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Including Students in Anti-Bias and Anti-Racism Work

Nicole M. Thompson, *Browns River Middle School*

Abstract

This Practitioner Perspective describes how the anti-bias and anti-racism work began in our school district and specifically how it is going in the school where I work. I am part of the district's Antiracist (ABAR) council and involved in bringing this information to the building's staff, and I am also curious about investigating ways we can invite students into the conversation. Equity work takes time and not everyone feels equipped or able to have uncomfortable discussions with students. Regardless, we have a responsibility to do the work with our students every day. In her 2016 article "Don't Say Nothing," Jamila Pitts reminds educators that "we may be uncomfortable talking about race, but we can no longer afford to be silent" (Pitts, 2016). We are living in incredibly challenging times and now is certainly not the time to be reticent in teaching our students ways they can raise their voices.

A SNAPSHOT

Browns River Middle School (BRMS) in Jericho, Vermont is one of two middle schools in the Mount Mansfield Unified Union School District (MMUUSD). With an enrollment of over 300 students in grades 5 through 8, the majority of our student and staff population are white. During the time they are at BRMS, students are members of instructional teams with the same two core teachers for (2) two-year loops.

- One team for grades 5 and 6
- One team for grades 7 and 8

Many of the school staff have received training in the Responsive Classroom approach; our school has an established Circle of Power and Respect in our Responsive Classroom routine that takes place twice a week on Monday and Friday mornings.

I have been the school librarian at Browns River Middle School in Jericho, Vermont since 2018. My current schedule allows me to meet with all classes (grades 5-8) once a week for a library class. I advise multiple afterschool clubs and groups. I have been a part of the BRMS Reopening Committee, the Scheduling Committee, and have been a MMUUSD ABAR Council member since its inception in the fall of 2020.

What is ABAR?

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, (MMUUSD) formed an ABAR Council. In addition to the goal of equipping teachers and

staff with the knowledge and skills with which they can be antiracist educators, the MMUUSD ABAR council is committed to building staff capacity to facilitate and sustain anti-bias and anti-racism work. The MMUUSD ABAR Council consists of staff members and administrators from each of the nine schools in the district, a school board member, a staff member from our district's central office, and the district's Director of Curriculum and Innovation. Our high school also has invited two students to participate. Last year the council met once a month to receive training, to share situations, and to check in on different issues that came up in each of the district's facilities. Members are then responsible for facilitating the professional development and gathering feedback from their building's staff after each session. Council members then bring their findings back to the council so that reflection and feedback are included in the process.

In 2020-21 the district's work was led and facilitated by Rebecca Haslam, Saint Michael's College professor and founder of *Seed the Way*. With Dr. Haslam's guidance we conducted equity audits of many of our school systems in each of our district's schools in order "to self-assess our current practices through an equity lens with specific focus on representation and inclusion in literature, curricula, terminology, inclusive practices, culturally sustaining pedagogies, physical spaces, and school culture." We looked specifically at the "Hidden Curriculum" that is not explicitly taught but that communicates different messages to students. That lens has been used to audit physical spaces and how the different spaces serve each school's

community. The third and final module included auditing School Culture and Implicit Messaging.

Using the audit tools that we were given, staff members looked closely at the practices and routines, discussed them, and brought to light the items that we could each work on in our spaces and roles within the school. This was important work and the first step in the direction of making BRMS a school where all students are seen and heard. This is best practice as Bishop, Harrison, and Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (2021) state in their book *The Successful Middle School*: “Middle school educators purposefully foster a culture that sustains the dignity of all members within a school community” (p. 12). Throughout this process, the feedback that has been gathered from staff after professional development events has been analyzed to better plan and to assess further needs to be addressed at BRMS. Our ABAR Council work has continued in the 2021-22 school year with Dr. Luvelle Brown, an educator and the superintendent of Ithaca City Schools, New York.

When can we include students?

As we gathered feedback in 2020-21, many staff members at BRMS wanted to know why we had not started involving students. It was a difficult year but students’ voices were needed to get the true picture of where we are and where we wanted to be as a school. BRMS students need to be part of this work, “Successful middle schools connect students meaningfully to teachers, peers, and the school to promote a strong sense of belonging for all learners” (Bishop, Harrison, & AMLE, 2021, p. 17). When I asked Dr. Haslam about inviting students to participate, she said, “There’s no reason to wait on talking to students about how it feels to be at school. I would hope folks aren’t waiting for permission from someone to do this. We should always be inviting input from students about how they’re experiencing school through an equity lens” (Haslam, personal communication).

Stay Engaged!

Some folks were ready to forge ahead but close to the end of the 2020-21 school year, we had stalled in our work. Many staff/faculty at our school felt overloaded and did not have a lot of energy to put into the work. It was not that they did not believe in what we were working towards, they just did not have a lot of time or

energy when so much was being asked of them during a pandemic. We were reminded that there is no ‘right’ or ‘good’ time to do this work, but it is never *not* a ‘right’ or ‘good’ time to do this work. We worked to keep folks engaged and asked our staff: *What gets/keeps you motivated to make your practices and our school more anti-biased and anti-racist?*

Summer 2021

At the start of the summer break our staff (like educators all over Vermont and the world) had experienced arguably one of the most challenging times in our professional careers – teaching through a pandemic. We had a small population of students who opted to learn virtually in 2020-21; some of our faculty had been tasked to teach virtually for the entire school year. Neither had attended school in person since March of 2020. Additionally, the ways we kept our students and each other safe, healthy, and learning in our schools during the 2020-2021 school year resulted in a sense that though we were all in the same building, students and teachers, grades and teams, were not connected. Outside of school, it seemed we were surrounded by turmoil. The last year had caused us to be so isolated from each other that we knew that we needed to find some way to come back together as a school and community.

As our staff looked towards our summer break, nine BRMS faculty members who each fulfill different roles at our school took on the challenge of attending the 2021 Middle Grades Institute (MGI):

- 2 members of our Administration: the principal and assistant principal
- 4 team teachers
 - 2 from fifth/sixth grade
 - 2 from seventh/eighth grade
- Special Educator
- Allied Arts teacher
- School Librarian

Because we each brought our different roles and perspectives, we were able to capture a better understanding of our school as a whole. It helped us see clearly what we had and what we could accomplish together.

Goals and Intentions

As we began our learning, part of the BRMS MGI Group’s goal was to work on a project that would

unite us. We hoped to create better connections with our students and sustain lasting relationships with them over the time span of their four years of middle school. We could feel the lack of connection that had emerged over the last year and we knew we wanted to work together to heal it. My personal goal was to work with the team on the larger project while centering the question that had emerged for me during the previous year – how do we get students involved or included in the ABAR work we started?

We decided to work on reconnecting our school community at BRMS by creating fifth through eighth grade advisory groups. According to *Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students*, “When properly facilitated, an advisory period can be a time for the authentic relationship and community building that students need to feel safe and supported in their schools. School must be relevant and engaging to adolescents before they will make an effort to do what schools ask of them” (Learning for Justice, 2019). This really spoke to the goals we had created together. I was familiar with Learning for Justice: Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2018) and advocated for us to use these standards to guide our planning of advisory times. The standards structured our planning and goals for empowering students to amplify their voices, developing team and personal identity, and building community through advisory groups and activities. In addition to helping structure our advisory sessions, this would also be in line with our district’s ABAR goals towards “combating racism and proactively teaching anti-racism.”

Planning Priorities

We knew the addition of the multi-age advisory would impact our whole school so we worked to be mindful of making this as easy a transition as possible. We did not want advisory to be an additional burden for staff to plan and we wanted to be unified in our message to our school community. We worked on designing what would happen during each advisory session, planning each advisory time from the beginning of the year until the December break, knowing we could add and adjust as the year went on.

Because we had been using the Responsive Classroom’s Circle of Power and Respect (CPR) for several years at BRMS, it was decided that we would keep that routine established in our school and add an additional time each week for students to meet in their multiage advisory groups. Bishop, Harrison, & AMLE (2021) said that in a successful model, “Each student has one adult in the school who assumes special responsibility for this advocacy, acting as advisor to support that student’s academic and personal development” (p. 15). We also know this model would work better with smaller groups of students so we needed to enlist as many adults as we could to lead the groups.

NEST

We wanted to be mindful and creative with how we communicated what we were trying to achieve with the multiage advisory groups. Our school mascot is a bird so we decided to brand our advisory model as the NEST. It is not an acronym; it is the idea of being part of a close group where we each belong and can support each other. Students are assigned a group (or a flock) in fifth grade and stay with that same group all four years. Each year eighth graders will leave the NEST and move onto their high school years and new fifth graders would take their place.

Staff Roll Out

We introduced the idea of NEST to staff members prior to returning to school for inservice in August. We provided reading materials and resources so everyone would be open and prepared to help us make this happen with the students at the start of the school year. We knew that this plan required some folks to move outside of their comfort zone but our administrators were part of our team and supported what we were attempting to do. We were well prepared to answer the questions and concerns of our colleagues. We were given two hours of inservice time to roll out the plan to our school staff. Our staff was generally open to the idea but with so many details to manage, some were apprehensive about the change. As our planned start date grew closer, more questions and issues emerged but excitement was building.

Table 1
Advisory FAQ

When?	Where?	Who?	What? Structure	Why?	How? Content
1 X a week Scheduled for Wednesday mornings We will meet about 40 times this year Advisories meet for lunches on early release days?	Students will come to advisor's area; we are working on planning spaces for those without an area	All classroom teachers All special educators All EXP teachers All guidance counselors Support staff Administrators +/- 40 NESTS +/- 10 students per group, 2/3 per grade level	CPR will still happen on team, M/W Because we are familiar with it and it works we will use the CPR structure in advisory with modifications Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards Four Agreements of Courageous Conversations Courageous Conversation Compass	Building community of the whole school Relationships with a trusted adult over their time at BRMS is best practice Teach students to recognize, respond to, redress, bias and inequity and actively cultivate and sustain equity	To learn more, check out these learning modules from Middle Grades Institute: Advisory Programs How another VT school did it Engaging students in Courageous Conversations about Difficult Topics MGI Resources: Teaching for Social Justice/ Anti-Racism

What Came Next

In advance of our first NEST advisory time in early September, our principal sent out information about NEST to parents and the school community in our weekly newsletter. By the following week we learned that NEST would not be happening due to COVID health and safety measures. Our administrators said that in 2022 we would try again. Despite our team's disappointment, I reminded myself to "Stay Engaged" and pledged to keep doing the work. Though disappointed, I tried to re-route and look for evidence of what was happening at BRMS and ways students were able to use their voices.

Inviting Students to the Conversation

Luckily in my role as school librarian I work with all BRMS students every week. My role gives me access to students and the ability to continue this work in my own space and within my own

teaching. I keep continuing to add books that contain information and stories by and about people and groups who have been historically excluded from our conversations. I read, discuss, and promote these books in my weekly conversations and book talks with students. These are not always easy chats, but students hear me talking about characters whose stories may be different from theirs. I have noticed that students seek these books out, regularly check them out, and then recommend them to their friends. Through these talks and conversations with students I know they are forming their own thoughts and voices. I also teach my older students media literacy skills. These lessons ask students to look critically at information that they find online and be aware of how that information affects them. This work has helped students develop critical thinking skills so they become well-informed citizens who are able to support their thinking with factual evidence. They also develop the skills to communicate their thinking and views with others.

Figure 1
How to Challenge Ideas in a Respectful Way

In BRMS Library...

How to challenge ideas in a respectful way (online and otherwise)

Sometimes we disagree. Here are some ways to challenge ideas you may not agree with in a respectful way.

Instead of....	Say this....
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are wrong. I don't believe you. People that believe that are... If you believe _____, then you are _____. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I've seen some evidence that contradicts that, let me share it with you... Can you show me some research that helped you form that opinion? I'd like to learn more. We may not agree on this issue but that doesn't mean we can't be friends. I respect your right to disagree with me.

Lafayette, Jennifer, and Owen-Hughes, Paul. 16. Factors: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in the Age of Fake News. 2018. 1075. 2018.

BRMS Virtual Book Club: The Hate U Give

Angie Thomas talks to Vermont students about *The Hate U Give*

Books that reflect students' and others' experiences

Media Literacy & Civic Online Reasoning

BRMS Clubs and Activism

Students or groups who have a concern about an issue they care about know they can advocate for change at BRMS. Students advocated in support of the students where a school shooting occurred in 2018 by staging a walkout during the school day. Another group organized a Climate Change

March in 2019. Our school proudly flies the Black Lives Matter flag in front of our school partly because students worked to make that happen. We have a thriving PRIDE club which welcomes all students to participate. Though there is still work to be done, we have three gender-inclusive restrooms available in our school.

Figure 2
BRMS Activism & Clubs

BRMS Activism & Clubs

CLUB PRIDE
Fridays in Mx. Erickson's room (or outside if the weather is good!) 22-45-3125

I'm sleeping Out!
Spectrum Sleep Out

Climate March
THERE IS NO PLANET B

New student-led Community Service Club organized a Community Food Drive

"This week we will begin flying the BLM flag at BRMS. Several students presented a signed petition to have the flag flown on our pole."
~January, 2021

Taking care of those in the community seems to be one of our BRMS values. Our students annually participate in and raise significant funds for the Special Olympics' Penguin Plunge and the Spectrum Sleep Out events. Another group of students started a Community Service Club this year to give back to the community. These students organized a holiday food drive to benefit a local food shelf and are conducting an all school read-a-thon to support displaced children and families in Ukraine. These are all activities and ways in which students can make their voices heard.

Ways BRMS is Doing the Work with Students

Even though our NEST efforts to create a closer and more informed whole school community had been delayed, the BRMS community appears to stand up for what they believe and care about. Students see the message that "all are welcome here" and that we work to be open and encouraging to our students. These observations are encouraging but I was still interested in capturing the views and voices of students who were not speaking up.

Figure 3

Ways BRMS is "Doing the Work"



Action Research and Notable Findings

I continued to work independently on my Action Research project in preparation for the Middle Grades Conference that would take place in January, 2022. I decided to conduct a student survey of seventh and eighth graders in December, 2021 about our BRMS school climate. The goal of this survey was to learn how students feel about their experiences at BRMS and how they want to take part in the ABAR work being done. The data collection method

consisted of a voluntary and anonymous survey because most students would be more comfortable sharing their opinions and feelings that way. Seventh and eighth grade students were given the option to fill out a survey during their library time. I decided not to survey fifth and sixth graders because these students had yet to experience a normal year at our school and I was not sure I would be able to gather dependable data. Though not all students opted to participate, well over half of seventh graders and half of eighth graders responded.

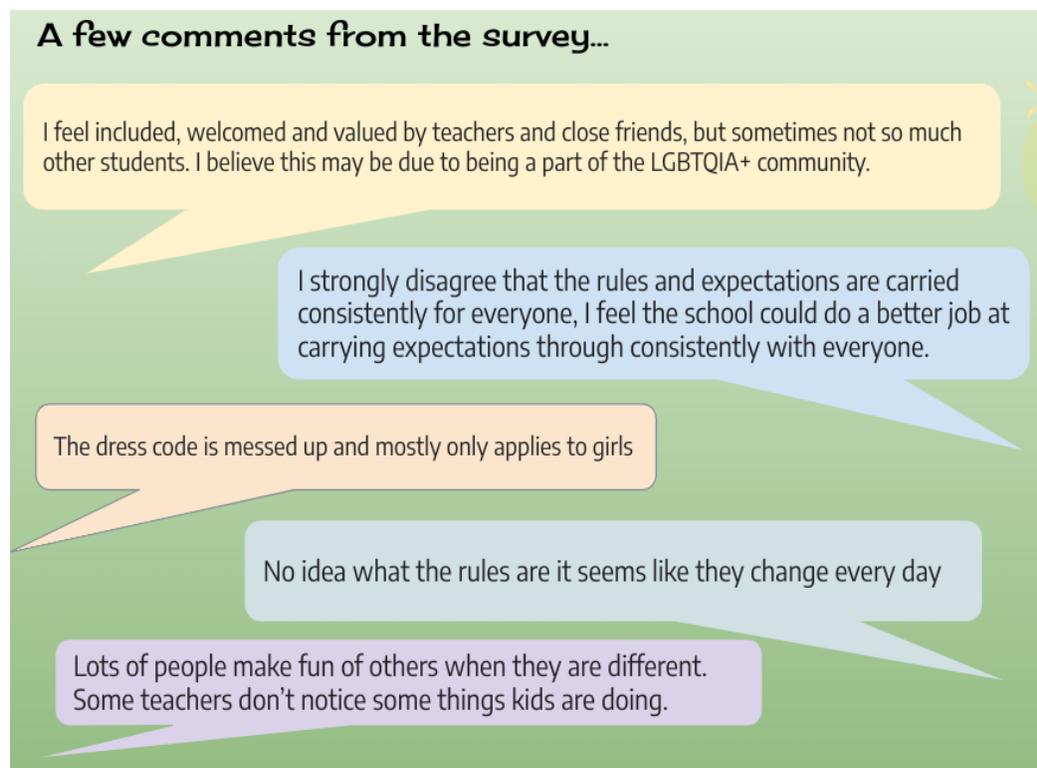
Table 2
Summary of Survey Results

7th grade	8th grade
52 respondents (out of 75)	48 responses (out of 92)
69% of seventh graders participated	52% of eighth graders participated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Majority of 7th graders surveyed feel safe, valued, included, and valued at BRMS 46% do not believe all people are included or valued at BRMS 56% did not agree that rules and expectations are carried through consistently for everyone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Majority of 8th graders surveyed feel safe, valued, included, and valued at BRMS 79% do not believe all people are included or valued at BRMS 56% did not agree that rules and expectations are carried through consistently for everyone

Because this study’s goal was gathering information from students about their own experiences, some questions allowed participants to respond to the questions on a personal level and allow them to express

themselves more fully. Most student comments were consistent with the survey results but there were also a few that were concerning/potentially harmful.

Figure 4
Students’ Comments for the Survey



Though it was helpful to get some data, this short survey only helped me get a tiny snapshot

of how a portion of our student population felt about their time at school. I realized that this

small study would need to be expanded if we were to gain a clearer picture.

What's Next...

Though it is clear that some of our students feel they are welcome and accepted at school, we still do not have a accurate picture of how all of our students feel about BRMS and in what ways they want to be involved in anti-bias/anti-racism efforts here. I would like to create another study of our whole school that digs a little deeper into how it is going for our students and welcome them to join us in rebuilding our school community at BRMS. I know I will continue to advocate for opportunities for students to use their voices and become involved. I, along with others, am still a member of the MMUUSD ABAR council and have been tasked with developing a plan for next year. It is my hope that we will rebuild our NEST and try again in 2022.

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