

## Editorial Remarks

### “Always a Place to Start” in Middle Grades Education

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As we near the end of 2023, we are pleased to offer five articles that help advance our understanding of middle grades education. The following essay, research accounts, and practitioner perspective provide insights into how education for young adolescents might be strengthened or advanced. During these challenging global times, the pieces offer a sense of hope, optimism, and tenacity for what is and what could be. As the authors of this issue's final article suggest, they offer “a place to start.”

Opening this final issue of the year, Bond and Tulino's essay acknowledges the deeply polarized environments in which educators now operate, noting the current public expectation for leaders to publicly address matters of equity. Synthesizing scholarship from two well-established areas—distributed leadership and critical consciousness—these authors offer a framework for school leaders to advance both their own critical consciousness and that of their school ecosystems. Moreover, they move beyond isolated theory to provide compelling examples of what critical social analysis, collective identification, political self-efficacy, and sociopolitical action can look like and accomplish in the contemporary middle school context.

Faulkner, Cook, Alverson, and DiCicco share this focus on the contemporary middle school, as they present the results of their study examining teachers' and principals' perceptions concerning the middle school concept. Based on survey responses from over 1,600 educators across the US, these researchers conclude that principals and teachers largely hold common perceptions about the levels of importance and implementation of many middle school components. However, they note waning support for the middle school concept and, in particular, for associated organizational structures and for teachers specifically prepared for this age group. The authors observe that the waning support may indicate a need to reexamine and update the middle school model.

In the next piece, Hughes, Ranschaert, and Benson use a qualitative case study design to examine how COVID-19 became a catalyst for one middle school to reimagine a more equitable

education for all its students. Using thick description throughout the piece, these researchers depict how justice-oriented educators can and do enact engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). Rejecting the notion that there is a blueprint or generalizable strategy toward engaged pedagogy, they instead emphasize and illustrate the great potential of developing and supporting justice-oriented middle grades teachers.

The third and final research report of this issue brings readers into contact with a 7<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics curriculum in the form of Casler-Failing and Swan's mixed methods case study. By using theories of social constructivism and technology integration, these researchers examine the development of students' proportional reasoning skills as they engage with LEGO robotics. This study extends prior research pointing to the utility of robotics as an instructional tool in the mathematics classroom, in this case with young adolescents. The authors call upon readers to consider similar practices that are hands-on, student-focused and inquiry driven.

Finally, Benson and Conlon close this issue and volume by connecting Casler-Failing and Swan's focus on middle grades mathematics with the polarized context introduced by Bond and Tulino at the start of this issue. In their practitioner perspective, Benson and Conlon describe their experience introducing social justice lessons into 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms in a rural county in the United States, as a result of their work together in a social justice-oriented teacher education program. These authors remind us all that, “even in divisive and hostile political contexts... there is typically always a place to start.”

As we look toward 2024, we wish our readers a safe and healthy new year. May it bring peace to all.

## References

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.