” between childhood and “maturing adolescence.” Eder et al. (1995) note in describing their three-year study of the gendered speech of middle school students:

Many people with whom we have discussed our study have asked how we were able to immerse ourselves in something as painful as middle school life or even walk once again inside a middle school building...because of the pain and confusion many adults associate with this period of their own lives, they tend to forget that often bewildering transition.... Consequently, we as adults are often less able than we would like to provide support and guidance to those currently in this important stage of life. (p. 3)

One must call back or somehow handle the presumed trauma of their own middle school years in order to teach middle schoolers effectively, but yet that very pain might put them not closer to their students but more at a distance from them. There seems an important emotional weapon here that one’s own middle school experience could possibly both be used for and against one’s own teaching, by oneself and others. Dernikos and Goulding (2016) note the possibility of observations having the effect of resurrecting (and even fueling anew) forgotten trauma. The swirl of discursive moves and the constituting forces that create the “collective body” then

“re/animate” those forces and “trigger us emotionally by transporting us back to different times and places” (Dernikos & Goulding, 2016).

A Time Best Left Forgotten? Memory Interjections

A memory! Not my own. Well, actually, yes. My own memory, but of a “trauma” confessed by someone close to me a couple of weeks ago. A recent reflection of hers: being an eighth grade teacher (a change for her from seventh grade) has led to a resurfacing of her eighth grade self. “They roll their eyes and suck their teeth, and then I do. It’s what I was like in eighth grade. It’s horrible. I was horrible then. I don’t want to be like that now, as an adult, as their teacher!”

In fairness, a memory of a memory I had last June. That would be June, 2016. The scene is the seventh and eighth grade dance on the final Friday evening of the school year. We’re in the cafeteria. My principal, one of my deans, and two fellow teachers, and I are supervising. It’s kind of a ridiculous thing to call “supervision,” as we are participating in our own ways. We play ping pong, we wear the silly hats that the DJ is passing out. I observe a student of mine, Jimmy, sort of awkwardly hovering near the ping pong, but not playing, and then weirdly bumping into his friends (all boys) and seeming to avoid contact with the kids actually dancing and the girls. He is shoving the straw hat on his head further on his head than either the hat or his head were designed to withstand. He bumps into friends, he rams into a support column. I turn to one of the other teachers, a friend, and say, “Yup, that’s one of my fencers.” He chortles. I note that as a seventh grader he (the teacher) would more likely be the kid who was, in that moment, dancing on the stage with the DJ, sweat pouring down his face; I simultaneously note that I would have been the spatially challenged, more-than-vaguely socially awkward kid we were then observing. He chortles much more deeply. And, as the moment fades, I just keep

thinking, “oh God, no joke, I probably was Jimmy.” And I spent much of the rest of that dance hovering awkwardly by the ping pong table, spirits occasionally lifted when folks (teachers and students alike) engaged me in conversation. I was in some way transported back to my seventh grade self. Though I truly believe my spatial awareness was stronger.

Mobilization of Memories

In one work on the utilization of particular historical “memories” to fuel a collective national consciousness, Jelin (2003) has this note, which rings true of how these memories are mobilized by middle school teacher handbooks:

The significance of past events is never constant or immutable; their meanings are never established once and for all. Furthermore, the relationship between the salience of a particular event and the passing of chronological time is never linear and direct, in the sense that the memory of an event would necessarily fade with passage of time to be replaced by other temporally more proximate ones. (p. 52)

The importance of the calling forth of the memory is in the use it has in the present. Cushman and Rogers (2008) explicitly mention in their “epilogue” their call for readers to remember their own early adolescence in the introduction.

Many of the teachers who complete this exercise remember the confusion, doubt, and even pain they felt in school at that age...Unearthing those memories can help you understand why you enjoy some students more than others, and why some kids seem to push your buttons more. This happens because we ourselves, in early adolescence, were buffeted and shaped by the same dynamics you see in the classroom. We can still hear those echoes today, if we listen for them. And as we understand where they come from, we can gradually bring more students into our “sympathy zone.” (pp. 195–196)

Friedrich (2014), in his work questioning the production of citizens at least in part through “collective memory,” analyzes the “double impact” of calling forth memories and says, “Subjects are constituted as much through experience as through their recollection of said experiences” (p. 10). Hargreaves (1986) echoes the importance of a teacher’s own biography, or least the “sense” made of one’s own biography, in producing the investments made in everyday

decisions made in the classroom. “Being”, or at least being able to position oneself within the discursive role of “middle school teacher,” is in large part in how one calls forth and mobilizes these memories, and becomes, to paraphrase Friedrich (2014), produced both in the actual experiences of middle school and middle school teaching as in the *use* and mobilization of those recollections.

Positioning middle school and middle school teaching in a way that suggests both lived (but perhaps forgotten) trauma and immediacy in the present is certainly of note. In the process of calling forth these best-forgotten memories, they get reinscribed upon the youth in the classroom of that teacher. The student bodies come to represent the fears and traumas of that teacher’s own (presumably “typical”) middle school years. And, even if the teacher has not had an experience in the past of middle school trauma, so prevalent is the idea that trauma and middle school are temporally simultaneous, existing in time, space, language, memory and imagination all at once, that the collective “memory” of trauma pervades any real memory one might have.

The rooting of much of this can be drawn back from—and perhaps gets reified in—the discourse of adolescent that is grounded in the “developmental needs” of that group. To understand the needs of the early adolescents in our care, we are simultaneously called to remember our own experience in that same stage (suggestion of universal experience, the awkwardness of that experience, the power of empathy...), remember that we should have forgotten it, and know that the reason for so much of that awkwardness (theirs, ours) is situated in the body. The call to remember, as it were, seems situated in a presumption not only of having had a traumatic experience, but the universality of that traumatic experience. Much as the developmental needs of the adolescent are universal, so too is its constituent trauma. (The acne!

The weird growth spurts! The *odors!*) Having “remembered” this, the teacher is then asked “to exist both in the past and in the present: beginning teachers remember their own adolescence, teachers, and school experiences and must develop a relationship between the past experiences and their present approaches as a teacher” (Lesko, 1996b, p. 453). And at least some of that remembering is taking place as a bodily experience, felt by the teacher, perhaps in the moment of teaching. Such “bodily voices” (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003) come to be a significant part of the moment of teaching, even if (according to Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003) such bodily voices tend not to be heard, particularly in the literature.

The beginning of an understanding of students in middle school is understanding the body in a “scientific” or technological (Foucault, 1995) sense. A teacher can cast the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1995; Lesko, 2001; Lesko & Mitschele, 2013) and “know” the needs of that student by the stage of their body. Of course, here, the “body” must be read in all of its biological components, and the truths and fictions represented therein. A teacher can know, in this assumption, the maturity of a student by her/his physical stature (Lesko, 2001). A vital move of the discourse, though, is a call for a teacher to now bring back the memory of one’s own body and its moves through the stages of adolescence, despite the disclaimer, the caution, the caveat: *you’ve been through it, dear teacher, and though it would be best for you to forget that this ever happened to you and your body, well, hey, you survived it.* To connect with those students, we as teachers are urged that we must remember our own bodies—or, at least, that our bodies held similar needs. And now, at once, the teacher is made to sacrifice (working through the adolescent memories that *must have been* traumatic in some way), to empathize (you were no better than and so similar to that “creature” once!) and to somehow rise above both of these emotional plays to do “what’s best for the kids.” And here, discursively, we arrive back at the “science” of what

is best for the kids, which is to know their needs and centralize curriculum planning, advisory activities, and interpersonal relationships to help guide and protect them. So the teacher comes to be defined as, at least in some way, s/he who possesses and utilizes knowledge of bodies (the collective) in order that those bodies (individually) might gain, hold, and utilize (collective) knowledge (of) themselves.

Discipline and Biopolitics: The Body in Middle School

Michel Foucault (1997/2003) described a technology of power that began to emerge and take shape over the course of the eighteenth century. This technology, “biopolitics” (or, sometimes, “biopower”) is what Foucault sees as the technology of power that dovetails from the technology of discipline of the “self,” which he sees as established by this time in history. Discipline, he argues, was a technology of power that guided the “self” to being rational, to being a citizen. It was the extension of governmentality into the self. Biopolitics, however, was the move not away from, but concomitant with, discipline of the body into a regulation of multiple bodies, of populations.

To be more specific, I would say that discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished. And that new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on. (pp. 242-243)

As was noted earlier, the middle school is an attempt to “guide,” “care for,” and otherwise “steer” young adolescents to safety, towards adulthood, towards an independent sense of “self” (forming an “identity”). Students are prodded to understand themselves better and take on behaviors that will promote and continue “good health.” Many of these discourses act upon/through and make possible not only the adolescent-as-body, but also the adolescent-as-

species (or adolescent-as-population).² In Julie McLeod's (2012) chapter on the discourses and movements in, around, and through the term "middle school," she asserts that

The classificatory regimes of middle schooling are a form of biopolitics...they name and regulate a particular population group and stage of adolescence, attributing characteristics—emotional turbulence, vulnerability, role confusion—and plotting the movement of normative adolescent subjectivities. (p. 47)

This biopolitics is a discursive constitution of power on, over, and through the body. Much about the middle school, as discussed previously in this chapter, is designed with the intention of protecting and promoting the welfare and health of the child turned adolescent (the "young adolescent" or "early adolescent"). Foucault (1997/2003) continually draws upon the examples of statistics like birth and death rates, fertility, and other "knowledges" that act upon and normalize the man-as-species. The middle school is built upon the "knowledge" of the adolescent-as-population: there is a normative sequence of bodily, emotional, and intellectual development to be acted upon, measured, and "guided."

Much of this begins with what could be read as an obsessive gaze at the body of the young adolescent. By "knowing" the changing, pubertal body of the young adolescent, (the very timing of this "stage" surrounding the years typically "just before and during the onset of

² Foucault(1997/2003), in formulating the distinction between the operation of disciplines and biopolitics, creates a distinction between man-as-body, the subject of discipline as a technology of power, and man-as-species, the subject of biopolitics. This distinction may prove fruitful, too, in propelling an analysis of the discourses at play on adolescent/adolescence and on the "middle school teacher." In inserting "adolescent" in place of "man" in Foucault's terminology, I aim to draw this distinction between the gaze and mobilization of power upon the individual versus the population. A more useful formulation for the concept of adolescent as the subject of biopolitics would likely be, as suggested above, adolescent-as-population. I thank Professor Friedrich for the suggestion of this term.

puberty”), we are said to know their needs. Of course, it is vitally important to note that this gaze and this knowledge are meant to operate on the “individual” adolescent and on all (as a normalized, unitary knowledge of a stage acting as a stand-in for the individual). As Lesko (2001) notes in her introduction to *Act Your Age!*: “Adolescence can be considered part of a move to a modern nation-state, one in which social sciences and psychology helped make the inner, personal qualities of individuals visible and significant for building a modern society” (p. 9).

The young adolescent, though, is a fiction (Walkerdine, 1990) and a fabrication (Popkewitz, 2012) in the same way as the “child.” While lived as very “real” categories, “child,” “youth,” and “adolescent” are all subjects created within social and psychological sciences to respond to needs at the time of their social construction, but have since taken on a “realness” through the work and discourse of science (e.g., Foucault, 1977/2003, 1978; Lesko, 2001; Popkewitz, 2012; Vagle, 2012).

Hacking (2006) discusses the concept of people as moving targets. In creating groups of people—in this case, adolescents, but in his examples, he offers many possible groupings, such as “genius,” “homeless,” and “obese”—there is a dual movement. First is the very naming of the group *as a group*, with something believed to be an identifiable group of characteristics, and the second is the effect that those supposed characteristics and the belief in the existence of such a group has *on the members of that group*. Finally, there come to be effects back on the people within that labeled group. Hacking refers to this latter movement as the “looping effect,” which is helpful. The category and its defining tenets help to create the subjects they name. Further, and importantly, as this naming often comes with the weight of normativity and science, the groups are further reified by the “realness” noted above.

Kessen (2005) notes the “abyss of the positivistic nightmare” in the field of child psychology: “American *children* [are] shaped and marked by the larger cultural forces of political maneuverings, practical economics, and implicit ideological commitments” (p. 58). This nightmare, then, is the realization that, amidst these shifting maneuvers and commitments, there is no singular, pure child to be understood and cataloged and normalized. Perhaps, then, the “adolescent” is something of a night terror: those who try to define it or pin it down, in order to better elucidate its needs or program curricula for it instead are lashed out at; while the discursive site of the “child” may sadly be an abyss into which positivistic principles fall into a void, the “adolescent” does not stand as a possible site for such a void. Admitting this would mean that not only is there no true “stage” of adolescence, but that the development of the future of these citizens can not be purely conceived and surely known. This might account, in part, for the consistent, indelible tension between setting a core of knowledge to be known for adolescents and allowing them to pursue their own path of knowledge-holding and knowledge-creation: we know not what the true adolescent is or needs, as the “true” adolescent is a fiction, much in the same way as the “true” needs of a citizen. The investments, though, in both of these sites are certainly there, and are continuously acted upon.

The middle school teacher, then, comes to be a site for some of this same biopolitics: the middle school teacher must guide adolescent bodies to a better sense of self, a healthier development of that adolescent body into adulthood, and prepare them to enter into adult roles, to be “modeled” and “mentored” through their example. At the same time, teachers are not given voice or agency in the creation of the standards (e.g. the Common Core) to which they will be held “accountable.” It is, of course, important to note at the same time that this is not to say that teachers do not have agency in the actual delivery of curriculum, the planning of lessons, or the

interactions of children. The swirl of creating “good” middle schools, though, reformed to the needs of early adolescents, has its investments and operates discursively to produce certain possibilities and futures, while foreclosing others. This passes down to teachers: the ways in which teachers are to model good behavior, proper relationships, “good” adulthood come explicitly and implicitly to them in their positions as middle school teachers. The very enactment and embodiment of those by “becoming” the adult guide by being strong, well-grounded “role models” is itself an operation of the discourse. The body of the middle school teacher becomes the enactment of proper role model, and then becomes a site upon which future good, healthy citizens can be seen in the present. If adolescents are seen to need and even to “crave” boundaries, the body of the teacher becomes the enactment of those bounds, and the limits of those (im)possibilities.

Movement/Confinement and the (Re)Negotiation of (Classroom) Space

The space of the classroom, considered as such, is largely absent in the research literature. In handbooks, it occasionally comes up as a topic connected with effective classroom management. In *This We Believe*, the authors note that the middle school in tune with the needs of middle school students would be “attractive, inviting, clean, and structurally sound” and include a wide variety of student work or student-selected decorations on the walls (NMSA, 2010, p. 34). Wiles, Bondi, and Wiles (2006) focus primarily on space of a classroom in terms both of the physical space and layout of a classroom (i.e.: dimensions, furniture planning, color of the walls, decorations) and the space between students and the teacher, what the authors refer to as the “social interaction zone.” The description leans heavily on psychology and other sciences to describe an optimal learning environment, including detailing that extreme temperatures are not optimal for learning in middle school, and “having large panels of color that

are changed according to activity” (p. 141) may affect the learning and mood of students. In making this latter point, the authors rely heavily on a study from *Applied Ergonomics* of office workers and their moods, attitudes, and focus when working in either white, red, or green offices. The authors also extend beyond the findings of this article and mention that “pinks are often used in prisons and mental hospitals to put residents at ease” (p. 141). Undoubtedly, this is a bit of a “slip”: why include this note, about this one particular color, when it is not linked to the research article being cited, and no other color is mentioned in the same way (i.e.: this specific color, used in this particular setting, affects this particular response). In a discussion of creating an effective learning environment for middle school students—or, perhaps, a setting to tame and make docile bodies (Foucault, 1995)—this tangential note on the benefits of adorning the walls with pink sheds light on the dominant thinking about middle school students, and middle schools as institutions akin to prisons or mental hospitals.

The distance between students and teacher can also affect learning, Wiles, et al., (2006) mention. Twelve feet is too far for “meaningful communication,” at eight feet, “a kind of social interaction can occur,” at four “students and teachers can receive nonverbal feedback from one another, and at three feet, “meaning can be reinforced by touch” (p.141). For the authors, then, the connection between students and teachers is not managed by an actual engagement with the space between teacher and students, but a regulation of it in a scientific, technical sense. Regulation of color and distance can be applied to exact, particular behavioral responses in the students, a group written about in Wiles, et al. (2006) as though they are simply subjects to be controlled. The management of space is thus a creation and maintenance of proper distances and emotional responses, not a real, lived space in which interactions might occur in unintentional,

lived ways. There is also a supposition that the teacher is always the one completely in control of this space; the teacher is a manager of the environment and space of bodies.

Classroom management, which tends to imply how a teacher makes sure that students are behaving in ways that are conducive to the stated objectives of the lesson plan, also often implies that a teacher is somehow arranging and managing the space of the classroom in particular ways to affect those ends. In the discourse of classroom management, we have the confluence of the management of space, bodies, and behavior. Most of the middle school teacher handbooks hope that a teacher is presented with a classroom in which furniture is easily arranged and rearranged, so that a lesson plan's needs and the desired level of student interaction can be efficiently achieved. Here, though, the arrangement of a classroom can say much about how a teacher aims to regulate bodies and "deliver" a lesson. In fact, teachers often deploy seating arrangements or grouping scenarios that highly prioritize whether the student is (seen as) a boy or a girl. As Mellor and Epstein (2006) note, boys and girls are often brought together in ways that help to further position students in stereotypically hetero-normatively gendered ways. They offer the example of unruly boys being paired with girls in an effort for the girls to provide a calming or mature influence on the boys. Here enters the importance of the gendered/sexed bodies of the students and teachers of the classroom.

School Bodies

Gender, Sexuality, Race and Students

One of the constituent experiences and contexts of my own middle school teaching experience, and one of the operational, fundamental questions that propel me into this study is the need to see boys and girls very differently in the middle school setting. While certainly much is questioned and researched around assumptions made of boys and girls in preschool and

elementary school contexts, gender confines and constraints seem “entrenched” and “beyond critique” particularly in middle schools (Moore, 2012). In my own teaching context, the administration had, from the creation of the Middle School as a separate division in the late 1980s until the 2018–2019 school year, a position for a “Dean of 7/8 Boys” and a “Dean of 7/8 Girls.” For no other grades in my school are there or have there been administrative positions that singularly provide deans for one sex³ over another. Why in the middle school this presumed need? More precisely, why in the “upper” middle school years (grades seven and eight) did the school have such a “need” but do not have separate boys and girls deans in grades five and six? And why not in the beginnings of the high school, in grades nine and ten?

I have long believed that the assumed need is linked to the presumed needs of young adolescents, particularly as they enter the biological stage of puberty. There is an increased gaze and fear on their adolescent bodies, as they enter biological sexual maturity (Lesko, 2001). Consequently, there is an untroubled mirrored gaze and normative expectation for their gender (and gendered) development, along with their sexual development. “Notions of male and female not only limit and regulate bodies, they are complicit in upholding a heteronormative society” (Moore 2012, p. 80). Paechter (2012), drawing on Butler (2004), also questions the role of the sex of one’s body being read in ways that limit possibilities not only for that person’s gender identity and expression, but simply the living of one’s life.

³ I consciously chose the label of “biological sex” here, rather than gender. I presume that much of the thinking that leads to a presumed need for these two administrative roles stems from an untroubled and unquestioned matrix of biological/determined sex, gender, and heteronormativity. I question whether, say, a student who does not conform in terms of presumed gender or a trans student would fit neatly under the domain of one dean or the other.

While the gender and sexuality of middle school students is not at the forefront of the analysis here, it is a vital discourse within the discourses of early adolescence, and consequently, for the presumed needs being met in the middle school. If we make a not-altogether large step from those presumed needs to what we know of the overall expectations of middle school teachers, and their discursive production of themselves as “adult role models” of “proper behaviors,” there are clear implications for how middle school teachers are further constructed in gendered ways. Teachers also structure ways in which gender is “properly” embodied and enacted. As Connell (2002) importantly notes: “Gender difference is not something that simply exists; it is something that happens, and must be made to happen; something, also, that can be unmade, altered, made less important” (p. 14).

Caldwell and Frame (2016) note the important role that teachers of color play in serving as both role models and support systems for students of color. They describe the “unpaid part-time job” that teachers of color often assume, which is that of counselor and support to students of color who seek them out for advice on dealing with the racism encountered with white students or teachers, or the microaggressions of the day. Students of color often seek out the few-and-far-between teachers of color for presumed, but often real, shared perspectives and lived experiences.

Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) write critically about the implications of hegemonic heterosexism in middle schools. They found that “central to girls’ and boys’ descriptions about being female and male is the requirement to be heterosexual or to display heterosexual behaviors” (p. 98). In interviewing and observing middle school students, they found that girls’ expression of femininity was made possible through regulation of and recognition of the importance of appearance and interest in boys, while an expression of masculinity for the boys

was largely centered around being “antifeminine” and expressing sexual desire for girls. The borderwork (Thorne, 1993) helps to regulate and delineate the boundaries of acceptable masculinity and femininity available to middle school students, and keeps the possible range of masculinities and femininities narrow.

Jen Gilbert (2014) opens her study, seeking and pushing the limits around sexuality in schools, particularly as they put bounds around the school lives of LGBTQ youth and faculty, by exploring the role of sexuality in any school. She notes that too often sexuality equates simply to sex, and to the “invasion” of hormones in adolescent youth. In questioning this stance, and offering others, she asserts:

When educational institutions try to cordon off sexuality in the health class or the guidance counselor’s office, to fix ‘sex’ as a knowable and discrete entity, that effort reflects a tacit acknowledgment that sexuality moves through educational objects and pedagogical relations in unpredictable ways. (Gilbert, 2014, p. xiv)

I raise sexuality, then, as a very real means by which subjects are produced and subjectivities are made un/available to not only the youth in schools, but to the faculty and staff as well. Again, while much of the study does not explicitly tackle sexuality in its design, I wanted in carrying out the study to remain very open to what was un/said and what was un/done with respect to sexuality in the lives of the middle school teachers with whom I came in contact.

Nancy Niemi (2005) writes about the possibility that there is an impossibility to “being” both a “good boy/good girl” and a “good student” simultaneously. Ultimately, the attempt to occupy both subject-positions simultaneously is untenable, and leads to, at the very least, a great amount of struggle for the students negotiating these subject-positions in their schools, amongst the gazes of their teachers and their peers. “When gender identities are sublimated by student identities, they become even more powerful: gender feels natural as it resides in a student identity, thereby masking the ways in which gender and schooling interact” (Niemi, 2005, p.

486). Moore (2012) points to any literature invoking a “boy crisis” in schools as part and parcel to/of the problem. She draws from Butler (1993) and Lesko (2001) to explore how the subject position of the “boy” student is read through a lens of hegemonic masculinity (after Connell, 1995/2005). “Boy” becomes reified as singular, masculinities are denied as a range of subject positions and lived experiences, and the objectives of interventions for the presumed “crisis” of boys in schools utilizes and reinforces these views. Certain “behaviors are noticed in the boys because they are expected. Such observations, in conjunction with the expectations placed on male bodies, reify the dominant notions about boys (Moore, 2012, p. 85).

Black adolescents get positioned in ways that make school success something that can be read by peers as “selling out” or getting read as trying to be white (Ward, 2005). Positive racial identity development is often taken up for students of color primarily in the home, as rarely are school curricula designed to mirror or celebrate the histories of communities of color; the role of the school in developing such curricula to mirror success for students of color is a significant one (Caldwell & Frame, 2016). Ladson-Billings (1998, 1999) points to the need for development of teachers to teach students from a variety of races, cultures, and backgrounds, as schools and teacher education programs have historically struggled at training teachers for meeting the needs of students of color, or students from traditionally underserved or underrepresented communities.

Gender, Sexuality, and Schools

In *History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1978), Foucault notes that secondary schools dating back to the eighteenth century, within the creation of the institutions themselves had:

the question of sex [as] a constant preoccupation...The space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of the recreation lessons...all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children. What one might call the internal discourse of the institution—the one it employed to address itself, and which circulated among those who made it function—was largely based on the assumption that this sexuality existed, that it was precocious, active, and ever present. (p. 28)

Further, “The sex of children and adolescents has become, since the eighteenth century, an important area of contention around which innumerable institutional devices and discursive strategies have been deployed” (p. 30). Much of the gaze at adolescents, as described above, can be read as a gaze meant to regulate and patrol the gender roles and sexual identities that are meant to be associated with the adults they will be “becoming.” Consequently, Foucault’s notion that the “internal discourse of the institution” “referred...to the sexuality of children” can be seen as referring to middle school as an institution, perhaps in particular.

Connell (2002) makes the same clear in the present day: “Embodied learners encounter the gender regimes of the institutions they come in contact with. ... In a school, the teachers present a range of different patterns of masculinity and femininity to children, simply as a result of the diversity of their own lives.” Of course, even with that said, there are boundaries patrolled around what is seen as acceptable patterns of masculinity and femininity, often bound around heteronormative assumptions of gender. These heteronormative assumptions in turn are made unquestioned/unquestionable parts of what it even means to be “professional” in an educational setting (Mizzi, 2016).

Gender and Sexuality Historically

In the nineteenth century, as the need for teachers grew, school reformers and supervisors looked to lure more women to teaching, and, as this expansion began, teaching became about a woman’s natural ability to do the job. In the earlier part of the century, the emphasis was on creating educated mothers who, in turn, would provide for and instill in their children the character and moral set that would allow them to become future citizens and defenders of the burgeoning republic. The “republican motherhood” argument is one that was used by most supporters of education for women in the early half of the nineteenth century. “Political virtue

became domesticated, and the republican mother became the ‘custodian of civic morality’” (Nash, 1979, p.172). Women had to be taught the requisite skills for citizenship not to bring greater equality to the “women’s sphere” of society, but for those women to be able to raise their children in a manner that would allow *them* to be productive, participatory citizens. Young boys could grow up to be men participating fully in the economic and democratic life of society, and women would repeat the process, becoming the caretakers and early educators of their own children. Women teachers were seen as performing the “formative work of the mother” (Tyack & Hansot, 1988, p. 35), or, according to Horace Mann, a woman was predisposed to teaching due to her “constitution, and faculty, and temperament” (Rousmaniere, 1997, p. 121). Correspondingly, the role of the teacher changed “from one of disciplinary power to moral exemplar” (Rousmaniere, 1997, p. 119).

The nineteenth century notion of a “genteel” woman closely corresponded with the qualities supervisors desired in their teachers; teaching became a “natural” extension of a woman’s “nature.” Thus, one’s successes and failures were part and parcel not only of one’s practice, but also of one’s own *being*. Within school reform movements of the nineteenth century, there were “propaganda campaigns” that heavily reinforced and emphasized the “nurturing” qualities of women school teachers. Male school supervisors reported women’s disciplinary measures as motherly and caring, while female teachers in the same districts would through correspondence report discipline that was primarily corporal or physically coercive in nature. Reformers, though, pushed an agenda that placed a supreme emphasis on the natural qualities and proclivities of women so that teaching would actively become more populated by women.

What nineteenth-century school reformers saw as the humanizing of schooling required also the adaptation of the occupational ethic of teaching from the impersonal

delivery of information by untrained and itinerant male teachers to the personal nurturance of children's characters by a feminized teaching force. The notion of an innate attribute of caring and 'goodness' in teaching played off of cultural images of nineteenth-century female moral purity, and it neatly corresponded with reformers' efforts to feminize the American teaching force. (Rousmaniere, 1997, p. 117)

The caring mindset, though, called for a great deal of self-monitoring, reflection, and, at times, sacrifice. "The emphasis of natural and personal qualities of teaching has placed unusual pressure on teachers. In no other occupation are workers so driven to analyze, self-criticize, and evaluate their own personal behavior, identities, and motivations" (Rousmaniere, 1997, p. 118). A Foucauldian reading of this would certainly suggest that there are the technologies of the self-reflexive gaze at work on the woman and on the teacher. There are echoes of the Nineteenth Century in 21st Century teacher discourse, and, importantly, that which helps construct the middle school teacher.

As schools began to be graded, women were increasingly placed in positions in the earlier grades, while male teachers were placed in positions in higher grades and in administration (Cortina & San Roman, 2006). Indeed, graded schools rose as part and parcel of school systems, which made the business of educating the nation's youth much more highly organized and systematic. Schools took on an important role in the institutionalizing of building and maintaining society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as society changed, schools were seen as needing to fill a parenting capacity that was being lost in the home. Consequently, the school took on an even more important "mothering" role for the youth in its charge, and teachers explicitly and implicitly carried on the nurturing of the mother. Thus, it was increasingly important to put women in the roles where they would be closest to the youngest children: in the elementary grades.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century and the beginning decades of the twentieth

century, as high schools spread throughout the country, the success of girls relative to boys in school came to be recognized as a widespread problem. The vast majority of critics pointed to the “feminization” of schools, as women “monopolized” the profession of teaching (Tyack & Hansot, 1988, pp. 36-37). Parallel to the problem of boys being outperformed in schools by girls was the “woman question,” which was the notion that, as women became more educated and more successful outside of the home, they would begin to forgo their traditional roles as wives and mothers. It was also argued during this era that, while girls *could* hold their own academically with boys in any subject, they *should* not, because it would harm their physical development (Tyack & Hansot, 1998). In fact, even as these dangers were exhorted, and programs such as increased vocational and physical education were put in place to keep boys interested and invested in school, girls continued to excel in the classroom, and women continued to move into and stay in teaching. In turn, schools and the profession of teaching began being labeled problematic.

Schools as a system, primarily because of the prevalence of women in the teaching force, were seen as a tremendous problem. In 1900, 70% of the teaching force was female; by 1920, the percentage increased to 86%, *despite* active attempts to bring more male teachers in, to curb the tide in schooling in favor of women and girls (Tyack & Hansot, 1988). Attempts were made to make teaching “more professional” by lengthening the school term and raising the requirements for certification, which was designed to entice more men to pursue the job. This included making administrative positions, particularly in secondary schools, easier for men to attain than women. Women, who were largely teaching in elementary schools and not in high schools in the early twentieth century, were required to have more years teaching experience to even apply for a high school principal position than a man with high school teaching experience. “Women’s work” in

elementary schools was made quantifiably less important than a male teacher's time in a high school classroom (Rousmaniere, 2007). Women's roles in schools were questioned and critiqued considerably, with continual efforts to make schools more "male."

Men have often been noted to turn away from the role of teacher because of the minimal pay (Tyack & Hansot, 1988), and the belief that teaching is "truly a woman's profession," which simultaneously calls into question its "true" status as a profession (i.e.: Acker, 1995). After all, elementary school teaching is still dominated by a "mothering discourse," which places value on deep connections, a sacrifice of time and self, and the struggle for the mystical knowledge of when the job may be truly done (Acker, 1995). There is a frequently held belief, often unquestioned (and unconscious) that teaching is a job driven by people who have innate patience and the qualities of caretaking and nurturance—qualities often associated (again, in a stereotypical and largely untroubled way) with women. "Indeed, the only real kind of training teachers *need* [emphasis original] is in their subject matter (the rest is innate). So college professors, who are of course teachers as well (and are mostly male) are respected for what they know, not how well they convey it." (Maher & Ward, 2002, p. 112). The same can easily be said of the largely male body of teachers in subjects that require what some argue is deep knowledge of a discipline, such as math, science, and social studies. And male teachers who do go into elementary school teaching often receive praise for taking on a difficult position while no such praise is heaped upon women (see, for instance, Richardson, 2012).

In Tanner and Tanner (2007), the authors note in both the history of junior high school and middle school a history of male teachers in these institutions in an untroubled way. The attraction of male teachers to junior high school is noted as "accomplishment"; meanwhile, in noting one of the shifts that occurred in moving to a middle school model from the junior high

model, the authors say: “In general, the facilities and resources of the junior high school have been more extensive than these of the middle school, along with the higher percentage of male teachers and the provisions for more advanced studies and specialized faculty in the junior high school” (p.238). This note seems to equate the presence (or absence) of male teachers to be something to note as an achievement, and one that can help also tie to curricular specialization and development, in a matter-of-fact way. Richardson’s (2012) description of the treatment of male elementary school teachers also suggests this equivalence with male faculty and instant improvement of the faculty and instruction. Assumptions prevail about what male teachers bring to a faculty, to a classroom, and to a school.

Gender, Sexuality, and Teachers

As noted above, it is hard to delineate the how the discursive field of gender may begin and end or be delineated in terms of students, teachers, and the school itself. Foucault (1990) asserts that at some point, discourse produced that regulates subjects is not only productive of those subject positions, but also itself. It makes the institution and its practices known and recognizable. In Chapter 1, I offered examples of the bodies of teachers as curricular knowledges, while the teachers themselves perform curricular gazes upon the bodies of students (i.e.: McWilliam, 1999; Mellor & Epstein, 2006; Walkerdine, 2001).

Male teachers have been found, at both the elementary (Francis, 1998; Richardson, 2012) and secondary (Francis & Skelton, 2001) levels to engage in practices that help to normalize and police masculinity and (hetero)sexuality. Teachers, both men and women, create spaces in which certain masculinities and femininities are normalized and able to be practiced in the open. Fields (2008) opens her book on sex education and social inequality with a vignette about the combination of fear and flattery that came with a male gym teacher’s note in her middle school

yearbook: “If you were older and I were younger, what a time we would have” (Fields, 2008, p. 1).

Middle schools are seen as sites that discursively produce and reinforce heteronormativity (Mandell & Shakeshaft, 2000). What are the ways in which the gendered body of the teacher comes to stand in not just generically for authority, but the normalizing gaze of proper behaviors—in this case, performing proper gender within a heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2011)?

Particularity: The Counter to Claims of Universality

Wednesday, July 8, 2015. Meeting of the “Curriculum Scope and Sequence” committee. The round table of nine is reflecting on an activity earlier in the day, during which everyone shared a favorite lesson or unit from their teaching experience. Across the table of teachers of all levels (though I was the only middle school teacher on the committee), folks are remarking at how terrific it is that universal themes can be seen in the work of high school Latin honors classes and second grade literacy curricula. Amidst this discussion:

Erin, a high school teacher: “Yeah. We’ve got all these themes because no matter what age you’re teaching, we’re all human. Well, except for seventh graders.”

Folks in the room chuckle.

Pandi, another high school teacher: “Thank God for those middle school teachers!”

Eyes at the table turn towards me. Expectant? Knowing? Pitying?

I’m forced to offer something. I muster a tight-lipped half smile and a sound emerging as something close to an “mmmmm.”

Erin again: “NOTHING good happens in the middle school. Seventh grade is the WORST time in your life.”

Sunday, July 19, 2015. Flying home from not-home, typing the above. I feel ill. I didn't say anything. "Mmmmm." What the hell does that constitute? Admission. Defeat. Admission of defeat? Confirmation through near silence.

In noting that the “middle” in “middle school,” “middle schooling,” and middle schoolers” acts as a floating signifier, McLeod (2012) also notes that the constant underpinning of all of those “middles” to the developmental framework of early adolescence makes any discussion of middle school take on qualities of universalism, “which obscures how middle-school experience is mediated by many factors, including cultural differences, gender, social class, and school location” (p. 46). The same problems that arise because middle school discussion and reform are tied to what is believed to be itself a universal stage and a universal experience lead to discussions that often lack acknowledgments of many other factors that contextualize and mediate lived experiences. It is ironic, then, for so much of a work—this study—to be founding itself in the naming and claiming of these discourses of universal experience, time, and development, while also seeking to interrupt them. McLeod (2012) herself offers this as a reminder and an interruption of this claim to universality: “But middle-school identity is more than an abstract emblem for the contradictions of contemporary subjectivity. It is embodied, lived practically and problematically, vagrant, incomplete, lost, mobile, and a source of hope and difference (p.48).

Borrowing this phrasing from McLeod, then, in interrupting the universality of discourses of middle school experience, the move of this study is to take up this embodiment, in its possibilities and its problems, its vagaries and contradictions. Here, the static of the “middle” as

signifier for all and nothing at once can be taken up, and the conceit, seemingly universally proclaimed, that middle school as a time is something to get through, survive, and “emerge from unscathed” can be called to question. Much of the deployment of the gaze at adolescents-as-population is normalizing, as much of this chapter has explored. The particularity, the lived experiences, and the textures of bodies beyond those that get appropriated as universal (read: those bodies that are marked as Other within a dominant discursive paradigm—people of color, LGBTQ bodies) are rarely found in the literature that sets up and stabilizes “middle school,” such as the handbooks and chapters that discuss the development of the adolescent and the “natural” needs of (supposedly all) middle school students. It is the goal of this study to seek conditions in which particular experiences of particular teachers bring the problems of the broad-sweeping, often universal claims made of middle school into focus.

Chapter III - Methodology

Overall Research Design

This study was designed to uncover and trouble the subject-positions and performativities that teachers take on in order to be understood to themselves and others as a “middle school teacher” and how these roles intersect, inform, or overlap with discourses and performativities of the body. The design was as a multiple case study (Stake, 2006) to explore the discourses at work to produce and patrol the “middle school teacher.” Engaging in the research from a case study perspective allowed me to examine what contextual factors, at least from the examination of such things as published documents and web sites produced by the schools being studied, might shed light on discourses at work in the two cases to be studied. Stake (2003) notes “the study is the observation of operations. There is something to be described and interpreted...case studies need accurate description and subjective, yet disciplined, interpretation” (p. 149).

Stake (2006) suggests that what is actually being studied in the case can shift with the direction of the research and what is found over the course of a study. As it turned out, that became necessary after the COVID-19 pandemic began, coinciding with data collection in this study. While the opportunity to adapt was an important one conceptually as I planned and then began the study, it became vital during it. So, largely out of unforeseen necessity, the study went from being a case study of two different teaching contexts with interview participants in each site forming a case to a case study of one institution, but in two very different contexts of time and situation.

The goal in each case was to analyze the ways in which people spoke about and discussed enacting discourses and roles of the “middle school teacher” in order to be understood not only in those contexts alone, but also as a and possessing a “body of knowledge.”

I wrote in Chapter II about this study itself as a performance of a body of knowledge, and that obviously continues in the design of the study. One of my aims in including myself in the study is to make an attempt to include my own discursive reproductions of “middle school teacher” to help give a reader somewhat better of a window into my thinking. Further, as the site of my study was the site of my own teaching, and participants are people with whom I am teaching colleagues and friends, I feel it necessary to lay out—in as critical a way as I can manage—my investments, interests, and entanglements with the participants. Of course, what will follow will always be one representation of my thoughts, in those moments, held up as a sort of offering. While this does not mean that the work becomes more valid (a concept itself to be explored and questioned) or more reliable, teachers are often subsumed in the research literature by the voice of the researcher. It would seem that, as a full time middle school teacher while conducting this study, it would be at odds with my goals as a doctoral student to silence my own teacher subjectivity.

Further, a critique that I would imagine might come of this work is that I am appropriating feminist poststructuralist theories as an operating framework for the research and my analysis, while “being” a white, heterosexual, male, and with “being” in those categories, living privileges afforded people in those categories. Some might question the legitimacy or the purpose(s) of taking up this framework and this lens to create and engage the study. In giving further voice to the particularities of the lived experience the participants and I have over the course of this research study, I hope that, by including some of the ways in which I perform “middle school teacher” and am bound in and constructed discursively by that subject-position, it simply adds more to be considered, questioned, and taken up with the ultimate goal of finding ways to question those hegemonic productions at work and find new spaces in which to operate.

While what will follow will be an exploration of “methods” in one sense (i.e.: *how* I sought out or was open to the collection, finding, or stumbling upon of “data”), I seek also to interweave the concepts of validity and reflexivity into the discussion of the reasoning for these methods in particular, and the decisions that I made to actually bring these methods to life in my study. I hope to take St. Pierre’s words to heart: “Over the years, it has become abundantly clear to me that methodology should never be separated from epistemology and ontology (as if it can be) lest it become mechanized and instrumental and reduced to methods, process, and technique” (2014, p. 3).

Multiple Case Studies: The Initial Design, and the Decision to Change “Cases”

The context of each case shapes the activity, the functioning, and the experience of the cases in different and important ways (Stake, 2006). While it is not the goal of a multiple case study to explicitly seek out a comparative report with the goal of generalizing findings along the lines of contrast found, Stake (2006) suggests that pursuing two (or more) cases gives an opportunity to analyze the cases to seek contrast as another way of understanding the data. The first and most important goal of the case is to use various methods to come to understand the context of the case as well as possible. (Stake, 1995). Then, a critical element is “thick description” of the case, presenting rich and textured description to the reader of the study. In fact, there is some methodological debate on whether case study is more of a means of conducting a study or a means of reporting a study, with the emphasis predominantly on the critical nature of this “thick description” (Yazan, 2015).

Case Selection & Contexts of Sites

Participants were originally to be selected from two different schools. As noted above, the circumstances of COVID-19 and the shutdown of schools coincided with data collection. I

will offer here both my original thinking on the study design, and the decisions made to ultimately change that design and treat the post-COVID-19 realities of the first research site and its participants as a different “case.”

The first—and ultimately only—institutional site was the school in which I taught at the time of the study, the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 school years. (I still teach there as of the final writing of this study in 2022.) The choice to use this site as the first case was made so that any of the narratives offered from my own experiences could be read against and with other participants who are in the same teaching context (at least, institutionally). The questions this seemed to support exploring were: How are teachers constituted discursively as “middle school teacher” in the same institutional context? How do they position themselves within or against these discourses, and how might they come to embody “middle school teacher”?

Given, too, my own investments in my setting, I sought to use the “insider” status I have there not only to gain access, but as a means of further reading the case. I hoped that the “shades of autoethnography” that I have used will help position my own positionalities as a middle school teacher within the case being studied. Further, by looking more deeply into the case of my own teaching context by focusing primarily on experiences other than my own, I hoped to unearth some complexity through the other embodied experiences of this context and shed further light upon it.

Research Site: Cedar Day School

Cedar Day School is a co-ed, independent, college preparatory, PK-12 day school in the suburbs north of New York City, situated in Westchester County. The school has operated for over 150 years, something the school takes pride in articulating in publications and on the school website. The school has approximately 1000 students, with roughly a third of the students in the

school in the Middle School division. Roughly a third of the entire student body self identifies as students of color; a statistic is not offered breaking this statistic down by division.

Cedar Day includes grades five through eight in the middle school, a somewhat broader span than many area independent and public schools with the inclusion of the fifth grade. While the division operates in many ways that pull all four grades of students and faculty together, there is a separation between the 5th and 6th grades and the 7th and 8th grades, as the 5th and 6th grade have the bulk of their classes in a different space in the building than the 7th and 8th grades. Within the school, this is often referred to as the “upstairs” and “downstairs.” Participants occasionally noted this divide and referenced these organizational groupings in their interviews.

The participant faculty members noted a few times in their conversations two major pieces of school culture that funnel into middle school. One is the ever-present pressure to not only attend college, but particular colleges. The list of colleges graduating seniors plan to attend is often touted on the school website and social media accounts in the late spring. The list is comprised of “highly selective” colleges and universities, and the names of those institutions can often funnel into middle school dealings. (Anecdotally, in my third year of teaching fifth grade, I distinctly remember a boy I taught—after I had given a pep talk about not worrying about their grades, trying to counteract the anxiety that came with fifth grade being the first year in the school in which they received grades—telling me that grades *did* matter because there were only 2,863 days left between that day and his impending entrance into Yale.) Participants each noted in various contexts that there is a blend of pressure on students to perform well enough that they place into honors classes (honors tracking begins for math in the 7th grade, and for science in the 8th grade) but that there is often a discourse among many—faculty, parents, and students alike—

that middle school is “the time” to make mistakes and learn from them “before things count” in the high school years.

The second component of the school culture noted by the teacher participants several times was the set of resources available to them at Cedar. The tuition for the 2020–2021 school year was listed on the website as above \$40,000 for grades 5–8. The resulting monetary resources, combined with administrative and parent association support, mean that teachers often have access to the teaching materials and supplies that they need or want upon request, and that the desire to attend workshops and seminars for professional development is widely and generously supported. Participants frequently noted the “ample resources” of the school as a benefit of the job, and one of the major components of the experience in teaching at Cedar, especially as compared to other institutions each participant had taught in previously.

Proposed Second Site

It was my intention pre-pandemic to work with faculty in a public school within 20 miles of where I teach and live. It was my belief that finding a second context would help provide a wider range of experiences and student and teacher bodies from which to draw experiences, data, and narratives. Another reason for the original desire to select a public school to go alongside the first case involves the type of preparation teachers undergo (or not) to teach in these different sites. As public schools in NYS demand education coursework for certification, and there is no such demand in independent schools, I conceptualized that teachers might position themselves differently as teaching professionals in a middle school context given this training—or that “middle school” discourse would in certain ways have echoes across contexts that would have been important to unpack.

One other goal in drawing from a public school would have been to study a case that more closely represents the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the surrounding communities. According to the New York State Department of Education website, as of the 2017-2018 school year, New York had 2.62 million students enrolled K-12: 43% are white, 27% are Hispanic or Latino, 17% are black or African-American, 10% are Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 2% are multiracial, and 1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native. In Westchester County, the county in which my school is situated, there were 146,283 students, of whom 45% are white, 33% are Hispanic or Latino, 13% are black or African-American, 7% are Asian or Native American/Pacific Islander, 3% are multiracial, and less than 1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native. Statewide, 58% are classified as “economically disadvantaged,” while in the county, 40% are. The Department of Education maintains this definition of the term economically disadvantaged:

Economically disadvantaged students are those who participate in, or whose family participates in, economic assistance programs, such as the free or reduced-price lunch programs, Social Security Insurance (SSI), Food Stamps, Foster Care, Refugee Assistance (cash or medical assistance), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Safety Net Assistance (SNA), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or Family Assistance: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). If one student in a family is identified as low income, all students from that household (economic unit) may be identified as low income. (NYSED.gov)

The second site would have presented a very different socioeconomic context from the first site, as well. Across the student body at the first site, which is PK-12, 34% self-identify as students of color, compared to the 57% of students in Westchester County who identify in racial/ethnic

categories other than white.⁴ Perhaps of even greater note, though, is the socioeconomic disparity which is at play in the communities. As noted above, Cedar Day charges in excess of \$40,000 for annual tuition, which 16% of the families at the school receive financial aid towards paying; the other 84% pay full tuition. As a source of contrast, a family of four would qualify for the state's Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Plan (SNAP) by earning a gross annual salary of just over \$30,000; by the state's definition above, such a family would be part of the "economically disadvantaged" families that the State maintains data on, and 40% of the students in the county fit this definition.

The second site would have provided important opportunities for depth and possibilities for contrast, and unfortunately that opportunity was lost due to the pandemic. I had been due to finalize preparations to enter into a district that met my initial design goals, but contact with the leaders in the district ended abruptly around the time of the beginning of the pandemic. While I was not given an explanation, I must presume that the various daily challenges of leading any school from the shutdown of March 2020 onward simply made my request as an outside researcher with no existing connection to the district beyond the scope of what any district or building leader wanted to or could have been expected to manage. I also imagine further that recruiting participants, which I would have been doing in late March and early April of 2020, would have been an enormous challenge.

⁴ Here I am not using the term "students of color" simply to maintain the language employed on the NY State Department of Education Data site. I hesitate in utilizing language which suggests any group as "other than" another, but I thought it important to try to mirror the language provided by both institutions.

Second Case: Same Location, New Case

Consequently, my focus in the fall of 2020 became shifting course and adapting the study to consider my own institution and the participants I had worked with initially in a second context: teaching during the pandemic, as well as teaching in a post-George Floyd moment. The focus on bodies as potential vectors for disease transmission, the need to distance and to mask, the need to remain at various times remote from one another, *and* the call to more actively and concretely attend to how one as an educator was living up to being anti-racist (Kendi, 2019)—these forces all brought bodies of teachers and students into sharper focus. I wanted to consider, then, how re-engaging the same participants in these new contexts, along with bringing them together in conversation, would provide a new “case” of sorts. Consequently, I treat the new contexts of March 2020 through the 2020–2021 school year as a new case, despite the same site and participants.

In order to explore the new and ever-evolving case with the participants who were a part of the first phase of the study, the three participants were brought back together via Zoom for a focus group in late November 2020. (See Appendix E for the focus group protocol.) The focus group was chosen because it would allow for the participants to discuss together some of the themes I had identified in the interviews that seemed relevant to the new contexts that had emerged since March 2020. Given the profound isolation we had all been experiencing, it felt important to put the participants in conversation with one another. Tracy (2013) notes that focus groups can be very effective for their ability to allow ideas to “cascade” and interact with one another; they are also good for exploring emotional experiences—and pretty much everything about teaching and life in general in November 2020 and the months preceding were highly emotional.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

My proposed timeline was to recruit and work with participants in the first case in the fall and early winter of the 2019–2020 school year, and to enter and work with the participants in the second case during the late winter and spring of 2019–2020. As noted above, the pandemic necessarily changed the timeline for the second portion of data collection, and necessitated abandoning working with the desired second site’s faculty. Consequently, per my proposal, I recruited and selected three participants in my first case, and I was able to complete the proposed three interview per participant protocol with each of the recruited participants by early March 2020, just days prior to the school closing for spring break, and then staying remote upon return for the duration of the 2019–2020 school year.

Recruited participants were chosen with the first criteria being that each had completed at least one year of middle school teaching prior to participating in the study. I wrestled with the question of whether or not to preclude teachers who have just entered the profession, or have just entered middle school teaching, perhaps from another teaching setting. I followed Stanko (2012), who needed to consider who constituted an “English teacher” in selecting participants for her study. For a while, I anticipated having a cut-off so that only teachers who were in or beyond their third year in middle school would participate. But then I wondered about a teacher with a wide range of experience who had just moved into middle school; a teacher with over a decade of elementary school teaching experience in multiple grades in several contexts who had only recently moved into the middle school came to mind. I asked myself if she, theoretically, would not have something compelling to add to this study, and if she would certainly have experiences enough in the middle school to answer some of the questions I am currently planning on asking participants. The answer seems to boil down to experience on some level: a teacher in her/his

first day of teaching middle school would not have experience to draw from. But, then, here too is an assumption. After all, looking back at the very narrative I use to open this study in Chapter I, I started to learn and sought to embody and communicate with students something about what it meant to be a part of “middle school” on that very first day. Ultimately, then, some arbitrary number of years of experience in middle school teaching seemed just that: arbitrary. It seemed more vital, simply, to have a participant willing to engage the study and draw from her/his experiences. A career of longer duration would not necessarily have equated to getting somehow “better” data.

In pursuing the participation of teachers from my research site, I first obtained permission from the principal of the school to contact middle school teachers for participation in the study. Once IRB approval was obtained, I formalized permission with the middle school principal, and then began recruiting. With permission obtained, I distributed to all middle school teachers a brief introductory letter (Appendix B), asking for teachers who are interested in thinking about and reflecting on “what it means to be a middle school teacher.” The letter outlines the time commitment involved, which I estimated to be around an hour and a half per interview, depending on the responses of participants.

Those interested in being a part of the study answered some basic introductory questions at the conclusion of the letter about themselves and their teaching experience. In this way, with more than three people interested in participating, I was able to select from those participants, looking to ensure that I had both men and women (as they identified themselves in their responses). Further, I hoped to recruit faculty of color and members who self-identify as part of the LGBTQ community. As one of the frameworks for the research was around the conceptualization of the “body of knowledge” and the “knowledge of bodies” of middle school

and middle school students, I aimed to see how gender, sexuality and race might begin influencing, informing, limiting, and prohibiting certain actions by teachers in their efforts to be a “middle school teacher.” As I aimed to have a variety of voices involved, it was invaluable, given the discourses at work in producing the site of “middle school,” to put gender, sexuality, and race all at play, as I strived to achieve an intersectional analysis of the embodiment and discursive production of the middle school teacher.

While I do not mean to reinforce binary constructions or essentialist notions of singular identifiers, I hoped that including people across several of these identifying categories opened a spectrum of experiences in the contexts in which we work that may not be as fully possible if I were to include only other heterosexual, white, men. Further, by *not* including people who self-identify in a variety of ways, I would be seemingly silencing these voices, which for so long have been silenced in academic research. It would not be in keeping with my framework, my research questions, or my personal ethics or interest in the study. I also wanted to stay open to new lines of inquiry as they became available. I aimed to employ questions to try to get a relative spectrum of “bodies” participating—not to essentialize the experiences of the participants in those bodies as somehow representative of the bodies they embody or to try to generalize from the data produced in interviews—but, rather, to attempt *not* to privilege only, say, white, heterosexual, male teachers’ voices and experiences.

Consequently, the goal was to select a first participant that afforded as intersectional an analysis of the willing participants as possible. The intent from there was to combine the survey data and snowball sampling to select the second and third participants. I also asked each successive participant to suggest others within the faculty who might have differing views on middle school teaching and might be differently situated within the discourses being

investigated. Combined with the data from the surveys, I identified three participants who offered narratives of middle school embodiment and discourse that provided enough contrast to one another that the data collected was “deep” and offered a variety of perspectives on middle school teachers, how they embody roles of middle school teaching, and their interactions with and knowledge of middle school student bodies.

Selected Participants: Partial Sketches

The first participant selected was Dominic, beginning him for several reasons. The first was that he had expressed on numerous occasions his desire to be a part of the study. Dominic and I are close; I mention him specifically later in this chapter as someone who had even expressed to me, back when I was designing this study, that he should probably be actively *excluded* because he “knew too much” about me, my passions and interests, and my investments in this project and as a middle school teacher. I thought, beyond the convenience of beginning with Dominic, that he would also serve to offer a window into opening up my own observations as a white male in the same teaching context. While I do not want to privilege these subject positions, I wanted to explore how his perceptions might overlap or diverge from my own. Making this decision, I broke somewhat with my intention in selecting my first participant. But, given my survey responses, I knew I would have access to people who would still fit my desired qualities in the recruited group of three participants.

I then utilized my designed recruitment, proceeding with snowball sampling, alongside the general call for participants and the survey data that was collected along with that call. Six people expressed interest either formally or informally as a result of my recruitment email. I also, as proposed, utilized Dominic’s thoughts on who would have opinions and experiences differing from his own, leading me to speak with Holly. Discussions with Holly then helped solidify

Zadie as a third participant, as she had expressed interest, and had been recommended not only by Holly, but by Dominic as well.

Below, I will give brief introductory glimpses into Dominic, Holly, and Zadie, with particular respect to patterns or themes as I (re)read, experienced, and felt them. I will also share some biographical information that each person shared with me in our initial interview about their teaching career. Obviously, these are (re)constructions of and (re)presentations of participants that can not fully honor their complexities and richness, but I offer them as incomplete glimpses. In an effort to counteract some of the force and power of my (re)constructions and (re)presentations, in these introductory glimpses and beyond, I seek to honor their voices by presenting more than just short snippets and sound bites from our conversation. When and where possible, I will offer lengthier engagements with the voices of these participants as a possible window into the conversations—though obviously I am also doing the selecting of what views to offer you as a reader. Another goal of these introductory glimpses is to give readers a sense of my relationship to each of the participants, given that I am a colleague to each, and would hope to be considered a friend by each, as well. Thus, beyond the responsibility I bear to represent them each richly as a researcher, I have personal investment in wanting to represent them well as someone who cares about them and also acknowledges the great deal I owe them in making this study possible.

Dominic

Dominic taught seventh grade Spanish and also served part-time as a counselor in the Cedar Day Upper School; since the interviews and focus group, Dominic has shifted roles in the school. Dominic is a white male in his 40s, and chooses not to disclose his sexual orientation publicly—though he identifies himself as straight and makes mention of his wife at a couple of

points in our interviews, which is the only reason I do so here. In fact, he brings it up in terms of generally not wanting to privilege his position as heterosexual, and not mentioning his wife by name or as his wife in school, referring to her instead as his partner and avoiding use of her name or use of gendered pronouns. He joked about how his wife thinks that he is “embarrassed” to bring her to school functions, as this then clarifies his sexual orientation to those in attendance. In a subsequent interview, he relayed a circumstance at school that “outed him as straight,” and which he expressed annoyance about both at the time and subsequently, as in the interview.

Dominic taught for six years in an all-boys school in a suburb of Washington D.C. prior to Cedar Day, but in between that teaching job and his ten years at Cedar, he undertook a course of study in social work, earned his degree, and worked in that field for about six years. Dominic also graduated from Cedar Day, which came up a few times in our discussions, especially as I asked participants to think back to their own time in middle school and any notable teachers in their middle school days. At least one of those former teachers of Dominic’s is a mutual colleague now, so his position as an alumnus of the school came up not only in these discussions, but it also serves as conversational fodder off and on at school.

Though not immediately apropos in terms of the content of our conversations, it should be noted that Dominic and I frequently spend time in one another’s rooms, we text frequently, he and I have coached middle school fencing together, and for four years, he was my assistant for the Summer Session, which I serve as director. These shared experiences and our closeness definitely figured into the ease of the conversations, and would definitely factor into some unspoken shared understandings over the course of our interviews. I raise this because there were occasions when I became conscious of something he and I were talking about that would not be immediately clear to a third party listening or reading the transcript, and on those occasions, I

would ask clarifying questions to get certain information “on the record.” There are times, though, that have become clear since—especially in the (re)reading of the transcripts, and listening to the interviews again since transcription—that I did not have that conscious thought, and there were things left “unspoken” in our conversations. I have tried, in the forthcoming narratives and analysis, to shed light on those moments, particularly as they impact either the clarity of the narrative, or perhaps hint at one of the “silences” I intended to “listen” for in my methodological design, a concept forthcoming in this chapter.

One of the main themes of Dominic’s comments and one of his primary investments as a teacher—which came across in the interviews, but is also something I know of him more generally—is the issue of student character. In discussing what drew him to (and keeps him in) middle school, he immediately went to issues of character education.

I think that I love to...I mean, perhaps this doesn't make me the best Spanish teacher. [...] I think that for me, issues of character and kindness and sort of social emotional development ... I would rather produce a kind student than a really great Spanish student. And I think in middle school, and maybe it's just this middle school, but I feel the complete flexibility to go on digressions to [do that]. (Dominic, Interview 1, 12/4/19)

Over the course of our conversations, Dominic would often utilize examples from these digressions to illustrate moments in class that stuck out to him as illustrations either of himself and his investments as a teacher, or to illustrate “typical” moments with middle schoolers. Dominic positioned himself within these narratives as utilizing these digressions as opportunities to do teaching that was just as important, if not more important, than learning Spanish vocabulary, conjugations, or reasons that Spanish grammar and spelling rules work the way they do, and tricks for how to remember and correctly apply them.

Another relevant and important note about my relationship to Dominic, which likely plays into my “reading” of our conversations, is the fact that Dominic taught one section of his

class in my classroom during the 2018–2019 school year. While it is the culture of our school that often teachers will leave their own rooms for another teacher to teach a section in that room, there are times when the teacher whose room it is will stay on occasion, or the teacher of the section expresses that they do not mind if the other teacher stays in the room to work at their desk during the class period. Dominic actually invited me to stay frequently, and so I was a frequent presence in his seventh grade Spanish class that year. While I was far from taking a stance of active observer, I was certainly present enough to get a sense of the daily engagement of his students and the ways in which Dominic ran his class, communicated expectations and content to students, and, importantly, would engage in the digressions he describes in the interviews. Given that experience, I will add to this introduction to Dominic that he does often utilize moments in the classroom to explore issues of character, ethics, “teachable moments” from dynamics in the classroom or hallway, or issues of power, race, gender, and sexuality, particularly as they intersect with Spanish language and culture in Spanish-speaking countries. It is in this spirit and returning to the notion of these digressions that I bring back the initial response above.

When first mentioning the character digressions in our first interview, Dominic’s first example was this:

I don't feel beholden to a curriculum so much where if I take a day to talk about like, what it means that in Spanish, you know, there's this machismo in the culture, and we can spend a day talking about it and ways we see it and why would a student laugh—which happens sometimes, if somebody uses a feminine ending to describe a boy; it happens all the time. Someone will say, you know, he is tall, but then use the feminine ending and then they laugh. And I just feel ultimate freedom to like spend half an hour if I need to, talking about, well, what's funny about getting the gender wrong and the adjective and is it as funny if you use a masculine ending to describe a girl than it is to use a feminine ending to describe a boy. (Dominic, Interview 1, 12/4/19)

It is these moments that Dominic brings up as examples of what it means to be a middle school teacher, and the means through which he frequently finds himself addressing issues he cares about, such as character development, addressing the positions of power he holds as a white male (and trying to counteract that power by naming and calling attention to those moments), and finding space for kindness and building greater equity and care in the classroom and, importantly, beyond.

One of the other themes we discussed, and which will factor into the forthcoming analysis, is the concept of “soft spots.” Dominic used this phrase (seemingly for the first time ever in our third interview) to describe the passing moments of interaction with students and advisees.

I think like, you know, there are times where we are required to interact with kids. Our classroom. Our advisory. Homeroom. But I think if I'm talking to a kid in the hallway before homeroom, or even I'm sitting in homeroom, waiting for homeroom to start, and we have a conversation going, you know, recess, or after class, the class is dismissed and two kids stick around after. The lunchroom. If you have a conversation with someone about how something's going ... like I consider those the soft spots. Although, like I said, I hadn't really termed it that before, but I *love* the soft spots of school. (Dominic, Interview 3, 12/16/19)

Dominic sees these moments as moments to convey care and make students feel known, and it is in these moments that he believes he can best make connections that have greatest impact on the character education he so values. These moments of connection—these “soft spots”—will be an idea explored later.

Holly

Holly is a middle school Latin teacher, teaching sections of Latin to students from sixth through eighth grade. Holly identifies as a white female in her 30s, who is an “open member of the LGBT community.” At the time of our initial interviews, Holly had taught at Cedar for eight years, and prior to that, she taught for two years in an “alternative” high school for students who

needed individualized learning plans for a variety of reasons. She described much of the work of those two years as “essentially tutoring.” In describing what brought her to middle school, she mentions that she had done work in a Montessori school in high school and part of college, as well as roles in an afterschool day care center and as a nanny. Against this backdrop of lots of work with kids, Holly describes initially wanting to be an academic in the field of classics, but that the pressure to publish “just wasn’t fun for me,” which in turn brought her to a program in classics teaching pedagogy, specifically in grades seven through twelve. It is from that program that she entered Cedar.

As one of the primary teachers of Latin in middle school, most of her students are students that she has for multiple years, and in some cases, three consecutive years. Her conversations about the students, then, frequently conveyed both a level of care and knowledge as well as a great deal of care about the students’ development as Latin students and as people. She seemed to demonstrate a good deal of pride in knowing her eighth grade students in that intimate way that afforded her an ease of manner and communication with them. She also drew on stories of their growth and their progression as students through the middle school, and how much the connections that she forms with her students (and her advisees) mean to her.

These connections—and the importance she holds to forming them—are also apparent to me in my relationship with Holly in school. Like Dominic, Holly and I have frequent conversations daily while at school. Holly, like Dominic, frequently visits my room to chat and debrief the events of the day. Holly also stepped in to help me coach middle school fencing when Dominic stepped away from the team, and she has also helped me co-lead the Middle School Gender Sexuality Alliance (formerly known as—and still sometimes persistently referred to instead as—the Gay Straight Alliance). The meetings were held in Holly’s room prior to Holly

having any formal role, as she asked to “hang out” for some of the meetings in 2018–2019, and then approached me about more formally being the co-advisor to this student club for the 2019–2020 year. She joked at the time of asking me (and this joking is referenced in one of our interviews) that she wanted to ensure I, as a straight man, was making GSA “gay enough.” In our interview, though, she assures me that I “bring plenty of gay to the table” (Holly, Interview 3.1, 3/6/20).

For Holly, what came across in her carefully considered answers—there were multiple times when Holly asked for a moment to think through a question before delving into a response—was an energy, passion, and investment of herself as a teacher in the idea of “being around” students. Multiple times, it came across that Holly finds genuine joy in being with and near middle school students, embracing their quirks and foibles. She smiled and chuckled in recounting anecdotes of students in her room or in her interactions with them before and after class and in the hallways. She also articulated in multiple moments over our conversations the idea of being a middle school teacher as one that she enjoys because of the energy and joy she gets from hearing about their interests, exploring some of the music and shows that the students might be into in a given moment, and feeling “cool” and “connected” as both its own reward, and something of a responsibility.

I feel like I professionally get so much out of [teaching middle school]. Like, I ... like yes, I teach the same subject over and over every year for eight years, but I don't, I don't feel bored with that. I feel like I change things up a lot. Like, I like coming in and doing this stuff with them. Like, I feel sort of very satisfied professionally with what I do. I don't feel like I would ever want to be an administrator. Like, I don't feel bored with the things I do. Like, I like ... I like what I do, because the kids are different every year. Right? So I feel like I do get a lot out of them. And also I don't want ... I love kids, but I don't want kids myself. So like, I get something very personal, that like I get to be around kids.

I think there's something very important about just on a human level to be able to interact with the younger generations, I think there's something that's like ... I don't know ... just like important to your soul to be able to interact with like, younger generations of

humans and like, contribute to them and like all those things—without having to like really fully commit to like the at-home portion of it. So, you know, I love that. I think they're at such a cool age. A lot of that is selfish. Like they still think I'm funny and so like I get a lot of like validation that ... as horrible as that sounds. It's like okay, maybe my adult friends don't think I'm funny *but these kids do*. [Holly laughs.] (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20)

While some of the phrasing will be analyzed further in Chapter IV, for this moment, I offer this glimpse of our discussion as an opportunity to hear Holly's thoughts on this notion of fun and energy, as well as the "importan[ce] to your soul" (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20) in connecting with and being with young people.

Holly positioned herself on occasion as something of a "non-typical" teacher and a "non-typical" woman, both of which figured into ways in which she constructed meaning of being a role model, of being a middle school teacher broadly, and as someone who "embodies" middle school teacher. She spoke several times about being authentic, and was clearly invested in being seen as authentic, and had investment in that authenticity contributing in some way to the students. In the above passage, she notes "contribut[ing] to them" and this idea of offering something to students beyond Latin and classics and Roman history was an investment that Holly articulated multiple times. It was against this authenticity, though, that Holly would often draw herself as something outside of the norm, or outside of the typical. "I think a lot of times there's a very sort of rigid idea of what being a teacher looks like, when you're a man and when you're a woman. And I feel like I'm not any of those things, but that it's okay. And so it's important to me that the kids get to see an authentic person in front of them" (Holly, Interview 2, 2/26/20). This sentiment will be explored in more depth, but it was a pattern that I read in the ways in which Holly narratively constructed herself as a middle school teacher.

Zadie

Zadie is a seventh grade life science teacher, who has taught at Cedar Day for seven years, and taught in St. Croix for five years before that. Zadie identifies as a biracial, Black, heterosexual woman in her 40s, and she often references her West Indian roots as a part of her identity. Zadie spoke enthusiastically over the course of our three conversations, often speaking for several minutes on any given question—and sometimes asking to be redirected back to the question. She mentioned herself—by way of apologizing to me several times that I would have to type the transcripts—as a bit of a rambler. Rather than classifying it this way, though, I would say that Zadie spoke very fluidly about topics she felt great passion for. (I have found this at other times in knowing her, too.) The self-described “rambling” did not happen with every question, but, rather, when Zadie had an opportunity to talk about her classroom practice, particularly in light of getting students interested, engaged, and invested in science and sustainability and environmental stewardship, she would speak at length, with involved and detailed anecdotes to detail scenes in which this passion could be known to others. Further, these topics came up even when the prompt would not necessarily have led one to these topics. I have chosen to read these diversions back to stories of lessons, of mentor teachers, and or classroom scenarios as windows into that passion and investment on Zadie’s part—not digressions or ramblings.

Zadie and I do not speak as frequently or have quite as many overlapping moments in school as the ones I share with Dominic and Holly, but when we have conversations at lunch time, or we find ourselves debriefing politics, or chatting about dynamics at school, I have always felt an ease with Zadie, and found her to be someone who cares deeply about many things. I also served as an advisor to her son when he came through the seventh and eighth grade,

so we (I think!) developed some trust and a deeper engagement with one another through those conversations over the course of two years, as well.

Zadie also spoke passionately about using her position as a middle school teacher, and as a Black, female scientist as a means to affect change. Multiple times in our conversations, Zadie would link teaching, her subject positions and her positionalities, and equity work. She viewed that work in multiple ways: creating a space for learners to have access to and benefit from the learning, regardless of upbringing or access to resources (such as tutoring, past travel or learning experiences or parents/caretakers with a knowledge base that gives certain students a “leg up” in science); utilizing the tools of science to create sustainable and environmentally just communities; allowing all students to feel success, regardless of results on graded work (which she noted as “constructed violence”); and ensuring that the classroom and other school spaces, such as homeroom and advisory, are safe, comfortable, and accessible for all. With particular respect to her subject positions as a biracial Black woman she examined her role as a mentor and role model for students of color, for girls, and for the girls who were students of color. Zadie spent time reflecting particularly on her ease (or lack of ease) in connecting with Black female students in recent years. (This will be a discussion examined later.) Another influence on Zadie’s teaching and passions is her love of and commitment to the arts. She drew reference to herself as a dancer, and the powerful role of a dance teacher in her youth in shaping her perspective on nutrition and being healthy, treating one’s body well. She also noted that she would use some of that call to movement in her own movements around the classroom, or as part of a lesson— noting as a particular example giving her students a little moonwalk when discussing cells with no cell walls, and the tin man when cells have cell walls. Bringing dance into lessons was part of discussing the role of creativity in teaching—describing lesson planning as an opportunity to get

creative—but it was also connected to the notion that, as a teacher “there should be no boundaries. There aren’t silos. It all relates” (Zadie, Interview 1, 2/24/20). Interestingly, over the course of our discussions, it seemed that this meant both for the sense of boundaries between disciplines, but also in opening herself up to her students, and offering personal anecdotes. These anecdotes served as a major piece of what Zadie shared with me, seeming to share with me what she would share with students.

Zadie described getting into teaching through a variety of influences. One of those motivating factors was her own middle school experience. She recalled teachers that bored her: “But the idea, it started when I was in middle school, thinking, ‘man, I wish ... I wish that this teacher had put in a little bit more effort to make this visual or hands on,’ and ‘oh my gosh, I cannot stomach another terribly done history lesson where I come into the class and all the notes are already on the board’...” (Zadie, Interview 1, 2/24/20). She also discussed coming from a family where her mother is an educator, and her father spent some time as one. Growing up, Zadie described setting up Barbie dolls as students and delivering lessons—noting that this was of course “mostly mimicry.” Another factor was her own love of breaking down information for people and explaining it, as well as learning from others. She expressed wonder at being in settings, prior to being an educator, where people would have access to knowledge and would not immediately break it down and explain it for those who did not have that same, shared understanding or prior knowledge.

Tuesday, November 17, 2015. Discussing the upcoming faculty meeting with Dominic. Desperately trying to figure out how to structure the activity I’m supposed to be leading, and he’s offering feedback, but he drops in one of his knowing comments about “well, we’re just

middle school teachers, so, well, what do we know.” He knows a good bit about the questions I ask and the assumptions I trouble about middle school in my doctoral work, and, consequently, in our school.

I give him some look. Something to communicate that I know he thinks he’s being funny, but he’s not being funny. I have a deadline. I have to make a meeting happen, and hopefully in some useful, meaningful way. His response to the look: “Calm down. I was just getting you all fired up.” And he pauses, and then says, “There’s no way I could participate in your study. I know way too much.”

Insider/Outsider

One vital consideration in this study is my own set of positionalities within the research. As I have noted, I was brought to the study fully invested and embodied as a middle school teacher. The research questions are both highly theoretical and vitally and fully lived—actual concerns and questions that reflect my practice. To maintain the positivistic parallel universe fiction of a distanced researcher stance, observant of but personally unaffected by the research and the participants, I would be denying my own embodiment of the research, the subject positions constituting the “middle school teacher,” and helping to situate distance as singular, objective truth. This would be, in short, inconsistent with my framework. Consequently, as I explore later in this chapter, I employed autoethnographic tools while conducting and writing this study. Further, beyond my own investments as a middle school teacher, I was (and continue to be) an “intimate insider” (Taylor, 2011) at Cedar Day. Taylor (2011) mentions that a degree of autoethnography is taken up simply by one’s involvement with and possible existing friendships with participants—and this was certainly the case, as described above, with the participants in this study.

Complications, though, certainly come more fluidly to the fore when I write myself into the text when Cedar Day is where I have been employed over twenty years. My plan, then, heading into the study, was to embrace the insider role through self-reflexivity and a constant self-awareness (Taylor, 2011). I wrote my responses to context, to other participants' reading of context, their readings of me, and mine of them, all up front, as nearly as I could manage. Of course, there are a number of limitations to "knowing one's selves," so even for all of this engagement of self-awareness, there were things that went unrealized or unrepresented.

There are other considerations, too. Taylor (2011) notes that, in her engagement of ethnographic studies in doctoral and postdoctoral work of the queer culture of Brisbane, Australia, she found herself developing casual friendships with informants as a result of her studies, but that she also found herself using previously established friendships and those friends as informants, too. Consequently, she differentiates between insider research and "intimate" insider research. She notes that as an intimate insider in the culture—as she frequented the clubs and nightlife outside of her work that she sought to study inside of her work—it allowed her "ongoing opportunities to talk with and observe these people that are significant yet often random and unexpected—moments that one is privy to as a result of intimate contact" (Taylor, 2011, pp. 10-11). I tried as best I could to note moments of any conscious awareness I had of this happening within my study and engagement with the participants and with the research questions while being continually involved and invested in daily life in the middle school of Cedar Day.

Interviews

I utilized interviews as the primary method of coming to understand the discursive landscape of the initial case because a fundamental operating belief of this study is that "reality"

is constructed through the negotiation of subject identities and performativities taken up in those subject identities. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), “A postmodern approach to interviewing focuses on the interview as a production site of knowledge, on its linguistic and interactional aspects ... and emphasizes the narratives constructed in the interview” (p. 53). Denzin (2001) notes that: “the interview functions as a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves” (p. 25). I sought to interrogate these narratives in order to make sense(s) of the discourses at work in de/constructing the positions available to a middle school teacher. Thinking of the roles of interviewer and participant, though, in a postmodern sense means recognizing the interview as a sort of performance (Denzin, 2001), a collaborative construction of “data” that comes to be known as interview (Fontana, 2002).

In telling and shaping these narratives, we also come to open up spaces for knowing how we are made by the narratives available to us; in the context of “middle school teacher,” the identities and narratives available to us flow into, through, and out of the discourses of middle school, and the particular identities recognized and made available in particular middle school contexts. Soreide (2006) notes that the telling of oneself in a narrative helps to position oneself in the discourses and subject positions available to us, particularly in the context of the positions available through the workplace of the school. As one of the goals is to question the universal claims of middle school, the particularities and lived experiences of the participants in this study are vital.

Participants were asked to take part in three semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) interviews, and several informal email follow-ups, particularly following the interviews. Initial interviews were conducted with the three participants selected and described above: Dominic, Holly, and Zadie. Each interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A).

The questions map to the discourses explored in Chapter II and the research questions framing the study. Further, I seek to employ questions to explore the tensions between the universality of middle school discourse and the particular realities of the teachers who participate in the study. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) propose open-ended questions that elicit stories in order to co-construct data with interview participants to meet these ends.

The focus of the initial interviews was gathering information about the participants and some beliefs and experiences that they have as middle school teachers. In the first interview, the beginning of the conversation was on the participant's history as a middle school teacher. I sought to find out what brought him/her into middle school teaching, what keeps him/her in it, and what concepts s/he had about middle school before entering. I then explored a bit about the participant's own history in middle school, including as a student. We also discussed some of the context of the person's current teaching, and colleagues s/he believe might be "ideally suited" for middle school teaching. I drew much of this from the research literature from Chapter II. I also draw from the discourses outlined in Chapter II to explore a bit about the concepts of nightmares and dreams and the other ways that middle school teachers seem to call forth their own experiences in middle school; do these help construct im/possibility for these teachers, in their classrooms and in their relationships with students and others in the course of a school day? There is also a line of questioning around the qualities in people that might make them either "perfect" or "ill-suited" for middle school. I hope, too, to see how these mis/align with the discourses that have begun to be explored in Chapter II.

The second interview began by checking with the participant on the transcript from the first interview. Were there additional thoughts or clarifications s/he would like to offer? Was there anything that resonated in that interview that the participant would like to begin this second

interview by speaking about? Particular note was made to debrief on roles & subject-positions taken up while working with students & colleagues, as well as any incidents in which gendered discourses/performativities are noted. I asked each of the participants to comment on incidents that fit or challenge “middle school teacher” roles in the interim. Past this, the arc of the second interview was primarily on middle school students. What are the concepts that these teachers have about the “needs” of middle school students? What are the generalizations made about im/possibilities of middle school students? What do particular students do to substantiate or to counter these views? And, once more drawing on the dreams/nightmares theme, I will wonder with these participants about what an “ideal” student might look like in middle school.

This interview was concluded by asking participants to be mindful of the discussion and mentally note things that they notice in their own, or others’, practice with regard to any of the topics we have discussed through that point, in particular the positioning of themselves as middle school teachers and what they are asked to (not) do and what they call on themselves to (not) do as well. Further, if participants notice the ways in which they construct expectations of middle school students, or how they interact or manage those students, they will be asked to jot down those thoughts as well. I invited participants to email me observations, but did not require it. Certainly, it would have been sufficient to share these observations in the next interview. (And, of course, if participants either elect not to participate in this jotting down of thoughts, or in the sharing of those thoughts, that is, too, something to be examined and listened to.) As it turned out, none of the participants did opt to bring anything in, though they did reference things in their teaching practice or artifacts of student learning from their classrooms, where we held all of the interviews.

In the third interview, I shifted to the embodiment of middle school—the teachers in the study, and the students in their classes. Here, I began to explore explicitly the role of gender in the experiences of the teachers participating in the study, how presumptions may (or may not be) made of what can and cannot happen with students as a consequence of their gendered bodies, and then swinging things towards some kind of tentative conclusion. The interview then shifted into discussions of gender, “proper” gender roles in school, and how the participants felt gender has played into their teaching, the way that others view them as teachers, and how they might be defined (or not) as a “middle school teacher” as a result of gender. The language of “performativities” was not be used per se, but teachers will be asked if they feel that there are ways that they take on certain actions, behaviors, speech, (etc) to be a “good female/male teacher.” This will be purposefully introduced so that the participants can begin to be mindful of this interplay in their practice and in the expectations made of them in school, so that they can further reflect on this interplay both for themselves and the purposes of this research project. I aim to draw on the notion of being aware of discursive production of “norms” to be able to see beyond them to new possibilities as being important to the production of and participation in this research.

Multimodal Texts as Conversational Prompts

Given the goal of working in conjunction with the other participants, I sought ways to include texts from my autoethnographic writings, texts in popular culture that take up “middle school,” and other prompts that will elicit conversation and open-ended story telling. Participants were invited in between the first and second, and then again between the second and third interviews to bring visuals, artifacts, objects, and texts that help them make sense of “middle school.” Because I envisioned this part of the study as emerging during the course of the

relationships built with the participants, I did not know precisely what I will ask participants to “bring to the table.” One set of possibilities, though, is represented in the sketch of the third interview (Appendix A), as I presented this list of possibilities to each participant. This “visual elicitation” can form as a way of stimulating participants’ thinking, a means of reducing the power dynamic between researcher and participant, and allowing a less threatening way to discuss topics through the intermediary of an artifact (Prosser, 2013). Photographs and discussing their significance would be a way to both reduce the power dynamics of my researcher positionality relative to the participants, and it may “spur meaning that otherwise might have remained dormant in a face-to-face interview” (Clark-Ibañez, 2004, p. 1513).

Each of the participants cited interest in bringing something along, but all three wound up relying on artifacts in their classrooms to engage the prompts. Zadi in particular utilized student presentation slides, student-produced videos, and various projects they had completed that were displayed all around her room as engagements with these portions of the research. She also provided visuals from her genetics unit, as she explores genetic traits alongside such concepts as race; in doing so, she displayed pictures of herself and family members at a recent family wedding alongside similar pictures from her the white female teacher who taught another section of the same class. These “artifacts” figured into Zadi’s discussions of how her body was something she consciously brought attention to in the classroom, and figured prominently in our discussion of the intersections of her body, her subject-positions, and the particular subject-position of “middle school teacher.”

Why Not Participant Observation

For some time I debated the use of observation in my data collection. In earlier iterations of the research, I thought it would be important to utilize an observation of a teacher in the

classroom and then, as importantly, in the times and spaces outside of the classroom and with colleagues and students, to see how these professionals negotiated spaces other than the classroom in making themselves “middle school teachers.”

Several problems emerged from this consideration, though. First, there was simply a concern of the reality of scheduling observations of other teachers while being a full-time middle school teacher myself. Even finding time within my own building would have been challenging, but while designing the study and planning on adding another research site to the study would have meant taking a number of personal days, which could have proved too daunting to work out in my own teaching schedule. Next, while the observation would certainly have allowed me to steer the questioning of subsequent interviews, the more I thought about this, the more this seemed artificial: why should my observations, on a particular day and in a particular class, help privilege how a teacher is represented or represents him/herself in constructing this narrative? Finally, as many have pointed out, there is often a gap between how a teacher envisions her/himself in the classroom, and how s/he presents a lesson or otherwise conducts her/himself. That being said, it truly is in this “envisioning” that I am interested: how does a teacher envision the middle schoolers in the room? (Not, let’s say, how they actually behave or answer questions or complete tasks, or do “nightmarish” “seventh-grader” things.) How does a teacher make sense of the demands of being a middle school teacher, or what are their passions for or other positionings in being a middle school teacher? I believed that the research questions could be explored meaningfully through interviews and occasional other document analysis; observations ultimately would not have provided the type of data that would have been most useful to this study, particularly under the constraints mentioned above. (Perhaps, if I could have pursued this

study full time, I would have been able to utilize observation and could have imagined this study in a completely different way altogether.)

Shades of Autoethnography

H.J. Jones (2005) notes that autoethnography seeks to ask questions that involve “how knowledge, experience, meaning, and resistance are expressed by embodied, tacit, intonational, gestural, improvisational, coexperiential, and covert means,” and “how body and voice are inseparable from mind and thought as well as how bodies move and are privileged ... in very particular and political ways” (p.767). Noy (2005) breaks down the term autoethnography, in citing Ellis (1999): “The writer addresses himself or herself, (“auto”), as a subject of a larger social or cultural inquiry (“ethno”), vis-à-vis evocative and revealing writing (“graphy”)” (p.360). Given my framework and research questions, and many of the foundational assumptions I am already bringing to my work, the inclusion of autoethnographic components in the research is vital to the study. Jones (2005) goes on to say that “autoethnographic texts point out not only the necessity of narrative in our world but also the power of narrative to reveal and revise that world, even when we struggle for words, when we fail to find them, or when the unspeakable is invoked but not silent” (p. 767).

In her writing, Jones (2005) utilizes a method of “showing” autoethnographic texts at work, drawing herself into the text to breathe life and performance into what autoethnography can be. She also challenges readers to “create disturbances,” to “stage impossible encounters,” and to “implicate” oneself in the questions one is seeking to raise. Given that I am inextricably wound up in the discursive performativities and subject positions I seek to trouble and unpack in “middle school teacher” while I am a full-time middle school teacher and have been for twenty years—and given the goals for this project—I am compelled to write autoethnographic scenes

and reflections into and through the writing of this study. Poulos (2013) notes that autoethnography is a move to acknowledging the experiences, the presence, and the effects of a researcher within the research field. Not only are the participants who are constructed as objects of the study participating, but so too is the researcher. Even if I was not a part of my particular context and a co-worker with people I propose to include in the study, I would be involved with them, even in “just” my research role.

Jones (2005) also describes the idea of movement and a call to action being vital in autoethnographic work. I am interpreting this as, among other things, a movement to the keyboard or to the pen, or the pencil—some opportunity to write what I have experienced in and around middle school. Sometimes, though, as I have experienced numerous times, the sheer volume of “middle school” is too much. I can be at lunch and hear something about what a seventh grade boy can or can’t do, or what a “typical middle schooler” might pose in the form of a problem in a classroom, or I can be having dinner with my wife (who is also a middle school teacher) when she or I will simply utter the words, “well, it is middle school,” in order to explain away some behavior being described. I have not been able to write all of what I say, or others say around me, or my own gestures, thoughts, and movements in, around, through, and of middle school. I simply hope that the movements I made to do the writing helped to propel the questions and the work forward, and not “too many” opportunities were left behind, in the depths and shadows of forgotten memories and utterances. I will plumb the depths, but “middle school” is a discursive abyss. Forber-Pratt (2015) writes that one of the most frequently repeated pieces of advice from autoethnographers that she received in embarking on what she calls the “sometimes dark and lonely path” of her own autoethnography for her dissertation was “just write.”

Poulos (2013) asserts that autoethnography “takes the ethnographic lens and turns it directly inward,” focusing conscious and careful attention on the emotional-volitional experiences, responses, and impressions of the ethnographic researcher, while ever looking outward as well” (p. 39). One attempt to be consistent in my writing or journaling was when the occasion comes up in class that I either explicitly call the attention of my students to my body or to their own bodies, or I otherwise feel conscious of my (or my students’) bodily presence in the classroom on the middle school, more largely. When are bodies more “present” in my awareness? Such was the case in drawing in the story of Malik’s body and his presence in my classroom, forthcoming in Chapter V. As I sought to understand how knowledges are constructed and maintained in and through bodies, it would seem that this presence (especially set within/against the overall, general *unconsciousness* of bodies in middle school) was worth noting and analyzing.

Another time I sought to “journal the moment” was when “middle school” was used as a phrase somehow in place of something else: when it was no longer just describing an organizational structure of school, a certain level of grades and subjects, teachers, administrators, and students. An example is something as seemingly simple as: “You are *such* a middle school teacher right now”; this phrase figures into some of the discourses of middle school presented in Chapter IV.

Another method I employed is borrowed from methods of collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006). I engaged in memory writing through the prompts that particularly asked the other participants to tell stories. Davies and Gannon (2006) frame one of the fundamental pieces of successful memory writing as writing *from the body*. Given the framing device of the body in this study, this seems like a sound grounding to write from. The goal, as Davies and Gannon say,

is not to write in an explanatory manner, but rather to remember moments through and from the body. They also mention that collective biography is highly aligned with methods of autoethnography. The Malik narrative mentioned above, as told through my bodily and affective experience of the moment, was written as much “from the body” as possible.

Ultimately, I hope that the concepts of autoethnography that I take up in this study help to further inform the ways in which this study comes to represent the narratives constructed with the participants. Barton and Darkside (2005) “see two important aspects of auto/biography: telling one’s story, and engaging in conversation with another about and through one’s story.” I came to the decision to write myself into fragments of the study because I felt that I had to do so—that leaving myself out would simply have positioned myself even more authoritatively as the omnipresent positioner of other people’s experiences in text on a page. I also came to the decision, as Barton and Darkside (2005) suggest, to help engage in a conversation with the other participants, and to offer that conversation more fully to the readers of this study. Consequently I tried to remain open and flexible, mindful of opportunities as they emerged to incorporate my own experiences, jottings, memories, and images into the interview protocols and the focus group. Particularly in the focus group, this led to more free-flowing discussion, which I hope was ultimately generative.

Representation of the Data

While not an ethnographic study, I find Britzman (2000) helpful in my problematization of representation: how I will represent the experiences of participants, how I will represent myself amidst these voices, and how I will represent the discursive construction of our subject-positions, varied and variant as they are and will be. “Because representation cannot deliver what it promises, unmediated access to the real, ethnographers must think the categories of agency and

voice beyond the humanist assumptions of a self capable of transcending history or a self that can somehow recover his or her authenticity from the unwieldy effects of discursive regimes of power and truth” (p.35). “Poststructuralists read the absent against the present. Thus, the ethnographic promise of a holistic account is betrayed by the slippage born from the partiality of language of what cannot be said precisely because of what is said...” (p. 28). Rodriguez (2005) references Pinar (1994) to echo much of this sentiment. He calls upon a researcher utilizing auto/biography to make explicit the reasons for including the given narrative. This is not to somehow force the conclusion drawn by a reader, but to offer more information, more presence to read absence against, to paraphrase Britzman. Rodriguez draws on Pinar: “We are not the stories we tell as much as we are the modes of relation to others our stories imply, modes of relation implied by what we delete much as by what we include” (Pinar, 1994, p. 218 as cited in Rodriguez, 2005, p. 122). In positioning my partial subjectivities against and within the representations of the other participants in the study, I hope to challenge the notion that my silence might be taken as authority—the omnipotent researcher/knower giving sanction to the words of others while obscuring my own. Here, then, I change and challenge the silence—not as something to be taken for granted or understood as authority, but rather something to be seen amidst the participants’ accounts, something to use as a further counteraction to power/knowledge. Lenzo (1995) suggests “subjectivity and identity...become strategic sites for deployment of practices of the self. This is not to say that there is an escape, a suspension of the uneven power relations inherent to any research enterprise; merely that such relations may be interrogated through a more modest self-reflexivity and have the potential to be interrupted and explored in fruitful ways...” (p. 18). It is the hope, at least, that the authorial lens of my writer/researcher “self” can be studied perhaps more deeply than would be the case without the

presence of my teacher “self” narrative. The narrative is certainly occurring whether or not I chose to include it textually in these pages: it is constructing “me” as I construct the text and the analysis of these pages.

The representations of the narratives from the cases and autoethnographic strands are not meant to be “more than” the participants. The goal is to simply make a narrative more visible, in order to be more closely scrutinized against itself and the silences it produces, and perhaps, continues to mask and obfuscate. Pillow (2003) suggests, “To be reflexive, then, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced” (p. 178).

Writing as Method and Use of Layered Text

Confessional: I was doing this before I knew I would be validated by some qualitative research handbook chapter by having a name for it! (Do I have to cite it here? I'll just cite it below this.) The joy I have in writing this—this sentence, this section, this “this”—it's really a shame my fingers aren't moving to type faster—it's indescribable! To have some instant connection between the joy and the neurons that fire to give my joy words, and then back to the neurons that fire words, and finger strokes, and all of that; with that, I could describe this so much better! Anyway: joy. This-here text has purpose, and a name, and that name is “layered text.” Citation to follow.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) describe “layered text” as “a strategy for putting yourself into your text and putting your text into the literatures and traditions of social science” (p. 974). I used layered text as the means through which I conducted the actual writing “of myself” into the text. Richardson and St. Pierre write, “I used writing as a method of data

analysis by using writing to think” (p. 970). This is largely how I wrote the analysis, as well as the method I employed to layer and analyze the many layers of text that get generated, as St. Pierre shares her thinking that “*Thought happened in the writing*” (p. 970, emphasis original). This has the ring of truth to me: the only clarity I have gained in this project has come through the writing. (And, of course, I use “clarity” here very liberally, given the tangled web of questions, literature, and methodology I have thus far spun—and continue to spin later—in this text.) In particular, though, when these “layered” entries have been written into the text, the sections and chapters of the study have come into greater focus for me as the author. This method also aligns with some of the “tools” of autoethnography (Poulos, 2013).

I am actively trying to explore and, perhaps, push the boundaries (Honan & Bright, 2016) of the text and the representation of voices in it. The layered text entries are fueling the work, and I hope that they help to give greater voice and representation to the participants. At the same time as I work to push the boundaries, though, this writing seeks to conform in subtle and not-so-subtle ways (*headings! pagination! margins...get in there that extra half inch, left side!*) to standards of acceptable doctoral dissertations in my department and in my institution. I do, hope and aspire to playfully engage with the participants, the data, and myself in ways that will move towards “new knowing” (Guttorm et al., 2015)—perhaps especially important in pushing against the many normalizing discourses and attempts at stability at work in the assemblage of “middle school.”

MacLure (2003) writes a chapter in her book on discourse in educational research on the subject of the “threat of writing.” She explores the contours of the no-win and no-middle-ground of what she deems “puritan” and “vernacular” moves in educational research writing. She describes writing that has as its objective clear purpose and plain language so that it can go

seemingly “directly into the mind of the reader” as “puritan”; “vernacular” writing, meanwhile, lives in and takes up the jargon of a particular research methodology, sometimes with the purpose of questioning the very notion of “plain” writing as something that simply perpetuates the status quo. She does not position either as holding more value than another. Rather, she explores both as having their own anxieties, worries, and fears of writing *itself*. For the puritan, the primary fear is in not being understood; for the vernacular, the fear is in misrepresenting the voices of the participants.

I recognize this latter fear. What happens to what we seek to represent if it is misrepresented?

Of course, on the other end of this fear, as MacLure (2003) says, is coma, paralysis—a death of sorts. The coma could come from simply attempting to write everything—to know everything, to let everything spill on the page and all of everything, being everything, somehow all be on the page—brilliant, easy, clear, to all. To every reader. This cannot be, as something must end here and be here on this page, and something will, necessarily, be left out. “You have to suspend your belief in the innocence of words and the transparency of language as a window on an objectively graspable reality” (MacLure, 2003, p.12). Rather than not have anything, then, something must be, and it must be in words. If part of validity in qualitative studies comes from self-reflexivity, and self-reflexivity at some point means being aware of the burdens of choices and representation, then those choices will be written through and represented as thoroughly as I believe I possibly can.

To that end, I journaled and took notes, always with the goal of representing moments and ideas and consciousness of the ways in which I took up or was taken up by discourses of the middle school teacher. I sought to layer those notes in the text, and put them alongside and in

conversation with the narratives that are produced through the interview study and focus group; I desire to “seriously play” (after Lenzo, 1995) with my relationship to the research participants and the knowledge “produced” by this study. Guttorm (2016) reflects on the nature of shifts in thinking and in text, but how so rarely does the text resonate with those shifts:

Always a new assemblage, a new writing in the middle of the process, a piece of text for a conference or a seminar, for the supervisors or for an article. Then one reads something more and the text and thinking turns around or moves direction again at least. That all I think is becoming. Often, the becoming of the thinking is not documented, and so, only the last thoughts stay (in an article or a book). (p. 2)

I hope that the writing produced here breathes life into the thinking behind the words on the page. What are the decisions being made? What are the interests and investments that I have that come to effect how other participants’ experiences, beliefs, and narratives come to be represented? I offer that the writing —the kind I offer throughout this and previous chapters—is the type of inquiry I will do, and I hope it to be understood as valid.

Validity

Postmodern and feminist poststructural researchers must confront many preformed concerns about the reliability and validity of their methods, data collection, data analysis, and the formation and justification of their conclusions. Validity presents a particular concern, as some means for checking, maintaining, and, arguably, constructing the validity of research designs and their data maintain themselves in means that lean heavily on beliefs in common-sense “truth,” and how a singular or, at least, identifiable truth(s) could be “collected” and analyzed. “Poststructural thought poses direct challenges to this reformulation of validity criteria and seamless ... realism. Simple, self-evidence documentation of evidence becomes problematic given the relational, constitutive conceptions of language in the poststructural framework” (Lenzo, 1995, 18). It seems the ultimate catch-22: to be known as properly conducted research, a

researcher must prove the evidence (and means of collecting that evidence) as valid *while at the same time* conducting research that itself is questioning the nature of truth and validity. Singular truth in a poststructuralist framework gives way to situated and relational truths, to subject-positions and positionalities. Thus, validity (to be considered valid itself) must itself be relational, fluid, and seen in its situatedness.

Cho and Trent (2006) “revisit” the notion of validity in qualitative research and write about what they describe as a somewhat fundamental divide between the objectives of qualitative research, and how these might lead to different standards for and concerns about validity. After exploring the notions of transactional and transformative goals in research, after which validity goals can be fashioned, they try to come to what they assert might be a middle ground. Given that one of the poles of the spectrum that they imagine in discussing and “revisiting” validity is the “extreme” of poststructural approaches to qualitative research and notions of validity. Given that this is their lens for poststructural conceptions of validity, the desired middle ground is not what was sought in this study. However, they do arrive at a helpful bottom line on a means through which a researcher can consistently be in process with engaging the concept of validity. “[T]he researcher(s) must explicitly consider the degree to which the research purpose, question, and actual acts intertwine with an embedded, process view of validity. Specifically, our notion of ‘validity as process’ can be equated with a reflective journal that makes transparent the subjective process now made explicit for research consumers” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 327). The earlier writing in this chapter echoes this, as I hope to achieve some level of transparency through the inclusion of my selves in the research process. Lenzo notes that “Writing becomes the site where poststructural validity practices are performed in text” (1995, p. 19), seemingly a call for such methods as layered text.

Lather (1993) offers the notion of validity as an “incitement to discourse.” She conceptualizes validity not as a set of structures to limit and construct the research, and, in so doing, making the research data “valid,” but, rather, a construct to push against and through. It is in the practice of the research, she suggests, that allows someone to explore notions of validity, not in pre-selecting various parameters to live by. Indeed, the very notion of its inescapability and the seemingly endless haunting of its questions on the researcher and the research make the conceptual ground of validity (and the obsession with its quest/ions) “fertile” ground, as Lather deems it.

The goals of the study, as defined by the research questions and the supporting text of the previous chapters, are ultimately to question taken-for-granted discourses and the resulting subject-positions available to the “middle school teacher.” Simultaneously, it is a small attempt to question the constructs of validity that call for the “masking” of questions and a failure to represent that which is claimed to be represented through “methodological assurances” (Lather, 1993, p. 677). Lather goes on to probe the seemingly “stable ground” of validity by remarking it may stand in for a simulacrum: a copy of an original that does not exist. How much of any validity practices, she asks, are simply made as that “mask”? Rather than mask (or unmask) through validity practices, it seems most fitting to pursue the concept of poststructural research practices “that increase the circumference of the seeable,” something Patti Lather attributes to using Foucaultian thought and lines of inquiry in her work (Lather, 2015).

Geelan (2005) draws on Carolyn Ellis to come to the conclusion that the best judge of validity in a qualitative study might be the “ring of truth” that a reader feels in coming across a narrative or some other textual representation or the participants’ experiences. He goes on to draw from what he then calls more “scientific” language that suggests validity is achieved when

the person consuming the research feels that an essential truth, some essence of reality, has been achieved. Given the stances already described, I reject the notion of an essence to be uncovered and reported. After all, besides my operational and methodological stances, a goal is to trouble and open up new ways of thinking about and “being” a middle school teacher; it is to counter the very essentialized discourses surrounding that subject position in the first place. Instead, I sought an ironic and rhizomatic validity (Lather, 1993), wherein the interconnectedness of knowledges produced are “pulled up” for further questioning and tensions that exist are laid bare and allowed to exist, unresolved.

Self-Reflexivity

It is probably an artificial distinction to discuss self-reflexive actions in this research project as somehow other-than, subordinate-to, or apart-from the work undertaken to ensure validity. There is enough to discuss in this regard, though, that it warrants the somewhat artificial breaking-off from the validity section. Cho and Trent (2006) sum up the relationship between necessary self-reflexivity and validity well:

[M]eanings are social constructions and multiple perspectives on a topic yield multiple meanings. Therefore, the question of validity in itself is convergent with the way the researcher self-reflects, both explicitly and implicitly, upon the multiple dimensions in which the inquiry is conducted. (p. 324)

There is a notion that self-reflection and the continual analysis of one’s own relationship to the research participants, data collection, and analysis, will help bring greater “truth,” and/or “validity” to one’s research project. Given that the poststructural lens applied to this and other studies actually questions this first belief—that there is a “one,” knowable “self” as a subject that presupposes the discursive production of identity in anything other than the subjectivities, and discursive fields of the lived-in moment—means that the applicability and usefulness, as well as the desirability, of self-reflexive turns to their own ends must be questioned. However, the

researcher must engage in what Lenzo (1995) deems a necessary amount of putting the subjectivities of all involved in the research project “under scrutiny and set in serious play” (p. 19).

Thus, I took my own relationship between the researched and the researcher in both scrutiny and play. I aimed to actively and seriously blur, to re/negotiate and re/present this fictitious dichotomy between the researcher and those being researched by engaging my “self” in this study. I used some autobiographical narratives, journaling, and a good amount of self-reflexive writing in the course of the data collection and analysis of other participants. Further, in working with the participants in a focus group, I worked to share my own reflections during the process, opening up my own positionalities, not only as a graduate-student researcher, but also as a fellow teacher who reflects on my own practices and the ways in which the discourses of middle school teaching and the body weave and intersect in my own understanding of myself in the myriad subject-positions un/available to me.

It is not, then, for its own end, or the end of validity, that self-reflexivity is engaged in this project. It is a required politic of a feminist poststructuralist project, and one being undertaken by a man. I choose not to cloak myself in the language of the researcher and the practice of separating myself from the research I am designing. Rather, I intend, as much as I can possibly “reveal” my selves in the framing and writing of this project, to allow my own positionalities be “openly” represented in the same text as the participants of the study.

Methods of Data Analysis

Given the postmodern and poststructuralist stances at play in this study and in this text, and given that these stances constantly help me re/seek, re/structure, and destabilize the discourses of “middle school teacher” and then re/present those fragments of partial truths on

these pages, the data analysis was a constant, shifting, iterative process. The iterative process began with transcribed transcripts of the interviews. The interviews themselves were digitally audio recorded, and the transcription was based off of the audio recordings. When something was difficult to hear or to interpret from the audio on the recording, I relied on the notes in my interview protocol to attempt to reconstruct that fragment of the conversation. When that was not possible, the transcript simply notes an inaudible passage in the interview. I read the transcript to highlight and then later code the highlighted passages that aligned with my research questions. Further, when language began to “echo” other interviews, or my own writing, I noted it.

As data were gathered in the form of interviews, I engaged in writing-as-method. As noted above, I wrote myself into, out of, and against the texts as part of that iterative process. I jotted down fragments of speech and questions provoked. As I read and re-read the texts of the transcribed interviews, I attempted to code the findings, but was also open to new codings as I reiterated the process as new data come in, and as new readings emerged. This was particularly so as the second “case”—the circumstances of and surrounding COVID-19 and the post-George Floyd calls towards anti-racist stances—demanded a serious re-engagement with the first case; attempts to (re)think the data, particularly in discussion with and against each other, are presented in Chapter VI. The rhizomatic validity (Lather, 1993) that is explored above suggested that the codes themselves might be so intertwined and multiple that the most fruitful endeavor may be in finding the *tensions* produced in the act of coding, and using those tensions as analytical fuel; this was, in fact, one of the most productive methods of going back to the data in the study.

Two of my former peers in the doctoral program offer in their own poststructural studies of discursive (re)positionings, (re)constructions, readings, and (re)interpretations particularly

meaningful operating stances when it came to analyze their data. Both Stanko (2012) and McCall (2014) called for iterative interpretative practices, interrogating not only the data, but their own readings and interpretations of the data. McCall (2014), for instance, notes the simple practice of highlighting words and phrases in the transcripts of completed interviews as itself a form of her own discourse (de)constructions around her research questions. Stanko (2012) also importantly notes the interpretive work already done by her research participants in their interview participation; the participants often reported (or did not report) information that they thought would be useful to her in her research. The interview itself is a production of knowledge; it is not a neutral collection of data among which there is a singular truth to be uncovered. The operating stances of this work challenge this notion as positivistic fantasy. Rather, the analysis followed from the methodology proposed throughout this chapter: I aimed to write my thinking into the text in such a way that my interpretive decisions will be open to at least as much reader analysis as anything I (re)present from the interviews conducted.

Listening for Silences

As noted above, Foucault (1978) says:

Silence itself—the things that one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (p. 27)

Consequently, one of the interpretive strategies I attempted to employ was to “listen for silences.” It certainly stands to reason that silence operates as discursively equal to utterances, but there is little in the field of interview methodologies that suggests ways forward. Further, it

seemed doubly important to consider the role of silences in the study as a primary goal is to rupture the taken-for-granted: When is it that something about middle school goes unsaid, or seems unable to be said? Why might something be unable to be said? When is it impossible to see, know, articulate, give voice to a different “middle school” teacher or student body? Similarly, readers of this text will be challenged to be attuned to my own silences and blind spots, the discursive practices and threads that I report but never analyze, or that I simply never seem to report.

Davies and Davies (2007) draw attention to the importance of “the gaps, ellipses, and silences that function[] within any text (or data) and in which some truths [are] either unable to be told or inappropriate to the particular telling” (p. 1142). I believe that the assumptions that are packed into, support, and shape the discourse of middle school (and consequently middle school teacher) are precisely the sorts of things that will be “unable to be told.” Mazzei (2013) notes, “I learned that limiting interview data to spoken words and not attending to words that seemed present in their absence limits knowledge production” (p. 733). Mazzei (2007) also mentions the importance of what happens “when the silence is recognized not as an absence, but as a presence, as a critical aspect of the ‘what happens’ when the notion of what *counts* [emphasis original] as speech is disrupted and a more complete (not complete, but more complete) understanding of what might constitute speech, or the text, or data (in other words the spoken and silent words) is given a hearing” (p. 15). Mazzei (2007) suggests that silence is a vital text also to be sought out, not for an identifiable and uncoverable single truth, but, rather, “in hopes of remaining true to the passion of endless inquiry” (p. 26). Mazzei also mentions that silence is also vital to theorize, not only as an inquiry and theoretical strategy, but also a recognition of “purposeful rhetorical strategies” (p. 28). If an aim is to represent multiple knowledges and unearth the rhizomatic

qualities of middle school's discourses, anything that can be done to counter the "limiting" of knowledge production seems generative.

Limitations

One possible critique of this work is the utilization of feminist methods of inquiry and analysis being taken up by a male author who is exploring his own enactment of "masculinity" in the work. Jones (1996) writes about his experience as a man investigating and working with a group of female nurses, utilizing feminist methods for his inquiry. For him, "a feminist methodology is about leveling the potential power imbalance between researched and researcher. It is about admitting that the researcher has her (or his) own agenda, and that is intertwined with the lives and experiences of those being experienced" (Jones, 1996, 134). It is my goal in this work to make explicit my own "intertwining" in the research subject and with the participants by explicitly weaving in my own experiences as a teacher and as a white man. It is my hope that, in making my own experiences a part of the research that, rather than privileging my position as a researcher, it makes more plain for a reader my own biases and experiences. Rather than constantly combat and try to account for my power as a researcher and perhaps as a white male taking up feminist methods and attempting to employ faithfully and thoughtfully intersectional means of seeking and representing the lived realities of participants by making my part in the research an upfront part of the writing, the power dynamics and possibilities of my opinion simply becoming implicitly woven into the fabric of the other participants' narratives, these tensions rise to the surface. There, they can be troubled with and by the reader.

It should further be noted that vital to this study is the belief that gender is not and should not be viewed as a binary, and that gender is not and should not be based in a person's assigned sex. An explicit goal is to examine ways that the profession and the work of "being a middle

school teacher” has become gendered and remains enacted and patrolled as a performance of gender in order to help define and shape social order, as Butler (1989) asserts the binary operates to do. In order to help counter this, it is necessary to move against this binary, seeing gender as a much broader enactment and performance. In so doing, it is necessary to not succumb to notions that, for instance, a man cannot conduct research on feminine interests, with feminist methods, and participate with females. This allows the dominant discourse of a gender binary to shape what is possible, again something I explicitly aim to counter in this study.

Jones asserts that it is not the assigned sex or the “possession of the Y chromosome” (1996, p. 142) of the researcher that makes it (im)possible to be a feminist researcher, but the genuine interest in, use of, and adherence to feminist principles that sets apart the ability or inability to successfully use feminist methods and do research on and with women. It is my hope, too, that in enacting and constantly working to foster an intersectional stance, and one that interrogates assumed power relations “to ferret out, examine, and contest the various, sometimes hidden workings of power and to unsettle the either/or imaginaries that help to rationalize and reinforce systemic domination” (May, 2015, p. 230) I will be honoring its traditions and engaging and representing the experiences of the participants in as deep and complex a way as I can. Part of the complexity of the stance and the work, though, suggests that I will, at times, fail.

Attempts at Analysis and Resisting Universality or Generalization

While the object of what follows is meant to serve as a means of exploring emerging themes in the conversations with the participants, particularly as they shed light on ways in which these participants discursively constructed themselves within and against dominant narratives of “middle school” and “middle school teacher,” these patterns are not meant to suggest that the patterns are universal, or even universal within the shared teaching context of

these participants, or that somehow these patterns are meant to represent or point to a larger truth of some kind. Given, however, that certain articulations of positions did recur, either echoing or shadowing conversations by the same person or one of the other participants, those echoes called my attention time and again in my initial experiences of, exploration of, re(reading) of, coding of, and analysis of our interviews together.

Chapter IV – The Middle School Musical: The Discursive Production and Embodiment of Scenes and Roles as “Middle School”

You’re Being Such a Middle Schooler Right Now: The Middle School Musical.

“You’re being such a middle schooler right now.” I have heard this articulated in many different ways over the course of my twenty years in our middle school. I have even employed it myself. I would like to explore what could be represented in deeming certain moments or behaviors as particularly “middle school,” with an eye towards then linking this to discourses of being a middle school teacher *with* and *of* these “middle schoolers.”

Dominic connects the notion of being “such a middle schooler”—something that multiple times he said he strives *not* to say—to a class anecdote about what it is like being in a middle school, that a student then proposes to make into a musical:

I know that I have said [“you’re being such a middle schooler”]. Yes. In fact, I don’t ... I struggle to remember the context. But I remember one very clear moment last year. ... I remember saying to my class, “Oh my God, I feel like I am in a play right now that somebody wrote about being in a middle school classroom.” And one of my kids then said, [Dominic changing voice, slightly higher] “Ooo, can it be a musical?”

[Both Kyle and Dominic laugh.]

And I thought that was like the funniest retort I’d had. ... And again, as I just said, I try *not* to refer to them as middle schoolers. It was one of those moments where it was like, I couldn’t get control of the class. It was like a daisy chain of non sequiturs, where no matter how hard I tried to bring it back to the class, it was like, you know, “Ooo, I had spaghetti last night.” “You guys, we’re not talking about what we had for dinner last night.” “Ohhhh, spaghetti.” “I was once in Italy,” and blah blah blah and “We’re not talking about Italy...” And it just kept going, and I couldn’t kind of get control of like their popcorning sentences. And that’s when I was like, “I feel like I am in a play that someone has written about being in a middle school classroom.” (Dominic, Interview 2, 12/9/19)

The scene Dominic represents as he constructs and reconstructs this narrative gives some shape to “middle school” for him: the “popcorning” comments, but also the “retort” of the student: “can it be a musical?” And, as Dominic went on to explain, a key facet of the story seems to be

that the same student, later in the year, held on to that moment and actually made a final year-end skit in the class a musical.

Dominic across the interviews emphasizes the fun in middle school as being a primary factor for him in being and continuing to be a middle school teacher, and takes the opportunity to revise his “negative” comments by making sure to mention the “playfulness” of middle school students. The scenario portrayed seems to suggest this interesting tension: Dominic is exasperated by the moment in class he’s describing, saying he is simply in someone else’s play about middle school—also suggesting, perhaps, an implication of powerlessness. He is in *someone else’s*—perhaps this student’s—play. The student’s retort, though, is something he seems pleased with because the student has now “made” the play a musical is funny, light, playful, the qualities Dominic reports cherishing, alongside connections with students, in being a middle school teacher. All the while, though, he is presenting this story as a counter to using “middle schooler” as a pejorative to describe his students.

Often taking pains to re/inscribe those moments and qualify them by saying such things as “not all of them,” or “a lot of time, but not all of the time,” there is both an initial application of universality to the image of “middle schoolers” behaving in these ways, but also a recognition that within the array of students, not all do. In narrating the scene, Dominic describes the moments, as an assemblage, as being “*very* middle school.” “Middle school” (or “middle schoolers”) seem to be at the height of their “middle school-ness” in these moments that most exasperate or seem to be most outside of the control of the teacher. Much of the construction and maintenance of “middle school” seems wrapped up in this fundamental tension, and the embrace of that tension by expressing yet another tension: participants’ exasperation with the oddities or

ridiculousness of middle school students, while proclaiming their love *of* that ridiculousness and the ensuing exasperation.

Other Scenes in the Musical

While neither of the other participants mentioned feeling like they were in someone else's play or musical, each described scenes that they believed represented "middle school." I offer them as possible additional scenes in the musical. They link directly with Dominic's setting of something that is typical of middle school around the notion of the "musical" in his class because they were offered in the same manner: these are the stories Holly and Zadie both told immediately when asked to provide a "typical" middle school moment. Beyond that, though, they also seem to point to certain ongoing, layered, and unresolved discourses which were often in conflict, at least nominally.

The Appropriately Inappropriate

Holly shared, when she mentioned "the first thing that came to mind, and the sort of thing I tell people when they ask what it's like teaching middle school," was a "dirty" story. She proclaimed a reticence to share it, seemed to actually physically withdraw a bit, and then "folded"—she moved back towards me, sighed, and began telling the story. After sharing it, she joked that she probably shouldn't have. The story began with a class examination of a statue of Hercules and students directing the discussion towards the size of the penis on the statue—but then shifted to another class, later in the year, with the same students:

Holly: And I think later on in the year that it may have been the same student, when we were talking about numbers. The number six in Latin is *sex*. And then he was just pontificating. He was like, "well, does the word *sex* come from this number *sex*?" and so I felt like I needed to explain because it does *not*. It comes from a Latin verb meaning to cut, *secare*, and *sec*, but c's change to x's often, so I'm trying to explain it ... to cut you know, sex, two genders, whatever.

And again—I hate to even say this—but his hand goes up. [Imitating student voice:] “So sex comes from the verb to cut. [pause] That's where they get scissoring from, right?”

Kyle: Oh my God.

Holly: And he said it out loud for everyone. And all the boys were like, “oh,” again, “oh my god,” and I didn't even ... like I didn't even know what to do with that one. Like, I cannot ... I don't even want to touch that with a 10 foot pole.

So the answer was like, “No. No, the answer's no, let's move on.” But to me, when I'm thinking of stories that encompass a middle schooler, it's those sort of inappropriate—what we would consider, adults would consider—like socially inappropriate questions, but that I think they are genuinely just thinking that ... like his mind went from cut to scissor. I don't know how he would even have the context for what that means. But it is a 13 year old boy, I guess. (Holly, Interview 2, 2/26/20)

Holly positions the inquiry both as genuinely curious and as “inappropriate.” In leading up to the story, she positioned it as a middle school occurrence because elementary school students would not have the knowledge base to make the connections posed by the student in this story, and a high school student would have the (in Holly’s words) “socially conscious filter” to *not* ask about the link between the possible relationship between a Latin word and slang for a sexual act of a teacher in a classroom, even if the thought occurred to them. It is this “inappropriateness” that seems to position it primarily as “middle school” for Holly. Interestingly, she seemed to be exercising some amount of “appropriate” behavior (perhaps as an adult) by signaling that the story might not be appropriate for this research. That she proceeded to do so suggests that, adult to adult, it was okay. The “inappropriate” quality seems to be both the lack of a filter and the content of the interruption, as she did not provide an example, say, of someone talking about an upcoming history test, a travel team tryout, or asking about any other academic or social topic besides the task at hand in that given Latin class.

She also noted that part of the “middle school” quality to the scenario was the wide range of response in the class: a couple of other boys who had enough of a similar base of knowledge to recognize that the connections that were being made, and asked of Holly in that moment, were

inappropriate—while other students in the classroom seemed not to know what was going on. This seems to link with the wide array taken as a “given” in terms of middle school students’ maturity levels. The range is positioned as the norm.

The combination of having knowledge of a use of the term “scissoring” and its use in reference to a sexual act—connecting it quickly to the thread of the discussion about the derivation of “sex” in Latin—and a generic “pushing the boundaries” resolve in the final line: “But it is a 13 year old boy, I guess.” Every layer of the interaction is encapsulated in not only the possibility of it coming from a 13 year old boy, but that the age and gender of his body actually *explains*, without further discussion, the entirety of the exchange. His access to and use of the term scissoring, combined with “pushing boundaries,” seem to be a fundamental truth revealed through these age and gender labels, in combination (Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003).

Holly, at another moment in the interview, suggests that a quality of middle school students in asking either “absurd” or “inappropriate” questions is that there seems to often be a blend of genuine curiosity for a response—but also, and just as much, curiosity for *how* a teacher will deal with the question. She sees such moments as middle school *because* they are “pushing boundaries” or “pressing you in some way.”

I think you have to cope the most with middle school students because they are probably the most infuriating simply because they're at that stage where they're like, finding their ... they're pressing boundaries in a way that a lower school student doesn't.

...

But middle schoolers press their teachers because the teachers are the ones that are like the prominent adult force in most of their day. ...

[Lower schoolers] are not pressing you in the same way. With like, the same amount of like, “let's just see how far we can take this just cuz.” Like, I think with lower schoolers, they're...they're frustrating in their own way, but there's not really like a malice or intent behind it. I'm not saying middle schoolers are malicious, but I'm not saying they're not either. Like, they know what they're doing. ... Like it's very visible to me when a sixth or seventh or an eighth grader is doing it, just to see how far they can push you before you lose your mind. (Holly, Interview 2, 2/26/20)

Holly sees some design, or at least awareness, on the part of middle school students in actively bushing boundaries, and teachers. This design, to Holly, seems connected both to their being middle schoolers and the teachers bring “the prominent adult force in most of their day.”

Such a middle schooler, then, for Holly is what she constructs as the fun: the inevitability of a middle school student being a “jackass,” needing to be joked with to “unhand” one another, and pushing you perhaps to the point of “losing your mind.” One of the frequent tensions in the discursive construction of “such a middle schooler” for Holly, Zadie, and Dominic is that part of the “good” or the “fun” of a middle school student is the “negative.” The predictability of the unpredictable “inappropriate” comments, for instance, seems to be at once positioned as both good and bad. Holly seems to be constructing the “negative” *as* the positive. The perfect day *is* “somebody ... doing something annoying or challenging.” Being a jackass *is* what “makes them good.” The genuinely curious comment merging Latin roots with terms linked to sexual acts is the appropriately inappropriate.

“Ms. Z., Is Your Underwear Pink?”

Zadie’s scene involved a moment she described as “super embarrassing.” The story was of a recent day in her science class when she thought she had earned devoted, rapt attention from her students due to an amazing presentation she was giving, but they were, in fact, more drawn to something on her body.

I can't remember what [the subject] ... but um I guess I thought I was like hitting a groove, and I was really into it and you know, kids were not talking. There was a reason they were ... [Zadie laughs] that I had a captive audience.

At the end of the lesson, [laughs] I think it was Betsy. She's like, [whispering] “Ms. Z. Is your underwear pink? Because it’s been showing. You have a hole.” [Zadie laughs] I'm mortified. Mortified thinking about how many times that I turned my back ... how many times they glimpsed my underwear through my pants, this hole to it ... it was rough.

The whole lesson.

And so they originally... This is cringe worthy...they originally thought it would be best to write me out...she had a note. [Through laughter:] One of the boys said, we were just going to leave a note, but the girls thought it would be better to tell you in person. (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20)

Zadie went on to tell another story she considered to be typical middle school, which amounted to students when she taught in the US Virgin Islands listening in on a conversation she had with a local pizzeria to secure food for an upcoming field trip. When the pizzeria asked for her number, she ran from the room so she would not give her number within earshot of the students. However, upon returning to the room,

I come back into my classroom and all of a sudden they are like this: [*Zadie shifts quickly in her seat, going quickly still, looking straight ahead, and grinning.*] And I look on my chalkboard and there is my friggin' number on the chalkboard. And to this day—I cracked up. I died laughing, it was the funniest thing. I just thought how funny and clever.

But that group of students my first year here, there was like this group [that] texted every once in a while. And I wouldn't respond, but I did finally when they were 18 now, you know ... But it was just something that meant a lot to them and they quietly loved having me as a science teacher and respected me and knew my friggin number because that pizza person called right in the middle of class, and they just thought it was the funniest thing. Yes, there's a middle school story for you. (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20)

As Zadie went on to other topics rapidly from there, she did not offer her own read of why these scenes might fit the musical or be considered “typical” of middle school—just that they were. They both, though, suggest some of the same qualities as Dominic’s musical and Holly’s story—students acting in ways that could be read as crossing some kind of boundary, but also being somewhat playful. Where in Holly’s story she read the student at some level making a choice to “push” to see her reaction, Zadie seems to recognize that there was a lot of weight in students experiencing and seeing her reaction—but not as a “push.” In both of Zadie’s stories, there is a comic quality and some amount of vulnerability demonstrated. Zadie “cringes” at the notion that there had been for some amount of time a debate between the boys and the girls about how to break the news to her that she had a hole that revealed her underwear to the room for the entire

lesson. And while the students who approached her/wrote her a note about her underwear issue, one wonders about what changed in the scenario that the students had clearly plotted a response *and* addressed it not just by saying something to the effect that she had a hole in her pants, but identifying the color of her underwear that day. In the second story, her students' ability to get the phone number Zadie was clearly trying to protect by running out of the classroom is still up on her blackboard upon her return, which she experienced as not only a funny moment, but one that prompted long-standing bonding with those students.

Students in these scenes are constructed to naturally be probing and patrolling these boundaries. Given that these stories were each provided as a "typical middle school story," the students' exploration of "proper" boundaries and their being viewed as doing this work simply by *being* middle school students are vital facets of middle school discourse that both the teachers and the students are understood to be embodying.

Why Middle School? Age.

Dominic, Holly, and Zadie all expressed that the thing each of them loves about being a middle school teacher and what keeps them there is the age of the students. Age, though, seemed to be a stand in for several different complex beliefs about middle schoolers. In fact, age as related to several different assumptions about middle schoolers *also* became part of the discussion for hating middle school (or, at least, disliking moments of it). While this tension clearly existed—in the sense that the same topic of age prompted both feelings of love and hate, or excitement and dejection, or appreciation and trepidation—rarely did participants move between the two fluidly. When discussing the "cool" parts of the age, each person stayed on that theme for some time. Consequently, I will explore the themes of loving the age, and then some of the hate or fear of the age, and then sites of tension between those two.

Loving the Age and “Enjoying the Ride.”

One of the first questions we each explored was why the participant teachers were in middle school, and what kept them there. All three instantly brought up the age of the students. The “coolness” of the age became a recurring theme in what all three teachers discussed over our time together.

Holly immediately said: “I love middle school.” In fact, so instant was her response, that she cut off part of my question. Once I finished the question, she continued:

Because the kids are awesome. They're the perfect age where they still think you yourself are cool, to a certain extent, but that learning is cool and fun and sort of novel still. And so every day is exciting in some way or another. And you feel like ... I think you feel more like you're contributing to their lives with middle schoolers than you do with upper schoolers, who are so stressed and feel like they have a goal that they need to attain... this going to college, right. So they're so hyper focused on it, whereas middle schoolers are just sort of enjoying the ride. So I think that's what's exciting about it. They're fun. They're still learning about themselves. You feel like you have an impact on that. (Holly, Interview 1, 2/11/20)

Besides the “fun” and the “awesome[ness]” of the kids themselves, what emerge, too, are other themes that came out with Zodie and Dominic, as well. The fact that middle school students are perceived to still be interested in and excited by learning, that that learning seems motivated by factors beyond personal gain (i.e.: being hyper focused on getting into college) and that the students are “learning about themselves” and that “you have an impact on that.”

Zadie spoke about being a middle school teacher at least in part because of her own middle school years, which she emphasized having “hated,” both for social reasons and because the middle school classes themselves were rote and boring. When she shifted from discussing her own middle school days and discussed what kept her in middle school teaching now, age came up immediately.

It's actually the age group. I like ... I really like seventh grade. I think that they have a pretty solid skill set to be able to really, like, get on thinking on their own. ... I also think

that middle schoolers ... because they are developing ... our job is to hone the skills of reading comprehension and putting together ideas and doing research. But they are also not as jaded, they're open, they're really impressionable. (Zadie, Interview 1, 2/24/20)

In another interview, the same notion came back in connection to the importance of having mentors for students “at this age.” “I think you become like your ... your pores open to susceptibility in middle school, you just get caught ... you're super vulnerable and, you know, impressionable” (Zadie, Interview 3, 3/5/20). Development, openness, and impressionability again emerge in connection to age initially, and in rapid succession.

Dominic discussed not necessarily seeking out middle school, but that it was “the job,” but has stayed in it because “I loved being in that age group.”

What I love about middle school age is, especially, I would say some of the eighth grade, that I think the students are like cognitively advanced enough that you can have very real, very cool conversations. But yet they aren't jaded yet and are just kind of more open to redirection and having their minds opened, then you get kind of later in high school. ... So you can have just more real and honest conversations about strengths, weaknesses and what people need to do that aren't laden with this [stress over getting into college]... I think middle schoolers have more time, where high schoolers, their days are just so packed. So I just like working in the middle school age group. There's a lightness of fun that I find here that I don't find in high school. (Dominic, Interview 1, 12/4/19)

Here Dominic's comments echo some of Holly's in particular. Opportunities to be honest, and to explore either “cool conversations” or “having their minds opened” in ways that high school students are not perceived as being open(ed) to are key facets of both teachers' constructions of investment in teaching middle school *aged* students. Their age keeps them open, it seems, while their position in time, relative to high school, gives them “more time.” The “hyper focus” Holly eludes to for high school students is replaced by “enjoying the ride” with (and by) middle schoolers—presumably because of this confluence of an availability of time, not feeling the “pressure” of college admissions, and the cognitive abilities and “openness.” That openness, in turn, might be read as an assemblage of their place in time (having it, or at least the converse of

high schoolers “not having it” ... or running out of it), their place in “development time” (being cognitively developed enough *to* learn and have deep discussions), and not being “jaded,” as both Zadie and Dominic mark high school students as, and being available to the “novel[ty]” of learning, as Holly suggests.

The theme of students having open minds in middle school, and that this openness is linked to age emerged in the narratives above, and re-emerged at several other moments in our conversations. One site of fluidity in the discourse is the notion of middle school students having, *presumably* “*naturally*,” “open” minds, as Zadie suggests, whereas Dominic mentions “having their minds opened,” implying an active role in the teacher *doing* the opening. In this construction, they are naturally open to *being* opened. Their place in time not only means the possibility of openness, but the need for the teacher to step into the fray to further their development away from being inferior to civilized adults (Lesko 1996; Lesko & Mitschele, 2013).

Consequently, the age of the students seems to be a reification of the possibility of teachers being able to “guide” students to productive outcomes, namely in the discovery of “self” or moving in their perceived “normal development” on the path to adulthood. As age became a factor in schooling and its normalizing gaze concurrent with societal desires to guide young people to “productive outcomes” (Woo, 2012) the link between age and their potential for being shaped by teachers seems notable. There is a suggestion here that the “awesomeness” of a student or the “coolness” of teaching middle school (and both in conversation with one another) is constructed entirely by the ability of the student to be led by the teacher to this future productive self—while importantly emphasizing the “self” as the cool part, not necessarily the

emphasis on future and production, as this is what makes the high school students “stressed” and unfun.

Middle School Bodies Are the Worst

While the age of middle schoolers was quickly cited by all three participants as a vital factor in why they enjoy and stay in middle school teaching, the age of middle schoolers was also a site of annoyance, dismay, awe, disgust. The love of middle school for Zadie, Holly, and Dominic meant loving characteristics and behaviors of students in their quirkiness, their identity “forming,” their humor, and their openness (or ability to be opened) to learning. The “problems” of the age, or middle school, tended to surface alongside the bodies of middle schoolers—or at least the notion of middle schoolers as the site of (or victims of) pubertal, developing bodies. Given the emphasis examined in Chapter II in middle school literature on the role of the bodily development of middle schoolers and how that coincides with the perceived needs of middle schoolers (i.e.: Powell, 2011), the shift in tone and discourse when age either shifted to bodies, or bodies were explicitly asked about, seems notable.

One of the interview questions opened a discussion on the flip side of what each participant loved about middle school: what did they think was horrible about middle school? Dominic immediately went to how the reputation of middle school—and what earns him the “universal looks” when disclosing to others that he teaches middle school—is linked to puberty, and the “hard” and “awkward” time of middle school.

Its reputation. I think like middle school ... you think of it as puberty. A lot of people think of like going through puberty in middle school. And I think that's a particularly hard time for people. It can be an awkward time. Just in terms of managing your body, and your voice cracking. I think it's a stereotypical Middle School problem.

And I know we talked about this but the universal looks on people's faces when you tell them you work in middle school. I hate that. You always get that. (Dominic, Interview 3, 12/16/19)

The middle school as a *universal* problem comes with the “universal” experience of puberty, and the associated deficit perspective Dominic reports and is echoed in the literature (i.e.: Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Powell, 2011). Holly echoes this, pinning it a bit more directly on the students themselves:

That they're going through puberty, and they're the worst. Like, they're pushing boundaries, that's what's annoying about them. And I'm sure we all did it at that age, like we must have, but as an adult perspective, now I'm just like, “Oh, *you're the worst*. Just do what I'm telling you to do.” (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20)

Holly acknowledges the “universality” of both the puberty and the “pushing boundaries” that makes the students annoying, seemingly as a way of softening the actual culpability of the “worst-ness” of the students: “we all did it at that age.” The annoying qualities are deemed natural and embodied, represented by age. The normalizing gaze at adolescents through age deems young adolescents as “Other” and need of the (re)direction, guidance, and surveillance (Lesko, 2001; Lesko & Mitschele, 2013; Woo, 2012). Perhaps this is best summed with Holly’s words: “Just do what I’m telling you to do.”

In Chapter II, the normalized functions of middle school and middle school teaching were presented as intimately linked with the supposed typical and “normal” development of early adolescents. The joys often mirrored those expressed above: that the age presented, alongside its supposed assumed developmental course, a path to a more cognizant, more critically thinking, and more intellectually capable and engaged student. Their “worstness,” though, is constructed through the parts of developmental speak—again, prevalently mirrored here—that reflect back upon the bodies of middle schoolers as bodies going through puberty. There was a visceral response to bringing forth this piece of middle schoolers.

The Worst Bodies (Shouldn't) Interact

There was a decidedly active disclaiming by the participants in discussing individual student bodies—as opposed to the more generalized age, developmental language, or nods to puberty. Holly made a face when I asked about interactions between bodies in middle school, which I asked her to clarify.

Holly: Don't say Middle School bodies interacting with each other. It's deeply sexual and I don't like it.

Kyle: Why does it have to be sexual?

Holly: That's the only way they interact with each other's bodies. In like a pre-sexual-like exploration. (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20)

I asked for further clarification, which then resulted in Holly sharing an interaction between two boys in her homeroom. And, in sharing this interaction, she decided to demonstrate these two boys touching each other's hair—on me.

This is gonna be weird. Put your arms up. You don't have to actually do too much touching of me. So your hands would be there. [Holly is now standing behind me, and guiding my hands towards the back of her neck.] And you're running your fingers through my hair. And when your arms [go] around like this, yeah, like, like holding his arms as they're touching the back of my neck and hair and like running through the hair. Yeah, they were doing that to each other.

I'm sorry I just made you do that to me. ...

And [my homeroom partner] and I like looked at each other because they were like, in the middle of homeroom and like nobody else seemed fazed by it. And that's like a very intimate like, rubbing each other's necks and stuff.

Like that's what I'm imagining when you say bodies interacting with each other and why I'm making that face because it's like, please *stop* interacting that way. (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20)

Foucault (1990) makes clear in the opening of his work that attempts to limit what might in the present be referred to as “inappropriate” talk about sex and adolescents actually simply made the discourse shift, not disappear. He notes, too, that any disappearance in verbalization is not really a disappearance in the discourse. He points to designs of schools as a place in which “What one might call the internal discourse of the institution—the one it employed to address itself, and

which circulated among those who made it function—was largely based on the assumption that this sexuality existed, that it was precocious, active, and ever present” (Foucault, 1990, p. 33).

Despite wanting to disclaim, shed, and shun the interactions of bodies that *might* be read as “sexual,” the assumption of sexuality, the operation of its specter, are “ever present.” Holly’s initial impulses—verbal and affective, both—are to disclaim and be disgusted by the notion of middle school bodies interacting in “pre-sexual exploration.” But then disgusting became discussion. And reenactment. The intimacy she describes as troublesome in the two middle school boys in the middle of a homeroom is something she intimately reenacted with me in the middle of an interview. The thing she didn’t want to even acknowledge, or then discuss, she did. (While apologizing for it.) And while this whole interaction happened because it was being disclaimed as something to *not* discuss, it was something that, to her account of it, no one who actually witnessed it *did* discuss. And in not wanting the students to touch, but demonstrate the awkwardness of that touch, she engaged me in that way. It seems that, while my own sense-making of this moment seems to defy my attempts to categorize it, it is a moment I am drawn to “unforget,” given its “uncomfortable affects,” that MacLure (2013) suggests are calls to attend and attempt analysis, even in the face of the moment resisting fitting inside a structure of coding and headings.

The question seems to become: what makes the act itself objectionable, and what makes the speech of the act (or acts like it) similarly objectionable? Next: what makes it less objectionable to actually do it? The intersection of the language I used in my question: interactions of bodies, in a middle school context, brought Holly to a near instantaneous point of disgust, seemingly due to the association she made with that language and it being “deeply sexual.” The act of the boys caressing each other’s hair she reads as “pre-sexual exploration” that

she wants to see stop. Reading the moment as sexual, and the possibility of bodies interacting as sexual, seems intimately connected with the setting of a middle school (science) classroom—a setting that, on its face, would seem to be removed from any place meant to elicit illicit (or, at least, inappropriate) sexual feelings, actions, or language. If this touching suggests sexual touch, it would seem to suggest Foucault’s notion above of it being truly “ever present.” The more middle school student bodies suggest sex, perhaps, “they are the worst.” The fallacy of the mind to be taught and the body to be disciplined (Saavedra & Marx, 2016) as either a possibility or a dichotomy to be recognized seems to fall away, to in the fall bring forth the worst-ness. Perhaps too, (or otherwise) this affective response on Holly’s part is fueled by the bodies bringing forth a hint of sexuality in a school space that pedagogically is designed to “render *eros* unthinkable” (McWilliam, 1999).

Bodies to Be Guided

There seems, too, an intimate connection between the perception of these teachers that the middle school “age” is “cool” because the students are impressionable and able to be influenced and guided, but simultaneously “the worst” because “middle school” is reified as a pubertal, uncontrollable group. The gaze of the teacher is at the bodies of the students as adolescents as a developmental category; adolescent bodies are to be regulated as a population, through biopolitics (Foucault 1997/2003). The bodies these teachers are speaking about are not specific bodies, but the biological category of adolescent—pubescent body, *en masse*. The connection between age as positioning adolescents within a certain confluence of time, inferiority in terms of liminal progress, and the need for a normalizing gaze to help them push towards “normal” adulthood (Woo, 2012) suggest the discursive importance placed upon the work these teachers are reporting so necessary. When the students are the best, their age and their

bodies represent the possibility for teachers to aid in and help regulate their “normal” development into adulthood. These are bodies that can be disciplined, and taught to “properly” discipline themselves. When manageable, the students are the best.

When unmanageable, because the adolescent pubertal development of their body has “made” them so—both to themselves (Dominic’s “awkward time...in terms of managing your body” comment) and to others (Holly’s “they’re pushing boundaries”)—they fall outside of the *possibility* of being their “best.” When they are at their worst, they are at their worst because their bodies have made them so. In so doing, their bodies have also made them unteachable. There seems to be a strong relationship between the perception of the teachers in the opportunities to actually impress certain behaviors and actions on middle school bodies and the teachers’ sense that they are in fact teachable that comes to the fore in Chapter V, which will explore the shifts these same participants had in their thinking once remote teaching and learning became the norm during the COVID-19 shutdown beginning in March 2020.

Role Models: Embodying and Modeling What a “Cool Human” Can Be

All three participants heartily accepted the notion that middle school teachers are or can be seen as role models, and all identified moments that they felt like they made conscious decisions in how they carried themselves because of this perceived gaze from the students. The notion of a role model, though, seems to offer parallels to consider alongside the possible “roles” within the middle school musical. Might middle school teachers, in “being” a “middle school teacher” be taking on a role, as a role model? If so, there seems to be a fundamental fluidity to the notion of the performance of role model as a performative, constituting discourse of “middle school teacher.” If there’s no doer before the deed (Butler, 1990)—and the deed is essentially

creating a deed to be known as the *doer*—“middle school” seems to give evidence to the lack of stability in the classifying notions that are meant to be stable within “middle school.”

Zadie noted a direct awareness of students watching her as a role model, as well as the fact that she “had to be very much aware of that.” “I think it is important. You ... we are looked at, we are evaluated in our choice of words, in the music that we like. They're ... they're very interested in what we do. And it does matter and it leaves an impression” (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20). For Zadie, a discussion of being a role model moved swiftly through several aspects: modeling processes and doing the same work expected of students alongside students; appearing fallible and able to own and learn from mistakes; appearance and choice of dress; authenticity in living in ways that demonstrate a firm commitment to strong personal ideology; being an example of a biracial, female scientist given the underrepresentation of women broadly and women of color specifically in the sciences. She seemed to link this with a broad concept of “being a cool human” and that there are “lots of ways” to do that. Zadie specifically links being watched by students to breaking down misconceptions, and offering students a window into the fact that adults can offer a range of being, and sees her role in being a Black female scientist, but one who has a range of hobbies (in this excerpt, noting dance as vital to her being) as helping offer part of that range of possibility:

I think my presence as being a Black female who loves to do dance and loves to do science and ... it is. You ... your interests. Whether it's you know, like what you are teaching, or your hobbies, are as important in leaving an impression, a positive impression, on your students. And just providing them with like options for like figuring out what a human is, you know, like what is, and how do I identify? Does it mean I have to do this? Like, no, but so and so does this, you know, I don't have to do ... just do this. There's so many ways to be a cool human. (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20)

Seeing a richly, “authentically” embodied “cool human” in shared space seems to be linked to envisioning students’ own possibilities for their future coolness: “figuring out what a human is.”

This simultaneously implicates the notion not only of middle school students “becoming” (Lesko, 2001), but also students not yet being human. Though so much of what Zadie says would suggest that she holds a view of students as quite the opposite—that students are people with interests, passions, skills, and clearly well into their being “human”—this does seem to echo or cast a shadow of “beings” and “creatures” (i.e. Powell, 2011) that so often features in discussing middle school students. The horrors of middle school, the echoes of which will sound in sections, and have reverberated in earlier chapters, often seem to have their initial soundings in the changing bodies of middle school students.

Zadie spoke directly—and immediately following the link between offering herself as a person amid the range of “cool humans”—about the notion of students explicitly watching teachers and noting their interpersonal interactions and friendships, even noting my relationships with people in school like Dominic and Holly, and how the students often remark on the “besties” groups among faculty. There seemed to be a link back to the notion of simply being a role model of a range of being a “cool human”: “They love ... they *love* to watch teachers interacting. The collegial ... like friendships and relationships are really important for modeling, like a fun, healthy, middle school environment. I think that's important” (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20). This echoes Holly’s sense that her enactment of certain relationships and their authenticity is something that students see, and that they “love” seeing it. Zadie even described a recent “development” in a group of faculty friends as something students had been commenting upon as they came into a recent class. While the voice of students is largely absent in this study, and we only get it through the stories and perceptions of the participants (and the stories and perceptions as I am selecting and representing them), this seems to demonstrate some investment

on the part of at least a handful of students in doing the observing of teacher relationships both Holly and Zadie invoke.

Embodying Role Model

Zadie's investment in science is, as she describes it, in affording students the opportunity to "break down the isms." "You don't...you can't solve all the world's problems. Maybe I'm a little full of myself. But one of the ways I feel like it's important to get to the bottom of racism and the isms is through science, science literacy..." (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20). She frequently moved fluidly between talking about science lessons, her design of those lessons, and allowing students to express themselves, expand their understanding, push their thinking, and share their stories. She sees a major role in sharing parts of herself in order to model this. Moments like sharing her dance background and connecting that to cell wall structure are the sorts of narratives she offered about herself as a teacher often. In particular, though, she put emphasis on letting students *see* who she is. She didn't just describe her dance background or the dance moves, she demonstrated them. (Including in the interview.)

To "attack" racism, she noted the goal of establishing race as a social construct by way of thinking about genetics, one of the core curricular units of her seventh grade class. She opens the unit with family pictures: a picture of her and her family at a sister's recent wedding, displaying her transracial family, and a picture of the other seventh grade science teacher, a young heterosexual white woman, at her own wedding, alongside her white husband and white family. Discussing this moment with me, Zadie notes the surprise of students in seeing the family picture of her transracial family, but sees opening up students to her family through pictures and stories as both the opportunity to help break down "the isms," and the notion explored above of being a "cool human."

And so I am able to have these great wedding photos and compare the two. [Zadie has pulled the photos up to share with me.] And at that point in time, students start asking questions. They're like, "wait a minute. This is your mother?! Wait, this, this white woman with blond hair and blue eyes?" Yeah. And they're like, "no way." (Of course when [Zadie's son was in class], it's like [Zadie's son's name], "I'm going to try and like not put you out there.") I said [to the class], "Yes. And this is my niece, who, whose father is Puerto Rican and Italian. This is my sister, XXXX, this is my other sister, XXXX, who is six hours older than me, and we share the same father. So you can do the math there. Welcome to the West Indies." ...

But I try and get all the isms in here, like your pigment. Like, you know, the social construct of race and how science in itself has played a significant—a *huge* role—in perpetuating racism. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Like that's why it's important. ...

But it's ... but it's done to just to break these mis- ... like these ... you know, conceptions, that people may have. You know I, and you ... each of you has an amazing story to offer and to make these assumptions is ... you're losing out big time. Big time. And, you know, creating fear and stupidity. (Zadie, Interview 2, 2/28/20)

In being her full self—in being a dancer, in being a black woman scientist, in being a daughter of a Rastafarian man and a white woman, in being a 12-13-year old sheep herder (two things she says at other points in this same passage)—Zadie is utilizing her body, the bodies of her family members, and her narratives of life growing up in St. Croix in service of teaching race, combating racism and homophobia (another “ism” she notes within the same portion of the interview), and opening up the possibility of getting to more fully know oneself and others through stories and through sharing. And, in that sharing, she is hoping to combat assumptions and countering the creation of “fear and stupidity.” The stories and the writing of herself (and her colleague teacher) into the curriculum serve to write her body as a text into the meaning-making of students. In Zadie's stated hopes, that writing of her selves into the “story” of science she is hoping students take from the class is one that counteracts problematic ignorance and mis-used science—moving, she hopes, students towards “cool human”-ness.

Dominic notes consciously enacting a role model stance by describing how he calls attention to being a white male as a means of demonstrating how to discuss topics such as race and gender, especially from a position of privilege. He invokes his body as positioning him in a

particular way that can serve as a role model, especially in light of the actions he performs in that body.

You know, I think we live ... we live in a time and teach in a school where certain things are very difficult to talk about—like race, you know, privilege. Social justice. So I think I try to model how to like talk about that stuff in a not-so-serious a way. So I will frequently, you know, refer to myself as a white male in the class, just to, you know, let them see that it's okay to talk about this and acknowledge it. Yeah, issues of homophobia, gender equality, stuff like that. I feel like I come at them pretty hard, and I think when I'm doing it, I ... I do it in order to show people especially as a white male, straight ... with power ... that you, you can attack this stuff to be like, you don't have to support it. You try to confront it. (Dominic, Interview 1, 12/4/19)

By consciously naming his positionalities as they relate to power and privilege, he sees it as a means to demonstrate that it is possible to name those pieces of identity and privilege aloud, and, from there, seemingly to make “attacking” the issues possible. On two separate occasions in the interviews, Dominic mentions instances of calling out students for misusing gendered pronouns or endings in his Spanish class and then laughing. He noted on both occasions that the typical scenario is using a feminine ending for a masculine subject, and that this “mistake” gets chuckles, usually out of boys in the class. In recounting those instances, he positioned his response as one to interrupt the behavior and question why that particular mistake was funny. He further linked that interruption to the same work of trying to “come at them pretty hard” about issues like “homophobia” and “gender equality.” Consequently, in at least the ways he recounted moments in the classroom, and moments that mattered to him and spoke to the nature of “middle school,” he made this connection to the work of issues of social justice. There is a hint of what Ersula Ore (2017) notes as caring; for Ore, pushback on the practices of whiteness that are “calcified” into being seen as natural demand pushback, and that pushback amounts to a pedagogy of care—particularly for Ore, as a Black woman in academia. While Dominic’s positionality is clearly different, there is a suggestion of his “pushback” enacted as care.

Holly also saw her potential for specifically enacting the possibility of being a role model with what she sees as the mission of middle school teaching and her subject positions as a woman and as someone who identifies as being within the LGBT community.

But in middle school, if you're building integrity, and you're building ethics, and you're building like compassion and community and all those things, like what you ... what you need to understand those things is a diverse group of people who are going to help you understand those things. Because they're there, and so being able to access an LGBT side and a female side brings that diversity to students. Right. So I do think it positions me as a middle school teacher because if that's ... if that's what they're taking from middle school, like growing into a certain kind of person, that they need to be around ... around people who can give them exposure to different kinds of people. (Holly, Interview 3.1, 3/6/20)

Holly seems to be linking the notion of the *becoming* of middle school students—“growing into a certain kind of person”—with exposure, being around, and nearness of teacher and student bodies. Her body, and students’ proximity to it, she presents as “access to an LGBT side and a female side of things.” That access, and the relative closeness of those bodies in school spaces (despite Holly’s rejection of consideration of closeness with middle school bodies) then connected to the opportunity, bringing in Zadie’s words, to be a “cool human.”

Filling the Role of Role Model

The notion of being a role model at times also suggested a role being played in the “middle school musical.” Dominic specifically notes the importance of the position of being a role model *as* a middle school teacher:

And I think like, I try to role model... like in the way I interact with my colleagues around the kids. I ... I feel like I am a role model in terms of like, how to be friendly, how to be interested, how to joke around how to, like, generally try to enjoy the place that you're in and the things that you do. And I do think the kids will watch and pick up on that and like, you know, if you're like, high energy and friendly and telling jokes and stuff, I think you're showing that you don't have to just grumble through and count the days till you're on vacation, the way I think a lot of people do, adults included.

So I would say of all the questions like that was one that I feel pretty important about just ... yes, I do think we are role models and you know... the middle schoolers are trying to figure out who they are, who they're going to be. And I mean, that continues

through high school, they haven't figured it out by the end of eighth grade. But I think providing models for positive ways to interact is a huge part of my job. (Dominic, Interview 1, 12/4/19)

Dominic's response suggests a conscious enactment and investment in putting himself into relationships and interpersonal interactions for the purpose of providing a "model" for "positive ways to interact" for middle school students. Middle school students as in a liminal position—uniquely figuring out "who they are" and "who they're going to be," present and future—are conceptualized as requiring this modeling. Dominic's comments, alongside several others, and the notion that there is a cultivation of personality that happens due to this role model role, seem to be an assemblage of middle school teacher *cum* role model.

Holly also notes explicitly desiring students who see that she is modeling good relationship building with colleagues:

I want them to understand that I respect them, that I respect the position I'm in, that I respect myself, that I respect my colleagues ... but I don't think that respect has to look the way everybody wants it to look all the time. (Holly, Interview 2, 2/26/20)

Holly's body, then, seems to be the site of being a role model through what she notes is being authentic, positioning that against and in opposition to "the look of a teacher." Care, openness, and "giving something" of oneself are the means through which Holly saw herself enacting the "role model" position of a "middle school teacher." At several times in our interviews together, Holly noted the importance of having real relationships with faculty members that would allow students to see, in full view, a range of relationships, including playful banter and "giving each other shit." This notion of banter with colleagues as a kind of positive role modeling seemed to be connected to the notion that respect did not have to be "the way everybody wants it to look all the time." She noted the benefit of a colleague who frequently crosses boundaries in joking with

people like Holly, and how he will “be the first to come in here and be like ‘sorry, I really crossed the line’” and that “kids see that kind of stuff, and I think they benefit from it.”

Further, Holly at several times across the three interviews mentioned the idea that in middle school, students are building relationships and discovering who they are—that they are taking away more from lessons about connections and relationships than they are the content of the curriculum—though she noted that those things were vital, too. She shared an anecdote about a student who, at the time of the interview, was a sophomore, who frequently pops by the middle school building and stops by Holly’s room to chat.

This student (who I will call Janice for the sake of relaying this part of the interview) had come by before one of the interviews and spoken to Holly about how Dominic had sent her an email detailing how proud he was of her performance in a recent play, and how much that email and that relationship with Dominic, her former Spanish teacher, meant to her. Here’s Holly relating this story, connecting it to “what middle school is all about.”

Holly: So, Janice was just in here with me for a solid 45 minutes from like 1:15 to like 2. She was in here for 45 minutes talking to me and she, as Janice is want to do, was talking about her favorite middle school teachers and her life as a middle schooler. And she was pulling up emails from you, she saved them all. And so she was wanting to read some of them to me and she said, I have one that everyone really wants you to see. And she had done the fall play. She sent me this email. And then [in] the email Dominic had written like the dictionary definition of the word proud. And he’d like copied it out and then he had taken a very particular piece of the definition which was and he was proud of her, which was one of the examples and he like, copy-pasted it individually, so that like Janice could read it separately. And he was like you did such a good job, like, blah, blah, blah. And she's showing [me] this and she's like, crying a little bit like, “I love [Dominic] so much and my middle school teachers.”

And I guess that's actually a nice reflection of what I think is important about the school, the relationships that you build with the kids when they're there. Because if we're being honest with ourselves, like yes, they're building skills and learning content, but I don't know that what they're learning in middle school is life altering for them in terms of like, now you can do algebra. You can identify the continents and now you can decline a noun. Like those sorts of things.

But sort of like feeling that confidence ... that pride in themselves that for ... that sense that like someone cares about their success and cares about them as a person, like

clearly that meant something to her and she's a sophomore. Right, like, those are the things she's remembering from her middle school experience. And I'm sure she takes academics with her too, but like the things that she reflects back on and the things she talks about the most and the things she wants to come and connect about, even as a high schooler, *are those moments where she felt that she was heard and known is important. Being made to feel like you matter, and like you can be successful.* [Emphasis added.] (Holly, Interview 3.1, 3/6/20)

There is a suggestion at multiple times, across interviews, that the participants all held in common this view of being a middle school teacher as particularly connected to, and their own professional identities as invested in, the concept of building relationships with the students. The story of Janice suggests just that: that it was the successful building of those relationships with her teachers that made middle school successful for her, and that Holly recognizes as the “important” work of being in middle school. As the conclusion of the excerpt above suggests, it is in the feeling of being “heard and known” that “mattering” and “being successful” are seemingly made possible for middle schoolers by middle school teachers.

Cultivating Personality

The topic of one’s personality as a teacher and one’s connection with students were both topics that were threads at various moments in my conversations, but these two threads came together when I specifically asked what someone needs to be, or needs to be able to do, in order to “be a good middle school teacher.” While each person approached this response differently, connection with students and one’s openness, responsiveness, and interest in the students all came to the fore. Both Holly and Dominic mentioned specifically “cultivating” this personality; at the same time making connections or echoing comments along the theme of “authenticity.”

An excerpt from Holly:

I think you have to cultivate a certain kind of personality to deal with middle schoolers. And maybe not even a personality but they need to know that you care about them in whatever that capacity that that means to you. So whether you have a sense of humor, whether you are warm and fuzzy, whether you like to joke with them ... whatever

it is that feels true to your nature, right, you need to be able to express that part of your personality that makes them comfortable and makes them know that you care about them and their success. Because if you don't, they are not going to listen to you. They're going to think you're a jackass. And then they're not going to do the thing that you want them to do. They ... middle schoolers want to please, I feel like they want to please, even when they don't act like they want to. But they only want to please people that they think care about them. So I think cultivating that sense in yourself is really important. Like being able to connect with like, those soft parts of yourself in order to express them to kids is really important. In a way that I think is different for high school. Not completely different, but different. (Holly, Interview 1, 2/11/20)

Holly positions these “soft spots” of one’s personality as a sort of well of possibility that can be used to both express care and then, consequently, connect with students and show that you want the best for them—and in so doing, you are more likely not only to form that connection, but to get the students to “do the thing that you want them to do.” Initially when she utilized the word “cultivate” to begin describing this concept of tapping one’s “soft parts of yourself,” it definitely raised a response in me, believing this to be a signal that she was veering from other, previously stated ideas, of being authentic with the students. Cultivate implied, to me, in that moment, a sort of creation of “teacher self” that could connect; however, it seems clear from the excerpt above (and in conjunction with other statements) that Holly was positioning this notion as a sort of “tending” to pieces of one’s personality—drawing forth qualities that “feel[] true to your nature” in order to accomplish the means of connecting with middle schoolers.

Zadie’s slice of conversation around this same question seems to be formed in this same discursive space: performing the authentic, creating a role from the real:

Okay, the perfect middle school teacher has devised curriculum where the resources that this teacher is using come from multiple ... like ethnicities. You... you’re drawing in not just one face. That the walls are covered in student work as they are creating their classroom. And that they can see themselves in your curriculum. ... So yeah, so maybe, yeah, developing identity, the identity of your students, having them show who they are. And being proud of that. Being able to devise lesson plans where students... are feeling good about themselves, they don't feel like others. And that, that does, it takes the literature that you're selecting, to be diverse, and worldly. It takes the images that you use on your slideshows and the posters to reflect multiculturalism.

It even takes like what you wear, the clothing you wear ... like what your habits as a person, like what you should ... what, you know, whatever you believe in, if it's sustainability, you should model that in your actions. You've got to play ... you gotta like really play the part. (Zadie, Interview 1, 2/24/20)

The final slice echoes comments at other times, as Zadie frequently came back to the notion of the way the teacher lived, the way the teacher dressed, the way the teacher modeled the kinds of beliefs she has (i.e.: about environmental stewardship, sustainability, equity and justice issues) as vital to the cause of being a middle school teacher. Here, “playing the part” seems to echo Holly’s “tending” of qualities of personality. Zadie is not seeming to suggest, here or at other times, being something that one is not, but consciously utilizing parts of oneself to connect with students. At least twice in other moments of the interviews, for instance, Zadie discussed wearing clothing that would model an awareness of the sourcing of the material, and the environmental impact of both the production of the clothing and then the lasting lifecycle of the clothing. So her discussing modeling sustainability alongside a comment about the “clothing you wear” suggests this visibility of very literally modeling the things you care about, and providing that authenticity to students. Zadie is also invested in the production of curricular lessons and materials that “develop students’ identities,” by “making them feel good about themselves.” When referencing making slides and using posters that show “multiculturalism,” she seems to be showing the connection she makes to the visibility of students from a variety of backgrounds in the curriculum: so the authenticity not only of herself but her materials in allowing middle school students to be “themselves” is something Zadie is heavily invested in.

Butler’s (1990) notion that there is “no doer before the deed” seems helpful here. As this lens of performativity opens up the possibility that there is no essential actor behind (or before) the action, the action of the cultivation seems to be the act most at work in the creation of “middle school teacher” here. There is seemingly no end to it, though—which seems to suggest

further the power of Butler's theory. Granted, Butler is applying this to gender and its being marked as the essential product of biological sex, but the "essence" of a middle school student's age—the critical, "universal" amidst all middle school students determining their ubiquitous needs—is said to also require the exploration and discovery of "self" that is seen, in turn, to necessitate the teacher-as-role-model.

Holly also made this connection between her own development of and presentation of personality, and how she hopes this would make certain positive feelings possible in school for students.

If I'm consciously thinking about it, I just like what I would like the kids to take from me and what I guess I try to model—maybe not consciously all the time—is just like you don't have to worry about what other people think of you. And like whoever you are, like, that's cool. Right? So like the kids make comments to me. Like: "You wear this," or "You do that," or you know, and it's like a lot of the time my response is: "I do what I want." And so, like things like that. ... And "I'm still cool." And they buy it. Because you're telling them. They need to know that. So what I'm trying to model is like okay, you think it's weird because what ... you don't see it all the time, or it runs counter to what your beliefs are or you've never seen it before or whatever it is. So, "still cool." ...

Like I would just like them to be able to sort of accept people for who they are. And I know that I'm not typical. So, if I can do it, [noticeably softer voice] they can do it. (Holly, Interview 2, 2/26/20)

In the embrace of certain quirky behaviors or hobbies—in this same moment of the interview, she goes on a tangent about a sixth grader who likes discussing siege weapons—Holly sees the possibility of proclaiming and demonstrating an interest that falls outside of a "norm" of cool, but in the public embrace in the face of ridicule, she and students like her are "still cool." She positions herself as "not typical" and someone who shows that it can be done.

Holly positioning herself discursively as outside the norm, or what is typical of a woman, especially the image of a highly sexualized heterosexual "dressed to the nines" female elementary or middle school teacher, is a powerful theme of Holly's narrative. She mentions students pointing out what she wears, and that she "does what she wants." Here, though, she

employs this “outsider” status as something that can be seen by students who might themselves not fit the norm, or be made fun of for what might be seen as “quirky” interests by peers (i.e., the sixth grade student she mentions loving siege weapons), and make their being ... whatever that being is or represents ... as something acceptable for them to be, and to embody. Zadie’s concept of fitting into the range of “cool humans” seems to be embraced here by Holly: “still cool.”

Holly spoke about the need for teachers to explicitly model authenticity and then swiftly moved into discussing the “look of the teacher”:

I think what's important to model the most is authenticity. I think a lot of times there's a very sort of rigid idea of what being a teacher looks like, when you're a man and when you're a woman. And I feel like I'm not any of those things, but that it's okay. And so it's important to me that the kids get to see an authentic person in front of them. ... When I think back to my middle school experience, there were definitely those teachers that were giving you themselves, right? Like they were quirky, and you understood that they were like a human. ...

It's so ... when I'm thinking about ... when I'm being conscious of the fact that there are children who are looking at me as an adult ... it's hard to think of myself as an adult. [Laughter.] But when I'm conscious of that fact, what I want them to see the most is that ... that I'm an authentic person, like I'm not trying to get something over on them, I care about them. (Holly, Interview 2, 2/26/20)

Dominic’s response uses language Holly did in the opening of her response, on “cultivation” of personality.

So, I mean, yeah, I think to be a good middle school teacher, you have to be able to cultivate a little bit of personality. I think you should be ... you should have approachable features, open posture. I think you know, I don't necessarily know physically ...

I think you need charisma. Because I think some of ... some of what we do as middle school teachers is entertain. You know, I can think of a colleague of mine who has been known to stand on a desk or a chair in his classroom and jump up and down screaming to make points and I think those are the classes...those are the things people remember. So I think like, you know, I think personality is good. Big personality is good. Especially teaching Middle School. ...

I mean, it's hard because I think I'm ideal. [He chuckles, joking.] And I think I rule with a little bit of an iron fist, like I'm white and I'm male. So I think I'm capable of like, you know, sort of cracking down, you know, like, cracking down... ‘Okay, that's enough,’ you know, in sort of an authoritarian/authoritative way. (Dominic, Interview 1, 12/4/19)

Charisma and the cultivation of a personality “to entertain” are vital to Dominic’s stated ideal. [It must be said that, when referencing the “colleague” who stands on desks and “scream[s] to make points,” he is referencing me...which felt weird to know in the moment of the interview, and feels weirder to acknowledge in this text.] At the same time, while he jokes about viewing himself as ideal, he does construct his positionalities as white and as male as giving him access to “cracking down” and utilizing an “authoritarian” stance that allows him to be “effective.” He then acknowledges that this would certainly not be the only means of being effective in the classroom, and explicitly discounts “gender or ethnicity or race or physical characteristic[s]” as making one more likely to “be” an “ideal” middle school teacher—though the calling forth of both his male body and a tough authoritarian moment in concert with one another echo Mac an Ghail (1994) and Connell (1995).

While not explicitly said, there does seem to be an unspoken link—a slippage of sorts—from the “big personality” and “charisma” and “energy” that are ideal to the “iron fist” (which Dominic later positions a bit more as a put-on, but one with a purpose of “control” in the classroom). While the cultivation of personality has a similar nominal goal as those stated by Holly and Zadie—to be an effective middle school teacher—Dominic seems to shift away from the *use* of that cultivation in order to connect with students (despite saying at many other times, such as when he discusses the “soft spots” of school, that he finds making those connections one of the principle rewards of being a middle school teacher). While he opened by mentioning approachability, there is a slide into management and control in the classroom, and one particularly made “possible” by being a white male who can crack down with an iron fist and stern tone.

It is then interesting to consider that the cultivation of a charisma seems to be in service of striking a tone of command over the classroom—and then shifting between playfulness or assertiveness as the situation seems to warrant. And while the “soft spots” did not elicit the same sort of evocative discussion of a “cultivation” of personality, it is those interactions that Dominic seems to value, but seem to slip into a slightly less “cultivated” set of responses and a more “authentic” manner and tone.

Melding into One: the Silly Transformer Middle School Teacher

In each of Holly’s interviews, she referenced something I had mentioned off and on at other moments over the past year or so: that several of us were slowly morphing into the same person, both in manner and speech.

When I had mentioned that, it was always in a largely joking manner, but the comment was also made on the heels of one person saying something that another teacher is known to say, or someone making a face often associated with someone else. One of the teachers makes such a distinctive face in particular moments that it is dubbed with his name: Gregface. Multiple times, Gregface has been noticed and commented upon, and then it was slowly imitated, and then suddenly other folks, notably Dominic, could be seen doing it ... but no longer in a way that suggested imitation, but in a way that made the gesture his own. An homage to Gregface, if you will.

For Holly, who wrapped our interviews by coming back to this idea of “melding into one person,” she began by saying that it was largely that it was within a “friend group” in the middle school faculty, and then began to remark that even students seem to pick up on similarities: “I do think we all sort of picked up each other's mannerisms. Like, they'll [students will] be like, ‘well you do this like Mr. A or you just said that thing, and Mr. F says it all the time or you know, you,

you know, pulled your glasses off like Miss D does when she's mad,' like all of those things we all sort of do. And then when we do them in front of each other, like sometimes I think we make eye contact, and we're like, that's the thing we're all doing right now. And we're not quite sure why it's happening, but it is.”

In continuing to talk through her thinking on the subject, Holly continued:

Holly: So again, I don't know if that's personalities, like somehow we've all just found each other here. Or if it's really like a function of what middle school does to you, but maybe it is... Maybe like the people who can handle teaching middle school are the people who end up being you know, weird enough to hang around each other and want to do everything the other person does. I don't know. [Pause.]

Maybe middle school is like a personality mindset. I don't know that I've matured much past eighth grade myself, so it just feels right. ... I mean, I think there are moments of like ... I think there are moments of like adult functioning, but not a ton. [Holly laughs.] (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20)

This seems to suggest several interesting tensions. The first: the notion that the adults serving as role models themselves do not have many “moments of ... adult functioning.” Another is related to this: that a fundamental assumption of both what middle school students naturally do and need help in doing is develop their own individual sense of identity, while some of the adults around them seem to be “melding” into one.

Holly and I then tried to get to the “bottom” of this notion of the “melding” behavior and its link to us as middle school teachers. We explored two examples, both involving my image being displayed in some ways that ... not many other people have their faces used in the school. [I'm not yet sure what to make of this simple fact.] As these images are explained in short hand in the interview, I'll offer quick descriptions here.

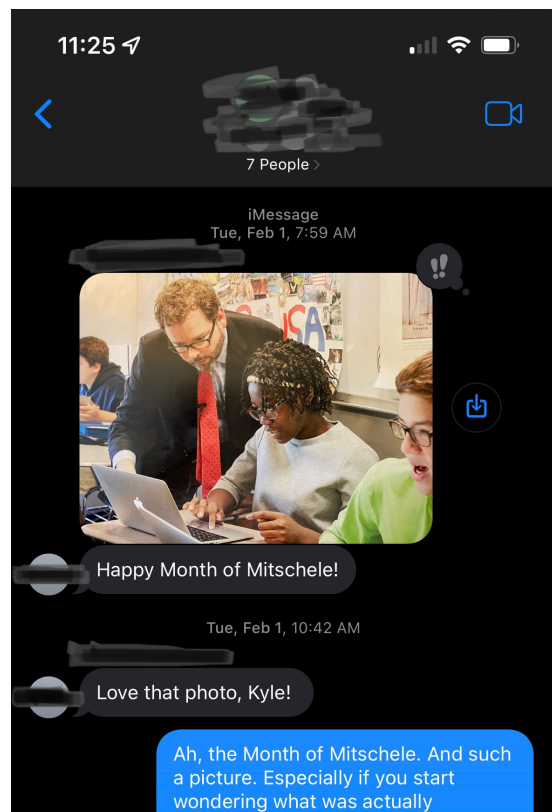
My Face as Part of the Middle School Teacher Transformer

Cedar Day creates a school calendar every year, and the calendar features classroom shots, athletic teams in action, concerts, and drama and dance performances. In the 2017–2018

school year calendar, there was a shot featured of me teaching my seventh grade World History class in the 2016–2017 year, when I was being photographed for some other reason for the school web site. For reasons still not fully clear to me, this picture, featured in February of 2018, led to February being dubbed by one person on campus as “the Month of Mitschele.” (Perhaps notably, that person, while at the time of the “dubbing” was a school administrator, had at various times previously been a middle school history teacher, and we had taught a class together.) Each February 1st since, that person texts a group of people with a picture of the calendar and a “Happy Month of Mitschele!” (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Happy Month of Mitschele, 2022



Note. “Happy Month of Mitschele” is a screenshot of a group text, sent 2/1/22. (Source: Author’s phone, retrieved 3/16/22)

Sometime shortly after that February, Holly removed the picture from the calendar and added it prominently to the bulletin board by her teacher's desk. In the years since this picture has been permanently on her bulletin board, kids have asked her in my presence, "Why do you have a picture of Mr. Mitschele on your bulletin board?" Her response is: "Why *wouldn't* I want a picture of Mr. Mitschele on my bulletin board?" Holly even moved classrooms in the 2021-2022 school year, and the picture is still a part of her bulletin board. And students—most recently, a group of middle school fencers during a study hall in her classroom—asked about its presence on the board. They finished the exchange looking at her, then back at me, shaking their head, saying, "That's weird."

Another example explored in this portion of conversation was the example of a high school teacher, Larry, who had formerly been in the middle school and who had, during his time in the middle school, created a coffee mug with my face on it and regularly drank his coffee from it in school. While I have trouble remembering precise conversations around this particular moment in the past, I remember remarking on it enough that Larry eventually counteracted its existence and, as a sort of peace offering, created a new mug for me, with his face on it ... in which he is shown to be drinking from the mug with my face on it. Both the mug and the calendar come up in this passage:

Kyle: I wonder... would a teacher in Upper School or Lower School [gesturing to Kyle's picture from the school calendar posted on Holly's bulletin board] ... would another teacher have another teacher's picture [Holly is laughing] permanently taken from [a past] calendar?

[Holly finishes laughing.]

Holly: I don't know about that. That's just for me. It's never coming down. Like would you have a cup of like Larry like...

Kyle: Any more? I don't know. Yeah, I don't think right now [referencing his being in the Upper School, and not the Middle School now] he's making that cup for me.

Holly: Well, right, I think that ... well, there it is then! Like when he was in middle school, having those relationships, he made that cup for you. Now that he's in the Upper

School, like, I think there's a shift in like, who you think you are as an upper school teacher versus a middle school teacher.

So maybe it is a middle school thing. Like there's a little less taking yourself seriously, a little less being judgmental about people. Like, maybe there is that. ...

So that's interesting. Like would I keep [the picture] up if I were suddenly an upper school teacher, like if I were getting the judgment of all the other Upper School teachers? Probably not... Yeah, there is a middle school mentality and things that are acceptable in the Middle School versus the Upper School that I think we're lucky to have. It keeps you sane. I said it before. If we didn't joke this way, or if we couldn't, you know, have these particular relationships, it would make it impossible. It might make it impossible. (Holly, Interview 3.2, 3/10/20).

Through this narrative, Holly seems to be positioning (and I seem to be agreeing with) “middle school teacher” as accepting of, embracing of, and perhaps being made possible by a certain “way” to “joke.” The fun being had seems to be constructed as a means of striking out against rationality, professionalism, and seriousness. As McWilliam (1999) mentions, “While fun never escapes rationality, it can and does trouble it” (p. 168). McWilliam also extends her analysis to note the role of carnivalesque humor—a humor to question “order and orthodoxy”—as that which could question (or at least ironically “poke” at) a bourgeois sense of reason and rationality. At least in the above exchange, there is a suggestion of middle school as the carnivalesque to the high school’s normalization and rationality. Importantly, though, McWilliam would also bring this analysis back to a point she returns to a few times: the carnivalesque never fully escapes that which it makes light of or attempts to make grotesque.

Both Zadie and Dominic also made similar connections. Zadie noted that students “love” watching teachers, and noting their friendships, and that these friendships lead in turn to “fun, healthy, middle school environment.” She also directly linked her own increased ability to laugh, both at herself and her students’ use of humor, as being particularly attributable to being in middle school—this seemed a crucial piece of why her underwear and phone number stories were “middle school.” Dominic noted that middle school teachers, particularly those attached to

the 7th and 8th grades, seemed to be more “bantery” than any other level in the school—noting the relative seriousness of the high school teachers and the elementary (and 5th and 6th grade) teachers. According to Dominic, “we” don’t take ourselves all that seriously—and attributed that largely to the ability to joke with students in a way that teachers of lower grades could not, and that high school teachers largely would not, in favor of the “seriousness” and “rigor” of their formal curriculum.

The positioning of “middle school teacher” outside of both “elementary” and “high” school teachers perhaps points back to another interesting tension elsewhere in the discussions with Holly, Zadie, and Dominic. All at some point spoke about how they somehow fell outside of what a “typical” teacher is, or does. For Holly, this came up particularly around her appearance, and how she did not look like the “typical” teacher. For Zadie, she spoke about the ways she could use herself—her body, her personality, her passions and interests—to get students to see theirs, and how this probably created opportunities that would not happen in other divisions. And Dominic frequently questioned whether the “side” conversations—on gender, privilege, culture, character issues, and current events—that he so cherished in his classroom might in fact make him a “bad” Spanish teacher.

Simultaneously, though, all routinely expressed their love of middle school; how much of that love and identity within “middle school” is constructed by being the thing that the others constantly are not, or do not want to be? Zadie, Dominic, and Holly each noted that people continually react to the fact that they are middle school teachers with a blend of wonder and horror, conveying simultaneous sainthood and insanity upon them in their wonder and awe. How might the discourse of “melding into one” be a bond forged by constantly being defined, by others, perceptions of what others believed, and ourselves, as something *not* elsewhere, and

perhaps not desirable? How might taking on a certain “bantery” “way to joke,” which seems so richly textured with mimicry and playfulness involving one another’s appearances (to the point of, say, making a mug of another teacher’s face) be a response to making “middle school” itself “possible”?

The rhizomatic assemblage of “middle school” seems richly intertwined with endlessly shifting discourses, performativities, and embodiments. The teachers in the study seem to take pride in their positions of influence with their students, especially in the face of being reinscribed as themselves in a professional position few outside of the position can make sense of, let alone aspire to do. The quirks, uncertainties, challenges are positioned as gratifying and interesting; in a recent interview of a potential middle school teacher for the 2022–2023 year, when asked why he in his early teaching career seemed to find himself gravitating to teaching middle school, the candidate responded, “They’re always changing. No two days are the same.” The teachers position themselves and their students as outside the typical, constructing “middle school” as a time, space, and function of constant flux, oddity, humor, and changing/atypical bodies *as* the typical, as the norm. The mimicry, the playfulness, the banter, and the “carnavalesque” positioned *as* “middle school” all seem to lean on the times and places when teacher and student bodies could freely interact.

What happens if those opportunities and those bodies go away?

Chapter V – Middle School Bodies: Distant, Remote, and Threatening

“Living through a pandemic, you’re prepared ... teaching middle school, you don’t expect things to make sense, or the dots to connect logically. You stop expecting them to act rationally. You just keep moving. Stuff doesn’t have to make sense.”

-Cedar Day Middle School Principal, remarking to Kyle and another teacher on the craziness of the moment and impending new regulations with increased numbers of students in the building, 2/19/21

To the participants in this study, stuff no longer made sense when schooling at Cedar Day pivoted to online learning in late March 2020 due to the closures prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, stuff not making sense was probably an understatement of how a large portion of the planet felt as the global pandemic caused a host of changes no one had ever imagined grappling with. In schooling, it meant continuing to attempt to educate even amidst dealing with any number of personal crises, while students and their families likely dealt with many of their own.

For the purposes of this study, though, one of the research questions in particular rose in prominence: When and in what ways does “middle school” make bodies of teachers and of students in/visible? When does the presence (or absence) of a teacher’s or student’s body make something im/possible for teaching in middle school? An extension, perhaps, from the above comment by the Cedar Day principal: does “middle school” make more or less sense amidst personal, familial, institutional, local, national, and global chaos?

Suddenly, student and teacher bodies, out of pressing global public health concerns, were *required* to be absent from one another in a classroom, but became reconstituted digitally through web video conferencing platforms such as Zoom. I became interested in resituating the

study to explore this: in what ways are middle school discourses so stable and resilient that little might change in the ways in which middle school teachers and middle school students were made to be possible discursively? Would middle school students still provoke some of the same concerns, even when moved to a digital platform? And, upon reopening, what would be durable from the earlier discussions with the same participants? What would change? In what ways might, given the omnipresence of COVID-19 restrictions and regulations in the reopening of school in September 2020, bodies of both teachers and students experience themselves and each other differently or similarly?

Importantly, another context for this chapter was also what transpired in between being fully remote after the shutdown of mid-March 2020 for the duration of spring and then coming back to “de-densified” classrooms of 50% students in fall of 2020. The summer of 2020 marked the school’s—alongside much of American society’s—reckoning with race and the history of systemic and institutional racism at the institution after the murder of George Floyd by Derik Chauvin. Shortly after Floyd’s murder, this all particularly came to light when a wave of BIPOC alumni and current students of Cedar Day and “peer institution” schools like Cedar Day began creating Instagram and other social media accounts to collect and broadcast personal incidents of racism in their experiences at their schools. These accounts were often created under the account name “@BlackatSchool.” [References to this account, or the subsequent “@QueeratSchool” account, are referred to in forthcoming excerpts as “Blackat” or “Queerat,” as this is the shorthand by which they were invoked in discussions from June 2020 onward. Consequently, references to Cedar Day’s accounts will be “BlackatCedar” and “QueeratCedar.”]

The summer then touched off a series of faculty meetings and reading groups to try to attend first to the painful narratives shared in the Instagram accounts, and then to begin to make

attempts at moving professional development forward along anti-racist lines. As the summer moved on, intense discussions about racism, anti-racism, and privilege—and later, anti-LGBTQIA+ policies and actions—began comingling with heated airings of grievances regarding how the faculty and staff were not being folded into the process of planning for the school’s reopening. The school began to deal with charges about a lack of care regarding the well being of many of the bodies in its care—students, faculty, and staff alike—while also turning an investigative lens on some of the Instagram allegations. In hiring an investigative firm to look into several of the more heinous narratives or repeated subjects of narratives (several current and former teachers were named, with only passing attempts at redacting the names in the posts) the school seemed to turn the lens and the responsibility back on the teachers and staff.

Consequently, alongside the stress and questions of safety in coming back to school in September 2020 because of COVID-19, a number of faculty members expressed concerns, both publicly and privately, about some of the difficulties in moving forward with anti-racist professional growth and pedagogy, given that attempts at doing so that might be seen as “failing” could be dealt with punitively. How much would people be reticent (or resistant) to doing the hard work of confronting personal bias and privilege, particularly with respect to race, as teaching professionals in a context in which doing so “poorly” might end in being let go?

The twin concerns of personal health and positioning oneself professionally as a successful anti-racist educator were dominant in the focus group, and set important context for the ways in which the participants—and I—produce(d) ourselves as middle school teachers in contexts that shifted tremendously from the initial wave of research interviews pre-pandemic. This was perhaps even more jarring because the final of those interviews, with Holly, took place

the day before the school shut early for Spring Break, March 11, 2020, and then did not reopen again until the fall.

Lost Physicality, Lost Pleasure: Lost Middle School

Erica McWilliam opens Chapter Five of *Pedagogical Pleasures*, entitled “Body to Body,” with the following paragraph:

At a recent conference on post-compulsory schooling, I heard the claim that schools are places where young people go to watch old people work. This cynical and simplistic comment touches on an important fact about the conduct of pedagogical work—its *physicality*. [Emphasis original.] Despite the promises of the virtual classroom, tele-tutoring, distance delivery, and the seductions of the superhighway, the overwhelming majority of young people continue to spend a great deal of time gazing at the bodies of their teachers, and listening to their utterances. For better and worse, a school teacher is still some body who teaches some body.” (McWilliam, 1999, p. 107)

McWilliam goes on to note that emphasizing the body often “disquiets” teachers, and posits that the body may be disquieting not solely because of the taboo of teacher and student bodies being read as having too much pleasure in shared space with one another, but because pedagogy implies and necessitates “rationality,” while the body and its intendent possibilities and pleasures bring about the possibility of “fun.” Interestingly, in both the fully remote and the hybrid circumstances, some element of both body and voice was still present—allowing for the “gazes” and “listening” of the students noted by McWilliam (1999). The *physicality*, though, was absent.

Physicality and fun seemed inherent in the chaotic, uncertain “nature” of middle school portrayed in Chapter IV. The mere possibility of “middle school nonsense” was largely a pattern in what participants noted as making teaching in middle school enjoyable. Once the bodies were no longer in shared physical space with one another, though, the joy, fun, and happiness went missing. The stark contrast between the first week of March 2020 and the end of March 2020 is perhaps where this fun was most absent. When asked about how the COVID-19 shutdown changed what was previously characteristic in teaching middle school, Holly remarked: “That

like, energy and what makes Middle School fun? Wasn't there. And that's, I think, what made it miserable for everybody" (FG, 11/30/20). Even being back in the building for 2020–2021, with social distancing and the cohort groupings of 50% of each grade any given week, normally bustling hallways, alive with noise and bodies and lockers, were nearly silent for the bulk of the year. Students and adults alike seemed, largely, miserable.

Perhaps, though, it's more about the possibility of observing, monitoring, or even participating in the fun that is being denied. Dominic then wonders if that fun simply "went underground."

Dominic: Yeah, that [playfulness] was definitely lacking. I agree with Holly, what Holly just said about, uh, like, just it was this very flat, non-fun thing. But then I also think that I wonder if that fun just went underground, and they're clearly texting each other, you know, and laughing at stuff that they're texting each other during class. So I think a little bit of that fun just went below where I could see it. (FG, 11/30/20)

The ability to see or participate with the fun—to be in the same space as the fun—has gone missing and made the job "miserable," per Holly. Zadie also agreed: "You feed off of that energy and that contact. And it's like all of that has been removed" (FG, 11/30/20). Given that one of the discursive threads of "middle school"—or, at least the participants in this study's discourses of "middle school"—was participating in the "fun," perhaps everything being a "very flat, non-fun thing" was more about the teachers' ability to participate in the fun *with* the students. As Dominic posits, it could have been happening, "just below where [he] could see it." Or be a part of it.

There is the obvious mingling with another theme of Chapter IV: the performance aspect of "being" a middle school teacher. But the lack of performance went with the lack of physicality—as Zadie puts it, "contact." Zadie went on to also note that all of the interactivity

and hands-on learning she so feeds off of as a professional and as a scientist was especially missing.

Zadie: I f---ing *hate* ... I *hate* teaching right now because I feed off of hands-on. Like, I hate the fact that I can't take kids—which I will...I have to just be more creative about it—taking them out to do garden work. It's like it's taken [away]. It's like all the things that I feed off of and love about teaching. The hands-on component that I...

[Fades, and then whispers] It's so boring to me.

[Back to normal speaking volume] Yeah, it's really hard. (FG, 11/30/20)

Without the hands-on aspects, the physicality Zadie needs when teaching her middle school students and her subject, the profession she expressed so much passion for prior to the pandemic is now something she “hates” and finds “so boring.”

If affects are “prepersonal and precognitive intensities that augment and/or diminish a body's capacity to act” (Dernikos et al., 2020, p.5) and that “happen[] to, with, on, through, and across us in divergent ways” (Dernikos et al., 2020, p.8) then there were plenty of affectual forces producing the responses described above. There was an intensity to the *absence* of the spirit and joy expressed by Zadie, Holly, and Dominic about middle school as we discussed teaching remotely. Zadie's voice drops in volume to the point of being nearly inaudible as she seems to feel the weight of giving voice to her hatred. These teachers—who spoke with enthusiasm, joy, and energy about their jobs pre-pandemic—described themselves as and came across to me as dejected and far removed from their passionate engagement with middle school teaching. The removal of bodies from one another in shared space was some major component of this affectual response to remote and hybrid teaching.

Lost Bodies = Lost Docility, Lost Teaching, and Lost Learning

Without the bodies of students in the room, Dominic, Holly, and Zadie felt that learning was impacted, particularly while fully remote, and that the learning was impacted primarily because they were not physically in the same space to redirect or guide the actions and attentions

of the students—the students were, in their estimation, seemingly incapable of learning. Being able to successfully position oneself as a good and effective middle school teacher seemed discursively inaccessible to all three without physical, bodily presence in a shared space.

Holly made mention multiple times in the focus group of her belief that, while remote, the students “actually didn’t learn anything.” Dominic noted at one moment, in expressing the frustrations that came with remote teaching, and particularly remote teaching of students who seemed so removed from the practice of being students, “I just sometimes feel defeated, and like, I’m going to teach it even if you’re not going to learn it. I can’t ... like, they’re... it’s just this passivity that I felt like you could have a little more control over when they were in the room and spur them into action that I haven’t figured out remotely” (FG, 11/30/20). Zadi echoed concerns about learning, how present students were when “on screen,” and their ability to connect. She opened bluntly:

Kids aren't learning shit, man. They're just like, holy... What are you all doing? Are you reading? And it's hard for you to read on a screen. ... I think you cannot fully—if there's anything to be learned from this—you cannot fully depend upon an online curriculum, like you need paper, you need book books. I don't think their brains can handle like the, for those micro cathode ray tubes that are doing glitch glitch glitch firing in their eyes, and like your inability to focus ... there's a major disconnect, I feel. (FG, 11/30/20)

Zadie echoes the assumption of *middle schoolers* being desensitized to their screens (somehow more than the adults around them). Zadi also echoes the connection between the presence of students in a bodily way in the classroom and their ability both to be managed and to learn.

Holly also bluntly put the idea that when remote “you can’t control the physicality of what it means to be a focused student” (FG, 11/30/20). The absence of the middle school bodies and the appearance of a lack of focus, notably through their gaze being broken and removed from the camera, help to reify the perceived need and what is understood as the *natural* inability

of students to focus and show the “physicality of ... what it means to be a focused student.” At another point in the discussion, Holly noted her direction of learning activities in a typical classroom scenario, and how her removal from that direction meant that students weren’t learning and their absent bodies were no longer able to be made “accountable”:

I feel like they're very distracted by their things. Like they can pull anything up while you're asking them to take notes or whatever. And I think like whatever you do, saying “Control yourself,” when you have them all in the room. Like I've never let them use their laptops for anything other than research on culture. And like when I'm forcing them to create a binder with all of their hard copy work in front of them with all of their handwritten notes in front of them, because I've been able to control how they take notes, what the notes look like, what's in the notes, where they keep the notes, right, like I have control over all of that. ... And you can't hold them as accountable when their bodies are not in the room consistently. (FG, 11/30/20)

Consistent, physical presence allows for the possibility of accountability—and with accountability, learning. “Control yourself” seems to be the invocation of the production of reflection and self-awareness as technologies of the self (Foucault, 1995; Foucault 1997/2003). There is, though, the gap still present: somehow students aren’t “able to control themselves” without the teacher in the room, holding them accountable (for holding themselves accountable). Holly actually imagined just before the closure in March 2020 that online teaching would essentially be like online higher education, likening how she imagined classes to go to her own past experience taking online graduate level classes. The removal of the bodies in her physical presence removed the “middle school.”

Dominic spoke about how, because he could not manage students’ behaviors on screen—and realized the power of his body pre-pandemic in completing this management of students’ bodies and learning—he would just continue to teach. The absence of bodies did not allow him to manage their behaviors or their engagement in learning, as he noted their “passivity”—and that, despite that passivity, he would simply continue teaching. The removal of middle school

bodies has removed the connection to the students and the job for each of these teachers has become something altogether different—and not “middle school”—than the job they were all passionate in expressing a love for prior to the pandemic.

The reading of the participants of the students’ bodies on screen suggests that context and a certain rigidity (or lack thereof) matter here, too. Licata and Cheng Stahl (2021) describe how in their own online, emergency teaching contexts—Licata teaching ELA to eighth grade students in Newark, NJ, and Cheng Stahl to first-year college students in Manhattan—they were able to “shift[] away from being neoliberal surveillers and producers” in part by embracing the gaming cultures of their students and shedding the desire to produce learners who had preset learning goals (such as the NJ State ELA exams). “We felt a fluid, *horizontal*, and expansive relationality, entangled within our and our students’ human and nonhuman, digital and physical, material and conceptual realities, rather than a single, vertical relationality” (Licata & Cheng Stahl, 2021). The fluidity they report having access to seems to be something Zadie, Holly, and Dominic did not see themselves having access to. Perhaps this was because of their investments in being “neoliberal surveillers and producers” or to educational outcomes that were defined pre-pandemic that they did not *want* to shift away from. Cedar Day, for its part, did not particularly encourage an exploration of “expansive relationality.” Ultimately, as we were told many times by school administrators, we were there “to deliver the mission of the school, and the parents pay for that mission to be delivered.” Students and teachers were given expectations about how to perform school via Zoom, including by *not* Zooming from bed, keeping cameras on at all times, and students remaining muted until called on by the teacher. Teachers and students were reminded of their roles as teachers and students—the “vertical relationality” was positioned as vital to the continued functioning of the school. In short, where Licata and Cheng Stahl (2021)

positioned possibilities for more fluid and “thin skinned” embodiments of their relations with their students, Cedar Day seemed to position school in such a way that Dominic, Holly, and Zadie could not (or could not see the possibility of exploring) alternatives that might have been more fun—and perhaps, more just.

Muted, (Not) Docile

Dominic, Holly, and Zadie each noted how withdrawn, how placid, and how quiet the students were when school went fully remote in spring 2020. They also found much of the same withdrawal, lack of energy, and “passivity” even upon return to a hybrid model in fall 2020, with half of the students on campus each week. Zadie noted one student of concern, Bob, who had been so passive by November 2020 that “he [was] likely not going to pass the grade.” The students crossed through docility to being *so* placid as to be unable to submit to the instruction, discipline, and knowledge of the teacher.

The middle school bodies in the charge of these teacher participants were not being read as “docile.” Foucault (1995) saw the body “as object and target of power,” and docility as “join[ing] the analyzable body to the manipulable body,”—stating that “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (p. 136). Docile bodies can be read as ready to learn, able to be taught—and, to Foucault’s point, “improved.” Saavedra and Marx (2016), following Boldt (2001), note the connection between student bodies not behaving in ways expected by their teachers as being associated with not learning. They connect the outsize role that the docility of the body has on a teacher both estimating that a student is learning *and* in directing effort and “correction” to the “unruly” bodies otherwise in the room. It seems that the inaccessibility of the bodies, though docile, has helped transform them into bodies beyond manipulation, and thus, beyond learning.

Echoes of a resilient, persistent set of middle school tropes peppered the discourse around remote, and then hybrid, teaching: the non-compliance, stemming from either unwillingness, inability, or lack of care on the part of the middle schoolers; the assumed “doing something else”; the natural and unquestioned proclivity to be distracted and absorbed by screens; the impulsivity; and the awkwardness. Zadie noted that it’s hard for the middle schoolers when remote: “It’s hard for immature...it’s hard for an audience not well trained in remote learning.” Given that she is referring to their ability to stay on camera there’s a suggestion that their bodies are not ready to receive the instruction in either how to be a proper student of remote learning, or in the general lessons of school themselves.

Stockton (2009) offers the concept of “growing sideways,” which may have application to this notion of an assumption of loss (here, of learning) when a child is developing outside of the “norm.” Growing sideways Stockton offers as a way of reading youth who fall outside of dominant cultural norms and ideals, hence “to the side” as opposed to “growing up.” She theorizes these moves as “suspensions and shadows of growth” (Stockton, 2009, p. 13). While much of her work is focused on the application of this concept to the reading of queer children in artifacts of popular culture, I wonder at the conceptualization of children growing sideways during the pandemic, and how they may be read as “queer”—as anything outside the norm or ideal. Taken this way, we may re-read Zadie’s note about the students being “awkward” on camera more broadly: they are unintelligible on screen as “normal children.” Holly seemingly joins the inability to “control...the physicality of ... what it means to be a focused student” with the students’ “[in]ability to be improved” further suggesting for Holly a “suspension of growth.” Their growth as students has moved sideways—outside of the frame of the Zoom/laptop lens and the frame displayed back to Holly and the other teachers. Their growth has also taken them

“sideways” from the development middle school teachers are “supposed to be” doing; Dominic mentioned the role of middle school teachers in bringing middle school students into “certain functioning roles in society.” Zadié also mentioned above in remarking about their awkward characteristics that they seemed “in limbo.” Middle school discourses, woven as they are with “proper” developmentalism, fundamentally ties “proper” middle schoolers with their development as adolescents. This “proper” development puts adolescents in a linear course through time, conflating past, present, and future (Lesko 1996b). Developing linearly—growing “up”—suggests that anything outside of this is something that would put students “at risk.” The “limbo” the students are in positions the students beyond the proper reach of the middle school teachers who are meant to guide and shape them into proper young adults. (Or, at least, putting them on the linear path towards doing so.)

Reading Zoom Resistance (or Awkwardness?) as “Middle School”

At Cedar, students were expected during remote learning to have cameras on for the entirety of their remote classes in spring 2020 and while home during hybrid learning in 2020-2021. Teachers like Zadié, Dominic, and Holly saw it as a necessary measure to assess a student’s engagement by seeing them on screen. The laptop lens was the only thing that could complete the interaction between the teacher displayed on the screen (through their camera lens) and the student body, otherwise not only distant, but unseen. And unseen meant not just unobserved, but also uncontrolled, unregulated, unmanaged and ultimately, unable to learn. Gallagher (2010) notes, in referencing Foucault’s (1995) technologies of power, and specifically hierarchical observation, “Once students are seen, they are able to be known; when they are known, they can be controlled” (p. 77). While from teachers’ perspectives the camera was

necessary, it was simultaneously experienced as extremely limited in offering the opportunity to actually affect change in students' bodily movement and certain bodily behaviors read as learning behaviors.

Dominic noted students' constant moves off screen—frequently, in his telling, positioned to be barely visible on screen (showing only a forehead), holding their gaze at some assumed object (like a phone) just outside of the frame of the camera, or simply turning their camera off. Dominic noted this as a maddeningly repetitive part of his remote teaching days, and the “most middle school thing to happen during remote teaching” in response to a direct question on this subject.

You know, kids who sort of are on camera like this [Dominic ducks head below camera, only top of head visible at bottom of screen] every day and you say to them, can you please put your whole face on, and then they'll go like this. [Dominic lifts head slightly.] And in a minute, it's down here. [Dominic's head returns to being lower than the frame of the camera.] And it's just this constant battle of like, you know, do you think I'm not gonna ask you this today? Because I asked you for the last two weeks. ... I mean, sometimes, you know, when their screens are off, you know, they're just doing something else. Right? (FG, 11/30/20)

Daily repetition was not new during remote teaching. In fact, repeating the same sorts of requests—often for compliance with systems, expectations, or instructions—was seen as “middle school” before the pandemic, as well. However, around their compliance with requests to be on screen, Dominic noted it as a battle. Paraphrasing Gallagher (2010), if only that which can be seen can be controlled, Dominic seems to see the need to “fight the battle” for students to be seen—control for the possibility to control, perhaps. Of course, this seems to be the rub: they need to be seen to be controlled, so middle school students are “naturally” moving off screen. And Dominic—as well as Holly and Zadie—see the students as being unable to be controlled to even be on screen, let alone to be controlled in what they are doing on the other side of it.

The students' gazes moving away from the laptop camera and its gaze, moving entirely off screen, holding their attention on something off screen, or outright turning their cameras off seem to have been small acts of resistance not unlike those described by Ferguson (2000), who detailed frequent observations of elementary school students who would find ways to resist a teacher's power over their movements in the classroom by either moving slowly from one task to another, getting up to do something "unauthorized," like sharpening a pencil at an "inappropriate" moment, or moving too quickly into or out of the classroom.

Zadie puts it succinctly:

They kind of withdrew. They weren't as vocal. I mean, we talked about impulsivity. But that's relative. There is this dramatic withdrawal ... or just ... a lack of visual participation. Being in front of a camera is spooky for them or just ... they're awkward. ... They didn't seem as happy either. They seemed ... in limbo, sad. Like uncertain. (FG, 11/30/20)

Certainly given the confluence of personal and life events, particularly in March, April, and May of 2020, the noted unhappiness and sadness could have been read as any number of possible influences. It seems notable, though, that within the swirl of various noted personal behaviors is the positioning of the camera in this narrative. Their withdrawal isn't being constructed as pandemic-related, it is the "spooky"ness of the camera, or the students' being "awkward," an oft-repeated piece of the construction of a "typical middle school student."

The "spookiness" could be read in relationship to the panopticon as theorized by Foucault. Gallagher (2010), following Foucault, explored the notion that social institutions such as schools demonstrate the principles of panoptical surveillance, and with that surveillance, the exercise of power. Gallagher explored the power of observation—or students or teachers merely being called to the *possibility* of being observed—in a primary school in Scotland. He offers the notion that, even with the threat or the possibility of being observed, the teachers' observations

of students was discontinuous. The panoptic “ideal” would be that the observed would not know whether they were, in fact, being observed by the warden or guard (or teacher or administrator in a school) but the *assumption* would be that they were under total and constant surveillance. In schools, however, Gallagher points out that students quickly know whether a teacher is *actually* looking (not just that the teacher *could* be looking) and amend behaviors accordingly. In his study, students routinely positioned themselves with their back to the teacher to make faces at other students, or used classroom tables “acting as screens beneath which illicit activities could be carried out” (Gallagher, 2010, p. 267). In this resistance, then, there is a nod to the relational nature of power/knowledge—that power is not housed, held, or constituted by any one person, group, or structure, but rather in the techniques and technologies that help give it form and effectiveness.

Zoom and the school policy for students to keep their cameras on and microphones muted unless called upon by the teacher represented a dramatic shift towards the “panoptical ideal.” A student’s place on the gallery view of a teacher was unknown to the student. The teacher could at any moment be surveilling the student without the student knowing that they were the subject of observation. The teacher’s gaze could be assumed; the very policies of teachers and school alike were meant to establish this very assumption. Consequently, the teacher’s *gaze should be* assumed. Meanwhile, participants—teachers and students alike—engage in self-observation that approaches the Foucaultian panoptical space (Emigh & O’Malley, 2020). All in the Zoom session can observe everyone else and pay attention to what someone surveilling might see of their body/face on screen. The Zoom screen gives every user direct evidence that they can be, and might be, and probably are, being surveilled—and the power to adjust what is surveillable.

Middle School Body as Threat

Participant teachers spoke openly about the fear and anxiety of interacting with student bodies that has come with reopening and hybrid teaching. Even at 50% capacity, those students represented potential COVID-carrying and -transmitting threats. As such, student bodies became an assemblage for that fear and anxiety, a site upon which control no longer simply exacted its form and took its shape around “proper” learning or “proper” being, but around a threat to personal health and safety.

Zadie: I, in my mind, pay attention. There are just like a catalogue of students who I know don't wear their masks correctly, and have to consciously like, it's like, [if] there's a surface that I know they've touched, I will without pointing it out, wipe it down before leaving, because I know they haven't been wearing their masks correctly all day. And they, you know, like, I worry about them, like their overall hygiene and I worry about whoever is sitting at the desk afterwards.... I am, if you want to talk like in terms of a ball of anxiety, I am on hyper overdrive and constantly, like calculating and thinking about like, what's the risk here? So and so doesn't wear his mask? You know, who has he touched? ...

Because yeah, I'm like, I'm on high alert, and I crash because you can only sustain it for so long and it's exhausting. You know, I get migraines. I mean, dehydrated, you know, like all the things the whole long list [...] migraines, you know, orange pee you know, all of these because I'm not like using the bathroom. You know, it's all ... I'm not drinking enough water because I'm always like on high alert. (FG, 11/30/20)

Students not wearing masks correctly become a collective, catalogued and assessed for risk.

Zadie mentions being “on hyper overdrive” and “constantly calculating” the risks the bodies of students and their improperly-masked faces pose. The impact most immediately on Zadie and her body is one she directly connects: there is a discursive move, seemingly linear and causal in its offering and construction, between the cataloging of risk posed by certain ill-masked students and physical impacts on Zadie and her body: exhaustion, migraines, dehydration, “orange pee.” The impact on her body is seemingly a direct consequence to the constant, iterative weighing and assessing the masked (or partially masked) faces and the distanced (or not) bodies of the students and the risks to her health that they pose. The painfully ironic consequence is the risks to her health that the “hyper overdrive” calculations are causing for her mental and physical health.

Of course, this could be chalked up to the weighing of risk during the COVID-19 pandemic around any and all human bodies—but the construction of the middle schooler *as* threat (albeit a decidedly different level of threat) is part of the assemblage. In discussing the lack of distancing, even with greatly reduced numbers, of middle school students, the conversation in the focus group slid back and forth between protocols during the fall of 2020 and the “inability” of middle schoolers to “know their own bodies” and their place in space well before that.

Holly: If we as educational professionals can say it is **beyond the capacity** of a middle schooler to be able to manage themselves in this way, why are they here? Like, how come the school isn't making a bigger decision to say, it doesn't matter how many teachers are down there yelling at them to keep distance, they just physically can't do it safely. So why are we...why are we here?

Dominic: That's interesting. Do you think a middle schooler is less able to do it than a lower schooler?

Holly: You know what? Lower schoolers are more inclined to ...

Zadie: ...follow the rules.

Holly: Follow the rules. Yeah. (FG, 11/30/20)

While the beginnings of the concern are about the middle school students' “capacity” for bodily self-management, the construction of their bodies as threat seems to resolve to actually being about their perceived ability (or desire) to follow the rules. The fluidity of moving between the concern with middle school students and their inability to comply with distancing shifting from the developmental concerns to the “nature” of challenging authority and boundaries to reading it as a simple inability (or unwillingness) to comply with regulations is suggestive—especially when, within the conversation, even though it continued to slide back and forth to developmentalism, it seemed more of a question of enforcement and reminders about the regulations, not an actual physical inability of middle school students to keep distance. The elementary school students are positioned to be “more inclined to follow the rules,” not more inclined, to, say, “naturally” hold their arms out at their sides to gauge appropriate distance

between them and the people in front of or behind them in a line, something Holly and I noted in our discussion that we had just observed the day before. The fundamental assumption is that it was the assumed proclivity towards rule-following of elementary school students and the assumed “nature” of the young adolescents in middle school to say “f--- you” to “boundaries,” was the actual driving force in the difference in outcomes.

The middle schooler body—the “nature” of it—and the lurking, omnipresent, invisible threat of the coronavirus combine to produce a possibly deadly scenario. Zadi catalogues and risk-assesses, and reads faces and bodies for risky behaviors. But Zadi also worries about their “overall hygiene,” and Holly brings up concerns, twice, about how self-management of their bodies (through distancing) is “beyond their capacity.” She sees the school administration’s unwillingness to join the knowledge that middle schoolers are incapable of distancing with the threat they represent in an effort to continue to operate school in person in 2020–2021 as something that may come down to “literally people’s lives.”

@BlackatCedar

One way this played out a few months later, in the focus group, was when our conversation shifted back to how, if at all, the participant teachers felt that their role as “role models” might have shifted because of @BlackatCedar or @QueeratCedar? What was the interplay between their body, their discursive production of themselves as anti-racist educators, and the bodies of their students—particularly the Black students, or other students of color? With the challenges of COVID-19, how did these help make the work of forming the desired connections with students (im)possible?

Over the summer of 2020, a series of professional development sessions took place, largely in the form of discussions and book groups. Book groups were offered around two texts:

Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2018) and Ibram X. Kendi's *How to be an Anti-Racist* (2019). Discussion—at least in my memories of the experiences of the book groups in which I participated—frequently moved between the texts being discussed and the texts being increasingly grappled with through @BlackatCedar's posts on Instagram. One of the most frequent things I heard from white colleagues was "I just can't believe this happened. Not at Cedar Day."

Voices from @BlackatCedar

The @BlackatCedar Instagram account had over 250 posts over a roughly two month span from mid-June to mid-August 2020. Multiple posts each contain multiple expressions of pain and trauma at a variety of moments in and out of the classroom. Both current students and alumnae contributed over the two month period. A majority of the posts focus on memories of high school incidents in the classroom, hallways, lounges, playing fields and courts, and the cafeteria. Several, though, reach back to middle school memories. The selections are chosen to represent some of the voices who particularly brought up their bodies and the taunts, insults, and/or violence levied on their bodies by white peers, teachers, and administrators.

When I was a new 6th grader, a substitute teacher for our English class told me to put my hands up over my head to practice for when I got arrested. I had just turned 11. (Cedar Day Alumna, Class of 2017, Instagram @BlackatCedar, 6/12/20)

Black students at Cedar Day always have to be the bigger person, or else we're accused of being unreasonable and opposed to progress. White students are always painted as being innocent and well-intentioned no matter how blatant or hurtful their actions and behaviors are. (Cedar Day Alumna, Class of 2017, Instagram @BlackatCedar, 6/13/20)

My body matured faster than my white peers. Kids clothes began to look "inappropriate" on me in middle school, according to an administrator who called my mom to tell her my wardrobe was 'distracting' to the boys. ...

From 7th grade on, boys considered my well-endowed chest an invitation to throw things—spitballs, pieces of paper, crumbs—down my shirt. The white boys who tried to volley carrot bits into my cleavage were the same white boys who told me that I was

“kind pretty, for an African girl.” Cedar Day is an environment that glorifies the stick-thin and straight-haired, so accepted these behaviors and comments as compliments.

Sophomore year, I revealed to a teacher that I had been a human basketball hoop for nearly 4 years and it was disrupting my ability to get work done or focus. I thought she could help it stop. “They’re just boys being boys. You can’t let it get to you, be the bigger person. Wear higher cut shirts.” I never brought it up again. ...

I was led to believe that vocalizing my frustration was immature, and at 15 I was expected to act like an adult and sit silently while these white boys were allowed to enjoy their adolescence at the expense of my physical safety. I was fetishized, adultified, victim-blamed, and ignored. (Cedar Day Alumna, Class of 2013, Instagram @BlackatCedar, 6/14/20)

When I would come to school with my hair unbraided, it would typically be tied in a bun that looked like a poof. A few of my friends invented something called ‘the poof game’ in middle school. It became a challenge to see who could ‘poof,’ or hit, my hair without me stopping them. This game lasted 3 years. (Alumna, Class of 2017, Instagram @BlackatCedar, 6/16/20)

Malik’s Body

I asked explicitly about how QueeratCedar and BlackatCedar had affected the participants, or how they felt the narratives in the accounts intersected with their positions as middle school teachers in particular. While there was some discussion about how remote teaching in spring 2020 and distant/hybrid teaching in fall 2020 had made it seemingly “impossible” to have the same effects and roles as role models, the conversation quickly shifted to the students seen to be the sites of most concern—perhaps because of the lack of “role modeling” we as middle school educators felt was available to us. Malik, a 7th grade boy who identifies as a student of color, was one of the few named students in the entire November 2020 conversation, and was the students discussed most singularly as one of those students of concern. (Interestingly, the student referenced earlier in the chapter who Zadio believed had become so passive that he was likely not to pass the grade is white. And he was only named that one time.) Malik, however, became a repeated site of worry, surprise, and some amount of guilt and shame on the part of Dominic and Zadio, who both taught him at the time of the focus group. (I did, as

well, which I will discuss later in this chapter.) Malik represented the student who, without being named as such, clearly represented the possibility of making strides or continuing failure as an anti-racist middle school teacher.

Dominic noted, in particular, that he struggled with what he saw as a conflict. He wants to be seen as someone who is approachable, someone who recognizes his own privileges as they relate to his positionalities (“I joke with the kids all the time, and I refer to myself this way all the time [that I’m] like on top of the food chain, right? Like, I’m white, I’m male.”), and is forming connections with his students. After BlackatCedar and QueeratCedar, he believes there is a premium on being recognized as a teacher who is forming those connections. In service of being someone who puts a premium on those relationships, though, he sees a conflict with “standards.” This conflict is something he wrestled with in the focus group—and positioned Malik as the student who embodies this conflict for him.

Dominic: I am really struggling with the balance of like, standards, and my role as an educator and directing behavior and correcting behavior with this newly found sense of like, *all* that matters is connection. And how do I communicate to you that I care ... And I really struggle with holding some of these kids to a standard versus like my effort to be seen as on their side. And I’m having a hard time like, you know, like, Malik. When Malik can’t get his shit together, like, do I hold him to account? How do I ... how do I intervene? How do I communicate to him that I—

For me right now, it’s with the lack of time, and the fact that like, Malik’s there, and then bam, he’s gone [from Zoom], because the class ends, and there isn’t a chance to like, [say], “Hey, can you hang back for a second?” So I’m erring *way* on the side of like, not calling out, not saying like, “Dude, you’ve got to, like, we went over this in class, like, you’ve got to get on board with like how to put this file in this thing.” I’m terrified of having those conversations, you know, of being accused of not seeing these things that I’m supposed to see. So I’m erring on the side of like, not holding kids accountable, not having a standard, not— (FG, 11/30/20)

Clearly, there is a binary: standards and accountability as diametrically opposed to forming connections and communicating care. This conflict emerges at the confluence of Dominic and his embodiment of a performative of shedding privilege, an enactment of care, and a push-pull

between “standards” and “connection.” The standard seems to be something held as the objective metric by which behavior and achievement can and should be measured, and held “to account,” when a student is falling short. And, while Dominic seems to hold this view, he questions it moments later:

It is our job to correct students on a certain level. To shape their behavior. You know, we've talked about this before, but like, what is the role of middle school to like, bring them into a certain functioning role in society? But what is that role? And how much of that role is steeped in white supremacy? Like, what are we trying to bring them into? And are we supposed to bring them into anything? And are we just asking them to, like, they're not fully formed yet—but are we asking them to, like subjugate their own cultures and ethnicities? By bringing them into this, like, “this is the way you write.” “This is the way you show up on time.” Like, is that a white supremacy ... you know, standard? Or is that like, is that just good teaching? (FG, 11/30/20)

“Just good teaching” seems to be the slip back to the desire for an objective, identifiable goal, negating the constructed nature imbedded in what is considered “good teaching” in particular contexts (Ladson-Billings 1995), such as the selective independent school in which the participants and I work. Dominic returns to tropes of middle school by assuming the role of middle school teachers to “*bring* [emphasis mine] them along into a functioning role in society,” recalling the deficit assumptions that middle school students need to be brought along, and brought along to be able to “function” in society. His exploring the values and beliefs inherent and assumed in that society and in that “bringing along” are another moment of Dominic’s in which he wrestles with his role, and questions whether standards, such as “this is the way you write” are actually laden with problematic, racist assumptions, as he invokes the concern about white supremacy. However, it seems that he is only able to go so far down this path as he continually returns to the question of something being “standard.” “Just good” is this slip away from the troubling of assumptions and problematizing Dominic seems to be working through in order, it seems, to resolve to some sort of discursive “solid ground.” Ultimately, there seems to

be a desire for certainty, fixity. A knowing: there *is* a way to do this properly, in support of all students and supported by the school's, society's, and perhaps his own, gazes. And this desire came about through discussion of Malik—not earlier, when discussing the troubles and seeming inability to get students to learn in a remote context. Proper or good teaching in that moment was *disconnected* from student learning, which would likely account for no educator's actual definition of good teaching, and certainly not these three educators pre-pandemic.

Zadie encourages a different tack, though also utilizes Malik as a site of what she sees as her own shortcomings, but also opportunities to “do better next time.” Zadie seems to position her own feeling of failing Malik in class doubly (multiple-ly?), given being a Black woman.

Zadie: I know, with Malik, even as a Black, female teacher, with Malik, I tend to—I have to stop myself. Like maybe the last time he was physically in the classroom, because I just I wanted him to follow along with me, I had him sit next to me. Right, like a foot away from the board. And I realized at that point in time—I did it like automatically because I lost patience with him...just not like *doing*. He's a really interesting kid in that he'll capture something incredibly accurate[ly]. For like a split second. And you're...you're amazed. But then the rest is not gonna happen. And so he always surprises me. Like, there are things that he says and he's able to regurgitate that I can't believe [he was] paying attention, but most of the time it is like this painful... like, because he's so animated. And I love him. Like, it brings a lot of attention to him more so than like, if you were to compare it to like [Bob, a white boy in 7th grade] who is ... who doesn't, like ... his inattention is so passive...

I'm sorry, going back to Malik. I like lost patience. It was like “Malik, come sit next to me right now.” And then of course, like all of the students like kind of turned and looked, and I knew he felt embarrassed at that time. Then, of course, revisiting “How could I have done this better without ... pointing out the obvious.” Yeah, this is like something that happens. Like, that, we're not ... you know, we're human. And we're well intended, and it's good that we understand the power that we bring in our gender and ethnicities. I just ... I mean, you just you have to, like, think about how to better strategize. And you often ... more often than not, it's, you're exhausted, you're depleted and kind of go to bed feeling guilty and then wake up and try to make it slightly better. But it's ... but just to kind of ... Dominic, you're not alone. I'm trying to manage this even as a Black female. I felt badly about pointing him out, pointing out his like inability to focus at that point in time, and I just have to be better ... the next time around. That's all. (FG, 11/30/20)

Malik's body, and the behaviors he exhibits, are read as both challenge and opportunity. He is loved, but he draws attention through his animation. The corrective to get him to “follow along”

with Zadie is to have him physically move closer to Zadie at the front of the room “like a foot away from the board.” It’s the management of bodies in space that wasn’t possible for students when they were remote, and the barrier noted as holding the teachers and students back—but in this instance, with Malik’s body, it took on meaning beyond having Malik being better able to pay attention to classroom instruction and presumably gain more as a learner.

Zadie sees her own teaching in this moment as a failure, as it caused something in Malik that she read as embarrassment. The confluence of exhaustion and impatience converged to move Zadie to control Malik’s energy, attention, and body in a way that she does not feel proud of, and causes her to reflect on the “power that we bring in our gender and ethnicities.” She constructs, though, the possibility of being “better” at wielding that power through renewal: wake refreshed and ready to “try to make it slightly better.” With time and distance, then, there can be a more cognizant approach “the next time around”—time and distance and strategy being positioned as the counters to the action she took in having Malik move “automatically because [she] lost patience with him.” And in doing better, Zadie is reminding Dominic that this is simply a *human* goal that “even” she is “trying to manage this even as a black female” and that he is “not alone” as a white male. She also notes, in taking the mantle of talking about Malik from Dominic at the start of this response, that “even as a Black, female teacher, with Malik I tend to ... I have to stop myself.” Presumably, she means that she has to stop herself from actions that flow from losing patience with Malik, given where her account goes from there. The bookending, then, of discursively positioning herself in the narrative as a Black female teacher, seems significant and, perhaps, suggestive.

While both Zadie and Dominic in this moment of conversation seem to be well aware of the power of their own racial and gendered positionalities and their particular intersections—as

evidenced in both actually naming the power and privileges and responsibilities of these intersectionalities—Dominic seems to focus primarily on the norm or the corrective to be applied to Malik, and the limits on those norms, while Zadie seems to focus primarily on the fact that the action she meant to use to correct and re-direct Malik and his attention in her class was itself problematic. The aim was not simply to *not* engage or *not* challenge Malik in his behavior, but to do so in a way that would draw him in, while still maintaining his dignity.

Notable, too, in the two accounts was the positioning of Malik’s body, both in space and in the narratives themselves. In Zadie referencing her moment with Malik, he was in the room—“maybe the last time he was physically in the classroom.” Meanwhile he was not in the room—and consequently unable to easily be addressed one-on-one after class in Zoom by Dominic. Zadie desires to control Malik’s physical presence and regrets the way she engaged it; Dominic wanted to be able to control it in *some* way, and simply could not, and regrets that. Oppenheim (2012) points to the fact that attempts to be “culturally responsive” and “get to know” students “better” are really means of positioning students and their bodies as “objects of knowledge,” after Foucault (1977). Somehow, though, Malik seems to remain unknowable both to Zadie and Dominic—but both recognize the power of their own positionalities in relationship to Malik’s.

Dominic might be understood as reading Malik as a challenge because he is both middle schooler and a male student of color. Dominic, in reflecting on pulling students into a norm (and questioning the worth of that norm), mentions that “they” (in this moment, seemingly as “middle schoolers”) are “not fully formed yet.” As noted previously, this normalization is a critical technology of power (Foucault 1997/2003) that simultaneously normalizes the gaze at adolescents, the normalizing judgement, and their discursive production as needing to be shaped or guided. What has brought him to that part of his reflection, seemingly, was his rumination on

the difficulties as a white male in meeting the moment not only skillfully, but carefully, in forming connections with students of color while still “balancing ... standards.” Understood in this way, Malik is a site of great concern for this collision of discursive production of his body as something in need of, among other things, “correcting behavior” as well as “connection.” These untangled and overlapping discursive productions seem “in the end” to produce Malik, for both Dominic and Zadie, as a confused/confusing body of knowledge.

Malik, Hiding Behind My Wall

Here I grow more aware of the tugging of my own roles in this work, and I feel as though my “researcher” lens is analyzing this in such a way that it is negating my own lived experiences and my own moments with Malik, who was in one of my history sections during the 2020–2021 school year. In the class on the same day I began writing through Dominic and Zadie’s experiences with, around, and through Malik, I had echoes of Zadie’s estimation that “He’s a really interesting kid in that he’ll capture something incredibly accurate[ly]. For like a split second. And you’re ... you’re amazed. But then the rest is not gonna happen. And so he always surprises me” (FG, 11/30/20). And the silence: the surprise is that he has had a strong contribution, when seemingly given his other behaviors or contributions in class, he often disappoints, as well. In class, Malik produced both a thoughtful, insightful response on the role of citizens in a republic—and began gaming on his laptop within seconds of his answer ending and several other students beginning to offer their opinions. Echoing Zadie, Malik was able to “capture” something noteworthy, and then lapse into behaviors that drew him away from what I read in that moment as continued engagement with the discussion.

Interlude: I Scared You!

I enter my classroom to a most unusual energy. In the past several days (weeks? months?) it has been dim. The sucking of air through masks has replaced lively banter and deliberate group work; eyes staring bleakly at me, in place of looks of wonder, amusement, or perhaps intense focus on a laptop screen. These are the things I have come to know too well of late, but instead, two girls are bouncing up and down and gesticulating wildly, seeking and gaining my attention just as I cross through the open doorway. Their words are muffled both by their masks and the interplay between laughter, pitch, and their talking over one another. I can make none of what they are saying to me out, and their continued bounding (dancing?) is unintelligible to me. After about a minute of trying to make sense of them, asking for clarification, I stop. It seems I am bound to fail at this, so I turn my attention back towards the front of the room, where I'm going to plant my laptop and myself to start Zoom and the lesson.

But their words and their energy and their flurry of gesticulations continue. They escalate, even. Their dances have become more intelligible as attempts to call me back towards their part of the room. I make a few steps in their direction, but social distancing and my desire to start the class stop me short of them. They want me to come closer, but I can't make out why – one keeps yelling over the other – and so I give up, again.

As I attempt to begin Zoom for any possible remote joiners of the class, I note who is missing: Malik. I ask the room if anyone has seen him.

A boy towards the front of the room, usually rather quiet unless we're on the subject of warfare or battle tactics or machinery (which we usually are not), is offering very enthusiastically that Malik has been sent home to quarantine because his brother was sent home through contact tracing in his grade. Given the regularity of this kind of mid-day development

over the course of the school year, I don't even think to question it or verify it further. (In fact, previous attempts to verify someone's status on campus had so regularly been met with shrugs and uncertainty depending on who was in the know in that moment that I actively thought better of even attempting to follow up on this.) So I sit down and turn my attentions to plugging in my laptop to the SmartBoard and starting the Zoom Room equipment just in case Malik makes it home in time to join us for part of the lesson.

And then a sort of guttural ah! gets screamed! My heart leaps. Adrenaline flows. My head draws back.

Malik?

"I got you! I scared you!"

My face screws up and in: brow furrows, lips pinch, eyes squint. Am I seeing Malik? He's here? Did he just yell at me? Why did he just jump out from the wall?

"I scared you!"

This repetition finally meets with some response other than my quizzical, confused face: "No. Not really."

"Yes I did. I got you."

"Malik, just have a seat. Can we get started?"

"Ha! You were totally scared."

Usually silent boy: "You believed he went home, didn't you?"

Returning my focus to my computer and mentally shifting my energies to starting the class and not letting the anger beginning to run through my body come out through my mouth, I just plow forward. This will not derail the day. And I will not scream. Nor will I laugh. I might do either, or both.

While a bit startled, I was not scared. And I definitely let Malik and the class know that. And, while I certainly admit I would have been a bit scared, had the same thing happened while I was in closer proximity to Malik at my desk, I reinforce for all that I was not, in fact, in that moment, scared. But Malik wants to have scared me, and his peers seem to be quite happy to have tried to have me scared, too. And I want not to have been.

Why share this? Zadié and Dominic's discussion of Malik and my own attempts to analyze that moment led me to ask myself about how I might honestly read my own interactions with Malik, and how I might read his body, and the things I may or may not embody as well. How much did my white, middle-aged, male body represent in concert with and juxtaposition to his brown, thirteen-year-old, male body? How much did my disclaiming being scared stem from or become constituted by the discourses that came to produce us in that moment?

On one level, our bodies all simply being in space together made the moment possible. Nothing like this scene could have played out or did play out during remote school days or hybrid classes from March 2020 to April 2021. While I would have been pained to admit it openly, it was funny. It was fun. McWilliam (1999) might suggest that it was the very bodies that made that fun possible. And had it happened a year and half before, I feel strongly that it would have been the kind of moment Holly, Zadié, or Dominic might have been able to easily recognize or hold up as the sort of wacky, bizarre, strange behavior that constituted "middle school" behavior and what made teaching middle school fun.

I did *not*, though, immediately recognize or acknowledge the fun of the moment. I had wanted to begin the planned lesson for the day. I had had issues—trivial, really, but which were steadily starting to grate on my patience—with this classroom of students for a few days, so the

wackiness preceding Malik bursting forth from behind the wall put me in a mood unwilling to cede the possibility of fun. I may have been secretly *longing* for the days of students being on “mute” by default. There was no leaping from behind my laptop happening when I was Zooming from home.

It is challenging to try to determine what produced my response. Why did I enact—or affectually experience, and then process, and then enact—a dismissive shake of the head, a slight side eye, pursed lips and raised brow, and a “Nope, not scared” as a response? If a “body is defined not by what it is, but by what it *does* and *can do*” (Dernikos et al., 2020, p.5) it seems that, at a very minimum, I was denying Malik’s body’s *possibility* of producing a response in my body. My body denied his. I was annoyed. I remember distinctly—and cognitively—gathering myself so as not to react in anger at Malik, the girls who tried to dupe me into moving into place to be scared by Malik, and the boy (and accomplices) who began to spin the yarn about Malik’s sibling being quarantined. I relaxed my shoulders, unclenched my jaw, softened my gaze. Perhaps even doing these things was simply re-mastering some control: if not over others’ bodies, at least my own. If one can ever truly “control” the body they’re produced by and through.

There is probably no way to disentangle the many meanings brought together by our bodies in that instance on that day. The nagging question, though, is how much I on some level felt the jump and the claim of being scared as any one (or more) of the following: a breach of etiquette or decorum; a challenge of my authority; a challenge of my “masculinity”; a challenge of my knowledge; and/or a statement about my gullibility. My impulses within the moment, my affectual experiences before, within, through, and after it and its lurking presence in my mind as I wrote about others’ experiences of Malik, all suggest that there is some blend that came to

produce my experience and my sense-making; I'm writing through this for a reason. It was clearly an "agential and affective" moment produced by the material-discursive productions in the room (Childers, 2013).

It was theorized earlier in this chapter that the physical absence of bodies from one another seemed to actually strip several of the constituent discourses of "middle school," offering that perhaps without the bodies in space together, teaching became more generic and less tied to "middle school." Some of that character seems to have returned in the moment I'm wrestling with—and maybe have been wrestled by—but I seem to have resisted its pull in favor of easier lines of instruction, and less interaction with the bodies. Malik's absence from the classroom did not bother me. It did not make me pause, consider, or wonder. I was ready for his body to be displayed in the back of the room, on a 60" Zoom Room monitor, from the distance of time and space the supposed quarantine was bringing. When he sprung his body out from the wall, I seem to have reacted to it as an obstacle to negotiate on the way back to instruction. His body's presence did not, in that moment, make something possible—at least for the lesson as planned. The lesson would continue.

This classroom moment also suggests that perhaps Malik was reclaiming some power. It seems his peers were, too. As Grosz (1995, 32) notes, "Bodies are essential to accounts of power and critiques of knowledge." His removal from my sight, the students' knowledge of his body and my ignorance, and my "really believing" he had been quarantined all flipped the knowledge and the surveillance. They knew, and I did not. The "I *scared* you!" proclamation was not an aside, it was the culmination: I scared you by leaping out at you. I scared you because I saw you and you didn't see me. I scared you because we all had you going. While there is little to suggest that Malik's body and actions in my classroom on that day were a response to his being moved in

Zadie’s classroom in the fall, could it have been a response to being moved, disciplined, and surveilled many times beyond that? Or being silenced by Zoom muting him by default? His body, like many student bodies, particularly student bodies of color, has been marked as one of concern, at-risk, and in need of intervention through “manipulation, surveillance and control” in ways that reflect larger patterns of discrimination in society (Saavedra & Marx, 2016). Our discussion marked him as a body of concern to be led towards a more “successful” path as a student, but also as a site of concern for *too much* intervention. Dominic expressly noted his own pulling back on reprimanding Malik for things so as *not* to seem racially motivated, given the disciplining gaze of the administration on teachers—an administration the participants and I positioned as simultaneously promoting personal, academic, and intellectual risk-taking to move to a more “anti-racist” set of educational experiences and institutional practices while also making clear that investigation and punishment were lurking in the shadows of that hopeful gaze, should someone’s lightly redacted name be implicated in a future Blackat or Queerat post.

(Mis)Connections Over the Distance

Distance seems implicated everywhere in the discourses utilized and available to the participants and me through our collective (mis)understandings of our role as middle school teachers through the initial months of the pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2020. Distance as it operates spatially and temporally through the operations and mechanisms of remote teaching and its reliance on technology; distance as it operated to “de-densify” the campus with only 50% of students at school any given week of fall and winter 2020–2021; distance in the spacing of bodies in the classroom and hallways and the rendering of certain spaces like the gym and cafeteria unusable in fall 2020; distance as it operated to seemingly make “soft spots” and connections with students through the “role model” role conceptualized as difficult, if not

impossible; distance as it seemingly materialized as a tangible and affective production of the gap between the teachers' desires for student learning to continue in relatively "typical" ways and student behavior and learning seemed to submerge or disappear from the grasp or control of those teachers; distance between the proclaimed desires to create a school and community of greater belonging and the discourses and educational practices that would seem to make that a reality for students across racial, gendered, and sexual subject-positions. The distance seems to operate across space, bodies, emotions, desires, investments, and (im)possibilities. Perhaps some element of this distance is the fragmentation that Rancière (1991) describes as emerging from the obsession with insisting on a certain knowledge, and a certain understanding.

Stockton (2009) explores what she terms the "child queered by color." This exploration focuses on children of color "who have entered white families" and how these children "as if in reverse ... birth parents. They create the context in which the parents prove to be their best or worst selves. That is, the child intruder, the child queered by color, makes parents reflect on their ethics of inclusion...and reflect upon their image as liberal intellectuals" (p. 192). This seems to be echoed in the participants' (and my own) reflections seemingly brought to focus through Malik, but then reverberating back through the selected voices from @BlackatCedar. While the school positions itself as a diverse one, the alumnae on the account and represented above position it clearly, forcefully, and resoundingly as a white one, and one entrenched in white supremacist practices. Stockton's notion of a child "queered by color" within a family can, I think, be applied to Cedar Day. Malik forces reflection of all of the participants. The voices at BlackatCedar forced reflection. Many of the posts had additional comments from those who were in charge of the account, naming the alum (but never a current student) and saying "_____ has something to say!!! Listen!" Both the fundamental "queering," as Stockton positions Black

youth amidst racist and largely White-affirming practices in American culture, and the demands to justice and action highlight the distance than exists between “liberal intellectual” ideals and school realities, between whiteness and Blackness (certainly at Cedar Day), and action and inaction. In the words of bell hooks, “Racial integration in a social context where white supremacist systems are intact undermines marginal spaces of resistance by promoting the assumption that social equality can be attained without changes in the culture’s attitudes about blackness and black people” (1992, p. 10). The discursive production of certain bodies as worthy of assumptions of innocence, or greater regulation; certain bodies as worthy of protection, or being ignored; listening with the intent to placate or the intent to change—the women quoted as voices from BlackatCedar all suggest the operation of particular normalizing gazes and dominant discourses to produce their bodies as somehow “Other” (“queered”) at Cedar Day.

The distance between action and inaction on issues of racial justice and creating more equitable classrooms and practices suggests, among other things, the role of connection. One of the gaps Dominic noted in his ability to connect and get Malik “on board” was his ability to grab him after class to offer support. Zadi referenced the many things she is concerned about on any given day as wearing at her patience, and her ability to pause and offer Malik other ways to connect back to the lesson and her desires for her students’ learning objectives on that day. As Licata and Cheng Stahl (2021) noted, and I referenced above, Licata’s and Cheng Stahl’s abilities to chart a course through remote learning that felt engaging and engaged with their students, and also opened up new possibilities for the relationships they had with their students, was largely predicated on their ability to conceive of and see the availability of discourses that made such relations available to them. They navigated across distance of place and of the discourse of what a teacher-student relationship “needed” to be in order to make a reality that

worked for them, in that moment, and for their students. Additionally, and importantly, Licata and Cheng Stahl also position that shift in relationality to have allowed for more just practices, recognizing the wholeness of the pain and suffering their students were going through in Newark and Manhattan in spring 2020. Despite making efforts to connect with students, and particularly students who seemed to be “in need” while remote, Dominic, Holly, and Zadié each mentioned—and reported feeling defeated by—their inability to connect with their students in the spring, and the persistence of that distance from connection with their students in the social distanced classrooms and hallways of fall and winter 2020.

Earlier in the chapter, I posited that middle school bodies were positioned as particular threats. Perhaps connection and distance offer a way to think once more about that collective threat. If “typical” middle schoolers seem to be threats in as much as they are sites ready to produce oddity and uncertainty and need guidance from adults, it seems that the pandemic and racial reckoning so implicated in this chapter make those threats vibrate and reverberate with both real pain and the threat of illness or professional failure. Remote students were no longer middle school bodies in need of (or available to) guide or control to certain learning outcomes. Students-amidst-pandemic were seemingly fluid sites of actual concerns about health—illness and death lurked in the unwashed hands and unaware bodily movements of students, even when six feet away, in distant classrooms. Malik—as well as other students—seemed to constitute the threat, as noted above, of failure on multiple levels. His learning, his emotional well-being, his safety, and his happiness are certainly all within the normal hopes, desires, and investments of the educators in this study, and arguably most educators. The supposed/assumed anti-racist gaze, though, casts his potential failure as not only failure as a teacher of a student, but of educators at a predominantly white institution of a student of color. And, in the repercussions of

BlackatCedar, this failure would be positioned as the teacher's, not the institution's. The threat of Malik is the threat of being positioned as a failure as a teacher—beyond whatever failures the teachers in this study would typically feel, simply for not having the desired impact on him as a student. The threat of Malik was, and is, the threat being potentially positioned as racist, or, at least, so imbued in racist practice that connection or positive impact on him was impossible.

Chapter VI - Standing on the Edge: Embodying the Best and the Worst, the Crazy and the Scary

February 4, 2022: My daughter, who is herself heading into middle school in fall 2022 (and with it, bringing all sorts of “how did this happen?” conversations between my wife and me), is in the back seat of the car, dutifully singing along with the opening number of the musical she just began rehearsals for, 13.

The song, “Thirteen,” introduces our cast of twelve and thirteen year olds, each providing some hope or worry, with a choral chant of “13!” coming as interjections:

All: Thirteen!
Evan: Life has changed overnight!
All: Thirteen!
Evan: How do I do it?
All: Thirteen!
Evan: Nothing is going right.
All: The best and the worst / And the most and the least / And the crazy and the scary /
And I’m standing on the edge!
Evan: Twelve years old, everything that used to be as good as gold starts to crumble and crack...

And later in the song, two choral refrains, the second repeated three times before a transition in the song:

Why is the world feeling suddenly stranger?
Why are my friends acting totally weird?
Why do I feel like my life is in danger?
Why do I feel like my brain disappeared?

No, you’re not ready!
No, it’s not time yet!
No, it’s not right now!
Wait until you’re older!

I drive, amused at the earnestness my daughter is delivering the lines with and the histrionic ridiculousness of the lyrics. (I also make a mental note to jot this song down for the dissertation.) I also, though, cast a sideways glance at my wife on the line “[I] wanna get

drunk” also being belted by my ten-year old. And there was a real impulse to respond “No you’re not ready! Wait until you’re older!” Instead, that and every other anxiety I have about my growing daughter I swallow, and focus on the road ahead, bringing her to her first rehearsal.

February 7, 2022. We’re back in the building after the previous week concluded with a snow day on Thursday and a remote learning day on Friday. Jim, an Upper School teacher, is talking with Dominic, Greg, and me in the MS hallway as classes are changing. After harassing his son, a seventh grader (“Watch. I’m going to say hi to him, in front of his friends. He’ll hate it.”), Jim gets walked into by one of the boys in the huddle of seven bodies moving down the hall. Jim turns to the three of us: “That’s it. Despite what some of my Upper School colleagues think – they think they could be professors if they ‘just had time to write and do research’ – there’s really not much difference to teaching over there and over here. Intellectually, cognitively, even emotionally – the upper school kids are really not much different. But here, they just have no spatial awareness. They’ll just walk into you. That never happens in the other building. But here, it happens every time I come through this hall.”

And shortly thereafter, at MS Fencing practice, Holly remarks to me, after observing two of our fencers put on their fencing jacket backwards, another fencer with the strap that is at the bottom of the jacket being far too tight and going into the seat of his sweatpants – but doing nothing to adjust it – and a girl who seems not to be getting changed for practice and is just wearing the jacket like a hat on her head: “I’ll never forget, when I first started at Cedar, and Trina was still teaching Latin, too. She said to me, ‘Just wait. You think 8th graders’ movements are all spazzy now. They’re like little drunk people. They will give you a heart attack at the Met when you go in the spring. They’ll just walk within centimeters of toppling over a two thousand

year old urn, and think nothing of it. Because they won't notice.' And she's right. They just..."
The thought was completed with a simple hand gesture towards the display of oddly or mis-dressed fencers in front of us.

Embodied Minds in the Middle

In this chapter, I aim to explore and probe the (dis)junctures between bodies in the middle school as embodied in the experiences of Zadie, Holly, Dominic, and, to a lesser extent, me. In particular, the treatment in Chapters IV and V of the different cases of middle school at Cedar Day as experienced through these participants both pre-pandemic and through the first year of grappling with the changes brought to teaching and learning now beg questions of the shifts and gaps between these cases, the intensities felt, the enfolded sensemaking, and the investments challenged, lost, or displaced by being physically removed or distant from one another and from the students in their charge. Further, I aim to offer some attempts at re-reading some of the themes in Chapters IV and V to try to make sense of the (dis)junctures, the silences, the shifts, and the (re)investments.

In her work *The Brain's Body*, Victoria Pitts-Taylor (2016) argues at some length about countering reductionist neurobiological views of the capacity of the brain by critically engaging with the ways in which the entirety of the body, in concert with the plasticity and functions of the brain, help make meaning and sense of the world for any particular person. At least in part, a recurring claim of her work is meant to critically engage with and counter the universalizing and flattening effects of seeing the mind through neuroscientific claims reducing the sense-making and lived realities and emotions experienced by humans in the world to only neural processes and reductionist beliefs in a mind capable of neutrality, objectivity, and rationality. In Pitts-Taylor's words, "I argue, in other words, for the multiplicity of the neurobiological body and the

specificity of embodied lives” (Pitts-Taylor, 2016, p .15). Pitts-Taylor makes a compelling case for the view, aligned with feminist scholars, that making meaning of the world is not just mediated through but made possible by the body—and that, in concert, lives are shaped not only by that set of perceptions, experiences, and knowledges, but how the world and other bodies come to mediate and make meaning of other bodies and embodied minds. “A mind that is embodied, potentially, can mean it is immanent (tied to capacities and worlds in which it is enacted); relational (affected by its position to and interaction with other minds, bodies, and objects); affective (shaped by feeling and emotion); and situated (tied to specific places, needs, and circumstances)” (Pitts-Taylor, 2016, p. 45).

Among of the largest (dis)junctures across the cases of time and space represented in pre-pandemic and first-year pandemic Cedar Day middle school participants were those that tied to the affect of the teachers and the students, and the view among the participant teachers that no learning could (or was) happening through remote classes. Even when classes resumed in person in fall 2020, the social distancing, reduced class sizes, limited interactions outside of the classroom, and severely limited movement within and between classes all amounted to massive changes in what participant teachers *felt* about middle school teaching and the relationships made (im)possible with middle school students. I would like to explore the relationship of space, time, and bodies particularly through the “embodied mind” lens.

“Middle school” as a means to universalize, naturalize, and normalize certain behaviors and expectations around and through an assemblage of age and developmentalism discursively produces a gaze on middle schoolers that flattens the “potentially infinite” embodied minds of the students the discourse is meant not only to represent, but to empower with actualized potential. Reading the narratives of both cases of Cedar Day’s participants in time and space

through a lens of embodiment can hopefully both make better sense of the gaps and silences and oddities (and the normalization of oddity) in and between these two cases while also countering the flattening, normalizing discourse of middle school as it seems to remove the particular realities of specific bodies of both teachers and students. And while the study was not designed to focus on students, the bodies of students are precisely the sites through, upon, and about which “middle school” comes to take shape, and consequently come to be referenced directly and indirectly by the participants specifically and “middle school” as a discursive assemblage.

Middle School as Embodied Minds in Space

Setting the focus of analysis for a moment to middle school as a place and a space helps to address some of the discursively constitutive forces at work “in” middle school. Helfenbein (2021) notes that “spaces and places express ideologies, affective forces, and power relations, and are ontological processes filled with living politics that shapes who we are as subjects” (p. 7). Middle school exists to be a place, with specially trained professionals and a curriculum, suited to address the “needs” of early adolescents—shaping middle school students along the contours of the concept of adolescence itself. The needs are not natural, but are discursively constructed as biological and natural and normal. The needs are not universal, though the needs and claims of universality stem from studies of very particular bodies in a particular time. To be a good middle school teacher, an assumption is made that knowledge of those universal needs is necessary and beneficial, despite the fact that the universality is untroubled, and the consequent gaze on adolescents produces certain effects. Among these effects are an assumption of “natural” impulses, behaviors, growth, change, desires, actions of bodies and interactions of those bodies with other bodies. Middle school is in fact a discourse of, through, by, and upon bodies, consequently becoming an assemblage of all that is acting to make those bodies knowable. The

discursive forces of the “place” of middle school constitute what is possible for middle school teachers in turn.

Perhaps the most stark disjuncture between cases in this study was particularly around space. Pitts-Taylor’s (2016) presentation of an embodied mind as one that is immanent, relational, affective, and situated heightens the relationship between mind, body, and space. The embodied minds of middle schoolers, as well as those of the participant middle school teachers, were deeply impacted in all facets by being remote in the spring of 2020. A particular example comes from Zadie: the lack of being able to use her hands or ask students to use their hands in their learning, as was the case in both the remote and hybrid circumstances of spring and fall 2020 led to a teacher that danced in front of me and bounded around her room showing work examples from her students, exuding and emoting what I could only interpret as enthusiasm, joy, and love of teaching in February 2020 was in late November 2020 expressing dejectedly how much she hated teaching under remote and hybrid circumstances. The students in her view “weren’t learning shit.” Holly echoed, “they actually didn’t learn anything from March to May 2020.”

If learning is largely affective and relational, and “occurs on a line of becoming as a body is transformed ... in the affects, forces, percepts and concepts it may establish relations with,” (Duff, 2013, p. 194) then having no opportunity for the bodies to not only be in space with one another but not have the *possibility* of transforming one another, given the bodies’ static nature in the socially distanced classrooms of fall 2020, Holly and Zadie’s conclusions about learning and their affect in reporting these conclusions seem to follow. Indeed, recalling Jim’s anecdotal reflection at the beginning of the chapter, it is the very real *probability* that bodies will come into

contact—causing no shortage of affectual, physical, or emotional responses—that seems to be deemed a classifying characteristic of “middle school.”

This may also help us re-read Holly’s feelings *pre-pandemic* about what it would likely be like to teach remotely. She utilized her experience in online graduate school courses to what it would be like teaching middle school, and all notions of what she had deemed characteristic of middle school were completely absent her theorizing on what teaching middle schoolers would be like. In Chapter V I posited that some of this might be because of the lost docile bodies, but perhaps re-reading with embodied minds at the forefront, the emphasis isn’t so much on the body’s existence or docility as the opportunities for relational learning in shared space—which would seemingly reemphasize the very thesis Pitts-Taylor is utilizing, which is to suggest the body’s centrality in the learning processes and meaning-making, both often attributed solely to the brain (as mind).

Middle School as “Geographical Middle Space”

Schee (2012) explores youth in “geographical middle space” and though the chapter is about malls and the discourse of mall curfews as a means of exploring discourses of youth, perceived needs of supervision, and the competing claim of the call to their consumerist adulthood as freedom, the notion of “geographical middle space” rang true for middle school and the discourses that enable and limit it. Citing Matthews, Taylor, Percy-Smith & Limb (2000), Schee (2012) notes “the panopticon of the adult gaze provides a safety net that enables young people to develop their identity [or] individuality” (p.171). In noting how spaces are actually the targets of curfew policies rather than individuals (or at least that the perception that this is the case means they go largely uncontested), Schee notes that the curtailing of certain behaviors is seen as a means of not “disciplining particular individuals per se but, rather, [they] become about

governing particular locations in order to ensure the spaces are used appropriately and consistent with their designed purpose” (p. 172). Schee further calls for attention to locations where youth are deemed “out of place.”

The adult gaze and enactment of the “role model” positionality in middle schools seems to echo this. Lesko (2001) makes the point that much of the language attached to middle schools and the operational and policy goals attached to middle schools (especially as seen in the critical *Turning Points* report) continually returns to adults doing something and middle school students observing it—in order to develop their own potential, their own individuality, and their own eventual course as adults. In Chapter IV, Dominic, Holly, and Zadie all described not just their role as role models, but, particularly, the knowledge that students were watching. And the *knowledge* of that gaze, and the importance the participants attached to that gaze, meant that the participants were exceedingly conscious of their role and their enactment of the role. The “geographical middle space” actually makes the role model possible. Perhaps this also helps untangle a bit of why the absence of “role modeling” was so stark in the Chapter V case—both remote *and* hybrid learning, including among the socially distanced bodies of fall 2020—so changed that space that role modeling was not discursively accessible. In fact, in the focus group, all three participants noted that the inability to just be in space with students (and not fear, for safety reasons, being in space with many students, in close proximity) as fundamentally limiting their ability to “be” role models. Vis-à-vis her role as an accessible adult to LGBTQ+ middle school students, Holly mentioned, “I feel so disappointed that that visibility for me is gone. I feel like, I can't be a resource. Because I don't have a way for students who might not know it already. Like, I'm not gonna run up and down the hallways being like, ‘gay friendly, here!’ ‘People of color, like, I’m your ally!’ It feels weird to do that.” All of the examples of the kinds

of cherished relationships and “soft spots” that the participants so enjoyed and cited as vital and characteristic of middle school fell away in both the remote and hybrid modes of schooling.

Citing Deleuze and Guattari, de Freitas (2013) explores the rhizomatic assemblages of classrooms, challenging the privileging of discourse as only or primarily language. “In the classroom, assemblages are formed with heterogenous materialities (body, smartboard, desk, language) quaking and quivering with affective intensities” (p. 131). These “affective intensities” seem present in each participant’s descriptions of what makes their classroom particularly “middle school.” Zadie’s navigation of her classroom, demonstrating to me the beauty and wonder and awe both of her sense of her students’ completed work displayed around the room (and through PowerPoint slides she frequently shared with me) and the fullness of representation she hoped to express in her visual representation of what students can be through what she chose to make visible in space in her room to, finally, her own relationship with space and movement through the room and relationship to the bodies of her students all communicated the “affective intensities” at work in her room. Compressed in this space were all of her hopes for creating “citizen scientists” who would know, be, and become “cool humans.”

Bodies as Middle School Students and Middle School Students as Bodies

An interesting tension throughout both cases is the resistance to see middle school students’ bodies as bodies, particularly along any line that might invoke those bodies as sexual bodies. Even in framing my own narrative about the middle school fencers getting dressed, I assiduously avoided a description of the fencer’s jacket strap going up his backside in a way that would both draw attention to the fact that it was in fact giving definition to “both cheeks” – and that Holly and I began our mutual gesturing and Holly began her story because of our shared gaze at the fencing jacket bringing his ass to our attention. In sharing that narrative as both

teacher and researcher, it felt “improper” to characterize it ... in the way that I just did in the preceding sentence. Removing my teacher/coach self from the equation seems to have freed me to write that moment and that observation differently.

Classrooms are themselves “eros-free zones” (McWilliam, 1999) by design, but the notion of student bodies as being sexual cuts against constructions of childhood innocence (even as adolescents are on the “border zone” between childhood and adulthood) (Lesko, 2001) and against well-established constructions of “boundaries” between teachers and students which are meant to keep children safe from the potential of leering advances by predatory adults. Indeed, the “taboo” of seeing students as potentially sexual beings is well worn (i.e.: McWilliam 1999).

Gilbert (2012) characterizes the erotic as “gathering its libidinal force from its capacity to reach out and touch anything. The world, including the world of youth-adult relations, is enlivened by its touch” (p. 290). So enmeshed with touch is the erotic that Holly quickly disavowed any use of touch in her classroom teaching or in her relationships with students. Having asked her about using a touch on the shoulder or arm as a redirecting mechanism in class, for example, Holly responded:

Holly: I try not to touch. I do like to bang on things just to get attention.

Kyle: But no like shoulder tap or like,

Holly: I know they say you can do that. Like maybe I'll tap your shoulder as a little sign that you need to pay attention ... I don't touch.

Kyle: And why not?

Holly: I don't ever want it to be misconstrued in any way. I don't want a student to feel like I just have the right to touch them. And I don't even think it would be misconstrued. But I don't... I like the kids knowing that they have boundaries over their own bodies. I wouldn't want them to just come up to me like [a former student, an 8th grade boy] used to try to hug me constantly and I'd be like, get off.

The opportunity to be “misconstrued” seems central to the “taboo” of touch; for Holly, it clearly also extends into a politics of personal boundaries and space, and who has a right to touch or be touched by others. And, importantly, Holly’s declaration from Chapter V: “Don’t say Middle

School bodies interacting with each other. It's deeply sexual and I don't like it." When sharing the story that ignited for her in that moment of the interview, she wound up enacting her observation of two boys' touch on me to more fully convey what she had witnessed; there was certainly an "enlivening" of the interview that changed in that moment from us sitting six feet apart, with a cell phone on and recording our conversation on a desk between us. Holly's rejection of the boys in her narrative as sexual beings seemed not to be a concern driven by homophobia – as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and a co-leader of the middle school GSA, Holly would be unlikely to be reacting to the touching as troubling because it was two boys doing it; her concern seemed fueled more simply by the notion that *any* middle school students could be seen as or act in sexual (or in her words, pre-sexual) ways. The link between middle school and their "pre-sexual exploration" was "deeply troubling." We can read the observation and nearness of bodies, then, as being about their *proximity* to sexuality.

The observation of and nearness of bodies was central to what was missing in the Zoom teaching in spring 2020—the loss of bodies was troubling. It was, of course, troubling to most people through 2020. But the particularity of middle school teaching *being* middle school teaching was reported lost *in concert with* the interactions in shared space that characterized the "fun" described pre-pandemic, and what seemed to be gained more over the 2020–2021 school year, as regulations of space and bodies in space changed and became closer to the more typical movements of bodies in classrooms, hallways, and other school spaces. As little as I construed it as fun in Chapter V, there was no way for Malik to hide, or as many students to have had a role in creating the scene with him, prior to spring 2021. With "de-densification" and social distancing, there was truly no way that the same seen could have happened earlier in the school year.

While touch is so construed as problematic in and between middle school bodies—particularly those of teachers and students—the absence of its possibility seems to create the opposite of “enlivening”—or the Deleuzian-Gauterrian notion of learning Duff (2013) drew from, that it is “a dynamic, intensive and rhizomatic *practice* [emphasis original]” a body “*may* [emphasis mine] establish relations” with and through. The possibility of the practice, of course, changed without shared space. The docility that seemed to be sought—and identified—in the students during remote and hybrid learning, and that which was characterized as important to being able to “reach” middle school students and “teach them how to be students” can be read more as the lack of opportunity to touch—despite not wanting to or being unable through the gaze of “proper” relationships when actually in shared space with students.

Middle School Bodies and Biopower

Part of the formation of “normative adolescent discourses” (McLeod, 2012) is constituted by the regulation schemes that place a keen normalizing gaze upon the adolescent bodies in middle schools — a form of biopower (Foucault 1997/2003). This biopower mobilizes in and through the means utilized in middle schools of “guiding” middle school students to their proper adulthood. Biopower targets populations — the adolescent as a discursively produced subject position allows for the population of youth to “internalize” certain technologies of the self to follow the “path” to adulthood. If adolescence is “always becoming,” then perhaps biopower is the means of ensuring the “becoming” is happening within a certain bounds; biopower helps discursively form and maintain what the boundaries of the path are.

While middle school teachers, as part of the mechanisms of middle school as an entity, certainly take up various means of constructing and maintaining the boundaries of that path, it seems potentially fruitful to envision teachers in their role as “role model” actually “patrolling”

the boundaries, working the border of the path to “proper” adulthood. Recalling the centrality in the participants’ narratives of their bodies as a factor in “being” a “role model,” there seems a truly recursive, perhaps rhizomatic assemblage of gazes that help to form this “proper” path for middle schoolers.

Meanwhile, there may be some important comedy in recognizing, even if only briefly, that one of the recurring ways in which, despite all of the taboos of touch, and the “path” to “proper adulthood” being something I am only exploring discursively, bodies in the middle school most frequently interact is in the hallway. What might it say that despite much of what is potentially shared that may serve a role of “guidance,” especially along the “path,” bodies are endlessly colliding in space in a middle school hallway.

Re-reading the frustrations of the participants during the remote teaching of spring 2020 and the hybrid model after that through the lens of biopower — particularly the surety and promise of stability of a goal of helping students *become* something over the time of middle school — there is a possibility that some of that frustration was actually because that surety was not in place. All of the regulatory schemes and normalizing gazes were broken and the possibility of students “growing sideways” (Stockton, 2009) and outside of the “normal” and linear path towards adulthood became concerns. Participants feared that the students were not reachable, and that their “learning” could not be guided in “proper” ways.

One potential reading, too, is considering the role of time and its steady march of “progression” of adolescents towards adulthood. Middle school is continually noted for its consistent focus on the *becoming* of middle school students in the future — but the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the spring of 2020, made the certainties of the future and the typical progression of the school year massively in flux. If part of the “normal” of middle school is that

the uncertainties and oddities dealt with on a normal basis are conceptualized as normal largely because of the gaze on the future and the investments and sureties of students eventually becoming what they need to be — physically, emotionally, intellectually — once the present is itself unstable, and the day-to-day changes brought with the pandemic making the immediate future of tomorrow basically unknowable (somehow more unknowable than any other version of the future), the flux constantly at work in the always-in-flux discourses of middle school lost the stabilizing of the discursive boundaries of “middle school”: time, its sure and steady progression into the future, and the guiding of adolescents along a path towards adulthood.

Consequently, while middle school is continually constructed as odd (“the best and worst and the crazy and the scary”) but the gaze to the future normalizes those oddities of the present, once there was only a constant and steady “crazy and scary” there was no best anymore. Indeed, the reading of bodies colliding in the hallway in a typical year (i.e.: Jim’s anecdote at the beginning of the chapter) that usually seems to inspire wonder and amazement in adults transformed in the fall of 2020 into palpable concern, worry, and fear. One way traffic flow in the hallways, constant reminders to socially distance, patrolling the full coverage of masks over noses and faces—all became hyper-focused gazes on the bodies of middle schoolers no longer as those on a path to adulthood so much as, like all other humans in the pandemic, potential vectors for the spread of disease.

Embodied Minds Feeling Middle School

One of the major embodied limitations all participants reported was the notion that middle school teaching was not a widely respected profession. All noted that this was part of a wider problem of respect for educators, regardless of grade levels taught, but then also made clear that it seemed *particularly* strong when folks referred to middle school teaching. This trend

was also in the literature, noted in Chapter II. I raise it again here because I believe there may be a further mobilization and reasoning for this trend, and what becomes not only discursively constructed limitation of middle school teaching—potentially something that would keep preservice teachers from choosing to move into middle school teaching, or that would have implications on teachers remaining in the middle school—but an embodied feeling.

Returning to the “embodied mind” concept Pitts-Taylor advances, bodies’ sense making is somewhat made and constrained prediscursively through feelings (p). Those feelings, along with other pieces of the embodied mind, then contribute to the sense we make of the world. Discursively, middle school is constructed and patrolled by people’s—parents, teachers, administrators, popular media, and the students—own feelings towards it. All three participants noted the fact that people have interacted negatively with them about their being middle school teachers, often because of those people’s perceptions and feelings about middle school, largely based on those people’s own memories of middle school. Dominic lingered on this as one of the things he “hates” about middle school: its perception among others, and their reaction to him being a middle school teacher based on that perception. As he said in his first interview: “So I think part of it is that they reflect back on their own Middle School times and hated that time in their life.”

Dominic’s reflection also went in another direction in that first interview that is worthy of revisiting: that perhaps people’s perceptions of teaching middle school as difficult or something in his words that people believe they “could *never* do” stems from their feelings about talking to or connecting with middle school-aged kids. “And I think adults sometimes don’t know how to talk to kids. It’s easier to talk to a little kid. The stakes are a little higher when you are talking to a middle school kid in terms of like, I don’t know, maybe a recalcitrant attitude or something like

that. So I think people just think in middle school, you're just looking at a bunch of disinterested, recalcitrant kids. That's my guess..." Drawing in Pitts-Taylor, *I wonder*, then, if people simply see middle school aged bodies and *feel* "middle school." And that feeling begins with the response Dominic and others, including me, have experienced—the proclamations of sainthood and imminent patience for teaching in middle school, or the sideways glances and the "You teach *middle school?*" delivered as if the person has actually discovered that you frequently sky dive without a parachute. This has been noted elsewhere (i.e.: Knowles & Brown, 2007; Lesko & Mitschele, 2013; Powell, 2011).

People are drawn in or repulsed, amazed or horrified, largely by the embodied sense made of what "middle school" means. And, hopefully as has been demonstrated at least partially, "middle school" is itself rhizomatic in the assemblage it becomes and as it is maintained (pre)discursively. As an entity, middle school supposes things of bodies based on developmentalism, linking biology and age. With that biology and age, certain needs and dangers emerge and are assumed (irrationality, wackiness, uncontrollable movements and lack of spatial awareness, etc). Having experienced the world at that time in life, and having that time made a certain thing by the world around us, the middle school experience is discursively produced and ultimately embodied, in particular ways that then cause us to read onto particular bodies those same things. *We look at MS aged bodies and feel middle school.*

Intersectionalities and the Middle School Teacher

Each participant embraced the notion of role model and, while embracing the importance of cultivating the role itself and the relationships that seemed to flow from being a role model, positioned their embodied subjectivities and positionalities as vital to the role and to being a middle school teacher. For Dominic, mobilizing his "positions of privilege" "at the top of the

totem pole” as being a cisgender, heterosexual, white male was a means for him to model acknowledgement of the privileges he sees as concomitant with those subject positions. He demonstrated deep investment in this being a value held dear in his teaching—the freedom and ability to shift from a lesson about Spanish language and grammar to discussing how privilege may be operating in the classroom and through his body (and the bodies of his students in various forms) at any given moment. “Middle school” as assemblage simultaneously discursively provides Dominic what he positions as the opportunity to pivot from planned curriculum to a lesson “about privilege” in the moment and the “knowledge” and surety that middle school students benefit from this kind of modeling.

Holly embraced her positionalities as both opening up possibilities for being a “role model” and also limiting them somewhat. Holly notably saw being a faculty member who is openly a part of the LGBTQ+ community *and* “not a typical” teacher in appearance as two major ways in which she could be visible in her embodiment of “role model.” From Chapter IV: “And I know that I’m not typical. So, if I can do it, [noticeably softer voice] they can do it.”

Holly, though, saw her whiteness as a limitation to possibly connecting with students of color—not the path towards breaking down privilege that Dominic positioned his whiteness as. Holly did not conceptualize this limit as something she thought was happening in her instruction, or that she had to or should teach white students and students of color differently, but, rather, that she sensed that in advisory, it might be something of a barrier to her building more informal connections with her advisees. On race in the classroom, Holly said that she is mindful of the ways in which race (and gender) were operationalized in Roman history, something she incorporates in her Latin classes. In advising, though, she noted:

Yes. I think [race has] popped up more in advising. I think I talked a little bit about it last time, like with students like [two students from previous conversation], like, I feel

like a white guilt. You know, like white guilt constantly. Like, I wish that I could serve you better. Like I knew how to connect with you more. I assume that you think I'm fucking lame. I feel like it's all like a bias against myself. It's not the kids. I'm just like, I'm so sorry. I'm white. Like, I wish I could give more to you. There's nothing I can say. I feel like nothing I can say will ever make them think I understand any part of their experience because there's nothing that I can say. I could talk about maybe like the LGBT angle, but it's still not the same thing. I'm still a white woman with like, a lot of privilege. And so I feel like ... I feel like I can't be like, I know what you're going through because it's like, No, I don't. So, I do feel like on my heels sometimes in terms of that kind of a thing. (Holly, Interview 3, 3/10/20)

Holly positions her whiteness not as stopping her from connecting with students of color, per se, but, rather, that it put up an obstacle to connection that she felt stymied to overcome. Holly recognizes the value of bring a visible member of the LGBTQ+ community, and that the visibility is itself valuable and provides access to being a role model to LGBTQ+ students and to straight allies. Visibility of LGBT students in the classroom and the curriculum is cited as particularly important to the mental and physical health and well being of LGBT students, and “especially” in the “younger grades” of seventh and eighth grades (Rosiek, 2016). Indeed, this was a major factor in Holly becoming a co-advisor to Cedar Day’s middle school Gender-Sexuality Alliance. At the same time, though, Holly sees the limitations of the “LGBT angle” in making connections with students of color and the dangers of trying to equate her experiences with theirs (“I can't be like, ‘I know what you're going through’ because it's like, No, I don't”). As Ellingson (2017) mentions, “Intersections are places of activity and interface where structures, discourses, bodies, and actants come together and form a site of struggle” (p. 62); Holly’s reporting “being on her heels” with respect to navigating how best to position herself and her experiences in ways to connect with but respect the limitations of equating experiences with those she feels cannot be equate all seem to be operating at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality on/in/through her body.

Zadie's sense making of her intersectional positionalities evidence some of this struggle, as well. Like Dominic and Holly, Zadie actively joined the notion of her being a Black female, a child of the West Indies, a scientist, an activist for climate justice, and a dancer as pieces of her identity and her being that helped her to actively mobilize *as* a role model for middle school students. Zadie also acknowledged, though, the limitations of her own ability to connect with students along racial gender or gendered race lines; her engagement with Malik and the obstacles she felt in addressing what she viewed as his needs were actually mobilized just as much in her narrative as opportunities to connect with Dominic and his worries about "standards" for students of color like Malik. Through the intersectionalities Zadie embodies, she embraced and affirmed not only her role in being a role model for students, but in that moment brought forward these subject-positions to connect with and find unity with Dominic as another middle school teacher attempting to be a role model for Malik, but conceiving their recent interactions with him as failures.

Zadie also produced her body as central sites of discourse in both of her stories demonstrating what "middle school" really means to her. Her absence and return to the room, coupled with the gaze of her students, awaiting her reaction to their recording her phone number on the blackboard while she was a teacher in St. Croix, or her more recent incident and students' reactions to her pink underwear being visible to them during a lesson both positioned the students' gaze at her body as central features – maybe even defining features – to "middle school." Certainly the latter story mobilizes gender as constitutive of the response and the gaze of students with suggestions of heteronormativity guiding and bounding the response of the students to ultimately decide to write Zadie a note to address the hole in her pants. Neither she nor I brought that forward in our discussion, but the presumed inappropriateness of boys

addressing their female teacher's visible underwear – and the humor coming from the “middle school awkwardness” that ensued – clearly speak to Zadie's body and the heteronormative discourse of middle school at work in that moment and in that telling of the story. The bodies, gazes, and range of (non)responses all constitute what is seen as “so” middle school in that moment.

Middle school is clearly implicated, though often as much through silence as through the discussions and reflections offered in the study, in the intersectional embodiments of the students, as well. In particular, the prevalence of Black women who are alumnae of the school reporting the implications of race and gender (and class) on their bodies the Cedar Day Middle School is notable. A whole additional study could likely be done on their narratives of their experiences of being Othered by the dominant discourses of “normal” adolescent bodies at work in the excerpts on Instagram. Malik, so singularly positioned in Chapter V because of his position in the narratives in the focus group, and in my own reflections, is clearly not the only middle school male of color at Cedar Day or elsewhere to be positioned multiply as a threat. The discourses that produce and reify certain “norms” for middle school bodies make bodies like Malik's Other not only *in* the act of “othering,” but also in the insistence of their gaze. Dominic, Holly, and I each had ready stories to tell about Malik.

Addressing Cedar Day as an “Elite” School & Implications for “Middle School”

A factor in the intersectional analysis that has gone under-addressed in this study is the operation of class in and through the discursive production and sites of “middle school.” Class clearly is a factor in the production of what middle school is at Cedar Day, and the investments in certain ideas of and paths of success. One example of this was, as I noted earlier, certain possibilities for rethinking remote engagement with students by the teachers in the study (and by

me) were foreclosed because of the expectations for teaching within the institution. As an “elite” independent school, success for students and (consequently) accountability for teachers in the institution are both defined in large part by the colleges to which each year’s graduates are admitted. Published prominently on the school website, positioned within admissions literature to draw applicant students and families to the school, and utilized annually as a reminder of the “Tradition of Excellence”⁵ at the school to all constituent stakeholders, the college admissions list has a prominent place in the positioning of the school to both internal and external audiences.

Consequently, while reimagining the possibilities for engagement with, interactions among, and relationship building across teachers and students in the middle school were all possibilities during remote teaching in spring 2020, the realities of “what parents are paying for” meant that just being in shared space (albeit remotely) with one another in new ways was limited by the context of the school. The parents as clients exert pressure directly on both administration and teachers when desired educational results do not match “what they’re paying for.” This meant that, for instance, after reopening to remote learning after spring break in March 2020, teachers had been told, with a nod to the fact that people’s situations might be immensely complicated by health, family concerns (i.e., trying to teach through Zoom while managing kids at home) or any number of other complications that came with the immediate implications of shutdown in March 2020, that lessons could be posted and take place asynchronously. By the end of the first week, heading into April 2020, teachers were told that asynchronous lessons

⁵ This phrase is a reference to language used on many school publications in the past three years. As a fundraising tool, the school positions its work and strategic planning as, for instance, “advancing a tradition of excellence.” One such brochure’s front page showed a picture of the graduating class, with a list of the colleges and universities they were due to attend the following September.

would no longer be an option—because vocal parents had complained about the fact that asynchronous lessons were not what they were paying for.

Notions of how middle school is positioned within the “college preparatory” mission of the school as a PK–12 institution were referenced often by the participants in the study. I made reference a few times earlier in the study to comments that the Upper School of Cedar Day was positioned as more serious, more rigorous, and less likely to be a space or time for teacher silliness or student mistakes or exploration. In Chapter II, I offered the expression of a particular parent (who echoed parents both before and after) that middle school did not count, and that it was truly ninth grade when things began to matter. In Chapter III, I offered my memory of a fifth grade student providing the number of days he had to learn enough for (and get the right grades for) admission to Yale. Success is largely defined by the college list, and, before that, anything that is defined as necessary to produce students who will gain admittance to those schools. Middle school teachers, pedagogy, and relationships in that context get defined in particular ways because of this top-down gaze, but also because that gaze becomes slightly more diffuse as ninth grade is the first year offered on a transcript submitted in the college admissions process.

The impact of class and the context created by the school’s “elite” status are decidedly factors in the discursive production of “middle school,” but went largely unexamined in any particular way through that lens because of the design of the study and the methodological decision/reality that came with the global pandemic in 2020. The design of the study foregrounded other components of intersectional positionalities, and consequently did not position class as an analytical lens. That being said, as described in Chapter III, the original design of the study would have brought in another school as a context for middle school, and that site—as a public school in a less well-resourced community in the county—likely would have

presented data that would have brought class more clearly to the forefront. Not having had the opportunity to go to a different school context, the possible points of contrast in data around class were not there to be analyzed.

Future Embodiments: Possible Directions and Questions for Further Study

The design and scope of this study were of necessity limited. Despite the rhizome of discourses that have emerged and that I have attempted to recognize, untangle, and “make sense” of, there seems no shortage of ways to interrogate several aspects of “middle school” in future studies. Further, as I attempted to begin troubling, there seem very real implications for middle-school-aged youth for what has come to be deemed normal and appropriate in middle school teaching, learning, and practice. Even amidst the “wacky” and “abnormal” that seems at once so typical in middle school, both in popular discourse and the particular lives of the participants of this study and the students whose voices emerge fleetingly through @Blackatcedar and @Queeratcedar posts, as well as the narratives of the participants, some embodiments of middle school remain perceived as outside of that spectrum of “norm,” and the actions of people of all ages connected to middle school seem to make that “otherness” known at great cost to those “Other” middle school students.

An obvious limitation to this study is the range of participants and the scope of the study becoming limited to one school site. Any similar study that might find further articulations of middle school teachers making sense of middle school and consequently bringing to some light the discursive constructions of middle school as similar or different across different spaces and embodiments would certainly be a major opportunity. Other sites might help unpack questions that are only marginally hinted at here around socioeconomic class and positions of institutional

privilege, as well as affording access to a broader array of positionalities and intersectional embodiments of “middle school teacher.”

(De)Centering the relationships between constructions and discourses of space, affect, and embodiment would help to further interrogate and trouble the assumptions of “proper” actions of particular bodies in particular locations within schools. The specter and real possibility of future pandemics, climate crises, or other catastrophes that would make learning in shared spaces such as traditional school buildings and classrooms unfeasible or unsafe also suggest that much could be gained from further understanding the limitations faced by teachers and students in making remote learning something that would not discursively preclude learning, particularly from the perspective of teachers who may foreclose the very possibility of “real” teaching and learning in middle schools happening in such scenarios. Questions of embodiment that operate within traditional school spaces also surface outside of the classroom: the hallway, indoor and outdoor spaces for recess, the cafeteria, academic and sports locker areas, restrooms, and off-grounds events such as field trips all alight in possibilities for exploring middle school as a discursive operant in the (im)possible in space.

Studies that would locate and center the affective experiences of gender non-binary, trans, and other queer youth and students of color within middle schools would open much in the possibility of opening up the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and the normalizing gaze of “middle school” practices. Studies that would articulate possibilities for making wide the scope of possibility for “infinite embodied minds” (Pitts-Taylor, 2019) by privileging an intersectional analysis of a range of middle school students’ experiences would particularly be an important next step, particularly to counter such neo-conservative moves as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill in making queer youth even a possibility for speech acts and recognition in schools, or

Tennessee’s proposed bill to limit the adoption of books that “promote, normalize, support, or address lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or transgender (LGBT) issues or lifestyles,” actively negating the possibility of knowledge that even *addresses* the existence of queer youth.

On this particular point, middle school seems a particularly important opportunity for potential mobilization against this populist politics against queer youth in particular, but any site of difference to a perceived “normal” (read: white, hetero, cis, gender-conforming, Christian) American youth. Taken as a given that the discursive roots of middle school stem from a view of adolescence itself grounded in whiteness, fears of the “Other,” and heteronormativity (Lesko, 2001), these present challenges to school curricula as opportunities for queer youth to be recognized or brought into the fold of being seen as “normal” amongst their straight and cis peers, can be read not only as of a particular present political reality, but a new mobilization of a persistent pushback against anything outside of that which is seen as “normal” for adolescents.

One example of the ways in which a discourse of middle school and assumptions of what middle school students can and should “intellectually” handle is around recent moves to share one’s pronouns as a means of inclusive introduction, and a vehicle through which queer members of the community—particularly trans or questioning youth—can feel seen. As one recent article explores (Wenner Moyer, 2022), much recent advocacy literature suggests the benefits to trans youth in simply being able to share their pronouns and having them be honored within a class, family, or other community—and consequently, the costs of denial or erasure of the same. However, well documented protests against pronouns as a means of this kind of inclusion show the resistance not only to trans youth and adults, but the notion in particular that certain knowledge is illegitimate or “inappropriate” for certain ages to be *exposed* to, let alone to have or use.

Anecdotally, at Cedar Day, despite ongoing gestures towards inclusivity, we were told informally as a middle school faculty at the beginning of 2021–2022 *not* to ask students their pronouns as a means of introduction on the first day, given pushback that had happened around gender and sexuality topics in identity studies in sixth grade social studies in spring 2021. This despite professional development exclusively to give practice in using “they/their” pronouns to refer to students – several high school students and one seventh grade student – who had declared these as their preferred pronouns after “coming out” as trans to faculty and fellow students in spring 2021. Parents of sixth graders, though, in discussions of pronoun usage, had apparently said that sixth grade was “too young” to ask a student their pronouns. In a defensive posture, wanting not to incite more parent pushback, shared with faculty that they should not ask students’ pronouns. This would seem to back the view of middle school as heteronormative, normative of a gender binary, and the notion that queer youth – or topics of or intersecting with queerness – are themselves constructed discursively as being “inappropriate” at certain ages, in this instance, eleven- to twelve-years-old. In fact, it was shared that at least one of the parents countered that it was “just middle school” – and that the students “weren’t ready” to discuss their pronouns. Surely pronoun fervor and fury are not truly about words that have filled many a grammar worksheet without protest for decades, but, rather, are about the ways in which adolescents and their bodies are read to rightly (or wrongly) embody proper gender and sexuality identities and performativities.

Indeed, within the year, there are persistent voices calling for certain books aimed at middle school aged readers that present BIPOC or queer perspectives to be banned. One such book, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi (2020), is a “remix” of Kendi’s National Book Award winning history of racism, *Stamped from the*

Beginning. Writing about this book in a broader political context instantly brings my own affective response: a tightened jaw and quickened pulse as persistent, never-far-away conversations about the book's adoption into my eighth grade US history class curriculum come flooding to mind. Of recent vintage, I was asked by my principal to address concerns from parents of one of my students (the names of the parents were never revealed to me, despite wanting me to address them at some point directly) that the book was "biased" and that "the other side" was never given in the curriculum. Condensing my response to the principal somewhat, I asked if the school, which had positioned itself after George Floyd as pursuing anti-racism in its curricular and programmatic decisions moving forward, was not willing to support a book whose express purpose was to provide an antiracist perspective on certain issues in US history and their implication in the present. Further, I questioned whether "the other side" I was meant to provide was indeed the actively racist one. The conversation I was meant to have with the parents was eventually had by the department chair in my stead. (Shortly thereafter, the department chair met with the middle school faculty to discuss how we can "formalize and clarify" book adoption practices as a department moving forward; *Stamped* was the only cited example of concern in previous book adoption in the department.)

In short, pushback on what is an "appropriate" perspective to include in middle school curricula, particularly along racial, gender, and sexual orientation lines, clearly brings into heightened question what is itself assumed to be "typical" and "appropriate" in middle school, and what discourses and other societal constructions and forces act to make certain practice and knowledges in middle school then normalized and unquestioned — and others made problematic. Whose embodied experiences curricularly count, and which do not? Much needs to

be unpacked about the assumptions of what is appropriate and what is not, who has a say, and what is reified as natural — and those things that are not.

Ultimately, I hope that the study and any “future embodiments” of studies on the discourses and discursive practices that come to produce “middle school,” and the embodiments and performativities of teachers can begin to see the rhizomes of the assemblage and, to whatever extent possible, find those intersections that make richer, fuller, and more just possibilities for teachers and students.

Reimagining/Refiguring Middle School Teaching: Focusing on the Here and Now

Of course, what those possibilities are is difficult to completely envision given the rhizomatic assemblage of “middle school.” Perhaps, though, one possible discursive “interruption” would be to counter the continual gaze on middle school students, as early adolescents, as always “becoming.” Most of the discourse positions middle school students as wacky, crazy, hormonal, or adrift at best—and deficient or threatening at worst. The “problems” underneath these descriptors tend to deal as much with the concerns in the present as what would be even more problematic in the future: these adolescents not being guided to healthy, positive paths and outcomes as adults. Consequently, the interruption can exist in the discursive space drawing the focus of middle school, middle school teaching, and middle schoolers on the “here and now.”

Turning the focus of language and practice, pedagogy and curricular decision making, and the gaze at and management of bodies all towards the “here and now” provides possibility for resetting, reshaping, and rethinking “middle school.” Given the vast historical, societal, and cultural entanglements in and through the rhizomatic assemblage of “middle school,” there is no “solution” that will completely untangle or undo the rhizome. Interruption simply seeks to locate

a root or tuber in that rhizome, calling attention to its existence long enough to at least note it. Nothing taken for granted can be interrupted without first being noticed. As a middle school teacher, then, noticing the ease with which behaviors, curricular decisions, interactions, decisions about what and how to be a role model all get taken up as “just middle school” is a site for being in the “here and now” in one’s practice. Then, noticing the operation of something being categorized as “middle school” (beyond, say, the building) can lead to the next level of questioning: what occurred as a result of that characterization? What was made to or allowed to happen? What was made possible? What was made impossible? What has been made normal, or typical, or unassailable? What has been made abnormal, atypical, or assailable? I aim not to offer a prescription, but a pattern of possibility.

“Here and now” also offers a means to ground middle school students as humans now. This simultaneously interrupts several threads of the discursive production of middle school students: as “becoming;” as “creatures;” as crazily, uncontrollably, hazardously pubertal and hormonal bodies “on the edge;” as youth in need of purpose, direction, guidance, and role modeling; as needing to see a *future* as (as Zadie put it) a “cool human.” Being concerned with the future direction of students is not in and of itself a problem so much as the fact that it, alongside the many other constructions explored throughout the study, becomes a confining and defining characteristic and expectation. A possible interruption, certainly in line with the “here and now” lens, is trying to see physical changes and puberty as a piece of what youth go through—but not the defining experience. As was explored in Chapter IV, despite the love of teaching middle school, Dominic, Holly, and Zadie each pinned the particular challenges of teaching or being with middle school students to their pubertal bodies.

Middle school students are, as a consequence of discourses already explored at length, trapped liminally. The spaces they inhabit in middle school, as noted above, come to have their own constitutive discursive production, and those spaces also come to be about the liminal trapping. For example, in what ways are spaces constructed to ensure the opportunity for a teacher or other adult to observe students and their actions at all times, in the service of ensuring docility, itself in service of *becoming* ready for high school, and then adulthood? Responsibility in and moving through space is parceled out by grade and by time of year (i.e.: seventh graders aren't ready to lead x activity, or eighth graders are only ready for certain tasks or opportunities in spring, or fifth graders can only go to their lockers beyond designated times in the daily schedule after November). Simply resetting the focus to what the particular students in a class period and classroom demonstrate in terms of engagement, passion, and skills—setting aside assumptions of age and development, for instance—might in and of itself offer previously unseen possibility, for students and teachers in middle school alike.

References

- Acker, S. (1995). Gender and teachers' work. *Review of Research in Education* 21, 99–162.
- Acker, S. (2001). In/out/side: Positioning the researcher in feminist qualitative research. *Resources for Feminist Research* 28(3/4), 153–172.
- Adams, E. (2021). Making sense of space: mapping and materializing panoptic features in research with youth and teachers, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1957156>
- Alexander, W. M., Williams, E. L., Compton, M., Hines, V. A., & Prescott, D. (1968). *The emergent middle school*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Andrews, P. G. (2013), *Research to guide practice in middle grades education*. Association for Middle Level Education.
- Ball, S. J. (2017). *Foucault as educator*. Springer.
- Banks, J. A. (1993). The canon debate, knowledge construction, and multicultural education. *Educational Researcher*, 22 (5), 4–14.
- Barton, A. C. & Darkside (2005). Greater objectivity through local knowledge. In W.-M. Roth (Ed.) *Auto/biography and auto/ethnography: Praxis of research method* (pp. 23–47). Sense Publishers.
- Bishop, P. A. (2012). Multiple discourses and missing voices: The call for critical perspectives. In M. D. Vagle (Ed.) *Not a stage!: A critical re-conception of young adolescent education* (pp. 163–174). Peter Lang.
- Blaisdell, B. (2016). Schools as racial spaces: Understanding and resisting structural racism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29(2), 248–272.
- Bogden, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Boldt, G. (2020). On learning to stay in the room: Notes from the classroom and the clinic. In B. P. Dernikos, N. Lesko, S. D. McCall & A. D. Niccolini (Eds.), *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research, and pedagogies* (pp. 229–243). Routledge.
- Braun, A. (2011). “Walking yourself around as a teacher”: Gender and embodiment in student teachers' working lives. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(2), 275–291.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.547311>
- Britzman, D. P. (2000). “The question of belief”: Writing poststructuralist ethnography. In E. A. St. Pierre and W. S. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp.27–40). Routledge.

- Brown, D. F. & Knowles, T. (2007). *What every middle school teacher should know*. 2nd Edition. Heinemann.
- Brown, E. R. (2005). Freedom for some, discipline for “Others”: The structure of inequity in education. In Brown, E. R. and Saltman, K. J. (Eds.), *The critical middle school reader* (pp. 271–294). Routledge.
- Brown, E. R. & Saltman, K. J. (2005). *The critical middle school reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1989). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of ‘sex.’* Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1994). Gender as performance: An interview with Judith Butler. *Radical Philosophy* 67 (Summer). 32–39. [Interviewed by Peter Osbourne, Lynne Segal]
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. Fordham University Press.
- Caldwell, M. & Frame, O. (2016). *Let’s get real: Exploring race, class, and gender identities in the classroom*. Routledge.
- Carastathis, A. (2016). *Intersectionality: Origins, contestations, horizons*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- Chadbourne, R. & Pendergast, D. (2005) The philosophy of middle schooling. In D. Pendergast & N. Bahr (Eds.), *Teaching middle years: Rethinking curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment* (pp. 21–47). Allen & Unwin.
- Childers, S. M. (2013). The materiality of fieldwork: an ontology of feminist becoming, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26(5), 599–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.786845>
- Cho, J. & Trent, A. (2006). Validity in qualitative research revisited. *Qualitative Research* 6(3). 319–340.
- Clark-Ibañez, M. (2004). Framing the social world with photo-elicitation interviews. *American Behavioral Scientist* 47(12), 1507–1527.
- Coffey, J. (2016). *Body work: Youth, gender, and health*. Routledge.
- Coffey, A. and Delamont, S. (2000). *Feminism and the classroom teacher: Research, praxis and pedagogy*. Routledge.

- Collette, M. (2015). Meet the teachers crazy enough to teach middle school. *Being 12*. WNYC, New York, New York. 12 Mar. 2015. Radio.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). What's going on? Black feminist thought and politics of postmodernism. In E. A. St. Pierre & W. S. Pillow (eds.) *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 41–73). Routledge.
- Conklin, Lee, K., & Vagle, M. D. (Eds.). (2010). *Developmentalism in Early Childhood and Middle Grades Education : Critical Conversations on Readiness and Responsiveness*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Polity.
- Connell, R. W. (2002). *Gender*. Polity.
- Cortina, R. & San Roman, S. (2006). *Women and teaching: Global perspectives on the feminization of a profession*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cruz, A. L. (2013). Becoming a teacher: Fostering a democratically conscious citizenry through critical pedagogy. In P. L. Thomas (Ed.), *Becoming and being a teacher: Confronting traditional norms to create new democratic realities* (pp. 13–25). Peter Lang.
- Cushman, K. & Rogers, L. (2008). *Fires in the middle school bathroom: Advice for teachers from middle schoolers*. The New Press.
- Davies, B. (1994). *Poststructuralist theory, gender, and teaching* (pp. 1–43). Deakin University.
- Davies, B. (2000). Eclipsing the constitutive power of discourse: The writing of Janette Turner Hospital. In E. A. St. Pierre & W. S. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 179–198). Routledge.
- Davies, B. & Davies, C. (2007). Having, and being had by, “experience”: Or, “experience” in the social sciences after the discursive/ poststructuralist turn. *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(8), 1139–1159.
- Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2006). The practices of collective biography. *Doing collective biography*. Open University Press.
- De Freitas, E. (2013). Mapping the materiality of classroom discourse: Expression and content in school mathematics. In D. Masny (Ed.), *Cartographies of becoming in education: A Deleuze-Guattari perspective* (pp. 127–140). Sense.
- Denzin, N. K. (2001). The reflexive interview and a performative social science. *Qualitative research* 1(1), 23–46.
- Dernikos, B. & Goulding, C. (2016). Teacher evaluations: Corporeal matters and un/wanted affects. *M/C Journal* 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1064>

- Dernikos, B. P., Lesko, N., McCall, S. D., & Niccolini, A. D. (2020). Feeling education. In Dernikos, B. P., Lesko, N., McCall, S. D., & Niccolini, A. D. (Eds.), *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research, and pedagogy* (pp. 3–27). Routledge.
- Duff, C. (2013). Learning to be included. In D. Masny (Ed.), *Cartographies of becoming in education: A Deleuze-Guattari perspective* (pp. 193–207). Sense.
- Eder, D., Evans, C. C., & Parker, S. (1995). *School talk: Gender and adolescent culture*. New Rutgers University Press.
- Eichhorn, D. H. (1966). *The middle school*. The Center for Applied Research in Education.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2017). *Embodiment in qualitative research*. Taylor and Francis.
- Emigh, R. J. & O'Malley, C. (2020). Face to face with Zoom?: Remote teaching during the Coronavirus. American Sociological Association Culture Section Newsletter. <https://asaculturesection.org/2020/08/14/face-to-face-with-zoom-remote-teaching-during-the-coronavirus/>
- Estola, E. & Elbaz-Luwisch, F. (2003). Teaching bodies at work. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35(6), 697–719.
- Fenwick, T. J. (2003). The 'good' teacher in a neo-liberal risk society: A Foucaultian analysis of professional growth plans. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35(3), 335–354.
- Ferguson, A. A. (2005). From Bad Boys: Public schools in the making of black male masculinity. In Brown, E. R. & Saltman, K. J. (Eds.), *The critical middle school reader* (pp. 311–328). Routledge.
- Fields, J. (2008). *Risky lessons: Sex education and social inequality*. Rutgers University Press.
- Finkelstein, B. (1989). *Governing the young: Teacher behavior in popular primary schools in the Nineteenth-century United States*. Falmer Press.
- Fontana, A. (2002). Postmodern trends in interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein (Eds.) *Handbook of interview research: Context & method* (pp. 161–175). Sage.
- Forber-Pratt, A. J. (2015). “You’re going to do what?” Challenges of autoethnography in the academy. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(9), 821–835.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. Volume 1. Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. 2nd edition. Vintage.

- Foucault, M. (1997/2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*. Picador.
- Friedrich, D. (2010). Historical consciousness as a pedagogical device in the production of the responsible citizen. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31(5), 649–663.
- Friedrich, D. (2014). *Democratic education as a curricular problem: Historical consciousness and the moralizing limits of the present*. Routledge.
- Friere, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI.
- Gallagher, M. (2010). Are schools panoptic? *Surveillance & Society* 7(3/4): 262–272.
- Gallagher, S. (1999). An exchange of gazes. In J. L. Kinchloe, S. R. Steinberg & L. E. Villaverde (Eds.), *Rethinking intelligence* (pp. 69–83). Routledge.
- Geelan, D. R. (2005). Using webs of narrative to explore negotiation of meaning and practice. In W.-M. Roth (Ed.) *Auto/biography and auto/ethnography” Praxis of research method* (pp. 227–241). Sense Publishers.
- Gilbert, J. (2012). The erotic. In N. Lesko and S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 290–294). Routledge.
- Gilbert, J. (2014). *Sexuality in school: The limits of education*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.
- Griffin, G. (1997). Teaching as gendered experience. *Journal of Teacher Education* 48(7). 7–18.
- Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, time, and perversion*. Routledge.
- Grumet, M. (1981). Pedagogy for patriarchy: The feminization of teaching. *Interchange* 12(2–3), 165–184.
- Guttorm, H. E., Löytönen, T., Anttila, E., & Valkeemäki, A. (2015). Mo(ve)ments, encounters, repetitions: Writing with (emodied and textual) encounters. *Qualitative inquiry* 22(5) 417427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415620216>
- Guttorm, H. E. (2016). Assemblages and swing-arounds: Becoming a dissertation, or putting poststructural theories to work in research writing. *Qualitative Inquiry* 22(5), 1–15.
- Hacking, I. (2006, April). Kinds of people: Moving targets. *The tenth British Academy lecture*. Lecture conducted from the British Academy, London, UK.
- Hargreaves, A. (1986). *Two cultures of schooling: The case of middle schools*. Falmer Press.

- Hargreaves, A., Earl, L. & Ryan, J. (1996). *Schooling for change: Reinventing education for early adolescents*. The Falmer Press.
- Helfenbein, R. J. (2021). *Critical geographies of education: Space, place, and curriculum inquiry*. Taylor and Francis.
- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently*. Sage.
- Honan, E. & Bright, D. (2016): Writing a thesis differently. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2016.1145280
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.
- Howard, A. W., & Stoumbis, G. C. (1970). *The junior high school and middle school: Issues and practices*. Scranton, PA: Intext Educational Publishers.
- Hughes-Decatur, H. (2012a). Always becoming, never enough: Middle school girls talk back. In M. D. Vagle (Ed.) *Not a stage!: A critical re-conception of young adolescent education* (pp. 93–118). Peter Lang.
- Hughes-Decatur, H. (2012b). Red flags are blowin' on *The Tyra Show*: Acknowledging the body in middle grades education. *Middle School Journal* 43(4). 50–58.
- Irvine, C. (2013). “The middle found me.” Using a life story approach to guide the career paths of future middle grades teachers. *Middle School Journal* 44(5), 48–56.
- Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. Teachers College Press.
- Jelin, E. (2003). *State repression and the labors of memory*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Jinright, D. (2019). *Breaking the silence: Learning from the experiences of gay and lesbian educators in the predominantly heteronormative space of K-12 schools*. [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Alabama]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Jones, A. (2001). Learning proper masculine pleasures: Santa and the teacher. Paper presented at AERA Annual Meeting.
- Jones, M. (1996). Men and feminist research. In J. Pilcher and A. Coffey (Eds.), *Gender and qualitative research* (pp. 131–148). Avebury.
- Jones, S. H. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research, Third edition*, pp. 763–791. Sage.
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an anti-racist*. One World.

- Kessen, W. (2005). The American child and other cultural inventions. In Brown, E. R. & Saltman, K. J. (Eds.), *The critical middle school reader*. (pp.: 57–64) Routledge.
- King, J. (2000). The problem(s) of men in early education. In N. Lesko, Ed, *Masculinities at school*, pp. 3–26. Sage.
- Kirchgasler, C. (2013, April). "...And that's great teaching!": Hopes and fears of the urban adolescent in teacher education 'best practices.' Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Kuzmic, J. (2000). Textbooks, knowledge, and masculinity. In N. Lesko (Ed.), *Masculinities at school* (pp. 105–126). Sage.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Second Edition. Sage.
- Ladson-Billings, G. J. (1998). Teaching in dangerous times: Culturally relevant approaches to teacher assessment. *The Journal of Negro Education* 67(3), 255–267.
- Ladson-Billings, G. J. (1999). Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of Research in Education* 24, 211–247.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1167271>
- Lather, P. (1993). Fertile obsession: Validity after poststructuralism. *Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 673–693.
- Lather, P. (2015, March 25). *Against proper objects: Toward the diversely qualitative*. [Video file]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GePNU9hXwJ8>.
- Lee, S. (2005). Asian Americans: The absent/silenced/model minority. In Brown, E. R. and Saltman, K. J. (Eds.), *The critical middle school reader* (pp. 329–336). Routledge.
- Lemke, J. (2011). The secret identity of science education: masculine or politically conservative? *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 6(4), 287–292.
- Lemke, T. (2001). The birth of bio-politics: Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France on neo-liberal governmentality. *Economy and Society*, 30(2), 190–207.
- Lenzo, K. (1995). Validity and self-reflexivity meet poststructuralism: Scientific ethos and the transgressive self. *Educational Researcher*, 24(17), 17–23, 45.
- Lesko, N. (1994). Back to the future: Middle schools and the *Turning Points* report. *Theory into Practice*, 33(3), 143–148.
- Lesko, N. (1996a). Denaturalizing adolescence: The politics of contemporary representations. *Youth & Society*, 28(2), 139–161.

- Lesko, N. (1996b). Past, present, and future conceptions of adolescence. *Educational Theory*, (46)4, 453–472.
- Lesko, N. (2001). *Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence*. Routledge Falmer.
- Lesko, N. (2013). Conceptions of youth and children in the *Theory into Practice* archive. *Theory into Practice*, 52, 22–30.
- Lesko, N. & Mitschele, K. (2013). Rethinking adolescence. In P.G. Andrews (Ed.), *Research to guide practice in middle grades education* (pp. 105–128). Association for Middle Level Education.
- Levander, C. F. & Singley, C. J. (2003). *The American child: A cultural studies reader*. Rutgers University Press.
- Licata, B., & Cheng Stahl, C. (2021). Shifting Skins: Becoming Multiple During Emergency Online Teaching. *Occasional Paper Series, 2021* (46). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss46/7>
- Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lounsbury, J. H. (2013). Middle level education: A chronological history and a personal perspective. In P.G. Andrews (Ed.), *Research to guide practice in middle grades education* (pp. 11–49). Association for Middle Level Education.
- Luttrell, W. (2003). *Pregnant bodies, fertile minds: Gender, race, and the schooling of pregnant teens*. Routledge.
- Mac an Ghail, M. (1994). *The making of men: Masculinities, sexualities, and schooling*. Open University Press.
- Mandel, L. & Shakeshaft, C. (2000). Heterosexism in middle schools. In N. Lesko (Ed.), *Masculinities at school* (pp. 75–103). Sage.
- MacLure, M. (2003). *Discourse in educational and social research*. (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- MacLure, M. (2013). Classification or wonder?: Coding as an analytic practice in qualitative research. In Coleman, R. and Ringrose, J. (Eds.), *Deleuze and research methodology* (pp. 164–183). Edinburgh University Press.
- Maher, F. A. and Ward, J. V. (2002). *Gender and Teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- May, V. M. (2015). *Pursuing intersectionality, unsettling dominant imaginaries*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mazzei, L. A. (2007). *Inhabited silence in qualitative research: Putting poststructural theory to work*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Mazzei, L. A. (2013). *A voice without organs: Interviewing in posthumanist research. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 26*(6), 732–740.
- McCall, S. D. (2014). *What kind of “girl”? Curricular knowledge and the making of girls and young women in two all-girls schools.* [Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- McLeod, J. (2012). Middle school. In N. Lesko and S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 44–49). Routledge.
- McMahon, J. A. & Penney, D. (2013). Using narrative as a tool to locate and challenge pre service teacher bodies in health and physical education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(1), 115–133.
- McWilliam, E. (1999). *Pedagogical pleasures.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Mellor, D. J. & Epstein, D. (2006). Appropriate behavior?: Sexualities, schooling, and hetero-gender. In C. Skelton, B. Francis, & L. Smulyan (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of gender and education*, (pp. 378-391). SAGE Publications.
- Miller, J. (2005). *Sounds of silence breaking: Women, autobiography, curriculum.* Peter Lang.
- Mills, M., Haase, M., & Charlton, E. (2008). Being the “right” kind of male teacher: The disciplining of John. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 16*(1), 71–84.
- Mizzi, R. C. (2016). Heteroprofessionalism. In N. M. Rodriguez, W. J. Martino, J. C. Ingrey, and E. Brockenbrough (Eds.), *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (pp. 137–147). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moore, A. (2004). *The good teacher: Dominant discourses in teaching and teacher education.* Routledge Falmer.
- Moore, S. D. M. (2012). Putting “boy” in crisis: Seeking an education of gender rather than in gender. In M. D. Vagle (Ed.), *Not a stage!: A critical re-conception of young adolescent education* (pp. 77–91). Peter Lang.
- Nash, J.C. (2008). Rethinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review, 89*(1). 1–15.
- Nash, M.A. (1997). Rethinking republican motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia.” *Journal of the Early Republic, 17*(2). 171–191.
- Nayak, A. & Kehily, M. J. (2006). Gender undone: Subversion, regulation, and embodiment in the work of Judith Butler. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 27*(4). 459–472.
- Niemi, N. S. (2005). The emperor has no clothes: Examining the impossible relationship between gendered and academic identities in middle school students. *Gender and Education, 17*(5). 483–497.

- Noy, C. (2005) The write of passage: Reflections on writing a dissertation in narrative methodology. In W.-M. Roth (Ed.), *Auto/biography and auto/ethnography: Praxis of research method* (pp. 359–378). Sense Publishers.
- Oliver, K. L. & Lalik, R. (2004). “The beauty walk”: Interrogating whiteness as the norm for beauty within one school’s curriculum. In J. Evans, B. Davies, & J. Wright (Eds.), *Body knowledge and control: Studies in the sociology of physical education and health* (pp. 115–129). Routledge.
- Oppenheim, R. (2012). Surveillance. In N. Lesko & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies* (pp. 54–58). Routledge.
- Ore, E. (2017). Pushback - A Pedagogy of Care. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 17(1), 9–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-3658366>
- Paechter, C. (2012). Bodies, identities and performances: Reconfiguring the language of gender and schooling. *Gender and Education*, 24(2), 229–241.
- Paechter, C. (2013). Researching sensitive issues online: implications of insider/outsider position in a retrospective ethnographic study. *Qualitative Research*, 13(1), 71-86.
- Pascoe, C.J. (2007). *Dude you’re a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. University of California Press.
- Pendergast, D. & Bahr, N. (2005). *Teaching middle years: Rethinking curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment*. Allen & Unwin.
- Peters, M. A. & Burbules, N. C. (2004). *Poststructuralism and educational research*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pillow, W. (1997). Exposed methodology: The body as a deconstructive practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(3). 349–363.
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175–196.
- Pillow, W. (2015). Reflexivity as interpretation and genealogy as research. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 15(6) 419–434.
- Pitts-Taylor, V. (2016). *The brain’s body: Neuroscience and corporeal politics*. Duke University Press.
- Popkewitz, T. S. (1998). *Struggling for the soul: The politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher*. Teachers College Press.

- Popkewitz, T. (2012). Research and regulation of knowledge. In N. Lesko & S. Talburt (Eds.) *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 59–71). Routledge.
- Porter, S. E. (2009). *Relating to adolescents: Educators in a teenage world*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Poulos, C. (2013). Autoethnography. In A. A. Trainor & E. Graue (Eds.), *Reviewing qualitative research in the social sciences* (pp. 38–53). Routledge.
- Powell, S. D. (2011). *Introduction to Middle School*. (2nd Ed.). Pearson.
- Prior, S. (2015). Gender in schools: Constructing identity in high school. In D. J. Davis, R. J. Brunn-Bevel, & J. L. Olive (Eds.), *Intersectionality in Educational Research* (pp. 93–114). Stylus.
- Prosser, J. D. (2013). Visual methodology: Toward a more seeing research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (4th Ed.) (pp. 177–212). Sage.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford University Press.
- Rasmussen, M. L. & Harwood, V. (2003). Performativity, youth and injurious speech. *Teaching Education*, 14(1), 25–36.
- Richardson, L. & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd Ed.) (pp. 959–978). Sage.
- Richardson, S. (2012). *eleMENTary school: (Hyper)masculinity in a feminized context*. Sense Publishers.
- Rodriquez, A. J. (2005). Unraveling the allure of auto/biographies. In W.-M. Roth (Ed.), *Auto/biography and auto/ethnography: Praxis of research method*. Sense Publishers.
- Rosiek, J. (2016). Visibility. In N. M. Rodriguez, W. J. Martino, J. C. Ingrey, & E. Brockenbrough (Eds.), *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (pp. 453–461). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rousmaniere, K. (2007). Good teachers are born, not made: Self-regulation in the work of Nineteenth-Century American women teachers. In K. Rousmaniere, K. Dehli, & N. de Coninck-Smith (Eds.), *Discipline, moral regulation, and schooling: A social history* (pp. 117–133). Garland Publishing.
- Rousmaniere, K. (2007). Go to the principal's office: Toward a social history of the school principal in North America. *History of Education Quarterly*, 47(1), 1–22.

- Saavedra, C. M., & Marx, S. (2016). Schooling as taming wild tongues and bodies. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 6(1), 42–52.
- Schee, C. V. (2012). Malls. In N. Lesko & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 169-173). Routledge.
- Scott, A. F. (1979). The ever widening circle: The diffusion of feminist values from the Troy Female Seminary 1822–1872. *History of Education Quarterly*, 19(1), 3–25.
- Seaton, E. (2012). Biology/nature. In N. Lesko & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 24–29). Routledge.
- Silberman, C. E. (1970). *Crisis in the classroom: The remaking of American education*. Random House.
- Simon, M. & Azzarito, L. (2019). “Singled out because of skin color...”: Exploring ethnic minority female teachers’ embodiment in physical education. In *Sport, Education, and Society*, 24(2), 105–120.
- Smyth, J. & McInerney, P. (2007). *Teachers in the middle: Reclaiming the wasteland of the adolescent years of schooling*. Peter Lang.
- Soreide, G. E. (2006). Narrative construction of teacher identity: positioning and negotiation. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), 527–547.
- Spalding, E., Garcia, J., & Braun, J. A. (2010). *An introduction to standards-based reflective practice for middle and high school teaching*. Teachers College Press.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2013). The posts continue: becoming. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(6), 646–657.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2014). A brief and personal history of post qualitative research. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(2), 1–19.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stake, R. (2003). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. (2nd Ed.) (pp. 134–164). Sage.
- Stake, R. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford.
- Stanko, R. L. (2012). *Histories of discipline: The performative re/productions of subjectivities of secondary English teachers*. [Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Stockton, K. B. (2009). *The queer child: Or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Duke University Press.

- Stoler, A. (1995). *Race and the education of desire*. Duke University Press.
- Tanner, D. & Tanner, L. (2007). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice*. (4th Ed.). Pearson Education.
- Taylor, J. (2011). The intimate insider: Negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research. *Qualitative Research*, 11(1), 3–22.
- Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. Rutgers University Press.
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Harvard University Press.
- Tyack D. & Hansot, E. (1988). Silence and policy talk: Historical puzzles about gender and education. *Educational Researcher*, 17(3), 33–41.
- Vagle, M. D. (2007). Middle school teacher qualities: Looking for signs of dignity and democracy. In S. B. Mertens, V. A. Anfara, & M. M. Caskey (Eds.) *The young adolescent and the middle school* (pp. 323-342). Information Age Publishing.
- Vagle, M. D. (2012). Trying to poke holes in Teflon: Developmentalism; young adolescence; and contingent, recursive growth and change. In M. D. Vagle (Ed.) *Not a stage!: A critical re-conception of young adolescent education* (pp. 11–38). Peter Lang.
- Vagle, M. D. (2012). *Not a stage!: A critical re-conception of young adolescent education*. Peter Lang.
- Vagle, M. D. (2013). Contextualizing middle grades teachers. In P.G. Andrews (Ed.), *Research to guide practice in middle grades education* (pp. 751-776). Association for Middle Level Education.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirl fictions*. Verso.
- Walkerdine, V. (2001). Safety and danger: Childhood, sexuality, and space at the end of the millennium. In K. Hultqvist & G. Dahlberg (Eds.), *Governing the child in the new millennium* (pp. 15–34). Routledge.
- Ward, J. V. (2005). Racial identity formation and transformation. In Brown, E. R. & Saltman, K. J. (Eds.), *The critical middle school reader* (pp. 259–270). Routledge.
- Weber, S. & Mitchell, C. (1995). *That's funny, you don't look like a teacher!: Interrogating images and identity in popular culture*. Falmer Press.
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructural theory*. (2nd Ed.). Blackwell.

- Wenner Moyer, M. (2022, March 15). How to support a child on the transgender spectrum. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/well/family/support-child-gender-identity-trans-non-binary.html>
- Wiles, J., Bondi, J., & Wiles, M. T. (2006). *The essential middle school*. (4th Ed.). Pearson Education.
- Wilkinson, S. & Kitzinger, C. (2013). Representing our own experience: Issues in “Insider” research. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37(2), 251–255.
- Woo, Y. Y. (2012). Age. In N. Lesko & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 111-116). Routledge.
- Yazan, B. (2015). Three Approaches to Case Study Methods in Education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 134–152.
- Youdell, D. (2006). *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusion and student subjectivities*. Springer.
- Zembylas, M. (2021). Affect, biopower, and ‘the fascist inside you’: the (Un-)making of microfascism in schools and classrooms. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 53(1), 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2020.1810780>

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Interview #1 – *To be conducted in the teacher’s classroom*

Thanks for agreeing to meet with me today. First, tell me a bit about yourself and your teaching career.

1. How long have you been teaching?
 - a. Where have you taught?
 - b. What grades?
 - c. For how long?
2. Tell me a bit about what drew you to being a middle school teacher.
3. What keeps you in middle school? Why are you here, now?
4. How do people respond to you as a middle school teacher? What sorts of reactions from friends, family, or strangers have you gotten when you shared the fact that you’re a middle school teacher?
 - a. I have often had the experience of someone being surprised, or saying that it must be hard, or that I must be especially patient. Do any of these resonate with you?
5. What’s it like to be a middle school teacher here, at this school?
6. Are there challenges in teaching at this middle school? Are there rewards?
7. Have you taught in other middle schools? If so, how does this compare? If not, how would you imagine this would be the same or different from other middle schools?
8. Have you taught in elementary or high schools? If so, how is this the same or different? If not, how do you think middle school teaching is different?

Teaching in Middle School

1. What does someone need to know in order to teach middle school?
2. What does someone need to be able *to do* in order to teach middle school?

3. If you could somehow conjure the perfect middle school teacher, what would that person be like? Look like? Sound like? What mannerisms, demeanors would s/he enact? How would s/he be with students?
4. Could you describe a particular middle school teacher who you know, have observed, or have admired? What ways does s/he embody “middle school teacher”?
5. As we are in your room, can you reenact a moment in the class that would somehow best represent you as a middle school teacher? Where would you be? What might you sound like? What would you be doing?
 - a. Probe: IS there any one particular thing? If so, what? If a range of things, show those.
 - b. What is the way you would *want* to be pictured as a middle school teacher in this room? Any different than what you’ve already shown me?
6. Are there ways that students carry themselves in this room? How do they enter? Move around? Sit? Are there patterns of their movements that you would say are typical?
 - a. PROBE: Would you be willing to reenact a typical student being in this room?
7. Is there some artifact in here that makes you think, “ah, *this* is middle school!”? How? Why?
8. Tell me about a time when you felt proudest to be a middle school teacher.
9. Tell me about a time when you felt ashamed or embarrassed to be a middle school teacher.
10. What’s oddest about teaching in middle school?
11. In your teaching of middle school, have you ever gotten directed to go about your day in particular ways (your lesson planning, your instruction, the kinds of assignments or assessments you’ve assigned, your interpersonal interactions with students in and out of the classroom) because it’s middle school?
 - a. (Possible clarification: This could be directions received in faculty meetings, in other group settings, or one-on-one. Additionally, could simply be “a sense” that people would like you to do things in certain ways....)
12. How has teaching MS affected you—cornier sense of humor? Dress differently? Less/more tolerant of wacky behavior?

Middle School Teacher as “Role Model”

1. Middle school teachers are often positioned as role models for their students. Can you point to some part of your practice, or the way you carry yourself in your day that might make you a role model? In what ways do you yourself consciously “model” for the students?
2. Tell the story of a time when you offered counsel to a student on issues other than academics or your other “official” duties.
3. Is there something about your appearance, your position in the classroom, or the way you carry yourself within it that you think is meant to show that you are someone to be modeled?

Participant’s Own Middle School Experiences, Dreams, and Nightmares

4. Think back to your own experience in middle school. Do any stories come to mind?
5. Did you have any favorite experiences? Favorite classes or teachers?
6. Any nightmares?
7. Did your own middle school experience play into your decision to become a middle school teacher? If so, in what ways?
8. Has your own middle school experience “come back” to you while teaching? Are there memories that come back as you teach or otherwise interact with students?
9. Would you ever go back to your middle school to teach? What do you think it would be like to be a teacher there?

Conclusion

10. How do you feel right now? How has this conversation been for you? Anything additional you’re thinking about middle school, your experience in it or teaching it, that are floating in your head right now that you would like to share?

Interview #2

Checking In

11. Have you had a chance to look over the transcript of our interview last time? Do you have any thoughts or feelings on it?
12. Have you had any thoughts about our conversation since last time?
13. Any moments in or out of class (or in or out of school) that stood out to you after the conversation?

Students

14. Let's talk about the students for a bit. Do you have a particular term you use for them? Middle school literature uses "students," "middle schoolers," "middle level students," "early adolescents", and I'm sure you've heard (or maybe even used) more colorful ones than that. What do you most often refer to them as?
15. Do you ever find students described simply by their being in middle school? For instance, do you or others say things like, "You are being such a middle schooler right now." Why, in what kinds of scenarios?
 - a. How about by their grade or age? ("Well, he *is* a seventh grade boy, so...")
16. How would you characterize them? What makes a middle school student a middle school student?
17. Are there qualities you see in middle school students year after year?
18. Tell me a middle school student story. What's an incident that comes to mind?
19. Is a middle school girl typically different than a middle school boy? If so, in what ways?
20. Can you tell a story about these differences?
21. Are there students that you worry about?

"Needs" of middle school students

22. Students in middle school are said to embody certain needs. What would you say those needs are?
23. Do you ever feel limited by those needs? (i.e.: if these weren't "middle schoolers," how would you structure lessons, classroom rules/policies, or your interactions with them)

differently?) Do you feel like certain things are possible to do with them, while other things are not?

24. Are there particular challenges to teaching your discipline in middle school? If so, what are they?

Outside the classroom

25. Beyond the classroom, how else do the needs you mentioned before play out in your day?
26. What kinds of interactions do you have with students beyond the class period? In what other spaces in the school and school day do you interact?
27. Do you find that you interact differently with students outside of the classroom than in it? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
28. Is there a student with whom you're especially connected this year, or in recent years? Can you describe that student and your relationship to her/him?
29. What's a scene or a moment from a recent class or a recent interaction outside of class that you think best represents what middle school is all about? (Can you describe it? Perform it?)

Dreams, Fantasies, Fears, and Nightmares

30. What's the class of your dreams? Who's the student of your dreams? What kinds of students do you find it easiest to respond to, to give them the benefit of the doubt, to have fun in teaching them?
31. Give me the nightmare middle school scenario. What's the class like? What's the student like? Who gets under your skin?
32. Any students particularly puzzle you, who just don't seem to fit middle school?
33. There is a key report in the field of middle school reform, the *Turning Points* report of the Carnegie Foundation. Among many other things, the authors of the report mention that teachers should have and utilize "intimate knowledge" of their students. When you hear the phrase "intimate knowledge," what does it do for you? What conceptions do you have of this? What, under the best circumstances, might it look like to have "intimate knowledge" of your students?
34. Is there a time or space that you feel lends itself to getting this kind of knowledge?

35. Are there students whom you have felt you have had “intimate knowledge” of? Could you talk a bit about a student with whom you have had this kind of relationship?

Conclusion

36. How do you feel right now? How has this conversation been for you?

Interview #3

Checking In

1. Have you had a chance to look over the transcript of our interview last time? Do you have any thoughts or feelings on it?
2. Have you had any thoughts about our conversation since last time?
3. Any moments in or out of class (or in or out of school) that stood out to you after the conversation?

Bodies

1. Do you ever feel the need to do something different with your body (intonation of voice, position of body, stance, gestures) to “send a message” of some kind? If so, could you show me?
2. Are there times when you feel like you have been called upon to interact with students in specific ways because you’re...
 - a. a man/woman?
 - b. your race/ethnicity?
 - c. your sexuality?
 - d. Any other part of your body? Your identity?
3. Besides being called upon to act differently, do you ever think about your position as a (gender, as self-described), as a (race/ethnicity, as self-described) person, or as a (sexuality, as self-described) person? How do you think those identities position you as a middle school teacher?
 - a. Are you asked to “stand in” as a man or woman? As a White or as a person of color? As a young/old person? As a straight or gay person?
 - b. Are you ever conscious of these identifiers as you’re teaching, or otherwise in your school day? Are you ever *not* conscious of them?
 - c. Do you ever mobilize these identifiers, or call attention to them? If so, how?
4. Do you ever find yourself more present, more “in your body” than at other times? Do you ever call attention to your body during the school day?
 - i. In what ways do you call attention to your body, or have you had attention called to your body? (I sometimes get students’ attention by saying, “Hey! Bearded guy. Up

here.” Or, “Mr M., did you get a haircut? Or “Mr. M., nice shoes!” I’ve even had colleagues point out features of my pants, or my weight.)

Interactions with other bodies

1. Do you feel the need to teach boys differently than girls (or vice versa)?
2. Do you feel the need to interact with boys differently than girls at other times or spaces in the day (or vice versa)?
3. Any fears or concerns attached to dealing with students of the same sex? Opposite sex?
 - a. What’s your greatest fear?
 - b. What student would you most fear being alone with in a classroom?
4. Are you ever particularly aware of or changing something about your interactions with students because of the color of their skin, as it relates to the color of your skin?
5. Do you ever use touch or proximity to students to convey something?
 - a. (If there’s a need to prompt a bit more: There are studies that suggest that moving around the room, or proximity to particular students will change their behavior. Do you find that you ever do this?)
 - b. Does touching a student ever cause concern?
 - c. Does it ever bring joy or pleasure?
6. How do you organize space in your classroom to manage students’ bodies in relationship to each other? To you?
7. In what ways do you feel attention is called to the bodies of students in the school day?
8. Do you ever have to deal with students’ appearance, or how they are dressed?
 - a. PROBE: Could you tell me about a time that stands out in your memory?
9. Going back for a moment to our earlier conversation, when we discussed role models: do you think you might be more of a role model for boys, or girls? Could you describe your thoughts?
10. What about your colleagues? Do you see them interact differently?
 - a. How do you interact with colleagues? Is it different for men or women?
 - b. Is it different when students are around?

Im/possibilities of Middle School Teaching

1. Are there things made possible to you as a middle school teacher that would not be possible in other teaching contexts? If so, what?
2. Are there things made **impossible** to you as a middle school teacher that **would be** possible in other teaching contexts? If so, what?
3. What things haunt you now about being a middle school teacher?
4. OK...how about fantasies? When you daydream about the perfect middle school day or the perfect middle school class what would that look like?

“Images”

1. What image or object for you represents a perfect middle school student?
2. What image or object for you represents a middle school student who you worry about?
3. What image or object for you represents a perfect middle school classroom?
4. What image or object for you represents a middle school classroom that could never work?
5. What image or object for you represents a perfect middle school teacher?
6. What image or object for you represents a middle school teacher who concerns you?
7. What image represents you best as a middle school student?
8. What image represents you best as a middle school teacher?
9. What objects or artifacts best represent middle school life?

Conclusion

1. Bottom line: what’s great about middle school?
2. What’s horrible about middle school?
3. What will you most remember from these conversations?
4. Which topics that we have discussed would be most interesting to discuss with other middle school teachers?
5. How do you feel right now? How has this conversation been for you?
6. Last chance! (At least, sitting here, now.) What, if anything, more about middle school, middle school teaching, or middle school students would you like to say that you have not yet had the chance to say?

Appendix B: Call for Participants, Site 1

(Cedar Day)

Hi, folks,

As some of you may know, I am pursuing doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University. The program is in Curriculum Studies, and I have had my dissertation proposal approved – which means I am on to doing my research for the study I have proposed.

My dissertation is exploring the ways in which we think of, speak about, and enact what it means to be a "middle school teacher," and ways in which other identifiers, such as our gender, sexuality, and race might also be part of being a middle school teacher. Who better to speak to and think about this with than, well, middle school teachers – and ones I know who are thoughtful and passionate about their practice?

Consequently, I am seeking participants for my interview study from our very own middle school. Participants would need to be willing to meet for three interview sessions, spread out over the course of six to eight weeks, taking place after the school day. Each session would likely last an hour and a half to two hours, depending on your responses. In between interviews, participants will be asked to reflect on the interviews and find artifacts, such as photographs or short videos, that help us think about the role(s) of middle school teacher and how we each “embody” that/those role(s). Finally, there will also be an opportunity for us to gather for a focus group discussion together to conclude the study.

I will work to keep the anonymity of participants by eliminating names from the transcription and coding during data collection, and I will utilize a pseudonym in referring to you in the writing of the study. Data will be kept in password protected storage on my computer and in my file backups.

If you are interested or have questions, please let me know! If you are interested in volunteering, I'll pass along a quick questionnaire that I'll use to help select the three participants if there are more than three willing to volunteer.

Thanks for considering!

Best wishes,

Kyle

Appendix C: Proposed Call for Participants, Site 2

Hello!

My name is Kyle Mitschele, and I'm a middle school teacher in a nearby independent school. I am pursuing doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University. The program is in Curriculum Studies, and my dissertation is exploring the ways in which we think of, speak about, and enact what it means to be a "middle school teacher," and ways in which other identifiers, such as our gender, sexuality, and race might also be part of being a middle school teacher.

I am seeking volunteers to participate in an interview study to explore this topic, and I would love to have participants from _____ Middle School.

Participants would need to be willing to meet for three interview sessions, with each session likely to last 90 minutes, depending on your responses. The interviews will be scheduled at mutually agreeable times over the course of a few weeks. I will also ask participants to do some work in between conversations; for example, a participant might have to find pictures to represent ideas of what it means to be a middle school teacher. Finally, there will be an opportunity for all three participants chosen from this school to meet in a final focus group discussion, also likely to last approximately 90 minutes. Besides benefitting my study, I hope that the conversations that we have will be stimulating and beneficial to your practice as a middle school teacher.

I will work to keep the anonymity of participants by eliminating names from the transcription and coding during data collection, and I will utilize a pseudonym in referring to you in the writing of the study. Data will be kept in password protected storage on my computer and in my file backups.

If you are interested or have questions, please let me know. If you volunteer, I'll pass along a quick questionnaire that I'll use to help select the three participants if there are more than three willing to volunteer.

Thanks for considering!

Best wishes,

Kyle

Appendix D: Participant Questionnaire

One of the goals of the study is to select a spectrum of possible teachers with whom to discuss middle school, middle school students, and being a middle school teacher. The questions that ask for identifiers are for these purposes only; you may, though, decline to answer any or all of them. Should you also choose, you may explain your reasons below or on the back of this sheet.

Name:

Gender:

Age:

Race/ethnicity:

Sexuality:

At some point, your participation in this study will be written into the dissertation. In writing about your participation, I will seek to describe you to the readers of this study. How would you describe yourself to someone who will only come to know you through a piece of writing?

How long have you taught in a middle school, including this year?

What course(s) do you teach? In what grade(s)?

Have you taught in other places? If so, where, what subjects, and what grades?

What interests you in participating in an interview study on middle school teachers?

Appendix E: Focus Group Protocol

Embodiment During @home and During Distanced/Remote Reopening

Introductory script

Good afternoon. Thank you all for agreeing to meet with me, and with each other, in continuing to participate in this study with me. As you each know from your time in our interview conversations a few months ago, the primary framework I'm investigating middle school teaching through is the notion of embodiment. How do our expectations of middle school students flow from certain assumptions about them and their bodies? How does our own body make certain things possible, impossible, desirous, or necessary as middle school teachers? Do we negotiate our relationships with other middle school bodies differently, based on our own bodies and perceptions by others of our bodies?

As I have tried to write through some of the themes of those initial interviews, I grew curious about what was happening through the spring, which was when I began that writing: how did our teaching, and the relationships between our bodies and the bodies of our students change with remote teaching via Zoom? Did certain things we typically think of as middle school stop happening? Did we not allow certain things to happen because it is middle school?

That line of thinking made me think it would be great to bring us together to think about some of that, and I thought it would also be interesting and important to see how you might all contribute to one another's thinking on this. Let's start.

Questions

I'll return us to a couple of the questions I said popped into my head that served as the impetus for this focus group.

What is the “most middle school” thing that happened while @home this spring?

In the spring, during XXXX@home, did certain things you typically think of as middle school stop happening?

What durable, reliable aspects of middle school stayed present on Zoom?

Do you feel like there were any particular challenges to middle school in the remote teaching through Zoom during the spring closure of school?

Did we not allow certain things to happen because it is middle school? (Did you not even consider trying certain things, or allowing certain things, because you thought “eh, they’re just middle schoolers.”)

What is the most middle school thing that has happened this fall? What reminds you most of a typical year?

What reminds you least of a typical year? How has being on campus, but under our new restrictions, most changed middle school?

One of the themes in the conversations we had in the winter months was about the notion of being a role model in the middle school, and you each described your consciousness of that, and a certain embrace of the role. One of you noted that “that [MSers] need to be around . . . around people who can give them exposure to different kinds of people”. This has left me wondering about that role when we are physically distant or remote. Has it changed? Did you consciously address this in some way?

You all remarked at times about the “fun” and “lightness” of being in the middle school – either as a contrast to the lower or upper school and their seriousness, how some of us interact with one another, or the opportunity to form connections with students in ways we did not imagine being able to in either of the other divisions. What impact has remote teaching and learning in the spring had on that fun and lightness? What impact has our current set of teaching protocols had on that fun and lightness?

(Do you still feel it? Do you not? When do you feel it most in ways you're used to? Are there new moments of "fun and lightness"? When do you find yourself missing it most?)

Do you ever find yourself making certain calculations about risk or danger and being too close to middle school students? (Or colleagues?) Are there moments you've experienced this fall that have made you worried? (if needed: worried about being near/in the same room as students)

Are there certain times or situations with students that make you uncomfortable? (If not totally uncomfortable ... when are you least comfortable?)

What changes as a middle school teacher because we need to maintain six feet of distance at all times between us and a student? What does this seem to imply – now that it's at least temporarily gone – about being physically close to students?

Do you feel like there are any challenges particular to middle school in our current "distanced" and masked moment? Are there benefits/positive side effects?

Dominic mentioned the idea of “soft spots” as being key both to his enjoyment of teaching middle school, but also likely where he feels the most connected, and the most opportunity for impact with students. If I have it right, those “soft spots” are those opportunities for discussion, chatting, and closeness with students before and after class, in the hallways, in the shifts between classes, as students funnel in and out, etc.

- First, would you both concur? (You seemed to in our earlier discussions, but I wanted to check in.)
- Next, for all of you: has this changed? If so, in what ways?

Has there been a moment you can easily recall this fall when you felt most aware of your bodily presence in your classroom?

Was there a moment in the spring when you felt most bodily present in Zoom? Most distant?

One of the other major themes of our discussions collided a bit with something in our time away. At various points, we talked about the role of our gender and race in our teaching, or our role model positions in middle school. The confrontation we had as a faculty and as a community with racism as a result of black@ and homo- and transphobia as a result of queer@ ... I'm wondering if this has any of us thinking differently about our role as middle school teachers, particularly at this confluence of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Where does your own body fit into how you think about this role? Do intersections of race, gender, and/or sexual orientation impact how you see yourself as a teacher of middle school responding to black@ and queer@ ?

Has there been a moment you can easily recall this fall when you felt most aware of being a male or female? White or Black? Straight or gay?