

Editorial Remarks 1(3)

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Deeply influenced by educational progressivism, the middle level concept emerged in the 1960s as an effort to respond to the needs of young adolescents by providing schools appropriate for their particular and unique strengths and needs (McEwin & Smith, 2011). Despite the humanistic aims of this social and educational reform movement, relatively little has been published regarding how social justice issues unfold within middle grades education. For this theme issue of *Middle Grades Review*, we invited authors to examine aspects of social justice in relation to the field.

As with our first two issues, *Middle Grades Review* encouraged authors to raise “critical perspectives and broaden the discourse in our field.” We are delighted to share four articles that explore social justice in middle grades education. In the first essay, Ann Milne explores the tension between identity and indigeneity for young adolescents who attend Kia Aroha College, a bilingual (Māori, Samoan, Tongan) middle and high school located in South Auckland, New Zealand. In a world dominated by neo-liberal globalization, Milne asks readers to re-examine how schools can accommodate young adolescents of color as they develop their “Identity” while not losing their “Indigeneity.” After a thorough discussion of how students at Kia Aroha College experience “white spaces” at their school, Milne calls for educators to “ask hard questions about the purpose of schools, whose knowledge counts, who decides on literacy and numeracy as the primary indicator of achievement and success?” This question, and other difficult questions regarding social justice curriculum, multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogies, and anti-oppressive teaching practices, are taken up in the three subsequent articles in this issue. Each explores the limits and challenges of explicating a social justice frame in middle grades education.

In “Beyond Digital Citizenship” Lynn Mitchell explores what social justice education looks like in new digital spaces for young adolescents who are exploring their identities. Mitchell argues that the most common conversations in middle schools about digital citizenship tend to focus on issues of surveillance, safety, cyberbullying, and internet etiquette. While these are important and essential conversations, Mitchell sees a less often explored research topic surrounding digital spaces – youth political identity and democratic participation. In her discussion of TakingITGlobal (TIG), an online youth global justice platform, Mitchell argues that the potential exists for youth to shape diverse identities through such digital technologies. She sees the role of digital citizenship education as addressing youth political identity and empowering youth activism through digital spaces such as TIG. However, to afford such opportunities requires teacher education and educational research to support an expanded role of digital citizenship in youth identity and empowerment.

At the educator preparation level Hilary Hughes, Matthew Moulton and Gayle Andrews use Kumashiro’s (2009) “moments of crisis in critical, justice-oriented teacher education” to share their struggles as teacher educators and their students discomfort when they implement anti-oppressive practices in a middle grades teacher education course. In their extremely honest and authentic portrayal of their teaching practice during this course, Hughes, Moulton and Andrews allow us to see how difficult it can be to change prospective middle grades teacher attitudes and beliefs. While this conclusion is not new to the research on teacher beliefs (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992), Hughes, Moulton, and Andrews provide us with concrete and compelling ways to rethink and practice social justice education at the teacher educator level, with an emphasis on the middle grades.

Finally, Sarah Bonner and Robyn Seglem offer another example from practice working with middle school students using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to explore social justice issues in the novel *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. As in the study conducted by Hughes et al., Bonner and Seglem discuss the discomfort experienced by some of their students as they grappled with the racial and social issues brought up in *Monster*. It is through this disequilibrium that we see change.

These contributions, along with work by Gutstein (2006), Harrison (2015) and others at the intersection of middle level education and social justice, afford us new and important ways to educate prospective middle grades teachers and young adolescents. They also highlight just how difficult this work can be, as practicing social justice education can at times shake us to our moral core. We offer these powerful depictions of practice so as to contribute to the small but growing research base in social justice teaching, multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogies, and anti-oppressive practices within middle level education. ❖

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