Considering Middle School Organizational Structures through a Lens of Equity and Justice

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In the second decade of the 21st century, educators encounter a complex and dynamic context for practice. In this historical moment, schooling traditions and routines are problematized within a post-pandemic setting: academic content and curriculum are interrogated in politically charged debates, and the purposes of schooling come into question as social thought moves toward deepening polarities (Delpit, 2019; Hess & Noguera, 2021). Many states have seen the advent of "Divisive Concepts Legislation," which "are intentionally designed to prevent K-12 teachers and students from engaging in critical conversations about race, gender, and oppression" (Kelly et al., 2023, para. 1). There is also a growing call to acknowledge and address the realities, both present and historical, of institutionalized racial and other social injustice in U.S. education within curriculum, pedagogical practice, schooling infrastructure, and long-standing educational policy (Benson & Fiarman, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These realities include a diversifying P-12 student body and growing inquiry about approaches to schooling that dismantle systemic barriers to educational equity, fostering just and inclusive school communities that responsively engage students and families, while offering the promise of educational freedom for students in communities who have been historically marginalized in traditional versions of school (Love, 2019).

In middle grades education, specifically, researchers have interrogated extant literature in the field, identifying opportunities for continued collaborative and empirical inquiry around culturally sustaining, socially just education (Kennedy et al., 2016; Smith & Falbe, 2021), holding in focus the realities of practice within a contemporary socio-cultural and educational context. There has been particular attention to the ways that middle level education takes up social issues and engages youth with their justice-orientations in developmentally appropriate ways (DeMink-Carthew & Gonell, 2022), pivoting toward culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris 2012); centering social identity awareness within definitions of developmental responsiveness (Bishop & Harrison, 2021); promoting curricular inquiries that grapple with evolving and multi-dimensional real-world scenarios (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022); and interrogating persistent barriers to inclusive school environments. Middle grades scholars have called for the disruption of socio-educational harm through intersectional and justice-oriented scholarship that strives to push forward antiracism, anti-bias, linguistic and curricular justice in research methods and middle grades pedagogy, while amplifying the voices of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) scholars and the educational experiences of historically marginalized communities (MLER SIG, 2020).

Middle level scholars and educators have also begun to examine dominant narratives and conceptual traditions around middle level history and philosophy with careful attention to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) (Harrison et al., 2018). Across these critical shifts in focus for middle grades education, myriad questions have arisen about signature pedagogical practices and enduring organizational structures that define and qualify middle schooling both historically and in the present educational moment. This shift also includes a focus on achieving more just middle schools that take up and execute the theories of young adolescent developmentalism with attention to diverse intersectional social identity, the mutable educational context, and DEIJ (Harrison et al.). Of particular importance in considerations for achieving more just middle schools is interrogating how traditional organizational practices might promote and/or inhibit inclusive classroom and school environments for all students and educators.

Key questions around this topic include the following:

- What do the structures of teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling, and grouping look like when they are culturally relevant, responsive, or sustaining?

- What opportunities do these and other structural elements of middle grades schools afford to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- What intersections or clashes are revealed between these structures and efforts to advance a more just education for young adolescents?

These kinds of questions underscore both the complexity of designing core infrastructures for middle schools that value, promote, and embody DEIJ and the opportunity that organizational structures at the middle level present to effectively frame and advance equity as a signature concept for middle schools of the 21st century.

Middle School Organizational Structures

Middle school organizational structures traditionally include plans for teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling, and grouping (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Implemented collectively, these principles help to create a positive schooling experience designed with intention toward the unique phases of socio-emotional and cognitive development during young adolescence (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). Described in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (SMS), interdisciplinary teaming is one of the key organizational structures that characterizes successful middle schools. On a middle school team, a small group of teachers work in collaboration with a mutual group of students. In its most effective design, teaming requires frequent common planning time for teacher teams as well as authentic collegial collaboration across content area classrooms to strategically address middle level curriculum that is "challenging, integrative, relevant, and exploratory" (Bishop & Harrison, p. 53). Advisory is a concept of middle school organization that, according to SMS, takes up the advocacy charge that every young adolescent within a middle school is mentored, beyond the academic classroom, by an adult. Done effectively in middle school organization, models of advisory have regular meetings during the school day with opportunities for conversations that strengthen and support students' social and emotional growth. Advisory thus provides every student in a middle school with an adult advocate who knows and "sees" them, who is genuinely invested in school-family-community partnerships, who advocates for each student's social and academic flourishing, and who develops, nurtures, and sustains an open and supportive advisor-to-middle-school-student relationship (Bishop & Harrison). Advisory, as a school structure, helps to uphold the idea that adults in successful middle schools unconditionally and positively regard (Venet, 2021) all young adolescents, helping them to feel "valued, respected, cared for, encouraged, and listened to" (Bishop & Harrison, p. 11).

Both teaming and advisory, as structures for organizing successful middle schools, are intertwined with the concepts of flexible scheduling and grouping, which are also conventionally defined as hallmarks of successful middle schools. In flexible scheduling models, middle school teacher teams are allotted both the instructional space and autonomy to teach across large periods of time (i.e., block scheduling), where necessary taking apart a traditional and static bell-to-bell schedule to be able to delve into experiential learning designs (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The middle school organizational concept of grouping is also connected to the others —teaming, advisory and flexible scheduling. It is through options and structures for flexible scheduling that students have the opportunity and learning space to make academic discoveries together across their learning differences and across their multiple cultural and social identities. Grouping is also significant in conversations about organizing for advisory models and creating socially and cognitively diverse academic teams.

Middle School Structures and Culturally Relevant, Responsive, and Sustaining Frameworks

Given the signature organizational structures that qualify successful middle schools — teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling, and grouping — and the work of teaching in the current historical moment, it is pertinent to consider ways in which these structures might help to promote culturally relevant and sustaining practice toward inclusive middle school environments. Teaching through both developmentally and culturally responsive approaches is a characteristic of successful middle schools (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), and ideally the organizational structures that middle schools have in place help to carry this work forward.

The first of Ladson-Billings' (1995) principles about culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is the

criterion that "students must experience academic success" (p. 160). Ladson-Billings drew important connections between a history of systemic anti-Black racism in the US, the historic African American fight for civil rights, and a need for African American students, in particular, to be academically competent, given the nature of schooling as a social institution impacted by systemic racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Academic success in middle school is ideally facilitated by its unique organizational structures. At its best, the benefits of interdisciplinary teaming are both social and academic for young adolescents. Given its design, interdisciplinary middle school teaming brings together a student's teachers and core content classrooms, creating ample support for academic success and safe learning spaces for young adolescents to freely explore new content, while taking learning risks (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Working in tandem with interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling in middle school affords teacher teams the autonomy for instructional plans taught collaboratively across blocks of time, creating instructional space for personalized, inquiry-based, and experiential learning that provides academic depth and opportunities for student-led discovery, addressing both the cognitive and developmental needs of young adolescents (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). However, when middle school models forgo flexible scheduling, it may impact student grouping and create inequitable student experiences around curriculum that should offer a depth of personalized and engaging learning experiences for all students (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Further, when middle schools organize through tracking, not only is this structure incongruous with SMS philosophy, but there are also negative academic outcomes, such as "decreases in student motivation and self-esteem, unequal learning opportunities, and declines in the overall quality of education" (Bishop & Harrison, p. 53). These outcomes particularly impact multilingual learners, students who exhibit learning differences, students experiencing poverty, and students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Flexible schedules also strategically leave space in the school day for advisory, wherein students have the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging, to appropriately develop their socio-emotional capacities, and to be cared for in a close-knit community that will directly support students' academic success (Bishop & Harrison).

Ladson-Billings (1995) noted that within CRP "students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence (and that) culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (pp. 160-161). And building upon Ladson-Billings' CRP work, Paris (2012) noted that culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (p. 95). Considering middle school structures, interdisciplinary teaming along with flexible scheduling and diverse grouping are relevant in both potentially facilitating and sustaining cultural competence, as these structures combined present the space for teachers to plan, with student voice engaged and a broad view of curricular components, for the design of community-based and community relevant problem based and inquiry-driven work. Additionally, given the middle school advisor's role as "primary liaison between school and family" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 16), advisory is a structure that can be leveraged toward the development of young adolescents' cultural competence. As Paris (2012) discussed, CSP "has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspectives for students and teachers" (p. 95). CSP also critically takes up the issue of "pluralism in linguistic and cultural practices" (p. 95) within educational spaces. Thus, the ongoing democratic engagement of family and community can help to eliminate barriers to home: school communication and relationships; promote students from historically marginalized communities to authentically interlace their cultural and school knowledges; and invite the full expression of students' home languages in their academic contexts. These ideas are connected to democratic approaches to middle school practice and organization (Bishop & Harrison), in that they help to push forward a decentering of dominant language and ways of academic and school thought in order to culturally democratize the academic space.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) third CRP criterion is the idea that "students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). At its best, the successful middle school upholds this tenet in its curriculum and instruction, but middle school structures should also undergird and bolster the kind of pedagogy that critically engages young adolescents with the world and

that fosters a development of their principled and multi-dimensional sociopolitical selves. Both flexible scheduling and diverse grouping are significant in this, as these structures provide young adolescents with the time, space, peer exposure, and opportunity to practice the skills of critically reading the world and interrogating its dominant narratives (Muhammad, 2020), the skills of principled and civil exchanges of diverse social ideas (Ehrenworth et al., 2021), and the skill of inquiry around traditional knowledge. Across this work, there is room in pedagogy for the expression and growth of young adolescents' academic and sociopolitical thought throughout. Further, as the ideas of CSP require, the instructional models that teaming with flexible scheduling and diverse grouping promote potentially allow learning space for students to "rehearse traditional versions of ethnic and linguistic difference and offer new visions" (Paris, 2012, p. 5). This kind of rehearsal, practice, and thought aligns with the qualities of young adolescent cognitive development that prompt an inquisitive orientation to the world (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). With room for sociopolitical inquiry built into the middle school through is organizational structures, it becomes possible to disrupt "a monocultural and monolingual society based on White, middle-class norms of language and cultural being" (Paris, p. 95), in keeping with the ideas of CSP.

Middle School Structures and Social Justice Learning

Paired with the tenets of CRP and CSP, it is also significant in the current educational context to imagine ways in which middle school organizational structures might be leveraged in the pursuit of more socially just learning environments. In envisioning these intersections, Learning for Justice's (2017) Social Justice Standards may help to provide an accessible anti-bias framework, given its student-friendly language and curated resources for classroom implementation. The standards are organized across the four domains of Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action (IDJA). Looking across the IDJA domains, there are many ways that we might consider intersections with middle school structures. For example, in the identity domain, standard 5 notes that "students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces" (Identity Anchor Standard). Paired with this are learning experiences such as identity mapping around visible/invisible and personal/social identities. This kind of critical awareness exercise might be carried out in an advisory group where there is ideally safety for social community and the guidance of an adult advocate.

Within the diversity domain of the IDJA framework, standard 6 notes that "students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people" (Diversity Anchor Standards). Given the middle school structures of teaming paired with varied student grouping, work toward this standard is achievable. These structures help to create opportunities for students to learn and experience social growth with their peers of diverse intersectional identities, creating an atmosphere with the safety "to recognize that their own ideas and opinions are only part of the story and that other people may have access to pieces of the puzzle that we don't know about" (Learning for Justice, Practicing Diversity). Within the justice domain, there is language that states, "students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on the interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics" (Justice Anchors Standards, 15). The opportunity that flexible scheduling provides for extended project-based learning is relevant, as teachers can plan and execute cross-curricular thematic units that address broad driving questions such as: "Is there one right way to combat injustice? Does justice look the same for everyone? Does everyone have a responsibility to combat injustice, even if it doesn't directly affect them?" (Exploring Justice, Learning for Justice). Finally, within the action domain, standard 20 notes that "students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective" (Justice Anchor Standards). To address this standard, the advisory period provides the opportunity for extended discussion among young adolescent peers with an adult guide. Flexible scheduling also can present an opportunity for community-based learning and for the design of youth participatory action research endeavors to give space for the work that takes up critical action with localized impact and significance.

Considerations for Middle School Community

In the best version of middle school, students feel a sense of belonging and social safety. There is a pedagogical atmosphere that fosters differentiated cognitive growth and socio-emotional development. There are adult advocates watching out for the academic, cultural, and social needs of every student. There are positive and mutually beneficial relationships between school, families, and communities, and equity and justice are centered through curriculum, school policy, and importantly, through organizational structures (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Without attention to the full implementation of the structures that help to architect these facets that define successful middle schools, all students are negatively impacted, but as always, inequities are amplified for multilingual learners, BIPOC students, students experiencing poverty, students who identify as LGBTQIA+, students with learning differences, and students who are of other historically marginalized backgrounds. Paris (2012) noted that as educators pursuing just practice in a contemporary context, we should reconsider the purposes of our work and critically contemplate "the purpose of schooling in a pluralistic society" (p. 95). As we consider the purposes of middle schooling in the current historical moment, the pursuit of equity and justice through practice, school culture, policy, and structural organization are paramount. In particular, we must continue to critically consider key principles of a successful middle school organization — teaming, advisory, flexible scheduling, and grouping — for their potential, given thoughtful and strategic implementation, to support the just learning environments we envision for all young adolescents.

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