

## Editorial Remarks

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*“Is our emphasis on the group and on conformity in the middle grades contributing to the inhibition of creative ideas and activities?”*

Posing this important question in his groundbreaking 1963 Cornell address, Dr. William Alexander warned of the limitations of homogeneity in middle grades education, limitations he observed in curriculum, instruction, and grouping, among others. Over 50 years later, with the launching of this new journal, we pose a similar question to researchers and practitioners in our shared field, replacing the word ‘in’ with the word ‘to.’ *Is our emphasis on conformity to the middle grades concept contributing to our field’s inhibition of creative ideas?*

Few middle grades scholars would argue with the assertion that there has, over time, emerged a generally accepted doctrine for effective middle schooling. Seminal texts and position papers have for decades promoted practices such as interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, flexible scheduling, and relevant curriculum, to name a few. Further proof of the doctrine’s acceptance is the fact that some academic outlets require manuscripts to address specific middle level tenets or practices in order to be deemed suitable for publication. While we greatly respect, and in fact need, ongoing work in these areas, we also wonder how our field might inadvertently limit its own potential by not consciously and intentionally diversifying its perspectives.

A truly robust conversation about the theoretical underpinnings, research, and practice of educating young adolescents requires voices from different fields and worldviews. With this journal, we hope to fuel the fire that was sparked a half a century ago at the start of the middle grades movement and to invite participation in the

discussion of what it means to educate young adolescents in today’s world.

We are delighted that several very talented scholars and practitioners agree with us and have graciously accepted the invitation to serve on the *Review*’s editorial board. We are pleased to announce that the *Review* is open-source, meaning it is freely available and open to all. It also means that authors can freely post their work, further accelerating discovery. In this increasingly global, knowledge-based society, we want to expand one’s ability to be informed by and build on others’ work. We believe open-access is one important way to accomplish this. Here you will find a tentative roadmap to follow through this inaugural issue. We hope it strengthens our understanding of our shared field through theoretical exploration, empirical research, and practitioner accounts.

We are grateful to Mark Vagle for his willingness to author the inaugural essay. As we strive to integrate more critical perspectives into the middle grades dialogue, he was a natural first choice. In his essay, he states, “An insurrectionist mindset of sorts could be useful today.” We agree. Vagle’s call “to be less responsive to young adolescenCE as a developmental stage and more responsive to young adolescentS as they move through the complicated, contextual, and socially constructed particulars of their lives” sets the stage for one of many provocative debates that could strengthen the foundation of middle grades education.

In their research, Cynthia Reyes and Steve Netcoh take Anfara and Mertz’s definition of theoretical framework (2015) – using theory or a collection of theories as a “lens” or a way to “see” – and demonstrate how theoretical frameworks are used

or overlooked in research on young adolescents and middle grades education. As an outcome of their meta-analysis of articles from two peer-reviewed middle grades journals, they suggest the approach of “theories as more” (Anfara, 2008), where theoretical frame-works act as the “structure” or “scaffolding” for research in middle level education to make stronger associations between theory and middle level educational practice. They mirror Vagle’s call by suggesting that researchers in our field employ theoretical frameworks that appear in education generally but have been neglected in middle level education more specifically, such as critical theory, racialized discourses, disability inquiry, and feminist perspectives.

This theme of expanding the dialogue is echoed in Kathleen Brinegar’s topical content analysis of middle grades research since 2000. Mindful of critics such as Brown (2005), Brinegar mines four major publications of middle level education to identify strengths and gaps in the research of our field. Her review suggests that much in these works focuses on curriculum and instruction, student achievement, and organization – topics that are addressed in the accountability policies of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core State Standards. She ponders, “whether focusing largely on these topics is how the field of middle grades education aspires to be known.” In the end Brinegar urges middle grades researchers to explore more deeply factors such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, family/home life, and value systems to promote positive educational experiences for *every* young adolescent.

Next, Lisa Harrison offers one teacher educator’s example of how we might expand the inquiry and dialogue to better understand every young adolescent. Harrison challenges herself and other teacher educators to teach beyond the traditional notions of middle level pedagogy. In her self-study she uses Gutstein’s (2006) Freireian social justice framework to inquire into the challenges of promoting critical pedagogies to her preservice teachers. She blends attention to young adolescents’ cognitive development with a

mathematics curriculum grounded in social justice pedagogies. Through this, she explicates the nuanced challenges of teaching social justice in a middle grades mathematics classroom while also providing suggestions on how to do so in the diverse socio-economic and cultural context of today’s urban schools.

Finally, as an experienced middle school teacher, Joe Rivers provides a practitioner perspective on the standards and accountability reforms sweeping our country over the past decades. He suggests a type of “convergence” that places middle grades educational philosophy and practice as an overarching framework in implementing these standards. He challenges other middle grades teachers to embrace the progressive reforms of Dewey (1938), Beane (1993), Stevenson and Carr (1993) and others who established middle level curriculum development as integrated, authentic, project and place based, and student negotiated. Rivers sees in the newly created standards of the Common Core, Next Gen and C3 opportunities for convergence between inquiry, critical thinking, and authentic learning that can engage middle grades students.

With these selected articles for our inaugural issue we hope to create a forum for conversation within the field of middle grades education; one that explicitly invites critical perspectives and broadens the discourse of this field. We aim to construct another lively and respectful space for our field to explore middle grades education well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We invite you to be a part of it. And we are hopeful that Dr. Alexander would have approved. ❖

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