

Applying a Reflective SWOT Analysis to Examine Four Pillars of Culturally Sustaining Practices

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Abstract

Teacher educators and preservice teachers are increasingly tasked with ensuring that their classrooms are safe and respectful environments that encourage metacognitive reflection and modeling best practices. With this in mind, this paper uses a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis (Orr, 2013) tool that employs the Four Pillars of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy framework established by Diaz et al. (2023) to invite educators, teams, and schools to contribute their own work to uplift and share strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, as well as resources and experiences they engage in with a community of those who share their vision for a more equitable, inclusive teaching and learning environment.

Introduction and Framework

As professors of middle level education, we often invite classroom teachers and counselors to provide our candidates with connections between theory and practice. This research is an effort to provide educators with a reflection tool to expand their personal knowledge and skills as they become more culturally responsive. In this paper we have designed an inquiry project using a SWOT analysis to provide teachers with insights into how middle level teachers and teams view elements of Culturally Sustaining Practices (CSP) including: knowledge of self, decentering whiteness, outreach, and communication in curriculum design. A SWOT analysis is a tool educators use for program improvement (Orr, 2013). Knowledge of self, decentering whiteness, outreach, and communication are described as four pillars associated with culturally sustaining practices (Díaz et al., 2023). We present reflections from representatives of three middle school teams based on their curriculum development views using the SWOT analysis (Orr) to interrogate four pillars of CSP (Díaz et al.). We then discuss the implications and limitations of this process for educators.

According to Coffey (2010), educators who participate in reflective practices and group processing of experiences gain much insight into the link between theory and practice. As we considered the needs of our partner schools and

teachers, we designed a reflection process for us to learn which specific CSP practices are evident. We consider this study a living, breathing document and a continually growing resource for teacher educators, teachers, and practitioners. This is a space where ideas can be shared and reflected upon from varied perspectives and contexts. We hope that using the framework we have outlined above, coupled with the four pillars described below, will provide a space for like-minded professionals to share successes, resources, ideas, challenges, and opportunities for growth. Here we provide teachers, teams, and schools a tool for examining elements of curriculum, which Bishop and Harrison (2021) characterize as effective when it is *challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse*.

Four Pillars of Transformative and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

We believe diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work is an ongoing process. We know that educators who open their classrooms and schools to empower, embrace, and validate multiple cultures and viewpoints create dynamic caring spaces for young adolescents. Classrooms that enact CSP center on meaningful relationships between students and between students and their teachers (Eppley, 2018; Thomas & Howell, 2019). A teacher who values DEI appreciates multiple perspectives and appreciates students' individuality, respects

learners' diverse talents, and is committed to empowering students' self-confidence and competence (Thornton, 2018). We believe teacher educators must engage with middle level teachers, counselors, support personnel, and administrators as we prepare the next generation of middle level teachers who have the potential to greatly impact the lives of young adolescents.

As middle level educators examine their own processes, experiences, and growth as culturally sustaining practitioners focused on transforming the status quo of middle level schooling, we created a model for individuals, teams, and schools to employ with those goals at the forefront of their curricular planning and implementation. In this effort, we are utilizing the Four Pillars of Culturally Sustaining Practices (Díaz et al., 2023). We then invite middle school teams of educators who are working to continuously improve their own work by uplifting and sharing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, as well as resources and experiences they engage in with a community of those who share their vision for a more equitable, inclusive teaching and learning environment. By sharing the framework and applicable resources with one another, school personnel can collaborate across school settings, gaining access to innovative ideas, transformative practices, and gather collective learning possibilities.

Four Pillars of Culturally Sustaining Practices

In an ongoing effort to provide teacher educators with the clarity they need to provide student-centered pedagogy centering on building metacognitive awareness, a conceptual framework was developed by Díaz et al. (2023). The Four Pillars of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy was created to encourage educators to "use these tools to better understand and transform their own practice" (p. 2). These pillars embed what Bishop and Harrison (2021) report as five essential elements of successful middle schools. The essential attributes include responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging classrooms and schools. As we prepare educators to be culturally sustaining, these pillars stand as a framework for them to reflect on their own knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

- Pillar 1 relates to Self. The essential attribute from *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) is the application of Equity and corresponds to Cultural Pluralism in CSP. Culturally sustaining teaching, at all levels, is made possible through critical reflection upon and intentional examination of our own knowledge, skills, and practices. Using cultural and community assets, and ensuring characteristics of young adolescents are considered, teachers use these backgrounds and interests to celebrate young adolescents' Funds of Knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). This pillar invokes the notion that educators who examine their own ideas as culturally responsive can apply equitable practices in classrooms and schools.
- Pillar 2 examines Decentering whiteness/self. The essential attributes from Bishop and Harrison are Responsive and Equity, which manifests through the interrogation of how we examine our practices, self, whiteness, curriculum, and dispositions is necessary. When students articulate their thoughts, when questions are posed that address ideas and phenomenon, children are challenged and gain confidence (Awada & Ghaith, 2018). This pillar aligns with Cultural Pluralism in CSP and elevates educators who decenter whiteness use their knowledge and resources to challenge and engage student learning.
- Pillar 3 shares Outreach. This pillar exemplifies the essential attributes of Empowering and Responsive from Bishop and Harrison through community accountability and aligns with Cultural Pluralism in CSP. In developing educators' instructional strategies grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy, opportunities such as mentoring, place-based pedagogy, and service learning need to be incorporated to allow teachers the chance to develop equitable practices and increase accountability to their communities. Outreach and use of community empowers students to apply their learning in authentic spaces. McGee and Banks (1995) describe equity pedagogy as a transformative experience. They state that this pedagogy creates an environment in which students can acquire, interrogate, and produce knowledge and envision new

possibilities for the use of that knowledge for societal change.

- Pillar 4 encompasses Communication. In Bishop and Harrison, communication is fundamental to achieving all five essential attributes and 18 characteristics. Additionally, this pillar embodies the ideas of CPS' Linguistics and Literacy. To build a community of practitioners who engage in culturally sustaining practices and reinforce the first three pillars, educators must focus on communication among all stakeholders. Creating a community of learners includes "creating an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning; making space for student voice and agency and building classroom culture and learning around communal (sociocultural) talk and task structures" (Hammonds, 2015, p. 29). A key practice for educators is to participate in structures and practices that provide all stakeholders the opportunity to share their voice. The essential attributes to successful middle schools highlight best practices for educators.

The SWOT Analysis

As educators consider the essential attributes, characteristics associated with curriculum, instruction and assessment, and culturally sustaining practices, we recommend educators begin to share an analysis of their own individual work, examine the pillars as a team and as grade levels to consider strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). This research is timely because threats to CSP are becoming more prevalent across the country and, specifically, within K-16 schools. Orr (2013) states, "A SWOT analysis is a simple tool to assist faculty to initiate meaningful change in a program and to use the data for program improvement" (p. 381). The SWOT consists of four items of address: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Once a SWOT has been conducted, Osgood suggests, "Discussion of weaknesses and threats provides useful information for strengthening the project or plan where possible or anticipating the effects of environmental threats" (in Orr, p. 382). The SWOT allows for reflection and ultimately can be a useful tool for personal and collective reflection.

The process of interrogating our practices is deeply personal and requires time and space for introspection to do what Tyrell et al. (2018) refer to as "inside-out" work. They further this idea, not stopping at deep reflections, to also consider how our thoughts impact our behaviors towards human differences to develop actionable steps in addressing the maintenance of strong culturally sustaining practices and the development of action steps to address the gaps. Using the "inside-out" concept as the foundational aspect of this transformative practice, individuals and teams should be prepared to be vulnerable with one another through sharing of open and honest interrogations of evidence of individual and school practices. The framework of on-going critical reflection, equitable and anti-racist pedagogy, and action-oriented transformation is the foundation to the deployment of a culture of CSP by interrogating school practices and policies using a SWOT analysis table.

Collecting and Analyzing Data using Action Research

Using a SWOT analysis, we address how professors can help teachers gain a deeper understanding of the insights, challenges, and experiences voiced by educators. The use of the term *educators* refers to the adults in a school building who engage with young adolescents such as teachers, administrators, counselors, food service, custodians, and support staff. We reached out to middle level educators who have been part of our own preparation programs in North Carolina and who have participated in diversity, equity, and inclusion work with young adolescents and teachers. We invited them to reflect with their teammates on the four pillars associated with CSP.

The educators then responded individually to the SWOT analysis, engaging with the tool on the constructs of self, decentering whiteness, outreach, and communication and agreed to have their thoughts shared. The data are shared and discussed. These data can provide teachers with some insights into what educators are facing and how they are addressing CSP. One educator reflects on their own personal journey; one reflects on their view of the grade level; and one reflects on how they and/or their team addressed CSP. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. These data are illustrated in Tables 1 through 4.

Table 1*Self. Each Participant Describes Their Positionality and Critical Reflection of the Work Being Done*

Participant	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Teacher sharing a personal view	I have been on a personal journey to investigate, redress, address my own knowledge	I often think the people I am around are not as committed to this work. Some are but those I am closest to are not.	I think the opportunity is to reach outside my current space to those who are interested and to create a community. I am in a state group that is working on this and can continue with them.	The state I currently reside in is not addressing this work. It is as if anything is interpreted as 'woke' with a connotation that to me illustrates fear.
Counselor sharing a grade level view	The district I work in has a policy that this is important. In our school we hold advisory once a week.	The grade level does not engage in conversations about it.	I have been doing a lot of research on cultural identity and could provide this information to our staff.	There appears to be a fear of doing something wrong.
ELA/team leader reflecting on how CSP plays out in their classroom	I had students complete a genre personality test prior to allowing them to self-select books. They reflect on their reading weekly.	We do not collaborate on an interdisciplinary format.	We are so busy I feel like we don't have time to talk about our students.	Last year we had advisory five days a week. This year, four days a week, students are grouped by ability for reading or math remediation/enrichment. I work with the lowest students.

Table 2

Decentering Whiteness. Participants Describe the Examination of Practices Used by Them and Others Along With How They Navigate Non-White Identity Development in Young Adolescents

Participant	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Teacher sharing their personal view	I have been working on ways to bring this to my classroom.	My weakness is in the resources I have as a math teacher.	I could reach out to the state math organization for suggestions.	Making time for this to happen.
Counselor sharing a grade level view	I have been studying the notion of cultural identity development and use that in my interactions with students.	I am not seeing a lot of this. It could be happening. There appears to be a lack of racial identity knowledge on the part of teachers. A lot of times teachers will send Black students to Black support personnel rather than build relationships with the students.	I believe students need more hands-on experiences. Teachers need more clarity of what identity development looks like and how it plays out in classrooms.	The curriculum that is available is not providing students with cultural differences.
ELA/team leader reflecting on how CSP plays out in their classroom	I have been using an activity to engage my students in conversations. They work in teams.	Our classes are 50 minutes. I feel like I do more telling than allowing them to do. Our curriculum is okay, I have to supplement with other poetry, stories. We have not engaged our students in any service or outreach projects in my class or on our team.	I found an article and video that shared a story of a woman who decided to stop taking hair off her face. All but three students were very interested and handled the “difference” well. We had good discussions about challenges people face and how people react to those challenges appropriately and inappropriately.	Fortunately, in our district and with our families, we do not face opposition to having students read about, talk about and write about race, gender, or disability issues.

Table 3

Outreach. Participants Describe the Interrogation of Their Use of Place-Based Pedagogy and Strategies that Include the Community in Instruction

Participant	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Teacher	I am well aware of place based and project-based learning. I have students interview family members about math and have worked with colleagues to create lessons that integrate and display art. These projects often use insights from parents and family members.	I think this has been one of my weakest areas. I understand Place Based and believe in it but have not been intentional.	Perhaps there is someone in the district who could help me. There seems to be an academic push to focus on testing rather than thinking.	I am not working with a department group that is open to this. It is hard when you are in a setting without support.
Counselor sharing a grade level view	There is a great after school program. It is ongoing. Teachers have also recommended field trips that relate to our students. They wanted to take them to a drum circle demonstration that was filled.	Our teachers are not trained in racial identity development.	We need more training for our teachers around the issue of racial identity development. I would love to provide this. We also work with the United Way in our state on these topics.	I do not see threats other than our teachers are not diverse and this can be a challenge if they are not committed to this work.
ELA/team leader reflecting on how CSP plays out in their classroom	I use specialists in the building and community members who work with small groups on Thursdays. We have had several field trips. I am so thankful we have someone in our school who organizes the field trips. We don't have time to do any of that planning and logistics.	There are so few resources in the community. It is not diverse. But it isn't 100% middle class White either. Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors. We need more resources. Teachers don't feel confident in having the conversations. Talking about White and Black students. PD is so needy	We had parents who bound together. They wanted their children to have some acknowledgement of them in February. Administrators listened. That they had to ask teachers to include it is telling. When you have parents, they are challenging teachers/administrators.	We are considered a rural community, and our greatest diversity is economics. 90% of teachers are white females. Our students of color do not have teachers who look like them. We had 14 black students.

Table 4

Communication. Participants Describe the Interrogation of Communication Between Stakeholders and How They Navigate This Work With Team Members

Participant	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Teacher	I am comfortable asking questions and listening. As a teacher I used weekly notes of encouragement to my students.	I don't really like people who constantly complain without any effort to problem solve, so often I will back off rather than lean in.	I think in school and team settings I try to be uplifting and supportive.	Those who need power and who exert it aren't always thinking most about the children.
Counselor sharing a grade level view	Our district is in support of this work.	We do not have conversations about this work as a team.	I work a lot with our 5 th grade partners as they are coming to the school and work with our 6 th grade teams. Our district is very interested in this, and I could share ways to do this more with our school.	The majority of our teachers are white and are not tuned into the cultural identity of our students.
ELA/team leader reflecting on how CSP plays out in the classroom	As a team we communicate via email in the evenings, which is a challenge for me. Parents do come in for student-led conferences, but not all parents attend. Our district sets aside two days for this to happen, which is great. We keep a log of parent contact information. If a team member is going to call a parent, they check with the other team members to see if there is other information (positive and concerning) to share.	I came in this year with the mindset that I was going to get to know my students. Last year at the end of the year when I had to write up plans for each, I realized there were a number of students I knew nothing about. That was my goal. I have not been able to do that yet. As a team, we don't really have time to talk about our kids.	Our school is still organizing schedules. The administration wants to balance children but what often happens is that our most marginalized students end up lacking a racial identity group within their classes.	I am not aware of any threats to this.

Reflections and Limitations of Using SWOT as a Tool

Once the teacher, counselor, and team leader shared their insights, we examined and looked for patterns to consider how essential attributes associated with successful middle schools were described. The essential attributes include classrooms and schools that are responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

- Pillar one relates to self. As educators examined their own knowledge of CSP, they shared much passion for wanting to know more and recognized they and their community need more support with the topic. It is possible that educators could benefit from examining how self-knowledge of CSP connects with developmentally *responsive* and *equitable* classrooms. As educators create responsive, equitable classrooms, leaders must consider how to prepare their staff for addressing the needs of young adolescents.
- Pillar two relates to decentering whiteness. All three of the participants referenced *engaging* their students with content using examples from other cultures. Nieto (2000) shares that students of all cultures need teachers to acknowledge and *empower* them based on “their languages and cultures, and their communities” (p. 93). Two of the three educators suggested they need access to more resources in this area. Educators may need opportunities to compile and share resources that engage and empower students.
- Pillar three relates to outreach. The responses indicate educators lack planning time and resources that relate to CSP. When

educators look to *engage* their students, using place-based instruction and fieldtrips, they discover cost as the biggest challenge.

- Pillar four relates to communication. Only one of the educators discussed specific structures related to *empowering* students and parents. None of the participants shared multiple ways to communicate with students or teammates.

The reflections of these educators provide insight into ways the four pillars intersect with the essential attributes of successful middle schools. Based on their reflections, we can make suggestions.

Next Steps

Next steps could begin by inviting educators to examine this study as inspiration for exploring their own development as culturally sustaining teachers and the challenges they face. This could happen at the beginning of a school year or semester. Once educators share their SWOT analysis, school stakeholders could analyze the data to consider subsequent goals, action steps, and resources needed for the semester or year.

The following table is provided to give guidance on structuring the SWOT analysis when providing educators the time and space to pause for reflection and develop action steps for continuous improvement. The first column is where the participant’s position title is written. Across the top, there are four columns where strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are recorded. Within each column are listed the four pillars of culturally sustaining practices (Díaz et al., 2023). Under each column, participants reflect on each pillar: self, decentering whiteness, outreach, and communication as each relates to curriculum.

Table 5

Guidance

Participant	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Examples: Teachers Administrators Counselors	Write down examples of where the topic of self, decentering whiteness,	You will write down examples of where the topic of self, decentering whiteness,	You will write down examples of where the topic of self, decentering whiteness, outreach,	You will write down examples of where the topic of self, decentering whiteness,

Support Staff	outreach, or communication has areas of celebration.	outreach, or communication has areas of challenges.	or communication has areas of opportunity for improvements.	outreach, or communication has areas of threats that impede growth.
Goals	<p>Once the SWOT is completed by educators, Goals can be determined. Goals will change depending on the pillar you are addressing (self, decentering whiteness, outreach, and communication).</p> <p>For example, a decentering whiteness goal could be building and maintaining community discussions to break down biases and learn from multiple perspectives.</p>			
Action Steps <i>Teacher Example</i>	<p>A set of action steps with ways to assess the goals can be developed. If this is the team's first use of the SWOT, we recommend one to three goals for a month to a nine-week timeframe.</p> <p>In the decentering whiteness example above, a teacher's plan could be to examine and use a Kagan cooperative learning structure in class. When using a structure, the teacher will teach the structure using a non-content example before introducing a content example. The teacher will do some intentional planning around the frequency of the use (daily, weekly) of the structure. Once the students understand how the structure works, the teacher can scaffold in topics that will later address justice. To begin, we center multiple perspectives in this Kagan cooperative learning structure by asking the students to share with their partners how they or their family cooks rice.</p>			
Resources	<p>In order to address the goals, resources may need to be collected with the help of the media specialist or other personnel in the school, district, or university.</p> <p>The teacher will get a Kagan Cooperative Learning (1994) book and learn about a variety of structures.</p>			

Summary

By using our partner educators to provide insights for teachers, we believe this process could not only benefit participants but could also give educators more insight into the challenges educators face and the current reality of schools in our respective areas. In each of these interviews, educators indicated a commitment to culturally sustaining practices and each recognized challenges they faced individually as well as team and grade level challenges. As we prepare tomorrow's educators, we must find ways to help them interrogate realities and give them skills and resources to prepare them to meet the challenges and needs of young adolescents in a culturally sustaining atmosphere. We aspire to create a community of like-minded professionals working toward shared ideals and posing action items to make classrooms more inclusive and caring.

Returning to *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), we are reminded that educators seeking to create

inclusive cultures must be given time and resources to develop their own knowledge and to work collaboratively to create communities that provide experiences and opportunities for young adolescents to develop and embrace their own identities. Gathering insights from teachers and practitioners is likely to enhance the relationship among colleges of education and their partner schools, and to enlighten teachers regarding diverse, authentic, transformative practices.

The four pillars shared here provide schools with a place to start, utilizing the input of individuals, teams, grade levels, and support staff and administration. We encourage educators to take the four pillars and customize their implementation to enhance the education of teachers and the young adolescents they will ultimately teach. Each context and culture vary and may benefit from emphasis on one pillar over another. We discourage teachers at all levels from envisioning these pillars and the SWOT analysis as lists to check off or bullet points to mark as complete. Neither is an end to be achieved or a final exercise to inform all

future practices, but rather, conversely, as springboards for a continual cycle of reflection, implementation, and growth. We hope this framework is helpful and accessible to all middle level educators committed to the examination of their practices through the lens of CSP, leading to transformative dispositions, insights, and actions.

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