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Looking Forward by Looking from the Inside Out: The Future of Middle Level Education Research

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While attending the annual conference of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) this past week, we were privy to many conversations among teacher educators and educational researchers about the direction for middle level education research. These discussions were especially prominent during the Convening of the National Middle Grades Research Agenda. During the Convening, the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) unveiled its research agenda for the next five years (MLER SIG, 2016). Across eight areas of middle level education, the agenda lays out influential literature from the past and proposes important research questions to consider for the future. We believe this document should inform both researchers who are already deeply involved in middle level education and researchers from other disciplines who are now beginning to see middle level education as an important area of investigation. We see this document as essential in guiding researchers studying the education of young adolescents and middle level education

In our first non-themed issue of *Middle Grades Review*, we present articles from authors who have an established and strong voice in middle grades education research as well as from those who are newer to the field. In each case these articles address issues raised in the MLER SIG Research Agenda (MLER SIG, 2016). Mertens, Caskey and Flowers start us off with an essay arguing for the need for large-scale, longitudinal empirical studies “to expand and deepen the middle grades knowledge base” (Mertens, Caskey & Flowers, 2016, p.1). They assert that, for middle level education to be considered a distinct area of education research, data must be accessible to researchers and national research groups, including those who may have not focused their attention on this area in the past. After detailing the limited history of large scale empirical studies, Mertens, Caskey and Flowers (2016) make a powerful case that the time is right for these types of studies, particularly now that the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) has initiated a new national, longitudinal study focusing on middle grades education and the MLER SIG has documented areas for future research in its Research Agenda.

In a different vein of research methodology, Olmanson employs New Ethnographic Writing and Weak Theory in his empirical study as a way to critique the dominant discourses around the intersection of technology, early adolescence, and motivation in order to look at this nexus in a more nuanced manner. New Ethnographic Writing is “a process of narrative creation, built out of the researcher’s extended personal experiences within an environment, written in a way that is accessible to the public and pertinent to academics” (Olmanson, 2016, p. 2 citing Goodman, 2006). In his piece, Olmanson narrates extended scenes of lived experiences of teachers and young adolescents using a web-based, space-science curriculum. These scenes highlight the difficulty of drawing theory from such complex human interactions that we call teaching and learning.

Diggs and Akos continue the outsider perspective with their meta-analysis of character education in middle schools. Their rationale for this meta-analysis is based on the lapse in time since the last one (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007) and the fact that in the Berkowitz & Bier study focused primarily on elementary school children. Given the developmental differences between elementary and middle level students, and the great distinctions in school contexts, understanding how character education can be integrated into the middle grades curriculum in a developmental appropriate manner is important. Of the 112 studies reviewed, only 11 articles met Diggs’ and Akos’ criteria for review. While these researchers found that, in the studies reviewed, character education had an applied weak effect on academic, behavior and student outcomes, we found their discussion of exploratory observations most interesting and believe it can serve as a basis for further research in character education at the middle level.

In the two practitioner perspective pieces, Medlock Paul applies a critical lens to middle grades teachers and students and provides strategies for integrating critical literacy in the middle grades classroom, while Nelson describes his experience moving toward proficiency based assessment with his students. Medlock Paul uses McLaughlin and DeVogd's (2004) four elements of critical literacy—reflection on issues of power; examination of complex problems; multiple perspectives taking; and adaptation to specific contexts – to describe practical strategies for teachers to integrate critical literacy into their units of study. She posits that not only should critical literacy help middle level students become more critical consumers of knowledge, but also to help them become self-critical. Nelson describes the extensive use of practice in his skill-centered teaching, which allowed his middle grades students to explore the issues-oriented social studies curriculum in a more autonomous and focused way. When he structured multiple learning opportunities to practice essential skills in his classroom, students were able to design learning activities based on their interests and took greater ownership of their learning.

As the articles in this issue illustrate, there is both great capacity and great need for research at the middle level. The practitioner pieces are based on sound educational research that informed classroom practices. The essay calling for more large scale empirical studies and the empirical studies of different methodologies (ethnography and meta-analysis) shine a light on the importance of a wide and varied landscape of research on middle grades education.

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