

The interviews conducted for this report reflect two distinct formats: group interviews at H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow and one-on-one interviews at Urban Academy. The group setting at HOPE fostered peer interaction and collective reflection but also introduced more distractions, which occasionally limited the depth of individual responses. In contrast, the one-on-one interviews at Urban Academy allowed students to speak more freely and in greater detail about their personal experiences. While the HOPE interviews yielded fewer direct quotes, they still provided valuable insights into students' emotional awareness, peer relationships, and the impact of the Imagine Further Collective (IFC) programming. Both formats offer complementary perspectives that enrich the overall understanding of the program's effectiveness.

### H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow Group Interviews

The interviews conducted at HOPE for Tomorrow were held in a group setting, which naturally introduced a different dynamic compared to the one-on-one interviews conducted at Urban Academy. While the group format allowed for peer interaction and collective reflection, it also meant that some students were less talkative or more easily distracted. As a result, the responses were often shorter and less detailed, and fewer direct quotes were captured.

However, the insights shared, though more concise, still offer meaningful glimpses into the students' experiences, emotional awareness, and the positive impact of the Imagine Further programming. The group interviews remain a valuable source of data, particularly in highlighting shared themes of emotional expression, peer relationships, and the importance of safe, supportive environments.

### Interview 1 – Elementary School Students

#### Student Profiles

Dynasty is a thoughtful and observant 9-year-old who values authenticity and aspires to become a doctor. She is a natural leader who took the lead in responding to my questions first during the informal interview. Dynasty expressed appreciation for being in a space where she doesn't feel judged. She said, "She doesn't judge us...she lets you be yourself," referring to Miss Tiff. This demonstrates her sensitivity to environments that foster emotional safety and self-expression.

Queeny is a 9-year-old who aspires to be a lawyer or a hairstylist. She is quiet yet reflective. Queeny shared that mental health "...means a lot to me because I can express my feelings," especially when she doesn't always have someone to talk to at home. This highlights the importance of IFC as a safe outlet for her emotions.

April is 8 (almost 9), who aspires to become a zookeeper, or something where she can be creative. She is an imaginative and expressive child. When asked what mental health meant to her, she responded "...specialness," a unique and heartfelt answer that suggests she associates emotional well-being with feeling valued and unique.

Bria is a 10-year-old who aspires to be a nurse. She is caring and community-oriented. She mentioned that mental health "...means helping people," showing her empathetic nature. She also enjoys being around her friends at H.O.P.E. for tomorrow and values the connection, saying she likes being there because she gets to see her friends from different grades and schools.

Zara is a 10-year-old child who is introspective and articulate. She shared a deeper reflection on how she uses self-talk to manage her emotions. "When I'm mad at somebody...I would sit by myself and say nothing's wrong." She also mentioned using "reverse psychology" to affirm herself when others are unkind. Her comments show a growing awareness of emotional regulation and self-worth.

#### Key Themes:

1. Emotional Expression and Regulation - Students consistently mentioned how IFC (what they dubbed the "mental health club" helps them talk about their feelings and manage emotions:
  - *"It means a lot to me because I can express my feelings"* – Queeny
  - *"It makes you think about how you feel and how to control your emotions"* – Dynasty
2. Safe and Non-Judgmental Spaces – the students value being in an environment where they feel accepted and are allowed to be themselves
3. Self-Talk and Coping Strategies
  - *"I talk to myself when I'm mad at somebody or when they're having fun without me"* – Zara
  - *"It's like, oh, somebody's talking about me? I know I'm not ugly."* – Zara
4. Friendship and Belonging – The importance of peer relationships was frequently discussed. Students also discussed how to recognize unhealthy friendships.
  - *"I get to see my friends that are at different grades than me and different schools."* – Bria
  - *"If they're telling you to shut up or saying mean things to you, they're not your real friends"* – April
5. Empowerment and Self Worth – Students are learning to advocate for themselves and recognize their value:
  - *"It's okay to be yourself"* – Bria
  - *"Don't let others walk over you"* – April

- “*You know your worth*” – Queeny

## Urban Academy Interviews

### Corey

**Corey** is a fifth-grade student with a vibrant imagination and a passion for animation and gaming. He maintains a YouTube channel where he shares his creative work and gaming experiences. Despite his young age, Corey has faced significant personal challenges, including exposure to violence and physical injury. His participation in the IFC program at Urban Academy has played a crucial role in helping him process these experiences.

#### Key Themes Identified

##### Exposure to Trauma

- Corey shared vivid memories of traumatic events, including a near-death experience involving gunfire:

*“I almost experienced death by shots, really close.”*

*“We had to rush back inside because they weren't so distant.”*

- He also recounted a childhood injury where he stepped on broken glass:

*“I fell over, holding my leg until my mom came in and she put one of her socks over the wound.”*

- These stories reflect Corey’s realities outside the classroom and underscore the importance of emotional support systems in schools, like IFC.

##### Coping and Emotional Regulation

Corey credits the IFC program, particularly Ms. Tiff and Ms. Lex, with teaching him how to manage his emotions. When asked how he handles stress, he responded with the following:

*“Take a deep breath. Don't really think about it and try to get it out in your head.”*

This simple but powerful strategy illustrates the program’s emphasis on mindfulness and emotional resilience.

##### Creative Expression and Aspirations

Corey’s passion for animation and gaming serves as both a coping mechanism and a future goal:

*“I animate a little bit and I upload gaming videos...I want to be an animator.”*

His interests in games like Sonic Superstars and VR Chat reflect a desire to engage with immersive, imaginative worlds - perhaps as a form of escape and self-expression.

## Summary

Corey's story is one of resilience and creativity. Despite facing traumatic events at a young age, he has found ways to express himself through digital media and animation. The IFC program has provided him with tools to manage his emotions and build a sense of safety and support. His journey highlights the critical role of emotional education in helping students navigate complex personal experiences.

## Savannah

**Savannah** is an 11-year-old fifth grader who lives with her aunt. She has experienced significant personal loss—her mother passed away when she was four, and her father is currently incarcerated. Despite these challenges, Savannah is deeply empathetic and aspires to become either a lawyer or a nurse, driven by a desire to help others. Savannah also finds ways to enjoy things she loves, such as cheerleading.

## Key Themes Identified

### Grief and Family Separation

Savannah openly discussed the emotional toll of losing her mother and being separated from her father:

*"I miss my dad. He's in prison and I live with my aunt... I see other kids with their dad moms, and it's like, well, I'm with my aunt, and I know she loves me a lot, but like, Yeah, I'll be happy to get to see my mom and my dad."*

Her reflections reveal a deep emotional maturity and a longing for familial connection.

### Emotional Expression and Healing

Through the IFC program, Savannah learned that expressing emotions is not only acceptable but healing:

*"I learned that it is okay to express your feelings, and that it's okay to let tears out... expressing my feelings to people, like, get some stuff off my shoulder."*

This quote exemplifies the program's success in fostering a safe environment for emotional vulnerability.

### Conflict Resolution and Peer Support

Savannah described how the program taught her structured ways to resolve conflicts:

*"If you have an altercation with one of your friends... you sit down and you talk to her... I feel like those rules help me."*

*She also emphasized the importance of group support:*

*"We... got to get together and talk about, like, sad stories, but like, made each other feel like we were at home."*

These experiences fostered a sense of community and mutual understanding among peers.

### **Career Aspirations and Altruism**

Savannah's career goals reflect her compassionate nature:

*"I want to be a lawyer or a nurse."*

*"I want to help people."*

Her aspirations are rooted in her lived experiences and the empathy she has developed through the program.

### **Summary**

Savannah's journey is one of emotional growth and resilience. Despite facing early loss and ongoing separation from her father, she has developed strong emotional intelligence and a desire to support others. The IFC program has been instrumental in helping her process grief, express emotions, and build meaningful relationships with peers.

### **Ramona**

**Ramona** is an emotionally intelligent fifth-grade student who has faced personal loss and experienced heavy emotions for such a young child. She is learning to navigate her feelings and is developing strong coping mechanisms through supportive mentorship from IFC staff.

### **Key Themes Identified**

**Open Communication** – Ramona credits the IFC program for being a space that fosters open communication.

*"Whenever they come, like, you know, you can be open and get all the things out."*

### **Coping and Emotional Regulation**

Ramona has learned to manage her emotions through the IFC program:

*"We talked about...a lot of emotions that we didn't know about...it gave us a deeper look about what they mean and how they affect us."*

*"I was very upset over something...I used finger tapping. It helps me focus on that and not focus on the bad."*

### **Vulnerability**

*"It's okay to talk about hard things...you don't always have to be that strong."*

### **Academic Aspirations**

Ramona is determined to succeed academically and has set ambitious goals for herself:

*“I feel like, as a lawyer, like, I can help people...if a family’s going through something, like, I know that I can help.”*

### **Summary**

Ramona’s story reflects a growing sense of self-awareness and emotional strength. Her participation in IFC has helped her process grief and think of a future where she can make a difference in others’ lives by helping those who have experienced similar trauma as she has.

### **Harry**

**Harry** is a thoughtful and ambitious fifth grader with a strong interest in science, writing, and leadership. He aspires to become a doctor and a medical executive, combining his passion for helping others with a drive for innovation. His academic strengths include math and writing, evidenced by his recent win in an essay contest about influential African Americans. He draws deep inspiration from his great-grandmother, a pioneering entrepreneur in his community, and credits her with teaching him the value of perseverance. Through his participation in the IFC program, he has developed emotional resilience, empathy, and a forward-thinking mindset.

### **Key Themes**

#### **Career Aspirations and Academic Interests**

Harry has a clear vision for his future and is already thinking about how to combine medicine and leadership:

*“I want to be like a doctor that creates medicine and the CEO of a medical company.”*

#### **Family Inspiration and Legacy**

His great-grandmother is a major influence in his life:

*“She was the first Black entrepreneur in our town...she opened a restaurant in 1975”*

#### **Emotional Growth and IFC Program Impact**

Harry has learned how to manage negative comments and maintain self-worth:

*“I’ve learned to not let somebody break you down.”*

*“I learned to take deep breaths and talk about my feelings.”*

He uses self-talk and emotional awareness to stay grounded:

*“I do that by saying it’s not true, or simply ignoring them, or simply knowing that those words are not true.”*

**Summary** – Harry’s story is one of maturity, ambition, and emotional intelligence. Through the support of the IFC program and the influence of his family, he is developing the tools to navigate adversity, pursue his goals, and lead with empathy. His reflections highlight the importance of mentorship, emotional education, and culturally grounded role models in shaping young leaders.

### **Irene**

**Irene** is a fourth-grade student with a dynamic personality, balancing creative aspirations of becoming a hairstylist with athletic talents. Academically strong in math and emotionally aware through her participation in the IFC program, she demonstrates a curious and observant nature. Although shy, she communicates openly about her interests, family, and her emerging understanding of emotions.

### **Key Themes**

#### **Feelings Toward IFC**

Irene shared that IFC gives her a break from the classroom routines and that she feels positive when participating.

*“I feel happy because we get to do something other than work.”*

*“It makes me calm...”*

*“I learned about feelings, especially understanding my best friend better”*

#### **Emotional Learning**

Irene has learned to manage her emotions through the IFC program:

*"I learned to take deep breaths and talk about my feelings."*

#### **Career Aspirations**

Irene is determined to succeed academically and has set ambitious goals for herself. She understands that not every career aspiration requires college:

*"I want to become a hairstylist."*

## **Summary**

Irene's growing emotional intelligence is evident in her ability to understand others, especially her best friend, better. Irene's story reflects a journey of self-discovery, healing, and confidence as she learns to manage her emotions and pursue her goals with clarity and purpose.

### **Overall Themes Identified Across Urban Academy Student Interviews**

#### **Emotional Resilience and Healing**

All students, regardless of age or background, demonstrated growth in their ability to process and express emotions. Many had experienced trauma, ranging from gun violence to family loss, and credited the IFC program with helping them cope. Below are example quotes from the interviews that exemplify this:

*"Take a deep breath. Don't really think about it [mean things that people say] and try to get it out in your head."* – Corey

*"I learned that it is okay to express your feelings, and that it's okay to let tears out."* – Savannah

This theme underscores the program's role in fostering emotional literacy and psychological safety.

#### **Supportive Peer and Adult Relationships**

Students consistently mentioned the importance of trusted adults (Ms. Tiff and Ms. Lex) and the value of peer support. The IFC program created a space where students could share personal stories and feel heard.

*"We were just connecting together."* – Savannah

*"I feel special... I just like that they teach us."* – Harry

This theme highlights the importance of relational trust and community-building in educational settings.

#### **Aspirations and Future Orientation**

Despite their challenges, students expressed clear and ambitious career goals—doctor, lawyer, animator, president. These aspirations were often tied to personal experiences and a desire to help others.

*"I want to be a lawyer or a nurse."* – Savannah

*"I want to be a hairstylist."* – Irene

This reflects the program's success in inspiring hope and future planning.



### **Coping with Loss and Family Separation**

Several students shared stories of parental loss, incarceration, or absence. These experiences were deeply emotional and often surfaced during group discussions.

*“I miss my dad. He’s in prison.”* – Savannah

This theme emphasizes the need for trauma-informed care and grief support in school-based programs.

### **Conflict Resolution and Social Skills**

Students learned structured ways to resolve interpersonal conflicts and developed empathy for others. These skills were frequently applied in real-life situations with friends and family.

*“You sit down and you talk to her... and then they talk about what they did and what you did not like.”* – Savannah

*“I’ve learned to not let somebody break you down.”* – Harry

This theme illustrates the program’s emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practices.

## **Staff Interview**

Amajah Hall

Amajah is a thoughtful, emotionally intelligent, and deeply committed educator and youth facilitator. With experience as a Senior Program Facilitator at Urban Academy and Executive Administrative Assistant at Hope for Tomorrow, she brings a blend of administrative leadership and hands-on instructional expertise. Her approach is grounded in authenticity, cultural responsiveness, and emotional connection.

She is highly reflective, acknowledging her own areas for growth while modeling vulnerability and resilience for her students. Amajah’s work is characterized by a deep commitment to student empowerment, social-emotional learning, and community building. Her ability to adapt, connect, and lead with empathy makes her a powerful force in educational and community spaces.

Amajah’s interview offers a heartfelt and compelling reflection on her experiences as a Senior Program Facilitator with IFC at Urban Academy. Central to her story are themes of student growth, trust-building, and the transformative power of culturally responsive education. She highlights the emotional and behavioral development of students, especially their growing ability to mediate conflict, show vulnerability, and demonstrate leadership. Amajah emphasizes the importance of authenticity and shared storytelling in building trust, noting how her openness helped students feel seen and valued. Her

adaptable teaching strategies—customized to students’ interests and developmental stages—highlight her commitment to meeting learners where they are. She also openly discusses the challenges of navigating diverse personalities and teaching concepts she was still internalizing herself, revealing a deep self-awareness and dedication to ongoing growth. Through her reflections, Amajah paints a vivid picture of how intentional, relationship-focused programming fosters resilience, empathy, and community among young learners. Below are selected excerpts from the interview with Amajah that highlight the main themes discussed during our conversation.

### 1. Student Growth and Behavioral Transformation

Amajah observed a clear shift in how students handled conflict and expressed themselves over time:

*“Experiencing just like in general, a collective of the students shift in behavior and how they would approach a situation, approach an issue... as we progress throughout the year, there were a lot more who would step up and try to be a mediator in the situation, or they would try to calm people down, separate people, try to bring a positive light into the situation.”*

She shared a powerful story about a fourth-grade student who used to call himself a “crash out”:

*“We were having a conversation and they were kind of like doing a reflection... what is something that they're going to leave behind in that grade... I was talking to him and I was like, well, you know, I think you can leave behind being a crash out. Like you're not a crash out anymore. You definitely express yourself through your words a lot better than you did before.”*

### 2. Building Trust Through Authenticity and Vulnerability

Amajah emphasized the importance of being real and relatable with students:

*“I think my core strategy was just to come in every day trying my best and being myself, not trying to feel some type of like model or anything like that... I was always honest with my experiences... They appreciate that honesty because it's like, oh, you're not just an adult who's telling me I can and can't do something. You're acknowledging that you did do something beforehand.”*

### 3. Culturally Responsive and Adaptive Teaching

She described how facilitators had to be flexible and responsive to students’ needs:

*“We had to quickly think on our feet about how to change the curriculum, sometimes depending on the age group... something that Ms. Lex and Ms. Tiff made up was like*

*calling an audible... we would kind of like improvise and create a different conversation or a different approach so that everyone could feel engaged."*

She also tailored lessons to students' interests:

*"I did learn how to adapt and identify, okay, this student really responds well to these images... or I know they really love to dance... So I can say, well, this kind of incorporates how you always draw or this incorporates... discipline in the classroom... also relates to having discipline whenever you're at practice for whatever sports you play."*

#### **4. Impact of Programming on Leadership and Community**

Amajah saw students take initiative and support one another, especially in emotionally charged discussions:

*"The conversation shifted to solely focus on gun violence and how it impacts really everybody in the classroom... she really just like told her story or in her experience. And she was very open. And that showed to me that she not only trusted her peers, but she also trusted us..."*

*"Another student... opened up the conversation... I commended him on his leadership... especially him being a young Black boy... It's kind of like, oh, like boys shouldn't have emotions... So I see... growth in leadership and creating community and trust amongst the students."*

#### **5. Challenges in Facilitation and Personal Growth**

She reflected on the difficulty of working with different personalities and teaching concepts she was still learning herself:

*"Some personalities I was just easier to click with... and then other personalities... I just know, even if we were the same age, I wouldn't have necessarily been friends with them... trying to explain a concept to someone who just like thinks differently can be a little bit difficult sometimes."*

*"It kind of seemed a little bit hypocritical sometimes... I didn't feel like I really had the proper requirements to teach something to some students whenever I didn't fully grasp it for myself yet."*

#### **6. Feedback and Emotional Connection with Students**

The emotional bonds she formed with students were evident in their interactions:

*“They would come up and hug us or say, ‘Oh, I missed you’... there were a few students who gave me drawings or... a note saying that she’ll miss me and she loves me... that just touched my heart because I really was sad at the end of the year, leaving all the students.”*

She also reflected on how her tone affected students and how she addressed it:

*“Somehow I have made them feel like they were a bother... So I like sat there and I explained to them that I wasn’t mad or I apologize for hurting their feelings... I just needed them to be patient so that I could respect that student and what they had to say to me the same way I was gonna respect their comments.”*

### **Implications for Grant Report**

The qualitative interviews conducted across both Urban Academy and H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow Elementary School, along with the staff interview with Senior Program Facilitator Amajah Hall, collectively demonstrate the transformative impact of the Imagine Further Collective (IFC) program. Students at both sites have faced significant personal challenges, including exposure to violence, grief, and emotional hardship. Despite these adversities, they have shown remarkable resilience, emotional growth, and a strong desire to succeed academically and personally.

At Urban Academy, students like Corey, Savannah, Shaun, Harry, Ramona, and Irene shared deeply personal stories of trauma and their experiences with healing. They credited the IFC program with helping them develop emotional regulation strategies, build supportive peer relationships, and articulate ambitious career goals. The one-on-one interview format allowed for rich, detailed narratives that highlight the program’s success in fostering emotional intelligence and future orientation.

At HOPE for Tomorrow, group interviews revealed shared themes of emotional expression, self-worth, and the importance of safe, non-judgmental spaces. Although students were less talkative in the group setting, their reflections, such as using self-talk to manage emotions and recognizing unhealthy friendships, demonstrate the program’s reach and relevance. Students expressed appreciation for being able to express their feelings and for having a space where they felt accepted and supported.

The staff interview with Amajah Hall further reinforces the program’s impact. Her reflections on student growth, trust-building, and culturally responsive teaching underscore the importance of relationship-centered programming. She described how students became more empathetic, took on leadership roles, and learned to mediate conflict. Her insights also highlight the adaptability and emotional labor required of facilitators, as well as the deep bonds formed with students.

Continued funding for the IFC program is essential to sustain and expand its impact. The program's emphasis on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed care, and culturally responsive facilitation has proven effective across diverse school settings. Investing in IFC will not only benefit individual students but also strengthen school communities by promoting resilience, empathy, and holistic development.