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Hilary E. Hughes
University of Georgia, hilary.hughes@uga.edu

Rachel Ranschaert
University of North Texas, rachel.ranschaert@unt.edu

Kelsey L. Benson
University of Georgia, khanks2@uga.edu

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Engaged Pedagogies in the Middle Grades:
A Case Study of Justice-Oriented Teachers in COVID Times

Hilary E. Hughes, *University of Georgia*
Rachel Ranschaert, *University of North Texas*
Kelsey L. Benson, *University of Georgia*

Abstract

Much of the extant literature regarding middle grades teachers centers on interventions to improve the quality or effectiveness of their teaching: studies that identify a particular instructional strategy, curricular support, or disposition, and conclude with recommendations that teachers improve their practice by adopting said thing. In contrast, the qualitative case study we present here contributes to the rising tide of research illustrating the powerful, transformative work that middle grades teachers oriented toward justice and equity are already doing in the classroom. Specifically, we draw on eight months of data to illuminate how teachers in a Title I middle school located in the southeastern United States enacted what bell hooks (1994) refers to as engaged pedagogy. By this, we mean educators who believe we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between teachers and students; are continuously engaging in self-actualization by working to identify and unlearn harmful, dominant narratives about race/ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, and gender; and who attend to their own well-being so they can **better attend to their students' overall academic and social-emotional well-being**. Rather than a blueprint assumed to be generalizable, we offer these illustrations to underscore the importance of developing and supporting justice-oriented middle grades teachers who are and/or will become engaged pedagogical practitioners.

Introduction

It is no secret that teachers in the US are often key targets in a blame game that pins the purported dwindling academic performance of U.S. students vis à vis other developed nations on individual teacher quality (Sharma, 2021), a rhetoric commonly used to justify widespread neoliberal reforms (Brathwaite, 2017; Kumashiro, 2012). This pervasive, deficit discourse is particularly salient in the middle grades where developmental psychology has historically dominated (and limited) how we conceptualize youth as stuck in emotional and psychological turmoil during their transition to adulthood (Hindle, 1994; Hughes-Decatur, 2012a,b; Lesko, 2012; Vagle, 2012). Middle grades teachers are thus often caught in the crosshairs of a dominant narrative that situates their pedagogy and their students within largely deficit thinking (Andrews et al., 2018). Additionally, much of the extant literature regarding middle grades teachers centers on interventions to improve the quality or effectiveness of their teaching: studies that identify a particular instructional strategy, curricular support, or disposition, and conclude with recommendations that teachers improve their practice by adopting said thing (see for example, Hedges et al., 2022; Neth, et al., 2019).

Though this literature stems from perhaps benevolent intentions, the study we present here endeavors to contribute to the rising tide of research illustrating the powerful, transformative work that middle grades teachers are already doing in the classroom (e.g., Brinegar et al., 2019; DeMink-Carthew & Gonell, 2022; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2023; Ellerbrock & Highfill, 2022; Shockley & Ellis, 2023; Trinter & Hughes, 2021).

More specifically, in this article we illuminate how teachers in a middle school located in the southeastern US enacted what bell hooks (1994) refers to as *engaged pedagogy*. By this, we mean educators who believe we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between teachers and students; have a radical commitment to openness; are continuously engaging in self-actualization by working to identify and unlearn harmful, dominant narratives about race/ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, gender, etc.; and who attend to their well-being so they can **better attend to their students' overall academic and social-emotional well-being**. hooks articulates engaged pedagogy as a constructive commentary, a way to **conceptualize “countering the devaluation of teaching [even as it] addresses the urgent need for change in teaching practices” (p. 10). She**

describes this approach as “hopeful and exuberant...convey[ing] the pleasure and joy I experience teaching” (p. 10). We echo this joyful tone here, choosing to highlight the thoughtfulness of the equity-minded educators at Brookside Middle School (BMS) [pseudonym]. **We think with hooks’ notions of engaged pedagogy for this project to “stand as testimony, bearing witness to education as the practice of freedom” (p. 11).** We see the multiple, diverse aspects of engaged pedagogy the teachers in this study exemplified as just one of the myriad ways middle grades teachers at BMS respected and cared for the souls of their students (hooks). Even more, the examples we provide here highlight middle grades teachers who seek to cultivate relationships with their students (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), design a curriculum that does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination (hooks) and **instead is inclusive and affirming to youth’s** multiple identities; and create learning environments that are welcoming, inclusive and affirming (Bishop & Harrison).

Cultural and Political Context

In addition to contributing to the existing research highlighting the brilliance and magic teachers and students are creating in middle grades classrooms, we felt the profound need to think with engaged pedagogy for this project, given the political and cultural context of the study. At the beginning of April 2020, our research team met online with administrators, teachers, and staff at BMS to conceptualize a study where we would explore how COVID-19 might act as a catalyst for the school to (re)examine and (re)engage the social-emotional learning and well-being of its students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized due to racial, ethnic, social-class, and geographic disparities. We intended to begin conducting interviews in July 2020 to learn **about participants’ experiences during the** abrupt shift to online schooling at the end of the spring 2020 semester. As that spring semester ended in May 2020, however, the unraveling pandemonium of COVID-19 collided with a national reckoning on racial in/justice in the **wake of George Floyd’s egregious murder, and** our intended study quickly morphed into something none of us – researchers or educators – could have ever imagined or planned for. Established methods like semi-structured interviews and focus groups transformed into online communal spaces for genuine human

connection and emotion. Traditional interview directions and outcomes became secondary. While the overall experience was characterized by unpredictability and profound change, the collision of social tumult and the pandemic reoriented our inquiry processes and we were more open to adaptability and uncertainty. Thus, our research question shifted to exploring how COVID-19 became a catalyst for BMS to reimagine a more equitable education for all its students.

Throughout the course of eight months, we bore witness to a community of educators who embodied the kind of engaged pedagogy hooks (1994) calls for. Moment after moment, we sat in awe as this group of educators leveraged a moment of historical rupture to (re)design their online classrooms as spaces that centered well-being—both of themselves and of their students—a holistic approach that hooks describes as a transgressive act in education contexts where test scores are more often prioritized over genuine human connection. What follows, then, are insights that came from analyzing eight months of data we collected at BMS between July 2020 and March 2021 to illuminate the engaged pedagogical practices the teachers enacted. Beyond highlighting the powerful work of these educators, we see this research as contributing to a broader project in middle grades education research to study **“teachers’ practices during significant school disruptions to inform effective educational responses” (Bishop, 2021, p. 4),** making a conscious effort to focus on the growth potential that came out of the pandemic.

It is important to note that the findings we present here are not intended to be blueprints, generalizable to all middle grades educators. Doing so would **“undermine the insistence that** engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address **each new teaching experience” (hooks, 1994, pp. 10-11).** Instead, we share the stories of educators **responding to their student’s needs in a time of** crisis as a testimony to the power and resilience of those teachers and the possibilities of engaged pedagogy for young adolescents.

Engaged Pedagogy

hooks (1994) articulated engaged pedagogy as being rooted in Freirean (1970/2000) notions of liberatory education. In contrast to the banking

model of education—historically the dominant pedagogical approach to teaching in the US, and particularly in high poverty schools—wherein students are taught to simply memorize and regurgitate facts, engaged pedagogues are committed to transforming the curriculum to **“eliminate biases and dismantle systems of domination, thereby making educational practices a robust site of resistance” (hooks, p. 21)**. In an engaged pedagogical approach, students are not passive recipients of education, but active participants in the construction of a shared classroom culture (hooks). Recasting students in a holistic light that honors them as equal contributors to and members of a classroom community becomes a transgressive act in an education system that reduces students to test scores, numbers in a grade book, or class rankings. Engaged pedagogues instead **“...believe that our work is not** merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most **deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, p. 13)**. This approach to teaching does not, however, confine itself to recasting the traditional role of students in the classroom, but invites a reconceptualization of the role of the teacher as well:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (p. 21)

Empowered as such, engaged pedagogues center their own humanity and well-being alongside that of their students as they co-create classroom spaces outside traditional hierarchies of domination. Finally, engaged pedagogy is also, by necessity, intersectional, as it becomes impossible to enact transgressive teaching practices without addressing issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities that impact students and their communities.

Below we describe our research site, Brookside Middle School, as well as our data collection and analysis processes. We then describe three

primary findings from our analysis that illustrate how the teachers at BMS exemplified the principles and commitments of engaged pedagogy: (1) respecting and caring for the souls of their students; (2) transgressing the boundaries of normative schooling; and (3) attending to their well-being and self-actualization to better attend to their students' social-emotional and academic well-being.

Research Site and Participants

BMS is located in a mid-sized city in the southeastern US where the poverty rate is just over 30%. The school serves approximately 800 students (48% Black/African American; 35% White; 10.4% Hispanic; < 5% Multiethnic; < 5% Indian, Asian, Pacific) and is situated within a school district that receives Title I funds for every school in the district, with over 80% of students meeting the criteria for free and reduced lunch. The school's mission statement revolves around its dedication to implementing culturally responsive and restorative approaches to support students from historically marginalized backgrounds. All faculty, staff, and administrators were invited to participate in the study (N=72). Twenty-three people chose to participate: 17 teachers, two counselors, one restorative practice director, and three administrators. As we have written about the strengths of administrative leaders in this school community elsewhere (Hughes et al., 2022), for this article we only focus on data we collected from our interviews and focus groups with the 17 teachers (see Table 1). Members of the research team worked with BMS faculty, staff, and administration, taught teacher education courses onsite, and supervised student teachers placed at the school prior to this research project.

We would be remiss without also noting that, although we have significant experience working with members of the BMS school community in various capacities, the members of the research team (2 professors and 3 graduate students) are all White. Therefore, similar to demographic trends in education across the country where a vast majority of the teaching workforce continues to be cisgender, heteronormative White women, the cultural and historical locations of the researchers were/are vastly different from those of the socioeconomically and racially diverse communities in our research context. While naming ethical tensions inherent in occupying positions of privilege as White

researchers in the academy does not resolve those tensions, we agree with other critical feminist scholars who recognize the importance of locating our positionalities within our research contexts.

Table 1

| Grade Level | Content Area |
|-------------|----------------------------|
| 6 | Science |
| | Gifted Math |
| | Math/Special Education |
| 7 | Gifted |
| | Math |
| | ELA |
| 8 | Social Studies and Science |
| | ELA (2) |
| | Math |
| | Social Studies |
| 6 – 8 (all) | Science |
| | Gifted |
| | Agricultural Sciences |
| | Spanish |
| | Low incidence and adaptive |
| | ESOL |

Methodology

In this qualitative single case study, we explored how COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for BMS to reimagine a more equitable education for all its students. As described earlier, our research question evolved to better align with the changing landscape; however, the single case study approach (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009) still **allowed us to engage in an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project...in a ‘real life’ context” (Thomas, 2011, p. 21). Our case** in this instance was an in-depth exploration of the goings-on, complexities, nuances, and uniqueness of BMS’s **attunement to creating**

more equitable structures, practices, and policies **during an unprecedented time in our nation’s** recent history. As qualitative researchers have noted, case studies are not the methods in and of themselves; rather, conducting a case study is a design frame that incorporates multiple and sometimes mixed methods (Simons, 2009; Thomas). As the political, social, and local contexts shifted, then, so did the methods we relied on to capture the beautiful and despairing chaos simultaneously taking place within and outside of BMS.

Data Collection

This study took place between July 2020 - March 2021. During this time, 23 faculty, staff, and administrators participated in what we would have typically considered online interviews and focus groups, but because **everything we (thought we) knew as “typical” in** qualitative research had fallen apart, our online encounters with participants instead became spaces to process and connect. While we use **normative language like “individual interviews” and “focus groups,” it is important to note that,** even with prompts to guide our interviews and **focus groups, we followed the participants’ need** to process the real-time events that were heavily impacting building-level decisions, instructional **decisions, and the school community’s physical** health and emotional well-being. First, in July 2020, we met online with each of the 23 participants individually. During these 45-to-60-minute interviews, we discussed their experiences during the abrupt pivot to online instruction at the end of Spring 2020. A few months later during the Fall 2020 semester, we met with grade-level focus groups to learn how their semester was going online. Between January 2021 and March 2021, we met again with individual participants to learn about the transition back to in-person and their perceptions **of their students’ social-emotional** well-being, as well as their own.

Members of the research team also participated **in six weeks of BMS’s online pre-planning** meetings and professional learning in July 2020 and attended both faculty and leadership meetings during Fall 2020. Beyond interviews, focus groups, and field notes, we gathered additional case documents such as faculty and leadership meeting notes, weekly principal emails to faculty and the school community, and other digital communication. This broad range of case documents allowed us to gain insight into

our evolving research question, as well as contextualize our findings within the larger socio-political contexts.

Data Analysis

We used both an inductive and deductive approach in the beginning rounds of analysis by bringing aspects of engaged pedagogy together with data-driven codes that came from our research question (Yin, 2009). We individually analyzed interview and focus group transcripts to identify initial insights and patterns across the data and then discussed those initial observations collectively. Once we collectively identified recurring themes, we continued analyzing the data, juxtaposing theory-driven themes with data-driven themes to identify different and existing themes that pointed to the complexities and nuances of this context (Yin). In our initial analyses, for example, we collectively noticed dozens of moments across the interview transcript data where teachers seemed to intentionally push back against dominant discourses that reduce the complexity of students as whole human beings down to their simplest, quantifiable parts: test scores, attendance records, numbers of disciplinary referrals, etc. Instead, they expressed concern **for their students' rapidly shifting lives both in terms of academics and their situations at home and in the community.** Things like food security, responsibilities caring for younger siblings, and available physical space for learning in the home that may not have otherwise been on the radar of **teachers in "traditional" face-to-face school settings** became the primary concerns of the BMS teachers as they adapted to the demands and challenges of remote learning during a pandemic.

We then began grouping initial insights into larger categories. For example, we grouped the initial data-driven theme, **"teachers noticing students participating because of less/no rules"** with a similar initial data-driven theme, **"teachers eliminating school reward and discipline systems,"** and those combined insights eventually became a larger theory-driven theme **we named "transgressing boundaries,"** which we describe below. In later iterations of our analysis, we identified additional evidence across the data that contradicted and/or added nuance to the existing themes and considered the larger and shifting contexts in which the themes were situated. We noticed, for example, that some teachers talked about their

frustrations with having to use multiple monitoring technologies during their online classes because they felt like they had no time to teach, while they simultaneously described how the online space created multiple opportunities for them to connect with students and for students to participate differently or at all. As we wrote and talked our way through this analysis, we noted that both of these things could exist at the same time, and should.

Below we describe three primary ways the teachers at BMS exemplified commitments of engaged pedagogy: (1) respecting and caring for the souls of students; (2) transgressing the boundaries and structures of normative schooling; and (3) attending to their well-being and self-actualization to better attend to their students' social-emotional *and* academic well-being.

Findings

We also must give an honest and thorough account of the constructive interventions that have occurred as a consequence of all our efforts to create justice in education. We must highlight all the positive, life-transforming rewards that have been the outcome of collective efforts to change our society, especially education so that it is not a site for the enactment of domination in any form. (hooks, 1994, p. xiii)

hooks (1994) reminds us that the documentation and celebration of positive examples of justice-oriented teaching is a crucial component of the broader movement toward a more just educational future. In what follows, **we offer "an honest and thorough account" of the ways that the teachers at BMS enacted a justice-oriented engaged pedagogy that centered well-being amid numerous chaotic transitions during 2020 and 2021.**

Respecting and Caring for the Souls of Our Students

"...my teachers made sure they 'knew' us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family." (hooks, 1994, p.2)

hooks (1994) purports that those who enact **engaged pedagogy "teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students,** which helps create the conditions where learning

can begin” (p. 13). Similarly, Bishop and Harrison (2021) posit that middle school students see caring teachers as those who value them as learners and as individuals. Respecting and caring for the souls of our students as learners and individuals, then, might include, for **instance, acknowledging that youth’s multiple, intersecting identities, such as “race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender, dis/ability, and religion equally contribute to who young adolescents are and to their experiences in and outside of school”** (p. 11). Middle grades teachers who respect and care for the souls of our students seek to cultivate relationships with students (Bishop & Harrison), design curriculum that does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination (hooks) and **instead is inclusive and affirming to youth’s multiple identities; and create learning environments that “support, affirm, and honor youth holistically”** (Bishop & Harrison, p. 11).

Throughout interviews and focus groups, the teachers (as well as the administrators and the staff) talked about the importance of centering **care for their students above the district’s directives to keep academics at the forefront of each day’s harrowing events. On the most direct level, BMS provided food and supplies for their school community in drive-by pickup lines and ensured that learning packets were available to students who could not connect online. The administration and faculty created a system to contact each student every week so they could check on them and document who had and had not been contacted. The principal worked with the school’s PTO to raise money to help families affected by the pandemic who were having difficulty paying rent and other household bills. Many of the teachers, school counselors, and the restorative culture coordinator made themselves available via email, Zoom, and telephone for any students who needed emotional support. These actions were meaningful and necessary in creating a support system for students in Spring 2020. However, the care the teachers enacted extended far beyond these measures.**

The teachers recognized early on, for example, that their students needed additional engagement with others to process their experiences, foster their social and emotional well-being, and simply be in community with **other humans. Attending to students’ interests outside of academics, for example, an eighth-grade teacher described a moment during an online class when a student asked if they could**

play *Among Us* that coming Friday at the end of class, and she additionally noted how students in another class were talking about anime and other video games as they exchanged discord **names: “And that just feels really, really important right now because you just don’t have a way... They can’t private chat on Zoom right now, and...their breakout rooms are quick and school-related and they’re really shy in them, and so any of those moments that kids can connect, I think is really huge.”** Because of these observations and students’ requests, the teacher added time at the end of Friday classes for students to engage in online play and joined them in that play.

Another eighth-grade teacher talked about how she and other grade-level teachers created Friday online hangout spaces for any grade-level student who wanted to join and observed how some students who were not showing up for their online content classes would show up for **the Friday hangouts, saying, ...this particular student hadn’t come to any live sessions...But then, for the last couple of weeks, when it was just chatting or eating lunch with a teacher, she showed up, and this was a student who like had...a student who was experiencing a lot of behavioral issues in school and just was there to talk to the teacher, which is really awesome.** The Friday hangouts, according to the teachers, had anywhere from 5 to 15 students, depending on the day. Students would pop in and see what was happening, and some of them stayed and others left. During that same conversation, another eighth-grade teacher added, **...we made a really concerted effort to do some like social-emotional activities and games and things on Google Meet with the kids...and a lot of teachers had a lot of really great successes with that, and found some happiness just getting to talk to students. I played Nitro Type over the computer with a number of students for a couple of weeks and that was like, kids were excited to be doing that.**

Additionally, during a focus group conversation with seventh-grade teachers, one teacher said that she noticed how some of her students stayed online during the asynchronous time the school had built into each class to give students a break from their screens. After talking with them and learning that they did not like the asynchronous time, she stayed online during that time for any students who wanted to remain online. She explained, **...I just let them go to breakout rooms with whoever they want. And**

then a lot of times... I go through and check every three or four minutes, but I'm like, "What's the worst thing that can happen?" You know what I mean? Which might be the wrong attitude, but they gotta have some type of connection and... When I go in there, it's like 50/50. Sometimes they're just working on the work together, and then sometimes they're joking around or playing a game or something. But they ask to do it all the time, and I'm like, it's asynchronous time, it's your time. So I've been letting them do that and it seems to really build camaraderie... they look forward to it. They're more engaged during class 'cause they're looking forward to right at the end, they can go in the room with their friends.

This kind of attunement to the little things, especially when students' worlds had been upended in unprecedented ways, illustrates how BMS teachers respected and cared for the souls of their students. By cultivating spaces that supported, honored, and affirmed youth holistically (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), teachers were also creating the conditions where learning could begin (hooks, 1994).

Transgressing Boundaries

Expanding beyond boundaries has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students. (hooks, 1994, p. 10)

To be responsive to their students and to the daily and sometimes hourly crises everyone was experiencing, the teachers at BMS chose to transgress the boundaries that traditionally confined students (and teachers) to limited ways of being and learning in schools (hooks, 1994). Rather than treating the shift to online schooling as if teaching and learning would— or even could— remain the same during the early months of the pandemic, the teachers, staff, and administrators instead did what was in the best interest of their school community, even if those decisions did not align with the district's directives. An eighth-grade teacher explained, for instance, that pivoting to an online setting allowed the teachers to eliminate many of the negative interactions they had with students when in the building. The teacher highlighted

some policies that forced a sort of “deficit mindset, assuming [students are] gonna do something wrong and that we need to be able to monitor them every second they're in the building.” She elaborated using the example of a district rule that barred students from keeping the hoods of their hoodies on in the school building, with their heads and ears thereby covered. Instead, she explains how in the online setting, *...we aren't enforcing arbitrary rules, and maybe arbitrary is not the right word, because there's reasons for all these rules. But like no hoods is like— there's a reason for it because of liability and because it's harder to see who [students] are on a camera if they have their hood up. But it's like really, that's stress, like 20 or even 30 or 40 interactions you have to have per day with a student that is negative. And for the students that always have their hoods on for whatever reason, for them it's like 100 negative interactions with authority figures.*

Several teachers across grade levels also noted how their online teaching and learning spaces seemed much more relaxed and reciprocal because, unlike some schools across the country, the administration at BMS chose not to focus on enforcing some of the district policies. Instead, they focused on how to create online experiences that were inviting for students, that felt safe(r) for students, and that allowed students to participate in their learning and social connection in ways that were not typical during in-person schooling. This same eighth-grade teacher continued describing rules and policies the teachers were not enforcing online, which seemed to create a less combative teaching and learning environment for both students and teachers. She explained, *...it's the same thing with headphones in the hallway. And, [students] can't wear navy. They [district] changed that this year, but last year you can't [sic] wear black pants, you can [sic] only wear navy or khaki. And it's like that kind of stuff is just bullshit; it's just stuff that makes you have to be an authoritarian and police kids for no reason. And that makes them have a negative opinion of you, and it makes them have a negative opinion of school, and there's just... It doesn't accomplish anything, really. And so we don't have to deal with any of that right now, because they're not right in front of us. It's like just a vicious cycle that just brings everybody down, the teachers and the students. And we don't have to participate in that cycle right now.*

Transgressing the boundaries of traditional school structures by allowing students more freedom to exist and learn online in more autonomous ways created opportunities for students to take risks and engage differently. A sixth-grade science teacher, for instance, offered an example of a student who, when present in the building, was *“never in class because she always ended up in ISS [in-school suspension]”* However, when the school moved to a digital space, the teacher explained that the student *“completed all of her work. She was super excited about it. She was emailing me all the time and saying, ‘Hey look what I did.’”* The teacher acknowledged that he could not point to exactly what it was about the online environment that allowed this student to engage more fully in her work and connect more with her teacher. However, the removal of the disciplinary structures, in his perspective, seemed to contribute to how this student interacted, learned, and connected differently.

hooks (1994) asserts that in engaged pedagogy, **“educating anyone when they are not present is impossible”** (p. 173). While students were physically present online, the teachers acknowledged that no one could be fully present emotionally or academically during this unprecedented time. Thus, the teachers took what might otherwise be fixed norms and structures and made them more malleable to allow space for students to be present in this virtual atmosphere. An eighth-grade teacher noted that in the virtual space she was able to recognize that students were engaged, explaining that the online setting allowed her to **better** *“[understand] that even though [students’] music is lightly playing, they are listening and they’re engaging and they’re showing their engagement”* by, for example, adding comments and questions in the chat throughout the lesson. Providing more autonomy and fewer restrictions concerning how students interacted in those online spaces, then, **illustrated for that teacher how** *“the students feel that freedom.”*

Even more, by choosing to transgress the **traditional boundaries of schooling, teachers’** realization of the autonomy students experienced when, as noted above, the disciplinary structures of schooling were not in place, provided an opportunity for them to critically reflect on how the school should approach school norms and policies more broadly. The restorative culture coordinator who

sat on the teacher-leader advisory group with the administration, for instance, described how seeing the positive effects of **the school’s** decision to eliminate particular policies during online schooling led her to question the purpose of **the school’s merit-demerit** system. This critical reflection inspired her to propose abolishing demerits during the Restorative Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports meeting she attended prior to our interview. Additionally, she maintained at the meeting that **the school’s ‘incentive time’** (traditionally reserved for students with no demerits) should be for every student in the school— **that “every kid gets to go when it’s outside time.”** She explained further, *“...even the small things are gonna create more autonomy. It’s like we trust you and you don’t have to earn outside time. You should be able to go outside. And every kid should have that. And our reflection and the planning time should fully be restorative. And I think our school is shifting to that, but I just think culturally, it takes a while to make those changes, specifically with students who have already been in some of the structures and systems that have made them...feel smaller or controlled all of the time.”*

The careful attention teachers paid to how students were showing up— or not— in online spaces and drawing on those observations to consider how previous norms and policies were harmful is another aspect of engaged pedagogy **that hooks (1994) writes about, which “doesn’t** only seek to empower students but also creates space and opportunities for teachers to grow and in turn, are empowered by the **process”** (p. 21). While we suggest here that the teachers at BMS indeed transgressed boundaries to attend to **their school community’s needs the best that** they could, it is also important to note that the move to online schooling was not the catalyst for **the teachers’ thoughtful attention** to and care for their students. Indeed, these teachers were already deeply asset-oriented and believed deeply in the power and possibility of the young people in their classrooms. However, it was because they chose to transgress the boundaries of traditional school systems and policies during virtual schooling that they were able to see new and different possibilities for a more equitable and just education for all of their students.

Well-Being and Self-Actualization

Engaged pedagogy is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist

pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (hooks, 1994, p.15).

Notably, hooks (1994) writes that doing the work of engaged pedagogy is “taxing to the spirit” (p. 202) and that engaged pedagogues need time away from the classroom to sustain the intense work they do to support their students. During 2020-2021 (and in the years since) teachers nationwide were under immense amounts of pressure and stress as they navigated responses to the pandemic: plans changed, classes were moved on and offline, students were experiencing unthinkable levels of anxiety and depression, parents and caregivers were not complying with mask requirements, community members got sick, or worse, COVID-19 took their lives. Words cannot express how taxing this moment in history was to the spirit.

In our conversations with teachers, several explained the ways this ongoing turmoil and immense stress made it necessary to prioritize their well-being to continue doing the work they needed and wanted to do for their students. One teacher explained, *...I’m an overdoer and an overthinker and so I ran myself drained. I’m really good in crisis and have this energy that comes out of nowhere and so the first two weeks [of COVID-19] I was creating things and thinking of ways to connect with kids, like I was all in. And then the third week I was talking to another teacher on the phone and she was like, “You’re not okay...you just are going to crash.” And I crashed really hard...and so I had to recreate boundaries and rhythms...I was making sure I was checking in and holding myself accountable to boundaries for my own health.*

This teacher’s description of how she had to recreate boundaries is yet another example of how everything we (thought we) knew about how we functioned as humans and educators was no longer accessible.

During a focus group conversation in early October 2020, a sixth-grade teacher explained how the extreme grief and trauma he had experienced (and was still experiencing) in his own life allowed him to become more understanding of how little teachers knew about

what was happening in the lives of their students outside of school. He shared with us that he lost a close family member in Spring 2020 and described the difficulty of attending faculty meetings on Zoom and teaching his students online every day, while also caring for his loved one during the last days. In reflecting on this time, he said, *“I can see how I could have made more of my job if I wasn’t a person, but as a human being, I did what I could.”* He continued, *This [experience] helps set a frame for our students. [They] didn’t know I’m going through this. Well, students are going through life events that we have no idea of. So as I look back at Spring, and think, I wish I had offered more opportunities to engage with students, I couldn’t. I was at my emotional capacity. It wasn’t a possibility. But I did use that experience as a frame to sort of understand students who don’t feel they have it within them to engage in a session with adults who are living experiences that are outside of their own.*

This experience not only illustrated the humanity of the teachers and the ways that their pedagogies and interactions with students were embedded in large, complicated contexts but also how the teachers were constantly engaging in critical reflexive practices about their pedagogical commitments. Further, critically reflecting on his own experience allowed this teacher to see the wholeness (hooks, 1994) of his **students as they too might be “at their emotional capacity.”**

Self-Actualization

Elaborating on attending to our well-being, hooks (1994) maintains that engaged pedagogues must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization. We suggest that doing this kind of critically reflexive work is a major part of attending to our well-being because as we begin to identify, deconstruct, and unlearn the dominant, harmful narratives about Black and Brown youth and youth from working-poor and poor backgrounds, we are healing parts of ourselves. We experienced several occasions where the teachers (and administrators and staff) engaged in purposeful work to identify their assumptions and biases about racism and classism, in particular, so they could create safer spaces for their predominantly Black and Brown students in the wake of **George Floyd’s murder and the reckoning that followed.** One example of this was when the eighth-grade teachers decided to have their students read the

young adult version of *Stamped: Racism, Anti-Racism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram Kendi (2020), following the Black Lives Matter protests in Summer 2020. As teachers and instructional coaches brainstormed how to implement *Stamped* book clubs for their eighth-grade students, they considered how many of the White teachers (including themselves) were not equipped to facilitate thoughtful, anti-racist discussions with their students about *Stamped*. One instructional coach stated, for example, **“If teachers hadn’t been talking about this before with [their] kids, if you hadn’t been doing this work prior to June...I don’t think you’re ready to have the conversation with a room full of Black kids if you’re white.”**

Similarly, one of the eighth-grade teachers talked about how he volunteered to help lead the discussions about systemic racism and provided additional, supplemental resources for anyone who wanted to learn more about the topics addressed in *Stamped*. Emphasizing the dire need for everyone to engage in the difficult work of identifying their stuck places throughout the book, he stated, **“...it’s going to have to be a conversation, it’s going [be] like, these are the pitfalls, these are the rough parts because we don’t, I mean, to be completely frank, we don’t need you to fuck this up. Like, we don’t need you to mess this up. I really mean that. We don’t need to make your discomfort make a Black kid feel any less worthy. Because I’ve been in rooms with those discussions as an adult, and I’ve felt uncomfortable. So anyway, we are doing that [leading their own *Stamped* book clubs] to make sure everybody’s equipped to lead conversations because it is touchy.”**

As he continued talking about the importance of critical reflection, the teacher also discussed intersectional biases (e.g., race and class) and how everyone is implicated in those biases, explaining, *I feel like the conversation is geared toward how we have biases toward everyone, like how do you feel about the rich kid, how do you feel about the poor kid, how do you feel about this kid....And just like the weirdness of, how not being racist is not really a thing. You have to be anti-racist, you got to be informed. You got to understand it. And you don’t need to get offended if your kid calls you racist. I think it needs to be a time for introspection. Because you know, before I read How To Not Be an Anti-Racist, my kids taught me that as a Black man, I could still be racist in the way that I do things.*

This thoughtful attunement to his positionality and his awareness that everyone can benefit **from critical reflective work speaks to hooks’** (2009) assertion that racist (i.e., white supremacist) thinking informs the consciousness of everyone in the US irrespective of skin color (p. 11). It is also another powerful example of the kind of self-actualization hooks argues is needed within engaged pedagogy. During the summer, then, all of the eighth-grade teachers formed *Stamped* book groups, and a few of the teachers who volunteered to lead the small groups also facilitated discussions about institutionalized racism in the US, about the intersections of the book and their school community, and strategies and protocols to lead students through the book in thoughtful and responsive ways.

As evidenced by the teachers at BMS, the critical self-reflection required to enact engaged pedagogy is expansive. It requires not only **attention to one’s well-being** to sustain the profound work with students, but also attention to what the teacher does not know and where the teacher must continue to grow, to challenge assumptions, biases, and the status quo. The **teachers’ attention to their well-being** and their self-actualization were crucial in supporting their ability and capacity to create the caring, supportive spaces they did.

Conclusion

The engaged pedagogies the teachers at BMS enacted in 2020-2021 were powerful and undoubtedly provided support and comfort for their students beyond what was documented during this study. However, we must reiterate that this article is not meant to be a blueprint for engaged pedagogy. In addition **to hooks’** argument that to try and create blueprints of engaged pedagogical practices would **“undermine the insistence that engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (1994, pp. 10-11)**, we maintain that the findings from this study are a different manifestation of long-term and ongoing commitments to justice-oriented **teaching as a form of the teachers’ engaged pedagogies**: honoring the assets of their students, attending to their well-being, and confronting unjust systems that harmed their students, to name a few. It would be unrealistic to think any school or group of teachers could develop these orientations over the course of a

meeting, a workshop, or even a school year; and yet at the same time, we assert that this commitment is imperative if we are to have middle schools and teachers who are constantly working to transform educational systems— and thus society— **“so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom”** (hooks, 1994, p. 34).

Additionally, it is important to note that the examples we present here do not exist without flaws, contradictions, and complexities. The teachers at BMS, like all teachers, and the education system more broadly, are bound up in multiple, competing discourses and currents of ideas that constantly push and shape particular practices and interactions (Ranschaert, 2023). In other words, there were countless factors, **ranging from the teachers’ histories to their school setting**, to the sociopolitical contexts of the moment that influenced their pedagogical processes and decisions during the 2020-2021 school year. With that said, our aim in this article is to highlight the possibilities of engaged pedagogies and to draw attention to the justice-oriented commitments of teachers enacting those pedagogies— a focus that we maintain needs more attention in the extant literature.

Rather than a blueprint assumed to be generalizable, we hope these illustrations underscore the importance of developing and supporting justice-oriented middle-grade teachers who are and/or will become engaged pedagogical practitioners. Perhaps most importantly, as we have argued elsewhere, for teachers to enact engaged pedagogies in sustainable ways, they must have the support of self-aware and justice-oriented administrators who prioritize their school communities over district directives (Hughes et al., 2022). Finally, **we see this work contributing to Bishop’s (2021) assertion that “teachers’ practices during significant school disruptions [can] inform effective educational responses” (p. 4). Thus, it is indeed noteworthy to highlight the engaged pedagogies of these BMS teachers, to center their expertise and profound commitments to youth, as a way of speaking back to deficit discourses around both middle schools and teaching, and to also imagine future educational spaces that are designed with engaged pedagogies in mind. Moving forward, we imagine the possibilities of additional studies of middle grades teachers’ practices, as well as how teacher education, professional learning, and**

school culture can make engaged pedagogy possible.

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