

Editorial Remarks

Educators Engaging Young Adolescents

James F. Nagle

Saint Michael's College

Kathleen M. Brinegar

University of Vermont

Correspondence

James F. Nagle

jnagle2@smcvt.edu

© The Authors 2025. Middle Grades Review is the peer-reviewed, diamond open access journal of the [Middle Grades Collaborative](#), published in partnership with the [University of Vermont Press](#). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License ([CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)), which permits copying and redistribution of the unmodified, unadapted article in any medium for noncommercial purposes, provided the original author and source are credited.



Editorial Remarks: Educators Engaging Young Adolescents

James F. Nagle, Saint Michael's College
Kathleen M. Brinegar, University of Vermont

For this issue three middle level educators consider alternative education programs to foster equitable learning and critical thinking for young adolescents. The first two articles examine how a makerspace and a museum can provide learning opportunities that lead to critical perspectives on issues addressed in today's middle schools. The third article makes the case for professional development that focuses on culturally relevant pedagogy in an online learning environment. All three articles stand for innovative practices to meet the needs of young adolescents while addressing the challenges of our present-day society.

The first article, "[Above the Influence: Youth Activism in a School Makerspace](#)," by Lou Lahana, is an extensive case study of The Tech Café, a Social Action-themed Makerspace, that is part of a middle school known as The Island School, situated in lower Manhattan, New York. Grounded in Critical Pedagogy, and Youth Participatory Action Research, The Tech Café allows young adolescents to create projects that address social justice issues. In this practitioner perspective article, Lahana describes how a group of middle schoolers develop projects to examine and advocate for healthy practices around substance-free lifestyle. Projects include board games, short films, songs, sculptures, and podcasts.

The strength of Lahana's article is how detailed his descriptions are of the teaching and learning. From his article many other middle grades educators, who are interested in integrating makerspace practices with social justice learning, can follow his and his students' work to create a makerspace environment that addresses social justice issues using project-based practices.

Devin Winter also explores project-based learning in her essay, "[Past Stories, Present Voices: Exploring Identity and Community Through Museum-School Partnerships](#)." Grounding her article in a literature of museum-school

partnerships as a way to create relevant and authentic curriculum, Winter illustrates how a small local New England museum, the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, creates museum-school partnerships that engage students with an exploration of identity and community, supported by culturally relevant teaching.

In "Charity and Sylvia: Identity, Community, & Love," Winter and a middle school social studies teacher used the artifacts and materials at the museum to develop a unit for middle schoolers on the life and times of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, one of the earliest known queer couples in the US living in Vermont. The unit traces a community's open acceptance of the couple and their leadership among the community during the 1880s in rural Vermont.

Our final research and inquiry article, "[Expanding the Cultural Lens: Implementing an Ongoing Online Professional Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)," is from Cory Brown and colleagues, who studied how to provide professional development—based on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)—to five novice middle grades teachers from different schools in the Midwest during the COVID-19 educational shutdown. Admitting, in the first place, that working with novice teachers on culturally relevant pedagogy is a heavy lift, Brown and colleagues discuss the challenges and benefits for these teachers during one academic year after the beginning of the COVID Pandemic.

The professional development consisted of monthly group discussions on what is culturally relevant pedagogy and how can teachers integrate it into their classrooms, and one-on-one coaching sessions to discuss challenges in the curriculum and the classroom that may make it difficult to make change. Brown and colleagues do a good job illustrating the incremental change among the participants as they slowly understand

how culturally relevant pedagogy can better engage students in content and create stronger relationships among classmates and adults.

These three articles focus on engaging middle level adolescents that can happen in times of isolation like during the COVID Pandemic, or when educators work with innovative environments like makerspaces and museums.

References

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159–165.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675>