The Nexus of Teacher Beliefs and Culturally Responsive Teaching

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

The articles in this issue of the *Middle Grades Review* highlight an important intersection between educator beliefs and culturally responsive pedagogy in middle level education. Teacher beliefs long have been studied by educational researchers with regard to educators' learning and development (Hollingsworth, 1989; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996) and, more recently, as they pertain to student learning and adolescent development (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009). Particularly since Ladson Billings' (1995) seminal work on culturally relevant pedagogy, educational research and practice have emphasized honoring multicultural and multilingual experiences while creating access to the dominant culture, such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000); linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas, Villegas & Freedson, 2008); and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Not until recently, however, has middle level education underscored the importance of supporting multiculturalism and multilingualism in the education of young adolescents (Brinegar, 2015).

In "Synthesizing Middle Grades Research on Cultural Responsiveness: The Importance of a Shared Conceptual Framework," Brianna Kennedy, Kathleen Brinegar, Ellis Hurd and Lisa Harrison find a lack of theoretical cohesion in their review of research on cultural responsiveness at the middle level. To synthesize this research, they offer a conceptual framework to describe the relatively limited research addressing culture, power, and cultural responsiveness at the middle level. They identify three important tenets for this framework: specific use of explicit definitions; a critical stance toward school structures and policies; and links to middle grades concepts and practice. Using this lens, they see the seeds of a middle level research agenda and practice that support cultural responsiveness, democratic education, and social justice. They go on to discuss research that critically examines systemic change in five areas of educational reform to address cultural responsiveness: a) institutional structures; b) school leadership; c) educators' supportive practices; d) teacher beliefs and learning; and e) curriculum and instruction.

Each article in this issue focuses on one of the five areas identified by Kennedy and colleagues. In "Teaching in the Middle Grades Today: Examining Teachers' Beliefs About Middle Grades Teaching," Mike DiCicco, Chris Cook, and Shawn Faulkner report their findings about teacher beliefs in an empirical study of practicing middle grades teachers in the mid-west United States. A central finding is that teachers in their study saw their primary purpose as to "create lifelong learners and develop the whole child," but found themselves "working within an educational system that is currently designed to make this endeavor difficult." This work illustrates how teacher beliefs and institutional structures go hand in hand in addressing the needs of young adolescents and that good intentions can only go so far without the appropriate school structures in place.

Dana Bickmore's essay, "The Middle Grades Principal: A Research Agenda," argues for a more comprehensive research agenda on middle level leadership. Seeing a dearth of studies that focus on middle grades leadership, Bickmore proposes an agenda emphasizing the link between and among effective middle grades principal learning, leadership practices and student learning.

She proposes specific research questions that would allow for a research agenda on educational leadership to move forward for middle schools and urges the adoption of these for future research.

Kevin Duquette, Patrick Akos and Rydell Harrison emphasize the importance of school structures such as the house system and the adoption of growth mindset to create a safe and receptive learning environment for students who are "socially homeless." In this practitioners' perspective, a school counselor and a principal create a house system that incorporates Carol Dweck's (2006) work on growth mindset to assist students who have felt marginalized in the middle school context. The authors demonstrate the importance of combining the institutional structure of the house system with school leadership and an integrated curriculum to meet the needs of all adolescents at their school.

Finally, in the essay, "Understanding the Unique Needs of Adolescent Refugee Students," Bobette Bouton argues for expanded and more inclusive definitions of three of the Essential Attributes espoused by *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association [NMSA]/Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010) in order to address the unique needs of adolescents who are refugees: Developmental Responsiveness, Empowerment, and Equity. Calling for a mixture of structural changes, shifts in curriculum and instruction, and social/emotional supports, she similarly identifies the need for better educator supports for young adolescents who are refugees.

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