

Editorial Remarks: Young Adolescent Engagement

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As 2024 comes to a close, this issue of *Middle Grades Review* brings readers two powerful essays, a research report, and an insightful practitioner perspective. The pieces advance our thinking about young adolescent well-being, service learning, restorative practices, and near-peer relationships. In these articles, readers will find new recommendations, practices and strategies to better engage middle grades students.

The issue begins with an essay reporting on the risk factors that adversely affect the health and well-being of young adolescents in the United States and internationally and ways to mitigate these risk factors. Focusing on bullying, homelessness, mental health, nutrition, sexual health, and substance use, Mertens and Caskey document the prevalence of each risk factor and the associated consequences for young adolescents. They also recommend policies and practices that can reduce these risk factors. The authors assert that middle schools are ideal for comprehensive health education because schools are where young adolescents come together on a regular basis and can provide a tailored curriculum over multiple years to support young adolescents' well-being.

In the next essay Farber and Mark review the literatures of service learning and self-directed learning and propose a framework that combines the two to guide middle grades educators in the design, organization, and structure of service learning experiences for young adolescents. Farber and Mark expand on Garrison's

(1997) construct of self-directed learning in adult education by incorporating the tenets of service learning to create a framework for middle school students.

Brown, Grace and Jones report on their research into educator perspectives and experiences of implementing restorative practices (RP) at a large middle school. Using Khalifa et al.'s (2016) Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) as the conceptual framework for this study, the authors interviewed four administrators and 11 educators from a middle school in an urban school district in Texas. The researchers conclude that an "effective implementation of RP requires culturally responsive leadership that prioritizes needs-based assessments, ongoing professional development, and a commitment to understanding and addressing the varied needs of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students."

In this issue's practitioner perspective, Persohn, Zalman Mendez, Bishop Hunter, Rivera, and Ellerbrock share lessons learned about a mentored reading program, the Secret Society of Readers. In the program, university students mentor middle school students using an expanded version of a mentored reading program to not only promote reading but also create positive attitudes towards reading and develop readers' identities. The article describes the benefits and challenges of this pilot program through the perspectives of the mentors. The authors conclude with five assertions that they feel made the program effective.

Each of the articles in this issue of *Middle Grades Review* holds the potential to strengthen middle grades education. Together, the pieces illuminate paths toward better engagement in school and in our communities.

References

- Garrison, D. R. (1997). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 18-33.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272–1311.
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