

Building a Strong Foundation: Using Advisory to Support Students in an Uncertain Time

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to provide a practitioner perspective based on an action research project that investigated the question, “How can building a strong advisory community support students to feel connected and promote engagement in a remote or hybrid learning environment?” The goal was to encourage students’ sense of belonging and social connectedness to promote engagement and social-emotional well-being in response to the detrimental effects of the coronavirus pandemic. My middle grades colleagues and I focused our efforts on building strong advisory communities as we navigate an uncertain learning environment, because as one of them stated simply, “When the relationships are there, school works a lot better.”

Introduction

Our local and global communities were shaken and disrupted over the last year with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic felt by each individual in some way. At the heart of our communities lay our schools and our classrooms. Since mid-March 2020 many realities have come to light or have been acknowledged in new ways, ranging from the inequities in our society’s systems to the range of routine supports our schools provide. In preparing for the 2020-2021 school year, my colleagues and I were committed to our belief that, now more than ever, adolescents and their families needed a strong, inclusive school community anchored in trusting relationships.

While many unknowns laid ahead, we knew that students experienced trauma and uncertainty which impacted them in the classroom, both academically and social-emotionally. Our students struggled with engagement and connectedness in the spring of 2020 and we wanted to keep our students engaged regardless of the structure of the learning environment. In developing resilient, reliable support systems through our advisory program, we aimed to prioritize students’ sense of belonging and safety. We focused on building student identity, promoting a safe space using approaches like Restorative Practices and Developmental Designs, while integrating recommendations from reliable research and experts based on trauma-sensitive and equity-aware practices.

Rationale

For six years I had the pleasure of working at U-32 Middle and High School in Montpelier, Vermont, which serves students in grades 7-12 from five rural Vermont towns. A unique and defining program at U-32 is their six-year advisory. June 2020 brought bittersweet moments: my advisees were graduating from high school and I decided to transition to a new school. Our bond and relationship as an advisory group made staying connected during quarantine easier, and preparing for our next steps together is something I will be forever grateful. This speaks to the power of the relationships we built and nurtured over our six years together.

My new team and I wasted no time to prepare for the upcoming school year by attending the 2020 Middle Grades Institute (MGI) as a launching point for our work together. Over the course of the summer we gradually acquired information, including our shift from a grades 5-8 team to a grades 7-8 team and the announcement that we would be starting with a hybrid learning model. This structural grade level shift resulted in students being reassigned teams, which disrupted relationships with peers and teachers. In addition to the new team identity and a hybrid learning model, we were also faced with the tragic, unexpected loss of a student in the early weeks of the school year. Our students needed us now more than ever.

While the 2019-2020 school year was their first year with advisory, my new team at Williston Central School had laid the groundwork and built a reputation for a strong advisory system. Key features of our advisory that have helped make it successful include maintaining small groups, including off-team adults as advisors, meeting five days per week, and having 'sister advisories' to pair with if one adult is unavailable. I believe these qualities of our advisory program provide students with a reliable anchor at a time when they may struggle to find routine and control. While our previous experiences with advisory were different, our belief in the importance of building relationships with students remained paramount.

Project Description

A Spotlight on Adolescent Identity

Social connectedness, relationships, and personal identity are highly important for adolescents. The first aspect of this project addressed the importance of supporting students to explore and develop their personal identity, because in order to expect students to buy-in to an advisory community, we must first help them explore themselves. Before delving into the developmental characteristics of adolescents as it relates to the importance of building identity, I would like to highlight a word of caution from Caskey and Anfara (n.d.) of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) in light of current events around the pandemic and social inequities, "Many factors - race, ethnicity, gender, culture, family, community, environment and the like - influence development." Our students' identities will morph and change over their middle school years, and given the realities of our nation and world today, our students are grappling with new challenges that will also play a role. As students begin to explore and share about their ethnic and cultural identity, it is essential that educators provide an equitable, inclusive environment.

While adolescents are often characterized as being 'all about me,' they are also highly aware of and sensitive to peer judgement and approval. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown presents the concept of the "masks and armor" we wear as protection against discomfort and vulnerability, which I think of as students trying on different aspects of their identities. She notes that, "Upper elementary and middle school was

where most of us started to try on new and different forms of protection. At this tender age, the armor is still awkward and ill-fitting" (p. 114). Some of the masks and armor our students put on act as protection to cover up insecurities and guard them in the social battlefield, while others are a way for them to temporarily try out an identity trait or belief. In a supportive advisory community, it is essential to create an inclusive space for students to remove their masks and armor to explore and find confidence in their true identity. As Caskey and Anfara note, "Young adolescents deserve school environments that are free from harsh criticism, humiliation, and sarcasm" and it is our duty as their teachers to provide this environment.

As students take steps to explore and reveal their identities, being met with empathy and compassion from their peers is vital. Adolescence is a time of neurological transformation and development, and according to Caskey & Ruben (2007), "The prefrontal cortex—an area of the brain that handles executive functions such as planning, reasoning, anticipating consequences, sustaining attention, and making decisions—continues to develop (Caskey and Anfara n.d. citing Caskey & Ruben). With these neurological shifts, modeling and practicing how to have open conversations, listen empathetically to others and process their emotions will help students wire their brains to be more cognitively flexible, responsive and compassionate. As we help build their emotional and cognitive toolbox, students can develop their identities, build self-confidence, forge trusting relationships and develop resilience. When participating in this work through our advisories, we are preparing them to tackle future challenges in their own lives and communities, as well as supporting others with empathy and compassion.

Trauma-Informed Lens

The second aspect of this project acknowledged and addressed the trauma that students and families encountered as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Coupled with the developmental and hormonal changes happening in our adolescent students, the trauma many of them experienced and have continued to endure poses additional challenges to engagement. As reported by Caskey and Anfara (n.d.), "Emotionally-charged situations may trigger young adolescents to resort to childish behaviors, exaggerate simple events,

and vocalize naive opinions or one-sided arguments. Their emotional variability makes young adolescents at risk of making decisions with negative consequences (Milgram, 1992).” With this in mind, the importance of building a strong advisory community is paramount.

This transition to a ‘new normal’ was a traumatic experience and we cannot ignore the fact that it had a ripple effect on students’ families, thus putting a strain on domestic roles and relationships. The home learning environment is clearly not the same as our school learning environment, and more importantly, the home learning environment is different for each student. In building strong advisory relationships, we can support students to manage these additional stressors by providing them with routines and resources to navigate hybrid learning and bring social connectedness to their day.

Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) published an article in the spring of 2020, titled *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus*, where they sought advice from experts from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) to help inform educators how best to support students. Alongside several other recommendations, the article highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining predictable routines, which we aimed to do with a regular advisory schedule and routine in order to “...maintain a sense of psychological safety” (Teaching Tolerance). In creating advisory plans for my team to begin the year, I used a combination of Restorative Practices and Developmental Designs approaches to building community through circles.

Restorative Practices is an approach that can be used in an advisory setting that “...promotes inclusiveness, relationship-building and problem solving” (Porter, 2007). According to Dr. Paul McCold of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, “We know that the sense of belonging and pride in school are related to academic performance and dropout rates, and dropout rates are related to involvement in the criminal justice system and more at-risk behavior” (Porter, 2007). To apply this concept to our current situation, I would substitute ‘drop-out’ rate to ‘disengagement rate’ during remote learning. In addition, the experts from NCTSN advise us to explain any changes in our routines in digestible amounts appropriate

for our students (Teaching Tolerance, 2020). Our team has stayed true to this concept of maintaining predictable routines and clear communication in the various supports we have provided students and families this year.

Taking Action: Effective Supports for Students and Families

My colleagues and I recognized the importance of our role in providing effective supports for students and their families during hybrid learning. As described below, these have been social-emotional interventions, academic supports, or simply regular communication.

Weekly Reflection

Every Wednesday our students complete a weekly reflection in a Google Form, which serves as an executive functioning and social emotional check-in. Students identify and make a plan for missing or incomplete work, respond to a pertinent team survey, or provide feedback for teachers on a topic. Families also receive their student’s response in addition to a pre-loaded communication from the team teachers, which we titled ‘Ask Abouts and Look-Aheads.’ This weekly communication closes the loop between home and school, providing a support network that is invaluable when working with adolescents.

Whole Team Connections

With our students being split in two cohorts due to hybrid learning, many students have expressed feeling disconnected from their peers. In light of this student feedback, we have responded by helping students connect across cohorts remotely by hosting remote whole-team advisories and integrating cross-cohort student opportunities like team committees, enrichment experiences, and cross-cohort remote class time on a regular basis.

Academic and Organizational Supports

At the start of this school year, our team understood the need for streamlined, clear communication with students and families. Through using Google Classroom and MyHomework, we aimed to help students and families easily access class materials regardless of their location. In addition, we have spent many hours building and adjusting our hybrid class schedule in order to meet the needs of all

learners, while also balancing factors like our district's expectations, staff availability and licensing, or developing alternate schedules in response to possible COVID-19 scenarios. Our original goal was to minimize the class blocks to provide simplicity for students in an effort to increase accessibility and engagement, which was somewhat achieved.

Other Ways for Students to be 'Seen' and 'Heard'

Closegap is a tool our school adopted this year to monitor students' social-emotional health and is described on their website as "The first child-facing emotional wellness platform that captures how kids feel and helps parents and educators respond" (CLOSEGAP, 2021). Students complete these check-ins twice a week with their responses being monitored and flagged to a school counselor or advisor, if needed.

On our team, we have used a circle seating chart in advisory as modeled in Maura Weiler's "Creating a Connected Community" workshop at the 2020 Middle Grades Institute. While it is necessary for contact tracing due to COVID-19, it has also proved to be beneficial during remote advisory since it reminds students that we are all valuable members of our advisory community and sets the expectation that we want to hear and respect each person's voice.

Data Collection & Results

In three surveys conducted from mid-September to mid-January, I asked students and advisors for feedback about our advisory system focusing on three areas: connection, support, and identity.

Student Feedback

On the whole, students reported feeling more connected to other students and advisors over time. When asked to describe what connection looks like for them, students shared that they felt "welcome to share my thoughts or ideas" and "free to talk and have an opinion." They also reported that they connected on things they all had in common with one another.

When asked about how supported students feel by other students or their advisor, students were generally feeling more supported over time, but there remained more of a spread in the responses for how students feel supported by

their peers. Students were also asked to share about what supports have been helpful in advisory, to which they responded that they appreciated it as "a time to ease into the day" and "get [their] thoughts in order for the rest of the day." In addition, multiple students reported that they like having the time to socialize and check-in in small groups, while one student shared, "[My advisor] cares about how we are doing in school and mentally." When asked what else advisory could do to be supportive, students provided valuable feedback ranging from requesting to meet more often in the day, to requesting an understanding that it may take them longer to answer a share question, to turning on cameras during remote advisory.

Finally, students were asked about how often they "feel safe and included to be me, share my ideas, and express my opinions." In mid-September, 83.7% of students responded as "always" or "usually," while in mid-January this number rose to 91.5%. When asked to elaborate, one student noted, "Whenever I share I feel like I can answer honestly and no one will get mad at me for expressing my opinions," while another said, "A few weeks ago, the topic was what would your dream job be, and everyone was really supportive of each other and it felt like we were all included." These testimonials and data are cause for celebration; however, it cannot be ignored that there are still students who answered this question as "sometimes," "never," or "none of these statements apply." These are our most vulnerable students. Unfortunately, they did not provide an explanation for their chosen response.

Just as with many aspects of teaching, these survey results are consistent in that we have students ranging the spectrum of how connected and supported they feel. In my view, this goes to show not only how the work we are doing with our advisory system is working for many students, but also how necessary and vital it continues to be.

Adult Feedback

Advisory provides students and adults a unique opportunity to connect with one another – a basic human need that we have been deprived of during this global pandemic. When we open up with one another in these small advisory communities, students are able to see us "more as a person than a teacher" as one teacher noted. Another adult shared about how they see

themselves as a key support for students in that, “They know I’m an advocate for them who would do anything to help them succeed – academically, socially, behaviorally, or cheering them on in a sporting event.”

In our daily schedule, advisory meets in the morning and one advisor noted that, “When students feel seen, heard, and valued, and their voices have been heard in the morning, they are more apt to engage and share later in the day.” I believe this strong foundation our advisories have built this year is having a positive impact on student engagement, as evidenced by one advisor reporting that a couple students who were struggling to engage on remote learning days in the spring and fall of 2020 were starting to show up more regularly on remote days, while another shared that they noticed fewer students opting to ‘pass’ in a share.

Final Thoughts

One of the most notable observations I have made over the course of this school year is the amazing resiliency of humans. We have all been called upon to be flexible and to persevere in unprecedented ways. I believe the supports we have put in place have been effective in meeting our goal of building student connections to promote engagement. While it cannot be ignored that student disengagement still exists and the negative impacts of the coronavirus on adolescents’ health are concerning, we are providing more individualized, targeted support for our most vulnerable, disengaged students and it is a process. Working on a collaborative middle grades team has been key, and the work we have been able to do together is greater than what we could do for students individually. Speaking honestly as an educator, the work we do is a convoluted mix of exhausting, frustrating, rewarding, fulfilling, and having fun – and this school year has added a few more twists and turns with some steeper ups and downs. In my career, a professional goal that continues to guide me is to continually be open to new learning, feedback, and improvement, a goal which has been tested this year. As we move forward to the spring, I remind myself that we are all in this together.

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