

# Understanding Middle School Teachers' Levels of Efficacy to Meet the Needs of Young Adolescents

Erika Daniels, *California State University - San Marcos*

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## Abstract

Middle school students are in even more need of social and emotional support due to the cognitive, social, and emotional changes occurring at this stage of their development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014), and their teachers are key players in providing what is needed. Unfortunately, there are few Institutions of Higher Education that offer programs or coursework focused on young adolescents' unique and specific needs (Howell et al., 2016). This contrasts with calls for school contexts that are intentionally designed to support young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) and raises questions about whether and how middle school teachers are prepared to meet the wide-ranging needs of their students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how middle school teachers feel about their skills and knowledge in terms of supporting students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs. The teachers' perspectives shed light on ways educator preparation programs might refine and enhance their curriculum and instruction to better meet teachers' needs in terms of supporting middle school students most effectively. Five themes arose from data analysis, which were (a) appreciation of young adolescents, (b) knowledge of young adolescent development, (c) confidence and growth, (d) strategies for working with young adolescents behaviorally and academically, and (e) external stressors. The findings offer insights for teachers, teacher education programs, and school districts to create supportive and productive educational contexts for all learners.

## Introduction

Social and emotional learning is increasingly identified as an essential part of an educator's work with students (National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, n.d.). No longer is it enough to ensure that students are academically successful because social and emotional needs are interrelated with academics so each influences the others (Durlak et al., 2011). As the National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development explains (n.d.), "It is not a distraction from the 'real work' of math and English instruction; it is how instruction can succeed" (p. 6). However, because teacher education programs must meet strict and myriad requirements to be approved by the states in which they function, there is often not enough space to include dedicated courses on what students' social-emotional needs are and how to meet them (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Teachers instead learn what is needed through experience, professional learning opportunities, mentoring, and other ad hoc endeavors.

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cognitive, social, and emotional changes occurring at this stage of their development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014), and their teachers are key players in providing what is needed. Unfortunately, there are few Institutions of Higher Education that offer programs or coursework focused on young adolescents' unique and specific needs (Howell et al., 2016). This contrast with calls for school contexts that are intentionally designed to support young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) and raises questions about whether and how middle school teachers are prepared to meet the wide-ranging needs of their students.

## Purpose and Significance

Eight of the United States' 50 states do not have dedicated licensing for middle grades teachers, which means educators in those states are not specifically prepared to work with young adolescents (Howell et al., 2018). They learn how to teach academic content but are not necessarily trained in the most effective ways to meet middle school students' social and emotional needs. Further, little overall research has investigated the way that teachers in those eight states feel about their levels of

preparedness to work with young adolescents (Ochanji et al., 2016). There is, however, attention being paid to middle grades education in general, and the Middle Level Education Research SIG of AERA developed a research agenda designed to guide conversations, generate research projects, and contribute new knowledge to the community that works with young adolescents (Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, 2016). Organized into several categories, the MLER SIG research agenda mirrors other calls to meet social and emotional needs with a special focus on middle schools. A second edition of the agenda is likely to be released soon, but the present study is grounded in the recommended agenda from the 2016 edition.

Specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand how middle school teachers feel about their skills and knowledge in terms of supporting students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs. The teachers' perspectives shed light on ways educator preparation programs might refine and enhance their curriculum and instruction to better meet teachers' needs in terms of supporting middle school students most effectively. Administrators and district leaders may also use the findings from this study as they shape professional learning agendas that are targeted to the specific needs of their middle school teachers. To that end, this study asked the following research question:

*What level of efficacy do middle school teachers have in supporting the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of their young adolescent students?*

This research question complements an issue raised by Howell et al. (2018) when they asked, "Are teachers with a specialized credential able to more effectively implement components of the middle school concept into their classrooms?" (p. 9). Proponents of middle school education recognize that academic success is "highly dependent on other developmental and identity needs also being met" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 6) so it is important to understand whether and how middle school teachers understand and work to meet young adolescents' developmental needs in a targeted, intentional manner.

## **Literature Review**

There are many theoretical concepts and research avenues that might ground thinking about the topics addressed in this study. Because its research question requires an interdisciplinary understanding of middle grades education, there was not a single theoretical framework most appropriate for discussion. Instead, I situate the study at the intersection of three concepts that, taken together, inform a reader's thinking about the purpose of the study and the research questions. These concepts are the evolution of the middle school concept, neuroscience findings on young adolescent development, and knowledge of efficacy in general. While teacher efficacy is important to explore across the K-12 and higher education continuum, this study is focused on middle school because of the unique needs of the students who inhabit it. Therefore, it is important to understand how middle schools came into existence as separate from elementary or high school; a move that was partly due to the field's increasingly sophisticated understanding of young adolescent development (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

### **Middle School Concept**

When junior high schools were developed in the early 1900s, there was little consideration paid to the unique needs of the students who would learn in them. Instead, they were considered literally to be "junior" to their high school counterparts with the goal of providing a transition from elementary to high school (Alexander, 1995). This thinking began to change with Alexander et al.'s (1968) call to consider the notion that young adolescents had different academic, social, and emotional needs than children or older adolescents. Alexander asserted that junior high schools were not meeting the needs of their students, and they should be given a status of their own so that they could provide a true transitional experience that would look and sound different than elementary and high school.

Educators across the country took up the call to shift away from junior highs and toward schools that embodied the middle school concept. This led to the founding of the National Middle School Association in 1972, which is now called the Association for Middle Level Education. Middle level educators, those serving young adolescents (typically students ages 11 - 14),

recognized that schools “in the middle” of elementary and high school should be responsive to their students’ unique developmental needs (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, school administrators and educational researchers identified characteristics of effective middle schools such as the importance of flexible scheduling, “Staff members who recognize and understand the students’ needs, interests, and stresses, and a “unique program adapted to the needs of the pre- and early adolescent learner” (Alexander & George, 1981, p. 17). Building upon the work from mid-century, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) published the landmark document *Turning Points* that advocated for focusing national attention on young adolescents. A later update (Jackson & Davis, 2000) refined the argument by exhorting middle level educators to think about organizing curriculum and assessment to meet adolescents’ needs and developing relationships to promote student learning.

A review of the literature on young adolescents and middle school education reveals that, across the decades, educators have recognized the importance of advocating for instructional experiences specifically designed to meet the needs of this age group (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). While always grounded in the desire to provide a developmentally appropriate educational experience, the middle school concept continually evolves as knowledge is gained and the world changes (Schaefer et al., 2016). A key theme in this evolving thinking about middle school is knowledge of who young adolescents are and the ways in which this phase of development is unique and serves an important purpose as youth move into adulthood.

### **Young Adolescent Development**

Adolescent behavior can be perplexing to society at large, and researchers have learned that it is a critical developmental phase but is not unique to humans. All mammals experience adolescence, without which a species’ young would not develop the independence and skills necessary to thrive in adulthood (Blakemore, 2018). Specifically, there are three changes that characterize adolescence, which are a difference in the ways that risk and reward are weighed, more sensation seeking as they look for novel experiences, and a reduced emphasis on the

importance of parents/caregivers in favor of peers (Giedd, 2012).

Adolescence exists as a time when mammals learn the ability to survive and thrive without parents or caregivers fulfilling their physical and psychological needs. Specifically in humans, children and adolescents observe the way that adults around them handle situations, and then they apply those observations to their subsequent decision making. Interestingly, adolescents do understand the risks inherent to some of their decisions, but those risks are not always deterrents. Instead, “The chief predictor of adolescent behavior is not the perception of risk, but the anticipation of the reward *despite* the risk” (Jensen, 2015, p. 107). This knowledge explains some of the perplexing choices that adolescents make because their cognitive capacity is increasing while they are simultaneously driven to seek out more and greater sensations (Giedd, 2012).

Cognitive capacity changes as neural pathways in the brain become more efficient and sophisticated (Fields, 2010). Adolescents crave opportunities to apply their increasing critical thinking abilities to tasks that are personally relevant and/or societally meaningful, and their brains are primed to learn complex tasks and to engage in new experiences (Zatorre et al., 2013). This is due to the ability to harness the parts of the brain that control logic and reason more easily and efficiently (Luna et al., 2010). These findings from neuroscience researchers suggest that adolescents need teachers who provide multiple opportunities to apply their increasingly sophisticated cognition to meaningful learning activities and also create safety nets that allow them to take risks with their learning.

The reason for these changes is that brains constantly change and restructure in response to environmental stimuli and experiences, which is called neural plasticity. Although it occurs across a lifespan, neural plasticity is especially robust during adolescence, which is why middle school teachers should design more complex and rigorous instruction than their elementary school counterparts. The reorganization of neural pathways based on experiences combine to make young adolescents primed for deep immersion in learning experiences (Fields, 2010).

Changes in the adolescent brain also mean that adolescents often have difficulty reigning in reactions to social and emotional upheaval. There are myriad causes of this upheaval throughout the middle school experience. Relationships with friends and peers, the push/pull of moving away from caregivers but still wanting their approval, and the desire to avoid potentially embarrassing situations are environmental stimuli that influence how young adolescents act (Lourenco & Casey, 2013).

Young adolescents experience a dichotomy in terms of their social and emotional needs. They want to be unique, but they do not want to stand out. They want to separate from parents or caregivers but also desire their support and nurturing (Jensen, 2015). Because of the contradictory impulses and desires that characterize adolescence, teaching middle school students is challenging. Further, education does not occur in a vacuum so the interactions between teachers and students influence each group's school experiences. Students can learn control over their choices and actions, but they are nonetheless dependent upon the learning environments their teachers create. One influence on teachers' instructional choices is their feelings of preparedness to meet their students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs.

### **Efficacy**

Educators are responsible for designing and maintaining learning environments in which students can be academically successful, and their feelings about their ability to do so is the question that grounds this study. While many people conflate terms such as self-efficacy, self-concept, and self-esteem, they describe different, but closely connected, psychological constructs. Self-concept is broadly defined as the ways in which people perceive themselves, and those perceptions are simultaneously stable yet situationally dependent on environmental factors (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). Self-esteem tends to describe the value people ascribe to those perspectives; however, the two concepts are entangled and often used and considered interchangeably (Byrne, 2002). Self-efficacy describes people's personal beliefs about their ability to learn or perform in any given situation and determines "how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (Bandura, 1977, p. 194).

Influenced by environmental factors, self-efficacy is a predictor of human behavior because "people process, weigh, and integrate diverse sources of information concerning their capability, and they regulate their choice behavior and effort expenditure accordingly" (Bandura, 1977, p. 212). When they are successful in an endeavor, they are more likely to engage in similar tasks. Conversely, failures can inhibit people's willingness to attempt similar tasks or challenges in the future. Successes and failures do not have an equal impact as Bandura found that early failures reduce feelings of efficacy while later ones have a less negative impact. Social, situational, and temporal circumstances impact efficacy expectations (Bandura). While these findings appear to be true across populations, specific research on teachers has found that the social and situational realities of their professional environments influence their emotions, which in turn influence their feelings of efficacy (Taxer et al., 2018).

### **Methodology**

To explore this study's research question (what level of efficacy do middle school teachers have in supporting the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of young adolescent students?), I collected data through interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. I asked open-ended questions of participants who taught middle school and wanted to share how they felt about their preparedness to do so, which meant the data collected were purposive instead of random (Miles et al., 2020). The participants' stories revealed powerful insights about internal and external influences on their feelings of efficacy, which were triangulated by classroom observations.

The self-reported stories were at the heart of both data collection and analysis because efficacy is an internal construct (Bandura, 1977) so the teachers' own feelings were of the most value in terms of exploring this study's research question. I collected data primarily through semi-structured interviews because qualitative inquiry involves researchers interacting with participants by "talking directly to people and seeing them behave and interact within their environments" (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Due to time and logistical constraints, however, several teachers chose to share their stories through questionnaires.

## Participants

I recruited participants through a social media group specifically for middle grades teachers. All teachers who wanted to participate were interviewed and/or provided with the questionnaires to complete. Many teachers expressed interest in sharing their stories but ultimately did not because of stressors and limitations caused by school closures during the covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, 16 teachers shared their stories – four through Zoom interviews and 12 through written questionnaires. The participants' stories and insights provided important data in terms of exploring their feelings of efficacy about their work in middle school.

Years in the classroom ranged from one to 12 with all of that experience in the middle school, specifically 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Most of the participants (11) taught in suburban schools with the remaining five teaching in urban schools. None of the participants had experience in rural schools. Recruitment efforts began in a Facebook page specifically for the graduates of the only middle school preparation program in the state of California, and it ended up being that all participants had completed that program. I encouraged the participants to share the invitation to be interviewed with their colleagues but did not receive any additional responses.

To protect the anonymity of the questionnaire respondents, I did not collect information about their specific teaching contexts beyond asking them to identify the type of program from which they earned their credential. Conversely, the interview participants' identities remain confidential, but I, as the interviewer, know where and what they teach. Specifically, two were 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (Ms. Granger and Ms. Pretzel) in urban settings, and two were 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in suburban setting (Ms. May and Ms. Anderson).

Convenience sampling has both benefits and limitations in qualitative data collection (Peterson & Merunka, 2014). Benefits are that willing participants are recruited, and those participants possess the knowledge or characteristics specifically related to the research questions. Limitations are that convenience sampling might increase researcher bias, and it reduces the generalizability of the findings. In the case of this study, convenience sampling was useful because I was interested in

learning about middle school teachers' self-reported feelings of professional efficacy. I did not have a hypothesis I wanted to investigate; nor was I looking for findings that could be generalized to all educators. Rather, I wanted to understand how efficacious middle school teachers felt about their ability to support their students, which would provide data for thinking about the larger topic of middle school education.

## Data Collection

I collected data through four one-on-one semi-structured interviews and 12 written questionnaires. The questions on both instruments were the same and explored the participants' feelings about teaching middle school and toward the young adolescents with whom they work.

During the interviews, I asked follow-up questions to probe initial responses, which provided more details about the teachers' attitudes and feelings of efficacy. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the questionnaire responses were several pages in length. All interview participants were visibly eager to share their stories and thanked me for the opportunity to do so. The questions are found in the Appendix.

Additionally, I asked all participants if they would allow me to observe in their classrooms, and two extended an invitation. I spent three days in each classroom for a total of six observation days. I took notes on teacher-student interactions, student-student interactions, direct instruction, small group work, and independent work time; the observation protocol is found in the Appendix.

These observations provided detail about the context in which two of the teachers functioned. Observing the ways in which the teachers interacted with their students and noting non-verbal cues that either supported or contradicted their interview responses increased the trustworthiness of the data collected. I wanted to reduce the potential for bias by triangulating the data through two different sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). My goal was not to confirm the teachers' responses through outside sources but rather to better understand their self-reported feelings of efficacy in terms of supporting young adolescent learners.

After each interview, at the conclusion of observation day, and after reading the questionnaire responses, I engaged in reflective memoing about my reactions to the teachers' responses as they related to the research question driving this study (Miles et al., 2020). I found it to be a useful tool in bridging the data collection and data analysis processes because I captured thoughts and insights in the moment and then compared them to my noticings during coding and identifying themes.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative inquiry is the approach most appropriately suited to research questions that explore complex issues and investigate the "how" or "why" of people's feelings and actions (Salmona et al., 2020). Because I wanted to explore middle school teachers' feelings of efficacy for supporting young adolescents, tenets of qualitative methodology drove each of the data analysis decisions described here (Charmaz, 2014).

I conducted the one-on-one interviews via Zoom and used the recording feature in the application. After sending the recordings to a professional transcriber, I checked the returned written transcriptions against the interview recordings to ensure accuracy. While the transcripts were verbatim representations of the oral interviews, the quotations provided in this article were edited to eliminate speech placeholders such as "um" and "uh" for ease of reading. No real names were used, and all pseudonyms were chosen by the teachers. To begin the data analysis process, I printed the transcripts that had been verified against the recorded interviews and downloaded and printed the questionnaire responses.

I first read each transcript and questionnaire to get a general sense of the teachers' stories and made notes about my initial thinking. I then

read them a second time to highlight statements that offered perspectives on the research questions. After the second round of reading and highlighting, I read the documents a third time to apply labels to each highlighted statement. Creswell (2008) noted that "coding is the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes" that try to understand "what this person is talking about" (p. 251). Specifically, I identified text segments that related to a single idea through the highlighting process and then applied codes reflective of those ideas (Creswell). Throughout the coding process, I reviewed field notes and memos to ensure that the labels I applied were representative of the teachers' stated thoughts and not influenced by my own professional experiences.

As a result of the back-and-forth between coding transcripts and reviewing field notes, I renamed some labels to represent the participants' perspectives more accurately. After multiple rounds, I reached saturation, which is the point where no new ideas are identified (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I then put the codes into a spreadsheet that included frequency counts and descriptors. This allowed me to search codes and descriptors to ensure that like-ideas were grouped together, and I had a sense of which ideas were dominant and which were less so. Finally, I created a table that visually represented the codes and their descriptors.

During the next phase of data analysis, I looked for overlap or redundancy in the codes. This led me to identify themes that provided a way of thinking about the research question and insights to inform future practice (Creswell, 2008). Ensuring alignment between the research question and interview and questionnaire data increased the credibility of the data analysis (Salmona et al., 2020). Table 1 shows how the initial codes were collapsed into descriptive themes.

**Table 1**

### *Themes Illustrating Teachers' Thinking*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<i>Big ideas that arose from categorizing codes</i>	<i>Labels that led to each theme</i>	<i>Statements that illustrate each theme</i>
Appreciation of young adolescents	Unique age group "Where they are"	The neuroscience really does make a difference for the maturity levels. I really noticed that with their development.

	Love for young adolescents	Middle school is the sweet spot for me because they're mature enough to have those really in-depth, critical thinking conversations but still sheltered.
Knowledge of young adolescent development	Cognitive complexity In-between-ness Knowledge of YAD	The kids are making their own controversial topic presentation, and they're stoked on it.  This is the time where they're just starting to learn how to do some of that abstract type of reasoning and being able to take on the perspective of another person.
Confidence and growth	Reasons for choosing middle school Preparation Confidence Personal growth Life-long learning	When something happens in a classroom, I am like okay their brains aren't fully formed yet. This is why they're making those choices.  Now I am getting a grasp on how we assess students, why we assess students, the way that we do, and all of that.
Strategies for working with young adolescents—Academic and behavioral	Social interactions Teacher-student interactions Unproductive behaviors Challenging authority or "testing"	The social-emotional part is so big in middle school.  I think the community really helps, but you just have to acknowledge the behavioral issues first. Know they are bad, address it as real as you can be, and then move on.  I have to remind myself it's not about pushing the content and moving forward. It's really about them truly understanding what is happening and being able to build on that.
External stressors	Challenges Interactions	I am learning we have quite a big voice. It is bigger than I thought.  Dealing with all of those emotions, from 30 different kids, that can be really exhausting emotionally. I am trying to take it on and trying to be supportive, but there is also pressure being put on teachers to get through certain things. That balance is really difficult.

## Findings

The names used in this section are all pseudonyms. For the interview participants, Ms. Granger and Ms. Pretzel were both 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers while Ms. May and Ms. Anderson taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The other participants did not include their grade levels when filling out the anonymous questionnaire. The teachers spoke frequently about their love for and appreciation

of young adolescents. Mr. Matthews said that middle school was "the best thing that could have ever fallen into my lap," which was a sentiment echoed by every participant in writing through the questionnaires or verbally through the interviews. Ms. Johnson echoed by saying, "I think I will be a middle school teacher forever now. The age is so unique. It's a perfect balance of content and relationships."

While it is unlikely that people who disliked their work in middle school would have responded to the invitation to participate, the participants' depth of enthusiasm for middle school was striking. The teachers' responses fell into five themes that explain how efficacious teachers feel when working with their middle school students. The themes were (a) appreciation for young adolescents, (b) knowledge of young adolescent development, (c) confidence and growth, (d) strategies for working with young adolescents behaviorally and academically, and (e) external stressors. The themes are explained first using direct quotations to illustrate key points, and a discussion of implications that is situated in themes from the literature review themes follows.

### **Appreciation for Young Adolescents**

The teachers truly enjoyed the young adolescents they taught. They loved being able to "meet them where they are" as noted by Mr. García and saw the benefits, not just the challenges, of working with this age group. As Ms. Winn noted, "They are beginning to make big life choices about who they are going to be, what kind of students they are going to be, and how they feel about school. My students are just beginning to think critically about larger issues than just themselves and their own friends. I love seeing them really think!"

The teachers came to middle school through a variety of entry points; some accidental, some intentional. Ms. Pretzel thought she wanted to teach high school but was required to observe in elementary, middle, and high school as a prerequisite to entering her teacher credential program. She had an a-ha moment during her middle school observation and said, "Wait. I know it is just one time that I saw this, but I think I am going to keep watching because I like them more." Ms. May had a similar experience. She shared, "Initially, I had no knowledge of teaching middle school. It was not until I got into the middle school classroom that I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. It really just felt like fate."

Each of participants had earned their teaching credential from a program specifically focused on middle school. They felt that the specialized preparation helped them to appreciate their students because they understood where the adolescents were developmentally and what

supports they needed. Instead of being frustrated by students' behaviors, the teachers viewed them as expected and part of the developmental process. Ms. Anderson explained that "knowing the neuroscience really does make a difference." Ms. Granger said that her cohort laughed about constant discussions on neural synapses and brain development, but that the knowledge made her more prepared to meet her students' needs. Ms. Pretzel agreed, saying:

Adolescence is its own unique thing and a unique time of life. They are not just big elementary schoolers or little high schoolers, and schools need to be constructed with staff knowing developmental considerations—even things like how you set up a physical space or how you do the schedule. For example, our passing periods are four minutes long, so it is irritating when they keep asking me to go the bathroom, but then I think about it. It is only four minutes. Our school is really strict about tardies so they cannot really do both. I cannot be so rigid and still keep their needs in mind. So, it is just recognizing that it's a unique phase in life that needs its own specialization.

Ms. May agreed that middle school sometimes has a bad reputation in society because people do not understand the students who inhabit it. She wished that, "Instead of seeing all the negative things about this age group, more people would see the really awesome, fun, and exciting things that middle school kids have to offer. I don't think you can even describe how great it can be." It was clear from my classroom observations and through the interviews and questionnaires that the teachers enjoyed their students *because* they understood them and appreciated their uniqueness on a daily basis. What struck each of them was the moment "where the kids start figuring out who they are independently from their parents or who their parents want them to be or who their previous teachers or friends want them to be" (Mr. Fogarty). Ms. May said, "The most rewarding part of the job is being there to see that happens and supporting them in that."

Ms. Pretzel found that "the level of maturity and knowledge about things in the world is so different." She explained that, in the same grade, she has students who play in the sandbox with their sisters on the weekend and other kids who sneak out to see boys. Instead of finding that dichotomy daunting, Ms. Pretzel found it



exciting. She said, “When you can make things relevant and they understand the importance of things outside their own bubble, that is rewarding and that can happen for kids no matter where they are on that kind of spectrum.” As Ms. Anderson said, “I just keep going back to the innocence and maturity dichotomy because that is really what it is. They are finding themselves and finding their voices. I love that we get to be part of that journey.”

Each of the teachers felt protective of their students because as Mr. García explained, “We are working for kids. What is the best thing for them and how can we enlighten or inspire them in their learning journey?” Ms. May said:

Middle schoolers deserve specific attention, and middle school teachers need to provide specific supports. Far too often, those needs and supports are not acknowledged. It is very clear that this is a really special, unique, and challenging time of life. If we are going to be around students in that time of life, we should be trained to support students in that time of life.

Ms. Anderson said that “it really feels like my heart and soul and where I belong . . . because the students are the best part of every day,” and Ms. Granger summarized by saying “You don’t teach content, you teach kids. Middle school is where my heart is for sure.”

### **Knowledge of Young Adolescent Development**

The concept of “in-between-ness” echoed throughout the questionnaire responses and interviews. The teachers appreciated that the students were moving away from a reliance on what others thought about them and toward developing their own identities and personalities, but Ms. Ruiz noted that they are “influenced by everything and everyone in their lives.” The teachers said they felt prepared to meet their students’ needs because they saw the tension between childhood and adulthood and understood why it was happening. Ms. Pretzel explained, “You don’t have to handhold so much like you might in elementary, but there is still a childlike quality. They still think stuff is funny.” Ms. May said their needs were often overlooked, and “a lot of times middle schools are like the middle child. They just get forgotten about.” She said this was frustrating because young adolescents have very different needs. “A lot of

times middle school gets lumped in with high school. . . . An 11<sup>th</sup> grader and 7<sup>th</sup> grader are not the same. They have very, very different needs.” Another perspective on the same issue was shared by Mr. Simms who said, “Students are unpredictable, and we cannot control every outcome every day, but we do our best to monitor and adjust.”

These needs arise from cognitive, social, and emotional changes that occur with the onset of puberty. Young adolescents can think more critically than children and want to engage with increasingly complex tasks. Ms. Anderson explained, “This is the time where they’re just starting to learn how to do some abstract reasoning and being able to take on the perspective of another person.” Young adolescents also struggle socially and emotionally as they want to be independent but do not necessarily know what productive independence looks and sounds like. Knowing that “they do not have a mature prefrontal cortex” (Ms. Anderson) helped the teachers in this study be more patient and supportive when working with their middle school students. Ms. Pretzel explained:

They do not need the handholding, but they kind of do to a certain degree with some things. They know how to use the bathroom and stuff, but they do not know organization and keeping things in a planner or putting things in a binder, so you do not lose them. It is one of those things where I think ‘you’re not born knowing this. We have to teach it to you and practice it.’ Even if you just say it once, you have to keep doing it over and over again.

Knowledge of young adolescent development made the teachers aware that they are really starting to form their own independence and their own identity, but they are still young enough to where they care about what you think. They value what you have to say, but they understand sarcasm. They are at that age where they’re coming into who they want to be, and I really enjoy watching that take place. (Ms. May)

It was clear that the teachers participating in this study felt prepared to support their students because they were able to “connect the neuroscience with the social-emotional piece” (Ms. May). Ms. Granger said that she frequently

thought about the fact that “their brains are not fully formed yet, and that is why they are making those choices.” Further, Ms. May recognized, “When they act a certain way, I know it’s not coming from nowhere; it’s coming from something that is literally happening in their brain and their development.”

The teachers noted that an exciting yet challenging aspect of this stage of development was the students’ changing cognitive complexity. They enjoyed teaching students about world events so that, as Ms. Pretzel said, “We can make you aware of things people go through.” Robust classroom discussions gave her “hope for the future.” Working in middle school also allowed teachers to “take the heavy lifting off” themselves and “let the students struggle more so that they can truly understand what is happening and then build upon that” (Ms. Granger). Because Mr. Fogarty knew that middle school students “need to move and be social,” he “built opportunities for them to engage in meaningful conversations with each other into each lesson.”

### **Confidence and Growth**

The teachers felt more efficacious as their confidence in their skills increased. It was not about “giving away” control but rather exerting control productively by including students on the learning journey. They talked about finding their voices and getting a better grasp on how and why “we do the things we do” (Ms. Granger). Ms. Anderson learned that “collaboration is key. There are so many resources to pull from, and you should not be too proud to not know something. Do not be afraid to ask and do not be afraid to explore different options and continue learning as you grow.” In addition to being more willing to ask questions and ask for help, the teachers grew more confident in trusting that their decisions were meeting their students’ needs. For example, Ms. Pretzel’s school faced significant bullying during the first post-covid regular academic year, which led to a school-wide ban on cell phones. Some of the students understood the reasons for the ban, and others were upset because they felt like they were being punished unfairly. She said that her first reaction to the latter group was “that is selfish. How could you say that?” Because her knowledge had grown over time, however, she eventually realized they were not being selfish.

She said:

I understand developmentally, this is the time they are just starting to learn how to do some of that abstract type of reasoning and take on the perspective of another person. They are not bad because of it. It’s just developmentally where they are so you have to walk through it more. That is just one example, but I feel like knowledge from the program and my experience gives me more patience because you know you have to teach everything. Things you think that people just know, they don’t.

While their teacher credential program taught them about adolescent brain development, most of the participants were also life-long learners. They pursued professional learning opportunities and pushed themselves to improve their practice, which led them to feel more confident in their work with students. Ms. May said, “I have even done further research about adolescent brain development. I talk about it with my students; we talk about why they do certain things, and they do not mean to, but it just happens. Being armed with that information, I feel really prepared.”

In addition to feeling prepared to meet young adolescents’ needs, the teachers felt increased confidence in terms of advocating for themselves and their students. They also learned how to make decisions about what to do (and not do) in their classrooms. Because “things are always changing in education, it is hard sometimes to stay on top of the next big thing. Plus, sometimes the next big thing isn’t the right thing (Ms. May). Ms. Granger said that she “did not realize how much say teachers actually have. I just thought things were decided for you. I am learning that we have quite a big voice . . . it is a lot bigger than I thought.”

It appeared that both time and experience contributed to the teachers’ increased confidence and growth. Regarding time in the classroom, Ms. May said, “It was not until my second or third year that I really found my voice as a teacher and the kind of classroom environment that I want to cultivate and create.” Ms. Winn felt similarly and explained, “It has moved from surviving my first two years to thriving and innovating while continuing to discover more efficient practices and owning what works best for my four walls.”

Regarding experience with students, Ms. Anderson said, “I wish I knew that I did not have to nitpick every assignment. It’s more the journey to get to the big summative assessments and providing feedback where it is actually necessary.” Ms. Anderson also said it took her “a good three years to understand the appropriate amount of scaffolding, the appropriate amount of students exploring, and then maybe dialing it back and seeing if I need to support them more.” Part of her journey was feeling confident enough to focus on her students and not just the academic content. She said, “Knowing your students as individuals is really important,” and getting to know them led to increased confidence that she was able to meet their needs amid other competing demands and requirements. For the teachers in this study, it was all about finding their voices and showing their commitment to their students. Ms. May said, “If I am just trying to mimic somebody else and I am not showing any passion, then the kids are going to pick up on that. I had to make some adjustments.”

### **Strategies for Working with Young Adolescents Behaviorally and Academically**

Teachers constantly adjusted their practice in terms of their interactions with students, responses to unproductive behaviors, and decisions about what and how to teach (pedagogy). Ms. Pretzel realized, “It is not about pushing the content and moving forward. It is really about them truly understanding what is happening and being able to build on that.” While teaching academic content, however, the teachers were also dealt with sometimes disappointing behavioral choices. Ms. May noted that “academics are not at the forefront of their day-to-day life. That revolves around their relationships.” Those relationships are with peers, parents or guardians, teachers, and other adults in their spheres of influence. Learning to navigate those relationships is challenging for young adolescents, and they often make unproductive decisions. Ms. May noted:

These kids are learning how to be people, and they’re learning how to interact with others. So, when they get in a fight with their friend at lunch, that is the end of their world. They’re not being dramatic; that really is their whole world in that moment. There are a lot of emotions running wild; there are tears and sometimes anger and fighting. Sometimes they are really tired.

Dealing with all of those emotions from 30 different kids can be really exhausting emotionally—taking that on and trying to be supportive—but there is also pressure being put on teachers to get through certain things. That balance is really difficult.

Ms. Pretzel took the approach of “acknowledging the behavioral issues first. Know they are bad, address them as authentically as you can and then move on.” Ms. Anderson did this by “serving as a role model and mentor” and then “using all sorts of programs and supplementing them with current events to make the academic content applicable to the real world.” She also focused on giving “the students autonomy and choice to guide their learning,” which encouraged them to participate actively in the classroom environment and reduced some of the unproductive behaviors. From Ms. Granger’s perspective this was a student-centered curriculum. She said, “I keep it engaging, current, and make connections to their own personal lives to activate their own prior knowledge before and during.”

Because “middle schoolers can smell inauthenticity” (Mr. García), the way teachers interacted with their students and responded to student-student relationships influenced the classroom environment, which in turn affected the teachers’ feelings of efficacy. Ms. Anderson had “certain tools in the toolbox,” and Ms. May recognized that students’ questions did not usually come from a disrespectful place. She noted that:

With their new flowering independence and sense of self comes a desire to challenge. It’s not necessarily with negative intent, but it’s ‘why are we doing this? Why do I have to listen to this? Why do I have to work with this person?’ It’s very easy as a teacher to be like ‘I don’t have to tell you why, just do it.’ But I think it is important to remember that they’re not coming from a place of necessarily trying to challenge your authority, air quotes on that, but they are coming from a place of wanting to genuinely understand as a human, ‘why am I doing this? What is the purpose?’

By always “coming back to what is best for kids,” the teachers were able to keep from “losing their way.” They recognized that “if you give enough time, they actually produce some really cool stuff on their own.” They said things like “I see what

you wrote down, and I really like that. Would you mind sharing?' I will make sure that I'm picking the answers that I really want out of them while also seeing them struggle productively." Whatever strategies the teachers used, keeping the young adolescents' needs at the front of their minds contributed to feelings of efficacy. Ms. Pretzel summarized by saying:

Adolescents go from parents being the most important influence to peers being really important. I try to include social time in lessons because it is really important to include. Also, I cannot make just one thing for too long without moving. We are trying to build up stamina when it comes to how long you can read in one sitting or how long you can do a writing. We increase it over time, but you have to start small and then gradually go up.

### **External Stressors**

Regardless of their teaching style or the pedagogical tools in their toolboxes, teachers experienced myriad external stressors that affected their feelings of efficacy. They were responsible for 30+ students in every period, and "dealing with those emotions can be really exhausting emotionally." Plus, Ms. Pretzel noted that "there is also pressure being put on teachers to get through certain things. That balance [between students' emotions and district or school mandates] is really difficult." Some teachers worked toward achieving this balance by finding a "teacher buddy to collaborate with." Pervasive throughout the interviews and questionnaires was a sense of stress from myriad outside pressures overlaid with a commitment to the students. The teachers were candid about their stressors while recognizing that "we can control what we can control, and that is my room with my kids."

External stressors included lack of administrator involvement, too much parental involvement, community traumas, and the physical environment. For example, Ms. May said that she wished "administrators knew how hard daily life in the classroom is. The classroom now versus the classroom even five years ago is a completely different classroom. I just wish they [administrators] were seeing how hard it is." Ms. Ruiz echoed this sentiment and explained, "We need to see our administrators appreciate more often. They should visit our classrooms, engage with our students, and engage with me."

One external stressor is when, in Ms. Collavin's words, "Administrators do not know enough about the social-emotional aspects of being a teacher. I know that administrators deal with adults, but they do not hear the things we hear about the kids' home lives or just understanding that academics aren't always number one." Ms. Pretzel was concerned that her administrators did not understand that "I handle as much as I can on my own." If she sent a student to the principal or counselor, she wanted them to know "I am only sending you this issue because it is a really big deal." She hears "all the time about how they are really busy, but I just want to make sure I am doing my job if I hear something alarming. I am not trying to bother them." The teachers understood that they were experienced professionals, but there are aspects of teaching that require a different expertise. As Ms. Granger said, "My students are dealing with a lot of trauma at home. We're lucky we have four counselors and two social workers at our site, which has been really helpful."

In addition to supporting students through traumas and challenges, teachers do so with "up to 43 students in one room. That is really hard because we do not have a room big enough for that so we literally cannot walk around. Good teaching says to be collaborative and physical so 43 kids in a class makes it really difficult" (Ms. Anderson). She also felt that "parents are probably my number one obstacle. We are working as a team, but this is the time for students to make mistakes. It is them finding their style of organization and whatever that means for that student academically and behaviorally. Parents can be the big obstacles for students because they don't give them the opportunity to be independent." Each of these stressors weighed on the teachers who said, "It feels like not being seen and not feeling like your struggles are being validated." They cared deeply about their students and felt prepared to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs but wanted and needed support in dealing with external stressors.

### **Discussion**

While educational research is valuable as a means of advancing the field's collective knowledge, it is even more impactful if it also leads to concrete actions for stakeholders. The five themes discussed above lead to three observations that address this study's research

question, which was “what level of efficacy do middle school teachers have in supporting the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of their young adolescent students?” Previous research suggests the more efficacious that teachers feel, the more effectively they will support their middle school students (Taxer et al., 2018), and the participants in this study supported that assertion. In summary, the participants showed that teachers who understand young adolescent development and recognize the interplay among cognitive, social, and emotional needs feel more efficacious when working with middle school students.

The teachers’ stories were powerful, and middle school adult stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, teacher educators) should consider ways in which the participants’ stories might inform their work in the middle school space. Following are observations and recommendations for three stakeholder groups (teachers, administrators, and teacher educators) that are grounded in a connection between the findings from this study and the larger context as described in the literature review.

## **Teachers**

Teachers appreciate their middle school students more when they understand young adolescent development. Instead of getting frustrated by the behaviors and challenges of middle school students, teachers who recognize the cognitive, social, and emotional hallmarks of this developmental phase, find joy in its uniqueness, and know how to work productively with their students. Knowing that adolescents are more willing to accept potential risks if the promise of reward is great enough (Jensen, 2017) is important in terms of developing teacher efficacy. It was striking how the teachers in this study presumed good intent even when facing challenging behaviors and drew parallels between students’ actions and adults’ responses in similar situations. As Ms. Anderson said, “The kids have individual bad days, but that does not mean they are bad kids. We have to realize that adults are not perfect so why do we expect kids to be perfect every day?” Additionally, in reflecting on his teacher preparation program, Mr. Ruíz wrote, “The classes that dealt with the social/emotional development of middle level students were very beneficial.” Ms. Anderson, Mr. Ruíz, and the other participants explained that they felt prepared to meet their students’

needs because they understood the tenets of adolescent development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). It appears that their feelings of efficacy were closely related to their knowledge of why adolescents act in the way that they do. Classroom teachers are responsible for students’ mastery of academic content and also play a role in their students’ social and emotional development. This means that their daily life in the classroom requires them to juggle myriad responsibilities and challenges, and it is easy to become bogged down by all of it. To combat this, teachers can find techniques to identify the ways in which they impact their students and intentionally focus on their successes with students. If they do this, teachers will be more likely to exert even greater effort in creating supportive learning environments because positive feelings about abilities influence the amount of effort people are willing to exert in the future (Bandura, 1977).

External recognition through awards like teacher-of-the-year is helpful, but these programs, by definition, acknowledge a limited few. Many impactful teachers will never receive a formal award, but they do make a substantive difference in the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of students. Teachers might individually and collectively recognize their successes – whether that means getting one student to finally turn in a homework assignment or creating a school-wide program that excites the student body – and celebrate the ways in which their confidence grows, and their practice improves with each passing year. By doing this, teachers will operationalize Jackson and Davis’ (2000) suggestions in *Turning Points* that encourage middle school educators to develop relationships with students with the goal of promoting academic learning and social and emotional development.

## **Teacher Education Programs**

Regardless of each state’s licensing requirements, teacher education programs should include curriculum or learning units specifically focused on young adolescent development. Ensuring adolescents’ academic success means recognizing that they have specific needs that differ from their counterparts in elementary and high school (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Teacher education programs should promote middle school as a desirable teaching context and then prepare candidates who want to teach in middle

school how to consider those needs when designing instruction (Alexander et al., 1968).

Knowledge of young adolescent development informs the ways in which middle school teachers work with their students, which leads to confidence. This in turn leads teachers to feel more efficacious about their professional decisions (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, the importance of teaching middle school teachers specifically about young adolescents cannot be overstated. Ms. Pretzel earned her teaching credential through a program specifically focused on preparing teachers to teach middle school and explained:

I was really well prepared in the Middle Level program. I do not know what I would do if I did not go to one that was more specialized because a lot of my colleagues are wonderful, but they came into it from somewhere else. The social-emotional part is so big in middle school. I already feel out of my depth so I imagine it would be really hard if you were not used to some of that stuff. I think it is really, really important.

While all teacher education programs require courses on pedagogy, which is *how* to teach, and academic content, which is *what* to teach, the teachers in this study revealed the importance of also learning about young adolescence. They explained that middle school kids are not just smaller high school students or larger elementary school students but are at a unique developmental stage. Adolescents are learning the skills that will allow them to move from reliance on caregivers into independent living (Blakemore, 2018) and knowing why young adolescents act the ways they do is important. This knowledge leads to teachers feeling more confident about their ability to respond productively to challenges in the classroom, and the participants explained that confidence positively influenced their feelings of efficacy. Teacher education programs that intentionally teach about young adolescent development will increase their graduates' efficacy while also ensuring that more middle school students experience teachers who understand them and are able to meet their needs (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

### **School Districts**

In addition to their direct work with students, teachers also experience professional realities

that both foster and inhibit their feelings of efficacy. They appreciate when administrators spend time in classrooms to better understand the joys and challenges of day-to-day instruction. They want counselors and administrators to know that they are doing their best and that they want to work in partnership with school stakeholders to ensure students' success. The participants in this study echoed Bishop and Harrison (2021) in saying that academic success is dependent on developmental needs being met. As Ms. Winn explained, "Social aspects run their lives. Something seemingly small to us is the end of the world to them so academic focus is a challenge." The participants were eager to play an active role in the school context but needed district colleagues to partner with them in this endeavor. They felt this would increase their feelings of efficacy because they would be more fully supported in their work in the classroom.

At the site and district level, instructional coaches and curriculum specialists should offer professional development specifically focused on young adolescent development. The more that all teachers understand what middle school students need cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Caskey & Anfara, 2014), the more prepared middle school teachers will feel. Further, school districts might ask middle school teachers who already possess vast knowledge about young adolescent development to provide some of the professional learning experiences. This will position them as experts in their field, which increases their feelings of autonomy and competence (Deci et al., 1991).

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation of this study relates to the convenience sampling strategy used for participant recruitment. Although I was interested in hearing from middle school teachers with a range of efficacious feelings, all the respondents reported experiencing at least some level of efficacy most of the time. This could be due to the reality that teachers who do not feel prepared to meet their students' needs would be unlikely to want to discuss those experiences. As a result, the findings did shed light on the purpose statement, which focused on middle school teachers' feelings about their skills and knowledge for working with adolescents but could not definitively answer the research question. Instead of being able to compare and contrast the experiences of high

and low efficacious middle school teachers, I learned about the factors that led to feelings of efficacy.

A second limitation was that only four of the 16 teachers were willing to participate in a live interview. While the 12 questionnaire respondents provided a thoughtful reflection on their experiences and answered the questions with detail, written responses are, by nature, more limited than oral interviews. However, the themes that arose from the questionnaire responses mirrored those from the one-on-one interviews, which suggests that the feelings were common even when some details were missing.

### Final Thoughts

Teaching is simultaneously joyful and challenging, rewarding and frustrating. Effective teachers have a life-long impact on their students and many students stay in teachers' minds throughout their careers. The Covid-19 pandemic with its resulting, but uneven, school closures and the general disruption to daily life revealed the profound impact of K-12 school systems on people and society. This study provided insight into the thinking of teachers who feel confident in their ability to support students and who appreciate the adolescents who inhabit their classrooms. As Bandura (1977) noted, social, situational, and temporal circumstances affect people's beliefs about their abilities to learn and perform in any given situation. Middle school teachers who understand what Alexander et al. (1968), the Carnegie Council (1989), and Jackson and Davis (2000) meant about creating schools that recognize young adolescents' needs tend to feel more confident in their abilities to meet their students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs. In closing, I leave readers with Ms. Anderson's summation of her practice.

Leading with the human-first approach is most important; just realizing that everybody has their own problems. I have learned that academics are not always the most important thing with individual students. They have a home life we need to think about, and we need to make sure we have individual conversations with students to make sure they have access to what they need.

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## Appendix

### Questions for Interviews and Questionnaires

1. How long have you been in the education profession? From where did you receive your teaching credential? What type of credential is it?
2. How long have you been a middle school teacher? How did you end up teaching middle school?
3. If you had a choice, would you remain a middle school teacher or would you move to elementary or high school? Why?
4. How well do you believe your teacher preparation program prepared you to be successful teaching young adolescents?
5. What factors make teaching young adolescents rewarding?
6. What factors make teaching young adolescents challenging?
7. In what ways do the developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents affect your instructional planning?
8. How prepared do you feel to meet their cognitive, social, and emotional needs?
9. What are some of the considerations you take into account when planning your curriculum?
10. What do you wish administrators knew about your daily life in the classroom?
11. How has your skill level and/or knowledge base changed over the course of your career?
12. Are you a member of the Association for Middle Level Education? If so, why? If not, why not?
13. What do you know (if anything) about the middle school concept?

### Observation Protocol

Focus Area	Observation Notes	Analysis
Teacher – Student Interactions		
Student – Student Interactions		
Teacher – Directed Activities		
Student – Led Activities		
Examples of student success		
Examples of student struggle		