

## Editorial Remarks

### Strengthening Middle Grades Education

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As 2022 comes to a close, this issue of *Middle Grades Review* brings readers a thought-provoking essay, meaningful research, and insightful practitioner perspectives. The pieces advance our thinking about critical representation, historically responsive literacy, middle grades teacher efficacy, and the social, emotional, and mental health needs of young adolescents, among other areas. In them, readers will find new insights, timely reminders, and calls to action.

The issue begins with an essay introducing a framework of critical representation in children's literature not merely to increase the number of diverse texts in our school libraries, but rather to urge us as readers, teachers, and teacher educators to challenge "oppressive power dynamics and curricular patterns" so that the identities of all children are represented and acknowledged. Building on the work of Banks & Banks (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1995; 2006), author Haslam observes, "When students see themselves positively reflected in curricula and literature, it is easier to envision themselves as *part* of their school community, experience a deep sense of belonging and connectedness, and develop the strong sense of self-worth." Identifying five criteria for critical representation, Haslam calls on educators to understand that "inaction is not a neutral choice. When we learn that our literature, language, content, or pedagogy is harmful to someone in our care, we make a conscious choice to continue, or to shift."

The next piece in this issue brings students' perspectives into the foreground. Researchers Chandler and Wegrzyn draw on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of discourse and ideological becoming to understand young adolescents' interpretation of texts in their thoughtful case study integrating the perspectives of young adolescents. These authors examined two seventh grade boys' thinking as they delved into social justice issues in their language arts class, exploring social class in the novel, *The Outsiders*; race in the movie

*Hidden Figures*; and gender in school dress code policy. In each case the middle schoolers constructed a nuanced understanding of social (in)justice that could be applied to their own lived experiences. The boys preferred texts that laid out these issues in subtle ways so that they could have the chance to make their own meaning. From their findings Chandler and Wegrzyn identify implications for teachers that, while not necessarily new, are increasingly important in today's world. They urge teachers to create space for young adolescents to engage, explore, and struggle with social (in)justice in texts of all kinds.

Following this, Daniels expands our understanding of middle grades teacher efficacy. In surveying and interviewing middle school teachers, all of whom were specifically prepared to teach in the middle grades, Daniels examined how the participants felt about their ability to support students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs. She found five factors that contributed to their sense of efficacy: 1) appreciation for young adolescents, 2) knowledge of young adolescent development, 3) confidence in teaching, 4) strategies for working with young adolescents, and 5) external stressors. Daniels concluded that, while these criteria were all important, the first two criteria were foundational.

Also concerned with the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, Caldarella and Moya offer insights on the use of yoga with young adolescents. In their literature review of articles on yoga practices with middle schoolers, these researchers examined the literature for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies from 2001 to 2021 and found 12 applicable articles that explore how yoga may affect middle grades students. While the intervention of yoga practice varied across the studies, numerous benefits to students were identified. The most common of these were "improvements in students' mental health, namely emotional regulation, self-esteem, mood,

anxiety, and depression.” Other benefits included improvements in executive function, improved fitness and weight loss, increased sense of belonging, and reduced anxiety in academic performance. Although these are positive signs for including routine yoga practice in middle schools, the authors caution that more studies are needed to confirm these results from this small sample of studies.

Next, Jenkeleit’s autoethnography invites readers into her experience as a middle grades speech therapist during the 2020-2021 school year. In particular, the author reflects on the changes in parent-teacher communication that occurred. Using a Funds of Knowledge framework, Jenkeleit reflects on and analyzes the communication data she collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. She teases out the complexities of new roles and new forms of communication, and underscores the importance of the two-way street, reminding readers that “there will never be true communication and collaboration between parents and teachers if listening and learning does not occur from both sides.”

Finally, Benson and Brown offer a practitioner perspective that positions classrooms as “places of possibility because teachers and students can make them anew each day.” They introduce Muhammad’s (2019) four-tiered framework of historically responsive literacy (HRL) as a tool “for teachers to support students for whom the education system was not designed... [and] for teacher educators who are preparing the next generation of preservice teachers.” The authors designed a 10-day English Language Arts unit on identity that uses HRL to examine excerpts from five novels that depict voices and perspectives of queer, trans, and Black and Brown folx. While in the end the authors were not allowed to teach the identity unit, their discussion of how Whiteness can thwart curriculum that challenges established norms is an important lesson for all educators.

Each of the articles in this issue of *Middle Grades Review* holds the potential to strengthen middle grades education. Together, the pieces illuminate the ways youth think about injustice and they offer related frameworks and curricular jumping off points for discourse and action. They showcase teachers’ concerns about meeting students’ social, emotional and mental health and shed light on promising practices to meet

those needs, including new ways of thinking about partnering with families. As the new year dawns, we are hopeful that readers will find inspiration in these calls for change.

## References

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