Integrating a Culturally Responsive Framework within the Student Alliance for Flourishing Program to Promote Student Belonging
By Kristine E. Larson

Introduction

Marginalization begins with "othering" individuals and then creating and maintaining dichotomies of power/ privilege to oppress and exclude individuals. Social exclusion is "the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society" (Walker and Walker, 1997, cited in Jensen, 2000, p. 11). Children and adolescents from historically marginalized groups (i.e., LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, disability, etc.) are at high risk for experiencing social exclusion (Chan et al., 2022; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2016), which negatively impacts their sense of belonging (Bottiani et al., 2017). Disparities in sense of belonging during childhood and adolescence can have long-reaching implications on future outcomes related to mental health, social integration, and overall well-being (Briggs & Smith, 2024; Boyd et al., 2024; Grigorian et al., 2024).

Double Check: A Culturally Responsive and Student Engagement Model

Strong predictors of students' sense of belonging include building positive relationships, especially between teachers and students (Allen et al., 2018). Building positive relationships is a major tenet of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). Double Check (Bradshaw et al, 2018) is a culturally-responsive framework that uses a three-tier approach to enhance teachers' use of culturally responsive strategies and to increase student engagement. Within this model, there are five domains: 1) Connection to the Curriculum, 2) Authentic Relationships, 3) Reflective Thinking, 4) Effective Communication, and 5) Sensitivity to Students' Culture. These domains guide educators towards decreasing the overrepresentation of students of color in disciplinary referrals. Below, we argue that the Double Check framework can be integrated within programs like the Student Alliance for Flourishing (Larson et al., 2024a; 2024b) to increase student belonging and flourishing in schools.

## The Student Alliance for Flourishing

The Student Alliance for Flourishing (SAFF; Larson, 2024a; 2024b) is a Tier-2 (small group) intervention within a multi-tiered system to promote and support students' and educators' flourishing in schools (Larson & Chaturvedi, 2021; see Figure 1). Flourishing is the "relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the *contexts* in which that person lives" (VanderWeele et al., 2023; p. 3). Flourishing is comprised of five

domains: 1) Happiness and Life Satisfaction, 2) Close Social Relationships, 3) Meaning and Purpose, 4) Character and Virtue, and 5) Mental and Physical Health (VanderWeele, 2017). Within the multi-tiered system, Tier 1 introduces the concept of flourishing to all students, teachers, and administrators in the school's mission, vision, programs, activities, and curricula. Tier 2 builds on the concepts introduced to the school community (including families) and provides additional flourishing support to small groups of students, teachers, and families. Tier 3 is the most resource-intensive support (i.e., mentorship and coaching), and is provided to students, teachers, and families whose data suggests they may benefit from these services.

Figure 1.
MTSS- Flourishing Framework (Larson & Chaturvedi, 2021)

MTSS-Flourishing Framework
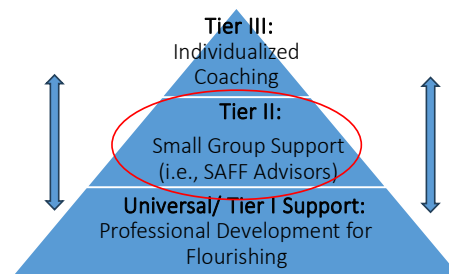
Larson & Chaturvedi, 2021

SAFF is a Tier-II support comprised of university program coordinators, SAFF advisors, and students involved in SAFF activities (see Figure 2). Although there are suggested activities, ultimately, SAFF advisors determine the SAFF group's activities (i.e., check-in, breathing, yoga, meditation, reflections, discussions, community service projects, etc.). SAFF advisors are educators and mental health professionals who volunteer to lead SAFF groups. There are generally two advisors for every SAFF group. SAFF groups range in size from 2 students to 20+ students. University program coordinators are faculty at local universities who provide training throughout the year (in-person and virtual) related to incorporating the flourishing framework and evidence-based activities to support flourishing to SAFF advisors. To support SAFF advisors, university program coordinators offer technical assistance, newsletters, coaching, and other resources and activities as needed (see Larson et al., 2024b for more information).

Figure 2.
SAFF Personnel & Recruitment (Larson et al., 2024b)

SAFF Personnel & Recruitment
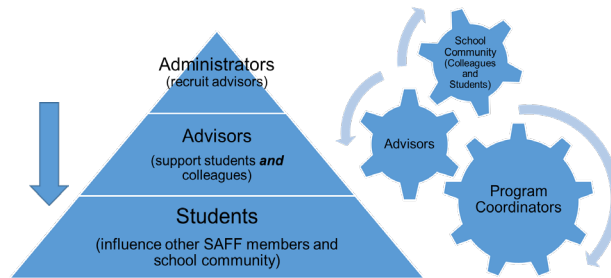
Findings from research on the Student Alliance for Flourishing suggest that students and educators enrolled in this program improve their flourishing and reduce stress while also developing deeper and more meaningful relationships with participating peers. SAFF participants also reported decreased feelings of loneliness. Additionally, student participants reported that their knowledge of flourishing increased, as did their social skills and feelings of worthiness and competence coping with personal challenges. Taken together, integrating the culturally responsive teaching domains within the SAFF program is a promising approach to increasing students' sense of belonging and minimizing marginalization.

CARE2Flourish: An Integrated Approach to Increase Student Belonging

The CARE2Flourish model builds upon the original CARES framework (Bradshaw et al., 2018) and the human flourishing domains (VanderWeele, 2017) to promote student belonging. Advisors *C*onnect students to the curriculum to promote meaning and purpose exploration. During discussions and reflection activities, advisors ask students questions like, "What inspires you?" "What are your interests?" "How can we make this world a better place?" Advisors may engage students in project-based learning (Kokotsaki et al., 2016) that aligns with students' interests to take this exploration even further. Second, advisors create *A*uthentic relationships with and between SAFF students that promote healthy and positive close social relationships. They help students get to know each other through discussions and project collaboration. Third, SAFF advisors help SAFF students *R*eflect on what promotes good character and virtue. Advisors facilitate meditations, journaling, discussions, and applications of these learnings in the real world. They ask questions about students' decisions and choice-making, allowing students to reflect on how these decisions and choices have or will impact them. Fourth, advisors *E*ffectively communicate with students, thereby demonstrating how to create safe and inclusive spaces that enhance happiness and life satisfaction. Advisors may also collect data to understand how they can improve the students' experiences within the SAFF group, school, and larger community. Lastly, SAFF advisors demonstrate sensitivity to students' backgrounds, identities, and

experiences to promote good physical and mental health. They discuss intersectionality, affirm diverse identities, and engage in trauma-informed practices.

Conclusion

The Double Check framework (Bradshaw et al., 2018) and the human flourishing framework (VanderWeele, 2017) can be integrated into the SAFF program to increase students' flourishing and promote their sense of belonging within schools and communities. SAFF advisors use the Double Check CARES framework (CARES) to integrate culturally responsive practices within their SAFF groups' curriculum and practices to create a sense of belonging by promoting students' personal and cultural assets, thereby buffering threats to social exclusion and marginalization. Students' flourishing could benefit from an integrated approach, and this model may be a beginning towards that goal.

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