

Cultural responsive middle schools:

Moving from events to relationships

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ABSTRACT

This is a practitioner-focused article that provides tips for developing social equity on middle-grades campuses. The advice in this article is primarily focused on campus organization and processes making the article most useful to campus administrators and school leaders, however, the advice in this article does address the importance of day-to-day interactions between educators, students, and the community, making this article useful to any middle-grades educator.

Cultural responsive middle schools: Moving from events to relationships

Over the past twenty years, culturally responsive education has become an increasingly common topic among middle-level practitioners. While most practitioners have a general understanding of culturally responsive education and acknowledge its importance in providing socially equitable education, many are still at a loss as to how to turn this concept into practice. According to Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis (2016), culturally responsive education refers to “the need for children’s educators and educational contexts to understand, respond, incorporate, accommodate, and ultimately celebrate the entirety of the children they serve – including their languages and literacies, spiritual universes, cultures, racial proclivities, behaviors, knowledges, critical thought, and appearances” (p. 1277-1278).

When working with middle-level campuses, I have noticed that many practitioners often reference specific events intended to target key demographics on their campus as evidence that they are implementing socially equitable or culturally responsive education. While events that respond to needs within the community are often welcomed engagement opportunities, our work as culturally responsive educators cannot begin and end here. When cultural events become the primary mode of implementing culturally responsive education, practitioners run the risk of engaging in practices that rely on stereotypes and focus on checking a box more than truly responding to the communities that we serve.

Researchers examining diverse school populations have consistently reported that the “small things” such as day-to-day interactions, relationships, and culturally responsive leadership are among the most impactful practices for promoting culturally responsive education (Brooks, Adams, Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Valenzuela, 2010). It is important that all students, particularly

young adolescents (Walker, 2017), be engaged in educational environments that validated and draw-upon their various identities and experiences (Stewart, Babino, & Walker, 2017).

Across these studies, students, families, and teachers all craved authentic, supportive relationships (Brooks, Adams, Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Gabro, 2003; Valenzuela, 2010). It is important for all stakeholders to feel valued as complex, capable beings. This includes acknowledge and drawing from both their in- and out-of-school values, languages, and knowledges. Consistently, campuses that have experienced the most success with developing and sustaining culturally responsive campuses have leaders that were fully invested in the transformation.

Tips for Moving from Events to Relationships

- **Prioritize relationship building.** Building structures into the school schedule can support your campus with the intentionality of relationship development. Depending on the needs of your campus, making time for relationships can take many different forms. You might consider utilizing advisory periods for mentorship and community-building or design open workspaces that are shared by faculty and students. Creating events before, during, and after school can also be a welcome engagement. These weekly opportunities for a casual coffee and conversation in the library or lunch meetings with students can provide space for students and faculty to feel invited to share their perspectives and ideas (Walker, 2017).
- **Model cultural responsiveness.** Definitions of cultural responsiveness and diversity abound. A good first step for any administrator is to make sure that the campus has developed an operational definition of culturally responsive instruction and that the definition be an accurate representation of the needs of the community. It is a good idea to include

students and parents when creating these definitions. Once explicit expectations have been communicated, the principal should model cultural responsiveness on a daily basis. Your campus stakeholders will be watching to see if your actions match your words. They will wonder if you are truly committed to this idea of cultural responsiveness. The answer should be yes. You will need to model this on a daily basis. Every interaction you have with faculty, staff, students, parents, and other community members should be grounded in cultural responsiveness. You may also choose to incorporate smaller events intended to build cross-cultural understanding on your campus. In Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney's (2010) study, the principal invited students to speak to teachers during monthly breakfast meetings about their personal experiences. You might focus on issues such as immigration, out-of-school responsibilities, mobility, or linguistic experiences.

- **Ask for feedback.** Engage your faculty, students, and families in shared-governance. Invite their feedback for issues such as discipline, curriculum, or extra-curriculars. Offer opportunities for open forums when stakeholders can address gaps that need to be filled. This can be a great way to keep a pulse on the needs of the campus community, as well as to work collaborative to find innovative solutions. Through this strategy, one campus realized that several students did not have access to clean clothes, so they were able to collaborate with community volunteers to develop a laundry system for students (Walker, 2017).
- **Celebrate the diversity on our campus.** Make diversity visible! This can be as simple as posting school mottos in multiple languages in your hallways and highlighting the work that various student groups are engaged in. You can also dig deeper by developing opportunities for parents to become involved as educational advocates.

- a. Collaborate with the your local Parent Teacher Association or Parent Teacher Organization to raise funds to take parents to lobby for educational legislation.
 - b. Send home parent-friendly information on educational issues.
 - c. Invite parents in as collaborative decision-makers for academic, as well as extra-curricular issues.
- **Shift the focus of events.** Many campuses rely on once a year multi-cultural events as their path to serving diverse needs. While the intentions behind events such as “Hispanic Family Night” are good, the result is to further solidify the “otherness” of marginalized populations. Researchers have found that small, day to day interactions with parents, students, and faculty members that have lasting, positive impacts when developing culturally responsive campuses (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Valenzuela, 2010; Walker, 2017). Campus administrators may consider other opportunities such as:
 - a. on-going parent-student mentorship events;
 - b. collaborative community literacy events such as poetry jams, writing workshops, and book clubs;
 - c. community apprenticeship opportunities or in-school mentorships through partnering with local business, institutions of higher education, recent graduates, and other local experts.

As middle-grades educators, we have heard repeatedly, the importance of providing socio-emotional support for the early adolescents in our care and we know that relationship building and mentorship are key components to providing that support. However, it can be difficult to determine how we are meeting the needs of our rapidly diversifying student populations. What we now know is that we can meet the needs of this new population through subtle shifts in our

thinking and approach to these relationships and mentoring. Rather than giving a nod to each group once a year, we can leverage the knowledge, cultures, and languages that our student populations bring with them as part of our daily practice.

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Bio

Dr. Katie Walker is an assistant professor in the language, literacy, and culture at Coastal Carolina University. She spent the last nine years in education as a professor, instructional coach, middle school language and literacy specialist, and as an elementary and middle grades teacher. Her research focuses on the intersections of middle grades education, adolescent literacy, and English as a second language instruction. Dr. Walker worked as a K-12 Texas public school educator for seven years prior to moving into higher education. She served in the roles of middle-grades classroom teacher, middle-grades specialist, and K-12 instructional coach.

Dr. Walker received her Ph.D. in Reading from Texas Woman's University in 2017. Her research focus is on the intersections of adolescent literacy, ESL instruction, and middle schools. She also conducts research focusing on of culturally responsive school leadership. She holds Texas certifications in the following categories: EC-4 Generalist, 4-8 English Language Arts, Reading, & Social Studies, 8-12 English Language Arts & reading, K-12 ESL, and K-12 Gifted and Talented.