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Understanding the Developmental Nature of Young Adolescents: Editorial Remarks

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In this issue of the *Middle Grades Review*, we are pleased to have contributors both from higher education and from middle schools. Each article is rooted in the premise that understanding the developmental needs of young adolescents is essential to providing responsive and effective pedagogy for today's middle grades students. Making the case for creating career education for students in the middle grades; examining trends in middle level structures and practices; exploring changing perceptions of pre-service teachers; and exploring literature and art to promote learning: each article extends our thinking about the provision of meaningful learning opportunities for this age group.

In their opening essay, *Career Exploration at the Middle School Level: Barriers and Opportunities*, Godbey and Gordon present a rationale for creating a career exploration program for middle grades students, exploring both the challenges and benefits of such a program. They note the lack of policies at the state level to require career exploration programs, as well as the absence of certificate programs to prepare counselors and educator in career pathways. Observing that family involvement in children's academic lives often begins to diminish as many young adolescents pull away from parents during these years, the authors propose a set of seven recommendations to bolster career education at the middle level, aimed at increasing student engagement and academic achievement.

The two research studies in this issue are strong examples of robust inquiry in our field. In their study of current trends in middle grades education, *The Status of Middle Schools in the Southeastern United States: Perceptions and Implementation of the Middle School Model*, Alverson, DiCicco, Faulkner and Cook report on survey responses of middle grades teachers in the southeast region of the United States, extending an important line of survey research in middle grades education. The authors report on their survey data, capturing teacher responses from eight states: Alabama, Florida,

Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Based on the responses of 374 randomly selected teachers and administrators, their study investigated the current organizational structures and instructional practices of schools and compared the findings to an earlier study by McEwin and Greene (2011) study. In more instances than not, they found middle grades structures and practices to be more prevalent today than in 2011.

In the second research study of this issue, *Picturing Teacher Agency: Developing Upstanding Heuristics in a Middle Grades Social Studies Methods Course*, Gallagher and Farley focus on how pre-service social studies teachers view themselves as change agents. After centering their investigation at the intersection of middle grades education, social studies education and social justice education, Gallagher and Farley discuss the role of teacher agency in middle grades education. Their qualitative study of six pre-service teachers describes how these pre-service teachers see themselves as upstanders and change agents, providing helpful recommendations for teacher education programs that wish to foster social justice education within their curriculum.

The two practitioner perspective articles, one by a teacher educator and the other by a middle school science teacher, both describe innovative practices designed to engage students to think more critically. Bouton's article, "Wonder" *Through the Eyes of Empathy: A Middle Grades Teacher's Guide*, is both an introduction to the three main components of empathy and an instructive reminder of the importance of incorporating empathy education into the middle grades curriculum. In it, Bouton provides a thoughtful how-to guide, using the critically acclaimed novel, *Wonder*, in order to develop empathy among middle grades students. She outlines the role of empathy in improving cognitive and social skills, and moral development.

Hunkins' practitioner perspective, *The Art of Science: An Exploration of Art Integration in a Science Classroom*, thoughtfully describes her collaboration with an artist-in-residence as she planned and implemented a science curriculum that integrated the visual arts over the course of a year in a middle grades science classroom. Her work explains how she planned the curriculum, addressed the challenges and opportunities, and reported on students' scientific conceptual understanding. She also considers the supports needed to engage learners who may not consider themselves artistically inclined.

Together these five articles provide readers with an important look at the current state of middle level education at multiple levels: policy, structure, and practice. Each offers valuable recommendations for middle grades leaders and teachers to reflect upon, iterate, and apply in their local contexts.

References

- McEwin, C. K., & Greene, M. W. (2011). *The status of programs and practices in America's middle schools: Results from two national studies*. Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.
- Palacio, R. J., (2012). *Wonder*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.