

## **Leveraging Collaboration and Challenging Dominant Discourses: Editorial Remarks**

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As 2017 comes to a close, this issue of *Middle Grades Review* brings you the work of scholars who, through their essays, research, and accounts of practice, share an emphasis on improving educational experiences for young adolescents. While the open call invited a broad range of topics, the articles we present here fall into two themes. The first two articles provide us with powerful examples of how leveraging collaboration with both adults and middle schoolers can result in educational improvement. The authors of the next four articles examine a variety of dominant discourses in relation to racial, cultural, religious, and economic diversity and (in)justice in youths' lives.

In their essay, "Drawing on the Layers of a Partnership to Prepare Middle Level Teachers," Rintamaa and Howell describe a "recursive, collaborative experience" in which they work as critical colleagues across two universities to prepare teachers for the middle grades. Acknowledging that teacher education programs often have only one middle grades specialist, these two teacher educators offer a model of cross-institutional collaboration rarely seen in higher education, built upon a shared goal and set of standards. Their emphasis on broadening teacher candidates' world views to understand students from diverse backgrounds has particular resonance, given the focus on diverse learners and dominant discourses within the second set of articles in this issue.

Flynn and Colby's study, entitled "Cultivating Classroom Spaces as Homes for Learning," similarly reveals the power of collaboration, by inviting students into the typically adult-dominated discourse about the design of learning spaces. Conducted in a suburban North Texas community, this

action research ethnography invited middle schoolers' perceptions of classroom space. The diverse group of sixth grade participants illuminated aspects of physical space that they found either conducive or distracting to their learning. Flynn and Colby consider issues related to physical environment, student self-governance, and disciplinary management, and they call for students to be included in the design of classroom space, rituals and routines.

In "‘That sh\*t is rude!’ Religion, Picture Books, and Social Narratives in Middle School," Dávila and Volz echo Rintamaa and Howell's earlier point that exposure to unfamiliar groups and situations can provide a lens into others' lived experiences. They ask us to consider, "What happens when a racially, culturally, and economically diverse group of sixth-graders in an English Language Arts (ELA) class at an urban middle school discusses religion in the context of news media and Mexican-American picture books?" In their qualitative study, these researchers answer their own question by exploring the types of narratives children construct in response to diverse picture books and public art. While they note that it can be difficult to initiate middle school conversations that challenge the othering narratives embedded in dominant discourses, their research makes a powerful case for including the interdisciplinary study of religious content in public schools as one way to tackle this critical work.

Stormer also challenges a dominant discourse; in this case, it is within the teaching of writing. In "Why Can't Tyrone Write: Reconceptualizing Flower and Hayes for African-American Adolescent Male Writers," the writing processes of the three African-American eighth graders in

Stomer's study did not align with the steps depicted by a widely accepted cognitive process model of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Stormer reconceptualizes the Flower and Hayes Writing Model to include tenets of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and reexamines the roles that academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness can play in the teaching of writing.

In "More than Human Sacrifice: Teaching about the Aztecs in the New Latino South," Monreal describes a lesson created to teach sixth graders about Aztec/Mexica resistance to Spanish conquest. In his classroom, Monreal decentered, complicated, and challenged the dominant discourse about Aztec/Mexica culture by concentrating on Aztec/Mexica arts, philosophy, and resistance rather than the familiar themes of European exploration and human sacrifice. In this Practitioner Perspective, Monreal illustrates how disrupting the majoritarian narratives typically reified in Social Studies courses is one way educators can resist oppressive systems and help remedy deficit perspectives.

Our second Practitioner Perspective similarly emphasizes the powerful role educators play in the selection of curriculum material and how such material- and media in general- inevitably represents a particular discourse. Bickmore, Rumohr-Voskuil, and Binford are teacher educators from three universities who self-identify as differing greatly in their political, economic, and sociological views. In "Crossing Selma's Bridge: Integrating Visual Discovery Strategy and Young Adult Literature to

Promote Dialogue and Understanding," these authors focus on adolescent media consumption and, in particular, the visual aspects of media. They offer one way to teach adolescents that literature, media, and art are often responses to historical and cultural events and, as such, are representative of a particular ideological perspective. In so doing, they call for educators to prepare students to "examine, interpret, and discuss injustice and justice as represented in the texts they read, the historical events they study, and the daily events they both live and witness."

As we head into 2018, this issue of *Middle Grades Review* is a timely reminder of both the power and the responsibility that educators hold. These articles emphasize the importance of collaboration among educators and with students; at the same time, they challenge educators to make transparent the many perspectives that exist and deserve to be valued within a democratic society.

## References

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