Students Deserve More Than Equity Conversations: Middle Level Structures That Promote Equity

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> The curriculum and pedagogies of U. S. schooling are steeped in White, middle class knowledge and assumptions of normality. Although it is important that the middle school concept emphasizes the need to listen to young adolescents' voices and respect their concerns, such an emphasis does not provide explicit direction and guidance about how to work against raced, classed, gendered systems of oppressions. (Vagle & Hamel, 2019, p. 29)

I recently watched a high-profile political television show with amazement as three college-educated men—two White and one of the Global Majority—one perhaps a professor, attempted to describe the difference between the principles of *equity* and *equality*. One asked the question, and the three of them failed to make any comments that might suggest their understanding of these two principles, or interest in knowing the significance of these tenets. Their responses demonstrated complete disinterest about these ideals, and perhaps many fellow U.S. citizens share this perspective.

You may be quite clear about the distinction between these terms as their connotations and the resultant policies based on those perspectives play out at school board meetings, state houses, the federal legislature, in U.S. Supreme Court decisions; and, if we are lucky, at faculty meetings. If you are reading this, I suspect you are quite aware of the distinction, or at least an advocate for social justice and equitable school practices and behaviors.

Recognizing the difference between these principles is a valuable beginning; but so what, if that is the extent of your efforts or advocacy? Educators who speak the language of *social justice, equity*, and *culturally sustaining practice* and love saying these words need to be intentional about walking the talk in schools: Otherwise, young adolescents and the state of U.S. education get lost in what could become nothing more but another cool educational "fad" creating no discernable change in students' lives or the educational system. In a scenario of imagining equity as a lofty ideal, yet an unachievable dream, the inability to be proactive and purposeful as a purveyor of equitable actions are as feckless to achieving a level of equity as those three men's ignorance on what it means.

I visit several middle level schools annually as a reviewer of their programs, policies, curricula, mission statements, instructional behaviors, assessment processes, and student-oriented community. A school's perspectives on equity are clearly evident to me if I ask the "right" questions of the "right" students. If educators at schools are asking the right questions about social justice and equity, then several components of their school will represent equitable philosophies and practices. Students, caregivers, educators, and visitors should recognize equitable perspectives, actions, policies, and procedures within a school without having to dig too deeply.

An Essential Beginning: Producing Equity Belief Statements

Several critical components exist in middle level schools that demonstrate educators' sincere beliefs in social justice. A faculty's mission, equity, or inclusion statements should drive their actions, as well as those of school board members, administrators, bus drivers, coaches, custodians, cafeteria workers, and front office personnel. Mission statements lay the groundwork for how students are to be treated. I believe that those who embrace equity pedagogy adopt a philosophical perspective and specific actions that demonstrate that all students' developmental, cultural, racial, ethnic, gender identity, socioeconomic, religious, physical, cognitive, and sexual orientation traits are valued, respected, recognized, and prioritized when making teaching decisions.

Here's an example of a school district's equity statement:

> WHEREAS we must center the voices of staff, students, families, and communities who have historically endured

discrimination and marginalization. Their lived experiences and stories require attention, require respect, require empathy, and most importantly require action. Therefore, it is essential that we establish an expectation that a diversity of students, families, and community members, specifically those that [*sic*] have been ignored, discriminated against, and marginalized, are heard and included on substantive school and district issues. (Upper Darby School District, 2021)

The drafting of equity statements must include representation of a district's many stakeholders—from caregivers to students—particularly at the middle level and may take months to develop into final acceptable form. Genuine inclusive actions are initiated by inviting all voices within a community to contribute to this essential transparent process.

It may be a common misunderstanding that equity pedagogy is designed to meet the needs of students from only the Global Majority. Many communities are frequently transformed by gains in immigrant populations, religious pluralism, mixed-race students, greater numbers of families in poverty, and international language diversity; and every school district has an obligation to address the needs of their students who are LGBTQIA+. Educators who intend to cultivate equitable pedagogy within their schools must address the totality of the student demographics within their communities.

Mascareñaz (2022) describes the constant challenges that supporting equity pedagogy bring:

Without a doubt, equity work is isolating and brutal; it is a position that demands countless hours in front of large audiences talking about the most sensitive and taboo subjects in our society: bias, stereotypes, race, religion, sexuality, and more. Equity work requires an endless well of hope and optimism for a better future even when you are faced daily with the dark and divisive outcomes of our past, such as racism, bigotry, and homophobia. (p. 3)

Some educators may think that tackling racial and social justice for their students is too difficult and risky of a task. It may be particularly challenging for educators whose personal experiences may not have prepared them to address their students' needs for social and racial justice and equity, or those who may not recognize their biases associated with heteronormativity (Downing, 2019; Fleming, 2018). Perhaps a faculty's avoidance is based on recent state legislation prohibiting public school officials' efforts to promote equity and social justice.

Avoiding equity and diversity advocacy, however, within schools is an immoral stance and denies students opportunities to experience the full benefits and unlimited potential that public education can and should offer all students. The phrase *in loco parentis*—"in the place of a parent"—is a lawful mandate to meet the needs of students while at school (Cornell Law School, 2023, p. 1). What more justification does one need to provide equitable pedagogy than a law requiring educators to act in the absence of parents?

Once an equity belief statement exists and is publicized, all stakeholders have guidelines to justify and support their decision making: a rationale, if you will, for becoming an equity pedagogy advocate and activist. What do equitable actions look like in practice, and what is meaningful advocacy for students who are marginalized?

The Missing Piece: Middle Level Students' Voices

My frequent visits to middle level schools for the past decade have revealed truths of which many local educators may not be privy. As part of invited visitation teams, I choose to find another set of students to listen to rather than the usual honor students assigned to me to interview. Lunchrooms are favorable locations for finding new sources of information. I have a habit of choosing a group of students from the Global Majority to ask their views of school. In every case in which I have spoken to middle level students of the Global Majority, they describe being called racial slurs and often feel that teachers do not support them when they experience fellow students' racist behaviors. Some students recognize and admit that teachers treat White students with more respect and care than those of the Global Majority (Brown & Saunders, 2020).

When I describe the students' anecdotal perspectives to educators in that school, there is often a stunned reaction of surprise and dismay.

Why take my word for it though? Many school administrators and faculty have begun designing their own surveys to elicit students' perspectives on school climate, and are savvy enough to include prompts about race, families' language acceptance at school, and whether educators and students demonstrate respect for students who are LGBTQIA+ (Brown & Bertoni, 2021; Brown & Saunders, 2022; Marshall & Brown, 2021).

Young adolescents are constantly searching for identity, and in the process, sizing up their teachers and fellow students to see if they are accepted, and what it will take for them to fit in (Brown, 2016). Identity questioning occurs during this developmental time period because of the immense cognitive growth that occurs, and students' resultant new heightened awareness of their personal characteristics (Dolgin, 2018; Jensen, 2015). All of this self-examination and searching for acceptance make young adolescents perfect sources of information for educators who want to address their needs, including how to create inclusive and equitable learning communities.

Student surveys should be designed by a team of educators *and* students. It is also advantageous for educators and/or students to conduct a percentage of interviews with a representative cross section of the student body: honor students, students most frequently suspended, students of the Global Majority, those who do not participate in extracurricular activities, students on free and reduced lunch, students with disabilities, and students not performing well academically.

Public analyses of these survey and interview data can provide educators with a set of guidelines for altering every component of school policy including discipline procedures, student handbook language, curricular decisions, instructional methods, assessment activities, and school dress codes. One middle level school equity advocate organized students of the Global Majority to design a survey as part of a social justice club (C. Beveridge, personal communication, May 30, 2023). Data from the surveys revealed a need for educators and students to build a culture of kindness within the school community. Linking equitable pedagogy to students' concerns and needs is at the heart of meaningful social justice change.

Middle Level School Structures That Support Equity Pedagogy

Preventing Inequitable Disciplinary Practices

A faculty's ability to promote, create, and deliver on the promise of an equitable community is always affected by the way that students are valued and treated. The level of respect for students can easily be assessed by the way students who need social, emotional, and behavioral guidance are supported. If educators substitute a different final verb in that sentence other than *supported*, it may reveal punitive perspectives and actions that seldom change students' behavior.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2023) show that in the 2020-21 academic year, 77% of public-school principals were White (p. 2). The most recent demographic data for public school students show that 55% are of the Global Majority (NCES). One can see the overwhelming mismatch of White teacher (80%) and administrator (77%) populations to public school students' racial demographics. Researchers identify educators' behaviors that result in inequitable disciplinary practices for students of the Global Majority despite a belief, perhaps, that students will be treated fairly (Eberhardt, 2019; Jacobs, 2018).

Bias has a compelling effect on behavior, and certainly those demographic data of public school students in the US creates a strain on the dynamics of behavioral expectations and perceptions between a majority White population of administrators and teachers and a majority student racial identity of the Global Majority (Eberhardt, 2019). Eberhardt explains that Black students are likely to be suspended at a rate of close to four times more than White students and noted, "Before they even enter kindergarten, Black children are already considered more likely to misbehave than White children" (p. 215).

Jacobs (2018) highlights difficulties that Black females in experience in school:

> Research on the school to prison pipeline and school push out as it relates to Black girls finds that a large contributing factor to disciplinary action that could lead to suspension, expulsion, and being pushed out of school among Black girls as a result of

teachers and administrators misreading the communication styles, behaviors, and emotions of Black girls. Growing research on Black girls' experiences in school shows that Black girls are often viewed by their teachers and administrators as loud, unruly, disrespectful, and unmanageable, when often the situation was that Black girls were attempting to express their opinions and needs (. ...) what most Black girls experience when they attend school is a clash between what their parents (particularly their mothers) have taught them about how to navigate the world as a Black girl and what their schools value as important in preparing them to be successful students. (pp. 380-381)

Other common miscues in school policies include zero tolerance policies that often result in excessive punitive actions, such as office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions for students of the Global Majority. Kemp-Graham (2019) describes common missteps by faculty and administrators:

> Notably, schools sanctioned African American girls for behaviors that appear to defy traditional standards of femininity such as appearing to be angry, hostile, and hypersexual. It is important to note that violence, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse disproportionately impacts African American girls who live in high concentrated areas of poverty and crime. (Wun, 2015, pp. 210-211)

Educators may need extensive professional development to readjust their understanding of differences in discourse patterns, behaviors associated with students' stress and anxiety, and their own biases that perpetuate inequitable actions with their students.

Inequitable School Dress Codes

Perhaps a faculty's most obvious violations of students' racial, ethnic, and personal identities are school dress codes. Often faculty and administrators are unaware of the negative effects of their dress codes (Kemp-Graham, 2019). For many students of the Global Majority, their hair is an object of constant discrimination while at school as they display corn rows, weaves, wigs, or braids leading to frequent suspensions (Jacobs, 2018; Kemp-Graham). Dress code conversations should be

commonplace among faculty, administrators, and students. Of all the school policies that can be easily addressed and altered, dress code guidelines should take priority as evidence of educators' comprehension of and commitment to equitable ideals.

The dynamics of seemingly diverse goals between students of the Global Majority and their White teachers often derail equity for students. Many faculties analyze their student behavioral referrals and in and out of school suspension rates to determine if those data for students of the Global Majority overly exceed the percentage of those student populations. These are essential conversations due to the probability of bias associated with excessive disciplinary responses to students of the Global Majority.

If studies reveal such discrepancies in the treatment of students—and they do—faculties must be cognizant of these data and begin to change skewed responses and policies. It may require extensive revising of school handbooks and dress codes. Use of equitable supportive responses to students' behaviors resides in educators' recognition of, attitudes about, and abilities to readjust their biases and ineffective actions for encouraging students' socioemotional and behavioral growth.

Eberhardt (2019) describes positive benefits and results of a program for teachers provided with empathy training and more accepting responses to students of the Global Majority's experiences and troubles. Students perceived these positive responses as indications of care and developed more trust for their teachers following the training. Emphasis on relationship building was emphasized for teachers to improve students' perspectives of support.

C. Beveridge (personal communication, May 30, 2023) coordinated with middle school students of the Global Majority who were members of the school's Social Justice Club to collect discipline data on suspensions. Students discovered immense disparities in disciplinary practices between Whites and students of the Global Majority. Students presented findings to administrators and teachers, and then proceeded to work on strategies to encourage restorative practices within the school. The club members also began to use bi-weekly meetings to build community among students and trust with teachers.

Processes that engage student voices in creating more equitable communities have a much greater chance of producing meaningful change due to the direct source of information. Inviting students to share their perspectives and using them to make change indicate educators' sincere advocacy for genuine equitable pedagogy.

Equity in Teaming Structures

The arrangement of students into teams is a central tenet of effective middle level schools. Teaming promotes camaraderie among students and faculty, creates a sense of security for students at their home base, promotes a family atmosphere, insures closer relationships among students, encourages the delivery of interdisciplinary curricula, and helps teachers support one another (Arhar, 2013; Berckemeyer, 2022). A powerful positive step toward equitable classrooms is placing students on teams and building unity within those grouping arrangements. Some student grouping processes, however, do not lead to students experiencing equity.

Traditional educational trends may affect a faculty's perspectives and attention to equity pedagogy. Tracking students by academic ability, for instance, as a placement strategy for students on teams demonstrates a failure to address young adolescents' academic, social, personal, and equity needs. Perhaps most devastating in tracking processes are the impact they have on student perceptions. Virtue (2013) revealed the possible debilitating effects:

> Collins (2003) conducted an in-depth case study of an African American young adolescent . . . whose school experiences seemed to be shaped to a great extent by the perceptions his teachers formed of him. Collins described *ability profiling* as a process through which teachers interpret, or profile, their students according to various characteristics: race, culture, social economic status, gender. Collins contends that ability profiling is an institutionally and socially sanctioned form of discrimination and segregation. (p. 40)

Virtue makes clear that however students are grouped, the priority for those decisions should be focused on morality, and the personhood, humanity, and dignity to which students are entitled.

Some educators may believe that genuine efforts at equity pedagogy would include specifically creating diversity among student populations within each team; for instance, dividing students of the Global Majority equally among teams or classrooms, or placing English Learner (EL) students in separate classes to "round out the diversity" among teams. This approach, on the surface, may appear to be a wholehearted effort at creating social justice opportunities for students.

Some middle level students refute this perspective. E.V. Saunders (personal communication, May 28, 2023) reveals that when students of the Global Majority, immigrant students, and students who are LGBTQIA+ are exposed to this "sprinkling" strategy, they feel isolated when away from students who share their racial characteristics, ethnicities, and/or gender or sexual identities. Grouping students by similar skin tones does not insure that those students share similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds. For instance, students of the Global Majority who are born in the US have little in common with recent immigrant students from western African nations. Similarly, separating most EL students who share a country of origin or language from one another is not conducive to camaraderie or in tune with the intent of teaming. Imagine the advantages of placing students who speak the same language, but at differing levels of English competency, helping one another in the same classroom.

Other complications arise from isolating a few students who share particular traits (race, skin color, ethnicity, religion, language, socioeconomic status) in classrooms. Middle school is the perfect place for rich, deep conversations about controversial social issues due to the immense psychosocial development during young adolescence (Eberhardt, 2019; Dolgin, 2018). Kay (2018) provides guidelines for and caveats when holding controversial conversations, particularly about racial issues, when only one or two students who share similar racial traits are together in a room:

> My first answer is usually, "Don't ask them to give their classmates a *minority perspective*." This request need not be explicitly asked to be inappropriate. Many times, it's just an unduly inquisitive first glance at the minority student every time a racial topic is brought up. It's even more troublesome if teachers treat minority

students as if their job is to lend credence to a teacher's controversial opinions about race issues. As we well know, racial experiences are not monolithic, which means one student of color might feel rightfully miffed when her classmate is held up as a global representation. (p. 68).

Placing more students who share similar racial, language, gender and sexual identities, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds in the same classroom can be a more equitable practice than it may initially seem. The support that fellow students can lend to one another is critical to their feelings of belonging, especially when controversial conversations occur.

Teaming offers occasions for teachers to collaborate on curricular issues. Common planning among teams provides time for teachers to develop and deliver interdisciplinary and teachable-moment lessons on racial events, LGBTQIA+ topics, religious differences, and socioeconomic challenges to clarify misunderstandings that young adolescents commonly experience. Teachers can choose to extend periods and coordinate collaborative discussions among their student teams to address controversial topics and events. Tackling these topics is a much more comfortable process when teachers collaboratively plan discussions, and then stand in the same room together with students to address these issues.

Many educators are reticent to address social and racial topics due to their limited experiences discussing racial, gender and sexuality identity, and immigration controversies as adults or during their adolescent years. Helping fellow adults and current students understand the value of an equitable community requires that students and teachers wrestle with the issues and clarify the controversies to lay the groundwork for young adolescents of all backgrounds to become advocates for their future equitable behaviors and actions.

Improving racial and social justice will not occur if teachers choose to ignore these necessary conversations. If fear of saying the wrong thing is the primary concern, rest assured that we all do and will continue to; but mistakes promote growth: no risk taking, no meaningful growth. DeMink-Carthew and Gonell (2022) describe three sixth grade teachers' journeys with social justice teaching. One teacher admitted the challenges she experienced:

For the first year that I did this, I wouldn't have stopped. I would have come home and internalized it, and been like, which student did I offend? How much did I just harm them? And I would have perseverated on it and freaked out about it. But now that I've been doing it for a couple years, I was able to check myself in the moment and model that it's okay to make a mistake and it's okay to be vulnerable. (p. 12)

The courage to improve students' lives starts with brave conversations on the issues of equity that affect our students.

Advisory

Middle level faculty who implement effective advisory programs make a commitment to provide an adult advocate for every student, address students' social and emotional needs, and promote greater student success (Wall, 2016). The primary purpose of advisory sessions is the personal advocacy that teachers can provide for students who they advise (Brown, 2013). Faculty use a variety of advisory activities for several purposes such as to develop camaraderie among students, promote mutual respect, substantiate collaborative values, and encourage personal and academic goal setting. Some faculty also use advisory sessions to promote social justice and equity.

Faculty may choose to create an advisory curriculum that addresses the challenges that young adolescents experience with identities, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. One middle school is using some of their weekly advisory sessions for students to self-select into *affinity advisories* based on their shared identities: such as a group of LGBTQIA+ students, one of immigrants from the same homeland, students of the Global Majority, and students who share the same native language (E. Saunders, personal communication, May 28, 2023).

These occasional separate groupings provide students with opportunities to share their personal stories with those like them and identify strategies for navigating their social milieu. An LGBTQIA+ student advisory group eventually initiated a more inclusive Gay Straight Alliance or Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club. After several weeks of individual groups of students of the Global Majority meeting separately, they started to invite White

students to their meetings to share their concerns to promote a culture of kindness in their building (C. Beveridge, personal communication, May 30, 2023).

Affinity advisory groups have presented the results of their equity studies to local administrators and school boards and successfully passed policies to raise Black Lives Matter and Gay Pride flags at their schools. Other middle level equity advisory teams have convinced school boards to alter school dress codes to better match the apparel and hair style needs of students of the Global Majority who are often discriminated against via schools' restrictive and Eurocentric dress codes. These student advocacy efforts evolve from educators purposefully engaging students in these critical decisions that affect their equitable standing.

One particularly empowering component that can lead to possible equity-focused advisory sessions are student-led activities. Some schools design a two-day late summer institute for rising eighth graders who want to lead advisories. The more emphasis placed on recruiting students of the Global Majority, those who are LGBTQIA+, or recent immigrant students into these roles, the better prospect for promoting equity in school for these marginalized populations. Students frequent leading of advisory sessions may have a more significant impact than when adults maintain leadership roles. The interdisciplinary nature of advisory sessions may make them a better place for equity and social justice conversations and activities.

Flexible Scheduling

Schools' daily schedules have been heavily influenced by an insistence on single-subject area experts teaching siloed separate content. Standardized 7-to-10 period school days of approximately 40–50 minutes dominate secondary school schedules despite numerous innovative pedagogical changes in U.S. schools for decades (Merenbloom & Kalina, 2016). Schools' schedules often negatively affect learning and growth opportunities for students of the Global Majority, low socioeconomic status students, and English Learners by virtue of design flaws that deny students access to numerous courses (McCarty Perez, 2022). School schedules designed with short periods (40-50 minutes) to prioritize homogenously grouping students by academic ability prevent opportunities for many students for deep

engagement with meaningful social content, social camaraderie, and less access to advanced content—obvious signs of inequity.

Middle level school faculties who engage in more flexible scheduling models create numerous advantages for students: increased instructional time, fewer disciplinary infractions, fewer transitions during the day, and greater opportunities to alter length of periods to a variety of time frames (McCarty Perez, 2022). Brown (2001) discovered through interviews with teachers that extended flexible class periods improve relationships between students and teachers, promote greater student understanding of content, give teachers more time to assist students with special learning needs, offer teachers more time to engage students in hands-on learning activities, support heterogeneous grouping practices, and encourage teacher teams to implement interdisciplinary studies.

All of these teacher adaptations based on longer and flexible periods are advantageous for marginalized groups. Students with special needs may particularly be advantaged by flexible scheduling due to greater opportunities for inclusion into general education classrooms and collaboration with fellow students for extended periods of time.

Flexible extended periods permit teachers to alter their schedules on short notice, and to meet team members' needs for interdisciplinary curricular investigations. Extended periods are advantageous for much deeper explorations into equity issues with an interdisciplinary focus.

Conclusion

Young adolescents' maturing minds lead to an acute awareness of fairness, and ultimately, a profound sense of racial and social injustice, despite the inability of those three men I described earlier who could not describe the difference between equity and equality. Kendi (2019) describes the moment he reached *racial puberty*: "When he realized that he was treated differently due to his skin color, and it occurred long before he reached middle school" (p. 37). Teachers and administrators cannot hide their equitable beliefs or actions from students. Young adolescents experience those actions each day they are at school. Educators have a responsibility to act to insure improvements in creating equitable pedagogy now.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to fellow justice fighters in *Letter from Birmingham Jail* explaining that he felt justified initiating peaceful protests despite differing perspectives among his colleagues, who implored him to be more patient and wait until the "time was right" (1963). King noted that it was time, and he wasn't afraid of "tension," which is necessary for change to occur: "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue" (p. 2). Educators must certainly be experiencing tension now as they ponder their roles in advocating for equitable pedagogy.

Social and racial justice and the struggle for more equitable schools is always ongoing, whether we recognize it or not. As educators, researchers, professors, parents, community members, and citizens, what is our responsibility to equitable pedagogy in our public schools? If we sit back and watch with caution and fear and avoid the tension, what will become of the ambitions that we have of genuine change through timely and significant action? Will the penchant of the loudest detractors and most assertive community members and legislators opposed to equity prevent ongoing progress due to educators' fears of the tension?

I believe that educators have the heart and motivation, and agree with the tenets of racial and social justice and embrace the need for schools to demonstrate equitable pedagogy. The faculty, administrators, and outside academics with whom I interact want to see change and are frequently instigators of equity. The practices that I describe within—from equity mission statements to alternative iterations of school handbooks, dress codes, teaming, advisory, and flexible scheduling—all have the power to influence young adolescents' equitable opportunities in positive ways.

Even more encouraging are the processes that educators initiate that place middle level students in the center of the conversations, actions, and changes among schools' equitable practices. I hope that the ideas within influence greater change and prompt more promising practices with young adolescents who are often much more enthused than adults to see transformations that reflect their visions of an equitable future. Let us guide and support them as they pave a path forward.

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