

## Teaching and Learning for Our Times, 2.0: Editorial Remarks

**James F. Nagle**, *Saint Michael's College*  
**Penny A. Bishop**, *The University of Vermont*

As we acknowledge the past year of social, cultural, and emotional turbulence, it is no wonder that the authors of the articles in this latest issue of *Middle Grades Review* have focused on such important topics as democratic education, the experiences of learners with culturally non-dominant family backgrounds, and how educators become more compassionate, caring and just practitioners. These six articles reflect the lived experiences of students and teachers as they have navigated a year marked by social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In “Using a Connected Learning Framework to Promote Democratic Education During a Transition to Online Learning,” Abigail Baker and Jennifer Kassimer describe the Connected Learning framework as a way for teachers to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning by connecting student interests with authentic inquiry-based learning. In their essay, Baker and Kassimer discuss the benefits of such learning on student engagement and fostering more democratic and inclusive classrooms. Baker and Kassimer suggest the use of the Connected Learning framework to co-create integrated curricular units in democratic classrooms.

Anny Case continues the themes of connection and creating more inclusive middle grades classrooms by interviewing English language learners in her qualitative research study entitled, “Complex and Connected Lives: Voices of ‘English Language Learners’ in Middle School.” Case borrows from Kramsch’s (2002) ecological

framework on second language acquisition, which is based on the premise that learning and socialization occur “in relation to the personal, situational, cultural, and societal factors that collectively shape the production and evolution of language” (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008, p. 18). In doing so, Case documents the experiences of six middle school English language learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Case offers a rich portrait of how these students negotiate their cultures and lives with the dominant culture of schooling and offers a provocative set of “what if” questions to coax us to think differently about how schooling could respond to English language learners.

Adding to the mix of diverse voices, the experiences of Pasifika families in New Zealand school settings are highlighted by Emma Cunningham and Rebecca Jesson in their study, “The Transition from Intermediate to High School: Insights from Pasifika Families.” Cunningham and Jesson apply Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) lens of ecological systems theory to examine the experience of young Pasifika adolescents and their families as the youth transition from intermediate schools to high schools. In a set of interviews of parents and students over one year during this transition, these researchers document that adolescents acknowledged and appreciated the role of educators, family members, and other community members in their successful transition to high school. While the level and type of support differed for these 10 students, they understood that “their parents played a strong role in their

academic achievement and were aware of the lengths that community and school members went to offer support.”

In the next three articles move our readers from examining student and family perspectives to considering how teacher educators and teachers can better prepare for educating middle grades adolescents. In the qualitative study, “Neutrality and Narratives: Situating Middle Grades Preservice Teachers in Broader Educational Discourses,” Rachel Ranschaert illustrates how discourse analysis can inform teacher neutrality from journals written by 12 preservice teachers in a justice-oriented teacher education program. Ranschaert defines justice-oriented teacher education as “teacher education which works against the privileging of some ways of being and the marginalization of others.” She examines the journals of preservice teachers in the initial course of a teacher education program to understand how they use language to identify their students and how these preservice teachers position their own identity. Ranschaert importantly concludes that, “while there is certainly space for assignments and courses that engage preservice teachers in questioning their own biases and assumptions, it is also important to acknowledge the broader discourses in which preservice teachers are always already situated.”

While Ranschaert’s study sheds a cautionary light on transforming one’s thinking about teaching and learning, the two practitioner perspectives in this issue depict how middle grades educators are attempting to transform their practice. In “Fostering Brave Spaces for Discussions About Race,” Grace Gilmour describes her experience working with her middle school social studies students to establish the kind of

classroom community that develops students’ social justice literacies. The purpose of her initial unit was to lay the groundwork for increasingly sophisticated conversations about systemic oppression and identity throughout the year. In this piece, Gilmour walks readers through the specific steps she took in researching, planning, and implementing this unit with her students, and reflects on this as the start of a never-ending journey.

Finally, in “Building a Strong Foundation: Using Advisory to Support Students in an Uncertain Time,” Brie Healy chronicles her team’s collaborative efforts to design and implement a middle grades advisory program that would respond to the hybrid learning environment circumstances inherent in the COVID-19 pandemic. Healy articulates three precepts that guided the team in designing the advisory program: 1) focus on adolescent identity; 2) use a trauma-informed lens; and 3) create effective supports for students and their families. Healy reports on how this holistic approach enabled students to feel more connected to teachers and to other students on the team and strengthened family engagement on the team.

In all, the authors in this issue of *Middle Grades Review* reveal the opportunities, challenges, benefits, and myriad nuances of education in the middle grades. At a time that remains uncertain and turbulent for many, we are grateful for their insights and findings. Each contributes meaningfully to the expanding discourse on what constitutes responsive education for young adolescents.

## References

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press.
- Kramsch, C., & Steffensen, S. V. (2008). Ecological perspectives on second language acquisition and socialization. In *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (pp. 2595–2606). Springer.