# Quantitative and Qualitative Research for Middle Grades Education: Editorial Remarks

**James F. Nagle,** *Saint Michael's College*

A recent resurgence in middle grades education research has expanded the breath and increased the quality of peer-reviewed research. This stems from several sources. It is a partially the result of commentators surveying the middle grades education research landscape and identifying areas that need more substantive and robust inquiry (e.g. Mertens, Caskey, & Flowers, 2016; Yoon, Malu, Schaefer, Reyes, & Brinegar, 2015). It also results from the American Educational Research Association's Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG), which has recently published a research agenda that articulates research topics and questions in three broad areas of middle level education: young adolescents, teaching and learning, and middle schools and structures (MLER SIG, 2016).  In this issue of the *Middle Grades Review* we are pleased to feature a thought-provoking essay and six robust research studies that respond to the above calls to extend our collective research base in middle grades education.

We open this issue with Kleine, Falbe and Previts' essay, "A Call for Self-Study in Middle Level Teacher Education," in which these authors acknowledge the need for longitudinal data sets in middle grades education as called for by Mertens, Caskey, and Flowers (2016); however, they argue for honoring diverse research methodologies in all areas of inquiry and, particularly, for the use of self study in teacher education.  For Kleine, Falbe and Previts, self-study affords "reflective and inquiry-based practices that are definitive of the middle grades philosophy" and provides a model for teacher candidates who can emulate such practices in their teaching. They invite the middle level education research community to "commit to developing wider expertise" through methodologies in which all can engage.

While Kleine, Falbe and Previts advocate for diverse qualitative research approaches such as self study, Olofson and Bishop present an analysis of the upcoming Middle Grades Longitudinal Study (MGLS) designed by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in relation to the *MLER SIG Research Agenda* (MLER SIG, 2016). In "Crossing MGLS with the Middle Grades Research Agenda: A Guide for Researchers," Olofson and Bishop provide a roadmap for how the *MLER SIG Research Agenda* topics and questions align with the items on the upcoming MGLS. In so doing, they provide an invaluable guide for educational researchers interested in mining the data of MGLS to address research issues identified in the *Research Agenda*.  While Olofson and Bishop conclude that the MGLS items do not map perfectly onto the *Research Agenda,* they note substantial overlap (i.e., eight of eleven *Research Agenda* topics are well covered in items of the MGLS) to support empirical quantitative research in middle grades education. An invaluable resource in their article is the appended, interactive database that conducts a detailed crosswalk of the eleven *Research Agenda* topics with the items of the MGLS.[1] Readers are encouraged to download it for their own use.

In the next five research reports we share a mix of qualitative and quantitative research on middle level education. In each they examine at least one area articulated in the *Research Agenda*. Schmeichel, Hughes and Kutner present a review of literature on how adolescents use social media in "Qualitative Research on Youths' Social Media Use: A Review of the Literature." They apply a neoliberal lens that views social media use being "driven by interests and rationales informed by economic concepts, like 'value', 'efficiency', and 'branding'." With this as a central tenet to their inquiry, Schmeichel, Hughes and Kutner use Foucauldian discourse theory to explore how these studies on adolescent social media can "influence readers' perceptions of youths' social media practices, and how they might limit the ways in which young people's social media behaviors were framed in the literature." They

---

[1] This database is available for download on the Middle Grades Review website as part of this issue.

find that studies on social media use by adolescents follow three trends: an uncritical examination of the "intentional design" of these platforms, a static conception of adolescents who use social these platforms, and a focus on young women and girls. In line with their findings Schmeichel, Hughes and Kutner recommend that future research address the underlying role of how social media platforms influence adolescent media use and take a more nuanced understanding of how social media use is part of an adolescent's lived experience.

Next, McParker applies a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach to investigate the intellectual and social identity of three female Burmese refugees in a multicultural middle school. Through interviews and observations McParker concludes that these girls' senses of identity are developed through their understanding of what it means to be a "good student" based on their home country's cultural norms. Further, the multicultural nature of the school, illustrating many ways to become a successful student, allowed these students to align their identity with the norms of the school. Providing appropriate social interactions in school, McParker argues, can improve social and academic engagement among students who are refugees.

Hughes and Quiñones examine another type of social interaction, letter writing, to understand the development of student voice around the theme of bullying. In "Is Sarah a Bully or a Friend?': Examining Students' Text-based Written Expressions of Bullying," the authors investigate how online communication between middle grade students and adult online pen pals can supplement a literacy program. By using a critical literacy lens that "views school bullying within the context of language, power and content" the authors analyze 32 letters from fifth grade students after they read a novel with the central them of bullying. They find that students address bullying in a variety of ways: through text-based interpretations; in relation to friendships; through personal experiences; and by lessons learned about bullying. Hughes and Quiñones recommend that literacy programs can use the theme of bullying as a way to improve literacy skills while at the same time addressing an important societal issue.

Examining another society issue, school violence, Anderson mines seven years of data from 110 districts and 471 middle schools in North Carolina to study the effectiveness of a state-funded matching program for school resource officers (SRO) within middle schools in "Policing and Middle School: An Evaluation of a Statewide School Resource Officer Policy." The data set was analyzed through generalized difference-in-difference and negative binomial hurdle regression designs. Despite North Carolina taxpayers spending over $23 million over four years, Anderson finds there is no relation between increased funding for SROs and overall reported acts of violence. Also, Anderson states that "race was a poor predictor of disciplinary outcomes" and that it is education that enhances school safety. Such findings are in line with existing research on policy (Kingdon, 2011) that illustrates often times a policy does not align with the issue attempting to be addressed.

In the final research article of this issue, "Middle Grades Democratic Education in Neoliberal Times: Examining Youth Social Action Projects as a Path Forward," DeMink-Carthew applies a case study approach to examine how youth social action projects in a middle school can affect student voice. She finds that, while "not all of the initiatives proposed by students were successful, the social action project was nonetheless largely successful in incorporating student voice. This suggests that the process involved in social action is perhaps more important than the outcome." She recommends that authentic opportunities for student voice and leadership are non-negotiable and should be part of every middle school.

The articles in this issue span the breadth of the research areas in the *MLER SIG Research Agenda*: young adolescents; middle grades teaching and learning; and middle schools and structures. They demonstrate a variety of research traditions; incorporate data sources ranging from an in-depth focus on three students to large scale databases containing thousands of students; and contend with a broad array of educational issues from social media use to bullying to funding for school policing. This robust and diverse assembly of research reminds us that rigorous, significant, and meaningful scholarship stems from many perspectives, methods and sources.

**References**

Kingdon, J. W. (2011). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Boston, MA: Longman.

Mertens, S. B., Caskey, M. M., & Flowers, N. (2016). The need for large-scale, longitudinal empirical studies in middle level education research. *Middle Grades Review*, *2*(2).

Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group. (2016). *The MLER SIG research agenda*. Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. Retrieved from http://mlersig.net/research/mler-sig-research-agenda

Yoon, B., Malu, K. F., Schaefer, M., Reyes, C., & Brinegar, K. (2015). Comprehensive and critical review of middle grades research and practice 2000-2013. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 10*(1).