Using Design Based Research to Influence How Middle School Students Visualize Local Communities and Sense Belonging to Local Communities

by

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Abstract

Many social studies teachers seek to serve democracy by empowering students to become transformative citizens (Banks, 2017). This goal requires teachers to meet students in their development and growth. Middle school students, particularly, are just beginning their journey toward more social and public lives. Opportunities for transformative action among young student-citizens may be found in their own local community. The context and content of the local community, however, is far from settled. So, too, is students' own sense of place and belonging within the local community. For many of these students their experiences have been limited, presenting a challenge to expand students' sense of the community to encompass the local. Further, kindling a sense of belonging and attachment to the place is critical for fostering inclusion, which is the foundation of meaningful, transformative action. This study explores how a cohort of middle school students envisioned their communities through in-depth community mapping and history projects as part of a 7th grade civics and geography course. The projects sought to understand the extent of students' sense of their community, their sense of belonging and unbelonging to places and spaces within their perceived communities, collaborative group community mapping projects, community asset catalogues, and group community history projects.

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List of Abbreviations

AIW	Authentic Intellectual Work
ALCOS	Alabama Course of Study
DBR	Design Based Research
NCSS	National Council for the Social Studies
NEA	National Education Association
SCI	Sense of Community Index
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of Problem

Citizenship education as a primary motivation for social studies education has operated with a lens toward creating active, participatory, and transformative citizens (Banks, 2017; National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). The "context of civic responsibility" for which students-as-citizens are too often prepared for are political and governmental arenas (Ho & Barton, 2020). However, perhaps equally important in preparing students-as-citizens is preparing them for a rich and meaningful associational life (Macedo et al., 2005). Further, the most appropriate setting for such a focus would be the student's local community where the associational life is most "concrete…[and] conducive to having experiences that lead to growth…[and] are worthwhile" (Dewey, 1938; 40).

Developing a social studies curriculum that can appropriately prepare students for civil society is one that asks schools and teachers "to attend more consciously to their physical place on earth and the social, political, and economic dynamics that surround it" (Theobald, 1997). While envisioning the local geopolitical community as the site of civil society, students' experiences of their community and the extent of their connection to it is an important starting point in discerning the social, political, and economic dynamics within. Understanding to what extent they see themselves as part of the broader community will help inform curricular choices aimed at expanding their sense of community and connection to it. Using students' experiences of their own lives in a particular place with personal connections can help us better see how they envision themselves and their identities within the context of civil society (Schlemper et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2011).

Perspective

The American community is in crisis as it faces declining associational ties and record high political polarization with balkanized neighborhoods and spaces (Hess, 2009; Putnam, 2000). The consequence is that the citizen feels disempowered as they lack meaningful affiliation in civil society (Nisbet, 1953). Active citizens want to impact institutional systems and citizenship education stokes this desire. Yet, as social studies educators seek to push students beyond the passive duties and responsibilities of citizenship (i.e. voting) they realize that the institutional structures that serve as intermediaries between the person and their government are largely collapsing and/or ignored. Citizens must have a day-to-day arena to act in, to participate in. Participatory and active citizens need a place *and* a willingness *and* an ability to interact with others on matters of public good (Larson & Parker, 1996). This arena is the community where people enter civil society and the public life.

Much of a person's willingness to associate hinges on the meaningful impact of the association and the extent to which the person feels membership and connection to the group. Indeed, not only do citizens want to act, participate, and transform (Banks, 2017)—but, they want to *belong* (Nisbet, 1953). Nisbet (quoting Ortega y Gasset) writes, "People do not live together merely to be together. They live together to do something together" (1953; 54). And it is this collective effort in which one feels a meaningful part that the person can declare, "I am involved in history" (Berry, 1977). This affirmation flows from the person's liberating escape from "anonymity and emptiness" and into fellowship and inclusion (Nisbet, 1953). To that end, "Schools have a responsibility not simply to encourage students' participation in civil society but to prepare them to engage with it" (Ho & Barton, 2020). This study is a first step toward curricular interventions to achieve exactly that.

Part of that achievement will be to re-orient and appreciate the value of the local community. Anderson (1983) has illustrated how we progressed to imagining communities as large as the nation state, a trend that has become similar in imagining larger extra-national organizations and non-governmental organizations. However, in his analysis he suggests the national identity essentially fed off the decline of the local. Eliminating dialects and niche language, print capitalism asserted a singular vernacular that small communities organized around only to lose their own singular history for that of a fictional larger entity. The same is true of economics (Shumacher, 1973)—corporations grow at the demise of small business. The same is true of agriculture (Berry, 1977, 1990)—agribusiness grows at the demise of the small farmer. The same is true of the environment (Jackson, 1994)—climate change grows at the demise of small-scale intentional appreciation and understanding of soil and permaculture. Indeed, too many of the global crises we face are due an ignorance of the local.

Intentions

Influenced by agrarian thinkers associated with rural renewal (Berry, 2012; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Jackson, 1994; Theobald, 1997; Vitek, 2008), this research aims at local community renewal. However, the ideas and concepts contained in this research proposal are not limited to the rural, alone. A number of other researchers within their local contexts have found the virtue that "small is beautiful" (Schumacher, 1973)—including in urban areas (Soslau & Yost, 2007). By thinking locally, one cannot understate the importance of local attachment and how it corresponds to global sensibilities. The impact that a local citizen can make in a local community (rural or urban) affords that community a prime position to be part of a coalition for global solutions in a world of integration and cooperation. Global solutions will demand local attachment and local investment. G.K. Chesterton (1908) points out that local communities need

faithful citizens who know the place—all its virtue, all its vice—and are willing to push it to greater versions of itself. When describing such dedication, he quips, "Love is not blind; that is the last thing it is. Love is bound; and the more it is bound, the less it is blind" (71), suggesting that we know best that place in which we find ourselves positioned. It is through the sheer knowledge that comes from being a part and included in a community that that gives each of us power to impact, participate, and truly engage meaningfully in the social life of our own while affording others the same opportunity.

It is the intention of this dissertation to begin a line of research that aims to determine if and how place-based, service-learning education can contribute to students' sense of belonging to their local communities. The nature of this dissertation is to establish foundation research into students' sense of belonging to their local community by understanding students own understanding of key concepts like community, place, and belonging.

Definition of Key Terms

Alabama Course of Study (ALCOS) The Alabama Course of Study for Social Studies was adopted in 2010 and has four major social science categories it considers core to organizing social studies in K-12 public schools: economics, geography, history, and civics/government. The explicitly stated goal of the overall social studies framework is to instill "responsible citizenship" (3). Further, the course suggests use of primary sources, literature & arts, global connections, service learning, current event, and technology as part of an instructional strategy meant to engage a wide variety of learning styles (7-9).

Belonging is defined as "the extent to which an individual feels included, respected, accepted and supported by others in a variety of social contexts" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It involves the emotional connection humans feel to place that promotes community, include

feelings of worth, emotion, and valuation (Kitchen, Williams, & Gallina, 2015; Knisley & Wind, 2017). While a term of art in certain disciplines, belonging generally has been called by other disciplines various labels, including: place attachment, place dependence, human-place bonding, rootedness, and sense of place (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2002).

Citizenship is meaningful membership within a community that affords one rights and responsibilities to participate within that community (Hart, 1992). Social studies education has debated what type of participation is understood within this definition (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Here they developed a typology including the notion of personally-responsible citizens, participatory citizens, and social justice-oriented citizens. At the same time, social studies education has debated membership, as well. Banks (2017) sees citizenship in four categories: failed, recognized, participatory, and transformative. Failed citizenship comprises those people who are in the community but do not feel a part and are denied the rights and privileges shared by others. He imagines Westheimer & Kahne's (2004) typology as fitting into a continuum along his categories of recognized and participatory citizens. For Banks (2017), these two middle categories of citizens engage (to various degrees) in civic work at the local, state, and national level. However, his final category of transformative citizenship are those who push societal norms to bring more people into the community wherein they can participate and be recognized. Indeed, Stitzlein (2021) recently defined citizens as the group of people within the community who ask themselves "what should we do?" Here a citizen is not just someone recognized by a nation-state, but is someone who engages in the community, particularly in civic reasoning and discourse. Helping students identify the *what*, the *should*, the *we*, and the *do*, of civic reasoning and discourse (Stitzlein, 2021) involves fundamental curricular decisions by the educator (Parker, 2008).

Community is defined as “an inhabited geographically defined area or groups of people identified by common interests, values, culture, etc.” (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramson, 2002). Community, like place, is a fluid social construct that involves boundaries (Leung, 2018). Community is about the feeling of being bound-up within the stories and sentiment held by a group within a space—thus, community is a relational idea concerning inclusion and membership (Cohen, 1985).

Place is understood as a unit of environmental experience—a convergence of a particular location bound within space and the meanings occupants give that space and experience (Canter, 1986, 1991). As one of the five themes of geography, place is defined as “a location with distinctive characteristics which gives the space meaning and character and distinguishes it from other locations” (National Geography Standards, 1994). Demarest (2015) writes that there are a “breadth of ways in which to understand place…[because of] this idea that places hold stories” (8) that range from the natural to the communal to the personal. As a concept, place is the lynchpin for how geography constitutes a social science as it merges spaces and human emotions (Demarest, 2015).

Place-based education is defined by Sobel (2004) as:

> the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation of the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens (7).

It is considered an umbrella term that includes community-based learning, service-learning, environmental learning, place-conscious education, outdoor education, nature studies, conservation studies, sustainable development studies, and others (Knapp, 2007).

Social Constructivism defined as the idea that knowledge is socially constructed, this

Approach to education and curricular choices allows students "to construct [their] own understandings of the world in which they live…by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; 4). Constructivism commits students to critical thinking and problem solving while keeping them at the center of the curriculum (Brophy, 2002). The four tenets of social constructivism according to Doolittle & Hicks (2003) are:

1. Knowledge is developed through active thinking.
2. Cognition is adaptable to the context and goal of the learner.
3. Cognition is a process of making sense of one's own reality, not the development of creating a model of an external reality.
4. Knowledge is based in social, cultural and language-based interactions (77-78).

Overview of Proposed Study

This research proposal develops a case study of a 7th grade civics and geography student cohort at a local middle school district examining middle school students' understandings of the concepts of community, place, and belonging. Seeking to create a meaningful place-based curriculum with the aim of developing justice-oriented citizens first implies students see themselves as members of the local, geopolitical community. This research undertakes to examine how curricular choices may (or may not) help grow students' sense of community from the parochial to the local using social constructivist principles. It also seeks to analyze to what extent curricular choices can influence students' sense of place and belonging. Finally, the research aims to describe what was revealed about middle school students' sense of community, place, and belonging. It is hoped that this description will further a line of research to better

construct and implement place-based research and foster sense of belonging to local communities through social studies education. The research questions are:

1. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?; and,**
2. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging following a collaborative community history and mapping project?; and,**
3. **What does the collaborative community history and mapping project reveal about students' sense of belonging to a community?**

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Purpose of Social Studies

Social studies curriculum in the United States has undergone extensive debate and revision as to its meaning, content, and purpose. In the early 19th Century, little attention seemed to be given to its meaning, as social studies was not a term associated with primary and secondary education which was confined to the classical model with isolated social science fields dominated by history, geography, and civics. However, by the end of the 19th Century, as the Progressive Era caused the nation to reflect, this traditional and antiquated model began to be questioned and reconsidered. The first critical question posed was a broad educational question with implications for social studies—what was the purpose of secondary education? Beyond teaching students the basics in grammar school, was secondary school meant to position the student for the university or for the workplace and society? The question was actually prompted by the rival camps of the university and industry who sought use secondary schools for their particular purposes (Social Science Education Consortium, Inc.,1996).

Indeed, this question triggered events within the field of social science education that have been outlined in *The Social Studies Wars* by Evans (2004). Beginning with the National Education Association's (NEA) Committee of Ten in 1894, a series of discussions surrounding the direction of social studies ensued. Over the course of the next two decades the American History Association's 1896 Committee of Seven and the 1916 NEA Committee on Social Studies would demonstrate the contest and debate surrounding the meaning, content, and purpose of social studies. While much of the 1894 Committee of Ten and 1896 Committee of Seven was focused on the role of history in secondary education, the 1916 Committee on Social Studies aimed to include a much broader subject matter beyond just history. As Progressives were eager

to use “social science data as a force in improvement of human welfare” (Saxe, 1991; 17), this committee sought to define a social studies curriculum “whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups” (Beal, Bolick, & Martorella, 2009: 9). This called for a more interdisciplinary and comprehensive base beyond history and geography, alone—but also government, economics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Further, it suggested the purpose of such a subject was to shape citizens prepared to confront real life and actual problems (Social Science Education Consortium, Inc.,1996).

Noteworthy, too, was the 1916 Committee on Social Studies’ role in the founding of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1921. It is this professional organization that helped organize social studies educators and foster ongoing professional, practical, and academic debate over the meaning, content, and purpose of social studies to this day—celebrating its centennial in 2021. The NCSS has been instrumental in clarifying and troubling the understanding of social studies education over the past century as educators, academics and politicians have sought to determine “to what extent should [social studies] education aim for socialization, passing on social traditions, or counter-socialization, [and] encouraging questioning” (Evans, 2004; 23). Of particular relevance, the NCSS has also provided a working definition of social studies which notes both content and purpose:

> the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides a coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of the social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (NCSS, 1992).

Social Studies Curricular Camps

Defining social studies was only one part of the struggle in forging the new program and way of teaching social sciences. Indeed, the purpose of social studies would play a critical role in shaping the trajectory of the field. While there was widespread agreement that social studies was meant to help educate and foster citizens, exactly how that goal would be met led to significant difference and subtle nuances among thinkers. At any given point in the field's relatively young history, "a set of competing interest groups is a relatively constant feature of the social studies arena" (Evans, 2006). Over the course of time certain groups have come and gone, morphed and mutated, but currently there are four major groups which are organized according to their methods and aim for educating citizens.

Citizenship

John Dewey (1959) suggested citizenship education was about empowering students to have problem-solving and decision-making skills alongside real world knowledge and experience so they could take charge of their lives. His pragmatic approach envisioned classrooms as places that provided knowledge and experiences with opportunities for discussion and reflection in which students would grow to learn that the world and democratic society are in constant formation (Dewey, 1938). Harold Rugg and George Counts, both contemporaries of Dewey, imagined a more robust meaning to citizenship education, however. They saw the charge of citizen as one more provocative and reform-minded. Dubbed social reconstructionist, these men created a curriculum that sought to train students to reform and rethink society. Such a view of citizenship was one that envisioned a pushing-of-the-envelope. Indeed, Rugg managed to create a curriculum that fulfilled the integration of many social science subjects and asked students to engage in reconstructive thought. While popular at first, Rugg's series became

problematic as the U.S. confronted Nazism and fascism in World War II. The rub involving Rugg's curriculum concerned whether a citizen could be critical of their government or whether a citizen owed a particular allegiance to the status quo (Evans, 2004; Social Science Education Consortium, 1996).

Indeed, the criticism of Rugg's work would echo throughout the latter half of the 20th Century. As the United States engaged the Soviet Union in the Cold War and the fabric of our democracy underwent distinctive movements in the 1960's, the questions of citizenship and its meaning became all the more pressing. Nonetheless, as the United States began posturing and engaging in the global race of competition and comparing itself to other nations, U.S. educational policy followed. The very question of what citizenship was and how it fit into national policy (and educational policy) managed to re-open much of the early controversy surrounding what social studies was and ought to be about. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1984 had profound implications for the field, its goals, and its methods (Evans, 2004).

Nonetheless, this curricular camp has continued to impact the field of social studies by asking critical questions concerning citizenship to both teachers and policy-makers. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) begin to tease out a typology of citizenship education by asking the very question that became the title of the their work—what kind of citizen are we seeking to prepare? In their analysis they identify three types of citizens: responsible citizens, participatory citizens, and social justice-oriented citizens. Westheimer and Kahne further suggest that social studies educators' choice of content and curriculum have critical impact on what type of citizenship for which students may be most prepared.

Taking the citizenship typology one step further, Banks (2017) renamed some of the types, retaining the notion of justice-oriented, engaged, and participatory citizenship delineated

by Westheimer and Kahne (2015). However, he introduced the concept of “failed citizenship,” in which students become unengaged through exclusion or misrepresentation. Indeed, he suggested that when the curriculum and content do not adequately represent the group, that those who are not included are left behind from classroom participation aimed at growing civic identity. It is this notion of inclusion and participation within the classroom’s environment, content, and curriculum that has provided considerable support among scholars in this camp to advocate for students to have meaningful opportunities to interact, reflect, and participate (Banks, Banks, & Clegg, 1999; Rubin, 2012). The motivation for such a classroom is to create a “laboratory for democratic citizenship” (Parker, 2005b) in which students can openly encounter, discuss, listen, and reflect on differences (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Once able to identify issues and reason together about the normative claims and action points, students have not only practiced civic reasoning and discourse, but also are prepared to engage in the community. The type of person who can seriously ask “What should we do?” is a citizen (Stitzlein, 2021).

Disciplinary Inquiry

This group is occupied by practitioners who think one of the ways to produce good citizens is to promote expert thinking skills. Dominated by historians, this group abandons the traditional historical pedagogy (which was devoted to lower-level thinking skills such as fact-accumulation, chronologies, and memorization) for higher-order critical analysis through historical literacy skills. Wineberg, Martin, & Monte-Sano (2011) have demonstrated how learning to think like a historian can allow students to answer more difficult, controversial questions. Teachers are encouraged to pose provocative questions to prompt students to wrestle with material and use an interpretive lens (Gerwin & Zevin, 2003). This is *doing* history. It helps see history as a discipline that is interpretative and contested. By honing students into experts,

the teacher moves the student to deeper knowledge and critical thinking skills through an evaluative process (VanSledright, 2013).

Disciplined Inquiry

Distinguishing itself from disciplinary inquiry, which aims to create experts in a field, disciplined civic inquiry aims to create expert citizens (Saye, 2017). Triggered by the scholarship of Oliver & Shaver (1966) who were writing during a tumultuous era in U.S. history, this camp synthesized controversial issues with citizenship education by asking students to think critically about social issues though reasoned evidence, personal values, and interdisciplinary knowledge. Educators were encouraged to ask not only provocative questions, but multi-faceted problems with no absolutely correct answer. This would position students to have to evaluate, discuss, and wrestle with competing implications. Newmann & Oliver (1970) would further this line of thinking by encouraging teachers to develop real-world questions with the potential for conflicting value, definitional, and factual claims. Justifying one's position on these claims mimicked democratic participation in real-world problem-solving and forced students to reason and empathize simultaneously. In more recent scholarship within this camp, focus has been turned from the controversial issues to the real-world problem solving. Dubbed authentic intellectual work (AIW), researchers have suggested that students not only need confronted with real-world issues, but be given authentic roles in devising and working out solutions to the problems (Saye, Stoddard, Gerwin, Libresco, & Maddox, 2018).

Critical Studies

Critical studies embraces critical theory which aims to raise questions and trouble assumptions and is often driven by social justice. This group of researchers and educators tend to focus on groups, individuals, institutions, and values in order to investigate domination and

subordination to “promote emancipatory change” (Cornbleth, 2017). Often examining issues of race, gender, socioeconomics, sexuality, and ethnicity, critical studies aims to push social studies towards its true values of an inclusive democratic society. Stanley (1986) explains critical studies as being:

> Critical of our dominant culture and social institutions. They seek to expose the social origins of our institutions and behavior and to identify and explore alternatives. They are not in direct opposition to the culture, however, and do not insist on radical social change. Instead they seek to demystify the nature of our social institutions and values. By helping teachers to understand the social origins of their beliefs and practices, they might be in a better position to make changes to help reduce some of the unequal aspects of education, such as ethnic and class bias (79).

Understanding social studies’ purpose as one to promote, educate, and empower students-as-citizens is a driving force in both my teaching and my research. Accounting for the dominant schools of thought concerning teaching methods is important, as they clearly point to how intentional educators must be of their choices. Further, the teacher’s goals and motivations create different emphases in methods, content, and curriculum.

As a teacher-researcher, it is important to identify with various curricular camps and be mindful of how and why I plan and conduct my curriculum choices and research objectives. Subscribing to a disciplined inquiry approach but also having a keen interest in fostering citizenship, this research will demonstrate how I am developing a middle school civics and geography curriculum meant to engage students in real-world issues through a substantive place-based, service-learning education. Allowing students to discuss and identify issues within their local community provides real-world settings rife with implications and controversy. Too, the objectives of such a curriculum provide direct experiences that encourage students to participate meaningfully and forge relationships. This means they simultaneously build expertise and civic identity while doing authentic tasks.

Middle School Students as Learners & Social Constructivist Framework

Adolescence is a period of massive transition for students. Fraught with challenges connected to physical change, it also is a long period of relational and social change that witnesses increased autonomy, intergenerational conflict, peer bonding and social anxieties (Choudhury, 2010; Farber, 2017). As a result, this phase of life is also met with a decrease in parental communication and decline in usual engagement, motivation, and achievement. This can be attributed to the young person's dauntless effort to face the great challenge of puberty—to become public—the arduous journey from the confines of private, immature, primitive childhood to the civilized world (Choudhury, 2010; Parker, 2005a). Understanding the unique nature and needs of a secondary student is foremost in any educational design.

Educational policy toward early adolescents as middle-school students with specific needs different from other secondary students was set off by the Carnegie Corporation's publication of *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* in 1990 (Virtue, 2000). This same group began issuing research grants throughout the 1990s as part of its Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative that led to a number of reforms ranging from teacher preparation, school organization, and curricular developments. This investment was matched by other foundations with similar motivations (Kronley & Hangley, 2003). In 1991 the American Education Research Association launched the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group and later, in 1997, the National Middle School Association laid out a comprehensive research agenda (Virtue, 2000). Much of the educational research that began in the late 1980s has advanced what we know about how middle school students and middle school curriculum. This information coupled with the science of brain development has renewed the special

emphasis on the adolescent brain and both confirms and informs our understanding of how middle school students learn and process information (Daniels, 2020).

Understanding adolescent brain development is relevant to education, which aims to shape the mind (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2018; Daniels, 2020). Compounding the social experiences and physical changes of adolescence are the numerous changes in the brain. While the overall brain tissue and mass remains stable, the mass is undergoing major transitions that shape and affect the organ's long-term structure (Blakemore & Firth, 2005; Choudhury, 2010). The brain is suddenly working to create an experiential repertoire with which to "regulate emotion, understand intentions, assess risk, decision making, cognitive flexibility and inhibition of impulses" (Choudhury, 2010; Robinson, 2017). In short, the brain is undergoing a seeming metamorphosis which results in the development of executive skills and emotional processing skills associated with the adult brain (Pfeifer & Blakemore, 2012; Robinson, 2017). How this transition occurs is of fundamental interest to the educator. A series of two complex processes are simultaneously occurring—metacognition and myelination.

Metacognition is the brain's own ability to reflect upon its own operation and status. This includes the ability to predict one's performance on a task, ability to make sense of concepts, self-assess, reflect constructively for improving, and monitor one's own understanding (Bransford, et al., 2018; Pressley, 2002). The adolescent brain is rife with this inter-subjective reflection that naturally accompanies this phase of identity formation and independence (Carlisle, 2011). These processes include thinking about thinking and learning and developing more complex ideas. Research has indicated that developing sophisticated metacognitive habits are learned behaviors that must accompany particular physical developments in the brain—which happen to be during adolescents and young-adult years (Bransford, et al., 2018; Cardullo, 2020).

One of important facets of brain research has been understanding how the physical structure of the brain undergoes change. Such structural changes can be natural and the result of learning. Metacognition, for example, described above is effectively an interplay between physical development and learning. Timing *and* educative reinforcement, then, is paramount in producing young minds of the highest caliber and quality. The physical preparation for significant learning is actually the brain's overcompensation of synaptic nerves and/or the brain's "sorting" which aims to "clean out" the brain's vast collection of neurological connectors caused by the periods of overcompensation (Bransford et al., 2018). The adolescent brain undergoes a period of sorting out—a process where our bodies can discern the strength of synaptic connections. The brain engages in a pruning of weak connectors *and* a reinforcement of connectors that continue to be used. The manner by which the brain reinforces these nerve axon connectors is by lining them with a fatty and conductive tissue called myelination (Robinson, 2017). This process is highly saturated in the frontal cortex of the brain which is home to a person's reward mechanism, attention span, task-planning, motivation, calculating, forecasting predictions, as well as deriving judgments (Blakemore & Firth, 2005; Pfeifer & Blakemore, 2012; Robinson, 2017). Importantly, however, it is the reality that if the mental activity which exercises the synaptic connection is not occurring during the pruning phase, the oft-comical quip "use it, or lose it," becomes a stark, serious, real world in-the-flesh tragedy.

The physical research on brain development lends itself to understanding what researchers are observing and concluding about adolescent students' knowledge and reasoning skills during. Students build new knowledge from their previous knowledge bases. This means knowledge is integrated with the students existing memories and experiences. Building off prior knowledge and activating such knowledge is of paramount importance when trying to encourage

students to successfully build new concepts (Bransford et al, 2018). Too, it is important for educators to know that "bias is a natural side effect of knowledge" (Bransford et al, 2018; 91), which educators should expect and utilize as they plan inquiries with competing definitional, factual, and value claims. My proposed research study seeks to understand 7th grade students' own understanding of the abstract notions of community, place, and belonging to begin a subsequent inquiry into helping students better identify with their local communities.

This research is framed by a social constructivist framework which corresponds to the previously explained neuroscience on adolescent brains. The students' brains are changing with their bodies and together this growth is moving them in a direction where they will inevitably be a more social person in a larger, public area. Meeting the students where they are and enabling learners "to construct [their] own understandings of the world in which they live…by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; 4) is the hallmark of a constructivist classroom. Constructivism commits students to critical thinking and problem solving while keeping the student at the center of the curriculum (Brophy, 2002). The classroom experience under a constructivist learning style affords students the opportunity to interact in their environment, in their own heads, and in the heads of others (through discourse and dialogue) in an effort to make learning a building activity—an active engagement with new facts, old understandings, and cognitive paradigm shifts. Such a classroom will engage as much of a student's bustling brain as possible, making connections and reinforcing connections (Daniels, 2020).

Committed to student-led inquiry, the constructivist model has been embraced by the C3 Framework whose inquiry arc calls on students to be supported in developing questions, planning investigations, using social studies disciplinary tools, collecting and evaluating

evidence, and working collaboratively to communicated conclusions (NCSS, 2013). Far from transmission or lecture, this approach grants needed autonomy to the student, situates them within the comfort of their social world and allows them to "perceive…and make choices in their own words on their own terms" (Mackey, 1991). The citizens we seek to develop must be steeped in the very qualities we hope them to become experts in—asking questions, reflecting, picking and using tools, discussing, problem-solving, and thinking critically. This learning strategy does just that by steeping them in these "interactions, negotiations, and shared discourses…as they negotiate their everyday contexts and communities" (Van Hover & Hicks, 2017).

A further strength of constructivism and its ability to engage and motivate students in developing this commitment to problem-solving and critical thinking skills is its commitment to authenticity. The four tenets of social constructivism according to Doolittle & Hicks (2003) are:

1. Knowledge is developed through active thinking.
2. Cognition is adaptable to the context and goal of the learner.
3. Cognition is a process of making sense of one's own reality, not the development of creating a model of an external reality.
4. Knowledge is based in social, cultural and language-based interactions (77-78).

By giving students opportunities to do real things together—avoiding "busy work"—has been shown to increase engagement and success (Brush & Saye, 2017). Students can make better, more meaningful sense of the world when they are given real-world problems and tasks that are viewed a worthwhile and significant (Engle & Ochoa, 1986; Social Science Education Consortium, Inc., 1996). Further, authenticity piques students' interests, prompts their valuing and investing in the work, the process, and, ultimately, the product by including them as co-

workers in their own learning and treats them like adults (Beal, Bolick, Martorella, 2009; Irvin, Harrist, Limberg, Roy, & Kunz, 2020). Together through discussion and collaboration students are able to build critical knowledge in the social studies classroom (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2019).

Middle School Social Studies Curriculum

The Alabama Course of Study for Social Studies (2010) has four major social science categories it considers core to organizing social studies in K-12 schools: economics, geography, history, and civics/government. Grade 7 is one of two grades that experience two strands in the same year through one-semester courses: civics/government and geography. Geography studies are meant to "increase [students'] knowledge about the physical and spatial nature of the world and about relationships between people and their environments" (1). Civics is "designed to enable students to become informed, responsible participants in political life and to function as competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of the constitutional democracy that established the republic of the United States of America" (1). The explicitly stated goal of the overall social studies framework is to instill "responsible citizenship" (3). Further, the course encourages the use of primary sources, literature & arts, global connections, service learning, current events, and technology as instructional strategies meant to engage a wide variety of learning styles (7-9). Alabama's Course of Study for Social Studies (2010) cites the NCSS and clearly adopts a type of citizenship education. However, the type of "responsible citizen" the ALCOS promotes is more akin to the lower orders of citizenship in the typologies of Westheimer & Kahne (2004; personally responsible and participatory) and Banks (2017; recognized or participatory). The latter types of citizenship in both typologies are more robust and require more of an investment of the individual person and recapitulation of the society.

What seems most critical in any type of citizenship education however is asking the right questions at the right time. Indeed, this research seeks to do just that. The right time to begin asking crucial citizenship questions is when the student "is equipped with basic knowledge, skills, and values…and becomes able to cope with issues requiring more complex skills in terms of mind and body in parallel with improvements in development and learning psychology" (Ibrahimoglu, 2020)—which is to say, middle school. The right questions to ask, are precisely the questions posed by Westheimer & Kahne (2004): (a) *what type of citizen?*; and, (b) *citizens of what?* These questions are apropos for Grade 7 because they correspond to each of the particular courses: civics and geography, respectively.

Citizens have been categorized according to particular behaviors which have been described in a number of ways from passive to active, minimal to participatory, personally-responsible to transformative/justice-oriented (Larson, 1997; Larson & Parker, 1996; Martin & Smolen, 2010; Sheppard, Ashcraft, & Larson, 2011). In striving to produce the more robust and active types of citizens, social studies educators must be aware that moving toward the simple roles of citizenship, such as voting, jury duty, &c., will not suffice. Participatory and active citizens need a willingness and ability to interact and work with others on matters of the public good (Larson & Parker, 1996) and not merely receiving the privileges of citizenship (Martin & Smolen, 2010). Banks (2017) suggests that citizenship education ought to be transformative, focusing on human rights and aspires to continuously bring the ranks of non-citizens into the fold of the community. This compels a certain sense of activism within the student who is not satisfied with the legal status quo but is, instead, justice-oriented and pushing the democracy to grow.

Banks (2017) pushes us to think of citizenship with an eye toward inclusion and exclusion. In doing so, he forces us to become boundary-conscious, which begins to implicate more than a question of who, but also where? Tying the idea of citizen to the concept of identity, we are confronted with discerning the appropriate boundaries for effectively raising up transformative citizens as social studies educators. In her analysis, Nussbaum (2008), suggests the appropriate level of citizenship education be as expansive as possible in what she calls "cosmopolitan education" (6). Such an education moves beyond the "politics of difference" and emphasizes less patriotic pride which traditional social studies curriculums were meant to instill (Evans, 2004; Nussbaum, 2008). Rather, such an education would focus on "recogniz[ing] humanity wherever it occurs, and give…reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance" (Nussbaum, 2008; 7). The specifics of this endeavor would include a thorough investigation of other cultures through an embrace of diversity studies, an emphasis on international cooperation, a discernment on moral obligations to the rest of the world, and recognition of shared common values (Nussbaum, 2008; 11-15).

However, of critical import, too, is the idea of local citizenship education. Fostering local attachments like family, city, and country, is important because "compassion begins with the local" (Nussbaum, 2008; xiii). Nussbaum suggests it is a failure of imagination that her cosmopolitan perspective is meant to combat—a charge that is taken up by Jackson (1994), who suggests "our major task as educators is to expand the imagination about our possibilities" (57). For him this task begins with the local community. With the same sensibilities about the global community and humanity, Jackson's embrace of local citizenship advocacy is deeply tied to environmental concerns. For him, we cannot love the human family if we fail to devote with unflinching fidelity to our own local community.

This same propensity to promote the global human family through the environment has a compelling swath of advocates beyond Jackson. Indeed, Pope Francis' first encyclical, Laudato Si' (2015), took up the environment and stewardship as a means to engage in conversation with the whole human family and the global community. One of the leading American voices on local advocacy and its connection to environmental concerns is Wendell Berry. His sense of citizenship is uniquely tied to a sense of place—fundamentally local, limited, and situated. Berry suggests that the local attachments that will empower the citizen to transform and promote justice through their own private lives and local lives where the most people possess the greatest political efficacy and capacity for stewardship (Berry, 2002). His sense of transformative citizenship is one that promotes justice to the local environment and those most near in order to promote the needs of the earth and the broader global community:

> While the government is studying and funding and organizing its Big Thought, nothing is being done. But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, and, accepting the discipline of that, to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem. A man who is trying to live as a neighbor to his neighbors will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and brotherhood, and let there be no mistake about it—he is *doing* that work. A couple who make a good marriage, and raise healthy, morally competent children, are serving the world's future more directly and surely than any political leader, though they never utter a public word. A good farmer who is dealing with the problem of soil erosion on an acre of ground has a sounder grasp of that problem and *cares* more about it in general. A man who is willing to undertake the discipline and the difficulty of mending his own ways is worth more to the conservation movement than a hundred who are insisting merely that the government and the industries mend *their* ways (Berry, 2002; 87).

Pegging Berry's view of citizenship to a typology would squarely put him in Westheimer & Kahne's (2004) category of responsible and/or participatory citizenship. However, Ho & Barton (2020) have recently observed the limits of the typical typologies, suggesting that participatory and justice-oriented approaches could be seen as one when participation does the work of promoting justice by building up and sustaining the community—from which justice

flows. Indeed, they bemoan the sense that certain typologies are seen as better or worse than others because they tend to create “false characterizations of participatory engagement” (477). Instead, they suggest that community participation cannot be separated from questions about justice because doing justice can occur in one of two ways—dealing with the consequence of injustice and analyzing and advocating for systemic change to correct injustice. In this light Berry’s view of citizenship is very much justice-oriented because it is building up the community and promoting the common good. His vision of the citizen is that they are taking activism to constructive ends: “It is a civilization they are building, a history they are compiling, a way of looking at the world and humanity’s place in it” (Berry, 2010; 43).

Trying to situate Berry alongside Banks (2017) presents a similar challenge. By using Ho & Barton’s (2020) distinction about the work of justice, one can see that Berry’s view of a society is in many ways apolitical, where Banks sees political engagement as a fundamental necessity. Again, however, this is because both men are promoting justice in a different way—one dealing with consequences, the other with causes. Nonetheless, both thinkers seem to seek inclusion and human flourishing—Berry’s view is one that seeks to build up the society by building up the community. It is as if Berry seeks to create the context for which Banks seeks greater inclusion.

Considering how to use social studies curriculum to balance local connections with global concerns is challenging. So, too, is developing the type of citizen who is engaged politically but also engaged in the work of communities. Yet this is where geography and civics, together, provides a complementary nexus by allowing us to think of not just the actions of citizens, but also the place of citizenship. Unfortunately, geography courses in secondary education tend to focus on isolated studies of places and low-level map reading skills. Civics

courses tend to focus on how to engage students with political institutions. Indeed, the Alabama Course of Study for Social Studies (2010) does not demonstrate how the two subjects can powerfully overlap and influence one another. To see the overlap requires the educator to look at both geography and civics more broadly and deeply. Geography can help trouble the assumption that the "citizens of what?" is the nation-state, thereby expanding the reach of civics beyond mere political institutions (Schmidt, 2011). Geography can provide a way for students to value their own complex identities—including civic identity—in relationship with others who have equally complex identities (Kent, 2002). Geography can provide invaluable capacity for students to critically engage with and solve political and humanitarian issues (Geography Education Standards Project, 1994). Indeed, some researchers have promoted the concept of "spatial citizenship education" that uses geography's capacity to provide spatial concepts and skills to enable people to become more "emancipated and participate in society" (Schulze, Gryl, & Kanwischer, 2015; 369). Indeed, the opportunity to consider how to use Grade 7 social studies curriculum for the purpose of promoting citizenship has compelling potential. Tethering the lesson plans to the local seems promising for middle-schoolers developmental needs and capacity for developing civic identity.

The Local as a Critical Level of Engagement & Place-Based Education

The call to reconceptualize geography and civics is not new. However, in recent years scholars and researchers have begun to see the value and virtue of envisioning these classes more mindful of the local community and context. Ho & Barton (2020) deliver a convincing case for promoting local civil society in the social studies classroom. Recognizing local, civic associations and their daily work in the lives of communities make involvement not just participatory, but the site of social justice and critical deliberations. Turning attention from large-

scale political branches and distant halls of power, they suggest the more impactful locus for exercising power toward greater justice may be within the "resources of community life" (471; citing Dewey, 1902). Indeed, trends among youth have shown political engagement is decreasing while community service, donating, and involvement in civic association is increasing (Ireland, Kerr, Lopes, & Nelson, 2006; Nie and Hillygus, 2001; Ravitch, 2001; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, Agrusti, & Friedman, 2017; Tourney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Israel (2012) makes a similar plea for geography education to become more oriented toward the local through place-based education. Envisioning students working out of the classroom on activities in the community and in nature, he sees the capacity for geography to help students:

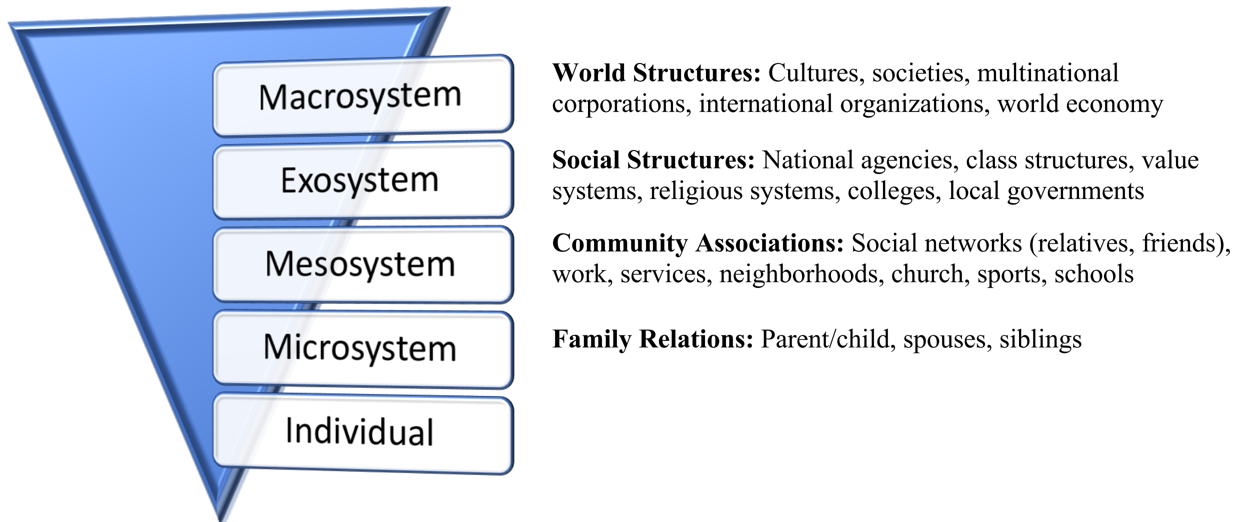
> learn about their place and learn to care for it: gaining knowledge and skills is inextricably connected with feeling and acting in new ways. With this connection between cognitive, affective, and ethical impacts upon students, place-based education provides a framework for making connections between content and pedagogy for socially engaged geography educators, offering a specifically geographic vision of ethically and politically engaged pedagogy (76-77).

Such a move toward the more local may seem counter-intuitive. As we encounter an ever-increasingly globalized world, it seems a curriculum more akin to Nussbaum's (2008) may be in order—such is the perspective of many civic education programs (Altinay, 2011; Camicia & Zhu, 2012; Marino & Hayes, 2012; Osler & Vincent, 2002; Reich, 2012; Rubin & Giarelli, 2007). However, the vision of a cosmopolitan citizen is not lost to a place-based, local education. Thinking globally seems predicated on thinking (and acting) locally. Per the adage, "love is in the details," a localized sense of identity tied to place and community is best positioned to discern and promote "the details." Cultural studies advocated by Nussbaum (2008) are not misplaced, but they are out of order at this level of education. Kent (2002), Natoli (1988), and Willinsky (1998) have noted that students need to be empowered to see their own complex identities before they can understand others. As a geography teacher (a teacher of place) and a

civics teacher (a teacher of civic identity), I am positioned to encourage students to "think about places and the people who occupy and give meaning to these places…[particularly] themselves and others in the world, particularly how our identification with places affects how we understand people and places, far and near, as familiar or foreign" (Schmidt, 2011; 107). In imagining how to begin leading students to know themselves and affirm their own sense of being which is inevitably rooted in a place and a space. Theobald (1997) has called schools "to attend more consciously to their physical place on earth and the social, political, and economic dynamics that surround it" (1). Citing the importance of neighborhood schools situatedness as community centers that "anchor [and]…bond," Ravitch (2001) suggests their unique position to promote "places with history, laden with traditions and memories that help individuals resist fragmentation in their lives" (i.e. build identities; 227). Further, Schmidt (2011) argues that the identity social studies educators must aim to build is civic identity—"citizenship is one sense of self attached to places and how we teach has implications for how students conceive of themselves as citizens" (107).

Social studies curriculum has a tendency to build outward in complexity from the student and their family to ever-increasingly larger social groups. Indeed, this is the organization of the Alabama Course of Study for Social Studies (2010). Dubbed the "ecological model" Bronfenbrenner (1979) put forth this theory of human development that says a child's development progresses through a series of embedded structures. The child is nested within these systems and grows outward through increasing interactions with persons and the environment they encounter as they breach the next levels in which they find themselves. This model is illustrated and detailed below in Figure 1:

FIGURE 1: The Ecological Model



(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

This model compliments Piaget & Inhelder (1954) and Bruner (1986) who emphasized the importance of increasingly complex social interactions and environmental interactions in stimulating children's intellectual development through a social context of learning. Middle school students are designated for particular attention for both the cognitive growth and physical growth that is occurring. Additionally, their social and public lives are just beginning to bud as increased mobility occurs with the physical, social, and psychological demands of puberty (Daniels, 2020; Scourfield, Dicks, Holland, Drakeford, & Davies, 2006). Situating them within a space for cognitive growth is important. Likewise, situating them in a space where the physical and mental steps can occur is important. Developmentally- and cognitively-speaking, the local is a prime site to expand the child-becoming-young-adult as they "make sense of their surroundings and the wider world…to learn about people and places and the inter-relationships between them…encompassing the development of a sense of themselves in space and place" (Pike, 2011).

Using local "communities as curricula," Theobald & Curtiss (2000) demonstrate how "this approach positions itself to build a remarkably robust social constructivist classroom. In

their description of such they envision students as citizens who provide themselves, their work together, and their vision to contribute toward community renewal. They argue, too, that student motivation would increase and suggest the more active role in their learning would transform schooling. With similar critiques as Sizer (1984), Theobald and Curtiss (2000) cite Hine (1999) who claims modern secondary education "effectively condemns adolescents to an extended period of uselessness in terms of their connection to society. With no effective way to make a contribution to others, these students turn inward, ceaselessly brooding about themselves…contributing to a culture of narcissism" (1). Such a student is exactly the type of student Sizer (1984) is opposed to creating. Seeking to forge "hungry students" (53), Sizer (1984) advocates for properly incentivizing and structuring the school not to subdue, bore, or hand-feed the young adult, pandering to them like a nonsensical child:

> The hungry student is active, engaged in his or her own learning…the student takes the initiative and works at teaching himself…Far too few modern American adolescents are hungry students…[They] are too often docile, compliant, and without initiative. Some who have initiative use it to undertake as little engagement as possible with school. They await their education and take in such of it that interests them. Such students like to be entertained. Their harshest epithet for a teacher is 'boring.' Nonetheless, and paradoxically, students do accept the boring classes, as a price that the school sets. There are too few rewards for being inquisitive; there rarely is extra credit for the ingenious proof. The constructive skeptic can be unsettling to all too many teachers, who may find him cheeky and disruptive. Questing can be costly (Sizer, 1984; 54-55).

Incorporating the local contexts into curriculum has been the goal of a number of educational pedagogies over the decades, including environmental education, service learning, civic education, workplace education, community-based learning, place-conscious education, outdoor education, nature studies, conservation studies, sustainable development studies, and many others (Knapp, 2007; Irving, Harrist, Limberg, Roy & Kunz, 2020). Place-based education has become the umbrella term to capture all these various pedagogies in a "broader pedagogical

framework distinguished by an explicit valuing of and efforts for bringing in the local context as part of instructional activities that also involves students contributing to their community" (Smith & Sobel, 2010b). Place-based education grew from a number of philosophical and research-based movements over the course of the 20th Century. The predecessors to place-based education are illustrated in Table 1:

TABLE 1: Predecessors that Informed Place-Based Education:

Predecessor	Significance to Place-Based Education
John Dewey's Isolation of the School	Lamenting the disconnect between formal learning and community life, Dewey seeks to move schools beyond rote cultural transmission into interactive, laboratory centers where students could encounter and construct knowledge.
William H. Kilpatrick's Project Method	Proposed projects rooted in authentic work that stemmed from immersion in a social environment.
Counts' & Ruggs' Social Meliorism	Suggested educators have a role to play in empowering students to challenge and build a new social order. Much of the curriculum developed stressed cooperative, interdependent sensibilities that promoted problem-solving and civic engagement.
Service Learning	Action- and work-based involvement that specifically aims to serve the community and improve social conditions. This approach (detailed more in the next section) recognizes the power and impact of linking service to learning objectives.
Nature & Environmental Education	Pioneered by Wilbur Jackman (1904) and Anna Botsford Comstock (1986), encouraged educators to make use of nature and the environment to provide more lasting impact on science and environmental issues.
Cultural Journalism	Propelled by Foxfire, a journal cataloguing the character of Appalachian culture, this movement combined English and social studies into conducting ethnographies, oral histories, narratives, and studies of communities and culture.
Problem-Based Learning	This approach suggests students learn most effectively when they are challenged to work through problems. These problems are complex, involved, and multi-faceted, allowing the student to engage with others, consider alternatives and justify and defend proposed solutions.
Expeditionary Learning	This learning grew out of mid-century European reforms that sought to liberate children from the confines of school as an institutional setting. Instead, it sought to immerse them in various elements of society and nature through learning expeditions. Travel, experience, and adventure were hallmarks of the approach.
Contextual Teaching &	Operative principles of this method include developing independent learners with lessons anchored in their life's context. Relying on

Learning	multiple learning styles, it utilizes problems, learning groups, and stresses authentic tasks.
Local Entrepreneuralism	Since the mid-1970's local efforts for sustaining economic growth sought to give students community specific education in career, finance and needs to enable students to develop skills for financial success in the communities.

Adapted from text and references from (Knapp, 2007), (Smith, 2007) and (Smith & Sobel, 2010a).

Place-based education has been used in classrooms and educational settings around the globe and in a variety of different disciplines to promote more experiential learning. It has been shown to increase students' sense of agency (Rodgriguez, 2008). Social constructivists appreciate that it makes students producers of knowledge—not just consumers (Smith, 2006). Further, it provides hands-on experience within the community (Dewey, 1959) that often provides the knowledge and experience to participate in solutions to environmental and social problems (Coalition of Essential Schools, 2006; Smith, 2002a; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Of importance to this research, place-based education has been utilized to promote geographic knowledge and spatial skills (Burke, Greene, & McKenna, 2016; Fearn, 2001; Perkins, Hazelton, Erickson, & Allan, 2010; Pike, 2006) and to promote civic engagement and community capacity building (Altinay, 2011; Gibbs & Howley, 2000; Hattam & Howard, 2003; Holdsworth, 2005; Smith 2002; Smyth, Down, et al., 2008; Sobel, 2005; Wood, 1992).

McInerney, Smyth, & Down (2011) illustrate some of the problems associated with place-based education as they articulate a critical pedagogy of place-based education. The first major critique is that often folks who discuss "place" tend to romanticize with a sense of nostalgia for a past that was good and idealized to themselves. However, sense of place is not a "stable, bounded, and self-contained entity…[but] something in the making" (9; citing hooks, 2009). The connections between people, places, spaces and identities can be sweet for some, bittersweet for others. What they recommend is a "critical reading of the physical, social, and

cultural attributes of the place(s) which shape students' identities" (10). This is an important criticism that must be consciously considered by the teacher to involve the students. Desiring inclusion and participation, the teacher must be prepared to shape the curriculum in such a way that all students experience agency, and in doing so be prepared for students to simultaneously describe places differently from experience. It is noteworthy to remember that students of different race, gender, ethnicity, sexual, and economic backgrounds will have experienced spaces differently. Such tensions are precisely the leverage points for discussion, listening, and working that place-based education can afford, however, in allowing students to practice democracy.

Second, McInerney, Smyth, & Down (2011) suggest there are pedagogical limits to place-based education. Describing it as "somewhat myopic" (10) as they push back against the developmentally-appropriate sense of proceeding "from the near to the far" (Sobel, 2005; 20). They suggest that all students "inhabit the planet earth" (10) and suggest by focusing on the local, children are denied a fuller education with disregard to other cultures, places, and times. They further go on to suggest that this limitation can contribute to "hegemonic curriculum… [which] endorses the status quo and leaves unchallenged community prejudices, inequitable practices, and unfair structural arrangements" (10). I find this particular criticism somewhat problematic. Indeed, the contention that place-based learning is myopic can simply be responded to that global civic education is hyperopic—which is simply stating the tension that developmentally appropriate curriculums must wrestle with. As to the point of their criticism as potentially creating a hegemonic curriculum is really not a unique criticism of place-based education, but all educational pedagogies (including critical pedagogies)—all curriculum can be hegemonic. The thrust of the authors' argument, though, is the concern that the pedagogy can too easily accommodate the status quo. As such, the point is similar to the first, and does need to be

carefully examined to accommodate and include a diverse group. But, more importantly, it seems the critique calls the educator to carefully consider how to bring wider concern than just local issues to the forefront of the local curriculum.

Indeed, place-based education can still think and act locally while thinking globally. West Virginia coal mine towns, for example, are not beholden to learn only the virtue of coal-mining and coal consumption. Place-based education can be critical and controversial. Indeed, the place and local can serve as a starting point for a larger discussion. Such would be invited and welcomed in my vision of place-based education. Cormack, Green, & Reid (2006), for example, engaged in a place-based science lesson they called nature writing. The task involved study and investigation in waterways in the area, but also pushed students to consider and reflect on deeper questions of environmental quality and humans' impact on nature. Thus, place-based education, itself, is not necessarily problematic—rather, it is the instructional choices of the educator that are most critical to using the education for growth of the students, their knowledge, their conscience, and the fate of the local and global.

Third, McInerney, Smyth, & Down (2011) speak to the failing of place-based education's emphasis for local activism as being too shallow. Their assertion is that local problems are far too heavily influenced by national, corporate, and/or global dimensions. They cite American Rust Belt communities as places suffering from large-scale injustices that require "nationally active citizens' organizations, such as trade unions and environmental groups" (11). This critique I think suffers from limiting the meaning of doing justice. Here Ho & Barton's (2020) concern that dealing with consequences of injustice and causes of injustice as both being equally valuable works of justice is appropriate. Further, I would argue that the scope of citizenship in such large-scale activism suffers from limitation—namely, the limitation of being outside the reach of a

middle-school student. On a national and global scale, the capacity of a middle-schooler to act and feel agency is largely limited. How do they infiltrate trade unions and steer environmental groups in such a way that is not akin to mere participatory action—voting, petitioning, calling distant leaders, &c. I feel the limit these authors see as a failure of the imagination as what can be achieved among the local and among communities. They cite Hayes-Conroy (2008) for saying place-based education's "self-reliance has limits in neoliberal capitalist systems" (11). So, too, does activism—but being limited is not fatal to the pedagogy. What is fatal is thinking critical global pedagogies are the only way to appropriately respond and react to the injustice of the neoliberal capitalist systems. They are not. Using the resources of the community and engaging in voluntary, civic action at the local level is not only important to the community, but also

> "the civic health of a country…[which is the] axiom of democracy. [Further], civil society is important for all segments of society but especially for individuals whose lack of legal citizenship makes voting impossible and direct interaction with the government risky. For these individuals, civil society may be virtually the only realistic realm for civic action (Ho & Barton, 2020; citing Macedo, et al., 2005; 472).

Advocating for a more critical pedagogy to place-based education, McInernery, Smyth, & Down (2011) propose a series of practical questions which would guide a place-based curriculum from the problematic pitfalls and critiques they articulated. These questions include:

1. What are the best features of our community? What could be done to make it a better place for all?
2. What do monuments and public architecture tell us about the heritage that is most highly valued in this community? What groups are under-represented or rendered invisible?
3. What might we do to ensure a more inclusive and accurate record of community heritage in our school and community?

4. What is the quality of our local environment—the air, water, soil, native flora and fauna? What might we do to conserve our environment and resources to achieve a more sustainable future?
5. To what extent does our school model and promote good environmental practices?
6. What are the social, economic and cultural assets of our community? How fairly are they distributed? What can we do to work for a more just community?
7. Who gets to make the decisions in our community? Whose voices are largely unheard? What might we do to achieve a more democratic society? (12)

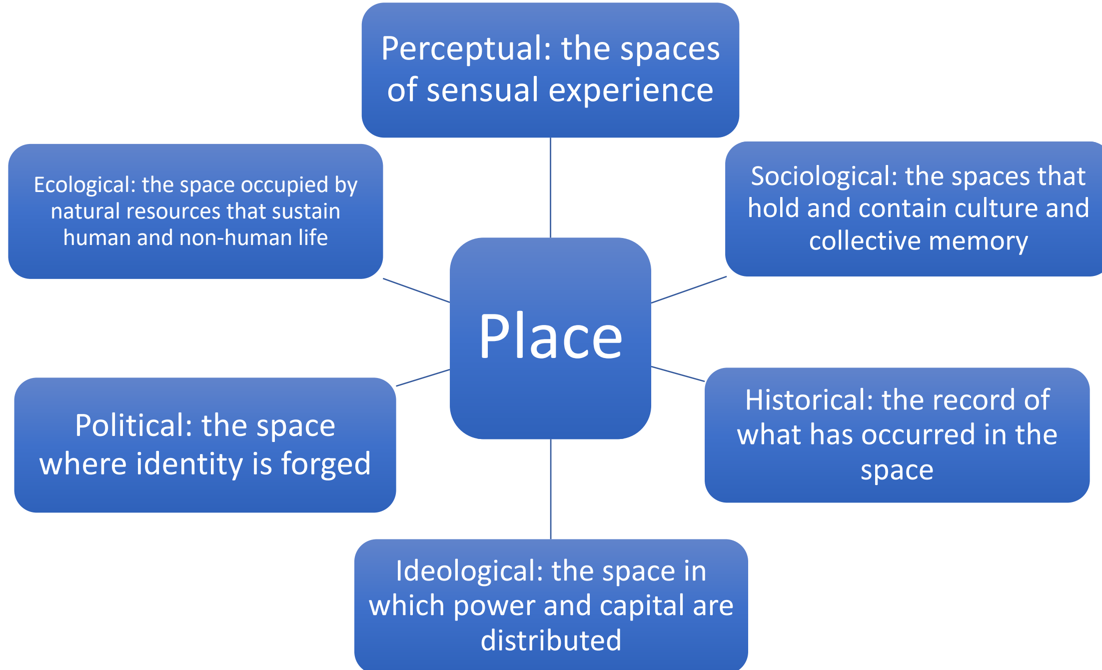
Guiding Research in Place, Community, & Belonging

Three major concepts which are distinct, but related, are bound up in my research questions: place, community, and belonging. I undertake this section of the literature review to unpack our understanding of these concepts and the research done with each.

Place

As one of the five themes of geography, place is defined as "a location with distinctive characteristics which gives the space meaning and character and distinguishes it from other locations" (National Geography Standards, 1994). Demarest (2015) writes that there are a "breadth of ways in which to understand place…[because of] this idea that places hold stories" (8) that range from the natural to the communal to the personal. The idea of place is a rich concept that it draws on many connections between spaces and individuals. Figure 2 illustrates the multifaceted perspective for viewing place:

FIGURE 2: A Multidisciplinary Representation of Place



Adapted from text by (Gruenewald, 2003a).

As a concept, place is the lynchpin for how geography constitutes a social science as it merges spaces and human emotions (Demarest, 2015). As human beings navigate spaces they inevitably encounter natural boundaries, but also an array of symbolic boundaries operating at many different levels (Newman & Paasi, 1998). How one identifies and relates within these boundaries creates a sense of place (Chan & McIntyre, 2002). Sense of place is constructed in relational terms as it involves understanding boundaries (Steele, 1981; Tuan, 1977). Common ways sense of place is understood is by building limits between 'here' and 'there', 'home' and 'away', 'us' and 'them' (Cohen, 1985; Relph, 1976). Sense of place as a construct is contextually bound and socially constructed and evolves as people and places change (Casey, 1996; McKinley, 2007).

Understanding students' sense of place is important—how do they experience spaces and boundaries? This question is important for social studies education that seeks to empower

student-citizens. How do they perceive themselves within spaces—particularly, spaces of power? How do they see themselves as members within various groups? Determining how they perceive boundaries is important to helping expand and manipulate boundaries to promote discussion, authentic work, inclusion, and civic action. Social sciences have sought to understand sense of place and variations on the theme for decades (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Not surprisingly, there are numerous approaches to teasing out the human emotions wrapped up in the concept—both qualitative and quantitative, as well as positivist and non-positivist (Shamai & Ilatov, 2005).

Quantitative researchers have utilized surveys and statistical analysis to measure sense of place. This has been a common practice to distinguish boundaries and membership, as well as levels of belonging, attachment, and commitment to particular places and spaces. Cuba & Hummon (1993) sought to determine how residents of Cape Cod, Massachusetts identified the concept of "home." Noting the fifteen towns that make up the county, all considered part of Cape Cod, the researchers wanted to hone-in on where the boundary of home was located for residents. Residents were given a survey which asked, "Do you feel at home here?" to a list of places that built from the home/dwelling, family, friends, neighborhood, work, to ultimately the town, regions (Upper, Middle, and Lower Cape Cod), to Cape Cod, in general. For places that respondents did feel at home, they were asked, "Why do you feel at home here?" Results indicated that conceptually, 'home' was felt strongest nearer the individual and largely associated with a dwelling, family, and/or friends. This confirmed some sense of nested growth, that home is that which is nearer. However, the survey asked, "Do you associate feeling at home with dwelling, community, and/or the region of Cape Cod, generally?" Responses to this showed that residents most often identified home as dwelling or region, skipping community as a mediating social structure.

Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston (2003) conducted a study that used portions of various indices from disciplines which overall seem to capture sense of place, but calling it another term (place identity, sense of community, place attachment, and place dependence). The goal was to determine how much variance there was between the various indices. Participants from two rural Australian towns were asked a single agree/disagree question, "I would really rather live in a different town. This one is not the place for me." Respondents were then grouped into adults or adolescents, then from those initial groups those who agreed or disagreed. These four groups were then asked a battery of survey questions from the various indices and data was analyzed for variance. Notable in this study was the inclusion of adolescents as a group. The results and discussion demonstrated "how the age of the residents seems to be an important factor…in the amount of sentiment held towards the community" (283). It became evident in their analysis, too, that the indices established indicated patterns and regularity for adults, but researchers found that the variance among adolescents' sense of place could not be explained with the existing indices and that "other aspects of community sentiment not included here are important to an adolescent's feeling that 'this is the place for me'" (283).

One of these other aspects of community sentiment important to adolescents is one that Shamai (1991) may have uncovered. This study set out to determine whether an adolescent's sense of place was correlated to the influence of school. Shamai was trying to demonstrate whether the *type* of schools could influence *national* identities. Asking three different groups of students (at a private Jewish day school, a Jewish after-school program, and a public school) the survey gauged level of sentiment toward the city, region, and country. The Jewish day school had positive impact on sentiment at all three levels, while the public school was the least

influential and had no significant impact at any level. This raised the question for researchers, "Are public schools not influential socialization institutions for students?" (354).

Whether schools can influence the sense of belonging among adolescents will require a deeper view of those students' interactions with their place and identity within it. This seems to be the limit that quantitative research runs up against—not being able to tease out the depth and variety of human emotion and meaning that makes a location wholly unique and sentimental. Starks & Taylor-Leech (2020) sought to more deeply understand adolescents' sense of place using qualitative methods. Asking students to respond in a reflective writing to the question, "If someone asks you, 'Where are you from?' how do you answer this question and why?" How students responded was far from the distinct places synonymous with the widely-accepted local, regional, national hierarchies. While certainly many did identify at that level, students identified other place identities which were insightful. This more open approach that is student-driven conforms to Myers & Lampropoulou's (2013) direction that researchers not "impose categories or maps without first attending to the ways in which participants describe and name places, and recognizing the complex uses to which this personal geography can be put" (349).

Scourfield, Dicks, Holland, Drakeford, & Davies (2006) conducted a qualitative study that explored how Welsh middle school students identified with place and national identities. The study relied on interview data that was generated after students completed a series of sentence completion exercises (i.e. In ten years's time, I would like to be living in…). When discussing the local, students were able to give the most immediate details, but offered a narrow "child's eye view of their locality…featur[ing] their own daily pathways" (586). Further, much of the commentary about place showed the nature of middle-school children straddling childhood and adulthood, still identifying places associated with play and broad categorizations of people in

groups as good or bad. The presence of adults and relationship constituting networks of people seemed most important to the adolescents. The study suggested that middle-schoolers are better at identifying "people as people, but not, on the whole, with places as places—i.e. not in the sense of fleshed out, elaborated geo-cultural entities" (590). Citing the typical situation of a middle-school child—lack of mobility, limited social networks, narrow vocabulary for comparison—the authors suggest the child's imagined world is not at all the shape of places and communities adults have organized.

Both Starks & Taylor-Leech (2020) and Scourfield, Dicks, Holland, Drakeford, & Davies (2006) serve as reminder of starting with the students' own notions. Using their prior knowledge and understanding their boundaries and identifications would serve as starting-points for expanding the students' awareness and sense of the local, geopolitical community.

Community

Community, like place, is a fluid social construct that involves boundaries (Leung, 2018). As a geographic concept, place involves the stories and sentiment invested within a bound space. Community, on the other hand, is about the feeling of being bound-up within the stories and sentiment within a space. A relational idea, community begins to bring to the fore membership within groups within a place (Cohen, 1985). Community is loosely defined as a place people identify as holding something in common with one another that distinguishes them in a significant way from others (Keller, 2003). Community and place work together in transforming space and investing it with meaning and emotion that cause the symbolic to form an entity or a reality (Cohen, 1985; Leung, 2018). So tightly bound are community and place that disciplines have used them interchangeably. Yet the nuance that the notion of community as an isolated concept allows us to delineate is membership within an environment (place), better

understanding the sentiment that creates the social boundaries (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2002).

Gauging one's level of membership within community, like place, has beget a measure called sense of community. Pioneered in the 1970's, sense of community theorized that membership within a group was rooted in the perception that you were supported by the group (Sarason, 1974). McMillan & Chavis (1986) defined sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met by the commitment to be together" (9). Further, they developed a sense of community model with four dimensions: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection. This model became the spine along which Sense of Community Index (SCI) was developed by Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman (1986). The SCI was used extensively throughout the 1990s for quantitative survey-based research (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999). The SCI has been used to gauge adults' satisfaction with neighborhoods (Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990) and workplaces (Pretty, McCarthy, & Catano, 1992). Too, SCI has been used to discern college retention among the student body (Pretty, 1990) and burnout rate among college students (McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990).

Reviewing the literature on sense of community demonstrates two gaps—focus on adolescents and qualitative work. The SCI was developed and widely used for adults. Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett (1993) recognized little attention was paid to adolescents and SCI. They undertook to study high-school students' sense of community as it related to loneliness and mental health. In so doing, they confronted the limits of the SCI with younger people which who acknowledged having never "thought about their neighborhoods or how they 'felt' around people besides their friends" indicating little awareness or knowledge who their neighbors even were—

calling into question the validity of the sense of community (355). Again, Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams (1996) confronted the same issue conducting a similar study involving adolescents and the SCI. Acknowledging adolescents' sense of community does not seem to be adequately captured by the SCI, they sought to begin interviewing adolescents "to gather qualitative data to determine what adolescents consider components of sense of community" (377). One such example of a spin-off of the SCI was the Neighborhood Youth Inventory, which sought to incorporate a recurring theme among adolescents' sense of community—safety (Chipuer, Pretty, Delorey, Miller, Powers, Rumstein, Barnes, Cordasic, & Laurent, 1999).

The direction that Pretty et al. (1996) realized they needed to go was into the qualitative realm to elicit more details concerning how adolescents sense their community. However, Puddifoot (1995) had begun to realize the deeper concern about what the object of the SCI was about: "What precisely is meant by the term community? Can there be such a thing as identity when applied to community?" (359). It is precisely this question that informs this research, to determine what constitutes the community so as to align membership with citizenship, civic action and civic power. Indeed, much of the SCI work of the 1990s with adults was limited to neighborhoods, workplaces, or campuses. Is the community larger? Can the geopolitical entity constitute the local community that adolescents (and/or adults) feel they are members of? Indeed, the discussion of boundaries in the postmodern world are increasingly discussed for their relevance and saliency. The more we are mindful of diverse identities in a globalized world, the more we are thinking about and re-thinking what our boundaries really are and what we feel a membership in (Newman & Paasi, 1998).

Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su (2001) conducted a qualitative study which demonstrates the richness that such research can afford furthering our understanding of adolescents' sense of

community. These researchers asked participants to create neighborhood boundaries on census-based maps. Emphasizing that the census maps defined a neighborhood boundary, the researchers asked if the boundaries were similar to those residents perceived to be the boundaries of their neighborhood. The exercise showed the power of mapping to understand boundaries and elicit factors of inclusion and exclusion. It also demonstrated how different conceptions of community are—acknowledging shared spaces possessing multiple identities and communities (Newman & Paasi, 1998). Coulton et al. (2001) cautioned that researchers should not assume the similarity of residents' definition of community or its alignment with government-defined maps. Indeed, they point out while consensus did exist, far more divergence existed. Noting that residents and the government did not view neighborhoods the same, the authors discuss further research—particularly with "children and adolescents" who they believed would "have different conceptions of neighborhoods than their parents" (380).

Kaufman (1959) wrote "it is just as important a social fact to discover what people think community ought to be as it is to describe what the community is" (16). As a social studies educator, it is all the more important a social fact to discover what students think community ought to be and what it is. Discerning the placements of their boundaries and recognizing what they identify as community assets can help prepare and empower student-citizens (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The context for citizenship is the community in which they find themselves. The action of the citizen is to build the community they envision.

Belonging

McMillan & Chavis's (1986) four dimensions of sense of community include membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection. The emotional connection element has been defined and characterized in a number of different ways through

various disciplinary lenses. Naming and defining this element has led to a proliferation of literature and research with varied labels, including: place attachment, place dependence, human-place bonding, rootedness, and sense of belonging (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2002). Acknowledging nuances of each, I plan to use the term 'belonging' to capture each.

Belonging is a fundamental human need (Knisely & Wind, 2017; Lambert &al, 2013; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Pesonen, 2016) that is defined as "the extent to which an individual feels included, respected, accepted and supported by others in a variety of social contexts" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Sense of belonging is a social phenomenon that involves feelings of worth, emotion, and valuation, as well as social perceptions and cultural concerns (Kitchen, Williams, & Gallina, 2015; Knisley & Wind, 2017). Sense of belonging research draws from numerous disciplines, including psychology, sociology, biology, and theology (Lampinen &al, 2018). Baumeister & Leary (1995) developed the 'belongingness hypothesis,' which sought to predict behaviors associated with breaking and maintaining social bonds. In their findings they listed a number of factors that correlate to sense of belonging. In their findings they listed five core elements of belonging: cognition, social bonds, emotion, efficacy, and fidelity.

Like the Sense of Community Index, a Sense of Belonging Index (SBI) was developed around Baumeister & Leary's (1995) core elements. A number of variations on SBI have been used in quantitative, survey-based research on students (primary, secondary, and college). Various indicators that researchers have used to measure sense of belonging are illustrated in Table 2:

TABLE 2: Catalogue of Sense of Belonging Quantitative Research Indicators

Study Citation	Sense of Belonging Indicators
Akar Vural, Yilmaz Ozelci, Cengel, & Gomleksiz (2013)	Social Support; Classroom Support; Teacher Support; Loneliness; Contentment; Obedience
Butcher & Conroy (2002)	Commitment; Comfort; Inclusion; Engagement; Connectedness

Davis, Hanzsek-Brill, Petzold, & Robinson (2019)	Social Belonging; Peer Connections; Social Environment; Roommate Relationships; Homesickness; Academic Belonging; Commitment to Institution
Faircloth & Hamm (2005)	Social Connections; Peer Dimension; Teacher Dimension; Time spent in extracurriculars; Perceived Discrimination; Valuing the School; Efficacy Beliefs; Academic Success
Kitchen, Williams, & Gallina (2015)	Quality of Life; Schools; Recreation; Neighbors; Social Aspects; Trust
Knisley & Wind (2017)	Bonds with Others; Sense of Being Part of the; Community; Patterns of Disclosure; Feelings of Pride & Shame
Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister, & Fincham (2013)	Sense of Belonging; Loneliness; Self-Esteem; Social Connections; Meaning of Life; Meaning of Life
Lampinen, Irmeli Konu, Kettuene, & Annikki Suutala (2018)	Fostering Factors; Open Interaction; Conversation Culture; Support & Encouragement; Common Values; Shared Vision; Leadership; Preventing Factors; Negativity; Lack of Common Time; Structure & Bureaucracy; Management Styles

Healy (2020) notes that schools have historically been responsible for engendering belonging among students, their peers, their school, and the wider society. In her commentary on the nature of not-belonging and unbelonging, she presses schools to double down on its role in promoting belonging. Pointing to the particular situation in the UK where the Syrian refugee crisis has populated classrooms with students who have no sense of place attachment or sense of belonging, she notes the traditional forms of civic and citizenship education will not serve everyone. Instead, students "need to narrate and re-narrate [their] lives in a way that gives meaning and purpose to our practices" (125). She goes on to embrace controversial issue discussion as a contemporary form of political deliberation that promotes reflection, empathy, soul-searching, and problem-solving (citing Hess, 2009; Ravitch, 2001). Indeed, place-based education could likewise serve as a way forward and empower students to navigate, and re-navigate their own stories as they, literally, navigate the local place.

Schools have long been the site of studies for engendering student belonging—both quantitative studies (Akar Vural, Yilmaz Ozelci, Cengel, & Gomleksiz ,2013; Faircloth, & Hamm, 2005) and qualitative studies (Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman, 2016; Riley, 2019; Sanders & Munford, 2016). Reviewing methods of various qualitative studies demonstrate how researchers seek to better understand students' and adolescents' sense belonging in schools. Sanders & Munford (2016) used interviews to engage drop-out students in discussing their sense of belonging to school (or lack thereof). They asked questions about life experiences, family composition and experience, views on education, the communities they grew up in, informal support systems, relationships, risk, and views on what assisted them and served them well. These interviews were coded into themes meant to empower educators to better serve the needs of at-risk students. Riley (2019) examined children's belonging to school and relied on students drawing pictures about what engaged them and satisfied them about school versus what disengaged them and dissatisfied them about school. Students were then able to discuss their drawings with researchers. Findings suggested that "school cultures that foster trust and draw on the strengths of communities contribute to the development of young people's sense of agency and belonging" (91). Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman (2016) specifically looked at middle school students' sense of belonging to their school. Relying on interview data, they found that school belonging may need to tease out whether students are expressing social belonging or academic belonging.

The research suggested here, however, aims to engender students' sense of belonging to their local communities. While no research has been done from this angle, there have been further examples of qualitative research about young people and their sense of belonging to places. Robinson, Fisher, Hill, & Graham (2020) examined how young people with intellectual

disabilities sensed belonging to their regional (small town) communities. These researchers used multiple data sources, including pictorial maps that asked the young people to depict places and relationships that they thought important. These graphics were later used as starting points for initial interviews where students were able to explain their drawing. Students were then asked to compile a photo album after being given disposable cameras that catalogued topics such as “my town,” “a day in my life,” “how do people see me,” and important people and places. The albums were then used as a starting point for a second interview. Finally, students held an exhibition which included their pictorial maps and albums.

Semken & Freeman (2008) document important findings for my own research goals—the effects of place-based education on students’ sense of place. These researchers were college professors in environmental sciences and sought to engender a better sense of place attachment in the state of Arizona, in which they taught. The designed a fieldwork program that took environmental science students across the state to different natural sites. Using mixed methods, they utilized a survey that acted as a pre-test/post-test which measured place attachment. This instrument was developed and validated by Williams & Vaske (2003) and is a simple 12-question survey which seeks to measure place dependence and place identity. Further, the researchers used field observations, student artifacts, and interview data. The statistical analysis, though, confirmed a significant increase in students’ sense of place attachment after the place-based curriculum.

In my own field of social studies education, Schmidt (2013) used representational mapping to determine how students visualize and negotiate in public spaces. Using the school as a public space, students were asked to draw a map that showed their impressions of the school and the space. Once drawn they were asked to mark places on the maps that were “student-

friendly” or “uninviting” (539). A brief survey asked students about student voice in the school and the level of civility. They also asked questions about the schools’ strengths and weaknesses. Interviews were then conducted allowing students to discuss their maps and survey responses.

Research Questions

Using the local community for middle school social studies curriculum through place-based education is developmentally appropriate. Further, place-based education with the goal of promoting citizenship effectively weds the two classes within the Grade 7 Alabama Course of Study of Social Studies (2010)—civics and geography. However, beginning a place-based curriculum to promote civic action that holds true to social constructivist principles *and* helps students identify with greater social structures than perhaps they are accustomed to *and* is mindful of the racially and socioeconomically diverse group of students could be complicated. Indeed, while the goal of a place-based social studies curriculum would be to foster a more robust civic identity and connection within civic associations (Ho & Barton, 2020), understanding how students see themselves as part of a community and their membership in it is going to be important. Taking a cue from Banks (2017) and Ho & Barton (2020), the goal of promoting civil society at the local community level is about doing justice. Yet to accomplish the work of justice, students are going to have to be empowered, feel they belong, and not lapse into failed citizenship. As Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model suggests, students will need support in expanding their own sense of community as they are required to see themselves beyond members of families and neighborhoods—but as a part of a larger, diverse geopolitical community. Further, their stories and feelings of membership will have to be considered by the teacher as the place-based curriculum unfolds to accomplish the desired goal of promoting civic

identity (McInernery, Smyth, & Down, 2011). With this in mind, I pose the following research questions:

1. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?; and,**
2. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging following a collaborative community history and mapping project?; and,**
3. **What does the collaborative community history and mapping project reveal about students' sense of belonging to a community?**

Pilot Study

To ensure the appropriateness of the curricular interventions and determine whether the level of student engagement was robust enough to inform the research questions, I conducted a pilot study during the 2020-2021 academic year (Malmqvist, Hellberg, Mollas, Rose, & Shevlin, 2019). This study focused exclusively on understanding students' views of their community and their sense of belonging. As a teacher-researcher, I conducted the study with my four 2021 seventh-grade geography classes with a total of 91 students. Demographics included the following: 54% male, 46% female; 52% Black, 31% White, 15% Hispanic, and 2% Asian. 62% of these students qualified for free or reduced lunch. These students were assigned a community mapping project which started by asking students to, "*Draw a map of your community that shows your impressions of the community and the places that are important to you. Mark the sites and spaces that you feel you belong, as well as those that you feel you do not belong.*" This was the starting point for an in-depth project that involved map-making, developing a slideshow photographic tour of their selected places of belonging, writing a reflection, and recording a

video presentation of their completed maps and photographic tour. The research questions guiding the community mapping project were similar to the first research question of this dissertation study: How do seventh-grade civics and geography students in a diverse, public middle school in the deep south: (a) *visualize* and *define* 'community'?; and, (b) *narrate* their sense of belonging?

The project was widely enjoyed and showed a heightened level of student engagement. More importantly, findings confirmed that students had a parochial view of communities. As middle-school students still largely dependent and immobile, their communities largely centered around their homes (34%) and their school (20%), while parks (10%), businesses (9%), and other people's houses (7%) received attention. These findings reflect what Scourfield et. al (2006) found—that children's sense of place tends to correspond to their own limited, daily pathways. Indeed, while 52% of students provided a range on their map that covered an area purporting to be their geopolitical community, only 30% of those students offered any degree of map-like quality that suggested a working sense of the space and boundaries of the city. This meant 70% either left sizeable gaps over the city, erroneous boundaries, or inflated spaces. Further, 35% of students marked their neighborhoods as the range of their community. Of these students 79% depicted a map-like quality, while only 21% did not. Again, this was unsurprising given the research of Starks & Taylor-Leech (2020) and Myers & Lampropoulou (2013) who suggest that students' mapping projects do not align to political visions or boundaries.

Community maps also showed an average of 6.9 labelled places per map. Of these places, 3.7 were labeled as places of belonging. The catalogue of places of belonging included: home (80%), relative's houses (45%), school (41%), the park (33%), and team sports and restaurants

(21% each). Notably, the number of public spaces that were civic-oriented (spaces primarily for association and fellowship) and not exclusively commercial was severely limited.

Students' own words correspond to the parochial view demonstrated by their maps. Over 599 quotations were flagged as rich and significant from the three sources. Such quotations include: "Community is a big home where you live together and know each other and help each other;" and, "Community is home. You feel you care about that place. It feels like you own that place." When all the quotations were further refined with reference to codes from sense of belonging indices and literature, the students spoke most to community and belonging as being "like home" (140), having "familiarity" (108), and a place of "connection & acceptance" (100). Next in the frequency of codes were places they felt "attached" (93), felt "comfortable" (90), felt they had "knowledge" (90) and felt they could contribute by "helping & participating" (81).

It is from this study that I was able to anticipate how my cohort of students in 2021-2022 might respond. Anticipating this helps me to plan the curricular intervention which will inform the second and third research questions about expanding student's sense of the local community and their belonging to it, as well as substantiate the students' narratives of community, place, and belonging (Cunningham & Kohlmeier, 2022).

Importance of Proposed Study

Anderson (1983) examined the development of nationalism in which he emphasized how the nation was an "imagined community" (9). Real in the sense of their consequences and cohesive capacity, the whole notion of national identities like any community are "invented," or constructed, out of the creative capacity drawing from a material condition. How people band together is often an intricate web of needs, threats, benefits, myths, and comradery (Blok, 2018; Calhoun, 2016). This amounts to rather striking and deep-seated emotional connections to group

membership that comprise perceived communities (Blok, 2018). The creativity associated with imagining and inventing communities is so fluid because of the sentiments and emotions invested in the places and the stories they contain (Blok, 2018; Demarest, 2015).

The first research question involved in this project recognizes the importance of discerning and validating different senses of community. Urrieta & Reidel (2008) prompt us to avoid "normalizing citizenship" to white privilege, which is similar to Schmidt's (2013) admonition to not normalize place to a singular narrative. Embracing the "messiness of public space" (Schmidt, 2013; 537) we must not "minimize or neglect…identities" (Urrieta & Reidel, 2008; 94). This type of sensibility is what Gruenewald (2003b) describes as "critical pedagogy of place…which are needed to challenge the assumptions taken for granted in dominant culture and in conventional education…[Such a pedagogy will] contribute to the production of educational discourses and practices that explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education" (3, 10).

At the same time, the second research question recognizes the need of creating a sense of the local community. The notion of a singular, geopolitical community is rooted in the idea of people having a unified sense of place in which the common good can be deliberated and undertaken (Cohen, 1985; Leung, 2018). Instilling a sense of the local, geopolitical community does not aim to delegitimate other identities or subsume them, but to operate alongside those identities and places and groups of belonging toward a common destiny. The importance of local communities is that they are seats of political authority and power. As such, these communities are important places for students to feel they belong because it is here they can engage and practice citizenship.

Sense of belonging is particularly important to social studies education and citizenship. As a political concept, belonging is multi-dimensional and multi-layered (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It includes both a private and public element that points to a more pronounced concept than just membership, alone, captures. Indeed, when considering belonging in light of citizenship, we harken back to Westheimer & Kahne (2004) and Banks (2017) whose heightened senses of justice-oriented and transformative citizenship are really about citizens who are not only able to fully exercise their rights and responsibilities within formal structures, but also who are able to thrive in the sense that they can daily grow in personal attachment to (and in) place (Fenster, 2005). Ultimately, the height of belonging sees one's own flourishing as linked to others within the group's flourishing (Mason, 2000). Understanding Bank's (2017) notion of failed citizenship is precisely to encounter the person who does not belong or does not feel they belong to the community. Citizenship is not "natural or neutral" (Urrieta & Reidel, 2008; 92)—is demanding and cannot be taken for granted.

Committed to promoting robust citizens through social studies education, I have chosen the local as a promising site with which to engage my middle school students where they are in their own development and encourage them in spatial thought and civic action. Place-based curriculum provides direct and authentic experiences to students and capitalizes on multiple intelligence. Knowing that places and communities are social constructions—and contested places—this research begins to build a curriculum that aims to see how students define and narrate these deep, abstract concepts of place, community and belonging. Starting from their (mis)conceptions, the research plans to determine how to engage students to socially construct a sense of the local community as a site for civil society, civic association, and active, transformative, justice-oriented citizenship.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Positionality Statement

It seems important to make clear my own positionality from the very beginning of the research methods section, as it informs the very direction and trajectory of the questions asked and the methods employed. As researchers we have been often reminded how we are instruments and how we become a part of research by intersect with the places, interact with the participants, and breathe life into interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Who we are flavors and colors the very results, but also the means. Hence, this research cannot avoid me, the researcher. Who I am makes this research what it is.

I am a second-year public school teacher in a community that I do not belong to. I am a white, middle-class male transplant from a neighboring town (as a transplant from another state, nonetheless). While I am vaguely familiar with the local community in which I teach, I am far from intimate or well-connected with it. I come as a stranger and outsider. But I also come with a passion for the promise of place-based education and the renewal of local communities—particularly rural communities. My hope is to use this dissertation research as an opportunity to find my own place as I discover the place in which I teach. I position myself as a teacher-researcher, but also a student of my own students. I thirst for increasing my own belonging to the community, learning the land, learning the history and meanings, and building enduring relationships. I want the same for my students. These desires and wishes impact this work, which aims to promote and craft place-based curriculum that emphasizes local communities, invigorates belonging among students, and creates an essential stock of social capital (Restakis, 2010). This, I believe, is the necessary and unequivocal recipe for transformative citizenship, community renewal, local stability, and environmental stewardship.

Guiding Theoretical & Conceptual Frameworks

> A civic way of knowing requires a social network and setting. It requires others: as teachers in a tradition of learning; as fellow investigators within and across disciplinary boundaries; and as relational subjects of study. Like any social network, a civic mind is bounded by values and constraints that are not derived from individual members, but, rather, from a shared understanding of the community. This communal aspect of a civic knowing limits the misplaced self-confidence and competition of the individual mind in solitary pursuit of knowledge and strengthens the faith in common pursuits commonly undertaken and ethically applied (Vitek, 2008).

This view of civic knowledge aligns with a social constructivist paradigm, which informs this research. The social constructivist classroom assumes that students "construct their own understandings of the world in which they live…by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). This demands that the social studies educator creates "an inquiry-driven, discussion-based environment with the teacher fostering, facilitating, scaffolding, and guiding discourse" (Brophy, 2002). This framework is "primarily a theory of learning" (Brophy, 2002) which seeks to capitalize on what students know in order to go further in building more complex conceptual knowledge and understanding (van Hover & Hicks, 2017).

Social constructivism is an important component to democratic education because it suggests that the community is responsible for building knowledge *from within* the community. Much within the purview of social science education's fields are facts and concepts not dictated by some external objective reality, but rather a collective sense of importance that is negotiated and navigated by members of the community. Vitek (2008) reminds us that "a civic mind ties together the sense that citizens are students of knowledge, including its limits, and that students of knowledge are citizens (members of interdependent…communities)." Our histories, politics, and economics are narratives and systems whose design is within the reach of every citizen. Discourse, deliberation, and debate empower discernment that gives direction to growth,

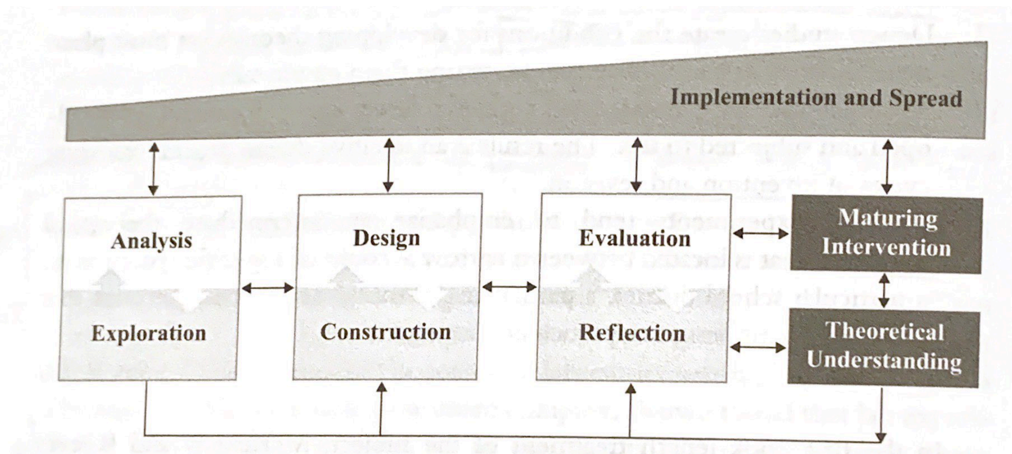
progress, and reflection. The community of learners, like the political community, grows together through the offerings and contributions of each member toward the conception of the commonwealth which is mimicked in the classroom.

This paradigm complements the designed-based research (DBR) methodology embraced by this dissertation. Definitively, DBR is:

> a genre of research in which the iterative development of solutions to practical and complex educational problems also provides the context for empirical investigations, which yield theoretical understandings that can inform the work of others. Its goals and methods are rooted in, and not cleansed of, the complex variations of the real world (Freedman & Kim, 2019; 6).

DBR anticipates longitudinal investigations that will undergo progressive iterations and refinement of curriculum interventions (Barab, Baek, Schatz, Scheckler, & Moore 2008; McKenney & Reeves, 2013). The strength of DBR is for its capacity to use curricular innovation in a series of deliberate iterations that "create the conditions" for "test-beds for innovation" that foster theoretical development (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). McKenney & Reeves (2012) capture the DBR model in Figure 3:

FIGURE 3: Design Based Research Model



(Mckenney & Reeves, 2012)

DBR has three phases: analysis/exploration, design/construction, and evaluation/reflection. The first phase is meant to "ascertain the problem space before devising a solution" (Freedman & Kim, 2019). It is here that the researcher gets a 'lay of the land' and determines "intellectual and social starting points of the students, teachers, and other stakeholders involved" (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). This is the phase where research questions and goals are refined due to the contextual circumstances present. The second phase is where the researcher begins any number of curriculum interventions and iterations to achieve the research goals. The ongoing interplay between a particular intervention implemented in this phase and evaluated and reflected upon in the third phase helps the researcher progressively develop the curriculum through in-class trials and continued modifications (Freedman & Kim, 2019).

Most DBR is reported in narrative form, where researchers describe the progressive nature of curriculum interventions and iterations (Shavelson, Phillips, Towned & Feuer, 2003). The goal of most DBR endeavors is to generate theory, being closely associated with grounded theory approaches (Freedman & Kim, 2019). However, what distinguishes DBR is its "inductive analysis undertaken with a designed, as opposed to a natural setting, [thus] positioning DBR as an 'interventionist ethnography'" (Freedman & Kim, 2019; citing Dede, 2004). Connecting these phases to the particular research at hand, the first phase was what the 2020-2021 pilot study focused on. It was repeated in the dissertation study, but accompanied by further interventions informed by the pilot study, thus moving the dissertation study into the second phase of DBR (see Figure 3 above).

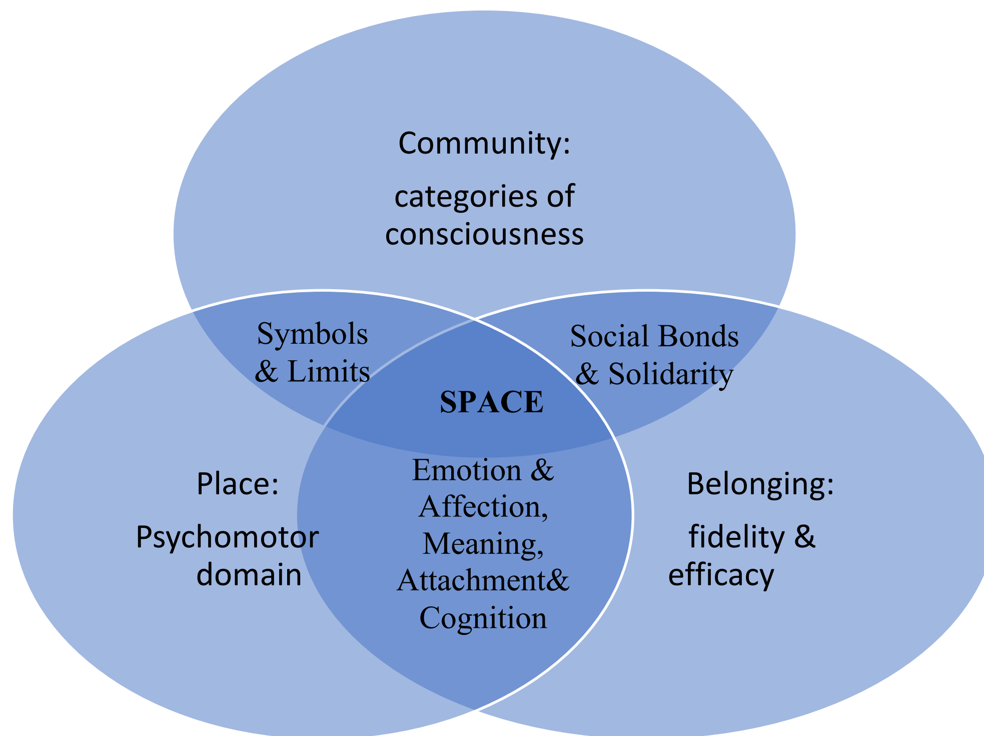
The overarching goal of this dissertation research was to examine if students' sense of belonging to their local communities was influenced through a place-based curriculum project.

Hence, a DBR methodology provided a process that allowed for the flexibility of curricular design within the context of democratic social studies education grounded in social constructivism. Social studies classrooms that adhere to constructivist frameworks must "keep the investigatory lens wide, the disciplinary boundaries fluid, the exits well marked, the larger implications well in mind, and the collaborator welcome mat in plain view" (Vitek, 2008).

Mindful of my research interest in community formation, sense of place, and sense of belonging, certain conceptual frameworks were used to guide my thinking, data collection, and initial data analysis. Benedict Andersen's "Imagined Communities" (1983) offered a theoretical framework to understand community formation. While he examineed the formation of nation-states as imagined communities, he later admited that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these)" are imagined (Anderson, 2006; 6). In viewing community formation elements through Anderson's (1983) perspective, one looks for symbols, social relationships, categories of consciousness, solidarity, and limits. Sense of place is the combined set of meanings and attachments that a person or group develops in a place (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995). Semken, Freeman, Watts, Neakrase, Dial, & Baker (2009) offered a conceptual framework for understanding sense of place as having cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Knowing the place, feeling attached, and interacting in the place stand to influence the student's sense of place. Baumeister & Leary's (1995) core elements in the "belongingness hypothesis" guided my understanding of the sense of belonging: cognition, social bonds, emotion, efficacy, and fidelity. Figure 4 synthesizes a conceptual framework combining these three authors' insights into belonging. Here you can see how each of these three concepts interweave and help prop up an awareness and understanding together. This framework served as

a starting point from which I analyzed my students' understanding of their community, place and belonging.

FIGURE 4: Conceptual Framework Guiding Understanding of Community, Place, & Belonging

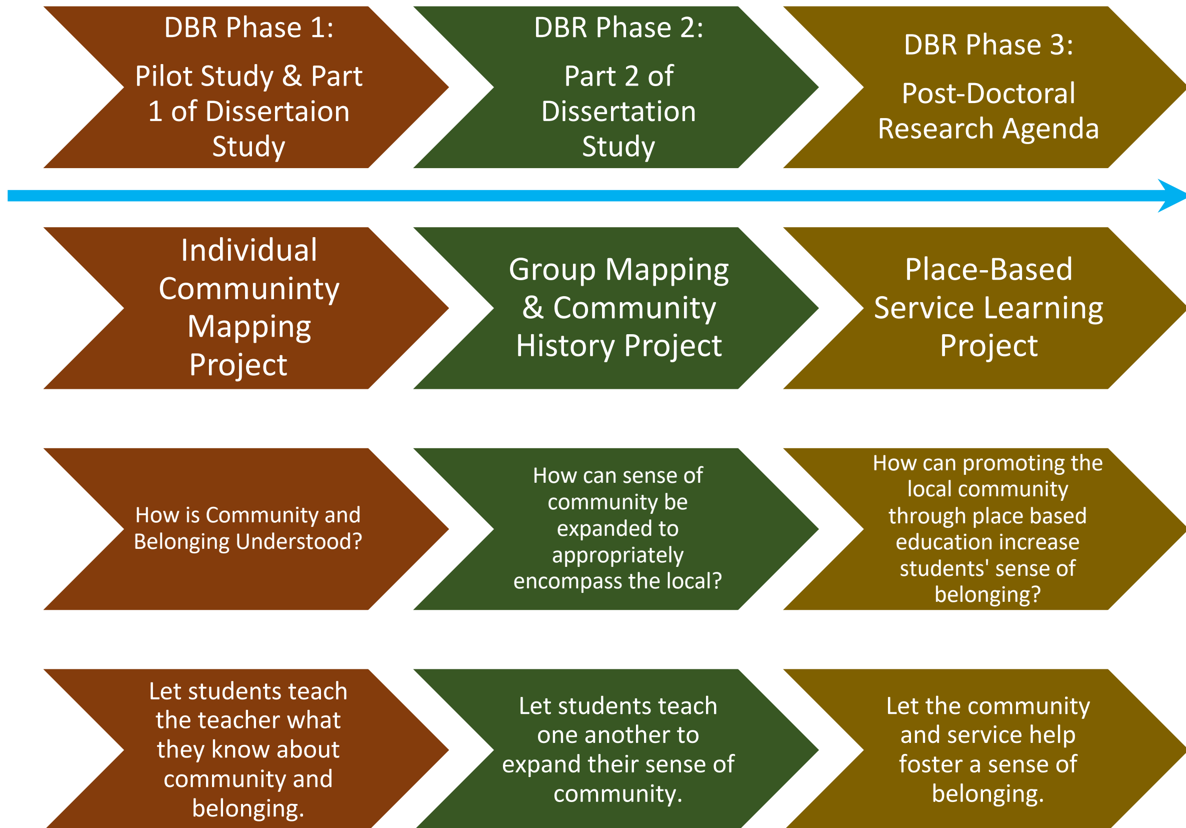


Data Sources & Data Collection

DBR afforded me as a teacher-researcher the opportunity to not only assess what my students knew about the concepts I am interested in (community, place and belonging), but also allowed me ample time to get acquainted with my surroundings and find my place *within this place*. The first phase of DBR can allow the researcher to hone their research goals—which in this case involved a desire to implement a place-based curriculum to promote belonging to the local community among social studies students. Considering how to accomplish such a task, however, is filled with small steps that DBR allowed me to take within the course of its cyclical model. While the goal may be "to emerge from the study with a newly tested" (Freedman & Kim, 2019) place-based education model that promotes local sense of belonging, there are

critical first steps that must be taken so as to be confident in the future research and curriculum design. Figure 5 captures the trajectory of my thinking on how to utilize DBR to develop appropriate curriculum interventions over the course of iterations:

FIGURE 5: Trajectory of DBR Iterations to Develop Place-Based Curriculum that Promotes Sense of Belonging to the Local Community



This dissertation's research aimed to answer the first and second segments detailed in Figure 5, leaving the third as a post-doctoral research opportunity and culminating capstone to the DBR cycle. The first segment corresponded to the first phase of the DBR model: seeking to explore and analyze what students bring to the classroom. The second mirrored the second phase of DBR as I designed curriculum based on the initial phase's unearthing and activitating students' prior knowledge (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). Based on what I learned from my students' own knowledge and experience with the concepts of community, place, and belonging,

I designed curriculum suited to help them enlarge their sense of community, anticipating it might help them grow toward student-citizens. A broad overview of each of these two phases of the overall project is detailed below in Table 3:

TABLE 3: Broad Overview of Project Lesson Plans

Phase	Description
Individual Community Mapping Project	*Have you ever considered what your community is? Where it is? What place you belong to? This project is going to ask you to begin thinking about these things while you practice the art of map-making. This project will take some time and involve in-class work and some work at home. The work will flow in sequential (one after the other) steps. Taking your time on the first step will allow you to do good work on the second, the third, etc. Here are the step-by-step instructions:* **(1) DRAW A MAP OF YOUR COMMUNITY.** Take a minute to think about what *you* consider to be your community. Think about the places you would include, the people, the landmarks, the boundaries. Plan it with the guides provided. Then, draw me a picture. Take your time and be sure to show me places that are important to you. Particularly, show me the places and spaces that you feel you belong. Also, mark the places you feel you do not belong. **(2) GATHER PHOTOGRAPHS OR CREATE ARTWORK OF PLACES/SPACES OF BELONGING.** Once you've completed your map and identified the places and spaces where you feel you do and do not belong, let's focus on the places you do feel you belong. Gather some pictures or create artwork of the people, places, and objects that will help you explain what makes you feel you belong to the places you mentioned and marked. Create captions. You will be given a guide to help you describe why you included each image/photo that you did. Compile these into an album following the instructions. **(3) ANSWER THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT "ON COMMUNITY, PLACE & BELONGING."** After you have drawn your map and gathered your photos/graphics, tackle the questions in the project's writing assignment that will ask you to further unpack what you think about community and place and put into words what you think about belonging. These questions will help you prepare for your presentation in the next part… (4) **PRESENT YOUR MAP & PHOTOS.** After completing the previous steps, prepare a 5-10 minute presentation. You will be using FlipGrid on your Chromebooks to record the presentation and only I will be watching the presentations. I will not share them with anyone else…including your peers or other teachers. Use the presentation guide to consider what you need to include and how you will be graded. You can take your time recording the presentation and start and stop as you feel.
Group Mapping and Community History Project	*You are being put into small groups within the class based on similarities with your individual maps. As a group you will be doing the following:* **(1) CREATE A MAP OF YOUR GROUP'S COMMUNITY ON "MY MAPS."** Organize each of your group's maps together and see how they fit together and overlap. You will combine each of these maps and together construct a map incorporating your group's overall boundaries into a map using My Maps on Google. You will be required to take measurements and record other details in the instructions.

	(2) COMMUNITY ASSETS & COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT. As a group, you will identify the places within your boundaries that you consider community assets (see instructions) and you will describe why. Based on these assets you will determine an appropriate in-depth study of the history of one. You will use available resources and interview at least one person in your community, asking them questions about that space, as well as their definitions of community, place, and belonging. Students will prepare a symbol for their community—an image or graphic that captures and conveys the assets and distinction their community possess. **(3) PRESENTATION & CLASS MAP CONSTRUCTION.** After completing the previous steps, prepare a 5-10 minute presentation. You will be using FlipGrid on your Chromebooks to record the presentation. These will then be shared with the class and viewed while we fill-in a wall map of the city of Opelika including the segments and symbols of each small group's asset throughout the class and cohort. **(4) INDIVIDUAL REDUX.** Now that you have completed the group project and heard from your classmates about their segments of the community, re-consider your individual maps and redraw maps of your community following the same instruction as before. Afterward you will also reconsider and re-answer the "On Community, Place, & Belonging" writing exercise.

**Complete lesson scaffolds for these two projects can be found in Appendix A.*

The methodology involved an instrumental, exploratory case study of seventh-grade civics and geography students. This study was instrumental because it may "provide insight into an issue or help refine a theory" (Stake, 2010). Simultaneously, it was exploratory because the study was "used to explore situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes" (Yin, 2003). The students were part of a cohort under the tutelage of the teacher-researcher. The cohort was a convenience sample as they served as an exemplary case because of their diverse backgrounds (see Table 4) and access to different contexts, peoples, environments, and milieux. As budding social studies students, they were also budding citizens simultaneous with their budding adulthood and identity. As these students began considering political responsibilities and obligations, as well as maps and formation of human communities, the questions of community and belonging was well-placed. Only by understanding their pre-conceived notions of community and belonging can we know an adequate "description of the problem space…[and envision] an initial design that specifies what the solution might entail" (McKenney & Reeves, 2012).

TABLE 4: Opelika Middle School Demographics

Grades Served	School Population	Student to Teacher Ratio	State Testing Proficiency	Gender Make-up	Racial Make-Up	Free and Reduced Lunch
6th-8th	1070	17:1	Math 43% Reading 43%	Female 50% Male 50%	Black 56% White 28% Hispanic 12% Asian 1% Other 3%	67%

The first step in DBR is to explore the situation to determine how to proceed. The first step in social constructivism is to determine what students are bringing to the context and classroom. Merging these two lines of thinking to form this case study served the teacher-researcher by mutually introducing him to the place and providing him with critical background knowledge by allowing the students to take the lead and provide a thorough direction for how to proceed. Embracing social constructivism served to engage the child's interest as the teacher used their experience to experiment with curriculum choices (DeVries & Zan, 2012). It is imperative that place-based educators first respect the communities and places in which they find themselves (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011), which means to first consult the "genius of the place" (Jackson, 1994). The pilot study and first project in this dissertation was this first phase of DBR, which allowed me to learn from one group of students' understanding of their communities. The pilot study afforded me that ability to anticipate and make more educated assumptions about how to extend the project and achieve greater impact in the dissertation study.

I assigned my students the same individual mapping project from Phase 1 in the dissertation study, but then added a community mapping and history project, which corresponds to the second step in DBR (Brown, 1992). Brainstorming, planning, building, re-creating

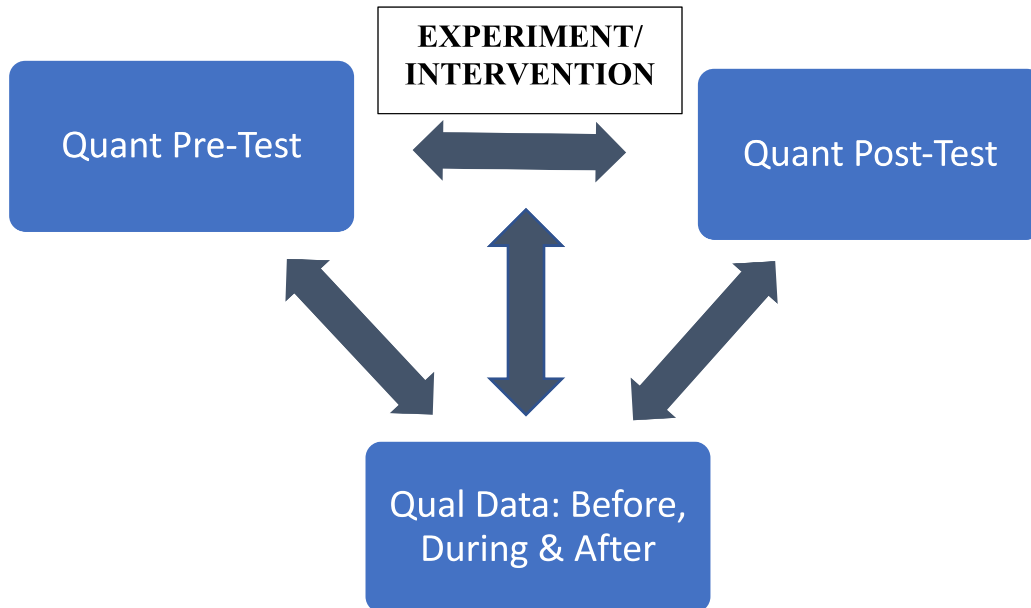
scaffolds and supports characterize this phase and “reflect responsive evolution” during which researchers should expect to develop and re-develop the curriculum to “better meet the stated goals” (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Once the curriculum is implemented, the bulk of revisions ought to occur during the third phase of DBR—evaluation and reflection. Because it has been tested in a live setting, researchers can now refine what worked and did not work. What drives the researcher’s awareness is ongoing collection of data during each segment from beginning to end, using formative and summative evaluation concurrently (Brown, 1992). Because of the breadth of data, DBR often embraces a mixed-method design, having gathered both qualitative and quantitative insights (Freedman & Kim, 2019).

This dissertation study’s two companion projects aligned with the first two phases of DBR. Referring back to Figure 3 (above), the initial individual community mapping projects (which was the focus of the pilot study and was repeated in the dissertation study) was the first phase of DBR—meeting the students where they are and letting their background knowledge and prior knowledge inform further curricular goals and choices. The companion group community mapping and community history project extended the students’ inquiry and anticipated students socially constructing a broader sense of their community. The goal of this dissertation was to determine if these curricular choices influenced students’ sense of community and belonging beyond their homes and neighborhoods to include the local geopolitical community. Further, in the course of the curricular intervention, this research sought to describe the influence it had on the students’ understanding of the three concepts bound in this research: community, place, and belonging. I implemented these two projects with my 7th grade classes to evaluate, reflect and describe the influence of the curriculum and what students understood about the concepts during their work. The research questions were:

1. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?; and,**
2. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging following a collaborative community history and mapping project?; and,**
3. **What does the collaborative community history and mapping project reveal about students' sense of belonging to a community?**

This dissertation used a mixed-methods approach relying on both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell & Plano, 2017). This method was chosen because multiple tools in both types of research are available and it was believed that the combination of methods would provide a better understanding of the research problem (Freedman & Kim, 2019; Timans, Wouters, Heilbron, 2019). An embedded mixed methods design was employed as both forms of data enhanced one another as they were concurrently collected within the case study (Creswell & Plano, 2017). The model for this work is illustrated in Figure 6:

FIGURE 6: Embedded Mixed Methods Design with Experiment



(adapted from Creswell & Plano, 2017)

A hallmark of this design is the dominance of qualitative data being used alongside and within the quantitative measures. While quantifying the influence and level of belonging students may feel, the subjective nature and quality that each of the concepts carries with it must be examined. Using students' voice, artifacts, ideas, and growth helped capture a much fuller sense of their understanding and conceptualization of community, place, and elements of belonging. While bringing theory to the case, it was also the goal of the research to refine the theory from the case, hence embracing a dialogical model between existing theories and the implications of the case, itself (Rule & John, 2015). Indeed, seeing whether or how the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 2 applied to middle school students and their local communities was an exciting undertaking. "Classroom life is synergistic…[full of] richness and reality" (Brown, 1992), this study provided a prime opportunity to create interaction between theory and research (Rule & John, 2015) to the concrete needs of a particular classroom with the hope of

implementing a meaningful place-based curriculum. To that end, this study utilized the following data collection techniques to invite a research dialogue: (1) a survey; (2) representational mapping; (3) graphic (artistic or photo) elicitations; (4) students' written work and presentations; (5) student interviews; and, (6) fieldnotes from observations. Before detailing each data collection technique, it is important to note that during the course of the entire study the researcher was committed to two practical disciplines to trace the course of decisions made within the study: (a) keeping a reflexive journal detailing his own thinking, reflection, introspection, and self-monitoring; and, (b) keeping a rigorous audit trail "describ[ing] in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam, 1998; 206-207).

Survey

The literature demonstrates a number of disciplines have produced a variety of terms associated with sense of belonging including: place attachment, place dependence, place identity, human-place bonding, sense of place, and rootedness (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2002). While each of these understandings possess nuances, they possess far more similarities than unique differences. For the sake of this research, I am collapsing each into a broad understanding of 'belonging.'

While there are established indices associated with sense of belonging, there is not widespread agreement on the use of particular indices or their ability to reliably measure belonging across contexts. Indeed, it is a future goal to try and build a reliable index for sense of belonging to the local community among adolescents, which this research hopes to inform. To constitute a sense of belonging measure I can use for quantitative analysis I will employ a very simple, valid, reliable and generalizable place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003).

This same instrument has been validated in science and environmental education (Semken & Freeman, 2008; Semken, Freeman, Wattts, Neakrase, Dial & Baker, 2009). The survey consists of twelve questions on a 5-point Likert scale which measures place identity and place dependence to capture an overall sense of place attachment. The survey adapted to use is shown in Table 5:

TABLE 5: Adapted Place Attachment Instrument of Williams & Vaske (2003)

1	I feel Opelika is a part of me.
2	Opelika is the best place for what I like to do.
3	Opelika is very special to me.
4	No other place can compare to Opelika.
5	I identify strongly with Opelika.
6	I get more satisfaction out of Opelika than any other place I visit.
7	I am very attached to Opelika.
8	Doing what I do in Opelika is more important to me than doing it in any other place.
9	Opelika says a lot about who I am compared to other places I have visited.
10	I wouldn't substitute any other area for doing the types of things I do in Opelika.
11	Opelika means a lot to me.
12	The things I do at Opelika I would enjoy doing just as much at a similar site
***	Note: The odd numbered items measure place identity, the even-numbered items measure place dependence, and the final item is reverse scored.

I embedded this instrument in a broader survey which included a series of questions adapted from Schmidt (2013) who employed a survey in a school representational mapping project. As this instrument has not been statistically validated, I used it for descriptive and qualitative analysis, as well as a means to conduct interview questions with the students at the conclusion of the project. This survey adapted to use is shown in Table 6:

TABLE 6: Adapted Survey of Schmidt (2013)

1	Outside of your home and school, what are three of the most important things you participate in?
2	At school how many organized teams, groups, or clubs do you participate in within the academic year? List the activities…
3	How many years have you lived in Opelika?
4	I feel like I "fit in" in Opelika.

5	I feel that I know my way around Opelika.
6	I feel that I am knowledgeable about the history of Opelika.
7	I feel that I am knowledgeable about issues facing Opelika.
8	I feel that I am respected and valued as a person in Opelika.
9	I feel that I am familiar with the places and spaces in Opelika.
10	I feel that I am a part of the community of Opelika.
11	I feel that I am connected with people outside my family and school in Opelika
12	I feel that Opelika is a place where I can make a difference.
13	I feel proud to say I am from Opelika.
14	If I left Opelika I would be sad.
***	Note: Questions 1-3 would only be asked once, at first and used to deepen demographic data. Questions 4-14 would be measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

This survey with the two embedded parts—adapted from Williams & Vaske (2003) and Schmidt (2013)—was distributed and collected via Qualtrics.

Representational Mapping & Graphic Ellictation

"Geography students should acquire tools that allow them to understand places and the implications of the meanings we give to places" (Schmidt, 2011). The most important tool in the geography classroom is a map. Indeed, the first standard within the Alabama Course of Study for seventh grade, middle-school geography is: "Describe the world in spatial terms using maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies" (Alabama Department of Education, 2010). Maps are such useful tools because they give answers and create boundaries. But, these boundaries and answers are seldom complete; often generating more questions (Schmidt, 2011). Maps are productions that synthesize the cartographer's choices and positioning (Schmidt, 2011; Schmidt, 2013). "Attributes [of maps] come together to form a sense of place…[but] not everyone in a place shares the same meaning" (Schmidt, 2011). The subjective choices cast into how individuals imagine spaces include "decisions about scale, range, and content [that] reflect perspectives" (Schmidt, 2013). This subjective perspective is captured in the parody poem of

G.K. Chesterton (1927) who writes in “Songs of Education, ii: Geography, Form 17955301, Sub-Section Z”:

> *The earth is a place on which England is found,*
> *And you find it however you twirl the globe round;*
> *For the spots are all red and the rest is all grey,*
> *And that is the meaning of Empire Day.*

Maps as an object of geographic study are as fraught with choices as representational mapping projects. Engaging in representational mapping as geography students is a prime time to begin understanding the privilege and plight of any cartographer to portray the world as they experience and see it—not in a strictly objective sense.

Representational mapping is a particular subset of graphic elicitation techniques that can help students to “portray individual emotions effortlessly” (Copeland & Agosto, 2012). Discerning sense of community, place and belonging are inevitably wrapped up in emotion and perception, many of which will be deep-seated and perhaps unexamined and difficult to divine. Graphic elicitations techniques are useful for a number of reasons, foremost in that they allow for participants to creatively express, highlight, and articulate conceptual information regarding relationships, places, and processes in “the telling of their stories” (Greyson, 2013). Researchers cite the unique capacity of graphic elicitation technique for data collection where words fail participants or abilities to make connections might seem impossible (Copeland & Agosto, 2012). Their definition captures this strength:

> graphic elicitation techniques ask research participants to draw or chart visual representations of a concept, experience, belief, or behavior. They can be especially useful in helping participants to express complex or abstract ideas or opinions that are difficult to capture via interviews alone (Copeland & Agosto, 2012; citing Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006).

This lends itself to a second capacity of graphic elicitation devices is how they can serve as "interview aids" in helping participants voice their own experience, perception and stories (Greyson, 2013).

There are also critical insights into use of graphic elicitation techniques for adolescents, specifically. Citing the "increasingly visually-oriented world," Greyson (2013) notes that arts-based methods of expression lend themselves to the "heightened creativity…[of] adolescents" (1). These methods give youth the appropriate flexibility to express themselves in deep and meaningful ways while providing a "fun, nontraditional" approach (Yonas, Burke, Rak, Bennett, Kelly, & Gielen, 2009). Perhaps more importantly, graphic elicitation devices have been shown to "enable boundary-spanning between researcher and participants across differences of culture, age, race and role, potentially reducing some barriers to adults carrying out research with youth" (Greyson, 2013; citing Liebenberg, 2009). These are all important considerations for the crux of this research which must serve to ease budding minds into complex thinking and robust articulations while building relational capital and trust as their new teachers (who, again, is a stranger and outsider).

Representational mapping as a particular form of graphic elicitation has shown promise in social science education and studies of public spaces. The notion of communities, particularly local communities, may have set geopolitical boundaries—but those boundaries may not correspond to students' experiences or perceptions. Indeed, the very concept of a geopolitical community like the "local community" is likely "contested…[and may] employ exclusionary practices…[as these communities are] produced spaces" (Schmidt, 2013, 536; citing Soja, 2010). It is precisely this "messiness of public space" (Schmidt, 2013) that leads to contests that need to be considered and articulated within democratic discourse and deliberative process. Giving

students the opportunity to draw *their* community empowers them to show how they imagine space. It also gives them a position from which to "communicate concepts" (Schmidt, 2013) about public space and community.

In a research study that sought to understand how students perceive their school, Schmidt (2013) relied on representational mapping. Asking students to "draw a map of your high school that shows your impressions of the school and the places that are important to you," students were then asked to "mark on the maps spaces that were student-friendly, spaces where they spent time, and spaces that were uninviting" (Schmidt, 2013; 539). These projects were followed up with surveys and student interviews. A similar exercise would empower exploration into students' sense of their communities and places of belonging and unbelonging. Asking students to:

> **DRAW A MAP OF YOUR COMMUNITY.** Take a minute to think about what *you* consider to be your community. Think about the places you would include, the people, the landmarks, the boundaries. Now draw me a picture. Take your time and be sure to show me places that are important to you. Particularly, show me the places and spaces that you feel you belong. Also, mark the places you feel you do not belong. You will be given a guide to help you think about these places and spaces before you begin drawing. (from the Individual Community Map Project; see Appendix A)

and

> **GROUP MAPPING PROJECT.** Organize your group's individual maps and use My Maps on Google to create your group's community. Take measurements and record details. Identify places within the boundaries that your group considers community assets and describe your reasons. (from the Group Community Map Project, Appendix A)

Representational mapping is a form of graphic elicitation. Originally, I envisioned using photo elicitation exclusively until conducting my pilot study. The reality is that some students had access to photographs, while others did not. Also, some students seemed more inclined to express themselves artistically. Graphic elicitation generally meant to "encourage participants to talk about their ideas" (Barton, 2015). All graphic elicitation techniques are devised to empower

students to discuss controversial issues and/or abstract concepts (Barton, 2015; Bignante, 2010). For the dissertation project I encouraged them to use either photos or artistic renderings—whichever was most helpful. Barton (2015) reminds of the importance of giving students the greatest opportunity to develop their thoughts and be prodded with the help of images. The old adage "A picture is worth a thousand words" is important since:

> researchers make their living with words, and it is hardly surprising they consider open-ended, verbal interviews a comfortable methodology. But not all participants have either the background or the inclination to engage in extended, abstract verbal exchanges (Barton, 2015; 181).

Graphic elicitation can take one of two forms. The first is when the researcher provides a graphic and elicits responses (Barton, 2015; Bigante, 2010). The second form (embraced by this research) is when the participants supply the graphic (an artistic rendering or photograph). This second form is sometimes referred to as photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) or native image making (Bigante, 2010).

Photovoice and native image making is particularly useful among the graphic elicitation techniques because of their particular power to draw insights and perspectives from participants. Demonstrating the strength of photovoice Berger (1992) suggests:

> The thrill found in a photograph comes from the onrush of memory…we once knew everything we recognize in any photo…Memory is a strange faculty. The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers (13).

Harper (2002) offers a near poetic evaluation of photo elicitation's ability:

> I believe photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews. It is partly due to how remembering is enlarged by photographs and partly due to the particular quality of the photograph itself. Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of retrieving something that belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk (22-23).

Photovoice and native image making are particularly effective to this research, as it parallels similar power dynamics as representational mapping. Keeping in mind that this lesson is about the teacher learning from what the students perceive within the concepts of *community, place,* and *belonging*. Thus, the project must give them voice. Photovoice and native image making is associated with participatory action research because of its power to "equalize power imbalances" giving students a more "active role…[and] greater agency…[as] experts who lead researchers through content" (Barton, 2015; 182). These techniques lend themselves to a more personal, intimate degree of authenticity that "not only shifts the power balance, but also makes the data more valuable" (Barton, 2015). It is precisely this personal, nuanced, authentic data that must initially be gleaned in the research as it aims to design a responsive, well-crafted place-based curriculum.

This graphic elicitation task involving photographs and/or artistic renderings served as a complementary project following the representational mapping project. I intended both aspects of the project to deliver critical and valuable insights into the students' thinking about *community, place,* and *belonging*, in a format designed to help students better communicate and convey more about these abstract concepts to their peers and the researcher. The maps served a critical capacity of helping the researcher visualize how the students imagined their community—its scale, size, and dynamics. The photograph/art assignment provided greater depth and insight into the students' sense of belonging and place during presentations and interviews. While students were asked to include places and spaces on their maps, the photograph/art project asked students to include:

> **GATHER PHOTOGRAPHS OF PLACES/SPACES OF BELONGING.** Once you've completed your map and identified the places and spaces where you feel you do and do not belong, let's focus on the places you do feel you belong. Gather some pictures of the people, places, and objects that will help you explain what makes you feel you

> belong to the places you mentioned and marked. You will be given a guide to help you describe why you included each image/photo that you did. (from the Individual Community Mapping Project, Appendix A)

and

> Draw a symbol that represents your community asset and includes reference to your community's strengths and uniqueness. Use colors and detail to make this symbol communicate as much as possible. (from the Group Community Mapping Project, see Appendix A)

This aspect of the project is akin to a photovoice project conducted by Burke, Green, & McKenna (2014) where they investigated how students understood public spaces in their neighborhoods. Students were asked to bring photographs of places they considered "good" and "needed improvement." Such a project serves a number of critical components. First, it allows the researcher to better see more of the actual physical places, people and objects of the community from the perception of the student. This greater definition permits the researcher with a greater insight into the students' setting and funds of knowledge. Second, these graphic devices give the students greater voice and agency by empowering them to provide more clarity. Research has shown that as young adults who are conversing on images from their daily life tend to be more comfortable with explaining abstract and personal concepts (Schwartz, 1989). In addition, Barton (2015) notes that the more pieces that audiences can focus on actually helps comfort the presenter, cover silences, and allows them to avoid direct eye-contact with the audience. The focus is on the maps and the photos, not the person, particularly.

Students' Written Work & Presentations

All reflections and planning materials that students used in the course of their work was collected and catalogued. Students planned, reflected, and captioned a number of the artifacts they produced, and each piece of written work was kept for analysis, forming an extensive transcript from each student. Students presented their mapping projects and graphic elicitation

projects on FlipGrid. This gave students an opportunity to showcase their work, verbally unpacking their maps, photographs, images, and history projects and served the researcher in discerning a greater sense of angles, perspectives, and sub-communities within the geopolitical community. The individual mapping project presentations were viewed privately by the teacher-researcher to discern individual students' community perceptions. Schmidt (2011) points out that:

> Not every place shares [the same] meaning…The characteristics we choose to describe places are just that: choices. Places exist because people make them. The way physical spaces are organized arises from human interaction. People's use of places gives them meaning, and different meanings vary across users. Meanings lead to labels, and geographers and geography educators must decide which labels to acknowledge (250).

The group mapping project and community history presentations were viewed by the class and used for students to socially construct the fullness and breadth of the local geopolitical community by showing their peers in-depth histories of various parts of the larger local community.

Interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each individual student conclusion of the project. These interviews recorded and were 1-2 minutes long. I asked students about personal changes within their perception of place or belonging that were indicated by the pre-test survey data and post-test survey data using the survey adapted from Schmidt (2013).

These data sources were collected at various times throughout two parts of an overall community mapping project within the initial weeks of a geography class. The community mapping project consisted of the first two parts of Figure 3: Trajectory of DBR Iterations to Develop Place-Based Curriculum that Promotes Sense of Belonging to the Local Community (above) and serves as the intervention labeled in Figure 4: Embedded Mixed Method Design

with Experiment (above). Figure 7 shows how collapsing of these two figures into one another illustrates the design of the research project. Table 7 shows a brief description of my data sources and the purpose of each stage in the research.

FIGURE 7: Design of the Research Project

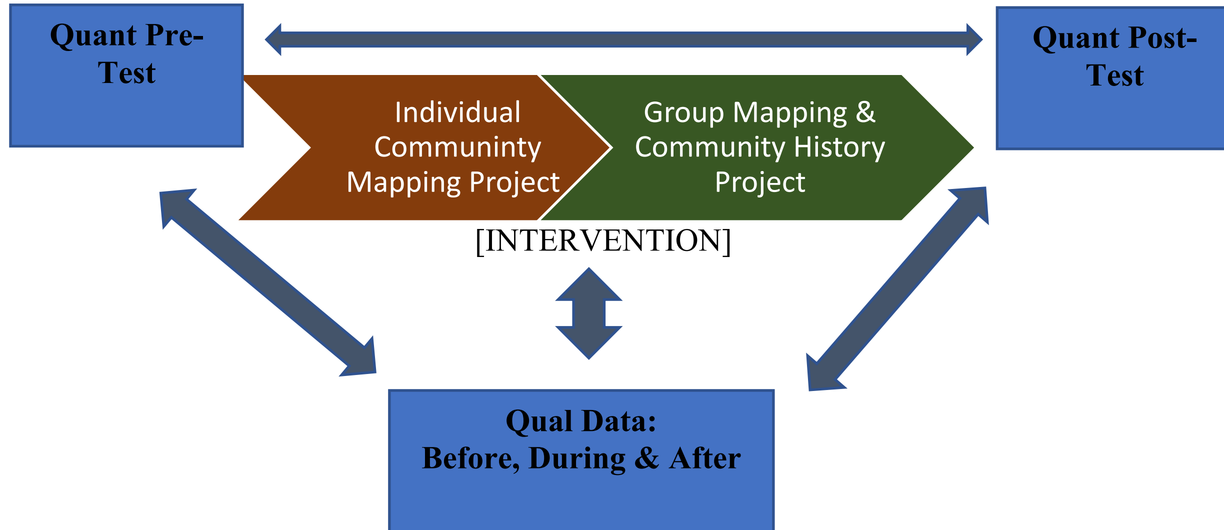


TABLE 7: Research Phase Descriptions, Data Sources Collected & Purpose

	Brief Description	Data Source Collected	Purpose
Quant Pre-Test	Students will be asked to consider and briefly reflect on Opelika before the mapping project is introduced.	• Survey (first round)	Establish a baseline sense of belonging and description of Opelika.
Individual Community Mapping Project*	Students will consider what is meant by the concepts of community, place, and belonging. Students will plan and draw maps, create graphics and captions for places of belonging, reflect on definitions and work, plan and record presentations	• Representational Maps (first round) • Graphic Elicitation • Written Reflections (first round) • Presentations	To develop understanding of students' own knowledge and definitions of community, place, and belonging
Group Mapping & Community History Project*	Students will be purposefully grouped according to maps to produce a group map using technology. Students will produce a community history project which will be presented for whole group collaboration on segments of Opelika. Afterward, students will be asked to repeat parts of individual community mapping project.	• Representational Maps (second round) • Community Mapping Written Work • Written Reflections (second round) • Group presentations	Provide a group project aimed at allowing students to socially construct a greater awareness of their community through in-depth spatial and historic work.
Quant Post-Test	Students will be asked to re-consider and briefly reflect on Opelika after the mapping	• Survey (second round)	Establish an endline sense of belonging and

	project is completed. Conduct brief interviews.	• Interviews	description of Opelika. Interviews will be used to examine changes in students' individual surveys.

**The Survey/Questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The Interview Questions can be found in Appendix C.*

Data Analysis

Patton (1987) proposes a tripartite process for constructing case studies. First, the researcher must collect the raw data. This was described above. Next, that raw data must be manipulated to "construct a case record" which is described as "the raw case data organiz[ed], classif[ied], and edit[ed]…into a manageable and accessible package" (149). This second extensive step is described immediately below. Finally, Patton (1987) suggests that you write the report of your case study narrative. This will be discussed in the very end of this data analysis section.

Survey Statistical Analysis

Student demographics and data from the pre-project and post-project surveys were organized and compiled using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Concerning the Williams & Vaske (2003) adapted survey, I followed the lead of Semken & Freeman (2008). Students' response were coded in SPSS with 1 corresponding to "strongly disagree," 2 to "disagree," 3 to "neutral," 4 to "agree," and 5 to "strongly agree." The sixth-place dependence item is reverse scored because it is a negative statement. A total score of 36-60 indicates place attachment. A score below 36 indicates place aversion. Students completed this survey at the very beginning of the project and again at the end of the project. A paired samples t-test (using SPSS) was conducted to determine the significance of results. Students whose scores indicated belonging at either the pre-test or the post-test will be designated as a 1, and those who indicated unbelonging at either the pre-test or the post-test will be designated as a 0.

This binary will enable me to determine groups that witnessed movements from belonging and/or unbelonging.

Concerning the Schmidt (2013) adapted survey, I recorded and catalogued students' responses to the first three questions in SPSS along with their demographics (as these survey questions were not repeated and were simply descriptive). For the remaining survey items, the same coding scale as above was used. However, a t-test was be conducted due to validity and reliability issues. Instead, students' responses and changes were noted through descriptive analysis within SPSS. These variations in student responses generated questions I asked in the brief student interviews—seeking to uncover what the student views as the source of the change (or not).

These comparisons of baseline survey responses and endline survey responses helped to answer both the first and second questions, but particularly the comparison helps to answer the second research question.

Representational Mapping Analysis Techniques

Students created four maps over the course of this project—first, an individual map of their own community; second, a small group map with a segment of Opelika using GIS technology and spatial precision; third, a whole-class map of Opelika compiling the small groups' segment maps, and, fourth, another rendition of individual maps. The first and fourth—individual maps—were analyzed for the purpose of this research.

Following the lead of Schmidt (2013), analyzing these maps involved spatial patterns, inclusions/exclusions, frequencies and discrepancies. Particularly, each map was coded based on the following: (1) what is at the center of the map; (2) what is the overall range of the map (who broad are the limits); (3) what is the level of detail of the map (a matter of scale); and, (4)

assessment of being "map-like" (spatial precision). I counted the total number of spaces/places identified on each map. I also catalogued and counted the number of spaces/places identified as places of belonging and unbelonging. A general frequency table for places of belonging and unbelonging was kept to identify the places most commonly associated with belonging and unbelonging among students. Further, students' demographic information was associated with their particular maps so that frequency tables of belonging and unbelonging could be correlated to various demographic factors. This data was organized and catalogued in Microsoft Excel software programming for data manipulation and statistical analysis.

The students' first maps were used to help detail an understanding to the first research question. However, the final maps drawn were used to discern and catalogue the changes that occurred for the second research question.

Transcript Coding for Written Work, Presentations, Interviews, and Fieldnotes

Students' individual presentations, photo tours, written reflections, individual presentations, and small group presentations were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions produced a wealth of data which will underwent a series of coding following techniques taken from Saldana (2016). The first round of coding was pre-coding (Layder, 1998) which simply involved reading through the transcripts and highlighting "rich or significant participant quotes or passages that strike you—those 'codable moments' worthy of attention" (Saldana, 2016; citing Boyatzis, 1998). A second round of coding was inductive open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where passages were described in single word or short sequences of words to capture their essence. A third round of axial coding was then conducted that synthesized open coding to existing codes as revealed in the literature.

Student interviews conducted at the close of the projects were read similarly. An initial pre-coding read-through identified rich and/or significant passages. A second round involved open-coding where words or phrases were assigned. A third round of coding began connecting students words to changes and shifts observed. Finally, a fourth round began to generate themes from which interview data could be organized.

While this coding method involved multiple iterations with the transcripts, it corresponds to multiple admonitions among qualitative and case study researchers—that you must "read and reread the data, making notes…comments…tentative themes" (Merriam, 1998). Many of the initial iterations of coding began as data was collected and transcribed. Thus, data collection and analysis happened simultaneously (Merriam, 1998). NVivo coding software was used to organize transcripts and track coding.

The coding done with the transcripts within the initial phase (including the first written reflections, photo tours, individual presentations) helped answer the first research question. Transcripts from the second phase compared with the first informed the second research question. The interview transcripts in conversation with all the other transcripts helped answer the third research question. Finally, per Patton's (1987) final directive, the case study narrative was written. Echoing Stake (2010) who suggests the case study report needs to provide the reader with the "vicarious experience" so they feel immersed in the research environment, Patton (1987) says that the study must be:

> a readable, descriptive picture of a person or program that makes accessible to the reader all the information necessary to understand that person or program. The case study is presented either chronologically or thematically (sometimes both). The case study presents a holistic portrayal of a person or program (149).

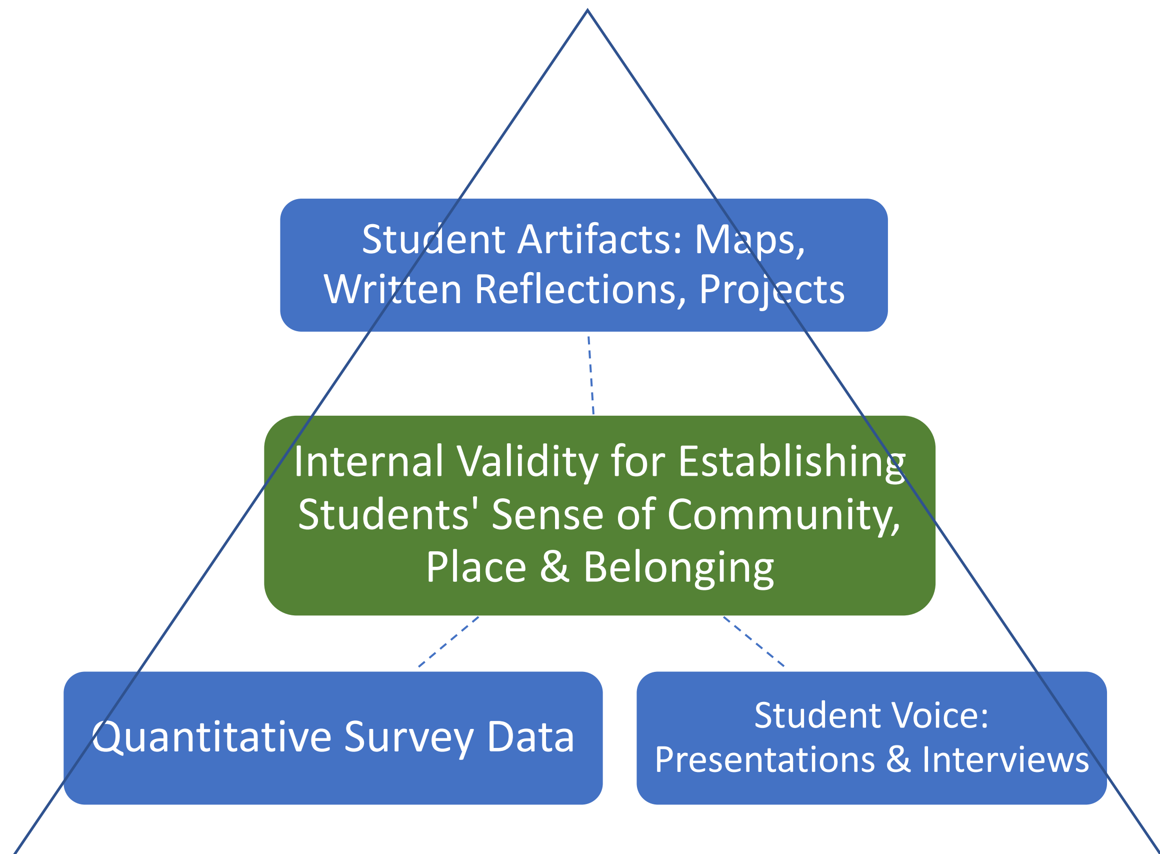
Validity & Reliability:

This research "provides insight into an issue to help refine a theory" (Stake, 2010) and "explores situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes" (Yin, 2003). As such, this study is all about using a sliver of the world to produce some small level of understanding. "*Understanding* is the primary rationale for [qualitative] investigation, [and] the criteria for trusting the study are going to be different than if discovery of a law or testing a hypothesis is the study's objective" (Merriam, 1998). Validity "assesses the accuracy of results" within the qualitative research (Ward & Street, 2010). This study is trying to capture an understanding of a group, thus the accuracy of the results must be measured from within, implicating a heightened importance to internal validity.

Internal validity within qualitative study is an issue "of how well the particular relationships described in the research actually can be ascertained to be the primary dynamic at play" (Yue, 2010). LeCompte and Preissle (1993) list four factors that tend to support robust internal validity: (1) common practice among participants for long periods of time which affords continual data analysis and on-site refinement; (2) participant interviews; (3) direct observations of participants in natural settings; and (4) researcher reflection recorded for reflection and reflexivity. Each of these is a component within this research study. Further, Merriam (1998) suggests that there are six basic structures to enhance internal validity, including triangulation. Denizen (1978) and Stake (2010) identify various types of triangulation, both agreeing that one such method is methodological triangulation. Patton (1987) defines methodological triangulation as "the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or program, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents" (60). Indeed, the many different data collection methods lend themselves to creating a greater capacity for attaining veracity, as the various methods and their analysis are put into conversation with one another. The sense of how the

various methods *together* will help contribute to the accuracy of the findings is illustrated in Figure 8. By aligning multiple lines of data to provide as complete, holistic and comprehensive a picture as possible, the researcher endeavors to “provide the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion makes sense” (Merriam, 1998; 199).

FIGURE 8: Triangulation of Data for Internal Validity



The issue of external validity often refers to generalizability (Yue, 2010), meaning “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied other situations” (Merriam, 1998; 207). The current study focused on a single cohort would not be a candidate for generalizability. Stake (2010) succinctly sums up the reasoning: “The search for particularity competes with the search for generalizability” (140). However, that does not mean external validity must not be considered. It simply means that qualitative studies such as these are, in many ways, unique

situations. But to "enhance the possibility" of aligning one study with another, researchers can: (1) provide rich, thick descriptions to enable readers to determine how parallel or analogous the situation is to their own; and (2) exhaustively define the case so that others can determine the potential for alignment among possible cases (Merriam, 1998; 211-212).

Finally, the issue of reliability must be addressed. Reliability is concerned with the "reproducibility of results" (Ward & Street, 2010). In research design, the concept is closely aligned with objectivity and suggests that in a single reality if the study were repeated it would produce the same results (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative study the issue of reliability is more closely aligned with dependability and consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This led Merriam (1998) to suggest reliability for qualitative researchers means "whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (206). She described three techniques that foster this qualitative sense of reliability: (1) positionality statements and researcher reflexivity; (2) triangulation; and (3) an audit trail. "If we cannot expect others to replicate our account, the best we can do is explain how we arrived at our results," (Merriam, 1998; 207) in an effort to leave little doubt that *if* another researcher been in the same position, time, and place *then* the same results would have reasonably been expected. All three of these suggestions are utilized within the course of this research.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion Concerning DBR Exploration/Analysis Phase (First Research Question) & DBR Design/Construction Phase (Second Research Question)

Introduction

The second half of this dissertation uses design-based research (DBR) phases to frame findings, results and discussion. DBR has three phases: analysis/exploration, design/construction, and evaluation/reflection. In this chapter I will use the first two phases to report findings and discuss results in order to answer the first two research questions. Data collected from students' surveys, students' community maps, photo tours, and two written reflections will be analyzed and discussed in this chapter. In the fifth chapter I will draw on student interviews and project evaluations to triangulate data while I reflect and evaluate what was learned and revealed in the students' work. In doing so, I will answer the third research question. In the sixth and final chapter, I will speak to the limitations, significance, and implications of the work.

The first two research questions which will be addressed in this chapter are:

1. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging?; and,**
2. **How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging following a collaborative community history and mapping project?**

Ninety students participated in all or parts of the two projects from which data was collected and these findings derived. Forty-seven of the students were male (52%) and 43 of the students were female (48%). Fifty-seven students were Black (63%), 17 students were White (19%), 15 students were Hispanic (17%), and 1 student was Asian (1%).

DBR Phase #1: Exploring & Analyzing—The First Research Question

How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?

The first question aligns with the first phase of DBR, in that it allows the researcher to begin exploring what students already know about their community and belonging (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). Once this exploration and discovery are complete, the researcher can begin to discern problems and determine possible solutions (Freedman & Kim, 2019). Data collected to explore this question included: students' first community maps, photo tours of places of belonging, first written reflections and community map presentations. The question itself has three elements:

- how do middle school students visualize their community?
- how do middle school students define their community? and,
- how do middle school students narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?

I will present the findings and discuss each of these elements one at a time.

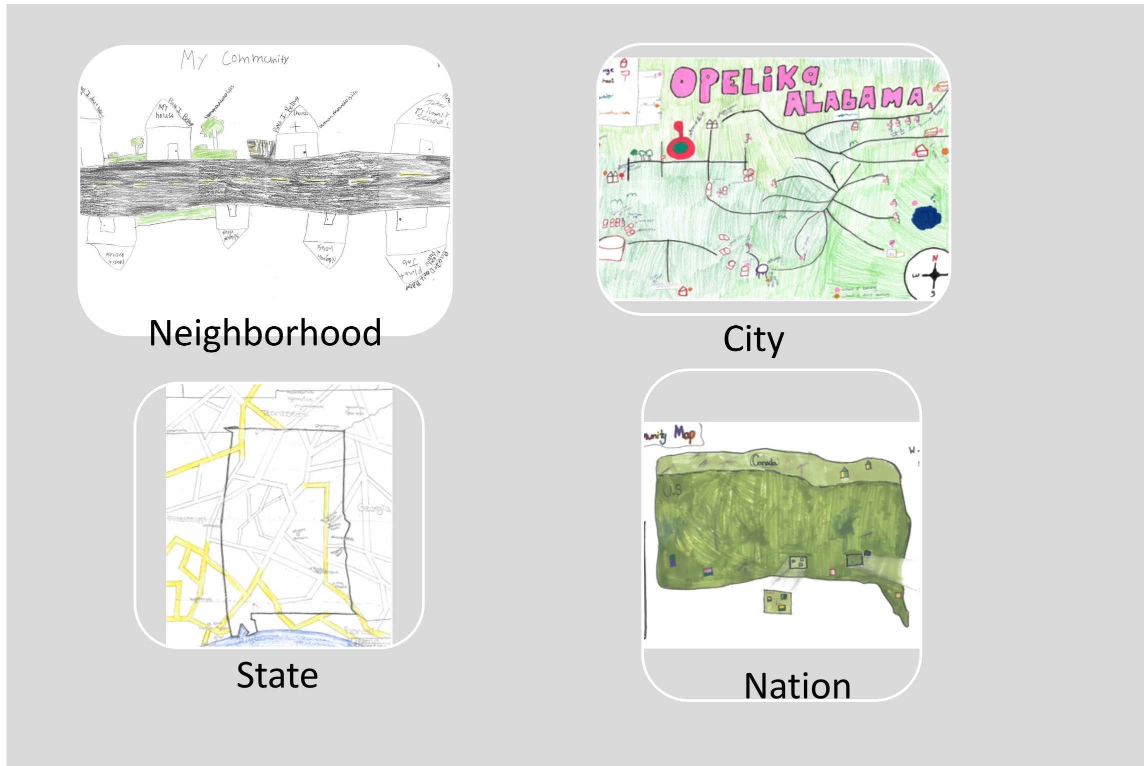
How do middle school students visualize community?

Over the course of the project, students were asked to produce two maps of their communities. They were asked to label places on the map that they felt like they belonged. Each map was analyzed looking at four factors: range, center, scale, and map-like quality. Also, the number of places labeled on maps was counted (including places of belonging) and catalogued. Each of the four factors of the mapping analysis is described below, along with student maps that exemplify different categories within each factor.

Range analysis sought to describe the extent or area that students perceived to be their community. Four categories of range were found in students' maps: neighborhood, city, state, or nation. The critical question for this categorization was *what is captured on the paper and where*

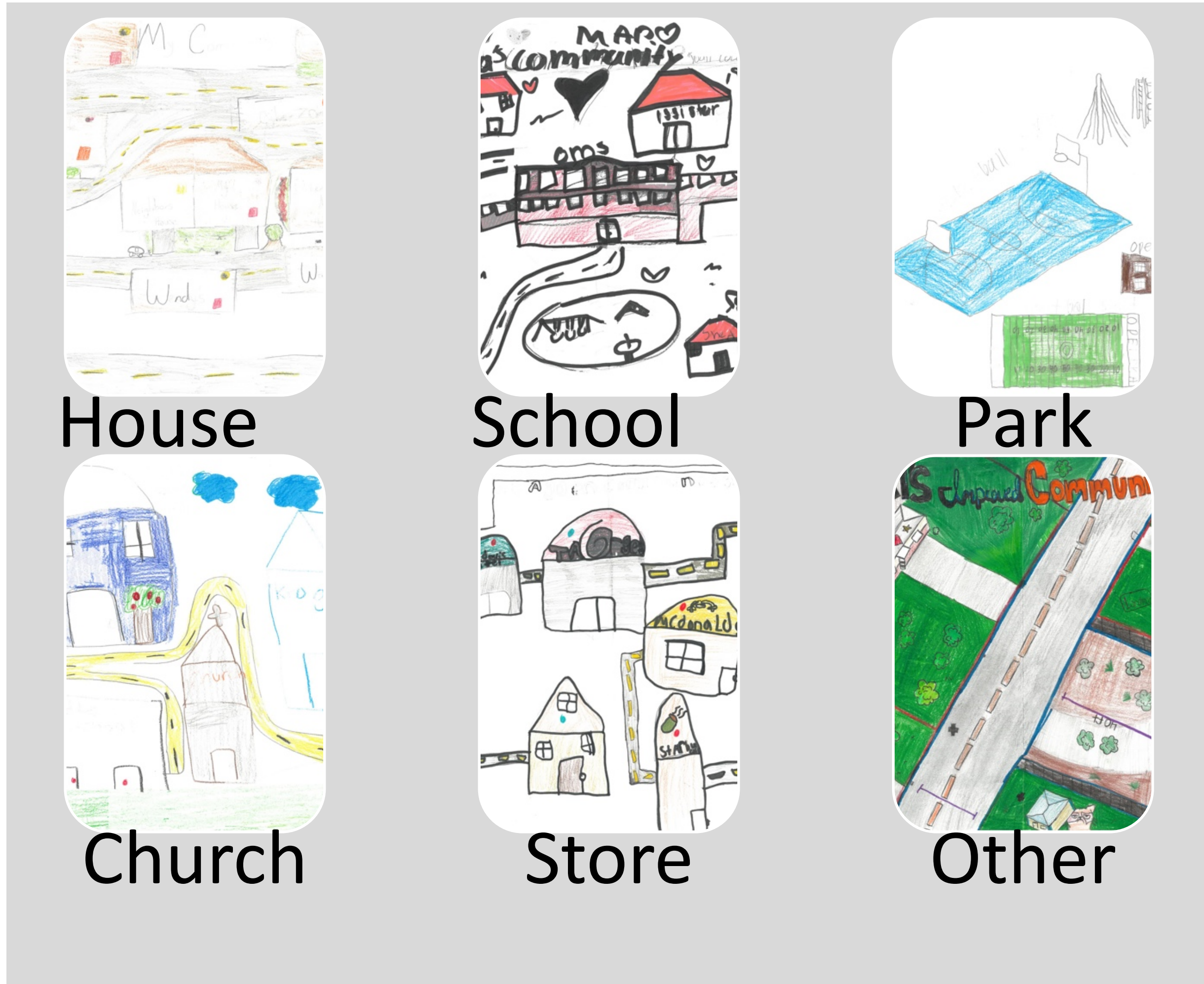
are boundaries located? Figure 9 shows examples of student maps that were designated in each of these categories.

FIGURE 9: Examples of Student Map Ranges



Center analysis sought to discern what students placed at the center of their maps. Center categories varied, but there were considerable common appearances of places and objects at the center of student maps, including homes, churches, stores, parks, schools, and others. Figure 10 shows examples of these six categories of centers that students frequently used on their maps.

FIGURE 10: Examples of Student Map Centers



Scale analysis sought to determine the level of detail provided by the student on the map. This was a highly subjective criteria, but the critical question was about how the student covered the space on the paper, and whether that coverage was meaningful. Scale is meant to demonstrate students' knowledge of what occupies the space—can they visual things occupying the space between objects and places? Figure 11 shows examples of the two categories of scale: low level of detail or high level of detail.

FIGURE 11: Examples of Student Map Scales

Map-like Quality sought to discern the students' spatial awareness. Like scale, the analysis focused on details. However, unlike scale, map-like quality actually asks that the details to be correct and be appropriately placed in connection with the various elements drawn on the map. If students' maps were organized in such a way that they actually corresponded to reality they were designated as having map-like quality; if their maps did not, they were designated as not having map-like quality. Figure 12 shows examples of maps with and without map-like quality.

FIGURE 12: Examples of Students’ Maps Map-Like Quality

In the first round of students’ map-making (*n*=86), students had a considerable number of clarifying questions when assigned the task to “*draw a map of your community*.” They wrestled with the abstract instructions which I purposefully left vague to force them to define what was meant by community. Students’ first round of maps were predominantly small-scale maps with a low level of detail (81%) whose range mainly focused on students’ neighborhoods (70%). Almost half of students centered their maps on their homes (45%) and over half produced maps with low levels of map-like quality (69%). Table 8 shows the breakdown of scale, range, center, and map-like quality of students first maps. It also shows the total number of places labelled on all the maps, as well as the average number of places labelled on each map.

TABLE 8: Map Analysis for Students' First Round of Maps

		Maps #1	
		n=86	
Range	Neighborhood	60	70%
	City	19	22%
	State	4	5%
	Nation	3	3%
Center	House	39	45%
	School	12	14%
	Store	12	14%
	Park	5	6%
	Church	7	8%
	Other	11	13%
Scale/Detail	Small Amount of Detail	70	81%
	Large Amount of Detail	16	19%
Map-like	No	59	69%
	Yes	27	31%

Maps #1	
n=86	
Total No. of Places Labelled	620
Average No. of Places Labelled	7.2

Students' first round of maps and these data suggest that the trend among students is to visualize their community as their neighborhoods, largely centering their maps on their own homes. This same trend was witnessed in the previous pilot study, and corresponds to middle school students' ongoing dependence and immobility (Cunningham & Kohlmeier, 2022). What is also evident from the data is the trend for students to provide low levels of detail and low levels of map-like quality. This suggests a lack of mature spatial awareness, as students visualize their own communities.

I have provided a purposive sample of seven maps to show examples of how students visualized their communities. The centers of students' maps were varied and did not seem to

create widespread trends, so I avoided accounting for centers directly in the purposive sample. However, as students' typical ranges were either neighborhoods or the city, I have limited the sample to those two ranges, providing examples of those ranges with the various combinations of scales (high/low) and map-like qualities (yes/no). Table 9 shows the combination of data points each of the seven samples included, and the percentage of student maps that share the same combination of data points.

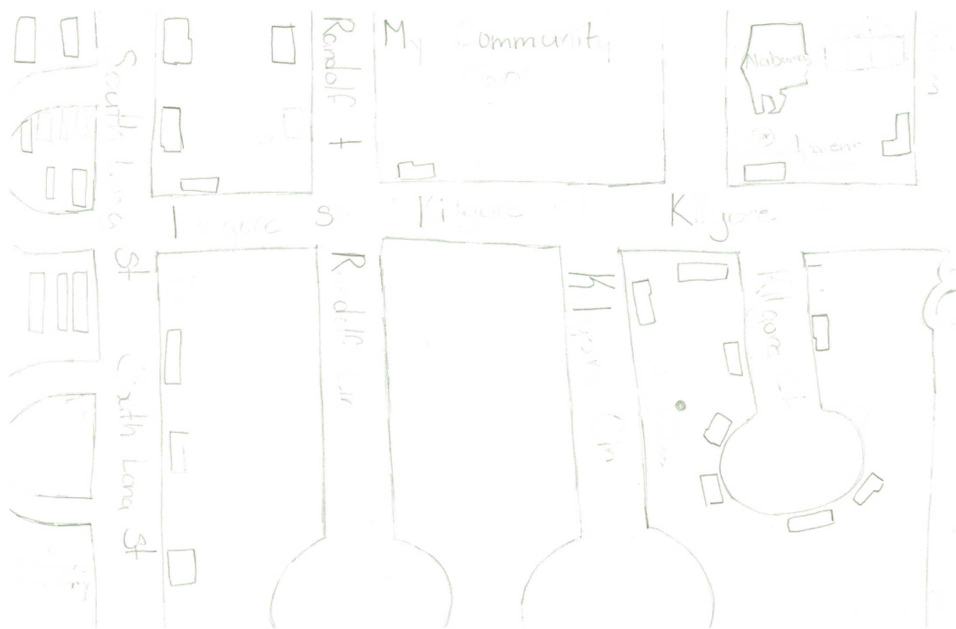
TABLE 9: Combination of Data Points Used for Purposive Sample

	Range	Scale/Detail	Map-Like	Percentage of Students with Similar Maps
Map 1	Neighborhood	Low	No	51%
Map 2	Neighborhood	Low	Yes	14%
Map 3	Neighborhood	High	Yes	6%
Map 4	Neighborhood	High	No	4%
Map 5	City	Low	No	6%
Map 6	City	Low	Yes	6%
n/a	City	High	Yes	0%
Map 7	City	High	No	7%

MAP 1: Neighborhood Map with Low Detail and No Map-Like Quality

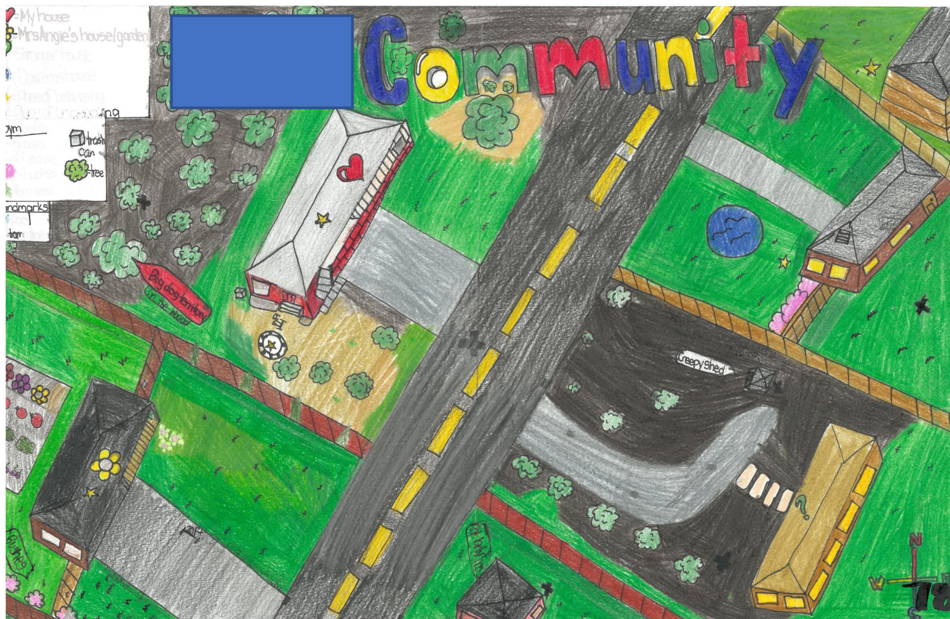
This map is indicative of over half of students' first maps (51%). It centers on the student's house and proximate area. Notice the inclusion of a family member's home (upper right) and an otherwise unlabeled store (lower left). The basic linear structure of the roads shows a basic spatial sense that intersects with the student's immediate experiences of home life and familial life. The amount of detail is minimal (more decorative than illustrative) and the map-like quality is low because of the line pattern with no landmarks or ways to indicate direction.

MAP 2: Neighborhood Map with Low Detail and Map-Like Quality



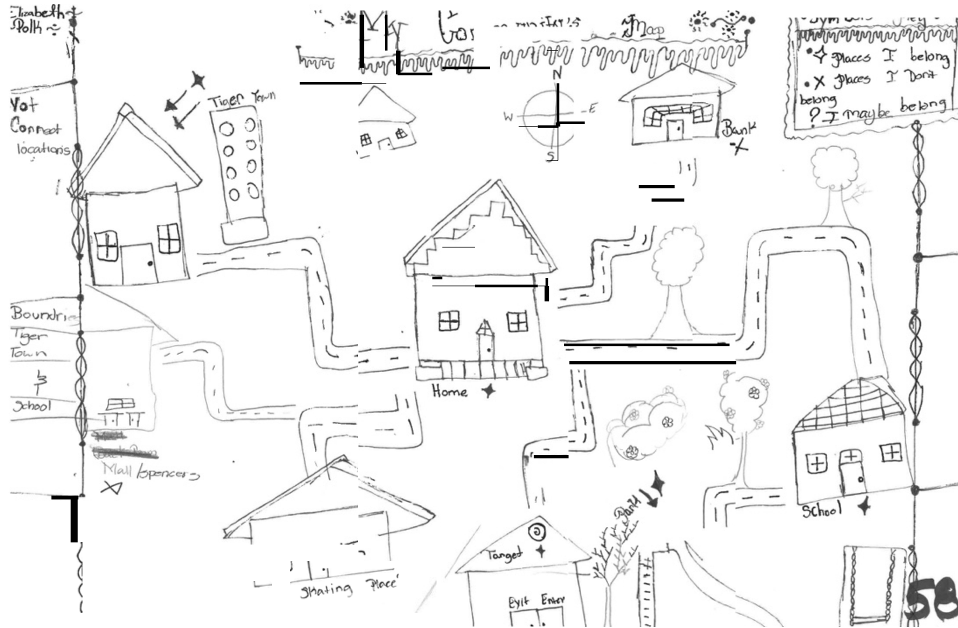
Fourteen percent of students produced maps such as this one, which focuses on a very select portion of the locality (hence, neighborhood designation). The labeling of streets correctly and awareness of the grid pattern with cul-de-sacs does indicate map-like spatial awareness. However, there is very little detail provided that shows how the student visualizes the space beyond houses and streets. The houses are all basically rectangular shapes right along the roadway line with little more to offer. A significant amount of white space is left, space that is realistically occupied with something that is not apparent from the map.

MAP 3: Neighborhood Map with High Detail and Map-Like Quality



Map 3 provides an example of what six percent of students in the class produced—a community map showing a neighborhood with a high level of detail and map-like quality. While the student is able to achieve both the high detail and map-like qualities, it comes by limiting the boundaries of the community visualized to the zone of proximate experience on the home and adjacent houses. This map, like those in group, constitutes those maps that are the most “zoomed-in” of and show the most confined vision for what constitutes community.

MAP 4: Neighborhood Map with High Detail and No Map-Like Quality



Map 4 shows a common trend seen in both the pilot study and this study. These maps center on the students' homes and create a series of tentacles that string in meandering directions from the map's center. This map actually has a high level of detail and labeling (both are in pencil and not clearly evident in the transposed image). The directional quality and spacing include possible attempts to be map-like, however, it does so without actually showing spatial awareness. One can gather only that the various places are away from the center, and perhaps in a vague direction. There is not a coherent correspondence between most of the elements labeled in the map.

Maps 1-4 exemplify what over 7 out of 10 of the students turned in—a community map focused on the neighborhood. Six of those seven turned in a map with a low level of detail. Five of those six turned in a map with low levels of map-like quality. Looking at these four types of maps together, it seems that students clearly struggle with visualizing their community beyond their more immediate zone of home. Maps 1, 3, and 4 (like 45% of all student maps) centered on their home. Organizing the community boundaries outside of that central place proved a

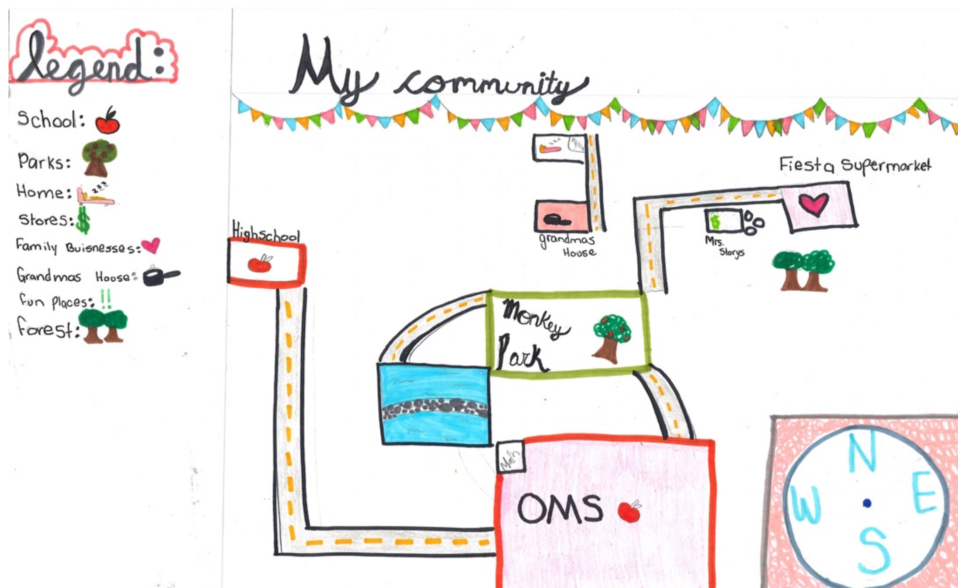
challenge. Map 2 did not have an evident central focus, but simply seemed to try to zoom out and see a series of streets as providing the boundary. Yet, that proved detrimental to the level of detail provided. Map 3, conversely, chose to zoom in on the home and create a very detailed, but also very small view of community comprised only of one's own home and adjacent neighbors. Maps 1 and 4 seem to suggest that students do see more beyond just their homes, but struggle with the spatial experience and/or knowledge to communicate it visually.

MAP 5: City Map with Low Detail and No Map-Like Quality

Map 5 is an example of a city-wide map with little detail and no map-like quality. The student's labels on this map do not show-up clearly when transposed, but the range of this map spans from Jordan-Hare Stadium (upper left) to Opelika Middle School (lower left red box) to a friend's house and Auburn Mall (lower right) then to Chick-fil-A (upper right), with a multitude of places and spaces in both Auburn and Opelika randomly labeled across the top and bottom. Six percent of students drew maps like this, which were more prevalent in the pilot study. They suggest that students see themselves in space based on experiences with little awareness of everything in-between. There is little to no reference to other structures, directions or the lay of

the land that actually occurs withing the space depicted in the map. It is not uncommon to see students just fill in large areas with green.

MAP 6: City Map with Low Detail and Map-Like Quality



Map 6 shows a rudimentary attempt to depict a community occupying a larger space than simply a neighborhood. It, like Map 5, shows a student visualizing a larger community. However, it also shows considerable gaps in what exists between the places marked on the map. This map, however, does properly orient the limited number of places labeled, showing them in a more accurate map-like quality.

MAP 7: City Map with High Detail and No Map-Like Quality

Map 7 is example of what seven percent of students turned in as a depiction of their community. There is a considerable area covered in this map, designating it as a city-wide map; too, a number of critical details including street names and places are included. However, there are a number of inaccurate spatial issues at work here. It seems the student’s thinking began at an intersection of two streets from which four quadrants emerged which were then organized. However, some of the elements simply do not fit together directionally or adjacently.

Maps 5-7 exemplify what 2 out of every 10 students in the class produced—a city-wide ranging map. However, it is worth noting that each one of the students struggled with either inclusion of details or map-like quality. Not a single student turned in a map depicting a city-wide community with a high level of detail and map-like quality.

Taking map analysis together as a whole, it is clear that students visualize their communities within the context of homes and neighborhoods. Even with such a parochial view, students are still not visualizing their communities with a high degree of accuracy or spatial awareness. Middle schoolers zones of experiences at home, with family, in school, at church,

and/or in commercial activities seems to dominate spaces and places labeled, with minimal capacity to visualize the areas in-between.

How do middle school students define their community?

Continuing the exploration phase of DBR, this first project asked students to define what community meant to them in the course of a written reflection. These definitions were analyzed using a series of themes generated from the literature base on sense of place, community, and belonging. Rich and significant passages from students' writing were first flagged and then categorized with one or more of the themes detailed in Table 10.

TABLE 10: Themes from Sense of Belonging and Sense of Community Indices and the Rationale for Triggering the Theme in Student Work

Theme	Rationale
Attachment & Belonging	Passages that discuss belonging, bonding, meaning, fidelity, commitment, or emotive language (love, like, &c)
Comfortable & Welcomed	Passages that discuss comfort, relaxing, enjoying self, fitting in, (non)judgment, tolerance or acceptance.
Connection	Passages discussing relationship and respect with people, places, or spaces. Includes discussion of feeling like other people, similar to other people, notions of sharing, closeness, tightness, togetherness, and unity.
Familiarity	Passages discussing family, friends, living space, home, or memories. Includes notions of trust, longevity, birthplace, growing up, and having experiences in a place.
Participating	Passages discussing contributions, helping, taking part, work, taking care or service.
Interested	Passages discussing enjoyment within place and space, boredom, desire and interest in a space, or care.
Knowledge & Awareness	Passages discussing knowledge, awareness, and being used to people, places, or spaces
Membership	Passages discussing being a part of something, feeling valued, feeling wanted or not being alone.
Neighborliness	Passages discussing people outside of family, the public, or others. Includes notions of hospitality and respect.
Safety	Passages that discuss an environment that is safe and clean and produces a feeling of security.

Analyzing and coding students' definitions of community in their first written reflection saw 144 passages being flagged among the 2598 words students used. Often students used choppy, compound sentences to respond ("Community is what is around you that make the community. Like the people, and the homes, and land. All this determines if the community is good or bad.").

Cogent responses were rare ("It is a place you belong in and people that you belong with."). It was clear that most of the time students were thinking while they were writing, producing a stream of consciousness as opposed to a textbook definition ("I would say that the community is the places that you usually are around or live/lived at. It could be the place you feel that you belong in some places. It could also be the place that you were originally born such as being born in a different state. It is what kind of emotions your community makes u go through. Emotions like safe, happy, overjoyed, loving. Your community can be helpful."). Two-hundred-seven themes were assigned to these passages that were flagged. Table 11 shows the resulting number of times that themes were triggered within the students' definitions of community. It shows the percentage of times the themes were triggered in students' definitions. The themes which were invoked 10% or more of the time were *a priori* determined to be selectively analyzed to delineate what students were most preoccupied with when defining community.

TABLE 11: Sense of Belonging & Sense of Community Themes Triggered in Students' Definitions of Community from Reflection #1

	No. of Passages Triggering the Theme	**Percentage of Passages Capturing the Theme**
Familiarity	46	22%
Attachment & Belonging	43	21%
Connection	33	16%
Comfortable & Welcomed	32	15%
Knowledge & Awareness	13	6%
Interested	11	5%
Safety	9	4%
Participating	8	4%
Neighborliness	7	3%
Membership	5	2%
TOTAL THEMES	*207*	
TOTAL PASSAGES	*144*	

Familiarity. This theme draws upon what students feel most used to being around and dealing with. A number of students simply called their community that place "I am usually around or live at;" "Where I spend most of my time;" or, "The places I go every single day." Birthplace definitions were commonplace, as well as places of growing up. Indeed, of the 46 times this theme was triggered, 12 of them were because students referred to their community as their "home" in some sense— "The community is like my home;" "It's the place that is your second home;" "My community is the place I call home." This theme, too, was triggered when students invoked the presence of their family. For many, community was defined as "the place where you have family and friends" or "lots of family." The closeness and sentiment that flows from home and family would reverberate throughout students' thinking while defining community, clearly informing the next three most popularly triggered themes.

Attachment & Belonging. Twenty-one percent of the time students were speaking toward the definition of their community they were using language expressing deep emotions and belonging. Community is a place—"where you belong;" "you feel like you belong;" "you truly belong or always will be in." This sense of belonging was credited as coming primarily from the people in the area. One student defines community as "a place you feel like you belong and where you won't be judged because there are loving people who care about your thoughts." Students cite their "family members" and "their people" as creating the sentiment of care. One student goes so far to describe community as "more about the people and not the place."

Sentimental and emotional language also triggered this theme, further offering insight into what created deep feelings within students. Feeling "loved" and "cared for" was a common response. Too, students spoke of "peaceful[ness]" and a "feeling of fellowship" that occurs in

this “place of importance” that “makes you happy.” In such places you can simply “let loose and just have fun.” This is because you are “with the people that love you and respect you and have been there for you and will not stop. They love you.”

Connection. This theme follows students’ willingness to discuss family and people they are close to. “Community is a group word that includes your neighbors and family.” Certainly, this theme was triggered where students articulated the togetherness and unity that comprises community. “It is where people come together” and “a place you take care of.” The rationale for this coming together have to do with the depth of bonds shared with people in the place—it’s where people are that you love;” “where you have family, friends, and people you care about.” Further describing these people beyond simply family and friends, students reported these people with whom students “share common characteristics” and are “a group of like-minded people that who you share the same ideas and thoughts with.” These connections were credited as creating “a group of people willing to trust one another” and an assurance that they are “people who help each other when they are in need.”

Comfortable & Welcomed. When students spoke of connections with others as important, it was not uncommon for them to describe why being connected was important. For instance, “being with people who don’t look at you weird and make fun of you.” Fifteen percent of the themes triggered by students’ definition of community captured this sense of acceptance, non-judgment, and ability to fit-in. It was not uncommon for students to just name this theme—“Community is where you feel comfortable and welcomed.” Students suggest that this theme occurs “where you can have a good time” and “be yourself with others. It is also a place that is open, “where you can share stuff with people,” and “share ideas and thoughts.” Also, students

suggest that comfort occurs in “places that people like them are” and “everybody fits in because you all dress and talk the same.”

These four predominant themes triggered in students’ definitions of community actually reflect the same top-four themes triggered in the previous pilot study. When examining the qualities of the various themes, there is a more intimate and sentimental sense about these four compared to the other themes. It seems unsurprising that students who visualize their communities as so centered on homes and houses bound within their neighborhoods, would use words in their definitions that reflect their visions of community. “Family” was used 9 different times (“community is a big group of people who are like a family”), “home” and “house” were used a total of 16 times (“community is the place my house is;” “where I call home”), and “neighborhood” was used 6 times (“community is where I can be, like my neighborhood. It is what I do everyday and stuff”). These four words alone constituted just over 20% of the 144 passages that were initially flagged as rich or significant.

Students’ ability to articulate a definitions of community, like their maps, was a challenge. Students struggled in formulating the abstract and vague meaning of an otherwise common word. Definitions, like maps, tended to resort to the familiar and familial—touching on themes that lend themselves to discussions of the intimacy and proximity of home and family life. No definition identified or invoked broad-sounding words, like “city,” “Opelika,” “association,” “society,” “town,” etc. Indeed, in reviewing the transcripts, the broadest word for a communal group of people used by any of the students was “neighborhood.” Students associate community with people they are close to and that they trust. Trust flows from on-going connections and interactions. Most of the places these sorts of relationships exist are at home, among families and in neighborhoods. The importance of this trust and these connections is that

they enable the student to express themselves and share who they are without recourse or judgment. Such an environment instills within the student a sense of love and caring, further promoting what one student describes as their own growth: “I can be myself and grow into who I am meant to be and just let some things go.”

How do middle school students narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?

In the same written reflection where students defined their communities, they were also asked about belonging, unbelonging, and how they felt about belonging in Opelika. Additionally, students had to develop a Google Slides photo tour presenting pictures of places they felt they belonged, as well as a unique explanation for the feeling. The final part of the project was for students to record a 5-10 minute presentation of their maps, photo tours, and reflections. All of these items were transcribed and analyzed to determine patterns and trends among middle school students as they narrate their sense of place and belonging. These transcripts were analyzed using the same series of themes generated from the literature base on sense of place, community, and belonging listed in Table 11 (above). Rich and significant passages from students’ writing were first flagged and then categorized with one or more of these themes detailed. The three sets of transcripts saw a total of 1182 passages flagged as rich or significant and 1840 themes were applied to these passages. Table 12 shows the resulting number of times that themes were triggered within each of the transcripts, as well as the total. Too, it shows the percentage of total times the themes were triggered in students’ discussions. I determined ahead of time to focus on the themes that students invoked 10% of the time or more. I did this so I could hone in on what the students own words and explanations seemed most preoccupied with.

TABLE 12: Sense of Belonging & Sense of Community Themes Triggered in Students' Narration of Belonging from Reflection #1, Photo Tours, and Individual Community Map Presentations

	Reflection #1	Photo Tour	Presentation	Total	Percentage
Familiarity	135	115	97	347	19%
Comfortable & Welcomed	134	75	80	289	16%
Attachment & Belonging	141	18	58	217	12%
Knowledge & Awareness	80	44	52	176	10%
Connection	90	33	42	165	9%
Safety	75	32	44	151	8%
Interested	71	32	44	147	8%
Participating	52	31	48	131	7%
Membership	56	18	35	109	6%
Neighborliness	68	15	25	108	6%
TOTAL THEMES	902	413	525	1840	
TOTAL PASSAGES	630	274	278	1182	

The predominant themes invoked concerning students' discussions and narrations of belonging somewhat mirror the themes triggered in students' definitions of belonging. Three themes share both inquires top positions: *familiarity*, *attachment & belonging*, and *comfort & welcomed.* However, in the discussion and narration of belonging, *connection* drops off as a top theme and is replaced by *knowledge & awareness.* Students' own words will be used to better understand what these themes mean to the middle school students' understanding of belonging.

Familiarity. As before in students' definitions of community, this theme was widely invoked by students' own discussion of "family" (use 50 times) and "home" (used 54 times). Students particularly spoke to longevity within a place in these transcripts. As before, students described a strong connection between their birthplace and feeling belonging: "I belong here because it is very special, it was where I was born and where I grew up." What is remarkable about students' discussion in these transcripts, as opposed to their definitions of belonging,

however, was how they described growing up in a place. Aside from being "where I have lived all my life," students described "caring about the place" and it "holding a special place in my heart" because it is where they spent their whole life. The importance of longevity is echoes in students' descriptions—students cite a widely varying number of years needed to be in a place before you feel you belong (ranging from 3 to 12 to "all my life"). Results from the initial adapted survey of Schmidt (2013) showed that the amount of time students have lived in Opelika ranges from 1-13 years, the average being 7.98 years. Students note that longevity and time spent in a place has an important sentimental connection involving "memories" (a term used 42 times in these transcripts). The connection they have with the people and the past in that place and in their own minds occupies a place of importance: "I belong there because I have experiences to look back on and have made memories with friends and families there." Another student described these memories as creating something of a permanent bond with the place that would be difficult to be undone: "I know the place well and I cannot forget it. I will never forget it. I have too many memories there."

Comfort & Welcomed. Students feel they belong in places "where you have the chance to grow as a person, where you have a chance to be yourself." These places are where you can "feel good" and "don't have to worry." Indeed, the notion of a place without anxiety takes a prominent position in students' discussions. Not having to "worry" is invoked 18 times in describing the importance of belonging. While a number of these times students describe such a place as enabling them to more passively "chill" and "relax," there is a notable tendency for students to identify themselves as not having to worry so that they can be more active in their own growth, expressions and actions: "I can do things here, try things, and make mistakes without being judged." The level of comfort is, again, associated with fitting in (used 39 times). Students

clearly associate likeness with those around them as contributing to a being "welcomed, feeling a part, feeling like I belong." One student articulates that "because the people around me are like me I don't have to worry about changing who I am or acting a different way. I can just be me and I am understood and fit in."

Attachment & Belonging. This theme, again, was triggered by a number of emotive sentiments described by students as feeling a "loved place in my heart" or, simply, "belonging" (used 84 times). Students describe being "loved" (22 times) and "cared" for (73 times). These are similar things that triggered the theme in students' definitions of community. However, students' descriptions of belonging showed a notable triggering of this theme where students described themselves as feeling "wanted" (14 times) and "needed" (43 times).

"I feel wanted and a part of something;"

"I feel a part and have opportunities to connect with people. I feel safe and wanted there."

"I feel wanted and needed and can say my opinion there and it matters."

"I need the place and feel needed there and feel I belong."

"You feel like you are needed there and the place is calling you."

Previous sentiments of attachment described in community definitions emphasize how students felt they needed or wanted people in the place due to their care and/or support. However, in these narrations of belonging students suggest that they, themselves, need to be wanted and felt as critical components.

Knowledge & Awareness. Familiarity is closely related to this theme in that being-used-to a place tends to create heightened levels of knowledge and awareness. This theme suggests that belonging and community are associated with a heightened sense of factual knowledge about the people and the places around you. One student captures the theme when saying, "I belong here

because it is where I live, where the people around you are. They know you, you know them. You are good and you know you wanna stay here and be here." The ongoing experience of being in the place every day lends students a sense of routine and commonplace: "It is where I go everyday, without hesitation. I don't have to think about it or ask permission. I just know I can be there." A number of students indicate knowing street names and directions as an important facet of this theme. Yet, knowledge associated with other people seems most important with this them. People "know[ing] you" (used 15 times) and students "knowing them" (used 27 times) seems a critical component to "feeling like I am welcome and fit in." However, import of this mutual knowledge is the capacity of mutual care. One student describes her neighbors as the people who "know me and want to help me become a star." With these people who "know you…you get to grow and become a part of the place." With them, you get to "be cared for" (used 19 times) and to "care for" others (used 13 times).

Students' own words about *familiarity* indicated they feel they belong in places where they have been able to spend long-term amounts of time and have critical experiences that make lasting memories between the people and places around them. Their descriptions regarding *comfort & welcoming* related to belonging show desire to fit in and not have to worry about their identities. They feel that places that promote belonging are those places that they are free to try new things and dare to make mistakes. Students' passages triggering *attachment & belonging* and *knowledge and awareness* show a desire among students to associate belonging not only with where their needs are cared for, but where they are wanted and needed. Students want to reciprocate—not simply being cared for, but to care for, as well. They seek to know those around them, and to be known among those around them so encouragement and growth can occur.

Students identified 313 places they felt like they belonged in their photo tours. Table 13 details the list and frequency of places that students identified as places they felt they belonged.

TABLE 13: Table of Places of Belonging

Places	Frequency	Percent of Whole No. (313)	Percent of Students (n=84)
Others' Houses	80	25.56%	95.24%
Home	52	16.61%	61.90%
Stores	50	15.97%	59.52%
Other*	36	11.50%	42.86%
School	33	10.54%	39.29%
Park	16	5.11%	19.05%
Gym	15	4.79%	17.86%
Church	13	4.15%	15.48%
Outdoors	13	4.15%	15.48%
At-Play/Sports	12	3.83%	14.29%
Restaurants	11	3.51%	13.10%
Water Places	9	2.88%	10.71%
Library	3	0.96%	3.57%
Cemetery	2	0.64%	2.38%
Theater	2	0.64%	2.38%
Clubs	1	0.32%	1.19%
Museum	1	0.32%	1.19%

**examples: mom's office, in the car, on the sidewalk, college, etc.*

The vast number of places of belonging that students identified are private in nature. Indeed, if they are public spaces, they are typically commercial or educational. The number of public spaces identified that are civic-oriented (spaces primarily for association and fellowship) was severely limited. In fact, in an initial survey given to students, the adapted survey of Schmidt (2013) asked students how many activities outside of home and school they were involved in. Students' responses ranged from 0 to 3, with the average number being .93, or less than one. This means most middle schoolers in this project are widely uninvolved in activities in the greater community. In fact, when students are later asked in the same survey to list the most important things they are involved in outside of home and school, 11 said "nothing" and four left the question blank. One student wrote, "I do not participate in anything;" while another

responded, “Nothing. Opelika has very limited activities.” The things that students did list were mostly social (5 answered “with friends”), commercial (6 answered “shopping”), self-oriented or passive (8 referred to “being outside” while 2 referred to working out at the gym). Girl Scouts was cited 1 time and church cited 2 times—aside from these, no activities were remotely civic-oriented or far removed from home or school. This goes hand-in-hand with students’ first maps’ tendency to be more neighborhood oriented.

Students’ understanding of belonging could also be informed from survey data collected from the students at the very onset of projects offered the following descriptive results. The results of the adapted place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003) and the adapted survey by Schmidt (2013) are reported in Table 14 and 15, respectively. Each shows the mean scores for each of the survey questions (5-point Likert scale; 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree), and the adapted place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003) includes the mean total (a total score of 36 or higher indicates a sense of belonging).

TABLE 14: Descriptive Statistics of Students’ First Responses and Sum of Students’ First Response on Adapted Place-Attachment Survey by Williams & Vaske (2003)

Survey Question	n	Mean	Std. Dev.
I feel Opelika is a part of me.	90	3.43	.984
Opelika is the best place for what I like to do.	90	2.98	1.101
Opelika is very special to me.	90	3.50	1.063
No other place can compare to Opelika.	90	2.42	1.141
I identify strongly with Opelika.	90	3.10	1.039
I get more satisfaction out of Opelika than any other place I visit.	90	2.47	1.093
I am very attached to Opelika.	90	3.02	1.180
Doing what I do in Opelika is more important to me than doing it in any other place.	90	2.68	1.110
Opelika says a lot about who I am compared to other places I have visited.	90	2.81	1.141
I wouldn’t substitute any other area for doing the types of things I do in Opelika.	90	2.64	1.095
Opelika means a lot to me.	90	3.27	1.149
The things I do at Opelika I would enjoy doing just as much at a similar site	90	2.70	0.953
AVERAGE SUM	90	35.02	7.393

TABLE 15: Descriptive Statistics of Students First Responses to each Item on Adapted Survey of Schmidt (2013)

Survey Question	n	Mean	Std. Dev.
I feel like I "fit in" in Opelika.	90	3.12	1.279
I feel that I know my way around Opelika.	88	3.93	0.956
I feel that I am knowledgeable about the history of Opelika.	88	2.78	1.169
I feel that I am knowledgeable about issues facing Opelika.	88	2.99	1.056
I feel that I am respected and valued as a person in Opelika.	88	3.20	1.186
I feel that I am familiar with the places and spaces in Opelika.	88	3.84	.958
I feel that I am a part of the community of Opelika.	88	3.30	1.146
I feel that I am connected with people outside my family and school in Opelika	88	3.31	1.207
I feel that Opelika is a place where I can make a difference.	88	3.09	1.024
I feel proud to say I am from Opelika.	88	3.17	1.261
If I left Opelika I would be sad.	88	2.93	1.388

The adapted place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003) shows that 46 students (51%) did not feel they belonged to Opelika, whereas 44 students (49%) indicated they felt they belonged to Opelika. This result seemed high, given students' neighborhood-oriented vision of communities and familial narrations of belonging. Indeed, the average sum total of survey results from the Williams-Vaske survey (2003) was just 1-point shy of indicating an average of belonging among students. The adapted Schmidt survey (2013) results show that students have a slightly higher than neutral response (indicating favorable views) of the city of Opelika and their place in it. Even more surprising were students own responses to the ninth question on the written survey. When asked in Question 9, "Do you feel you belong to the community of Opelika?;" 43 students (61%) said "Yes," and only 28 students (39%) said "No."

Survey results and written response to Question 9 would seem to indicate a more city-oriented student body than community maps and narrations of belonging would indicate. The source of this seeming contradiction during this exploration and analysis phase of DBR led me to question what students actually visualize when they hear or think about "Opelika" as their local community. Do students conflate their own neighborhoods with Opelika, generally? Do students

know how large the city of Opelika is? Ensuring that student understood the coverage of Opelika as a broad, local community took a central role in developing the curricular intervention for the second phase of this DBR project.

Summary of DBR Exploration/Analysis Phase: The First Research Question

Students in this research study visualize and define their neighborhoods in a parochial manner that reflects their dependence and immobility. Their sense of community indicates that those intimate connections and experiences at home, in families and in neighborhoods does not widely translate beyond these proximate zones of experience. They do not visualize their communities widely (or well) beyond their homes and neighborhoods. They tend to define their experiences of home and family as what makes community. Their narrations of belonging emphasize the importance of memories and experience to create meaningful bonds. Fitting in with others without anxiety is associated with a desire to be, grow, experience, and make mistakes. Students also suggest belonging is associated with places where they have cared for, but also where they have agency and are empowered to be a critical and necessary part.

When examining students' visions of community, definitions of community, and narrations of belonging, it becomes evident that middle schoolers are still closely bound to home and family life. As budding public figures, social studies curriculum aimed at developing active, transformative citizens must consider ways to expand students sense of community and sense of belonging to larger entities than home, family, street, and neighborhood.

Survey data suggests conflicting views of belonging to the local community. A valid survey instrument suggests a majority of students do not feel they belong to the local community. However, at another time in written responses a majority of students suggest they do. This raises questions about how students envision their local community and whether they conflate the term

Opelika with their own narrowly defined individual communities. These exploratory results helped me craft a project with the following goals: (1) expanding students' own sense of their communities, (2) properly seeing the expanse of their local community, and (3) attempting to heighten the sense of belonging students feel toward their local community.

DBR Phase #2: Design/Construction Phase—The Second Research Question

How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging following a collaborative community history and mapping project?

The second phase of DBR is where the researcher begins curriculum interventions and iterations to achieve the research goals. These goals are generated and refined from the first phase of analysis/exploration (Freedman & Kim, 2019). Based on students' parochial sense of community and belonging as generally confined to home, family and neighborhood, a curriculum intervention was developed to determine if students' sense of community and sense of belonging could be expanded to their local community. The curriculum intervention devised was a community history project that followed from students' individual community mapping projects. I hoped that students' parochial vision of community might make them have small, expert knowledge in certain areas of the larger local community. By tapping into this expert knowledge, I hoped that students could teach and learn from each other, thereby socially constructing a broader sense of community and instilling a greater sense of belonging through joint awareness and education. The curriculum intervention involved the following:

1. Based on students' individual maps, they were purposefully grouped into groups of 2-4. These groups were determined by overlap or adjacent boundaries shared by individual maps.
2. Once in groups, students were asked to share and compare their individually drawn maps and then create a group map on Google MyMaps which accounts for each individuals'

map. Using this GIS technology students were asked to draw community boundary lines and observe and measure the perimeter and area of their group's community with spatial accuracy and sophistication.

3. Student groups were then instructed on the meaning of community assets and challenged to identify and describe ten (10) community assets within their group's community.
4. Student groups identified one of these community assets and conducted a community history project. This project included students doing joint research, conducting an out-of-class interview of a community member associate with the asset, and creating a "token" that visually and artistically symbolized their group community and emphasized their chosen community asset.
5. These projects were recorded and presented to the class. As projects were presented, a large wall mural outline of the city's boundaries was populated with students' tokens so that the student body could begin to see the expanse of the larger city-wide local community.

After this curriculum intervention was conducted, students were asked to repeat three assignments already completed: (a) re-draw a community map; (b) re-reflection on what community and belonging mean in a written reflection; and, (c) re-take the initial survey. These second maps, reflections and surveys were then analyzed and compared with the first maps reflections and surveys to determine how students' understanding of their local community and sense of belonging to their local community influenced by the collaborative community history and mapping project? The findings from the second round of students' community maps, reflections and surveys are presented below. This comparative analysis will determine influence of the curriculum intervention by asking:

- How were middle school students' visualizations of their community influenced?;
- How were middle school students' definitions of their community influenced?;
- How were middle school students' narrations of their belonging influenced?; and,
- How were middle school students sense of belonging to their local community influenced?

How were middle school students' visualizations of their community influenced?

By the time students had completed their own community mapping projects and their group community history projects, students' second renditions of their community demonstrated shifts. Students' second round of maps (n=80) were now almost evenly split between small-scale maps with a low level of detail (53%) and large-scale maps with a high level of detail (47%). The range of these maps now saw a majority of students mapping the city (53%). Almost half of students still centered their maps on their homes (45%) and well over half produced maps with high levels of map-like quality (71%). Table 16 shows a side-by-side breakdown of scale, range, center, and map-like quality of students' first and second maps.

TABLE 16: Side-by-Side Comparison of Map Analysis for Students First and Second Maps

		Maps #1		**Maps #2**	
		n=86		*n=80*	
Range	neighborhood	60	70%	37	46%
	city	19	22%	42	53%
	state	4	5%	1	1%
	nation	3	3%	0	0%
Center	House	39	45%	36	45%
	School	12	14%	15	19%
	Store	12	14%	14	18%
	Park	5	6%	4	5%
	Church	7	8%	3	4%
	Other	11	13%	8	10%
Detail	Small Amount of Detail	70	81%	42	53%
	Large Amount of Detail	16	19%	38	47%
Map-like	No	59	69%	23	29%
	Yes	27	31%	57	71%

There were 80 students who turned in both the first and second maps, allowing a side-by-side analysis and study of changes and shifts. Table 17 catalogues the number of changes in each of the four mapping analysis factors that occurred between students' first and second maps.

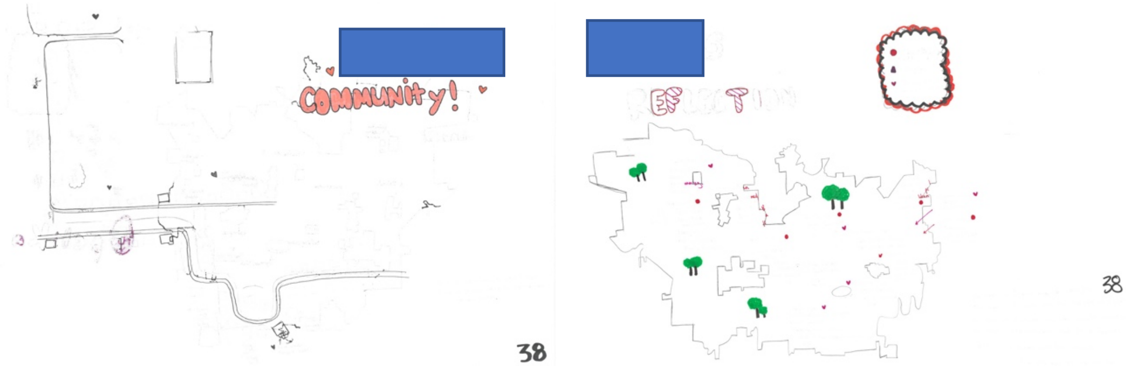
TABLE 17: Number of Changes/Shifts from Map #1 to Map #2 (*n=80*)

	Total Number
Number of Maps with CENTER changes	35
Number of Maps with RANGE changes	24
Number of Maps with SCALE changes	24
Number of Maps with MAP-LIKE changes	31

Each of the changes and shifts point to students undergoing a change in thinking about how they visualize their community. The changes and shifts associated with different maps centers did not demonstrate a pattern or produce a general result or trend. However, it does indicate that 35 students re-imagined and re-oriented their community maps from the first to the second drawings. The shifts in range, scale, and map-like quality, however, seem to provide more insight into students' thinking from the time of their first to their second maps.

Concerning range shifts, 19 students' maps expanded their communities, whereas 5 maps saw the range contract. Of the 19 maps that expanded, all 19 went from a first map with a neighborhood range to a second map with a city range. Of the five maps that contracted, each of these maps shifted from a state or national range to a city range. This means that all 24 shifts in range were due to students beginning to visualize their communities at a city-wide level by the time they drew their communities with their second maps. Maps Sets 1 and 2, show two sets of student work that exemplify these range shifts to the city.

MAP SET 1: Range Shift Sample; Students First Map (Left) and Second Map (Right)



MAP SET 2: Range Shift Example; Students First Map (Left) and Second Map (Right)

Concerning scale changes, there were 24 students whose maps grew in detail in the course of the first (low level of detail) map to the second (high level of detail) map (see example in Map Set 3, below). Similarly, concerning map-like quality changes, there were 31 shifts from low map-like quality to high map-like quality (see example in Map Set 4, below). Together, both these changes in scale and map-like quality show a student body more carefully and correctly visualizing the communities they depicted.

MAP SET 3: Scale/Detail Shift Example; Students First Map (Left) and Second Map (Right)

MAP SET 4: Map-Like Quality Shift Example; Students First Map (Left) and Second Map (Right)

Students' maps were also analyzed by counting the number of specific places labeled on the maps. There was not a considerable difference in the number of places labeled. Table 18 shows the difference in the average number of places students labelled on their two maps.

TABLE 18: Number of Places Labelled on Student Maps

Maps #1		**Maps #2**	
n=86		*n=80*	
Total No.	620	Total No.	613
Average No.	7.2	Average No.	7.7

Students' second maps suffered from similar limitations on the number of civic-oriented spaces identified and labeled. However, it is worth noting that one of the elements in the community history project was for small groups to identify community assets in their groups' combined

neighborhood boundaries. Each group ultimately had to do a community history project on one of the group's identified community assets. Table 19 lists the catalogue of community assets on which student groups did community history research projects on.

TABLE 19: Community Assets that were Subjects of Community History Projects

Asian Supermarket	Sportsplex
Auburn University	Ruby Tuesday
St. Luke AME Church	Eastview Baptist Church
Opelika Recreation Center	Curtis House (a church community center)
Opelika Middle School	Tuskegee Human & Civil Rights Multicultural Center
Lake Mead	Creekstone Hughston Homes
The Barbershop	ELL Class
Tonya's House (a church community center)	7 private citizens homes
Boys & Girls Club	Opelika High School
Municipal Park (Monkey Park)	Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail
Mt. Zion AME Church	Museum of East Alabama
East Alabama Medical Center	Northside School (an elementary school)
Opelika Public Library	Jeter School (an elementary school)
First Baptist Church	Tiger Town
Harwell Hills (a subdivision)	Wright's Supermarket
Greater Peace Church	Jordan O'Hare Stadium
Hickory Dickory Park	Burger King
New Rosemere Cemetery	Opelika Police Department

Twenty-two students included one or more of these 37 community assets on their second maps which were not included on the first map.

Students' maps underwent an observable transformation. The wall map with the irregular boundary of which we focused on during student community history project presentations influenced illustrations (see Map Sets 8 and 9). Too, the higher degree of detail and map-like quality can be credited to GIS map work on Google MyMaps (an idea that will be discussed further in chapter 5). While some maps shrank (5 maps, or 6%), the fact that 14 expanded (18%) to a city-wide vision, indicates a positive influence, especially given the goals of the

intervention. The idea was to help students properly envision the space and expanse of the local community, as well as grow their own vision of what their community included.

How were middle school students' definitions of their community influenced?

Analyzing and coding students' definitions of community in their second written reflection saw 98 passages being flagged among the 1952 words students used. 194 themes were assigned to these passages that were flagged. Table 20 shows a side-by-side comparison between themes triggered in the first definitions versus the second definitions.

TABLE 20: Table of Sense of Belonging & Sense of Community Themes Triggered in Students' Definitions of Community from Reflection #1 & Reflection #2

	Reflection 1	**%**	**Reflection 2**	**%**
Attachment & Belonging	43	21%	40	21%
Comfortable & Welcomed	32	15%	20	10%
Connection	33	16%	42	22%
Familiarity	46	22%	20	10%
Participating	8	4%	20	10%
Interested	11	5%	23	12%
Knowledge & Awareness	13	6%	6	3%
Membership	5	2%	13	7%
Neighborliness	7	3%	3	2%
Safety	9	4%	7	4%
TOTAL THEMES	*207*		*194*	
TOTAL PASSAGES	*144*		*98*	

The *a priori* 10% threshold as being considered noteworthy was maintained. These results show that, as before in their first definitions, students continued to emphasize *attachment & belonging, connection, familiarity,* and *comfort & welcomed*. However, these results also include two additional themes of emphasis: *participating* and *interested.* These two new additions will be

analyzed to determine how middle school students understand them in the context of defining community.

Participating. This theme is triggered as students begin to articulate concepts associated with service, care, and working toward bettering the community. One student exemplified the concept when he defined community as a place "where people have to come forward to keep the place safe and clean. It is where people become servants of those around them." Students regularly cited the community as where "people help each other" ("helped" being used 10 different times). "Caring about the same things" was described as a hallmark of community. Too, being "cared for" and being able to "care about" continues to tap into the students' desire for security within a community, as well as agency. "Work together" was invoked 8 times in the course of these second series of definitions, as well.

Interested. Students' definitions began pointing to community as a place they can "explore" (used 3 times). The space was now associated with intrigue—"it is a place that interests me;" "a place that I do not get bored." Students pointed to community as a place one can "enjoy yourself" and where they "want to be." One student captured the theme where she wrote "community is like home. I am excited to be there and want to be there. When I am gone I am always wanting to know what is going on. When I am there I am talking with the people about their life—we are all interested in each other."

Both these two new themes indicate a shift in how students discussed their community. It shifted from their first definitions as a place they were more passively served ("where I am cared for") and in which they existed ("the place that I live"), that now they began articulating as a place in which they could be active ("community is where I can help and make a difference") and grow into ("it is the place I can explore and discover new things and try new things").

Students' definitions changed in quality, as well. Students' definitions were seen to become: (a) less emotive; (b) less vague; (c) more coherent; (d) indicative of higher order thinking; (e) more definitive; (f) more cogent; (g) more illustrative; and, (h) less relative. Table 21 shows a sample of side-by-side definitions of community articulated by different students which stand as examples to each of the above shifts. The table includes a brief rationale for the label.

TABLE 21: Sample of Changes in Students' Definitions of Community

Label	Definition #1	Definition #2	Rational for Label
Less Emotive	I define the word community like world, like a place with a lot of people. I define community like love because wherever I go I feel loved. I define community like that one place that always makes you happy that is because it has all my favorite things to do.	A community is a group of people who share something in common. The community's strength is in the connections among them.	Definition #1 uses five emotive terms. The definition shifts from how the student feels to describing a community outside of one's emotions.
Less Vague	A community is a place or space that you feel like you belong. There can be more than one place you belong and not everyone has to belong at that place.	I would define the word "community" as a group of people living in the same area and you feel comfortable and welcome at. For example, say you go to church and people around you make you feel welcome, safe, and free to be yourself, that would be somewhere you can consider your community.	The first definition latches on to the word belong without really defining or explaining. The second goes to great length to not only define but give an example.
More Coherent	Community is a word I use for the candy store. All of that store, I love it. It's my community.	A community is a group of people who share something in common and who work together for the group.	I was not sure what the first definition was ever saying; at best it was too personal. The second clearly makes more sense in a general way.
Higher Order Thinking	I define the word as somewhere you live. I also define the word as where a lot of people work together. I also define the word as a big group of people.	I define the word as a group of people willing to trust one another and help each other out when they are in need. Community is united and will stay loyal to one another	The shifts from the basic factors of the first definition (where you live, working together, big group) to the more abstract notions of trust, unity, and loyalty are observable.
More Definitive	Community means a place you feel a part of.	I would define the word community as a place where you feel important to people and where you feel comfortable. You can be yourself around the people because you are a part of the community.	The first definition is so concise it is unremarkable. The second definition captures more and gives the reader a better sense of the students' thinking.
More Thoughtful	A group of people who lives in a neighborhood together. BONDS!	I would define community as having a sense of belonging. Notice, in the word "community" at the end it has "unity" which means "all together." A community is a tribe of people who have to stick together for a reason. You have to stay together to have a community.	The first definition assumes the reader understands the cognitive short cuts the writer takes (caps lock and exclamation points). The idea of "BONDS!" is thought out and articulated in the second.
More Cogent	A place where you spend most of your time and interact with others.	A place where you belong or a place you can call home. Community is somewhere you can express yourself in front of people you trust or care for.	The relationship between the first and the second is simply that the second seems to take the first one step further in logical thinking, producing a more cogent and telling definition.
More Illustrative	The word community means to have bonds with people and others in your neighborhood.	Community is a feeling of fellowship with others who you share the same interests and goals. You have the same	The critical word in the first definition is "bonds." The second definition really unpacks what this critical word

		attitude and outlook on things so you are happy living with them.	entails, making the definition more illustrative.
Less Relative	I would say the word community doesn't have one definition because community is different for everyone. For me community is the places I am always around or am at most of the time. The places I spend time at really determines how your community is created. All community is where a person is comfortable at and feels they belong.	Community is the place you live and grow up in. It is the space where you know the people and you share the same memories and stories from being together and working together.	The first definition hedges that the definition may not be accurate or may be relative. By the second definition, the student speaks definitively.

Students' definitions of community underwent change. They maintained a touchstone to previous themes, but added two new thematic elements, including *participating* and *interested*. Each of these new themes in their definitions evidences a more active and outgoing sense of interaction between themselves and their community. Further, students' own words show a more articulate, illustrative, and coherent sense of what community means.

How were middle school students' narrations of their belonging influenced?

Students had the opportunity to reflect, again, on the meaning of belonging and unbelonging through a second rendition of the writing reflection. Students' words were transcribed and analyzed to determine patterns and trends among middle school students as they narrate their sense of place and belonging in this second reflection. These transcripts were analyzed using the same series of themes generated from the literature base on sense of place, community, and belonging listed in Table 10 (above). Rich and significant passages from students' writing were first flagged and then categorized with one or more of these themes detailed. The transcript saw a total of 388 passages flagged as rich or significant. 680 themes were applied to these passages. Table 22 shows a side-by-side comparison between themes triggered in the narrations of first reflection versus the second reflection.

TABLE 22: Sense of Belonging & Sense of Community Themes Triggered in Students' Narrations of Belonging from Reflection #1 & Reflection #2

	Reflection #1	**Percentage for Reflection #1**	**Reflection #2**	**Percentage for Reflection #2**
Attachment & Belonging	141	16%	83	12%
Comfortable & Welcomed	134	15%	106	16%
Connection	90	10%	52	8%
Familiarity	135	15%	117	17%
Participating	52	6%	41	6%
Interested	71	8%	70	10%
Knowledge & Awareness	80	9%	67	10%
Membership	56	6%	53	8%
Neighborlines s	68	8%	20	3%
Safety	75	8%	71	10%
TOTAL THEMES	902		680	
TOTAL PASSAGES	630		388	

The *a priori* 10% threshold as being considered noteworthy was maintained. These results show that, as before in their first reflections, students continued to emphasize *attachment & belonging, familiarity,* and *comfort & welcomed*. *Connection* as a dominant theme from the first reflection dropped off in the course of the second. However, three other themes were woven throughout these second reflections: *interested, knowledge & awareness,* and *safety.* These three additions will be analyzed to determine how middle school students understand them in the context of narrating belonging.

Interested. Students showed a notable uptick in their use of the word "interest" (used 13 times) in this second reflection. "I feel like I belong in places that I care about and I am interested in what is happening." Another student writes "belonging is paying attention and taking interest in the place. You know you belong when you are interested and want to help out."

The idea of helping out was echoed by a number of students who said they "really care about the place" and "want to care for the place." Indeed, one student identified the connection between care and a level of responsibility—"When you care for the place you know it is in your control. It is up to you to make it better and love it." Another quote points to the idea of service and feeding off the energy of volunteerism: "I get to serve and there is a lot of energy there. It makes me feel better about myself." There is an evident demonstration that students' interest is tied to a growing desire for involvement.

Knowledge & Awareness. "You belong in the places and spaces where you grew up in, where your family is. It is your roots, where you started, where you get your background and everything. It is the place that you know. It is your place." Another student takes this sense it being "your place" by describing the knowledge you have as something unique that others do not possess—"because I am a part of it I know things about it that other people don't know. It is special being part of a place where there is unity with other people who know the place and the people and care about it." The mental nature of knowledge is credited as lending itself to the sentimental attachment you have for the place—"it is everything that you know and it becomes a part of you when you hold it in your heart and in your mind. You know it is where you are supposed to be and where you belong."

Safety. Safety, cleanliness and peaceful environments were periodically mentioned throughout all the transcripts. However, in these second reflections the theme of safety takes a more prominent stage. Beyond mentions of feeling safe from violence ("Nobody tries to hurt me and bully me") and safe from judgment ("I am safe and people don't judge me"), students speak to safety as a sure knowledge of security and care so they can be happy. "You are safe and know that you have people that will take care of you and that you can trust. You are not alone." This

sense that you are not alone, but together with people with your interests in heart matters: "I feel safe because other people let me know that I am wanted there." Another student describes belonging as otherworldly: "You know you are in a safe place that sets it apart from anywhere else. Everywhere else you have to worry and watch. But here, you are safe and away from the world."

Students' discussion and narration about belonging took on new dimensions and seemed to have broaden in the course of the projects. Students seemed more comfortable answering the question and not searching while writing—seemingly using less words and getting to the point in defining community and narrating belonging. Table 23 show a comparative word count between students first and second definitions and reflections.

TABLE 23: Word Count from Reflection #1 & Reflection #2

	Definitions of Community in Reflection #1	Definitions of Community in Reflection #2
Word Count	2598	1952
	Remaining Portions of Reflection #1	Remaining Portions of Reflection #2
Word Count	25968	19843

Students also began entering new ways of thinking about belonging beyond the familial and parochial that was often alluded to in their first reflections. Here in their second reflections students touched on new themes, offering greater insight into how they sense belonging through interest and agency, ways of knowing, and safety and security.

How were middle school students' sense of belonging to their local community influenced?

The results of both the adapted place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003), the adapted survey by Schmidt (2013), and responses to written reflection Question 9 are reported alongside the responses from the first round in Tables 24, 25, and 26, respectively. Each shows the mean scores for each of the survey questions (5-point Likert scale; 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-

Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree), and the adapted place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003) includes the mean total (a total score of 36 or higher indicates a sense of belonging).

TABLE 24: Comparison of Students' Responses and Descriptive Statistics of Students' Response on First and Second Takes of Adapted Place-Attachment Survey by Williams & Vaske (2003)

Survey Question	Interval	n	Mean	Std. Dev.
I feel Opelika is a part of me.	Pre	90	3.43	.984
	Post	90	3.47	1.073
Opelika is the best place for what I like to do.	Pre	90	2.98	1.101
	Post	90	2.73	.992
Opelika is very special to me.	Pre	90	3.50	1.063
	Post	90	3.49	.915
No other place can compare to Opelika.	Pre	90	2.42	1.141
	Post	90	2.37	1.096
I identify strongly with Opelika.	Pre	90	3.10	1.039
	Post	90	3.04	1.048
I get more satisfaction out of Opelika than any other place I visit.	Pre	90	2.47	1.093
	Post	90	2.40	1.110
I am very attached to Opelika.	Pre	90	3.02	1.180
	Post	90	3.08	1.124
Doing what I do in Opelika is more important to me than doing it in any other place.	Pre	90	2.68	1.110
	Post	90	2.52	1.094
Opelika says a lot about who I am compared to other places I have visited.	Pre	90	2.81	1.141
	Post	90	3.00	1.122
I wouldn't substitute any other area for doing the types of things I do in Opelika.	Pre	88	2.67	1.090
	Post	88	2.59	1.131
Opelika means a lot to me.	Pre	90	3.27	1.149
	Post	90	3.67	1.171
The things I do at Opelika I would enjoy doing just as much at a similar site	Pre	90	2.70	.953
	Post	90	2.62	1.087
AVERAGE SUM	Pre	90	34.92	8.028
	Post	90	35.02	7.393

TABLE 25: Comparison of Students' First and Second Responses and Descriptive Statistics to each Item on Adapted Survey of Schmidt (2013)

Survey Question	Interval	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
I feel like I "fit in" in Opelika.	Pre	74	3.09	1.252
	Post	74	3.43	1.124
I feel that I know my way around Opelika.	Pre	73	3.90	0.960
	Post	73	4.00	1.054
I feel that I am knowledgeable about the history of Opelika.	Pre	72	2.75	1.184
	Post	72	2.85	1.171
I feel that I am knowledgeable about issues facing Opelika.	Pre	72	2.97	1.061
	Post	72	2.96	1.013
I feel that I am respected and valued as a person in Opelika.	Pre	73	3.14	1.205
	Post	73	3.37	1.099
I feel that I am familiar with the places and spaces in Opelika.	Pre	72	3.82	0.954
	Post	72	3.90	1.037
I feel that I am a part of the community of Opelika.	Pre	73	3.25	1.222
	Post	73	3.51	1.015
I feel that I am connected with people outside my family and school in Opelika.	Pre	73	3.23	1.231
	Post	73	3.67	1.001
I feel that Opelika is a place where I can make a difference.	Pre	73	3.04	1.020
	Post	73	2.99	1.021
I feel proud to say I am from Opelika.	Pre	73	3.08	1.233
	Post	73	3.21	1.190
If I left Opelika I would be sad.	Pre	73	2.89	1.439
	Post	73	2.60	1.299

TABLE 26: Table Results for First and Second Responses to Question 9 on Written Reflections

	Yes	%	No	%
Q9; Reflection #1	43	61%	28	39%
Q9; Reflection #2	50	68%	24	32%

The adapted place-attachment survey by Williams & Vaske (2003) showed that in the second round 43 students (48%) did not feel they belonged to Opelika, whereas 47 students (52%) indicated they felt they belonged to Opelika. The adapted Schmidt survey (2013) results show that students have a slightly higher than neutral response (indicating favorable views) of the city of Opelika and their place in it. When asked in Question 9, "Do you feel you belong to

the community of Opelika?;" 50 students (68%) said "Yes," and only 24 students (32%) said "No."

Examining the comparisons, the Schmidt (2013) survey responses almost all see an uptick in averages from the first to the second (except for Item 11). The responses to the Question 9 see more students expressing themselves as feeling belonging to Opelika. The Williams-Vaske (2003) survey sees considerably more fluctuations across survey items, yet the running average of responses held steady at 35 (1-point shy of the 36-point indication of place attachment and belonging). Because this survey has been routinely used and found to be a valid and reliable instrument, paired samples t-tests were conducted to discern the significance of students' changing averages. A paired samples t-test is used to compare averages from a pre-test and a post-test among the same group, generally following an intervention. Conducting a paired samples t-test with the two sets of survey results of the 90 students was conducted. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 27:

TABLE 27: Descriptive Statistics of Entire Group's Pre-Test and Post-Test Items and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test Interval-.	Mean	Two -Sided p
Pair 1	Pre_1	90	3.43	.984	.104			
	Post_1	90	3.47	1.073	.113	Pre_1-Post_1	-.033	.807
Pair 2	Pre_2	90	2.98	1.101	.116			
	Post_2	90	2.73	.992	.105	Pre_2-Post_2	.244	.063
Pair 3	Pre_3	90	3.50	1.063	.112			
	Post_3	90	3.49	.915	.096	Pre_3-Post_3	.011	.928
Pair 4	Pre_4	90	2.42	1.141	.120			
	Post_4	90	2.37	1.096	.116	Pre_4-Post_4	.056	.622
Pair 5	Pre_5	90	3.10	1.039	.110			
	Post_5	90	3.04	1.048	.111	Pre_5-Post_5	.056	.689
Pair 6	Pre_6	90	2.47	1.093	.115			
	Post_6	90	2.40	1.110	.117	Pre_6-Post_6	.067	.602
Pair 7	Pre_7	90	3.02	1.180	.124			
	Post_7	90	3.08	1.124	.118	Pre_7-Post_7	-.056	.694
Pair 8	Pre_8	90	2.68	1.110	.117			
	Post_8	90	2.52	1.094	.115	Pre_8-Post_8	.156	.255
Pair 9	Pre_9	90	2.81	1.141	.120			
	Post_9	90	3.00	1.122	.118	Pre_9-Post_9	-.189	.129
Pair 10	Pre_10	88	2.67	1.090	.116			
	Post_10	88	2.59	1.131	.121	Pre_10-Post_10	.080	.604
Pair 11	Pre_11	90	3.27	1.149	.121			
	Post_11	90	3.67	1.171	.123	Pre_11-Post_11	-.400	.006
Pair 12	Pre_12	90	2.70	.953	.100			
	Post_12	90	2.62	1.087	.115	Pre_12-Post_12	.078	.561
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	90	34.92	8.028	.846			
	Post_TOTALS	90	35.02	7.393	.779	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	-.100	.901

The initial paired samples t-test did not reveal significant results among students' overall averages.

However, the use of this instrument for the study involved its capacity to gauge belonging at a critical value of 36 or higher. What I was interested in (as is the research question), was whether there is significant movement or fluctuations around this critical value of 36. Creating a binary designation for each student (0 for belonging, 1 for unbelonging) at each survey attempt (pre- and post-) I could isolate groups and create directions and conduct paired samples t-tests to discern significant results among various groups averages. I conducted eight

additional paired samples t-tests to determine what, if anything, the data showed. The eight tests were:

- Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose pre-test indicated *unbelonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose pre-test indicated *belonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between students whose pre-test and post-test indicated *unbelonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between students whose pre-test and post-test indicated *belonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between students who pre-test indicated *belonging* and post-test indicated *unbelonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between students who pre-test indicated *unbelonging* and post-test indicated *belonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose post-test indicated *unbelonging*.
- Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose post-test indicated *belonging*.

Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose pre-test indicated *unbelonging*.

Using only those students whose initial survey score was below 36, thus indicating unbelonging at paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 28:

TABLE 28: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Pre-Test Indicating Unbelonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	Two -Sided p	Cohens d
Pair 1	Pre_1	46	3.00	.966	.142				
	Post_1	46	3.33	1.230	.181	Pre_1-Post_1	-.326	.125	-.230
Pair 2	Pre_2	46	2.46	.959	.141				
	Post_2	46	2.61	1.085	.160	Pre_2-Post_2	-.152	.405	-.124
Pair 3	Pre_3	46	2.91	1.007	.149				
	Post_3	46	3.22	1.031	.152	Pre_3-Post_3	-.304	.099	-.248
Pair 4	Pre_4	46	1.93	.998	.147				
	Post_4	46	2.02	.931	.137	Pre_4-Post_4	-.087	.543	-.090
Pair 5	Pre_5	46	2.52	.913	.135				
	Post_5	46	2.72	1.068	.157	Pre_5-Post_5	-.196	.340	-.142
Pair 6	Pre_6	46	1.96	.988	.146				
	Post_6	46	2.13	1.067	.157	Pre_6-Post_6	-.174	.345	-.141
Pair 7	Pre_7	46	2.35	1.100	.162				
	Post_7	46	2.72	1.167	.172	Pre_7-Post_7	-.370	.104	-.245
Pair 8	Pre_8	46	2.13	.957	.141				
	Post_8	46	2.17	1.039	.153	Pre_8-Post_8	-.043	.826	-.033
Pair 9	Pre_9	46	2.28	1.026	.151				
	Post_9	46	2.52	1.110	.164	Pre_9-Post_9	-.239	.140	-.222
Pair 10	Pre_10	45	2.29	.991	.148				
	Post_10	45	2.36	1.131	.169	Pre_10-Post_10	-.067	.762	-.045
Pair 11	Pre_11	46	2.54	1.048	.155				
	Post_11	46	3.41	1.343	.198	Pre_11-Post_11	-.870	<.001	-.563
Pair 12	Pre_12	46	2.87	1.087	.160				
	Post_12	46	2.61	1.125	.166	Pre_12-Post_12	.261	.194	.195
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	46	31.76	8.340	1.230				
	Post_TOTALS	46	29.22	4.704	.694	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	2.543	.029	.334

The paired samples t-test did reveal significant results (p=.029) in both directions among students who initially scored below a 36 on the survey. The effect size (Cohen's d=.334) was small to medium.

Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose pre-test indicated *belonging*.

Using only those students whose initial survey score was 36 or above, thus indicating belonging, a paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 29:

TABLE 29: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Pre-Test Indicating Belonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	Two -Sided p
Pair 1	Pre_1	31	3.81	.792	.142			
	Post_1	31	3.74	.815	.146	Pre_1-Post_1	.065	.721
Pair 2	Pre_2	31	3.68	.909	.163			
	Post_2	31	3.19	.749	.135	Pre_2-Post_2	.484	.014
Pair 3	Pre_3	31	4.10	.746	.134			
	Post_3	31	3.90	.700	.126	Pre_3-Post_3	.194	.264
Pair 4	Pre_4	31	3.00	1.033	.185			
	Post_4	31	3.13	1.024	.184	Pre_4-Post_4	-.129	.489
Pair 5	Pre_5	31	3.71	.783	.141			
	Post_5	31	3.58	.848	.152	Pre_5-Post_5	.129	.474
Pair 6	Pre_6	31	3.10	.908	.163			
	Post_6	31	3.06	.998	.179	Pre_6-Post_6	.032	.845
Pair 7	Pre_7	31	3.74	.682	.122			
	Post_7	31	3.74	.729	.131	Pre_7-Post_7	.000	1.000
Pair 8	Pre_8	31	3.35	.985	.177			
	Post_8	31	3.26	.815	.146	Pre_8-Post_8	.097	.620
Pair 9	Pre_9	31	3.35	.985	.177			
	Post_9	31	3.61	.882	.158	Pre_9-Post_9	-.258	.244
Pair 10	Pre_10	30	3.20	1.126	.206			
	Post_10	30	3.13	1.074	.196	Pre_10-Post_10	.067	.807
Pair 11	Pre_11	31	3.97	.706	.127			
	Post_11	31	4.13	.806	.145	Pre_11-Post_11	-.161	.305
Pair 12	Pre_12	31	2.42	.765	.137			
	Post_12	31	2.42	.848	.152	Pre_12-Post_12	.000	1.000
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	31	40.81	5.516	.991			
	Post_TOTALS	31	41.39	4.080	.733	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	-.581	.585

The paired samples t-test did not reveal significant results in among students who initially scored a 36 or above on the survey.

Paired samples t-test between students whose pre-test and post-test indicated *unbelonging*.

Using only those students whose first and second survey score was below 36, thus indicating unbelonging at both times, a paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 30:

TABLE 30: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Pre-Test & Post-Test Indicating Unbelonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	Two -Sided p
Pair 1	Pre_1	30	2.97	.999	.182			
	Post_1	30	2.87	1.167	.213	Pre_1-Post_1	.100	.698
Pair 2	Pre_2	30	2.60	.855	.156			
	Post_2	30	2.27	1.048	.191	Pre_2-Post_2	.333	.115
Pair 3	Pre_3	30	2.73	.980	.179			
	Post_3	30	2.77	.898	.164	Pre_3-Post_3	-.033	.884
Pair 4	Pre_4	30	1.83	.950	.173			
	Post_4	30	1.70	.750	.137	Pre_4-Post_4	.133	.459
Pair 5	Pre_5	30	2.50	.900	.164			
	Post_5	30	2.27	.944	.172	Pre_5-Post_5	.233	.293
Pair 6	Pre_6	30	1.90	.960	.175			
	Post_6	30	1.73	.868	.159	Pre_6-Post_6	.167	.455
Pair 7	Pre_7	30	2.43	1.073	.196			
	Post_7	30	2.37	1.033	.189	Pre_7-Post_7	.067	.772
Pair 8	Pre_8	30	2.13	1.008	.184			
	Post_8	30	1.80	.961	.176	Pre_8-Post_8	.333	.186
Pair 9	Pre_9	30	2.03	1.033	.189			
	Post_9	30	1.97	.850	.155	Pre_9-Post_9	.067	.702
Pair 10	Pre_10	30	2.37	1.066	.195			
	Post_10	30	2.00	1.017	.186	Pre_10-Post_10	.367	.148
Pair 11	Pre_11	30	2.53	1.042	.190			
	Post_11	30	2.90	1.213	.222	Pre_11-Post_11	-.367	.125
Pair 12	Pre_12	30	2.93	1.081	.197			
	Post_12	30	2.67	1.124	.205	Pre_12-Post_12	.267	.293
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	30	27.30	6.529	1.192			
	Post_TOTALS	30	28.97	5.169	.944	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	-1.667	.096

The paired samples t-test did not reveal significant results among students who scored below a 36 on both surveys.

Paired samples t-test between students whose pre-test and post-test indicated *belonging*.

Using only those students whose first and second survey score was at or above 36, thus indicating belonging at both times, a paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 31:

TABLE 31: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Pre-Test & Post-Test Indicating Belonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	Two -Sided p
Pair 1	Pre_1	31	3.81	.792	.142			
	Post_1	31	3.74	.815	.146	Pre_1-Post_1	.065	.721
Pair 2	Pre_2	31	3.68	.909	.163			
	Post_2	31	3.19	.749	.135	Pre_2-Post_2	.484	.014
Pair 3	Pre_3	31	4.10	.746	.134			
	Post_3	31	3.90	.700	.126	Pre_3-Post_3	.194	.264
Pair 4	Pre_4	31	3.00	1.033	.185			
	Post_4	31	3.13	1.024	.184	Pre_4-Post_4	-.129	.489
Pair 5	Pre_5	31	3.71	.783	.141			
	Post_5	31	3.58	.848	.152	Pre_5-Post_5	.129	.474
Pair 6	Pre_6	31	3.10	.908	.163			
	Post_6	31	3.06	.998	.179	Pre_6-Post_6	.032	.845
Pair 7	Pre_7	31	3.74	.682	.122			
	Post_7	31	3.74	.729	.131	Pre_7-Post_7	.000	1.00
Pair 8	Pre_8	31	3.35	.985	.177			
	Post_8	31	3.26	.815	.146	Pre_8-Post_8	.097	.620
Pair 9	Pre_9	31	3.35	.985	.177			
	Post_9	31	3.61	.882	.158	Pre_9-Post_9	-.258	.244
Pair 10	Pre_10	30	3.20	1.126	.206			
	Post_10	30	3.13	1.074	.196	Pre_10-Post_10	.067	.807
Pair 11	Pre_11	31	3.97	.706	.127			
	Post_11	31	4.13	.806	.145	Pre_11-Post_11	-.161	.305
Pair 12	Pre_12	31	2.42	.765	.137			
	Post_12	31	2.42	.848	.152	Pre_12-Post_12	.000	1.000
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	31	40.81	5.516	.991			
	Post_TOTALS	31	41.39	4.080	.733	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	-.581	.585

The paired samples t-test did not reveal significant results among students who scored at or above a 36 on both surveys.

Paired samples t-test between students who pre-test indicated *belonging* and post-test indicated *unbelonging*.

Using only those students whose first survey indicated belonging (score at or above 36) and whose second survey indicated unbelonging (score below 36), a paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 32:

TABLE 32: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Pre-Test Indicating Belonging & Post-Test Indicating Unbelonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	One -Sided p	Cohen's d
Pair 1	Pre_1	13	4.08	.760	.211				
	Post_1	13	3.31	.947	.263	Pre_1-Post_1	.769	.017	.660
Pair 2	Pre_2	13	3.15	1.068	.296				
	Post_2	13	2.08	.641	.178	Pre_2-Post_2	1.077	.003	.907
Pair 3	Pre_3	13	4.15	.689	.191				
	Post_3	13	3.46	.519	.144	Pre_3-Post_3	.692	.016	.671
Pair 4	Pre_4	13	2.77	1.166	.323				
	Post_4	13	1.77	.832	.231	Pre_4-Post_4	1.000	.003	.926
Pair 5	Pre_5	13	3.69	.855	.237				
	Post_5	13	2.92	.954	.265	Pre_5-Post_5	.7.69	.043	.520
Pair 6	Pre_6	13	2.77	1.013	.281				
	Post_6	13	1.77	.725	.201	Pre_6-Post_6	1.000	.010	.739
Pair 7	Pre_7	13	3.69	1.032	.286				
	Post_7	13	2.77	1.092	.303	Pre_7-Post_7	.923	.008	.777
Pair 8	Pre_8	13	3.00	.913	.253				
	Post_8	13	2.00	1.000	.277	Pre_8-Post_8	1.000	.010	.739
Pair 9	Pre_9	13	3.38	1.044	.290				
	Post_9	13	3.23	.927	.257	Pre_9-Post_9	.154	.350	.109
Pair 10	Pre_10	13	2.77	.832	.231				
	Post_10	13	2.15	.801	.222	Pre_10-Post_10	.615	.036	.549
Pair 11	Pre_11	13	4.15	.555	.154				
	Post_11	13	3.46	.967	.268	Pre_11-Post_11	.692	.003	.922
Pair 12	Pre_12	13	2.77	.725	.201				
	Post_12	13	3.15	1.345	.373	Pre_12-Post_12	-.385	.178	-.266
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	13	32.08	2.139	.593				
	Post_TOTALS	13	40.38	3.969	1.101	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	-8.308	<.001	-1.638

The paired samples t-test did reveal significant results among students who scored at or above 36 on the first survey, but below a 36 on the second survey (p=,.001). The effect size was large (Cohen's d=1.638).

Paired samples t-test between students who pre-test indicated *unbelonging* and post-test indicated *belonging*.

Using only those students whose first survey indicated unbelonging (score below 36) and second survey indicated belonging (score at or above 36), a paired samples t-test was conducted

to observe if there was significant movement between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 33:

TABLE 33: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Pre-Test of Unbelonging and Post-Test of Belonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	One -Sided p	Cohen's d
Pair 1	Pre_1	16	3.06	.929	.232				
	Post_1	16	4.19	.834	.209	Pre_1-Post_1	-1.125	<.001	-1.034
Pair 2	Pre_2	16	2.19	1.109	.277				
	Post_2	16	3.25	.856	.214	Pre_2-Post_2	-1.062	<.001	-1.244
Pair 3	Pre_3	16	3.25	1.000	.250				
	Post_3	16	4.06	.680	.170	Pre_3-Post_3	-.812	.004	-.776
Pair 4	Pre_4	16	2.13	1.088	.272				
	Post_4	16	2.63	.957	.239	Pre_4-Post_4	-.500	.014	-.612
Pair 5	Pre_5	16	2.56	.964	.241				
	Post_5	16	3.56	.727	.182	Pre_5-Post_5	-1.000	.005	-.732
Pair 6	Pre_6	16	2.06	1.063	.266				
	Post_6	16	2.88	1.025	.256	Pre_6-Post_6	.812	.004	-.776
Pair 7	Pre_7	16	2.19	1.167	.292				
	Post_7	16	3.38	1.147	.287	Pre_7-Post_7	-1.187	.006	-.723
Pair 8	Pre_8	16	2.13	.885	.221				
	Post_8	16	2.88	.806	.202	Pre_8-Post_8	-.750	.004	-.750
Pair 9	Pre_9	16	2.75	.856	.214				
	Post_9	16	3.56	.727	.182	Pre_9-Post_9	-.812	.005	-.733
Pair 10	Pre_10	15	2.13	.834	.215				
	Post_10	15	3.07	1.033	.267	Pre_10-Post_10	-.933	.008	-.699
Pair 11	Pre_11	16	2.56	1.094	.273				
	Post_11	16	4.38	1.025	.256	Pre_11-Post_11	-1.812	<.001	-1.132
Pair 12	Pre_12	16	2.75	1.125	.281				
	Post_12	16	2.50	1.155	.289	Pre_12-Post_12	.250	.234	.182
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	16	40.13	3.442	.861				
	Post_TOTALS	16	29.69	3.790	.947	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	4.226	<.001	2.407

The paired samples t-test did reveal significant results among students who scored below 36 on the first survey and at or above a 36 on the second survey (p=<.001). The effect size was large (Cohen's d=2.4).

Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose post-test indicated *unbelonging*.

Using only those students whose second survey score was below 36, thus indicating unbelonging a paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement

between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 34:

TABLE 34: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Post-Test Indicating Unbelonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	Two -Sided p	Cohen's d
Pair 1	Pre_1	43	3.30	1.059	.161				
	Post_1	43	3.00	1.113	.170	Pre_1-Post_1	.302	.151	.223
Pair 2	Pre_2	43	2.77	.947	.144				
	Post_2	43	2.21	.940	.143	Pre_2-Post_2	.558	.003	.472
Pair 3	Pre_3	43	3.16	1.111	.169				
	Post_3	43	2.98	.859	.131	Pre_3-Post_3	.186	.323	.152
Pair 4	Pre_4	43	2.12	1.096	.167				
	Post_4	43	1.72	.766	.117	Pre_4-Post_4	.395	.020	.369
Pair 5	Pre_5	43	2.86	1.037	.158				
	Post_5	43	2.47	.984	.150	Pre_5-Post_5	.395	.052	.306
Pair 6	Pre_6	43	2.16	1.045	.159				
	Post_6	43	1.74	.819	.125	Pre_6-Post_6	.419	.040	.323
Pair 7	Pre_7	43	2.81	1.200	.183				
	Post_7	43	2.49	1.055	.161	Pre_7-Post_7	.326	.104	.253
Pair 8	Pre_8	43	2.40	1.050	.160				
	Post_8	43	1.86	.966	.147	Pre_8-Post_8	.535	.014	.391
Pair 9	Pre_9	43	2.44	1.201	.183				
	Post_9	43	2.35	1.044	.159	Pre_9-Post_9	.093	.578	.086
Pair 10	Pre_10	43	2.49	1.009	.154				
	Post_10	43	2.05	.950	.145	Pre_10-Post_10	.442	.029	.346
Pair 11	Pre_11	43	3.02	1.185	.181				
	Post_11	43	3.07	1.163	.177	Pre_11-Post_11	-.047	.806	-.038
Pair 12	Pre_12	43	2.88	.981	.150				
	Post_12	43	2.81	1.200	.183	Pre_12-Post_12	.070	.746	.050
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	43	28.74	5.973	.911				
	Post_TOTALS	43	32.42	7.149	1.090	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	-3.674	<.001	-.609

The paired samples t-test did reveal significant results in both directions among students who scored below a 36 on the second survey (p=<.001). The effect size was large (Cohen's d=.609).

Paired samples t-test between results of all students whose post-test indicated *belonging*.

Using only those students whose second survey score was at or above 36, thus indicating belonging a paired samples t-test was conducted to observe if there was significant movement

between their averages. Descriptive statistics of this group and results of the paired t-test are recorded below in Table 35:

TABLE 35: Descriptive Statistics of Students with Post-Test Indicating Belonging and Paired t-Test Results

		n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. Mean	Paired T-Test	Mean	Two -Sided p	Cohen's d
Pair 1	Pre_1	47	3.55	.904	.132				
	Post_1	47	3.89	.840	.123	Pre_1-Post_1	-.340	.051	-.292
Pair 2	Pre_2	47	3.17	1.204	.176				
	Post_2	47	3.21	.778	.114	Pre_2-Post_2	-.043	.811	-.035
Pair 3	Pre_3	47	3.81	.924	.135				
	Post_3	47	3.96	.690	.101	Pre_3-Post_3	-.149	.351	-.138
Pair 4	Pre_4	47	2.70	1.121	.164				
	Post_4	47	2.96	1.021	.149	Pre_4-Post_4	-.255	.077	-.264
Pair 5	Pre_5	47	3.32	1.002	.146				
	Post_5	47	3.57	.801	.117	Pre_5-Post_5	-.255	.165	-.206
Pair 6	Pre_6	47	2.74	1.073	.156				
	Post_6	47	3.00	1.000	.146	Pre_6-Post_6	-.255	.096	-.248
Pair 7	Pre_7	47	3.21	1.141	.166				
	Post_7	47	3.62	.898	.131	Pre_7-Post_7	-.404	.038	-.312
Pair 8	Pre_8	47	2.94	1.111	.162				
	Post_8	47	3.13	.824	.120	Pre_8-Post_8	-.191	.245	-.172
Pair 9	Pre_9	47	3.15	.978	.143				
	Post_9	47	3.60	.825	.120	Pre_9-Post_9	-.447	.014	-.374
Pair 10	Pre_10	45	2.84	1.147	.171				
	Post_10	45	3.11	1.049	.156	Pre_10-Post_10	-.267	.239	-.178
Pair 11	Pre_11	47	3.49	1.081	.158				
	Post_11	47	4.21	.883	.129	Pre_11-Post_11	-.723	<.001	-.519
Pair 12	Pre_12	47	2.53	.905	.132				
	Post_12	47	2.45	.951	.139	Pre_12-Post_12	.085	.611	.075
Pair 13	Pre_TOTALS	47	40.57	4.880	.712				
	Post_TOTALS	47	37.40	6.851	.999	Pre_TOTALS-Post_TOTALS	7.487	.006	.423

The paired samples t-test did reveal significant results in both directions among students who scored at or above 36 on the second survey (p=.006). The effect size was medium (Cohen's d=.423

Significant results were seen among five groups of students: (1) those initially scoring below a 36 (n=46); (2) those who initially scored below a 36 and then scored at or above a 36

(n=16); (3) those who initially scored at or above a 36 and then scored below a 36 (n=13); (4) those whose second score was below a 36 (n=43); and, (5) those whose second score was at or above a 36 (n=46). These results do indicate that the intervention of the community history project did influence students' sense of belonging. This influence was both in a positive and a negative direction, prompting some students to grow in belonging and others to grow in unbelonging.

Summary of DBR Phase #2: Design/Construction Phase—The Second Research Question

Students' own visualizations of their communities underwent change over the course of the two projects. Many students not only re-centered and re-oriented their community maps, but map ranges expanded largely from neighborhoods to the city level. Map details and map-like quality showed students had a greater awareness of their surroundings and spatial awareness.

Students' definitions of community were influenced, as well. Students evidenced greater comfort in defining community using more articulate, illustrative language and cogency. While maintaining previous themes, students' thinking articulated two new thematic elements: *participating* and *interested*. Students' discussion of these themes in their work generated definitions of community that evidenced a more active and outgoing sense of interaction between themselves and their community.

Students' discussion of belonging saw considerable shifts. A number of themes previously untapped were triggered in students' second round of thinking. These new themes demonstrate that students were growing in their own thoughts and thinking outside those themes otherwise closely connected to familial and home life.

Finally, students own writing indicated an upward trend in students' feeling they belong to Opelika. Significant results among certain groups of students average scores were seen when

analyzing student data from the Williams-Vaske's (2003) adapted place attachment survey. The project has influenced some students to grow in belonging and caused some students to grow in unbelonging.

In the next chapter, I reflected on the project using student interviews to delve into why changes occurred in student thinking. This interview data was the invaluable key that helped explain a number of the shifts and changes that occurred in students' maps, definitions of community, and narrations of belonging. Too, the data yielded considerable insights from students about how the project impacted their thinking, prompting further questions for future iterations.

Chapter 5: Findings & Discussion Concerning DBR Evaluation/Reflection Phase (Third Research Question)

Introduction

The preceding chapter presented findings that responded to the first two research questions. The first question was exploratory and aimed to discern how students visualized and defined community and narrated belonging. This was done through an individual community mapping project. Based on those results a curriculum intervention was developed that sought to expand students' vision of their community and socially construct knowledge about assets within the broader community in order to influence their sense of belonging. This was done through a small group community history project. The third research question, which will be addressed in this chapter, sought to understand what was revealed about middle schoolers' thinking concerning community and belonging over the course of the project and its many facets. Indeed, as each question has corresponded to a phase of DBR, this final question was about looking back at the whole curricular scheme—situated in the third phase of DBR: evaluation/reflective. The idea in this final phase was to create an ongoing interplay between the particular interventions implemented, evaluating and reflecting upon them in order to take stock of what was learned and progressively develop further interventions and continued modifications (Freedman & Kim, 2019).

This evaluation and reflection will be done by presenting findings from:

1. Student Interviews: at the conclusion of the project students were individually interviewed for brief 1-2 minute segments asking targeted questions based on their maps, survey data, and/or written response.
2. Questions 11 in the First and Second Reflection: Question 11 in each of these reflections was a student evaluation of the preceding task. In the first reflection

students were asked “Did you enjoy the community mapping project? Why or why not?” Similarly, in the second reflection students were asked, “Did you enjoy the community history project? Why or why not?”

Using students’ voices from these interviews and question responses helped make me interpret findings from the previous chapter and better consider how to continue making curricular choices to push students’ sense of community and belonging.

DBR Evaluation/Reflection Phase: The Third Research Question

What does the collaborative community history and mapping project reveal about students’ sense of belonging to a community?

Student interviews and their two evaluations of the projects (community mapping and community history) were read and significant and rich passages were flagged. Afterward, passages were re-read and notations made concerning the flagged passages. Transcripts were then re-read and connections to previous findings, students’ words and notations were made. This generated five overarching discussion items that revealed greater depth of understanding about students’ sense of belonging and understanding of community. These five themes emerged from the data and each which will be examined in respective turn:

- Visions of Community
- Sense of Belonging
- Students’ Desires, & Attitudes
- Higher Order Thinking & Self-Identity
- Cautions

Visions of Community

Students showed transformative shifts in their visualizing and defining of communities, as evidenced by their own maps and written work. These changes included shifts in all categories of analysis, including centers, range, scale, and map-like quality. Out of 80 sets of maps from students, 24 produced maps with a different range; 24 increased the level of detail; 31 produced

maps with greater map-like quality. Conversations and insights from students concerning the change in their envisioning and understanding of community revealed three topics worth examination: (1) expanded sense of community; (2) greater spatial awareness; and, (3) community assets and community history resources.

Expanded Sense of Community

Students' evaluations and interviews indicated that this project was the first time they ever considered and thought about the meaning of community. In students' evaluations of the mapping project, three students cited the difficulty of the project was due to their "never" having thought about it. Student interviews further emphasized this fact, mentioning 33 times that students have "never" thought about the meaning of community. The newness of the content challenged students: "I never thought much about the word community until this project. I had a lot of trouble with my first map and thought real small, because that was what I knew. I just drew my house and my neighborhood." The tendency to resort to closeness was not an isolated incident. Another student indicated, "I really never thought about my community before you told us to. I didn't understand really what you wanted our maps to look like. The project made us think about so much and like it forced us to see more about who we are than just our house. But at first, all I could think of was my house."

Students admitted given time, they were able to consider more. Indeed, a number of students credited the expansion of their concept of community to having to think more holistically for the first time. "I just think that the project made me think more about parts of my life. I think I have always felt a part of things, but the project sorta like made me think all at once about all the things that I am a part of." The consideration of boundaries forced many students to start thinking more deeply and critically. In an interview, one student stated:

> It made me think really hard about what it even meant. I was like, I will draw a map of Opelika, but I never really thought about Opelika. We use it all the time, but I never had to think about how to draw it. I never had to think about boundaries, either. It really made me think about space, but then I had to think about my own feelings and memories to draw the places I belonged. It made me connect the word Opelika to me and it made me think about the places that I am a part of.

A critical consideration for clarity and expansion of thought was not only "more time to think," but also students' own interactions with others, including their peers and family. Students' admissions regarding how others helped them re-think and re-consider their notions of community speaks to the value of social constructivism in this project. While working in small groups on the community history project, one student credited her group for increasing her thought about the community: "Once I worked in the group, we started having to identify assets and do the history project. We talked about so many places and I realized there was a lot more to draw and a lot more I need to put on there because I am a part of a lot more places than just my home and my neighborhood." Indeed, when the students worked together, they helped one another clarify the task and see their communities anew:

> When you asked us to think about our community it was so hard. Trying to figure out what all was in it was kinda confusing and overwhelmed me. I actually had trouble coming up with a map. I really think my map shows the space that is my home. But after we worked in groups I began thinking of all these other places in Opelika that I liked being at and felt good at. Once we started talking about it more, I began realizing there are a lot of places I didn't think of on my own. Once I could like see all the places, the idea of community made more sense.

Not only were students' peer groups important in seeing community more fully, but the project organically spilled over into students' home and family life. Both the mapping project and the community history project called on students to draw from their experiences and resources outside of the classroom. The importance and value of having family assist students in thinking about community and belonging was evidently important. "Having to do this project made me have to talk to my family more," one student reported. In an evaluation of the project

another student commented on the project favorably because “I enjoyed getting to work with my family. My grandma was all about going through pictures and talking about things with me. It was neat to be able to hear and see things with her that I hadn’t even known about.” The project helped students “get more connected” to their family, which seemed to share a mutual appreciation: “I enjoyed getting to sit down with my family and talk about some of the things that I included. They seemed to enjoy it, too.”

Greater Spatial Awareness

Not only did students’ map ranges and definitions of community seem to become more inclusive, but there was an evident increase in students’ mapping details and map-like quality. Both of these findings indicate students achieving a greater spatial awareness over the course of the project. Five students’ interviews and evaluations mention that this is the first map they have ever been asked to draw. Couple this with the 33 times students mentioned “never” having thought about their community and it becomes evident why 9 students remarked how “hard” the mapping project was in their evaluation.

Students widely credited the use of using the GIS technology in Google MyMaps for providing greater clarity in their map-making skills. One student in his interview stated:

> I think the Google Maps activity was important to helping me organize all the pieces. Before that everything was just a big clump of places in my head. Once we had to start really seeing where the boundaries were and then actually see the weird map of Opelika, I was able to begin seeing how things really sit.

Another student said:

> Thinking through [the first community map] and getting it on paper seemed a little rushed and so I did not think too much about how I drew it. Once we had to use Google to see the area and how it really looked…wow…I was way off! My second map has the same places, but it is just more clear to me how they fit together and what is in between it all.

Indeed, a number of students mentioned the value in simply exploring the digital satellite images and toying around with the tools as valuable in helping them see how things really looked. “I remember roaming around on Google earth looking at some of the places and wondering what they even were,” mentioned one student. Another simply stated, “I like getting to work with the Google Earth tools. It was neat to spend the class exploring and drawing lines and zooming in and out.”

Using the GIS technology, students were asked to compare and fit their individual community maps together with their small groups for the sake of the community history project. This required considerable exploration and manipulation. This activity, though, was widely enjoyed. “It was neat to compare them to Google Earth,” said one student. Another said, “The My Maps activity…was cool to be able to see what the surface of the earth all around our city looks like. It was also neat to be able to try to get our communities to fit together.” Students referred to the mapping projects as “like puzzles” four times in their interviews. Ultimately, the amount of time they had to consider, compare and collaborate was critical for calibrating students’ awareness. “[This project] forced me to actually try to see the space that all the pieces fit in and draw line and boundaries around them. We actually live in a lot of space that we don’t really think about.”

This mention of enhanced vision and awareness of surroundings was commonplace among students. In their interviews and project evaluations, students used the word “see” 69 times. One student said that by the end of the project “the idea of community made more sense.” When prompted to explain this he said, “now I can see more than I did before.” Students suggested that over the course of the projects it was easier for them to see and imagine boundaries (“seeing where the boundaries really were”), size (“I could see more of Opelika…[it]

just got bigger and bigger"), space ("it made me think about space"), and details. One student summarizes very well how the project promoted growth in spatial awareness:

> The project made us think about so many details and things we never thought about. All the tasks made us unpack piece by piece what was in our own heads. It is easy to see, like the whole picture. But, having to like zoom into our own thoughts and look at all the pieces, that was hard and took a lot of time. But seeing each piece kinda makes the whole things seem more special.

Spatially, students are more attuned to the shape and breadth of the local community's boundaries and size. They were seeing more clearly and accurately the human elements of maps such as the placements of boundaries, streets and neighborhoods.

Community Assets & Community History Resources

Two parts of the project which challenged students to consider more deeply their communities was a small group task of listing and describing ten community assets and choosing one of them upon which to conduct a community history project. Both tasks produced considerable commentary in student interviews and evaluations. Generally, the community asset assignment was met favorably, whereas the community history project was not. Understanding this disconnect is important.

Regarding the identification of community assets, students, overall, looked on the assignment as informative and helped expand their vision of their own portion of the community. One student observed, "Once I worked in the group, we started having to identify assets. We talked about so many places and I realized there was a lot more to draw and a lot more I needed to put on there because I am a part of a lot more places than just my home and my neighborhood." The fact that students had to collaborate and deliberate on not only what the community assets were, but why they were assets was influential because it gave students an opportunity to both instruct and learn from one another. "I think that as we discussed where our

communities were and what our assets were that we actually gained a lot from each other. Everybody had something to say and it was important."

Nonetheless, the greatest reported difficulty in student evaluations was the assignment that followed it—choosing one of the many assets identified and conducting a community history project. Students were quick to critique any given task within the two projects as difficult, but the community history project was the only project described as difficult for a repeated and specific reason—the lack of resources. One student stated, "I think the community history project was hard to do research on. I wish we had more time and maybe some better resources to help us. We couldn't find anything on the Internet and stressed about how to get everything together over the weekend." Another echoed the sentiment, "I didn't mind the first part, but then the community history project was just too hard to do. We really didn't have a ton of information to work from."

Indeed, not only was the community history project criticized for a lack of resources, but it also called for the greatest amount of cooperation among students. Because students were purposively assigned groups, the reality was that students did not get to pick their partners and workmates. While the values of social constructivism were previously emphasized, in the community history project's evaluation it began to lose some of its glimmer. One student expressed regret, "I almost wished I could have done a community history project alone. It was hard to agree on what to do and then be able to count on others to do their part." Another student remarked, "The community history project was hard to do. My group had a lot of trouble staying focused and not getting distracted." There, too, were the very practical concerns among behavior issues, pandemic quarantines, and increased student absences that "I was just over it. Both the people in my group were in ISS and I was just tired of doing all the work. I was glad to be done."

Certainly, however, the community history project was not without its fanfare and benefits. “Once we had to start working with each other and combine our maps and do the history project, it really forced me to talk about my spaces and my places more.” When one student was asked if she thought she would have done better if she did the community history project alone, she responded, “Maybe, but it would not have been the same…by working with my group we each walked away with more.” Once of the aspects of this portion of the project included an interview with a community member associated with the community asset that had to be conducted outside of class. This was a considerable and demanding task, but students overwhelmingly reported on it favorably.

> “I also enjoyed doing the interview for the history project. I like talking to people…any chance I get to have a conversation, I really like it.”
>
> “I like interviewing for our community history project. It was neat talking to a total stranger about something deep and meaningful.”
>
> “I also liked doing the interview. I think the questions we had to ask made me feel smart and made the person we interviewed think we were smart.”

Sense of Belonging

Students’ showed shifts in their narrations, discussion, and survey data concerning belonging. As reported in Chapter Four, students seemed to simultaneously grow and regress in belonging. Conversations and insights from the students concerning the change in their sense of belonging revealed three topics worth examining: (1) increases and decreases in sense of belonging; (2) distinctions in knowledge, learning, and experience; and, (3) fidelity and the middle school mind.

Increases and Decreases in Sense of Belonging

There were shifts in students’ sense of belonging throughout the course of the project. While the project was originally to *increase* students’ sense of belonging, there was statistical

evidence that some students actually *declined* in sense of belonging. Of course, the research question was open-ended to determine only *influence*. At first, this evidence may indicate the intervention failed, at least regarding my true intent. However, the student interviews and evaluations shed light on the meaning and import of both the increases and decreases in students' sense of belonging.

What became evident over the course of student interviews and evaluations was that the assumption of increasing students' sense of belonging was somewhat misplaced. It neglected to account for the students' own expansions of community, which the students themselves indicated occurred. Indeed, the very mention of "Opelika" that students repeatedly saw on the first survey may not have meant the same thing by the time students took the exact same survey with the exact same word. The meaning of the word "Opelika" changed because the students' visions of Opelika had changed. It was somewhat laughable to aim to trouble students' concepts of Opelika yet seek to maintain a stable association to an otherwise morphing and re-imagined concept. This is precisely what seems to have occurred.

Some students already seemed to know the size of Opelika and attributed its expansiveness and their unknowing to feeling they do not belong from the very onset of the project: "Opelika is too big and there are just too many places I ain't never been and I don't know," cited one student. "I feel like I understand Opelika better because I really haven't ever had to think about it so much," reported one student. She was not alone. "I [had] no idea how big Opelika [was]," stated one student. "It got bigger and bigger," over the course of the project observed another. As students began to think more and see more within the concept of "Opelika," they reported: "It's like when I first thought about Opelika I thought about my little part of it. That made sense to me. After the group projects and hearing from others, I realized I

had no idea how big Opelika is." Not alone, this very sentiment was echoed by another student, "talking with my classmates [about places] it really showed me how much more I have to experience and see of this town." Another student succinctly put it: "I think the more I learned about Opelika the more I thought to myself, 'I don't really know anything about this place.'" Each of these last three quotes were part of students' own reasoning for explaining why their survey scores dropped from initially belonging to unbelonging.

Student realizations about the size, shape, and expanse of Opelika helped them better defend their own sense of community and belonging. One student articulated a nuanced understanding of belonging and community when he was asked about his survey responses both being high (he felt like he belonged to Opelika both times), but he had very small range maps both times, as well. This was the exchange:

> Q: Can you tell me why your community maps are so small scale?
> A: You mean like why I drew what I did?
> Q: I mean your drawing of your community is fairly small. But at the same time you feel you belong to a big place. I am trying to make sense of that.
> A: I feel like I belong in Opelika, but I guess I don't see it like it is my community. My community is something that I am at daily and really familiar with.
> Q: What would you call Opelika if it is not your community?
> A: I guess you could call it the city. But can you call a whole city your community? You can't be everywhere all the time, know or like everyone. I think there is a difference and a community can't be too big.
> Q: But you think you can belong to a big place?
> A: I think so. I can still feel comfortable at places that I am not at everyday because I may know some of the people there. But, I still wouldn't say it was my place, you know. I feel I am there as a guest kinda. So, I belong, but it is not my community—if that makes sense.

This student was able to properly envision Opelika and even call it his "city," but he did not see it as his "place" because of its size and his immobility and inability to be in all places most of the time. Indeed, his sense of community and belonging maintained that "daily" familiarity factor. This student's vision is one that sees the local city as being made of various small communities.

The city, as an entity, to him is more abstract and large, whereas community is localized and defined by daily experience.

Of course, there were a number of students who did grow in belonging over the course of the project. Their rationales seemed more intuitive to me as a researcher because they followed my unspoken hypothesis for the curriculum intervention—increase students' knowledge of their local community and this enhanced knowledge would translate into increased community belonging. One student's interview exchange captured precisely my vision for the project:

> Q: …[Concerning] your survey results—you went from a low sense of belonging to a very high one. Can you explain what changed over the course of this project?
> A: When you asked us to think about our community it was so hard. Trying to figure out what all was in it was kinda confusing and overwhelmed me. I actually had trouble coming up with a map. I really think my map shows the space that is my home. But after we worked in groups I began thinking of all these other places in Opelika that I liked being at and felt good at. Once we started talking about it more, I began realizing there are a lot of places I didn't think of on my own. Once I could like see all the places, the idea of community made more sense.
> Q: How did it make more sense?
> A: It kinda got fit together like a puzzle. Now I could see more than before.
> Q: Do you think you understand Opelika better now that you did the project?
> A: For sure. There were some parts of Opelika I did not even know existed. Then there were parts I knew existed but did not know anything about. I remember roaming around on Google earth looking at some of the places and wondering what they even were. Now I could tell you about a lot of them.

There also remained those students who did not shift camps. Some students felt like they belonged from the beginning to the end, while others over the course of the project never indicated feeling belonging. When interviewing these students and looking at their evaluations, it became clear that a singular curriculum intervention would not shift these sentiments. Some students with a high sense of belonging were really not relying on the project at all in their rationale. There were those students who were born and raised in Opelika and seemed well-connected. I imagined I would be hard-pressed to develop a curricular intervention that decreased their sense of belonging: "It's like the only place I've been. Everyone I know is here.

I wouldn't want to be away from them." Then there were the students who recently moved to Opelika. Students' own narrations from their photo tours helped inform their own interviews, as it became apparent what struggles and tragedies some of these students have endured. For some, moving to Opelika is akin to a breath of fresh air. A number of students reported moving from different cities (far and near) and cited a high level of belonging. Their rationales were generally more excited and enthusiastic about their lives, not the curriculum intervention. One such student, who had only been in Opelika for one year, had one of the highest final survey scores. When asked about it, the following rationale was given:

> A: I really just like it here.
> Q: You have only been here for a year, right?
> A: Yes.
> Q: Why are you so excited about being here in such a short time?
> A: It is so much different than where I was before.
> Q: How so?
> A: It is safe and clean. You can walk around and not have to worry. Where I was, you couldn't be outside in the community. We don't even lock our door here!

Conversely, some of the students who showed levels of unbelonging on both tests were also newcomers to the area. One student, for example, produced two almost identical community maps that were of another place, entirely outside of Opelika. She also scored low on both surveys. When I asked her if the project seemed to change how she viewed community, she indicated, "Not really. I still feel most comfortable in the spaces I drew the first time." I asked her if she saw herself in other places, particular anywhere here in Opelika. She described herself as "really always busy. Mom works, I am at school, and I have to stay at the house until mom gets home. I don't have much family around here and just look forward to leaving." When I asked her how the project influenced her, she reported that she enjoyed "get[ting] to think about the things and memories that were important to her from where she grew up." Another student, whose fashion trends were exceptional among her peers, showed low levels of belonging on both

surveys and was adamant that she “did not fit in here.” She said that people in Opelika do not “dress like me” and went on to describe many of the people in the city as judgmental and unaccepting. She said Opelika was a “small town with small minds” and there was “absolutely…no way I am staying here.” No single curriculum intervention seemed likely to change either of these young lady’s sense of belonging.

Distinctions in Knowledge, Learning, & Experience

I want to repeat my unspoken hypothesis for the curriculum intervention in order to point out another way that this project troubled my own assumptions. I believed that if I could increase students’ knowledge of their local community that I would also increase their sense of belonging to the local community that they knew more about. This clearly happened for a number of students, for sure. The following exchange between one student during her interview exemplifies what I expected might happen:

> Q: You see how your second survey score jumped slightly, meaning your sense of belonging was higher…why do you think it changed?
> A: I think having to do this project made me talk to my family after school more. I had to interview my pastor and he took me outside the church and just talked about all these places in the neighborhood that I never knew. It kinda was like seeing it new for the first time, or different. Knowing it better makes me feel a part of it.

While this type of increase-in-knowledge-increase-in-belonging was the typical trend, there were a number of students who did offer insights for why that did not work for them. Learning was simply not enough for some students. “I think I learned about other places. But that doesn’t make me belong to them.” Another student was quick to instruct me, “Learning about a place is different from being comfortable in that place, ya know?” Over the course of some of these students’ interviews, it became clearer the distinctions and types of knowledge that would be necessary to move them. To the first student quoted above who said learning does not make you belong, I simply asked, “What would make you belong to [these places]?” He responded,

"I'd have to go there. I'd have to meet people there and keep going there until I was comfortable."

Experience for some students seemed paramount compared to knowledge. For them belonging required more of a connection than mere classroom learning could provide. One exchange with a student provided the following insight:

> Q: What do you think would help you connect more?
> A: Getting out of school and going to places. You can't just hear about a place or learn about it. You have to be in it before you can really connect to it. It is different to read about a place and go to the place, you know? I have heard about places before, even seen pictures, but you just have to go there before you know it…really know it.

Indeed, another student pointed out, "You can't belong to a place that you haven't been and don't know if you fit in with the people there."

What these students seem to be driving at is some level of expert knowledge. One student described this type of knowledge necessary for belonging as "I know well…I know really well" as compared to just having "learned about other places." The deeper type of knowledge is almost an exclusive level that sets you apart and makes you an authority. This is described by one student:

> You have to know about the place…like you have to be the expert on it because you kinda like own it. When you belong somewhere it is like your little part of the world and when someone who doesn't know or belong there wants to know what it's about, you need to be the one to tell them.

It was commonplace for students to admit they learned. However, for some students learning was simply not enough. "I learned a lot about different places that I have never heard of or never knew nothing about, and now I would like to visit them and figure out if I fit in there or not."

What seems evident from students' insights regarding knowledge, learning, and experience is that the element of knowledge as a factor in sense of community and belonging seems deeper than intellectual knowledge that is typically conveyed in classroom lessons.

Instead, the knowledge seems more personal (it comes from experience) and exclusive (it is something not widely possessed). These realities require the educator to re-think and re-conceive how create opportunities for students to gain knowledge, since simple instruction and awareness of facts does not readily create the type of knowledge community and belonging require.

Fidelity & the Middle School Mind

Another intriguing revelation about students' sense of belonging had to do with Question 10 on each of the two written reflections. Question 9 simply asked students to answer, "Do you feel you belong to the community of Opelika? Why or why not?" Question 10 asked, "When you grow up do you want to stay in Opelika? Why or why not?" This question was meant as a follow-up to Question 9's general statement of belonging to discern what, if any, level of fidelity to the place of Opelika that students had. Almost unflinchingly on each survey, students, despite reporting high sense of belonging levels, recorded low fidelity levels. Each survey indicated that only 1 in every 5 students saw themselves as staying in the local community. Table 36 shows the results for Question 9 and Question 10 in both the first and second reflections, as well as the percentages.

TABLE 36: Results for Questions 9 & 10 from Reflections #1 & #2

	Yes	%	No	%
Q9; Reflection #1—Do you belong to Opelika?	43	61%	28	39%
Q9; Reflection #2—Do you belong to Opelika	50	68%	24	32%
Q10; Reflection #1—Will you stay in Opelika?	15	20%	56	80%
Q10; Reflection #2—Will you stay in Opelika?	15	20%	59	80%

Students cite several reasons for and against wanting to stay in Opelika. Some the their reasons cut both ways, "I spent my whole life here," "All of my family is here," "It is quiet." All of these reasons were given for and against wanting to stay. Some students clearly have large ambitions and hopes, perhaps misplaced, about playing professional sports ultimately—none of

which will leave them in Opelika. Yet the single greatest rationale given in students own responses for why or why not in Question 10 revolved around exploration. “I want to explore,” and, “I need to see the world” were just examples of what students alluded to 36 times in responding to this question.

Fidelity’s touchstone to sense of belonging indices may be challenged by the position and life stage of middle school students. Asking students about these seemingly counter-intuitive results during interviews yielded considerable insights. One student pointed out the difficulties associated with casting a long-term vision at such a young age: “It is hard to think about growing up and what we will do. When we do have to think about what our futures will be like, most of us are thinking about college, which means we will move away.” Another student explained the context and situation of many of the students in this high poverty school district:

> I think it is hard to say you want to stay in one place, especially since a lot of them might be in a bad place. A lot of them might be in places like I was…bad neighborhoods. There we are always being told to get out, move on. Or moms are working hard to move us out. Sometimes you have to imagine a whole new life somewhere else because your dreams can’t come true where you find yourself at right now.

Other students felt they did not fit in or that the place is not inclusive enough for their taste or lifestyle. “There is no way I am staying here…it is just a small place and there are a lot of people with small minds.”

Students’ Desires and Attitude

Students’ discussion of community and belonging revealed a number of insightful commentaries about how the students grew from the project. Their remarks are worth examining as they are extensions of human growth that goes together with community building and belonging. This section will include discussion of the following: (1) Pride; (2) Agency; (3) Security; (4) Optimism; and, (5) Empathy.

Pride

Students' evaluations of the projects indicated an appreciation for being able "to show" others their communities, particularly me, their teacher. "I think it is a good project because I got to tell you about me and show you where I am from. You are always telling us about you and your family and your house. We know a lot about you. This project got to tell you a lot about who we are and who are families are." Indeed, one student evaluated the project as enjoyable because he got to "show off your community."

Students were notably proud of their products ("I drew an amazing map and I am proud of that"), but they are also proud of showing what is their place. One student's interview captured this notion of pride. Her second survey score showed her moving from unbelonging into the level of belonging. When I asked her about this, the following exchange occurred:

> Q: I noticed that your survey numbers changed from your first to your second. The scores indicate that you at first felt like you did not belong to Opelika, but the second one indicates that you feel like you do belong to Opelika. Why do you think this changed?
> A: I think the work in my group on our community history project really, like, made me see things I always knew about, but see them differently. None of us in our group ever really knew anything about the hospital…except that we had a hospital, and our mommas work at it. But then, we did this project and interviewed some people over there and found out how the hospital was built and what an important part of the community it is. Knowing more about a place like the hospital makes me more proud to be part of Opelika.
> Q: Why do you think knowing more about the place help you feel more proud?
> A: It Is like a connection to the place…something special that you have that others don't. It kinda makes it more like yours and not theirs. And I think you take pride in the good things that are yours.

This student captured exactly what the community asset assignment aimed to accomplish—helping students see what is good about their communities. The focus on a single asset was meant to vest students so deeply as to turn up the good and positive contributions of the asset and its importance to produce a level of pride. Indeed, the student's final words (in the quotation

above) speak to the idea implied in students' desire for expert knowledge—a unique exclusive quasi-ownership of something special in which they can feel pride.

Agency

In showcasing their communities, students spoke much about how the projects enabled them to make decisions, be responsible and feel empowered. Concerning decisions, one student remarked, "We had to put a lot of things into words and make a lot of decisions." The project required students to own the content and the direction to make the results truly authentic and organic. "This project was a lot of work. It asked me to be responsible for a lot of things." In doing so, students rightfully began to see themselves more as teachers. "It was like I got to teach you and show you around my neighborhood and introduce you to my people," remarked one student. Another said, "It almost kinda made me have to be a teacher. When I had to present my map and reflections, I was really nervous about recording myself. But, once I started talking, I felt like I was teaching and just went with it. It felt good." Feeling good and taking initiative was important to students. That feeling was repeatedly what students spoke to regarding interviewing people concerning their community history projects. One student remarked, "I also liked doing the interview. I think the questions we had to ask made me feel smart and made the person we interviewed think we were smart."

Students' appreciation and recognition of this agency experienced in the project triangulated with their own reflections on belonging and community. Being a part of a community "makes you responsible for everything" reported one student in his definition of community. Another included in her definition that being part of a community was "like having a job and a purpose in the place." Students sense community "where people work together and

come together to support each other and overcome things." Too, students expressed a desire to lead and take part. As one student succinctly put it, community is "a place I can help change."

Security

Students invoked the word "safe" 182 times throughout the course of definitions, reflections, and interviews. Students own words in their reflections and narrations of belonging indicated there were considerable and realistic fears among students associated with certain spaces and places. Indeed, from their perspective there appear to be unsafe places in Opelika. The fact that some of the students live in or near these places tended to preoccupy their thinking on community and belonging. This tragic reality was no surprise.

What was remarkable about students' discussions about security had to do with how the project helped them overcome some of the perceived fears they had. The reality was that fears and safety concerns in the city-wide area were real and numerous. But, it was also evident that some of the fears were simply perceptions. During their interviews, students remarked on how these fears were overcome. One student suggested that once you have labeled a place as unsafe, you just assume danger, no-good, and stay away. She described how the project helped change her mind:

> You know, there were like places that I thought were bad parts or unsafe parts and got to hear from other groups about some good things that happen there and some important things that are going on there. I would have felt unsafe in those places before, but kinda realize now I was wrong about.

Another student was similarly surprised about a particular area within his neighborhood. Because it looked "run down…bad" and the student was "told never to go over there." The student remarked that because he never knew anything about the place that he "made things up about it" in his head and imagination. "None of these things [I imagined] were good." But when

he learned more about the place from another group in their community history project he remarked,

> [I learned] That it used to be something important and meant a lot to the people around it. Knowing that makes you look at it differently…Now, I actually know something good about it and can look at for what it really is or was, and not just a scary place…I don't look at it with fear anymore.

Optimism

Students reported having a more optimistic outlook regarding Opelika at the conclusion of the project. Indeed, one student from the previous section, who learned more and became less afraid said, "I think I feel more optimistic about Opelika." Students seemed to appreciate the community history projects because they got to hear about "good things" that were happening in the community. The realness and applicability of the student-led work, discussions, and lessons were important, "It was like we were having a real conversation about our lives, but we were actually doing schoolwork." One students' interview highlighted this growth in optimism:

> I kinda feel better about living in Opelika. I got to see more about what was right with my town and my neighborhood. Sometimes it is easy to just get caught up in all the bad things…the hate and the negativity. But, I am kinda proud to be from here. There is a lot of good things happening in this town.

Certainly, this renewed and hopeful appreciation for the city leads students to greater interest and curiosity about the local community. Students reported that the project "made them want to explore more in Opelika," and "I feel more interested and drawn to it." One student, in fact, said affectionately that "I have a lot more to learn about. My community is much bigger than I thought. It is more mysterious."

Empathy

Student interviews also revealed another important side-effect of students' thinking about community and belonging—an openness to understanding differences of meaning and seeing

things from various perspectives. One student expressed surprise when confronted with the realization that places will have different meaning, “I guess I always knew that things might mean different things to different people. I think this project showed that to me and it did it in a way that really sorta meant a lot to me.” That student identified the school system’s alternative school (Opelika Learning Center; OLC) as a place he felt belonging because of the amount of time he had spent there during previous years. However, to his peers this place was perceived and imagined as considerably different. The experience of seeing things differently from others carried not only surprise, but a pain and unbelief, “People have disagreed with me about things before, but I really care about this place and it means a lot to me and it was surprising that it did not mean a lot to other people.”

Students began to realize that other people’s understanding of places might be an important guide to one’s own understanding of the place. Knowing “that [a place] used to be something important and meant a lot to the people around it. Knowing that makes you look at it differently,” observed one student. Another student recalls, “It was neat hearing about all the places and how they are special to other people. It was cool to see how things that don’t mean anything to me mean a lot to other people.” The project showed students how their stories and other people’s stories concerning place matter:

> Once we had to start working with each other and combine our maps and do the history project, it really forced me to talk about my spaces and my places more. I had to explain it to other people and not just make it make sense to me. And once my group had to do the same, I started feeling differently about some of their places. Once you know more of the story behind different people’s places, you can really start to see why they are important, even if not important to you.

For many students, this project helped clarify the complexity of ‘place’ as a theme of geography. One student remarked that place:

> really didn't make any sense until I did this project. There is a lot of space in this city, but places are really what that space means to you, if anything at all. There are spaces here that I never knew existed and that don't mean anything to me. But they mean something to someone. It is kinda neat to think about…all spaces are places to someone.

This realization that "all spaces are places to someone," was a sentiment expressed by other students, as well. It captured an empathetic tone by acknowledging that even when some space is not important to you, that meaning exist for someone else. One student described her learning:

> I learned that these are hard things to think about. To identify your community and where you belong takes a lot of thinking and a lot of feeling and wasn't easy. It was neat to see how places you don't care or know anything about actually mean a lot to somebody else. There were even places I was surprised would mean anything to anyone. There really isn't any place that doesn't matter to someone in this town.

The surprise and the realization experienced by these students left them more open to considering Opelika differently—acknowledging they needed to grow and experience more. "I have a lot more to experience and a lot of opportunity ahead of me in this town," said one student. "I don't really know it enough and it makes me want to get to know it better…I learned a lot about different places that I have never heard of …now I would like to visit them and figure out if I fit in there or not," observed another student. Finally, another student "showed me how much more I have to experience and see of this town."

Higher Order Thinking & Self-Identity

Student evaluations of the project expressed a view that the project was "hard" (used 17 times) and "difficult" (used 6 times). There was considerable angst about how to handle the very first individual map of the community. "It was hard not knowing what the right answer was and struggling to figure out how to say what I felt and what I thought," reported one student. She was not alone—many of the students struggled with the abstraction of the project. But, students did power through the struggle and ultimately began making sense of the assignment. Before the transition, however, the initial task seemed daunting. "I also struggled to understand what you

even wanted at first. It just took a long time for things to start clicking in my head." In the end, most students reported on the difficulty of the tasks favorably, despite acknowledging it was still very hard. One student described what she experienced as a "good headache." Another student remarked, "it was difficult at first. Once it got going, it was kind of fun. It took a day to really wrap my head around where my community was, but once you got that, you could really start thinking about all the spaces within the community that you could talk about." Still another student in her interview started off saying, "Mr. Cunningham, this was a lot of work. Too much work!" During the interview, though, I asked her if she thought I should do it with my students next year. She responded affirmatively. When I reminded her how much work the project was, she acknowledged, "It wasn't easy, but there was a lot of opportunity to try to tell you about who we are and then we got to work together. There was good stuff there."

Students cited several opportunities this project provided for them to grow as deeper, more abstract thinkers. Certainly, the project called on students to define very abstract concepts. Students had to search their own minds and hearts about place, community, and belonging. "We had to put a lot into words," stated one student. The same student also said they had to "make a lot of decisions," about how to show and communicate their own thinking. Another student expressed the difficulty in applying her own definitions to actual reality:

> I guess I learned that defining community is the easy part, but figuring out where your community is was the hard part. Figuring out what the word meant came pretty quickly, but then figuring out what that meant as far as drawing a map was really, really hard. That is what got all of us drawing lines all over the place, because where community is is different for everybody.

Boundaries were cited by many students as being one of the harder things for them to think about. "I never had to think about boundaries," remarked one student. In struggling to delineate and figure out what, who, and where things are or are not a part, another student complained that

"It is like there isn't a line that you just cross—this is my community, this isn't. It is more like there is a gray area where you are still in and out before you are just out."

Students were pushed to think more deeply about the more common things around them. "It really made me think about space, but then I had to think about my own feelings and memories," recalled one student. Another said:

> I think it really helped me better think about my neighborhood. It is like I know it so well that I never think about it. But then when you start to think about it you are like, I don't really know this place at all. So, I guess the project did help me to look at my neighborhood in a different way, a harder, better sorta way.

Indeed, one student whose map did not change significantly from the first to the second, still expressed changes in meaning. "What was on my map might look the same, but now I feel different about the things. It's like I know more about the shapes in the second map than I did when I drew the first map." This heightened sense of shape allowed the student to express how this capacity to perceive meaning in abstraction helped him be more understanding and empathetic:

> I think I also got to see what other people's shapes meant to them. You see, other people had different maps and different shapes that really didn't even make it on my map and didn't mean anything to me. It was neat to see how something I don't even know about matters to other people in a real way. The things on my map are really important to me and mean a lot. It is good to be able to express what is important to us so that people respect things even if they do not get them.

Students consistently spoke to how this project meant a lot to them and helped them clarify their own hearts. "It was really a problem of making sense of what was in my own head and what I care about. Once I saw it, I knew how important it was to me." A number of students mentioned one of the values of the project was having to focus on the details of their life and inventory the good things and collectively bring them together. "I think it was hard at first, but once I had the right idea in my head, it turned out to be fun. I got to think about all the things I

am involved in and a part of and that was neat to be able to tell you about," said one student. The students had to begin seeing extensions of themselves beyond the familiar, as well. "The project made us think about so much and like it forced us to see more about who we are than just our house. But I began to see myself in so many other places and kinda put all of them together," recalled another student. Thinking in this way and then having to explain it was cited as making otherwise important parts of students' life have more meaning: "Once you have to explain it, the place almost means more to me. It also helps me things about what makes one special place different from another. Before this, I would have had trouble saying what made this special place different from that special place."

Perhaps one of the most insightful ways students expressed how this project affected their own sense of self and identity, involved students' own perceptions of themselves in relation to the community. One student who expressed a change in thinking about Opelika said that "I just feel smaller." When I asked him how that affected his sense of belonging, he responded:

> It makes me feel like I don't really know it enough and makes me want to get to know it better before I could really say. I learned a lot about different places that I have never heard of or never knew nothing about, and now I would like to visit them and figure out if I fit in there or not.

This notion of feeling smaller was not isolated to this one student. Another student expressed a similar idea when he said he "felt smaller." He recalls that this project:

> forced me to actually try to see the space that all the pieces fit in and draw lines and boundaries around them. We actually live in a lot of space that we don't really think about. Once you start thinking about it, it is shocking and scary and makes you feel different.

But, the same student went on to say that he also felt bigger. When asked to explain these two different claims of feeling smaller and bigger, he responded:

> Well, the space that you really live in is big. Once you think about all the places and the space they take up, you see yourself as small. But, then you when you start making the

> connections you have within your community, you start to see that you matter to other people and other places. This makes you feel bigger.

Cautions

As a researcher excited about ideas of heightening local community awareness and instilling sense of belonging to local communities, there were considerable assumptions and blind spots in my thinking that are worth mentioning and noting for repetition or on-going iterations. Family situations, high poverty, and unseen challenges in certain students' lives can make this project a less than welcome assignment, or at least not full of positivity for the student.

Admittedly, middle school students have limited mobility. But, some students have *very* limited mobility. One student who lives with his great-grandparents has a zone of experience that follows the bus route from his home to the school. His family situation keeps him isolated more than his peers and creates a situation where his peers' experiences kept him from being able to connect or contribute substantially. Conversely, I had another student who was homeless and stayed with his father. His mobility was abnormally high, living a transitory life. His community map was necessarily unbounded and a patchwork of places that made it difficult for him to fit into a group and contribute substantially, as well.

Students that are new to the area have very similar experiences of not being able to contribute, relate, or connect, making the social interactions of the project difficult. Some students indicated their inability to engage on an equal level with their peers and made them feel more of an outsider because of the project:

> I think it was hard because every part of it started making me feel different compared to my classmates. I think it made me feel like an outsider by the time I was finished and saw how easy it was for them to connect and come up with maps, community assets and their projects. I didn't even know who to interview, so it was tough.

Another student who lived with her mother expressed frustration over how to visualize her community because her father lived in Florida, with whom she had considerable connections:

> I had a lot of trouble trying to figure out how to draw my community. My mom lives in Opelika with me, my aunt, my brothers and sisters, but my dad and his family are in Florida. It was really hard thinking about how to draw boundaries because somehow, I see myself in both places and nowhere in between.

Still other students' have past experiences that are not so positive or worth unpacking in a classroom assignment or setting. One student was a refugee from a war-torn nation with considerable background trauma. He recalled in the interview how it was painful, but good, to engage in discussions of community and belonging with his family:

> It helped me connect more with my family and talk about our home that we had to leave. It is hard to talk about with them because there is a lot of pain and disappointment there. But, having a reason to talk about it made us all open up more and laugh and cry together. I think it was hard for my dad and mom, but it was good to hear what they had to say about things and watch them struggle with it.

However, not all challenges in the home and in lives can be engaged for the positive, as this student's was. Considering more fully the complexities and diversity of students' lives must be considered and accounted for in the community mapping and community history project.
This idea of boundaries also has implications for state and national geography. How many people in the U.S. feel part of two places? It is interesting to see the persistent nature of the issues the students are experiencing in a local geography to other geographies.

Summary of DBR Phase #3: Evaluation/Reflection Phase—The Third Research Question

The community mapping project and community history project revealed five insights about students' sense of community and belonging. First, concerning students' visions of community, their expanded sense of community can be attributed to the repetitive and ongoing nature of the project. Students credited the work in groups and peer presentations as challenging their initial visions and assumptions. Students also seemed to make strides in spatial awareness,

notably through their work with GIS technology and comparing individual community maps. Too, community asset identification was formative. While students enjoyed conducting the community history project, they did indicate that resources were a considerable obstacle.

Second, concerning students' sense of belonging, there were several explanations for how and why the projects influenced students' sense of belonging. As visions of community were troubled among students, there was corresponding effects on students associating with a new vision of community. Too, students articulated a compelling narrative on the importance of experience in feeling belonging. Learning did not produce a deep enough level of knowledge for students to feel belonging to a place. Additionally, these middle school students had difficulty expressing fidelity in their sense of belonging.

Third, middle schoolers spoke to desires and attitudes that resulted from the projects. They felt a level of pride while they were able to showcase their communities to one another. They also noted feelings of agency as they were able to be like teachers. They appreciated the challenge of being responsible for their own learning. Too, students spoke to overcoming fear and false perceptions within the community. Students expressed a more optimistic and hopeful attitude due to the project's emphasis of good things that are taking place in all corners of the community. Finally, students showed growth in empathy, understanding their peers, and openness to explore and re-imagine places based on others' stories and not their own perceptions alone.

Fourth, students revealed overcoming struggles in abstract thought and embracing higher order thinking skills throughout the course of projects. Students also demonstrated how the project helped them better perceive their own identity. Meaningful things in their lives took on greater clarity.

Finally, a few students' experiences with the project required me to reflect on future cautions and blind spots in my own thinking. Some students have severely limited mobility and experiences. Others are highly transitory and have no place to call home. Some students' newness to the area is a liability for meaningful contributions. Other students' familial situations may challenge them to see who and where they are due to divorce or split living arrangements. Further still, stresses in the home or painful and traumatic experiences of the past may not be good to have students conjure up. These critical considerations need to be accounted for in future renditions and iterations.

In the next chapter, I continue to reflect on what has been gained from this research endeavor. I present a summary of the research from the previous two chapters, detail a series of limitations on the research, and offer insights about future lines of research given these results and findings.

Chapter 6: Summary, Implications, & Limitations

Summary

Citizenship education has motivated social studies education to support creation of active, participatory, and transformative citizens (Banks, 2017; National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Ho & Barton (2020) have called for using the more immediate context of the local community, including civic associations to provide students with concrete, meaningful experiences of engaging with their community as citizens. Developing a social studies curriculum meant to empower students to participate in the civic life of the community must help students "to attend more consciously to their physical place on earth and the social, political, and economic dynamics that surround it" (Theobald, 1997). This research study utilized design-based research (DBR) and sought to understand to what extent students see themselves as part of the broader local community. Understanding how student think, feel, and sense belonging within the community are vital pieces of knowledge to effectively inform curricular choices aimed at connected students to the local community and promoting their participation in in. This research investigated and answered three research questions:

1. ***How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of place and sense of belonging?; and,***
2. ***How do middle school students visualize and define community and narrate their sense of belonging following a collaborative community history and mapping project?; and,***
3. ***What does the collaborative community history and mapping project reveal about students' sense of belonging to a community?***

The phases of design-based research lent themselves to answering one research question in each of the phases. The first research question was addressed in the exploration/analysis phase which sought to gauge students' own sense of understanding, background knowledge, and funds of knowledge. In this first phase I sought to understand how students visualized and defined

community and narrated belonging. The second research question was investigated in the second phase, design/construction. Here a student-driven, small group community history project was completed and shared with the class. The goal of the intervention was to see how these projects and students learning from other students influenced students' visualizations and definitions of community and sense of belonging. Finally, the third phase, evaluation/reflection, allowed me to answer the third research question as I examined students' sense of belonging to a community through reflection, surveys, and interview.

The research goals overall were meant to determine if social studies curriculum could be used to promote students' sense of belonging to their local community. However, this endeavor required a prior understanding of how students visualized and defined their communities and sense belonging. Hence, a community mapping project was developed to investigate what students thought about when they considered 'community' and 'belonging.' In this individual project, students drew a community map, developed a photographic tour of places of belonging, wrote a guided reflection, and took a survey.

At the beginning of the project, the middle school students visualized and defined their neighborhoods in a parochial manner that reflected their dependence and immobility. Students' visions of their communities were widely varied, which were no surprise given the work of Newman & Paasi (1998) and Coulton (2001), whose research suggested that shared spaces remain subject to multiple conceptions by those living in them and that community maps seldom aligned with government-defined maps. The students' sense of community in this study indicated that they tended to define their experiences of home, family, and neighborhoods as what made community. Their narrations of belonging emphasized the importance of memories and experience to create meaningful bonds. Fitting in with others without anxiety was associated

with a desire to be, grow, experience, and make mistakes. Students also suggested belonging is associated with places they have cared for, but also where they have agency and are empowered to be a critical and necessary part. Survey data suggested a majority of students did not feel they belonged to their local community.

These findings were similar to what was found in the pilot study conducted in 2021 (Cunningham & Kohlmeier, 2022). The results of this pilot study guided my design of the community mapping project to investigate if community asset mapping and peer collaboration could expand students' sense of communities and influence students' sense of belonging in that community.

The curricular intervention was a community history project that was conducted in purposefully selected small groups. Students together re-created community maps from their individual work, aided by GIS technology. They then inventoried community assets and chose one on which to conduct an in-depth community history project. Afterward students presented these projects to the class. Once students had taught and learned about the larger community from one another, the individual students repeated their drawings of individual community maps, re-wrote their reflections, and re-took the survey which could then be compared with their first renditions.

Analyzing these second renditions, I could see how the intervention influenced students' sense of community and belonging. Students' own visualizations of their communities underwent change over the course of the two projects. Many students not only re-centered and re-oriented their community maps, but their map ranges expanded largely from neighborhoods to the city level. Map details and map-like quality showed students had a greater awareness of their surroundings and spatial awareness. Students reported that these changes occurred after

deliberately considering the question more and more over time (many had never thought about the question before, let alone had to sustain thinking about it through multiple iterations). Too, students sense of community grew through peer learning and social construction—students noted how working together with other students and family, learning from one another impacted their vision of community. Communities as imagined (Anderson, 2006) fluid social constructions (Leung, 2018) relying on relationships between people and the places they occupy and navigate (Cohen, 1985; Keller, 2003) reasonably should have been expected to change over the course of the interactions inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, students credited the use of GIS technology for providing considerable insights and clarity when it came to seeing the shape and scope of their community.

Not only did students' vision of community change, but so did their definitions of community. Students evidenced greater comfort in defining community using more articulate, illustrative language and cogency. While maintaining previous themes, students' thinking articulated two new thematic elements: *participating* and *interested*. Students' discussion of these themes in their work generated definitions of community that evidenced a more active and outgoing sense of interaction between themselves and their community. The sharpening of these definitions, too, was the result of sustained critical thinking about the topic, as well as students' coming to grips with the vague and abstract concept of community. What students described as very hard to put to words and make sense of at first, was clarified in their own heads over the course of the project.

Students' discussion of belonging saw considerable shifts, as well. Themes previously untapped were triggered in students' second round of thinking, including *interested, knowledge & awareness,* and *safety*. These new themes demonstrated that students were growing in their

own thoughts and thinking outside those themes otherwise closely connected to familial and home life. Students commented on how working together actually made them take greater stock of places and spaces in their community that they did not previously consider or think about. Too, the community history project presentations piqued students' interests in the area and fostered a desire to participate in the life of the community.

Finally, students' writing indicated an upward trend in students feeling they belonged to Opelika. Significant results among certain groups of students' average scores were seen when analyzing student data from the Williams-Vaske's (2003) adapted place attachment survey. There were significant movements in both directions among groups of students. Some students started out feeling they did not belong and ended up feeling they did and vice-versa. Too, some students remained unmoved in the sense of feeling like they belonged or did not belong from beginning to end. Still, even then there were significant movements in some of those students' averages on the survey. As students' sense of community changed, so too did their sense of belonging and perceptions concerning that community. Students reported growing in curiosity through discovering more about the size and various places within the community. Some students' response these revelations produced feelings of smallness and uncertainty, while others invigorated a greater pride in the place. These various responses moved students in their sense of belonging in sometimes dramatic ways.

Several insights were gained by analyzing the changes in students' vision and definition of community as well as their sense of belonging. Student interviews revealed the extent to which social constructivism helped students grow in their vision and understanding of community. Students credited the work in groups and peer presentations as challenging their initial visions and assumptions. Thinking about community for the first time and in isolation led

students to narrowly focus on what was most immediate in their mind. Working together, however, proved formative. Community asset mapping within a group helped students recognize and recall more spaces and places in their communities than before. Thinking together and justifying their inventory played a critical role in helping students see more. Additionally, students credited the GIS work with helping them more accurately see how spaces and places related.

While the community asset mapping and GIS elements of the community history project were perceived by students as a positive, there were indications from students that the resources available to research particular community assets were lacking. Students attempted to find information online and in-print, but many of the assets identified lacked formal resources. Indeed, certain assets were purposefully not chosen because there were not resources available to students to use to research the place and space in the classroom.

Students also provided valuable understanding concerning their sense of belonging. Students' sense of community was fluid, much like their sense of belonging. As their visions of community were challenged, students saw significant shifts in feeling of belonging. For many, their sense of community grew and the meaning of community and/or Opelika shifted to include places and spaces never before considered. These shifts prompted students to respond differently and demonstrated that expanding students' visions of community may produce uncertainty and/or greater awareness that could reasonably cause reservation about belonging or promote pride of being a part. Too, students articulated a compelling narrative on the importance of experience in feeling belonging. Learning does not produce a deep enough level of knowledge for students to feel belonging to a place. Additionally, middle school students have difficulty

thinking about fidelity to a community. While students ultimately felt they belonged, they could not readily see themselves remaining in that community long-term.

Third, middle schoolers spoke to a number of desires and attitudes that resulted from the projects. They felt a level of pride while they were able to showcase their communities to one another. They also noted feelings of agency as they were able to be like teachers. They appreciated the challenge of being responsible for their own learning. Too, students spoke to overcoming fear and false perceptions within the community. Students expressed a more optimistic and hopeful attitude due to the project's emphasis of good things that are taking place in all corners of the community. Finally, students showed growth in empathy, understanding their peers, and openness to explore and re-imagine places based on others' stories and not their own perceptions alone.

Students revealed overcoming struggles in abstract thought and embracing higher order thinking skills throughout the course of projects. Students also demonstrated how the project helped them better perceive their own identity. Meaningful things in their lives took on greater clarity. Being asked (multiple times) about the deep connections that constitute communities, belonging, and unbelonging caused students to take considerable stock of their lives and relationships to people, places, and spaces. Communicating such abstract, meaningful, and sentimental realities drew significant thought and capacity from each student.

Finally, a number of the students' experiences with the project required me to reflect on future cautions and blind spots in my own thinking about community and belonging. There were students with profoundly limited mobility, meager experiences beyond home and school, transitory lifestyles, separated families, homelessness, abusive situations, and compromising immigration statuses. These students' perspectives did not follow traditional lines of thinking or

easily comport to geopolitical lines. Their contributions to thinking about community was often purposefully narrow but profoundly impactful. Their experience of unbelonging in places and spaces would present considerable contributions to better understanding community dynamics. Their experiences are not isolated, but were not well-teased out in the line of questioning from this research.

Implications

The results of this study have considerable implications for future research and further iterations for ongoing curriculum design. These implications include: (1) increased use of GIS technology in the classroom; (2) development of local community history resources; (3) promoting fidelity to the local community; (4) exploration & experience opportunities in the local community; (5) assessing unbelonging; (6) further considerations of boundaries and their meaning; and (7) classrooms as communities. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Increased Use of GIS Technology

Not only did students generally enjoy working with the technology, but they testified to the gains made in their own spatial awareness from it. Whether it is a basic tool like Google's My Maps or a more sophisticated platform like ESRI ArcGIS, school systems and geography teachers should consider ways to avail themselves (and their classrooms) of these tools. Students have arguably little experience in drawing or working with maps. Teaching them how to access and use these tools aids another critical element to their digital repertoire and spatial thinking. As school systems push to promote linguistic literacy, many advocates have also pushed for promotion of spatial literacy. Perkins, Hazelton, Erickson, & Allan (2010) write that:

> spatial literacy plays an integral role in our ability to process information and provides a framework for understanding that crosses disciplines…A spatially literate workforce and citizenry able to access, manage, visualize, and interpret information, also capable of

multidimensional thinking, are vital to advance science and technology and address the world's complex problems.

Indeed, these researchers used place-based education and GIS tools with middles school students to demonstrate shifts in spatial awareness.

Future research questions include:

- To what extent can use of GIS help improve students' spatial awareness of their local community?
    - This question could quite easily expand on Perkins, Hazelton, Erickson, & Allan (2010) whose research focused on measuring how GIS helped students better see their schoolyard area. To do this they had students draw a memory map of the schoolyard area and then do an in-depth GIS project on the space. Afterward, a second memory map was drawn and comparisons analyzed. To help students better imagine various sections of the local community, the same method could be used. City council wards, various school district boundaries, historic districts, and housing communities could be immediate sources for investigation with students.
- How can students' increased spatial awareness enable them to ask political questions and identify issues for political action?
    - A follow-up companion question to the first would begin moving investigating how to follow students' growth in spatial awareness to civic and political action. It would be intriguing to see what questions students develop after seeing how boundaries are drawn and how spaces are organized politically once their spatial awareness is more robust. Based on these questions, there could be considerable action points from which to develop plans for participation and transformation.

Development of Local Community History Resources

Students appreciated identifying and discussing community assets. Notably, a number of students saw the task as good news that inspired them to want to learn more about Opelika and made them feel more optimistic about the direction of the community. The community history project, however, faced the problem of resources. For students who were able to readily find material, the project was fulfilling and empowering. For others, however, it was difficult and frustrating. While I tried to collect several resources online and in-print, ahead of time, my own preparations were inadequate. Consideration needs to be given to enable students to experience and connect with assets and information on a more personal level. Part of the project that was almost universally enjoyed was the interview that students conducted with someone in the community associated with the asset. Field trips would be well-considered, as would more intentional connections made between community members and the students. Additionally, forging an on-going relationship with the local paper would both enable access to history and access to the current civic and communal dialogue. Too, oral histories and an accessible archive would prove a formidable resource in future projects. Collaborating with the local historical society through the East Alabama Museum would be a logical first step. Social studies educators should consider ways to produce and archive oral histories collected by students concerning these assets—thus, making a readily available library of community history.

Valk & Ewald (2017) used oral history projects that included interviews and community art to teach about place and community in a small town in Rhode Island. Over the course of the project, participants (both students and community members) had not only collected art and transcripts, but also documents and photographs. I could imagine that as the community history project is refined and repeated year after year, materials could be more purposefully stored (digitally) and perhaps linked with an interactive map of Opelika so that students could share

their work with not only the community, but subsequent students. Turning the history project into more of an oral history project would alleviate the student of the burden to find typical research resources (books, articles, &c.). However, it would require more interaction and crucial connections between insightful community members and the students. While a challenge, it would be a challenge well worth the undertaking, as making these connections may more meaningfully impact the student and their sense of community and belonging.

Future research questions include:

- How does teacher-as-newcomer change over time as boundary spanner in connecting students to community members?
    - This question is a personal, professional question. As a teacher trying to engage students more, it would be intriguing to catalogue and reflect on how my role as liaison and intermediary develops, grows, and builds.
- How are students' sense of community influenced by referencing and interacting with a community history archive?
    - Assuming an archive were able to be developed, it would be fascinating to gauge its effectiveness as a community building tool. Determining what students may gain from other students work and how social construction may happen from afar and promote unknown spaces and places. How might the work of previous classes affect the sense of community and belonging of other classes? I think of the PIH website that was often utilized in the social studies education at Auburn, and how it impacted me as a teacher. I imagine a similar repository of materials that may allow students to grow in their awareness of the community.

- How are students and community members sense of community and belonging influenced through oral history projects?
    - The East Alabama Museum developed a series of recordings in the 1970's and 1980's from notable Opelika locals about their homes and their lives. One thing about the recordings is they were self-directed and more personal stories. They were not interviews and were more autobiographical than about particular spaces and places. I wonder how a more intentional sort of oral history project could be developed as an extension of the community history project and become a primary source to include in this interactive community history repository. Such projects have shown promise in engaging students (Haggerty, 2000; Reising & Spivey, 2005), but how can we use these projects to particularly promote community and belonging? What influence do they have on the students and the community members who participate?

Promoting Fidelity to the Local Community

Baker & Bilbro (2017), relying on volumes of Wendell Berry, lament that students are trained (particularly in higher education) to see themselves elsewhere. Instead of emphasizing the needs of the local community, schools and institutions are producing students who are unmoored and cannot see themselves "settling down and faithfully inhabiting a place" (165). Berry (1977) calls what schools and institutions should be doing, "homecoming." While the concept certainly has its critiques and shortcomings, it is remarkable that only one in five students from this small study sees themselves staying in Opelika. What is even more remarkable is that the likelihood is that many more than one in five will likely find themselves staying in the city.

Future research questions include:

- Do students who wanted to leave home and don't leave home see this reality as a failure to fulfill a dream?
    - This question would be intriguing to ask recent graduates and young adults in the community. This would help create a critical understanding the decisions of students who are positioned to leave, what motivated their choices. Discerning these reasons more effectively communicates the level of fidelity to the community at the time that choices could (or could not) be exercised. For middle schoolers involved in this research fidelity may be too remote an idea given undeveloped concepts of who they (as adults) will become.
- Is fidelity to place a priority for parents, schools, or local communities?
    - While this concept is important to me and a number of my literary heroes, is it to people in the community? Assessing this may really be telling and insightful as a starting point of inquiry.
- Should schools and institutions be providing students with opportunities to see future visions of themselves having a place and a fulfilling life in the local community?
    - Depending on the outcome of the previous question about the importance of fidelity to various stakeholders, a potential follow-up would be this question. Determining the normative scope that stakeholders believe schools should or should not have would provide direction for how to potentially develop curriculum and coursework associated with this line of research.
- How can fidelity as a factor of belonging be better assessed and understood from students' perspectives?

    - Just as this research asked students to define abstract and vague notions such as ‘community’ and ‘belonging’ to understand these form their perspective, I think ‘fidelity’ could create an interesting and meaningful commentary. Better understanding how students think about the term and what it means to them, may opening a pathway from which to instill and promote fidelity to place among students.
- What impact does mentoring students have on promoting fidelity to place? What affect does membership in civic associations have on students’ perception of fidelity to place?
    - I could imagine the development of a meaningful mentorship/internship program that existed to connect students with particular interests, skills, or ambitions with people from the community who are doing work in the same area. Indeed, future iterations of community and belonging work envision having students eventually working toward solutions with community civic associations. It could as easily go a step further and make more one-on-one connections between particular students and particular community members to empower the student to begin seeing what their life could look like in Opelika in time. Mentoring programs have been shown to have positive effects on secondary students (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006), including from school attendance to mental health to lower levels of drug and alcohol abuse. It would perhaps be a worthy endeavor to open up a research line in whether such programs could influence “homecoming” and fidelity.

Exploration & Experience Opportunities in the Local Community

Students want to explore. They thirst for agency. The local community is a wide-open backyard for this to occur. Students in this project have admitted there is so much more for them

to see in Opelika. Show it to them. Take them there. Students have acknowledged they want to serve and care for their community—in fact, that's what they say makes community. Let them. Help them. Recall that so many students indicated that merely learning is not enough—for some, knowledge does not promote belonging. Experience does. Citizens are the caretakers of the community and caretaking is best experienced than explained. Enabling students to identify problems within their own communities and propose and implement solutions is experiencing citizenship. Showing students that they have civic and political efficacy would undoubtedly position students to more fulfilled, participatory, and transformative forms of citizenship.

Future research questions include:

- What do students who participate in place-based learning and service-learning projects reveal to us about development of civic character and habits?
    - Place-based education (Smith & Gruenewald, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010) coupled with meaningful service-learning opportunities (Hedin & Conrad, 1981; Soslau & Yost, 2007) have proved invaluable at engaging youth and providing crucial awareness of local community issues. Using these opportunities to describe and track what affect they have on students' sense of political efficacy and development of civic attitudes and habits would be a crucial next step.
- What do youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects in the local community reveal about students as effective, transformative citizens?
    - Cammarota & Fine (2008) describe youth participatory action research as a means to empower students to identify issues and take action on these issues with the goal of building up the students' capacity as agents of changes. This goal dovetails with Banks' (2017) notions of inclusion and transformative citizenship.

Coupling YPAR's methods, how could we better assess how students are growing towards more transformative citizenship?

- What effect do field trips and opportunities outside the classroom have on students' awareness and sense of community? What effect does student engagement in fieldwork and community exploration have on their sense of belonging?
    - Given students' own words about experience as a critical component to their possessing deeper knowledge, fieldwork and field trips need to be considered anew. Combine this with the reality of students' limited mobility and these experiences may be some students only chance to venture into the greater and wider area of the community. William & Vaske's (2003) own study in which they developed the survey instrument used in this dissertation, tried to determine how fieldwork for college geology students affected their attachment to the fieldwork sites. How much does the experience on-site connect students to that place, essentially was their investigation. Indeed, a purposeful series of fieldtrips and site visits to community assets in the local community could be similarly treated with middle school students. Questions about how connected they feel to each individual site and asset could be asked, while also endeavoring at each to see how students are connecting more or less to Opelika. Further, pairing this survey data with students' reflections on belonging to the visited places and spaces could be powerful.
- How do students experience the community mapping and community history (and/or other iterations of the project) with their peers?

- I include this question here thinking about how invaluable student interviews were to helping accurately explain findings. In the future, I could imagine having a small group interview (more than one-to-one) where students could speak to one another about their experiences in the projects already developed and any future additions to the project.

Assessing Unbelonging and Narratives of Non-Membership

Thinking about two groups of students—those whose sense of unbelonging to the community remained unchanged throughout the project and those whose situations made them feel not yet (or not fully) bound to Opelika—it would be well to give them more of an opportunity to express themselves and still contribute. I wonder if there could be an alternative project so that these students' stories could inform the greater discussion and still allow them to teach their peers. Thinking about Banks (2017) notion of failed citizenship and marginalized groups, it would seem that for schools to help reduce these statuses, we must give those students some role in the forum and exchange of ideas.

Future research questions include:

- How do marginalized students' stories of unbelonging and non-membership in the community affect the classroom's sense of community and belonging?
- Do stories of failed citizenship motivate students to engage in transformative citizenship?
- How do students' narratives of unbelonging and non-membership help social studies educators develop curriculum for inclusion and membership?

Further Considering Boundaries and their Meaning

Students struggled with drawing boundaries. Indeed, students' remarks prompted me to consider more how students imagine boundaries. One student observed, "Drawing and thinking

about the boundaries was really hard. It was like you had to come up with a line which meant so much. On one side you saw your community and the other you didn't. That is a tough line to find." Another suggested the difficulty of imagining boundaries, "It isn't like the community just ends at a line. It kinda fades…It is like there isn't a line that you just cross…this is my community, this isn't. It is more like there is a gray area where you are still in and out before you are just out." Teasing out student thinking about boundaries has implications on how to understand and teach about great membership beyond just local communities. Considering Nussbaum's (2008) cosmopolitanism and the necessary exchange of individuals seeing themselves as local, state, national, and global citizens (among others), demands some analysis of boundaries and their meanings.

Future research questions include:

- How do students think about boundaries? Are they necessary components of community?
- What are students' perceptions of borders and boundaries? What are the impacts students see of borders and boundaries on understanding community and belonging?

Classrooms as Communities

During these projects, students reported positive outcomes and appreciation for the opportunity to teach one another, other students, and the teacher. In many ways the classroom began to work together more intentionally to help one another better understand the places and spaces in the broader community. In many ways this action mirrored and mimicked a community within the classroom. Digging deeper into this reality offers an opportunity to see how classroom communities impact students. Luter, Mitchell, & Taylor (2017) studied the effects of a "Community as Classroom," course aimed to identify and investigate neighborhood issues touching the students lives. The purpose of their study was to measure how it impacted students'

academic grades, attendance, and standardized test score. Rothrock (2017) created a similar classroom community culture, but facilitated students doing fieldwork in the students' own communities. The purpose of the goal was to foster great collegiality among peers, in the hope of counteracting the competitive culture of grades and test scores. This classroom communities' culture could be tapped into and cultivated to inform next steps in this research.

Further research questions include:

- How can consistent classroom community culture impact students' civic efficacy?
- How do classroom communities influence students' sense of belonging to school? To the local community?

Limitations

This research was conducted by a teacher-research in his own classroom. The research speaks broadly of middle school students, but the number of middle school students is limited. The students totaled 90 and included mostly high poverty students, either Black, White, or Hispanic coming from a small urban community in the Southeast United States. Most of the students are native English speakers. However, middle schoolers across the country could have considerably different demographics that could produce different insights or results. It is conceivable that different national (or international) regions might produce nuanced or different results. Using different sized communities and different community settings—urban, suburban, and/or rural—may, too, affect findings. The age of the students might also change the results. High-schoolers, or other age groups, could overcome certain obstacles that the middle schoolers in this study faced, changing the import of the findings.

It is also important to recognize the practical constraints that our course of study in middle school placed on examining student's sense of community and belonging. These lessons

had to be fit into a narrow timeframe that likely impacted the project from students' and researcher's prospective of feeling rushed. Student may well have benefited from more time to think and reflect individually, or as groups. As a researcher, I would have benefited from more time to observe and analyze data in real-time to better assist and monitor student progress. Too, the interviews were some of the more critical data for explaining changes in thinking and time and classroom management constraints limited these interviews to a brief 1-2 minutes.

This research also happened to be done in the classroom the second year after the initial COVID-19 lockdown. At the time the research was conducted, students with positives or exposed to positives were required to quarantine, and my classes were no exception. By the time the second renditions of maps, reflections and surveys occurred, several students did not complete parts of the assignment due to absences. The nature of the projects made working remotely from home difficult and it proved a limitation to the number of comparisons I could have made if all 90 students could have fully participated at all data collection points.

Students, themselves, faced significant limitations while doing the project. Some students turned in meager photo tours because their families lacked extensive sets of photographs. Further, some students complained that the interview was problematic for them because it required them to go somewhere other than their home after school. The high poverty district in which these students lived translates into lack of transportation and parents who are often working or need to rest when they have time off.

Finally, I think my own paradigm of community influenced my planning of the project. Despite being open-minded and seeking to learn from the students, my paradigm still affected what I anticipated. From the very onset I assumed that students would be able to identify some bounded community that would at least be a sub-set of the larger geopolitical local community of

Opelika. Indeed, students' experiences were considerably more varied. One student was a refugee. Another was homeless. Many were transitory. There were legal immigrants who missed their home countries. There were illegal immigrants who spoke no English and whose families purposefully self-isolated. Many had separated families. The number of students who struggled with the project was unsurprising, because the project was abstract and required significant self-reflection and higher ordered thinking. But my assumptions initially provided inadequate scaffolds because I was pushing students toward a reality that was my own—not one they had experienced.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social studies curriculum can be used in the middle school classroom to help expand students' sense of community and influence their sense of belonging. Carefully designing a community mapping project to discern students' background knowledge on community and belonging was then met with a small-group community history project aimed at prodding greater thinking about the community and what it entails. Analysis of student maps, surveys, written reflections, project artifacts, and student interviews show the project helped students better visualize and define their local communities and grow in understanding and feeling belonging. There were also significant shifts in belonging to the local community among certain groups of students. Future renditions of the project aim to incorporate further iterations which may include place-based, service learning opportunities that promote more exploration and experience of places in the community, increased use of GIS technology, efforts to promote greater fidelity to the local community, creating and curating an oral history based community history resources archive, efforts to better assess unbelonging, more deeply consider students' perspectives of boundaries, and intentionally fostering a classroom as community environment.

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APPENDIX A

<u>*Community Mapping Project*</u>

Have you ever considered what your community is? Where it is? What place you belong to? This project is going to ask you to begin thinking about these things while you practice the art of map-making. This project will take some time and involve in-class work and some work at home. The work will flow in sequential (one after the other) steps. Taking your time on the first step will allow you to do good work on the second, the third, etc. Here are the step-by-step instructions:

(1) DRAW A MAP OF YOUR COMMUNITY. Take a minute to think about what *you* consider to be your community. Think about the places you would include, the people, the landmarks, the boundaries. Now draw me a picture. Take your time and be sure to show me places that are important to you. Particularly, show me the places and spaces that you feel you belong. Also, mark the places you feel you do not belong. You will be given a guide to help you think about these places and spaces before you begin drawing.

(2) GATHER PHOTOGRAPHS OF PLACES/SPACES OF BELONGING. Once you've completed your map and identified the places and spaces where you feel you do and do not belong, let's focus on the places you do feel you belong. Gather some pictures of the people, places, and objects that will help you explain what makes you feel you belong to the places you mentioned and marked. You will be given a guide to help you describe why you included each image/photo that you did.

(3) ANSWER THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT "ON COMMUNITY & BELONGING." After you have drawn your map and gathered your photographs, tackle the question in the project's writing assignment that will ask you to further unpack what you think about community and put into words what you think about belonging. These questions will help you prepare for your presentation in the next part…

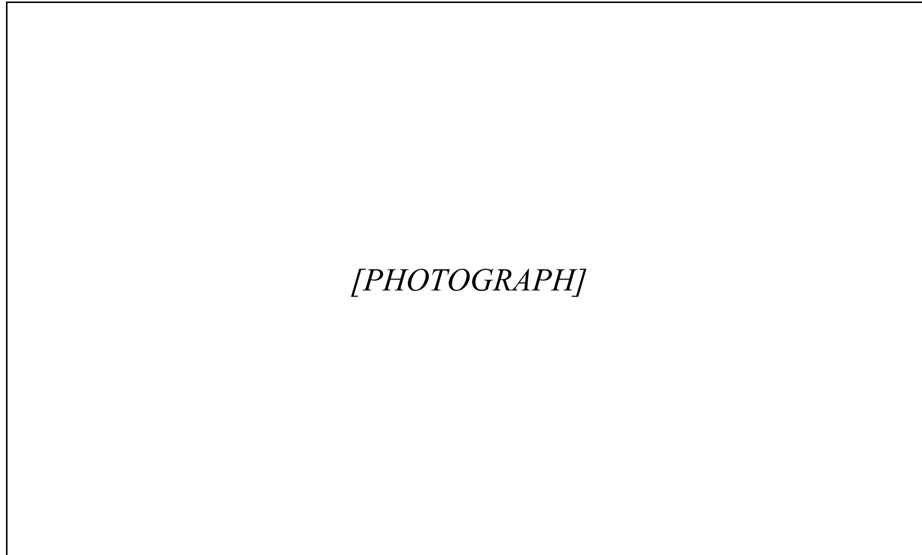
(4) PRESENT YOUR MAP & PHOTOS. After completing the previous steps, prepare a 5-10 minute presentation. You will be using FlipGrid on your Chromebooks to record the presentation and only I will be watching the presentations. I will not share them with anyone else…including your peers or other teachers. Use the presentation guide to consider what you need to include and how you will be graded. You can take your time recording the presentation and start and stop as you feel.

DRAW A MAP OF YOUR COMMUNITY *GUIDE*

When you think of your community, what do you think of…describe it:	
What places, space, and/or landmarks are in the community?	
What are the boundaries of the community?	
What are places you feel that you belong in this community?	
What are places you feel that you do not belong in this community?	
What sort of images can you use to best capture and convey how you feel about the places and spaces?	
What tools will you need to draw this map?	

PHOTOGRAPHS OF PLACES OF BELONGING *GUIDE*

Gather pictures of people or things that help explain why you feel you belong in the places/space that you included on your map. For each photograph, consider the following:



What is the photograph of: a person, a place, an object…something else?	
Describe what you want others to see in the photograph…	
What does this photograph capture…how does it help explain why you feel you belong to the places/space you included?	

ON COMMUNITY & BELONGING *WRITING ASSIGNMENT*

Please respond to the following writing questions in complete (and multiple) sentences. Include details and examples to show you have considered each question in-depth.

(1) How would you define the word 'community'?

(2) Is community important to you? Why or why not?

(3) How would you define the word 'belonging'?

(4) What makes you feel that you belong to the places/spaces that you do?

(5) What makes you feel that you do not belong to the places/spaces that you do?

(6) Do you think everyone would feel they belong to your community? Why or why not?

(7) Do you feel like you belong to the community of Opelika? Why or why not?

(8) When you grow up do you *want* to stay in Opelika? Why or why not?

MAP PRESENTATION *GUIDE*

Prepare a 5-10 minute presentation on FlipGrid that includes:

- ☐ **A show-and-tell of your map.** Discuss what you included while defining what you consider to be your community and places of belonging.

- ☐ **Photo presentations.** As you discuss your map, you can weave in the photographs gathered to help the viewer better understand the places on the map and the importance of the image to belonging.

- ☐ **Use Academic Vocabulary.** Be sure use the key vocabulary for the lesson as you work through your presentation. Explain to the viewer how you define 'community' and 'belonging.'

- ☐ **Submit your recording and all other materials.** Be sure to post your recording for Mr. Cunningham to see. Too, be sure to submit your Writing Assignment through Google Classroom and turn in your Photo Guide Sheets and Maps in-class.

<u>Group Mapping and Community History Project</u>

Overview

After completing your individual community map projects showing your communities and discussing places you felt you belonged or did not belong, you will be working within a group to accomplish these next steps:

(1) **GROUP MAPPING PROJECT.** Organize each of your group's maps together and see how they fit together and overlap. You will combine each of these maps and together construct a map incorporating your group's overall boundaries into a map using My Maps on Google. You will be required to take measurements and record other details in the instructions.

(2) COMMUNITY ASSETS & COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT. As a group, you will identify the places within your boundaries that you consider community assets (see instructions) and you will describe why. Based on these assets you will determine an appropriate in-depth study of the history of one. You will use available resources and interview at least one person in your community, asking them questions about that space, as well as their definitions of community, place, and belonging. Students will prepare a symbol for their community—an image or graphic that captures and conveys the assets and distinction their community possess.

(3) PRESENTATION & CLASS MAP CONSTRUCTION. After completing the previous steps, prepare a 5-10 minute presentation. You will be using FlipGrid on your Chromebooks to record the presentation. These will then be shared with the class and viewed while we fill-in a wall map of the city of Opelika including the segments and symbols of each small group throughout the class and cohort.

(4) INDIVIDUAL REDUX. Now that you have completed the group project and heard from your classmates about their segments of the community, re-consider your individual maps and redraw maps of your community following the same instruction as before. Afterward you will also reconsider and re-answer the "On Community, Place, & Belonging" writing exercise.

Group Mapping Project

This first step with your groups is going to require you to each piece together the maps that you drew for your individual projects.

- O FIRST, you will see how your maps fit together—where do they overlap, where do they come together side by side? Then, you will use My Maps in Google to build your group's overall community boundaries (the outer edge of all your individual communities together). You will share this community map with Mr. Cunningham.
- O SECOND, you will take measurements using My Maps.
- O THIRD, you will record measurements and answer the discussion questions below:

Discussion Questions

1. What is the perimeter of your group's community? ______________________________
2. What is the area of your group's community? ___________________________________
3. Are you surprised by the size of your group's area—is it bigger or smaller than you imagined? Explain.

4. Why did your group choose the boundaries that it did? What makes the areas on the other side of the boundary lines different from the area within your community? Explain what is unique and special about the space that your group calls its community.

5. What were the things (if any) that all the members of your group's individual maps had in common with one another?

6. What were the things (if any) that all the members of your group's individual maps did not include that really is within the area of your group's community?

Community Assets and Community History Project

This second step with your groups is going to require you to identify community assets within your group's community. Then you will choose at least one of those assets to do a small history project on. Follow these steps:

O FIRST, read the following description of what 'community assets' are:

What is a community asset?

A community asset or resource is anything that improves the quality of community life. Assets include:

- The capacities and abilities of community members.
- A physical structure or place. For example, a school, hospital, or church. Maybe a library, recreation center, or social club.
- A business that provides jobs and supports the local economy.
- Associations of citizens. For example, a Neighborhood Watch or a Parent Teacher Association.
- Local private, public, and nonprofit institutions or organizations.

O SECOND, you and your group will list the ten most important community assets in your group's community and briefly explain why they are so important.

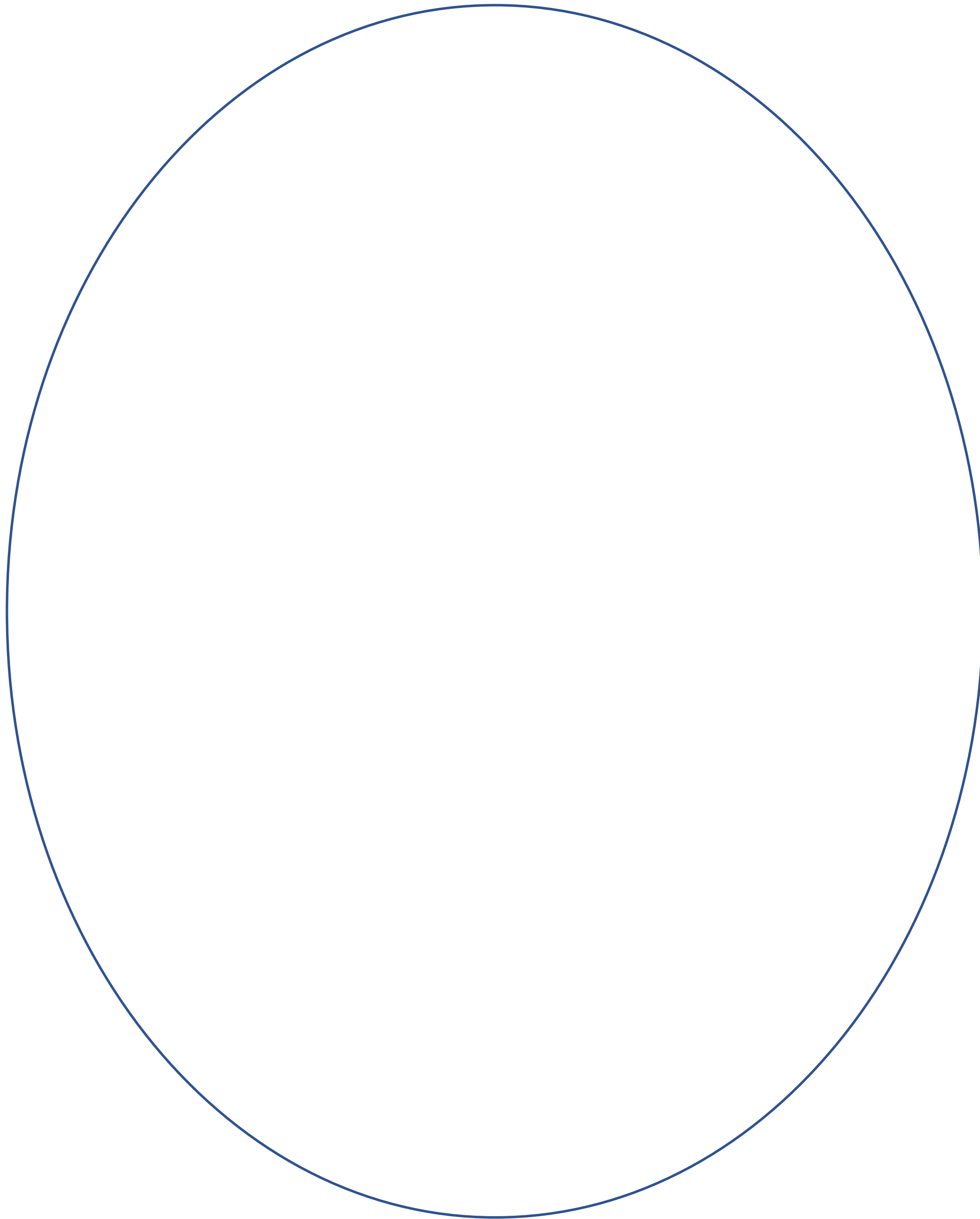
Community Asset	Reasoning

O THIRD, you will choose one of those community assets to do a community history project on. This project should include:

A detailed history of the community asset	
A discussion of how the community asset has changed over time	
A discussion of why the community asset is so important to the people in the community	

A set of unique facts about the community asset that most people would not otherwise know	
A short interview with a community member speaking about the history, importance, and meaning of the community asset.	(9) How would you define the word 'community'? (10) How would you define the word 'belonging'? (11) Do you feel like you belong in Opelika? Why or why not? (12) What can you tell us about the history of _________________? (13) What does ____________________ mean to you, personally? (14) What would you want to tell my peers about the importance of _______________________?

O FOURTH, draw a symbol that represents your community asset and includes reference to your community's strengths and uniqueness. Use colors and detail to make this symbol communicate as much as possible. Stay in the lines (you will cut it out once complete…



GROUP PRESENTATION GUIDE

Prepare a 7-10 minute presentation on FlipGrid that includes:

- ☐ **A show-and-tell of your group's map.** Discuss your boundaries, the area, and what you identified as community assets.

- ☐ **Community History Project.** After you discuss your list of community assets, you will teach the class about the one community asset you chose to do the community history project on. Teach them about the history, importance, and meaning of the asset.

- ☐ **Discuss your symbol.** Explain what you drew and the meaning of colors and details so your classmates understand the symbol.

- ☐ **Submit your recording and all other materials.** Be sure to post your recording for Mr. Cunningham to see and turn in all the group mapping materials.

APPENDIX B

SURVEY/QUESTIONNAIRE

1. I feel Opelika is a part of me.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. Opelika is the best place for what I like to do.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. Opelika is very special to me.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. No other place can compare to Opelika.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. I identify strongly with Opelika.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. I get more satisfaction out of Opelika than any other place I visit.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. I am very attached to Opelika.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. Doing what I do in Opelika is more important to me than doing it in any other place.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. Opelika says a lot about who I am compared to other places I have visited.

   Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. I wouldn't substitute any other area for doing the types of things I do in Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. Opelika means a lot to me.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. The things I do in Opelika I would enjoy doing just as much at a similar site.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. Outside of your home and school, what are three of the most important things you participate in?

14. At school how many organized teams, groups, or clubs do you participate in within the academic year? List the these activities…

15. How many years have you lived in Opelika?_____________________________

16. I feel like I "fit in" in Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

17. I feel that I know my way around Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

18. I feel that I am knowledgeable about the history of Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

19. I feel that I am knowledgeable about issues facing Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

20. I feel that I am respected and valued as a person in Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

21. I feel that I am familiar with the places and spaces in Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

22. I feel that I am a part of the community of Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

23. I feel that I am connected with people outside my family and school in Opelika

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

24. I feel that Opelika is a place where I can make a difference.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

25. I feel proud to say I am from Opelika.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

26. If I left Opelika I would be sad.

    Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1.) Did your idea of community change over the course of the project? How?
2.) Do you feel like you belong to Opelika more now that you have finished the project? Explain.
3.) I noticed this item on the survey/questionnaire did (not) change from your first survey/questionnaire to your last. Can you help me understand what change did (or did not) occur?