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Growing Culturally Responsive Advisory in Your Context

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Introduction

Teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling and grouping, and integrated curriculum are the classics of middle grades education (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). This special issue reminds us that Alexander (1963) was promoting these practices 60 years ago. Teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling and grouping, and integrated curriculum are perennial. Year after year, they return to the gardens that are schools that ascribe to the middle school model. Nagle and Bishop, our esteemed editors, remind us that these structures have seldom been analyzed as locations needing to be reimagined for the culturally responsive needs of young adolescents. Nagle and Bishop ask us in the call for manuscripts...

How do the structures of teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling, and grouping look like when they are culturally responsive or sustaining? What opportunities do these and other structural elements of middle grades schools afford to promote diversity, equity and inclusion? How can you use a gardening metaphor to tie it all together?

Okay, the call did not specifically mention a gardening metaphor. Like most gardens, they need tending, intentional attention to ensure that they are successful and grow to their utmost potential. My mind has been on gardening a lot lately. Let me explain.

Summer 2023 will be my first full summer in my new state of Colorado. I have loved it here so far. The weather has been a welcome change. The amount of opportunities to be outside are amazing. But, sometimes I find myself falling back into practices from previous places I have lived. Just because this colleague went to the same school as a former colleague does not mean that they are the same person. Just because the dirt in my garden looks like the dirt from my garden in Indiana does not mean that it is the same dirt, or that I can treat my garden the same. Let me be clear, my efforts at cultivating a successful garden in Indiana resulted in a yield of five sad looking ears of corn, a mutant cucumber, and a watermelon buffet for squirrels

the size of house cats. I was left fairly jaded and doubtful of my ability to cultivate a successful garden.

Through conversations with family, locals, and plenty of google searching, I have come to the conclusion that cultivating a successful garden in Colorado will require me to determine the Plant Hardiness Zone for my specific location, assess the soil in my backyard, plot out the garden layout, pick out appropriate plants, water the plants, research pests, be open to learning, adapting, and changing throughout the seasons, and give the garden the attention it deserves. Honestly, most if not all these considerations would be beneficial regardless of garden location.

Implementation of teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling and grouping, and integrated curriculum needs a significant amount of context specific planning, routine formative qualitative and quantitative assessment, and a desire to learn along the way. This essay will return to our gardening metaphor, but the focus will instead be on student advisory programs as locations of opportunity and innovation to examine how such structures can generate or inhibit a more culturally responsive, inclusive classroom and school environment for all students and educators.

Understanding Student Advisory Programs in Middle Schools

In middle grades education, advisory programs are structured, intentional, and supportive environments that assign 10 to 20 students to an adult advisor (most often a teacher) who serves as a mentor, advocate, and guide throughout their middle school years (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], n.d.). The advisory program typically involves regular meetings or sessions where students engage in various activities that promote their academic, social, emotional, and personal development. Advisors can facilitate discussions and activities that promote ethical behavior, respect, responsibility, and community engagement. Advisory sessions can address topics such as diversity, inclusivity, social justice, and civic

participation, helping students develop a sense of social responsibility and empathy for others. **Depending on the school's planned structure**, these meetings may be daily or meet less frequently. Some schools even plan for advisory **groups to remain constant through a student's** time at the school.

Advisory programs promote community and personalized support in middle schools. In addition to forming stronger social relationships with classmates in smaller communities, advisory programs offer students and teachers **the opportunity to “develop trusting relationships” (Brown & Knowles, 2014, p. 91).** Jackson and Davis (2000) shared that the relationships formed between students and caring adults result in improvements to academic and social outcomes. In addition to **Jackson and Davis' emphasis on relationships** with caring adults, Wall (2016) adds that middle schools implement advisory programs for other social and emotional reasons like facilitating positive interactions with school stakeholders. Knowing that middle school is a time of significant social and emotional growth and challenges for students, advisory programs offer a safe and supportive space for students to explore their feelings, build healthy relationships, and develop important social-emotional skills.

Situating Culturally Responsive Teaching in Middle Grades Advisory Programs

Culturally Responsive Teaching refers to an educational approach that recognizes, values, and respects the diverse cultural backgrounds, identities, experiences, and perspectives of students (Gay, 2018). It involves creating inclusive learning environments that affirm and validate students' cultural identities while promoting their academic and personal growth. Teachers do more than just accomplish these tasks; the practices of Culturally Responsive Teaching should be active methods that influence teacher dispositions, interactions, and ways of thinking.

Culturally Responsive Teaching is often mentioned in conjunction with culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining teaching (Paris & Alim, 2014). All three are asset-based pedagogies—**“teaching methods and practices[that] focus on strengths of all students and value diversity in culture, language, and other traits” (Will &**

Najarro, 2022, para. 1). Culturally Responsive Teaching, culturally relevant teaching, and culturally sustaining teaching work in concert, along with other asset-based pedagogies, to promote equitable learning environments for students.

Gay's (2018, 2000) conceptualization of Culturally Responsive Teaching was heavily influenced by the ideas of Diamond and Moore (1995) who said that teachers need to be *cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social context for learning*. Gay (2018) describes *cultural organizers* as individuals who must constantly seek to understand the complex ways that culture influences classroom learning environments. They must also craft their learning environments to be responsive to the varied needs of cultural and ethnic diversity while maintaining challenging and empowering academic achievements for all students. This means that the teacher must suspend the notion of teaching in ways that they themselves learned while seeking to understand who their students are and what their cultural and historical experiences include (Jones, 2006).

Teachers who are *cultural mediators* create safe and intentional opportunities for students to dialogue about cultural conflicts. Gay (2018) **wrote that cultural mediators “help students** clarify their ethnic identities, honor other cultures, develop positive cross-ethnic and cross-cultural relationships, and avoid perpetuating prejudices, stereotypes, and **racism” (p. 52).** **As a cultural mediator, teachers** facilitate culturally diverse classrooms in the development of caring and compassionate individuals who value and support each other.

Being an *orchestrator of social contexts for learning* requires teachers to be knowledgeable of, and able recognize, how differences in culture show up in classroom spaces. This means more than simply listening to the same music or watching the same TikTok videos. Orchestrators of social contexts for learning find opportunities to bring elements of culture into the classroom in intentional ways. It means recognizing how the lenses students view the world through impact the images they see and then adapting instruction to match.

These three roles and responsibilities of teachers sound exactly like what an instructor for a middle grades advisory program should be.

When implemented with fidelity and intention, **advisory programs are responsive to “the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 8).** Advisory programs have the potential to be challenging and empowering locations for students to develop into active community members with eyes on equity and justice. Advisory programs enacted by cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social contexts for learning become safe playgrounds where difficult and engaging conversations around equity can be broached in a community of peers with a caring adult.

Comparing Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Successful Middle School

Student advisory programs, as described through years of middle grades literature (e.g., Alexander, 1963; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Bishop & Harrison, 2021), are fertile ground for Culturally Responsive Teaching. I argue that successful teachers in middle grades schools are *cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social contexts for learning*. Successful teachers value and acknowledge cultural diversity, build cultural bridges to facilitate learning with and among students, create inclusive learning environments, adapt instructional strategies to best meet the needs of students, engage intentionally and meaningfully with families, and, most of all, they address bias and stereotypes as they crop up in classrooms and themselves. Successful Culturally Responsive teachers in middle schools are responsive.

Parallels exist between Gay’s (2002) Five Essential Components of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Bishop and Harrison’s (2021) 18 Characteristics of Successful Middle Schools (SMS:TWB). Gay’s **essential components** include:

- developing a cultural diversity knowledge base;
- designing culturally relevant curricula;
- demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community;
- cross-cultural communications; and
- cultural congruity in classroom instruction.

AMLE’s 18 Characteristics of Successful Middle Schools are divided into three groups as follows:

Culture and Community

- educators respect and value young adolescents;
- the school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all;
- every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate;
- school safety is addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully;
- comprehensive counseling and support services meet the needs of young adolescents;
- the school engages families as valued partners;
- the school collaborates with community and business partners.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

- educators are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach;
- curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse;
- health, wellness, and social-emotional competence are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies;
- instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic;
- varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Leadership and Organization

- a shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision;
- policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented;
- leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research;
- leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration;
- professional learning for all staff is relevant, long term and job embedded; and
- organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

These two frameworks share common goals and principles regarding effective education for middle grades students. They may approach teaching from different directions, but there are

connections. Both frameworks emphasize positive relationships and communication. Culturally Responsive Teaching and SMS:TWB simultaneously stress how relationships and communication are part of the foundation for successful learning environments. SMS:TWB highlights the need for supportive relationships between students and teachers (e.g., an adult advocate) as well as families. Gay's (2002) components emphasize building connections and trust with students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Other similarities between Culturally Responsive Teaching and SMS:TWB include a need for challenging curriculum, instruction, assessment practices coupled with thorough accountability for all parties involved. Gay (2002) and Bishop and Harrison (2021) specifically say that teachers, abiding by their respective frameworks, must maintain high expectations **for all students. SMS:TWB's characteristics** emphasize the need for meaningful and varied assessments to monitor student progress, while Gay's framework highlights the importance of authentic and culturally responsive assessments. Both frameworks recognize the significance of assessing students' learning in a fair, personalized, and equitable manner (AMLE, 2019; Gay). Assessment holds students and teachers accountable in both frameworks by illuminating opportunities for growth.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and SMS:TWB both emphasize inclusive and culturally responsive practices, school climate and culture, and continued professional learning for stakeholders. SMS:TWB highlights the need for schools to value diversity, create inclusive learning environments, and support teachers in further developing cultural competencies. Part of this work begins, as Bishop and Harrison (2021) wrote, when teachers **"reflect on how their identities may differ from those of their students and engage in critical conversations about bias and racism" (p. 50). This reflection** bleeds into an emphasis on school climate and culture. AMLE's (2019) characteristics highlight the need for a safe and respectful learning environment, while Gay's (2002) framework emphasizes creating an inclusive and culturally responsive climate that values and respects students' identities and backgrounds. Crafting environments like those presented in SMS:TWB and Culturally Responsive Teaching takes collaboration and sustained professional development to enhance cultural competence

and instructional practices (Will & Najarro, 2022).

Opportunities in Advisory

Contemplating the connections between Gay's (2018) Culturally Responsive Teaching and **Bishop and Harrison's (2021) 18 Characteristics** of successful middle schools spotlights several opportunities to intentionally employ culturally responsive practices in middle grades spaces. Here are some ways in which student advisory programs can weave the frameworks together for the benefit of all students

Student-Led Discussions, and Action, on Equity and Social Justice

Advisory programs can create a safe space for students to engage in meaningful discussions about personal identities, equity, social justice, and current events. Students can explore topics such as racism, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, or environmental justice, and discuss their impact on individuals and their local communities. These discussions promote critical thinking, empathy, and awareness of social issues. Additionally, the discussions would **"incorporate authentic learning experiences, such as service learning, that enables students to be actively and civically engaged" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 60)**. Advisory could provide an opportunity for students to identify specific community needs, utilize project-based learning activities that address those needs, and actively contribute to social justice initiatives. By engaging in hands-on experiences, students develop a sense of social responsibility, empathy, and understanding of the importance of equity and inclusion.

Peer Mentorship and Support

The smaller group setting of Advisory can serve as opportunities to facilitate peer mentorship initiatives. Older students could support and guide, with the support of their advisor, younger students in intentional ways. Mentorship like this promotes inclusivity, as it allows students to connect across grade levels, build positive relationships, and create a sense of belonging. For example, a study conducted with 6th through 10th grade students found that participants in a peer mentor program had fewer unexcused absences, fewer discipline referrals, and higher levels of connectedness to their schools (Gordon et al., 2013). Mentorship

programs can also address equity gaps by providing additional support to students who may face academic, social, or emotional challenges.

Collaborative Decision-Making In and About School

Advisory is an opportunity to involve students in decision-making processes that impact their school environment. When coupled with a **framework like Gorski and Swalwell's (2023)** Equity Literacy, students could learn the process of recognizing, responding to, redressing, actively cultivating equity, sustaining equity in their environments to tackle school issues. This could include school policies, activities, and events. By including diverse student perspectives in the process of building a more equitable school, advisory programs could serve as a catalyst for student voice, buy-in, and connection.

Cultural Celebrations and Awareness

Eight years ago, Gorski and Swalwell (2015) wrote:

When it comes to education equity, the trouble is not a lack of multicultural programs or diversity initiatives in schools. Nor is it necessarily a lack of educators **who...appreciate and even champion** diversity. In virtually every school we visit, we see attempts at multiculturalism: corridors lined with flags, student-designed posters representing the national or ethnic origins of families in the community, anti-bullying programs, or faculty positions like **"Diversity Director." The trouble lies in how** so many diversity initiatives avoid or whitewash serious equity issues. It lies in the space between what marginalized **students...say their schools need to do** to help them feel less marginalized and what many of the adults in those schools are comfortable doing in the name of multiculturalism. (pp. 34-35)

Advisory programs can serve as spaces of decolonization. They can serve as places where students are listened to, heard, and valued for their opinions, feelings, hopes, and dreams. Then, after much listening and intentionality, progress forward in a way that students feel is best. By fostering cultural awareness, competence, and appreciation, advisors and

their classes can promote inclusivity, challenge stereotypes, and create a sense of pride and belonging for students from diverse backgrounds in ways that are not problematic and self-serving for adults in the space.

Potential Obstructions (and Opportunities) in Implementing Culturally Responsive Advisory Programs

Promise and possibility of cultural responsiveness exist in middle grades advisory programs. There are also opportunities for intentional and unintentional obstructions to dissuade diversity. Some possible ways in which advisory programs could hinder cultural responsiveness, and possible responses, follow. I have divided them into two categories: Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment; and Context.

Obstruction: Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment

Maybe the advisory curriculum (intentionally) avoids conversations that could be considered political. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) remind us that omission based on politics is a political move in itself. Intentionally or unintentionally, if advisory programs do not incorporate culturally responsive practices or curriculum, they may inadvertently perpetuate existing biases and reinforce dominant cultural norms. This could create an environment where students from diverse backgrounds feel excluded or their experiences and identities are not adequately acknowledged or valued.

Advisory programs may fail to address the intersectional identities of students. If programs do not recognize the complex ways in which multiple dimensions of identity (such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) intersect and influence students' experiences, it can lead to a limited understanding of diversity and exclusion of students who navigate multiple marginalized identities. Also, if advisory programs do not actively involve students in decision-making processes or provide opportunities for their voices to be heard, it can perpetuate power imbalances and limit diverse perspectives. Failing to engage students from diverse backgrounds in shaping the advisory program's goals, activities, and policies can hinder inclusion and equity.

Advisors' familiarity and confidence with the advisory curriculum can also serve as an obstruction. If advisors are not adequately trained in a culturally responsive advisory curriculum they may unintentionally marginalize or exclude certain students. Without awareness and understanding of the challenges and needs of diverse students, advisors may struggle to provide appropriate support and guidance.

Advisors, like any individuals, may hold unconscious biases and stereotypes that can influence their interactions with students. These biases can result in differential treatment, limited expectations, or assumptions about students' abilities and potential. Overcoming these biases and fostering an inclusive environment requires ongoing self-reflection, awareness, and professional development for advisors.

Opportunities: Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment

NYU Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC) (<https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/ejroc/services/organizing-resources>). The EJ-ROC includes resources for schools related to organization and culturally responsive education. In addition to toolkits used to assess programs, EJ-ROC also provides a Guide to Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education.

Perspectives for a Diverse America - Advisory Activities (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/PDA%20Advisory%20Activities%20VF.pdf>). Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) partnered with the Origins Program to provide 20 advisory activities for middle schools. **Organized as "meetings," the activities "expose students to diverse perspectives and guide them to understand those perspectives and to critically and honestly analyze ideas from a variety of cultures" (Perspectives for a Diverse America, 2013, p. 2).**

Project Implicit - Implicit Bias Assessment (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). Implicit bias is automatic and unintentional. Every person has it. Cheryl Staats, a senior researcher at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, says that **"the unwavering desire to**

ensure the best for children is precisely why educators should become aware of the concept **of implicit bias" (2015, p. 29). Staats calls for** educators to address their implicit bias by first taking the Implicit Association Test (linked listed above). Awareness of personal unconscious bias is of paramount importance.

Obstruction: Organization

Homogeneity in student, teacher, and school populations can cause an obstruction in promoting culturally responsive advisory programs. If schools and advisory programs consistently pair students only with peers and advisors who share similar backgrounds, experiences, or perspectives, it can limit exposure to diverse viewpoints and hinder cross-cultural understanding. Homogeneous pairings may reinforce stereotypes, prevent students from seeing diverse role models, and restrict opportunities for meaningful intercultural interactions. In a meta-analysis of 14 studies between 2012 and 2020, Gabaldon-Estevan (2020) found that students who attended heterogeneous schools were more positive about friendships and heterogeneity is supportive of socialization and classroom interactions.

Teachers are routinely asked to do more with less. When resources are limited, opportunity for cultural responsiveness is obstructed. Adequately implementing an inclusive advisory program requires sufficient financial, personnel, and time resources. Schools may face challenges in allocating resources to support the training of advisors, provide ongoing professional development, and ensure appropriate materials and resources are available to address the diverse needs of students. Limited resources can hinder the ability to fully implement and sustain an inclusive advisory program.

Implementing culturally responsive advisory programs may face resistance from various stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Some individuals may be resistant to change or may hold misconceptions about the purpose or benefits of a culturally responsive curriculum. Resistance may be the manifestation of White fragility and a discomfort with having conversations around race, class, or gender (Patton & Jordan, 2017). Overcoming resistance and building consensus for an inclusive program requires effective communication, ongoing dialogue, and a shared

understanding of the importance of equity and inclusion in education.

Opportunity: Organization

Strength in Numbers. Change starts with small groups of like-minded folks working together. Within school walls this could include other teachers, staff, and students who recognize the need for culturally responsive materials and **other resources. Remember that “Successful middle schools intentionally organize people, time, and space to maximize young adolescents’ growth and development” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 50). Michigan’s 2015 Teacher of the Year, Melody Arabo (2019) recommends partnering with community members, utilizing research about why materials are important (especially with respect to educational equity), and when advocating to the administration be ready to share possible solutions.**

~~This We Believe...~~**We Believe in This.** Bishop and Harrison’s (2021) *Successful Middle School: This We Believe* can be a powerful tool for organizing and promoting change in schools. SMS:TWB is the guiding document of the AMLE and the authors present ample opportunities and references to promote change in middle schools. Consider the need for professional development to support culturally responsive advisory programs. SMS:TWB states that **“Effective professional development is customized and personalized to take [teacher’s varying identities, learning preferences, and levels of readiness] into account” (p. 49). Use the book to strengthen your cause. Mine its references and show how the roots of the middle school movement stressed progressive change (Andrews et al., 2018).**

Conclusion - Context is Key

Culturally Responsive Teaching and middle grades advisory programs, like gardening, are context specific. What makes sense in your context? What have you learned about your context that influences *what, how, and when* you cultivate culturally responsive practices? What is the earth in your context ready for right now? What habits, practices, learning do you have to cultivate in yourself in order to be successful when the *planting* season rolls around again? How can you think and plan seasons in advance to set your context up for culturally responsive success in the future?

My son’s first school year in Colorado had him learning a lot about Colorado State History. Every day after school he would share all the new things he learned about his new home. One thing he was quick to share with me is that where we live is the ancestral home of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute Nations and peoples. This has led to lots of learning, listening, and reflecting. Two specific pieces of indigenous wisdom have impacted my teaching: the four hills of life and the three sisters. The four hills of life include infancy, youth, adulthood, and elders. The Arapaho travel up **and down the four hills “in the same way that [their] ancestors moved [their] homes up and down between Colorado’s mountains and plains”** (The Sand Creek Massacre, 2023, para. 1). Each **person’s path is unique to them and influenced** by the choices they make and the learning they undertake. Emphasis is on growth through responsibility, knowledge, and respect; not **“because we simply grow older” (The Sand Creek Massacre, para. 2).** The second hill of life, youth, is referred to as the summertime of life. Youth is **when individuals “become doers rather than just listeners” and “are expected to invest [themselves] in learning how to behave in a good way, and how to be Arapaho” (The Sand Creek Massacre, Youth-para. 1).** My personal reflections have illuminated how my middle grades teacher education curriculum is overwhelmingly Eurocentric. The majority of the education philosophers and theorists we discuss are White males. The wisdom shared by the Arapaho is not ascribed to any one person. The knowledge shared about youth is shared by all for all. Culturally Responsive Teaching requires elements of introspection and critical conversations with self.

My wife’s desire to intentionally fill her bookshelf (digitally and physically) with voices different from her own is admirable. After **moving to Colorado she read Kimmerer’s (2015) *Braiding Sweetgrass*** and learned about the Iroquois planting practice called The Three Sisters. Three Sisters is an intercropping method of planting corn, beans, and squash together (Marsh, n.d.). Corn grows first. It serves as the structure to which beans are able to take hold and grow vertically. At the feet of the corn and beans grows the squash. Marsh wrote that Three **Sisters’ “historical value lay in larger-scale implementations designed to nurture and sustain entire communities” (para. 2).** Nurturing and sustaining entire communities requires that we expand the lens through which we view the

world. In middle grades education, our three sisters should include a deep exploration and connection to context, culturally responsive teaching practice, and a progressive middle grades education framework. Deep exploration and connection to context serves as the vertical structure. Without an understanding of where and who we teach we can stunt the growth and opportunity for change. Culturally responsive teaching practices need the structure of context to expand. Context provides the substance to which teachers can be responsive. The key characteristics of successful middle schools weave with and through context and culturally responsive teaching. The three together enrich the soil, take what they need, and support each other. The result could be a garden that nurtures and sustains entire communities.

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