Middle Grades Education in the Age of COVID-19: Editorial Remarks

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When we issued this call for manuscripts in late March of 2020, we had no idea how quickly we all would be required to face the steep learning curve pertaining to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This compilation of essays, research, and practitioner perspectives offers a window into how students, teachers and teacher educators responded to the pandemic in the United States. In each of these articles, the themes of flexibility, innovation, and growth are plainly evident.

In "COVID-19, Middle Level Teacher Candidates, and Colloquialisms: Navigating Emergency Remote Field Experiences," Eisenbach, Greathouse, and Acquaviva describe how teacher educators shifted their instruction and curriculum to support student teachers as they, and the rest of the world, moved from in person interactions to remote learning. They focus on the central colloquialisms of "no two days are alike," "expect the unexpected," "plan your lessons, but be prepared to make adjustments," and "relationships and community are key to the classroom." As colloquialisms, these precepts are common tenets for many teacher education programs; yet they took on new meanings in the spring of 2020, which are cogently described by Eisenbach, Greathouse, and Acquaviva.

Continuing with the examination of teacher education in the age of COVID-19, Smith and Falbe dialogue about how the transition to remote learning affected their professional lives in two distinct settings. In "In a Spirit of Curiosity, Concern, Collaboration, and Humility: Considering the Work of Middle Grades Education in the Context of a Pandemic," Smith, a literacy specialist working with teachers in a school district, and Fable, a professor at a middle level teacher education program, compare their daily and weekly interactions with middle level teachers and consider how middle grades students' learning is affected. They observe, "In the context of pandemic, our collective 'middle grades educator conscience' has been busy. We are wondering how the needs of the young adolescent learner are being met at a distance. In particular, we are thinking about issues of access and equity, socio-emotional needs of the young adolescent…."

The focus on teacher education continues in "Teacher Education in the Time of COVID-19: Creating Digital Networks as University-School-Family Partnerships." In this essay, Hodges, Kerch, and Fowler describe their experiences leveraging digital networks as a strategy to maneuver the additional stressors and challenges posed by teaching during COVID-19. Theirs is a hopeful message, as these authors note, "While it can be easy to focus on the negative consequences COVID-19 is likely to have on education, our goal is to focus on one big positive during this time: strengthening university-school-family partnerships." In particular, they consider how such partnerships can support learners across the continuum of instruction to lessen the impacts of trauma.

Trauma-informed practices and teacher self efficacy are the focus of the next two essays. In "Teaching through Collective Trauma in the Era of COVID-19: Trauma-informed Practices for Middle Level Learners,"

Crosby, Howell and Thomas argue for the integration of trauma-informed practices in middle level curriculum and instructional practices. After detailing how the COVID-19 pandemic created traumatic conditions for young adolescents, they posit that "teachers should make more intentional instructional decisions during remote learning to address these pressing needs, using their modified instructional practices to assist students in restoring a sense of safety and to model adaptive ways of functioning." They describe a variety of trauma-informed practices for middle grades students while also noting the importance of self-care for middle level educators in response to the particular conditions of remote learning during the pandemic.

Related to the theme of teacher self-care, Haverback thoughtfully applies theory to practice as she explores how teachers can build self-efficacy while teaching during the pandemic in her essay, "Middle Level Teachers Quarantine, Teach, and Increase Self-Efficacy Beliefs: Using Theory to Build Practice During COVID-19." Using Bandura's (1977) theory on self efficacy, Haverback provides examples of how teachers might use the four aspects of self-efficacy theory in their teaching and learning experiences. She suggests that this moment may be one educators might leverage to become more self-confident and to strengthen their work with young adolescents.

Shifting from addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on middle level education to seeing it as an opportunity for curriculum development, Yoon provides a series of instructional strategies to use the global pandemic as a source of content for middle grades students to "critically analyze the complexities of living in an interconnected world." In "The Global

Pandemic as Learning Opportunities about the World: Extending School Curriculum," Yoon details the importance of integrating the global pandemic into middle grades curriculum. She explains how the topic can enhance middle level instruction in three literacies: global literacy practice, critical literacy practice, and multicultural literacy practice. While she details these practices separately in her essay, she also conveys their interdisciplinary nature as "critical global literacies."

Next in this issue we present child-parent research by Schaefer, Abrams, Kurpis, Abrams, and Abrams, entitled, "'Making the unusual usual:' Students' perspectives and experiences of learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic." This research project investigated how three adolescent girls experienced learning at home during the pandemic. As co-researchers, these authors examined four areas of remote learning at home: 1) how doing school at home was like traditional schooling; 2) how the girls improvised their learning to adapt to their new situation; 3) how the girls responded to a learning environment that was always changing and uncertain; and 4) the opportunities that learning at home provide for the girls. Through these powerful perspectives, the authors offer recommendations to teachers, parents, and students regarding learning in uncertain times.

Like Schaefer et al.'s research, the following three practitioner perspectives reflect the on-the-ground and in-the-moment experiences of teaching and learning during the global pandemic. In the first practitioner perspective Burgess and Anderson describe the experience of a fifth-grade teacher and his students transitioning to remote learning and how community partnerships supported that process. In "Leveraging Community

Partnerships to Engage Digitally Foreign Learners in Response to COVID-19," Burgess and Anderson identify four challenges that community partnerships helped to alleviate: 1) inaccessibility of the internet or lack of devices; 2) inexperience of teacher using technology; 3) engaging fifth graders online; and 4) family engagement. In many cases the authors depict work arounds, stop gap measures, some successes in these four areas. They conclude that no coherent set of policies, structures, or measures provided a comprehensive way to address these challenges. Nonetheless, the authors provide insightful recommendations to teachers based on their successes.

In the next practitioner perspective, Chandler reports on gender differences in learning engagement in his middle grades science classes and in his middle grades school overall. In "Gender Engagement Differences with Remote Learning," this author provides data on the frequency of engagement among his sixth-grade classes, illustrating that girls' level of engagement was higher than boys in this remote learning environment. Chandler thoughtfully connects his observations to broader research on neuroscience, social media, and gender differences.

In the final article of this issue, Combs draws us to a close with her practitioner perspective as a ninth-grade English teacher. She provides an account of her experience with students during the transition to remote learning. In "Success Plan for the Online Learning Experience: Student Engagement, Teacher Accessibility, & Relationships," Combs delves into issues of balance in her professional and personal life. She describes the importance of maintaining student engagement, being accessible for her students, and creating meaningful relationships with them. She also details

how technology afforded opportunities in some cases and created roadblocks in others, concluding that, "maintaining student engagement, being fully accessible as a teacher, and preserving the student-teacher relationship are crucial for success in an online learning environment."

This body of work, written by researchers, teacher educators, students, teachers, and community partners, provides a glimpse into the lives of teachers and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. In it, we see the great challenges inherent in the context. We also see hope and promise. We are heartened to read the work of so many committed people striving to make the best of this disruption, and succeeding.

As we noted, we did not know when we issued the call for manuscripts just how quickly schools would need to shift to remote learning. Perhaps more importantly, we did not know that, by the time the issue went live, the U.S. would be in the midst of dramatic social unrest. Yet we find ourselves, as many have noted, in the midst of two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism. The former is relatively new; the latter, of course, has been present since the very founding of the country.

As white co-editors, we have written elsewhere about [our organization's commitment to antiracism](#) but will restate here that, like many of you, we see the effects of racism in our schools and communities every day. And we acknowledge our shared responsibility to work toward a better tomorrow. We pledge to use our power and platform as journal editors to elevate the visibility and messages of antiracist work and to prioritize the dissemination of perspectives, practices, and policies that aid in the dismantling of unjust, discriminatory, and oppressive educational systems. Please join us in this work.