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ADVISORS HELP YOU GET THERE: PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLANS IN THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Christy Irrgang

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ADVISORS HELP YOU GET THERE:
PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLANS IN THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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To my students ten years ago and my students today. Thank you for letting me into your world. Thank you for letting me help you climb to the summit.

To all my teachers, advisors, and mentors. Thank you for lighting the way.

To my mama, dad, and brother. Thank you for keeping our beautiful greenhouse watered through everything.

To Alex. For never holding me back and always lifting me up the mountain.
“However important they are, good intentions and awareness are not enough to bring about the changes needed in educational programs and procedures to prevent academic inequities among diverse students.”
- Geneva Gay
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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

This project grows out of a compelling desire to identify a quality approach to an important question about personalized learning and building strong relationships between teachers and students. In this paper, I seek to answer the following question: How does an urban Indigenous alternative school create a system in which personalized learning plans and advisor relationships improve student outcomes?

This project identifies one model of addressing crucial questions of personalization and disenfranchisement. The school at the basis of this paper is a unique one. The students are primarily Indigenous, and the school operates as a one-room schoolhouse alternative model with a highly individualized and Indigenous-centered curriculum. In this urban Indigenous alternative school, the first and most important task with students is to get to know them and build a relationship founded on trust and commitment. Students must trust that the teacher has the interests and needs of the students at the forefront of their practice and the teacher will do what it takes to support them. Students must also be committed to working toward their short- and long-term goals, asking for support along the way. Teachers and staff must begin by helping students identify their personal and educational goals and then navigate the necessary resources and planning steps for them to achieve those goals. Teachers and staff must also address student needs, both basic and complex. The personalized learning plan serves to provide teachers and students with a platform to formalize this process by coordinating and tracking the conversations, reflections, and activities.
In this chapter I will discuss the background of why this topic arose for me as a researcher and educator and provide a rationale for this project’s value within the urban Indigenous alternative classroom and beyond.

**Personal Background**

The inspiration for this project is a result of the relationships I have formed and the cultural knowledge I have gained over several years at the alternative program at the basis of this paper. The program is a high school with most students entering the school at ages 16-19 in 11th to 12th grade. Nearly all the students identify as Indigenous, Native American, Native, American Indian, or Indian. (The terms Indigenous, Native American, Native, American Indian, and Indian all refer to the same population. For the sake of clarity, I will use the term Indigenous in this paper.) There are also several fifth- or sixth-year seniors. Many of the students have already encountered many years of schooling without a great deal of success. The faculty and staff spend an immense amount of time helping students learn (sometimes for the very first time) the fact that they can succeed if provided with an environment in which they will thrive. It can take anywhere from one month to several years to help them through the process of understanding that they are valued, valuable, intelligent, and able to be successful. During this time, we invest in them as individuals by getting to know them, seeking to understand them as a whole person, connecting with their families, and holding them accountable for their goals and actions. The school also operates from an Indigenous model whenever possible. This includes specialized curriculum, intentional classroom set up, targeted field trips, talking circles, and more.

In my time working within the Indigenous community, I have learned a tremendous amount about the historical trauma they have faced as a people. I will discuss more about this historical trauma in the next subsection. It is important to note that my understanding of this
trauma and my desire to provide trauma-informed education for these students are the driving forces of my passion as an educator and decision to create this project. I believe that the students I work with deserve high quality education, rigorous standards and coursework, and compassionate classrooms and school systems.

**Rationale**

The question I aim to answer in this paper is: How does an urban Indigenous alternative school create a system in which personalized learning plans and advisor relationships improve student outcomes?

This is highly relevant to my current position as an educator but also to the current world of education. One reason it is relevant is that there is growing concern related to the achievement gap and drop-out rates of Indigenous students as well as other underserved youth. This concern affects not only Indigenous learners, but all youth and adults in the United States. The achievement gap is a reference to the assessment data which shows that low-income students and students of color have lower rates of achievement and opportunity than their white, more affluent peers (“The Education Trust,” 2013). While other minority groups have bettered in terms of achievement and opportunity since 2000, achievement results for Indigenous students have remained mostly the same. The prevalence and intensity of the achievement gap is not a mere “smear” on the educational system; it impacts the workforce and economy, the growing prison population, the entire education system from early childhood to adult learners, and many more aspects of society and the world (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Policymakers, school districts, administrators, and teachers have attempted countless times to address the achievement gap. As of 2013, only 69% of Indigenous students graduated in four years (“The Education Trust,” 2013). The social impacts of dropping out of school are vast (Orfield, 2004). High school
dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, in prison, unmarried or divorced, and living in poverty. Ultimately, because of these facts, students and families continue to feel disenfranchised by the system.

**Why Alternative?**

Students who attend large, comprehensive high schools find themselves in populous classrooms, bustling halls, and packed lunchrooms. These high schools often house 2,000 students across grade levels with classrooms as large as 40 students. Teachers are required to teach six or seven sections of courses per day, which often results in the depersonalization of coursework and instruction. Within large schools, some students do find their niche via sports, clubs, and social groups, but other students are continuously marginalized. No matter the school size, the school culture affects disadvantaged students to a greater degree (Watson, 2011).

Watson also wrote that in a school that standardizes the learning experience and treats each student the same as the next (or discriminates against certain students based on their culture or interests), many students will fail. This results in some students leaving without an alternate, robust, and equally successful pathway as earning a high school diploma at a traditional public high school. Furthermore, in a large school, it is more difficult for students to feel as though their voices are being heard and their needs are being met, for the staff and faculty are not able to get to know a student on a deeper level (Rumberger, 2004a). Only small parts of students’ lives are tended to in large schools, and these small parts are still oftentimes not tended to well. The impersonal nature of a standardized school system creates an environment in which a large portion of young people in this country cannot succeed, resulting in a general feeling of disconnectedness and alienation for many students; oftentimes the most marginalized students
are people of color and Indigenous people (Mcnulty & Roseboro, 2009; Paludan, 2006; Tyner-Mullings, 2015).

The United States cannot afford to continue to maintain school systems that do not attend to the whole person needs and interests of students. One solution to the issue of standardized school systems is alternative schools. These small-scale versions of educational reform are highly desirable to school leaders, policymakers, and families, as they can provide learner-centered opportunities to some of the most marginalized and struggling youth without large-scale reform.

Alternative schools are typically smaller than their standardized counterparts. Copland and Boatright (2004) argue that small schools are shown to have positive effects on students’ experiences because students can better connect with their peers and their teachers. The researchers also found that students in small schools had higher grade point averages and higher attendance rates than peers in larger schools. Tyner-Mullings (2015) describes one highly successful alternative school with small classes in which teachers are able to devote more attention to each student’s work and meet in faculty teams to ensure there is high levels of communication about the functioning of the school. Alternative schools foster a community that is much stronger and more supportive than a larger school.

Alternative schools also implement progressive approaches to learning and educational spaces. Typically, the classroom spaces are altered from the traditional lecture format so that learning is achieved in a variety of ways, e.g., communal, individual, or collective. The physical school space may also be a departure from a larger, traditional high school. For example, classrooms may be smaller and there may be more of an emphasis on shared work or social spaces. Another technique utilized by alternative schools is the fostering of a connection to
community (Hobot, 2017). Oftentimes, alternative schools value students' commitment to their families and community, social justice activities, service-learning opportunities, or employment/internship opportunities. By connecting students to the world beyond the classroom, they find relevance to their lives and meaning in their actions (Tyner-Mullings, 2015).

Raywid (1999) determined that alternative schools have existed since the 1960s, in many different forms and for many different purposes. There have been fewer studies on these schools than traditional ones. This paper aims to add to the discourse of what works in an alternative school with the hopes that it may help traditional schools and classrooms address the achievement gap and drop-out rates, which remain serious problems in education and society. Studying alternative schools provides insight into how to help diverse populations of students in a more successful way than traditional school systems.

Students who enroll in alternative schools do so for a wide variety of reasons. The types of students who enroll in alternative school include but is not limited to: students who face historical, familial, or personal trauma; students who are involved in the justice system; students who must work to support their families; students who are pregnant or parenting; and students whose cultures are not represented in the traditional classroom (Hobot, 2017; Raywid, 1999; Rumberger, 2004a; Rumberger 2004b; Tyner-Mullings, 2015). These students subsequently struggle with attendance (and, more seriously, truancy), credit deficiency, and behavioral issues that may result in suspension (and, more seriously, expulsion or administrative transfer). However, many other students face issues related to mental health, physical health, substance abuse, bullying, and/or childhood trauma relating to adverse childhood experiences. Another common result of these students’ experiences is the need for a learning environment with more flexibility because of personal or familial demands. Students may prefer alternative spaces for
several reasons, but, ultimately, schools that provide personalized attention are able to meet students’ needs in ways the larger, comprehensive high schools are not able to.

Finally, another reason they may enroll in a small alternative school is because they simply prefer an environment that is quieter, less sensorially stimulating, and all around more comfortable. Furthermore, such students benefit greatly from a strongly formed relationship with their teachers (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Gay, 2000; Hollie, 2017; Tyner-Mullings, 2015). Smaller schools and stronger teacher-student relationships are primed for more personalized instruction and classrooms.

**Why Personalization?**

There are many teachers in the education workforce that are set in their ways of instruction and classroom culture. This creates spaces within classrooms that are not always meeting the needs of each learner. On the other hand, some teachers and schools try to find the best ways to support their students using the resources they have. Schools vary in resources (books, technology, facilities, etc.), but the most quality resources are often the teachers themselves. One way that teachers find success in providing their students with the support they need is by personalizing the learning in the classroom. Personalization is a compelling way to meet the needs and interests of a diverse group of students.

How does a teacher personalize learning? First, a teacher must get to know their students. A teacher needs to learn not just their names, but their heritage, the neighborhood they live in, what is going on in their family, and what their personal interests and desires are. Teachers dedicated to personalization strive to find out more about student personalities, families, and preferences. This information is used to develop curriculum and uncover academic deficiencies that they can address. This information can also be used to understand what needs are not being
met in the students’ lives including personally, academically, and societally, and how they may further support them. Teachers have the unique opportunity to get to know students daily and are exposed to their academic work as well as their participation in class. This opportunity allows them to personalize their learning and assist them in their goals throughout the year. Though this likely not happening in every classroom, as the research shows that the achievement gap and standardization continue to show deficits for many students (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Hobot, 2017; “The Education Trust,” 2013).

There are many different theories in terms of how to personalize learning. What works for some students and classrooms may not work for others. This project provides a method that formalizes and operationalizes a relationship between student and advisor and the creation of a personalized learning plan. A personalized learning plan is a system for a student to determine their goals, skills, interests, strategies, deficiencies, and supports. With the help of an advisor, this plan informs their educational experiences and assists them in tracking their progress toward their goals.

Alternative programs in the state of Minnesota are required to maintain a “continual learning plan” for each of their students. The intention of this document is to outline the necessary steps to graduation. Each alternative program can decide how to specifically design their continual learning plans. Using this required framework, the project described in this paper outlines a more comprehensive system used in concert with structured advisories to give students the opportunity to determine their learning pathway. This system, referred to herein as a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP), identifies and plans for a student’s individual needs around educational objectives, goals, and supports. This plan could also be successful in other alternative programs beyond the school at the basis of this study, as well as traditional programs.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must consider factors of the achievement gap. Data shows that students of color and other marginalized populations do not make the academic gains as their white peers (Gay, 2000). This is not for lack of motivation or desire to learn and achieve. One reason non-white and marginalized students do not achieve as highly as their peers is a lack of culturally relevant schooling. Teachers bring their cultural background and knowledge into the classroom, and because they are in control of the narrative and the space, they often only teach from what they know. Inevitably this results in a classroom driven by a singular culture or narrative. This is further perpetuated by the fact that, in Minnesota for the 2017-18 school year, 95% of the teachers in K-12 schools were white (Mahamud & Webster, n.d.). Though increasing the number of teachers of color across the nation is of utmost importance, the issue of culturally relevant schools can be addressed through shifts in pedagogy. The PLP, with infusions of culturally relevant pedagogy, can be a way to systematically address the needs of underserved students and identify ways to better personalize learning pathways.

**Indigenous Students Deserve It**

Indigenous students are impacted by the historical trauma they have faced culturally as a people (Hobot, 2017). Indigenous populations in the United States continue to and will always face the effects of colonialism. Individuals must walk in the society that for generations was designed to, at worst, destroy them, and, at best, assimilate them; they must also walk in their own familial, community, and/or tribal culture that provides them with the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual pathway to success. Indigenous students must be able to transition each day from home culture to school culture and will eventually need to transition to college or work culture (Ness & Olson, 2011). The many roads and cultures in which Indigenous students must walk are copious and require distinct knowledge sets. To help them build those knowledge sets,
and build bridges between those roads, Indigenous students need to be supported culturally and academically. In alternative schools, higher rates of Indigenous students earn their high school diplomas, enter the workforce, and pursue post-secondary endeavors than Indigenous students in traditional, comprehensive high schools (Hobot, 2017). This suggests that there are successful practices for Indigenous students that are used in urban alternative schools.

It is important to note that Indigenous people are not a homogenous group whose needs can be addressed in simple, straightforward ways. At present, there are over five different tribal cultures present in the school being discussed in this paper, with individuals from many more bands from within those tribes. There are also students whose families identify with multiple tribal groups as well as other ethnic groups. Finally, there are groups who have lived in a variety of environments such as only having lived off reservation in an urban setting, having lived only on reservation and recently moved to the urban setting, and those with a mix of both experiences. Much of these experiences were dictated by the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, which formally lasted until 1972 (Hobot, 2017). However, Indigenous students also have higher rates of changing schools within the school year, which is a result of poverty and housing instability (Zehr, 2007). Though there is great diversity within the identity label “Indigenous,” there can be great benefits to all by using culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching that validates the culture and knowledge from which a student comes. This could include acknowledging heritages, building connections between their home life and schooling, using many different instructional strategies, teaching students to appreciate and praise one another for their differences, and incorporating information and texts from many different cultures. This theory is not specific to Indigenous students and can
be successful with students from many different cultures and backgrounds.

**Beyond the Alternative Classroom**

While some teachers have their own method for achieving personalization and centering the student in the teaching and school structure, some teachers are unwilling to adapt their curriculum delivery and methods to meet the needs of their students. This results in the depersonalization of schools and classrooms discussed earlier in this chapter. Some schools do have a developed system for personalization, but some schools have no structure that centers students’ needs and interests. Therefore, the default structure is that of the dominant culture; in the case of schools, that would be a Eurocentric one (given that the number of white teachers in Minnesota schools tops 95% as stated earlier).

This topic is of great interest to many educators and policymakers, as I have discussed disparities and the need for innovative, personalized, and culturally relevant schools with colleagues and leaders in a variety of schools. I hope to share this model with other educators so that they may adapt and use it to fit their needs. By engaging with this system of PLPs and advisory groups, teachers and schools will have a new way of framing the personalization over the course of a school year, centering the student in the decision-making process, and offering best practices for grouping students in structured, yet fluid advisories. It will also be helpful for teachers and administrators to address the needs and interests of their students as well as the necessary systems of support.

We cannot ignore the effects of historical trauma and colonialism (including disease, war, destruction of land and resources, forced relocation, boarding schools, and much more) on Indigenous students and the reclamation that must take place for Indigenous students. Indigenous people are alive and fighting for recognition, reparations, and survival; within that immense
burden, many are thriving, and creating, leading. While many scholars have addressed education of Indigenous students using cultural frameworks, personalization for Indigenous students, specifically in the alternative school setting, has been little discussed. The personalization and culturally relevant pedagogy at the heart of this project is an attempt to address the needs, culture, and value of Indigenous students that have for so long been destroyed and ignored.

**Summary**

This project arises from a desire to answer the following question: How does an urban Indigenous alternative school create a system in which personalized learning plans and advisor relationships improve student outcomes? In this chapter, I have discussed my personal background pertaining to why I became aware of the urgency of this question. I also discussed the urgency and rationale for why this question must be answered in our current educational climate. My work within an urban Indigenous alternative school inspired me to better understand how to serve this population of students. Systems can be designed to guide students to thrive, achieve their goals, walk in many different cultures, and be trained in relevant skills. In Chapter Two, I will detail the literature surrounding the major topics of this research question. I will continue with Chapter Three, in which I describe the project at the heart of this paper. Finally, in Chapter Four, I will reflect upon the process of creating this project and discuss its limitations and possibilities.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

This paper seeks to understand personalized learning and develop a successful framework for advisory relationships and PLPs in an urban Indigenous alternative school. More specifically, the paper addresses the following research question: How does an urban Indigenous alternative school create a system in which personalized learning plans and advisor relationships improve student outcomes? There are several theoretical themes at the heart of this question. The themes include culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher-student relationships, urban alternative schools, Indigenous students, and personalized learning.

I will begin this chapter by discussing theory and research on teacher-student relationships. Teacher-student relationships are highly relevant to consider when working with under-served populations of students (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). The levels of trauma, both personally and educationally, have caused students and their families to lose interest and trust in the education system. Rebuilding that trust through relationships or faculty members of a school can help rectify that trauma. I will continue the literature review with the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Students all over the country come from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds, and the contexts of their lives and experiences must be addressed (Gay, 2000). I will then discuss the literature on alternative schools and their place in society. Though discussed less frequently than traditional schools, alternative schools make up an important piece of the fabric of our education system. Often misunderstood, these schools are not
necessarily for “the bad students,” but simply an alternate space for learning for any who so desire or are referred for enrollment. Indigenous students represent a unique part of the population, so I devote a section of the literature review to discussing research on Indigenous education. Indigenous youth often choose alternative school routes to find success in the school system, and the history of why this is the case is important to understand for this paper. Finally, I will explore the literature on a primary theory of this work, which is personalized learning. As PLPs are the main system we are exploring, I will review the literature on what personalization has meant in education and what it could mean.

**Teacher-Student Relationships**

Humans are relational beings, whether it be in personal activities, day-to-day interactions with strangers, or professional relationships. The foundation of these relationships is based on the various morals or ethics of a community, values that have been lost through industrialization, capitalism, colonization, and social inequities (Verbos & Humphries, 2013). Relational values mean “a way of being, knowing, understanding, feeling, and acting in relationship to other humans, plants, animals, and the natural world, as interrelated and spirit-filled,” (p. 2). Though this is a viewpoint and understanding rooted in Indigenous wisdom, Verbos & Humphries argue that this wisdom is what the current world needs to coexist with one another, peacefully and with honor to the Earth.

Teacher-student relationships are a foundational aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy as well as positive classroom culture. Because of the high level of importance of teacher-student relationships within this research paper, I will discuss the literature regarding teacher-student relationships. I will also discuss the context of relationships within advisory groups, as advisory groups are an integral aspect of this project.
Foundations of Teacher-Student Relationships

I will focus my literature review specifically on teacher-student relationships in the high school setting. The importance of teacher-student relationships in this setting is clear: one reason students are more likely to feel alienated, experience failure, and, ultimately, face dropping out is that they struggle to connect with adults who care for them in the school setting (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Rumberger, 2004a; Wehlage, et al., 1989). The emphasis is on a caring adult. Research shows that teachers and students are often disconnected from one another because of the model of the traditional comprehensive high school (Wehlage, et al., 1989). Some research shows that positive teacher-student interactions lead to higher academic engagement and thus higher academic performance (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). One factor that Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam identified in their review of literature is that smaller schools produce stronger bonds and connections between students and adults, though that is not a sole factor of success for strong relationships.

One theory in particular lays out a framework for studying teacher-student interactions, and that is the teaching through interactions framework (Hamre et al., 2013). Within this framework, there are three domains that are present in teacher-student classroom interactions: emotional, organizational, and instructional. This research is a proposed method of measuring teacher performance within the described dimensions of each of these domains (Hafen et al., 2015). The dimensions measured in this framework include the following factors: positive/negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student perspectives, over-control, behavior management, instructional learning environments, productivity, chaos, concept development, quality of feedback, language modeling, and richness of instructional methods (Hamre et al., 2013). The researchers found that this framework was moderately successful in
measuring teacher-student interactions. Because of the thoroughness of each of the domains, other researchers could use this framework to isolate various factors of teacher-student interactions such as achievement, higher-order thinking, or classroom climate.

Cornelius-White (2007) explored teacher-student relationships by analyzing classrooms that were considered person-centered. A meta-analysis of over 1000 articles showed that a major contributing factor to positive outcomes in terms of teacher-student relationships is if the classroom or school is person-centered. The researchers determined that the reason positive outcomes have been documented between teacher-student relationships and person-centered education has to do with the following common variables: increased participation, satisfaction, motivation to learn, effects on self-esteem, and social connections and skills.

**Communication in teacher-student relationships.** Effective learning relationships must include the impression of community, a symbiotic climate within the classroom, reciprocated relationships, and student voice (White, 2016). Communication may be somewhat straightforward when all parties are from the same cultural background, but this is typically not the case in today’s classrooms. Again, in Minnesota, 95% of teachers were white in the school year 2017-2018 whereas students of color made up 34% of the school population (Mahamud & Webster, n.d.). Beyond the visual differences of ethnicities or age, there are a multitude of cultural rings that are not so explicitly visible, such as gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and socioeconomic status (Hollie, 2017). I would also include physical and emotional health into the cultural rings. A teacher must be keen in understanding these different aspects of students’ cultures and must communicate effectively despite coming from a different culture. Hollie also described that effective teachers do not simply acknowledge a student’s culture and language but
use it to build rapport by validating and affirming that culture and language. Teachers can use that knowledge and rapport to incorporate students’ language and culture into the classroom.

**Advisories**

There are ways of formalizing approaches to teacher-student relationships. One way of formalizing the teacher-student relationships is by forming advisory groups. Jenkins (1992) wrote that in most larger schools, counselors serve as the advisors of students; however, they advise hundreds of students. In any school, large or small, a system for teachers to be able to connect one on one with a specific group of students can be successful in forming deeper relationships (Goldberg, 1998). This kind of system can provide each student with the following benefits: the student is known well by one staff member, the staff member has the necessary and thorough information about the student, the staff member knows the parent or guardian of the student, and the student has at least one advocate in the school.

When a teacher becomes an advisor, they typically will have a much smaller group of students to advise than a traditional school counselor (Jenkins, 1992). The teacher should have one-on-one meetings with their advisees, so a group of 15-25 is most manageable. A teacher advisor should do the following:

- Monitor academic progress
- Advocate for the student
- Assist the student in planning programs of study
- Develop a system of in-school communication so that all faculty and staff can be on the same page about the student
- Assist the student in developing study techniques
- Develop a career plan with the student
● Contact parents on a regular basis
● Continually evaluate the success of the student (p. 4)

Advisory groups can also meet on a regular basis (daily, weekly, monthly) for short periods of time, and the advisor can go over any issues that students are having and provide assistance, advice, or connect them to the most applicable resource.

Not only does the advisor understand the learner in the context of the classroom and school, they also understand the learner as a human with needs that must be met. The advisor can approach this as a whole person model and utilize their position as a leader to disseminate important information about a student and identify resources that can be helpful. While this model is beneficial in all classrooms, research has focused primarily on larger schools as opposed to small alternative programs as a whole-person model for building rapport, relationships, and tending to students’ preferences and needs.

Teachers already forge bonds with their students by being the leader of their classrooms, though not always to the extent necessary to bridge gaps in achievement. Teacher-student relationships are an important factor in student success. The relationships between teachers and students can be formalized and operationalized as an advisory relationship to further meet the needs of learners. More research must be done on advisory relationships and how they can be beneficial to student success. In this paper, I seek to present an option for schools to create advisor relationships that help forge bonds with students, develop student-centered pathways for success, and create spaces that allow for consistent communication and follow-up.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is rooted in the larger theory that is multicultural education. Multicultural education is built upon the idea that equality does not always mean
equity (“Multicultural Education,” 1997). Ultimately, multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy grew out of the fact that students not a part of the mainstream culture (i.e. non-white students, students of a lower socioeconomic status, disabled students, students whose first language is not English, etc.) were not succeeding and achieving as best they could (Grant & Sleeter, 2010). Gay (2000) argued that culturally relevant pedagogy is crucial for the success of marginalized students. It is an educational strategy that aims to infuse the history, culture, contributions, language, and approaches of all groups of people into the curriculum, as opposed to a singular, Eurocentric narrative. Proponents of this educational strategy argue that this strategy empowers all students, even those who have not traditionally found success in the classroom, to be critical thinkers, social activists, and democratic decision makers, and high academic achievers.

Ladson-Billings (1995b) documented the fact that, oftentimes, success for marginalized, under-served students meant suppressing their cultural identities and norms to assimilate to dominant white culture. This is also true for Indigenous students in their first experiences of formalized education at boarding schools (Hobot, 2017). One key aspect of CRP requires that educators not only recognize the cultural background and cultural variations among the students in their classroom but provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity (Gay, 2000; Hollie, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). These cultural signifiers could include not only race, but age, sexual orientation, gender, nationality, socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnicity (Hollie, 2017). Some tribal cultures and Indigenous scholars would add mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects to the understanding of a person’s self or culture, as seen in the Medicine Wheel (Barraza, Bartgis, & Fresno Native Youth Council, 2016). Gay (2000) determined the cultural variables to be the following: affiliation (ethnic or cultural), gender, age, social class, education,
individuality, residence, and immigration. By honoring these cultural identifiers and incorporating them into the curriculum and culture of the school, all students can find their own place, voice, and empowerment within the walls of the classroom.

CRP is a response to the lower rates of achievement for marginalized students. One flaw in understanding achievement is the way in which we define achievement as a society; students are expected to fit into the same set of normative skills and accomplishments as one another (Gay, 2000). Though policymakers, administrators, educators, families, and students know that the achievement gap exists and see its effects on interpersonal, intrapersonal, microcosmic, and macrocosmic levels, overstating its problematic nature is not going to solve the problems. CRP puts theory into practice with ways in which educators can respond to the needs of students of color and Indigenous students. While systemic changes will need to occur for timely change, there are pedagogical practices that classroom educators can utilize to propel the ideologies of CRP.

Ladson-Billings (1995a) defined three important factors necessary in culturally relevant pedagogy: students must encounter and maintain academic success, students must cultivate and/or maintain cultural competence, and students must learn to challenge the status quos of society with a critical consciousness. These factors must also be rooted in the empowerment of the collective, not just the individual. Academic success means that teachers must demand excellence from students, not merely accept low standards. Students must feel as though their intelligence is highly valued. To do that, teachers can value the personal skills and abilities of all students and help them to channel that in an academic way. In terms of cultural competence, students’ cultures must be used as a bridge for learning. Not only should culture be infused and harnessed in the classroom, but students must feel empowered to utilize their culture to learn in
an academic and social way. Finally, challenging the status quo of society means developing a critical consciousness. This consciousness enables students to understand the systems and norms in place that maintain social inequities. By engaging in this higher level of thinking about society, students will feel responsible and able to do something about it.

Sekayi (2009) also reinforced the importance of teaching students to develop a critical consciousness. Achievement cannot mean lowering the standards so students who have previously struggled now find a false sense of success. Teachers should entrust students to take ownership of their education. Ultimately, students should be taught democratic empowerment; this means that they publicly participate in their rights and responsibilities, they have a belief that participation is important and makes a difference, they know that equality, community, and liberty is valued, and they know that the status quo can be challenged in a viable way. The nature of this democratic empowerment model lends itself to a culturally relevant environment, which leads to success academically and socially, in secondary school and beyond.

Furthermore, teachers who practice CRP must shift their opinions of the abilities and expectations of the students in their classrooms (Gay, 2000). There may be great variation in the types of behavioral norms and communication in the classroom, and one type should not be held in higher esteem than another. Oftentimes these diverse sets of experiences, skills, and achievements are considered “non-academic.” However, if not included in the traditional forms of measuring achievement, students and their successes will be overlooked and underappreciated on larger scales, which result in a one-dimensional view of what students know and can do.

This is also directly related to the level of expectations teachers have for marginalized, under-served students. Teachers, whether they are cognitively aware of it or not, have expectations that white students and those of a higher socioeconomic status are high achievers
and non-white students and those of a lower socioeconomic status are low achievers (Gay, 2000). Teachers will act on those expectations through lesson delivery or grading practices, which subsequently positively or negatively affects student achievement. Teachers practicing CRP are committed to and believe in their students (Lipman, 1995). This belief includes actions such as collaborating with families, advocating for students who they believe had been unfairly labeled or disciplined, and recognizing students’ strengths. There is a great deal of self-reflection and guidance required for teachers to make this cognitive shift as well as willingness for them to be open to completely changing their practices and interactions with students.

Furthermore, Gay (2000) describes the concept of culturally responsive caring. Though caring is often thought to be compassion and gentility, the kind of caring CRP scholars discuss is more closely linked to high expectations and commitment to conscientiousness of helping students achieve. These theories surrounding how teachers approach student expectations and achievement is directly related to the development of teacher-student relationships, which will be discussed later in Chapter Two.

**Pedagogical Elements of CRP**

Gay (2000) described culturally responsive teaching as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. Culturally responsive teaching, while a slightly different name than CRP, is based on the same foundations. Gay’s determinations of what each aspect of culturally responsive teaching means follows:

1. Validating means to acknowledge students’ backgrounds and cultures; teachers must also make students feel as if their backgrounds and cultures matter and are relevant to school and the wider world.
(2) Comprehensive culturally responsive teaching means teachers focus on crafting culturally inclusive curriculum but also on helping students maintain their identities, develop a sense of community, and develop principles of success.

(3) Culturally responsive teaching that is multidimensional includes teachers and students crossing disciplines within their activities, projects, and curricula; through these efforts they bring to light many different cultures and perspectives, expand the classroom climate, reinforce teacher-student relationships, and consider and implement various assessments and instructional strategies.

(4) Culturally responsive teaching that is empowering shows students that they can succeed, and they should pursue that success without limit.

(5) Culturally responsive teaching that is transformative means that, by defying traditional methods of pedagogy, students are honored, respected, and made into agents of change within their communities.

(6) Culturally responsive teaching that is emancipatory liberates students from the single narrative that has traditionally dominated the classroom and shows that there is not one single authority with answers and truth. (pp. 29-36)

Gay’s examples of each of these pedagogical elements provide a better understanding for what culturally relevant teaching means in practice.

Hollie (2017) discussed culturally relevant teaching and learning within the framework of classroom management, language, literacy, and learning environments. The goal of effective classroom management is to increase student engagement and decrease management issues. Hollie believed this to be crucial because there is a disproportionate number of students of color given referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. To ensure effective and culturally relevant
classroom management, teachers must build rapport, relationships, and respect with their students. They also must be proactive about problems, be positive with their reactions, and be preventative with the language they use with students. Hollie went on to explain that language and literacy are also integral aspects of culturally relevant teaching and learning. Teachers must ensure that their vocabulary instruction, academic literacy instruction, and academic language instruction are all culturally responsive. This is done through various instructional strategies that include validating nonstandard languages in instruction, using texts from many cultures and perspectives, utilizing many different types of activities, infusing restorative practices in instruction, and teaching code switching. Finally, Hollie explained that the physical learning environment must be culturally responsive. The space must be organized to include the following elements: a print-rich environment, maintain several various learning centers, be culturally colorful, be arranged optimally, include multiple libraries, incorporate the use of technology, maintain relevant bulletin boards, and display student work and images of students.

Jaime and Rush (2012) argued that an essential aspect to culture-based education specifically for Indigenous students means that curriculum must include experience, language, and culture. For this to take place, larger scale reform must occur through educating key policymakers and decision makers about why culture-based practices are effective with Indigenous students. First, child-centered, culturally responsive curriculum and teaching must be developed, implemented, and evaluated by tribes and their school districts. Furthermore, the researchers argue that pressures to raise scores on standardized tests must be relaxed. They also argue that teacher prep programs must be specialized for the teaching of Indigenous children, including the need for place-based education within these preparation programs.
There are many scholars of CRP. These scholars show a sampling of some specific pedagogical strategies and larger reform requirements needed for the implementation of CRP for all marginalized students as well as specifically for Indigenous students.

CRP is a widely researched pedagogical topic, though it has not gained as much attention on a policy level within the United States. Many teachers accomplish these practices on their own via the teacher training they have received, what they know to be best practices, or what they have studied on their own from these acclaimed scholars. Unfortunately, many teachers do not infuse any elements of culturally relevant pedagogy within their classrooms and continue to operate from a singular narrative. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on CRP within the alternative school setting. It is imperative that researchers continue to study CRP in various contexts and with a variety of populations to determine best practices. In my project, I will explore one possible option for creating a personalized version of CRP within a structured advisory relationship and personalized learning plans.

**Urban Alternative Schools**

Urban alternative schools are popular options for students who do not fit well into large, comprehensive high schools. Some urban areas have a great number of alternative options, including charter, magnet, online, etc. This literature review focuses on state approved alternative programs, which, in the state of Minnesota, include alternative area learning programs, contracted alternatives, and targeted services. These programs are governed by Minnesota Statute § 124E (2019). This includes all state alternative programs, but this project focuses specifically on urban contracted alternative programs. Contracted alternative programs are programs that are run by independent non-profit agencies in contract with the school district to provide educational services. The students remain members of the school district, though they
attend school at the non-profit agency. The school is provided with certain (but not comprehensive) resources.

In the state of Minnesota, 162,000 students attend alternative programs in high school (Alternative Learning, n.d.). That accounts for 17% of the entire population of Minnesota public school students. These programs, as defined by the state of Minnesota, are specifically designed for students who are at-risk for failure or dropping out of high school. Alternative programs can also include magnet schools with a thematic program approach such as arts, engineering, or technology (public institutions governed by either a school district or state), schools for disruptive students or high special education designations, and schools with a rehabilitation emphasis (the goal being for students to return to the traditional setting) (Foley & Pang, 2006). Oftentimes alternative programs are smaller settings, with individualized instruction that focuses on each student’s academic and social-emotional needs. Research has shown that students who attend smaller schools (whether deemed “alternative” or not) are more successful than students who attend larger schools regarding attendance and grade-point average (Copland & Boatright, 2004). In these smaller environments, teachers and staff can provide students with a nurturing environment and a strong support system (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013).

Foley & Pang (2006) determined that students who attend alternative programs may be referred to such programs for many different reasons including behavioral, academic or attendance issues, being pregnant or parenting, having a disability, or being a part of a minority group. Much of the literature surrounding alternative schools and why students attend them cites that students are disadvantaged, marginalized, or have behavior or attendance problems, and the literature discusses these students in the context of being at-risk of failure or dropping-out (Foley & Pang, 2006; Rayle, 1998; Watson, 2011). However, because of this narrative, there exists a
stigma around these institutions (Newton, Thompson, Oh, & Ferulla, 2017). This stigma negatively impacts the students who attend alternative schools as well as the staff who work there. McNulty & Roseboro (2009) wrote that this stigma is perpetuated by education and society having a reactive approach to helping students, as opposed to a proactive approach. In their research, they have found that students are mandated to attend alternative schools to remove them from the mainstream system. Oftentimes these schools are specifically designed without a way to remediate the behavior of the student and the schools’ climates thus reinforce the negative behavior that resulted in their enrollment at an alternative program in the first place. The researchers posit that alternative schools are an unjust and anti-democratic space because of the poor curriculum and lack of positive structures, and the schools reinforce the stigmatized identities that these students have.

However, alternative schools can be a proactive approach to education, as opposed to a reactive approach. Alternative schools can include full-service community schools that are designed to provide students with a space where their intellectual and social needs can be met (Newton et al., 2017). Some families may elect to send their child to such a school (whether they are at-risk or not) simply because they appreciate the model of such an institution. Some families fight for such schools to come into existence, as they see a desperate need for an alternative pathway for their children (Hobot, 2017). One example is the urban Indigenous alternative school studied in this paper, which was designed specifically with a cultural model. Hobot discussed the Indigenous communities in several cities who desired schools that specifically addressed the needs of the urban Indigenous populations they serve. Hobot specifically clarified that:

these communities acted by creating seven alternative programming and
alternative sites that were purposefully anchored within the values of their
community and in the belief that the people could no longer afford to remain idle.
In nearly all instances, these models were established as a means of addressing a
perceived need to help their own by their own means. (2017, p. 10)

In such spaces, teachers can get to know their students much more closely and thus address their
needs on a more personal level. Furthermore, the students’ cultures are also heavily inculcated in
the curriculum. As a result, these schools have seen successful data measures in terms of
graduation rate, attendance, standardized test scores, and school culture survey scores.

Many scholars, policymakers, and community members think of alternative schools as
spaces for at-risk youth or remediation programs, not prevention programs. However, some
students may make the change to alternative education simply because they would prefer to
attend a school that is smaller or is focused on an aspect of education or culture. More research
must be done on why alternative education can be a good first step for students as opposed to the
last resort. One population who may view alternative education this way is Indigenous people.
Education for Indigenous youth will be explored further in the next section.

**Indigenous Education**

Indigenous people have had a particularly fraught relationship with the public school
system in the United States. The history of colonialism, boarding schools, and forced
assimilation cannot be overlooked when discussing the historical trauma of this relationship.
Though there is not sufficient space to explore these concepts within this paper, there are a
multitude of texts available, written by Indigenous historians, that detail the effects of
colonialism on Indigenous youth. Consequently, the achievement gap for Indigenous youth
remains large (“The Education Trust,” 2013). Though many people assume that Indigenous
youth primarily attend reservation schools or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools, in actuality, only 7% of Indigenous students attend such schools. This means that the majority of Indigenous students are attending mainstream public schools. Furthermore, only 69% of Indigenous students graduate high school in four years, compared to their white peers who graduate in four years at a rate of 83%. This disparity is a great one and must be addressed. However, Indigenous students are routinely left out of the conversation when the achievement gap is discussed.

On a more positive note, there has been a great deal of rejuvenation and reclamation related to the education of Indigenous youth. Several schools have come into existence over the past 30 years that seek to Indigenize education. A key factor to educating Indigenous youth is that students are shown how to be successful in educational systems without compromising their cultural background; this concept deviates greatly from the history of education for Indigenous youth, which was mostly founded on forced assimilation (Franks & Mitchell, 2019). Two early examples of such spaces created specifically for Indigenous youth in the public school system are the American Indian Magnet School in St. Paul, Minnesota (opened in 1991) and the Native American Magnet School in Buffalo, New York (Pewewardy, 1994). The pedagogy used within these schools is a holistic and culturally relevant one; the methods include providing students with the best possible education, helping them preserve their cultural background, preparing them to have important relationships with others, and teaching them how to live productively in society while still maintaining their cultural values and ideologies.

Another way of viewing how to educate Indigenous students in any classroom is through Pewewardy and Hammer’s (2003) framework of culturally responsive teaching. This framework laid out five culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) tenets in relation to Indigenous students: (a)
cultural literacy, (b) self-reflective analysis of one’s attitudes and beliefs, (c) caring, trusting, and inclusive classrooms, (d) respect for diversity, and (e) transformative curriculum to engender meaning. These are research driven practices, but also ones that have emerged from conversations with and decisions made by Indigenous families and educators.

Trimble (2012) argued that one example of CRP in practice for Indigenous students is cooperative learning. Some strategies that exemplify cooperative learning include “individual accountability, group rewards, equal opportunities for success, face-to-face interaction, and interpersonal and small-group skills” (p. 10). Furthermore, Trimble argued that flexible grouping and differentiated instruction are also strategies that can be highly contextualized within CRP. Ultimately, CRP is a pedagogical model that transcends racial lines and arguably is successful with not only underserved students, but all students. As discussed with Hollie’s (2017) rings of culture, ethnicity is only one ring of a person’s culture. There are many other factors and aspects that impact a person’s identity, including gender, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and more. Teachers must address each aspect of students’ culture. Just as Ladson-Billings (1995) commented, CRP truly is a model of “good teaching.”

Beyond these daily practices, scholars also argue that cultural relevance within curriculum, school culture, and daily teacher-student interactions cannot simply be addressed with minor shifts to a teacher or school’s current model (Mogush Mason et al., 2011). Structural changes must be addressed using the knowledge basis that students and their families bring to the table. “Such an approach can transform perceptions of culture from static to dynamic, which makes it easier and more meaningful to incorporate culture as prior knowledge that can inform curriculum and classroom practices” (p. 81). Mogush Mason et al. (2011) outlined the following
principles for the teacher mentorship project that was developed specifically for teachers of Indigenous students:

- Long-term commitments to sustainable professional development
- Discovery-based STEM curriculum rooted in the Indigenous culture
- Multifaceted learning experiences where teachers play the role of students during modeled lessons, play the role of teachers during professional development settings, and play the role of presenters at monthly meetings
- Making connections with families and community members
- Mentoring in multiple settings
- Professional learning communities
- Reflective journaling
- Effective use of technology

This type of structured and highly contextualized teacher preparation project is one example of creating change on a systemic level for pre-service teachers as opposed to one-off professional development workshops.

Hobot (2017) also laid out a framework of principles of practice for the teaching of Indigenous students that were found across multiple Indigenous focused alternative school sites throughout the country. These programs were working in isolation of one another, but the researcher determined that these seven principles were identified as being successful in each site, for various tribal communities and affiliations. The principles are:

- Learning outdoors (on land and water)
- Learning in community
- Learning across generations
● Learning in redefined spaces (non-traditional classroom environments)
● Learning leadership and advocacy
● Learning Indigenous language
● Learning Indigenous cultural practices

This replication of culturally relevant pedagogical practices is yet another research-based model that is specific to Indigenous youth across North America.

Much of the literature around the education of Indigenous youth has been focused on how to reclaim and infuse culture into the classroom. However, if most of the Indigenous youth are attending non-Indigenous focused schools, more research must be done on how to address the needs of these students and families in a mainstream school. Furthermore, being that there is an abundance of diversity within the homogenous label of Indigenous people, more research must also be done on how to personalize education for students with highly individualized experiences, whether that be tribal affiliation, socioeconomic status, urban or rural location, and other factors. Using information gathered in an urban Indigenous alternative school, I propose a system for advisory relationships and culturally relevant pedagogy that makes way for addressing the needs of Indigenous students using a personalized learning plan.

**Personalized Learning**

Teachers working toward personalized learning are addressing a variety of learning styles, skills, interests, needs, and deficiencies present in their classrooms (Waldrip, Jin Yu, & Prain, 2016). Scholars have also posited that personalized learning tackles some of the pressing issues of today’s educational climate surrounding both student motivation and student support. Scholars postulated that when education is personalized, students feel more respected by the institution and therefore are more likely to be motivated to perform (Paludan, 2006).
Additionally, the trend of the labor market is increasingly demanding employees with highly independent skill sets, commitment to the work, and higher levels of responsibility. Each student can be taught a variety of these skills (the ones most applicable and interesting to them and their culture), and this can be done through personalized learning structures.

Some researchers have suggested or endorsed that personalized learning could include learning that promotes cooperation, mentorship, experiential learning, incorporation of learners' experiences (both personally and socially), and one-on-one support (Waldrip, Jin Yu, & Prain, 2016). Other researchers posited that a school or classroom that places an emphasis on personalization in learning focuses not only on tailoring learning to the needs and interests of individual students but puts the onus on the student to dictate what personalization means (Clarke, 2013). This can include preparing students in critical thinking skills, collaboration with both peers and the community, promoting creativity, and teaching and reinforcing responsibilities of the students. Researchers have noted, however, that though there are common themes throughout the theoretical side, schools have a wide variety in the ways in which they operationalize personalized learning (Sebba, Brown, Steward, Galton, & James, 2007). The method of operationalizing personalized learning relies heavily on the context in which the learning takes place.

**Personalized Learning Plan Process**

One specific approach to personalizing learning is the creation of a personalized learning plan (PLP). These can be called by a variety of names, such as a continual learning plan, personalized educational plan, personalized learning plan, individualized learning plan, etc. Solberg, et. al (2018) defined an individualized learning plan (ILP) as the following:

A document/portfolio consisting of an individual’s (a) course taking and
postsecondary plans aligned to career goals; and (b) documentation of the range of college and career readiness skills he/she has developed including out-of-school learning experiences, and as a process, ILPs provide individuals with personalized career development opportunities focused on developing their self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management skills that enables them to become aware of the relevance of academic preparation, work-based and other learning opportunities and the importance of completing a two- or four-year postsecondary credential, program or degree. (pp. 1-2)

The researchers determined that self-exploration, career exploration, career planning and management factors are pivotal for students to become more confident, set better goals, and record better academic outcomes. It is also stressed that these are not just documents, but entire processes that must follow a student throughout their academic careers.

DiMartino & Clarke (2008) provided another perspective when considering PLPs: the plans must be student driven and must be centered around a student’s talents, interests, dreams, goals, and concerns. The plans are also dynamic, as they should be modified by a student after new experiences happen to them. Though learning experiences can take place in many different locations both in and outside of school, it is important for a student to still adhere to the schedules and structures of the schools and fulfill the graduation requirements that are determined by the states and districts in which they live. So, a PLP should help both the student and advisor track those experiences and how they are meaningful to graduation requirements.

Barton, Hodara, & Ostler (2015) found similar outcomes, objectives, and theoretical frameworks. Additionally, they determined that the efforts for implementing this initiative need to have time and space schoolwide. Administrators should provide leadership and professional
development, and time should be built into classes for students to work on their plans. Second, it is helpful for the plan to be accessible online in electronic form. Not only are students able to update the plans frequently, but they can also easily share with peers.

Fox (2014) determined that there are three phrases to the PLP process beginning in grade six and continuing through the post-secondary years. The first phrase is exploration, and that is when the student would complete skill and interest inventories, participate in career exploration, and reflect. The second phase is planning, and this includes customizing a course plan, selecting from a career cluster, and planning out career experiences. The final phase is transitioning, where the student chooses a post-secondary path to take.

While I have discussed research and findings specifically related to PLPs and college and career readiness, that is not always the focus of a certain teacher, advisor, student, school, or family. Some students are more focused on just graduating high school, as this takes all of their efforts. So, PLPs can also be viewed through the lens of intervention and drop-out prevention. Rumberger (2004b) discussed a supplemental and comprehensive program that addressed the needs of students at high risk of dropping out. The three contexts that were considered when addressing the needs of the students in the program were that the individual youth, their school, their family, and their community all needed to be simultaneously considered. The researcher identified six interventions to influence academic achievement:

- Remediation of problem-solving skills
- Personal recognition and bonding activities
- Intensive attendance monitoring
- Frequent teacher feedback to students and families
- Modeling and instruction for parents in how to impact their child’s behavior
• Collaboration with community services to address student and home needs (p. 245)

These interventions focus on improving the educational environment by engaging and attempting to strengthen or restructure the families, schools, and communities. These are more comprehensive initiatives, as opposed to simply providing resources to struggling students.

Another concept that addresses this type of support is “wraparound.” Eber, Sugai, Smith, and Scott (2002) described that wraparound support is a planning process that identifies the strengths of an individual student to decide upon the outcomes, supports, services, and needs of that student. Integral to that planning process is consensus between the student, the family, and professionals. Supports and services for the student and family may include breaks, mentoring, peer support, parent partners, and basic needs assistance. For schools, supports and services could include behavioral assessment, instructional accommodations (including those related to academic, behavioral, and social skills), and teacher consultation. The researchers identify this process as related to prevention planning or linked with the individualized education plan used in special education.

Personalized education is a highly researched topic. Some teachers attempt personalized learning within the scope of their lesson planning and curriculum delivery via differentiation, attending to multiple modes of learning styles, and incorporating student voice and choice. Some schools formalize the process by creating systems that address student needs beyond just the classroom and extend into post-secondary planning. However, less research exists on drop-out prevention and how personalization could help ensure wraparound supports. This project seeks to determine a model that could assist students in identifying both needs and goals as a preventative measure.
Conclusion

In this paper, I seek to explore how PLPs, used in a formal advisory system, can help to provide students with a targeted system of support through culturally relevant approaches.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is an important iteration of multicultural education, which must continue to be explored to provide equity in a multicultural world. Teacher-student relationships are also foundational within equitable practices, as research shows that getting to know students and building rapport is the basis for understanding what their social-emotional and cultural needs are. Urban alternative schools are of value within this research framework, as they are often spaces where teachers and administrators have a great amount of freedom to identify student needs and build programs that suit the population they serve. The Indigenous population within the school system of the United States is also of great value to this discourse, as they are a small but consistently neglected group of students on a policy level. Personalized learning is an integral part of today’s classroom, as students are increasingly in tune with their needs and want to explore them within the classroom.

Each of these major topics has been explored through relevant research, however there are gaps in the literature for how this can be streamlined for students within an urban Indigenous alternative school. Furthermore, much of the research is centered around post-secondary pathways and success, and little is focused on preventing drop-out or reaching underserved students. After reviewing the literature and seeing themes within many different school systems, I believe that my project will have implications for the urban Indigenous alternative school I am exploring, but also other school systems that seek to provide students with multi-faceted support systems. In Chapter Three, I will describe the project I have laid out as a model for culturally relevant personalized learning plans.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Overview

Though much research exists around the various themes I have identified in my literature review, there are gaps in terms of how PLPs can be useful and effective in an urban Indigenous alternative school. The purpose of this project is to find out the most effective, efficient, and successful model for a PLP in an urban Indigenous alternative school. How does an urban Indigenous alternative school create a system in which personalized learning plans and advisor relationships improve student outcomes?

This PLP is informed by theories of assessment, teacher-student relationships, and culturally relevant pedagogy. I investigated what makes a successful PLP and what best promotes teacher-student relationships. Based on the research, I have crafted a PLP system using culturally relevant pedagogy. In this chapter, I will describe the intended audience and context of the project including the implementation, lay out the theoretical framework of the project, detail the final product and its timeline for implementation, discuss how to assess the project for success, and describe the personal experience and background that led me to create it.

Audience and Context

The main individuals at the focus of this project are the students and advisors at an Indigenous alternative program in a major metropolitan area (hereafter referred to as “the school”). The students are 14- to 20-years-old and range in grades nine through twelve. That being said, most of the students enter the school between ages 16-19 in grades 11 and 12. Several
the students are fifth- or sixth- year seniors. The students are a variety of genders, ethnicities or tribal affiliations, and sexual orientations. Most students at this alternative program primarily self-identify as Indigenous or identify as having multiple ethnicities.

The school has existed for 25 years and is a part of a larger non-profit agency whose mission is aimed at ending long-term, generational poverty for Indigenous community members and others through the method of short-term training programs and certificates, adult basic education, and other workforce development programming. The school has a contract with the main school district of the city to provide educational programming for high school aged youth under the parameters set forth by Minnesota Statute § 124E (2019).

The students enroll in the school for a multitude of reasons, and each participant will self-identify the reason they enrolled on their initial survey. A primary reason for enrolling in the program is because nearly all the students feel as though they learn more successfully in a smaller school environment. The school is in fact quite small. A maximum of 40 seats are available at the school, which operates as a one-room schoolhouse. Students sit in groupings of four to six to encourage collaboration and communication and to reinforce the importance of the circle in Indigenous culture.

In Chapter One I described research which posited that Indigenous students have consistently achieve at much lower rates than their white peers and even their peers of color. Furthermore, they are frequently overlooked in terms of theory and pedagogical best practices because they make up a relatively small portion of the population. This project is meant to explore possible solutions to addressing the education of urban Indigenous students and beyond.

Another focus of this project is the role of students’ advisors. There are two full time faculty members and one full time administrator employed at the school. Each faculty member
both teaches courses as well as shares some administrative duties. The faculty members and the administrator (who teaches one course each day) rotate teaching courses throughout the day. During their prep time, they also complete their administrative duties and advisory duties. Additionally, two part time teachers rotate throughout the day. One individual is employed by a local non-profit organization and teaches one section of a college and career readiness course; this teacher’s position is grant funded, and the position has existed at the school since 2014. This teacher also shares her time teaching the same material at another alternative program. The second teacher teaches one section a day of Ojibwe language and culture; this teacher’s position is also grant funded. This position is also in its first year in the program. Each of the teachers provide a mix of direct-instruction, independent work time, and project-based learning in each of their courses.

There are numerous part-time support staff who also rotate in and out of the school each day and week. One individual is employed by the school as an Educational Assistant; this teacher’s position is paid for through Title I funds, and 2019 is the first year the position has existed at the school. This individual works one-on-one with students to support them in their daily classroom activities. Four more individuals are provided by the school district with whom the school is contracted. These individuals include a special education teacher, a licensed school counselor, a work-based learning coordinator, a social worker, and a speech-language pathologist.

Finally, there is one full time staff member employed by a partner non-profit. This individual supports a caseload of students who are county-involved, pregnant or parenting, or homeless/highly mobile. This position is grant funded and has existed at the school since 2015.

Implementation at the Urban Indigenous Alternative School
The advisors who will be guiding the students in the creation and implementation of their PLPs are the three full-time staff members described above. Each advisor will be responsible for one-third of the student population (i.e., approximately 10-15 students each). They will meet formally with each of their students once after quarter one ends, once after quarter two ends, and once after quarter three ends. They will also meet informally in advisory groups to discuss major themes of goals together, update one another on school or life events, or spend time working on their PLPs. These groups meet on a weekly basis and the advisors and advisees will meet one-on-one as needed throughout the year.

This project is meant to provide advisors and their colleagues with a helpful framework for building relationships, assisting students in creating PLPs, and guiding students to set goals that address their needs, interests, and weaknesses. The project is also meant to provide a platform and a space for advisors to share insights with their colleagues about individual students to provide wraparound support. As discussed in Chapter Two, wraparound supports are meant to address the needs and goals of a whole person, not just educational or career related goals. If students have instabilities or deficiencies in their lives, the advisors will become aware and help connect students to resources. For example, students could be struggling with housing instability, food security, need for employment, mental health concerns, substance abuse issues, pregnancy, access to healthcare, and much more. The advisor can also work closely with the family to ensure there is consensus around how a student should be assisted.

This project is tailored toward the population at the urban Indigenous alternative school, but it could also be relevant to other alternative schools or possibly even some traditional school spaces. Next, I will describe the theoretical framework at the foundation of this project.
Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical framework that was used in forming this project was Wiggins and McTighe’s (2011) Understanding by Design. Further theoretical frameworks include those surrounding teacher-student relationships and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Assessing for Understanding Theoretical Framework

Wiggins and McTighe (2011) developed the model for writing curriculum called Understanding by Design. This model is based on the idea that teaching and assessing should be founded in student understanding. Understanding by Design is also based on the idea that curriculum should be designed backwards from what has been determined as the ultimately desired results. Though the authors discuss these theoretical approaches in the context of unit planning, the same theoretical backing can be used for PLPs. The PLP must effectively assess students' understanding of their pathways and goals as well as ensuring they can transfer the skills learned in the plan to a different, novel circumstance (such as communication, classwork, and in the workplace or post-secondary environment).

There are two stages of backward design for assessment of understand: identifying the desired results and identifying the assessments for depth of understanding. Wiggins and McTighe determined that evidence of understanding is revealed in six different ways:

- Explanation
- Interpretation
- Application
- Perspective
- Empathy
- Self-Knowledge (p. 93-94)
This theoretical framework was chosen because it mimics the methods of demonstrating understanding that students are asked to do within their coursework throughout their primary and secondary education. So, assessing learning, experiences, skills, interests, needs, deficiencies, and goals in the PLP will have the same logical flow.

**Strategies implemented using the types of understanding.** The framework for the PLP can be viewed in the context of each of the types of understanding: explaining, interpreting, applying and adjusting, having perspective, showing empathy, and having self-knowledge (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). I will discuss each of these types of understanding to provide more context on how they fit into the PLP.

Explaining refers to assessing the student on their ability to make connections, draw inferences, and express in their own words. This is the most important foundation of the PLP, as, with guidance from the advisor, the student will need to be able to explain what their past educational experiences are, what their goals are, and what their interests and needs are.

Next is interpreting: the student is assessed on providing a personal or historical dimension to the activity. In the plan, students will have an opportunity to express how their past and their cultural identity has informed their current place within the educational setting.

Next is applying and adjusting: the student is assessed on using what they have learned including contexts both in and out of school. The plan will help students identify how the knowledge they have is relevant to future situations and contexts they will encounter. This will help them find success not only in future coursework but college and career goals as well.

Next is having perspective: the student is assessed on seeing the bigger picture and being aware of and considering other perspectives and points of view in order to think critically and assess bias. This aspect of the plan will include the student considering the opinions of their
advisor, their other teachers and staff members, their families, and possibly their peers or employers. This is also a crucial aspect in the plan, as it takes the student out of their own comfort zone and requires them to be informed about the opinions of others.

Next is showing empathy: the student is assessed on perceiving and finding value in another person’s experience. This aspect of the plan will require the student to study another person’s experience and the possible differences and similarities, which will help them make informed decisions about their current school experience and future plans.

The final type of understanding is having self-knowledge: the student is assessed on showing meta-cognitive awareness and reflecting on the meaning of learning; the student is also assessed on recognizing the aspects of themselves (including prejudices, projections, and habits of mind) that shape and hinder their own understanding.

Ultimately the overall goal of the PLP is to help students understand themselves so that they will go forward in the world making informed decisions and goals about improving themselves and their situation. Next, I will discuss the theory behind the advisory structure of the PLP.

**Advisory Relationships Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the advisory aspect of the PLP is that of advisory relationships. Though there is no one researcher who champions this theory, I have relied heavily on three individuals: Bernstein-Yamashiro, Noam, and Jenkins.

Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) provided a general basis for how teacher-student relationships form and thus benefit students. The authors described that teachers first simply spend time getting to know their students on an individual basis. It can be as simple as taking a moment to ask them about their lives outside of school or their experience in another class.
Students appreciate and feel more welcomed and invested in their classroom when they feel that their teachers care about them as individuals.

Furthermore, teachers’ investments into students’ academic performance on a personal basis can be highly powerful in terms of academic success. Students feel valued and encouraged and therefore want to reciprocate the respect of high expectations. By maintaining strong relationships, teachers can continue to check in on students’ performance academically and assist when necessary.

Jenkins (1992) provided a general framework for advising strategies in schools. First, important information should be collected about students to understand their educational plans. This information can be used to understand how best to assist the student and also develop their career goals. The students’ talents and interests are crucial to this conversation. From that information, the advisors can assist the students in planning their coursework and studies in the coming semesters and beyond. Then, the advisors monitor the students’ progress on their coursework and help them adjust, as necessary. During that time, it is the advisors’ responsibility to develop a network of communication with the other teachers and the parents. Another important factor in the framework is the system the advisors must have in continually evaluating the success of their students and making changes, as necessary.

Jenkins (1992) also emphasizes that the advisors are the students’ main advocates and allies. The advisors are people with whom students can talk through problems with, get advice from, or connect them with other resources when necessary. The advisors are also able to proactively address and advocate for potential issues in the students’ lives. The framework that Jenkins describes along with Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam’s (2013) theories on teacher-
student relationships form the basis of the PLP project. Next, I will describe the strategies of these theories as they are implemented in the PLP

**Strategies implemented using the advisory relationship theory.** First, advisors are responsible for a small group of students, so that they can get to know one another on a personal basis. Jenkins (2000) emphasized that this relationship is different from a homeroom context, as advisors collect information about their advisees from the student and parents, other teachers, and other outside sources. The relationship begins with the first meeting of the advisor and advisee. During their first meeting, the data collection begins. The advisor assists the advisee in completing the PLP, providing as much support or as little as desired or needed. Jenkins determined that the data should include autobiographical info, academic progress, plans of study (both short- and long-term), activities in and out of school, and records of individual conferences.

As the individual conferences continue to occur and the relationship continues to build in strength, the advisor should be helping the student recognize their personal talents, interests, and career goals (Jenkins, 2000). To screen for personal talents and strengths, students will take a personality and strengths test using an instrument such as Do What You Are® (n.d.). This instrument will survey them on their interests, preferences, learning styles, and strengths, and weaknesses. After they utilize the instrument, they will record some key info on their PLP.

To assist students in exploring their interests, there are two possible instruments developed by the National Research Center for Gifted and Talented (Assessing Students’ Interests, n.d.). In the first, “If I Ran the School”, students identify specific activities they would prefer in each of the core content courses. The second, which is much lengthier, is called “Interest-A-Lyzer”. On this instrument, students explore various scenarios where they would
decide which approach or pathway they would like to take. The scenarios include both academic and personal contexts.

Furthermore, students will explore some of the career pathways they may fit into using the O*Net Interest Profiler (n.d.). Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, the O*Net walks students through a set of interests. Students select Strongly Dislike, Dislike, Unsure, Like, or Strongly Like for each interest. Then, the Interest Profiler results come in the form of six different codes: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. After reviewing codes, students explore Job Zones and Careers, which allow for filtering in terms of how much education could be pursued. The students will then record some of their results on their PLP. It should be noted that some of these activities could be done in a group format, since many of the activities will take some time to complete.

Finally, an important element that will be embedded into the plan is the connect to home and family. Jenkins (2000) wrote that advisors should contact parents to obtain important and valuable information that can help the advisors and teachers improve the school environment. The check-ins with parents can be done as frequently or infrequently as necessary, but more than one home contact should be done each year. The advisor gathers important information in these communications and uses the information to inform their work with their advisee. The advisor can also disseminate the information obtained to the other teachers. The advisor will record this information separately from the PLP, in another system of logging calls for individual advisees. These strategies are meant to successfully implement the theories of teacher-student and advisory relationships as determined by Jenkins (1992, 2000) and Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013).
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Theoretical Framework

Hollie (2017) determined that a successful framework for approaching culturally relevant pedagogy is to use VABBing: validate, affirm, build, and bridge. Each of these elements will be present in the personalized learning plan and/or the format of the advisor-advisee relationship. To validate and affirm, advisors must acknowledge the backgrounds, cultures, and languages of their advisees and make advisees feel as though their backgrounds and cultures are legitimate to both school and to the wider world. Furthermore, advisors must work to reverse negative stereotypes and representations for marginalized cultures. To build and bridge, advisors must form relationships with students based on their understanding of cultural behaviors and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, advisors must provide the social and academic skills that students will need to succeed in society and school.

Strategies implemented using the culturally relevant pedagogy theory. In the first activity in the PLP, students explore and define what cultures they identify with including ethnicities, gender, religion/spirituality, age, and more. Students also describe in narrative form a bit more about their culture and what they would like others to know about it. Advisors should review this information and use it to inform their conversations and assistance for students to succeed.

Furthermore, advisors can use culturally relevant approaches when asking students to complete their PLP. For example, for students whose cultures make them more skilled at oral interaction as opposed to independent writing, the PLP may be filled out by the advisor as the student dictates answers. Conversely, if a student’s culture is more dependent on community engagement, perhaps the advisor could group students based on comfort and culture and they could complete their PLPs at the same time with guidance from the advisor. This initial activity
exemplifies Hollie’s theory of validation and affirmation: “Validation - the intentional and purposeful legitimization of the home culture and language of students. … Affirmation - the intentional and purposeful effort to reverse negative stereotypes of nonmainstream cultures and languages portrayed in historical perspectives,” (p. 234).

Beyond the actual document that is the PLP, the foundations of the plan are rooted in the relationships built between the advisors and their advisees. The advisors must understand and recognize cultural behaviors of students and use that information to build rapport (Hollie, 2017). Therefore, advisors and advisees, as well as advisory groups, must meet on a regular basis. The PLP is designed so that it can be completed over the course of a school year and is also meant to be updated throughout the years, if possible. Hollie wrote that building rapport over time is how an advisor builds “stock with [their] students, making an investment,” (p. 28).

Finally, Hollie (2017) strategized that students must also learn academic and social skills for success beyond the classroom. The overall purposes of the PLP are rooted in academic and college/career success. However, some elements of the plan address this directly by assisting students in understanding their pathways to graduation, helping them explore possible college or career pathways, and aiding them in setting goals. While teachers of CRP focus on culturally relevant literacy and curriculum, the PLP and advisor-advisee relationship is more focused on interpersonal skills of communication. These skills will be required for student success both in the academic world and while navigating a multicultural society. Between the advisor and the advisee, there must be rapport, relationship, and respect. Hollie describes these factors in the context of classroom management, but in the PLP they are used to help students understand their styles of communication and the styles of others. Students will complete a communication styles inventory as a part of their PLP. This is built in so that advisors can better understand advisees,
students can better understand themselves, and groups can better navigate communicating with one another. Next, I will detail the logistics final project in detail.

**Final Project and Timeline**

This project takes place over the course of at least a school year, but preferably over the course of several years. In an alternative setting, it is typical that students may come and go from the school throughout the year. The project is designed to help students and their advisors measure understanding of personal learning and goals over however long a student is enrolled in the school.

The culminating form of this project will be an electronic document that can be duplicated for each student in usable, electronic form. There is immense value in electronic versions of the PLP (Barton, Hodara, & Ostler, 2015). The plan can be shared easily between collaborators (student, advisor, other faculty and staff, family, peers). The plan can also be kept track of and not lost. One downside of the use of technology is that it requires access. If students and families do not have access to the internet at home, they will not be able to view it at their convenience. The advisees will also print the plan quarterly to obtain a parent/guardian signature on the plan to ensure that with or without internet access, families are able to see it.

Many of the activities in the plan are meant to be completed in conversation with the advisor and advisee, or they are meant to be completed as a group activity within an advisory group. The important factor of this is that it is not just a document that is filled out by the advisee and then never looked at again. It should be a dynamic document that assists the two individuals to better understand the goals, academic needs, skills and abilities, learning styles, personality, culture, and communication styles of the advisee. The framework for the system is laid out in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Personalized Learning Plan and Advisory Framework
Goals and Logistics of the Personalized Learning Plan

The theoretical framework for the PLP is rooted in maximizing student outcomes. The goals of the plan are to do the following for the student:

- Improve relationships between students and advisors, faculty, and staff at the school
- Improve overall communication skills of students
- Increase student self-advocacy
- Reflect on needs, interests, and weaknesses that should be addressed within the school and beyond
- Improve goal setting and planning skills
- Increase understanding of graduation plan and post-secondary plans
- Decrease likelihood of dropping out of school
- Increase communication between families, school, and students
- Measure success via educational data and personal reflection
- Increase student-centered decision making
- Determine what aspects of cultural identity and behavior should be validated, affirmed, built upon, and bridged

These goals emerge from several theorists (Barraza, Bartgis, & Fresno Native Youth Council, 2016; Fox, 2014; Gay, 2000; Hollie, 2017; and Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Overall, multiple theories are used in this project, including that of personalized learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, Indigenous education, and teacher-student relationships. Through my research on the needs of the students identified for the primary audience for this project as well as my research on the major themes of the research question, I found that the framework for a
PLP would be best developed by combining aspects from a variety of previously developed theories.

Using these goals as the basis of the PLP, the advisor will assist the student in their own personal development of the plan and help them self-assess their understanding of each aspect of the goals. Next, I will describe the proposed timelines for implementation.

**Timeline for Implementation**

As previously stated, this project is meant to take place over the course of a year, but preferably over the course of several years. As with many initiatives in education and school systems, the longer a process is in place the better understood it will be and the more robust the results. I will now detail some options for implementation. Each option builds upon the next, as each is more robust than the one before. First, you will see a timeline for a one-year implementation (Figure 2). This would be a good starting place for a teaching hoping to try out the project in their classroom on a small scale.

Next you will see a timeline for a three-year implementation (Figure 3). This would be a good starting place for a small school or team at a larger school hoping to try out the project in their school. This would be a great starting place for grade 10 students, as the plan could follow them through the remainder of their secondary schooling.

Finally, you will see a timeline for a five-year implementation (Figure 4). This would be the ideal option of a whole-school implementation where each student is provided with an advisor and maintains a PLP. The full length of the execution would depend on the grade of each student beginning; the plan could be modified to adapt to various grade levels. Depending on the context of the school, one advisor could follow their students throughout their entire school career, or different advisors could rotate each year based on the grade levels taught.
Figure 2. One-Year Implementation
Figure 3. Three-Year Implementation

Students begin filling out PLP and meet with advisor. Advisor connects with families.

Students and advisor update PLP as needed. Advisor connects back with families. Advisory groups meet. New students are introduced to the group.

Students and advisor update PLP as needed. Advisor connects back with families. Advisory groups meet. New students are introduced to the group.

PLP continues; year 2 transition plan is developed.

PLP continues; year 3 transition plan is developed.

PLP is completed; post-secondary transition plan is developed; system is assessed for success.

Several teachers are selected to form advisory groups with a large group of students. Teachers develop personalized learning plan (PLP), sets a schedule for advisory groups and one-on-one meetings, and develops expectations.

Advisory groups meet. Grade reports are used to fill out credit needs in PLP. Information is disseminated to stakeholders. Long-term plans are evaluated and addressed.

Advisory groups meet. Grade reports are used to fill out credit needs in PLP. Advisor and advisee check-in about goals and needs. Information is disseminated to stakeholders. Long-term plans are evaluated and addressed.

Final advisory meeting with celebration for commitment and growth. Transition to post-secondary plans are finalized. Surveys are distributed to students and families to evaluate the success of the program.

Advisor compiles information from questionnaire to inform future practice. Students actualize long-term goals.
**Figure 4. Five-Year Implementation**

Students begin filling out PLP, meeting with advisor. Advisor connects with families. Grade reports are used to fill out credit needs in PLP.

PLP begins

All students in school assigned to advisory groups by grade level. Teachers develop personalized learning plan (PLP), set a schedule for advisory groups and one-on-one meetings, and develop expectations.

Summer before year 1

Professional development, advisory groups are formed

Year 1

Year 2

Summer after year 5

Post-secondary follow-up

Year 3

Year 4

Year 5

PLP continues; year 4 transition plan is developed

Final advisory meeting with celebration for commitment and growth. Transition to post-secondary plans are finalized. Surveys are distributed to students and families to evaluate the success of the program.

PLP is completed; post-secondary transition plan is developed; system is assessed for success

Advisors follow up with students six months and one year post-graduation

Advisory groups meet. Grade reports are used to fill out credit needs in PLP. Information is disseminated to stakeholders. Long-term plans are evaluated and addressed.

PLP continues; year 3 transition plan is developed

Students begin to actualize long-term goals

PLP continues; year 5 transition plan is developed

Advisor compiles information from questionnaire to inform future practice. Students actualize long-term goals.

Advisory groups meet. Grade reports are used to fill out credit needs in PLP. Information is disseminated to stakeholders. Long-term plans are evaluated and addressed.
Assessing the Success of the Project

A main aspect of the question posed in this paper includes improving student outcomes. These student outcomes are not only academic, but also include all the goals as listed earlier in the chapter. There is an assortment of ways in which the project can be assessed for success. Using the goals as a jumping point, the following is a list of ways in which to assess the project for success as well as the ways to measure each point:

1. More connections are made between families and school staff (namely the advisor)
   a. Measured through phone calls, e-mails, in-person meetings, etc.

2. Connections are reported to be positive and productive
   a. Measured through family surveys, questionnaires, and/or conversation

3. Students more frequently communicate, self-advocate, set goals, reflect, plan, and make decisions
   a. Measured through teacher and family observations
   b. Measured through side-by-side comparison of certain portions of the PLP from beginning to end

4. Student needs are met to the fullest ability of the school
   a. Measured through student surveys, questionnaires, and/or conversation

5. Students better understand graduation plan and post-secondary plans
   a. Measured through side-by-side comparison of certain portions of the PLP from beginning to end

6. Students are less likely to drop-out of school
   a. Measured through enrollment data

7. Students find success in academics
a. Measured through academic data

8. Students feel as though their cultural identity and behavior is validated, affirmed, built upon, and bridged

a. Measured through family surveys, questionnaires, and/or conversation

While these options are extensive, and it would be time consuming to measure them all, the leader of the project could choose one or two goals to focus on in order to measure the success most relevant to the setting in which the project is taking place. In my personal experience, I find that the most imperative measurement of success in this project is that of rebuilding the relationship between the school system and the student and their family. In the next section I will discuss more about my personal experience that influenced the theory and proposed practice of this project.

**Personal Experience and Background**

This project grows from the knowledge and perspective I have gained while working with urban Indigenous alternative school students. While these students have been forgotten about, pushed away, and underserved, they do wish to prevail and succeed. Many do not want to give up, and so they seek out alternative spaces so that they may have a chance at graduation and a pathway to reach their goals. However, it is not as simple as switching schools. Structures must be in place to help students not only pass classes but thrive and grow. In my time working in an alternative school, I have learned that the best way to help students is by forming a connection with them, talking to them about what their barriers are, and helping them identify the support systems and resources that can lead to strong outcomes and success. In many ways, this seems straightforward. If educators and advisors just talk to young people and help them get what they need, perhaps that is enough. And I know educators who work immensely hard each day to do
just that. However, as Gay (2000) has expressed, good intentions and awareness is not enough. There can and must be systems created to formalize this work and possibly lead these connections and guidance to better outcomes and more prepared and supported young people. That is what this project is meant to do.

Summary

In this chapter I have described the audience and context for whom this project was designed. Being that this school is near and dear to my heart, I am highly motivated to make contributions to benefit the structure of the school. The research put forth and the description of the project is an extremely valuable concept in helping students achieve their goals and stay in school. In this chapter I also discussed the theoretical framework for how this project will be designed. These theoretical frameworks will provide a solid backdrop for developing a system for advisors to assist their students in developing Personalized Learning Plans in a thorough and evidence-based model. Furthermore, I detailed the goals, logistics, and timeline, and assessment procedures of completing the project. With this information, an individual teacher or administrator could adapt and execute the project in their own school. Finally, I discussed the personal background that led me to creating this project.

In the next chapter, I will describe the conclusions I have come to after creating my project.
CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection and Conclusion

I set out on this journey to think of the most robust, actionable way to improve the alternative school in which I teach. The considerations for this project have been forming in my mind over the past ten years as I have floated in and out of classrooms as an interventionist, substitute teacher, after-school leader, classroom teacher, and administrator. In my time working with students from all around the world (some refugees to this country) to students whose ancestors have lived for centuries and millennia on the land we now call the United States, I have learned that no matter the student and no matter the culture, each young person’s world is its own galaxy with its own planets revolving around it. To teach that student, one must get to know that galaxy and those planets. One must try to see what it looks like from within. Therefore, learning must be personalized. Learning must be culturally contextualized. And learning must be considered through relationships, context, and beyond the classroom. That is why I set out to understand the following: How does an urban Indigenous alternative school create a system in which personalized learning plans and advisor relationships improve student outcomes?

In this final chapter, I will describe what I have learned along this journey of creating the personalized learning plan and advisory system by revisiting the literature review, my research, and development of a new system; discuss implications and limitations of the project; explicate opportunities for further research; and describe what benefits this project could bring to the urban Indigenous alternative school at which I teach as well as the larger education community.
What I Have Learned: Literature, Research, and a New System

In the process of creating this project and researching relevant topics, I have discovered new aspects of personalized learning, advisory systems, and culturally relevant pedagogy. I have also affirmed what I have gained from personal experience and found ways to address systemic issues within an urban Indigenous alternative school. One major discovery was about personalized learning plans. PLPs are meant to help teachers craft learning experiences that are relevant to students as well as help students determine what their short- and long-term academic and career pathways are. They are often used for students who are perhaps college-bound or more highly achieving in academics. Less often are PLPs used for students who do not fit into the structures of school because of various barriers. PLPs seem to be far less used for identifying the cultural and personal barriers of students. Thus, much of what I crafted was based on theories braided together to identify the necessary elements to boost outcomes and support systems for urban Indigenous alternative school youth. While perhaps the available literature, theory, methodology, and pedagogy on PLPs is successful for students who the education system was designed for, many students continue to demonstrate poor outcomes. As Gay (2000) stated, “[Culturally responsive teaching] teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming,” (p. 29). We must not try to fit students into forms they do not already take up; instead, we must personalize and elevate their internal and cultural strengths.

Another major discovery I found while crafting this project was the importance of relationships and the way to formalize those relationships through advisories. A foundational aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy is building rapport and relationships (Gay, 2000; Hollie, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is crucial to reinforce positivity between educators and students as well as build trust and respect. While this may be a naturally occurring dichotomy between a
caring teacher and a student, I found that it is important to provide targeted support and identified immediate and long-term needs for a student. There has been much success shown by doing this in advisory relationships. As Jenkins (2000) wrote, schools should be places where all students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance for who they are, students do not lose interest as a result of no one caring, the progress of an individual student is of utmost importance, someone listens when a student talks and changes are made to accommodate student needs, and parents are most certainly involved. This can be accomplished through advisement programs in which teachers are able to forge bonds with a smaller group of students, advisors and advisees meet on a regular basis, and track their goals, progress, skills, and personality through a personalized learning plan.

There were also elements of my research that were deeply validating to what I already knew to be true from my work in an urban Indigenous alternative school. Alternative schools are often looked at as the spaces created for the students who cannot succeed in the mainstream school. Alternative school students are looked at as the ones who are not motivated and committed to their learning and education. This stigma was reinforced in the literature (Mcnulty & Roseboro, 2009; Newton et al, 2017). However, I believe this stigma to be an inaccurate representation of the students who attend alternative schools. These students have been traditionally underserved by school systems and, despite immense barriers, enroll in a different setting to graduate, begin a career or continue in post-secondary, and succeed. These young people cannot be judged by the ways in which their previous schools or society at large have caused them to be required to figure, many times on their own, out how to navigate systems that were set up for them to fail. Alternative schools were created to serve students in innovative,
creative, comprehensive, and responsive ways (Hobot, 2017; Newton et al., 2017). That is why I believe these schools to be the answer to so many educational inequities.

Another deeply validating aspect of my research was that culturally relevant teaching can be so successful for students. This includes teacher-student relationships and the value they hold in student outcomes. When students see themselves in the books they read and in the lessons they are taught, and are celebrated for their individuality and cultural background, it can lead to positive self-esteem and image. These kinds of gains in self-worth are paramount in decolonizing the classroom.

**Limitations**

This project is grounded in a very particular and unique urban Indigenous alternative school. Though Hobot (2017) studied at least six other schools of this nature across the United States, this type of school is niche in its mission and vision. There are limitations with the project in that it is designed for a school in which the teachers and administrators have the autonomy to make school wide changes, experimental as they may be. Implementing a new advisor program with an extensive personalized learning plan is of large consequence to a school system. In the particular urban Indigenous alternative school in which this paper is grounded, the small instructional and administrative team and even smaller enrollment numbers allow the school to implement sweeping changes without teachers needing extensive professional development, students needing years’ worth of practice and training, and resources being drained. This may be more difficult in a larger school system (even if it may be alternative in nature or serving many Indigenous students). The project asks that teachers become responsible for a duty that will require them to develop a deeper relationship with a group of students, track those students, and record certain important elements of their learning, goals, and skills. Some teachers may struggle
to do this in a culturally relevant manner, or they may not have the capacity in their schedules. However, in a small enough setting, with dedicated enough staff members and administration, this project has great potential for success.

Another limitation is that the personalized learning plan will need to be tracked and followed by advisors, advisees, and parents or guardians. There is a possibility that the plans will not be properly tracked and monitored by the various stakeholders. The current digital document that the plan is housed on could be altered or damaged by the various individuals using it. Furthermore, because it is a digital document, an Internet connection will be required to access and maintain it. Family members may not be able to view it from home, so advisors will need to also maintain paper versions of the document to keep parents and guardians informed. Despite these limitations, the benefits of maintaining the plan in a digital document outweigh the drawbacks. Those benefits include access from multiple devices, multi-person collaboration, lack of paper filing needed, longevity of a digital document, and more.

Though these limitations exist, this project was developed for a particular school setting and student population. It will be piloted and adapted along the way, but ultimately, I anticipate it to be very successful in this urban Indigenous alternative school for which it was designed.

**Further Research Opportunities**

There is a great deal of opportunity for future research, including comprehensive personalized learning utilizing project-based learning pathways, Indigenized school systems, wraparound supports in school systems, and long-term advisory programs.

Research could be done exploring the possibility and accessibility of PLPs as part of a school’s technology outreach. The PLP could be hosted in a digital app-based platform for advisors, advisees, and parents and guardians to easily track an ever more comprehensive system
of cultural and personal information, student goals, skills and interests, academic success, and career and college pathways. A digital app could be highly successful as it could be accessed from many different devices, the data could be secure, the information could be locked into place and viewed for multiple years, and could be of high interest for young people.

From a personal research standpoint, this project could parlay into a doctoral dissertation on personalization in the urban Indigenous alternative school. Specifically, the research could be translated into a study of student outcomes when utilizing the personalized learning plan and advisory model. Both quantitative and qualitative data could be collected to analyze the success of the model as well as further hone it into a successful program.

**Benefits to the Larger Education Community**

As stated in the limitations section, the project was designed for an environment and school setting. However, there is much potential for the project to be successful in other alternative schools and perhaps even beyond. The ultimate approach for the project was based on personalizing the classroom environment, solidifying the importance of teacher-student relationships, and reinforcing the essentialness of culturally relevant teaching in all aspects of the classroom and school setting. These theories and pedagogies are responses to the fundamental systemic changes needed in schools today. As Gay (2000) wrote, “However important they are, good intentions and awareness are not enough to bring about the changes needed in educational programs and procedures to prevent academic inequities among diverse students,” (p. 13). Good teaching is not just good intentions; good teaching must include intentional focus on and remediation of inequities, historical trauma and oppression, and a traditionally Eurocentric lens. Furthermore, the need for systemic change is enormous. Indigenous students, students of color, students from a lower socioeconomic status, and disabled students continue to fail out of the
educational system, which leads to a lack of preparedness for the workplace or post-secondary pursuits and adds to the causes of long-term, generational poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Hobot, 2017, Orfield, 2004; “The Education Trust,” 2013). Ultimately, the need for change is clear; the answer, while not black and white, means a redesign of educational systems so that the individual student is valued, represented, uplifted, and nurtured.

I find the answer in personalizing the school system to tend to students’ needs, goals, and desires; student-teacher relationships that build rapport and respect; and culturally relevant teaching that raises the voices that have for so long been oppressed. While I am closest to an urban Indigenous alternative school, I believe these approaches could be successful in any school system. With the proper implementation, including staff investment and training, student resources, and administrative support, the personalized learning plan and advisory model could thrive.

**Conclusion**

My passions for the students in the urban Indigenous alternative school is colossal. It is founded in the desire to uplift the young people who have been underserved, marginalized, oppressed, and forgotten. I have learned a great deal in the pursuit to design this project, and I have affirmed a great deal of what I had learned on my own. It has been immensely satisfying to craft this system of support for young people, a system that is meant to amplify their voices, goals, and hopes. My hope is that this project be successfully and thoroughly implemented at the school I work and beyond. I will always search for answers for and deeply advocate for underserved students, both mine and yours.
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