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# A Review of Trends in the Scope of International Scholarship in Middle Level Education, 1989–2019

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## Scholarship in Middle Level Education: Mapping the Terrain

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### Abstract

Middle level education as a field of study has expanded during the last 30 years to include a growing, international knowledge base. The primary purpose of this review essay is to highlight trends in the extent to which refereed scholarship in the field of middle level education has reflected international content and perspectives during the last 30 years. To accomplish this task, the authors conducted a chronological review of the major refereed publications of the Association for Middle Level Education, Adolescent Success, and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Middle Level Education Research (MLER) SIG as well as *Middle Grades Research Journal* and *Middle Grades Review*. The authors also examined AERA conference programs between 2010 and 2019 for international content and perspectives in MLER SIG sessions. While the authors' primary aim was to understand trends in the geographic scope of scholarship in the field, they also gleaned tentative insights about research approaches, theoretical frameworks, and editorial bias that informed a set of recommendations they offered to advance future international work in middle level education. The recommendations include (a) expanding and strengthening worldwide networks of middle grades scholars; (b) building consensus around a middle grades research agenda that has an international dimension; and (c) promoting and engaging in more international scholarship that is theory-driven, uses rigorous, appropriate comparative methodologies, and draws on perspectives from cultures and countries not well represented in the literature.

### Introduction

All academic fields of study are defined and legitimized by “institutional manifestations” (Krishnan, 2009, p. 9) that typically include academic degree programs, designated faculty lines, professional societies, and publications. Scholars who do research about the education of young adolescents come from many disciplines and fields of study including psychology, sociology, and anthropology as well as applied fields like public health, public administration, and, of course, education. While researchers from many academic fields are interested in young adolescents and education, a well-defined “community of committed, passionate, knowledgeable scholars and practitioners” (Virtue, 2020a, p. 398) studies the education of young adolescents as members of *the field of middle level education*.

This international community of scholars engages in the production of knowledge about the education of young adolescents through refereed scholarship disseminated by three professional organizations that are international in scope: the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, formerly National Middle School Association [NMSA]) and the Middle

Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), both based in the United States, and Adolescent Success (formerly Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA), based in Australia. All three of these organizations have international memberships, and AMLE and Adolescent Success have formal affiliations with each other and with organizations based in other countries. The MLER SIG has mission focused specifically on the production and dissemination of middle level education research that it achieves through academic conference sessions and two handbook series it endorses (MLER SIG, n.d.). AMLE and Adolescent Success have broader missions than the MLER SIG that encompass practitioner professional development, advocacy and reform, and school improvement. However, both organizations also have a strong commitment to the production and dissemination of knowledge through academic conferences, research networks, and publications including *Middle School Journal* and *Research in Middle Level Education Online* published by AMLE and *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling* published by Adolescent Success. The infrastructure for middle level education scholarship also includes the journals *Middle*

*Grades Review*, published by the University Libraries of the University of Vermont, and *Middle Grades Research Journal*, published by Information Age Publishing.

Expanding and deepening the knowledge base in middle level education is an endeavor that must extend beyond national boundaries. As Virtue (2009) argued, “The forces of globalization, the universality of [early] adolescence and schooling, and the ethical imperatives of educational research demand that middle level education researchers broaden the geographic scope of their activities” (p. xxv). The primary purpose of this review essay is to highlight trends in the extent to which refereed scholarship in the field of middle level education has reflected international content and perspectives during the last 30 years. To accomplish this task, we conducted a chronological review of the major refereed publications of AMLE, Adolescent Success, and the MLER SIG as well as *Middle Grades Research Journal* and *Middle Grades Review*. We also examined AERA conference programs between 2010 and 2019 for international content and perspectives in MLER SIG sessions. While our primary aim was to understand trends in the geographic scope of scholarship in the field, we also gleaned tentative insights about research approaches, theoretical frameworks, and editorial bias that informed a set of recommendations we offer to advance future international work in middle level education.

### **NMSA Goes International: 1989–2008**

Founded in 1973 in the US, NMSA expanded in the 1980s to include individual members and affiliations with associations in Canada and Europe (i.e., European League of Middle Level Education). This expansion occurred during a period of heightened interest in education abroad following reports like *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) that used international comparisons of student performance to criticize the U.S. education system as well as the rapid globalization of the world economy and communications infrastructure as Cold War tensions eased.

In 1989, NMSA held its first-ever annual conference outside the US in Toronto, Canada. On the eve of the conference, the organization published an expanded, international-themed issue of its flagship publication, *Middle School*

*Journal*. The cover of the September 1989 issue featured a teaser, “Intercultural education—a special middle school responsibility,” and in the introduction to the issue editor John Lounsbury (1989) boldly asserted:

No other level of education provides so opportune a time for furthering the goals of multicultural education, developing a global perspective, teaching the world, and internationalizing the curriculum. The modern middle school’s classrooms and corridors must be hospitable to the diversity that exists in our world and which impinges on our lives more directly than ever before. The attitudes about others formed during these critical years tend to endure. The ultimate fate of our one world lies in the collective hands of early adolescents. (p. 3)

The themed issue included articles about enhancing global education and multicultural perspectives (Alexander, 1989; Gill, 1989; Howard, 1989; Manning, 1989), peace education (Alessi, 1989), and geography education (Gauzy & Eudaly-Burkett, 1989) as well as reports about middle level education in various countries. Some of the countries represented in the issue included Canada (Campbell, 1989; Fasano, 1989; Stewart-Lott, 1989), England (Tickle, 1989), Japan (Abiko, 1989), Korea (Fuller, 1989), the Netherlands (Darst, 1989), and New Zealand (Crouse & McGee, 1989). The authors of the practice-oriented articles in volume (e.g., Alessi; Alexander; Gauzy & Eudaly-Burkett; Gill; Howard; Manning) specifically referenced American contexts and audiences, and their purpose seemed to be to influence practice in American middle level schools rather than to advance a coordinated international reform agenda.

In one of the articles, former NMSA president James Garvin (1989) called upon the organization to become a global leader in exploring essential aspects of young adolescent education. Despite the sense of urgency regarding global and international studies of middle level education conveyed in the themed issue, during the next two decades NMSA publications included only sporadic international contributions from authors in countries including Australia (de Jong & Chadbourne, 2007; Hudson, 2007; Whitehead, 2005), Bermuda (Tully et al., 2006), Canada (Christopherson, 2002; Erlandson & McVittie, 2001; Field & Olafson, 1998; Kist, 2004;

Newman, 1993; Peterson & Belizaire, 2006; Ziegler & Mulhall, 1994), New Zealand (Neville-Tisdale, 2002; Nolan & Brown, 2002), and Singapore (Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). These contributions came at a time of heightened interest in education abroad during the 1990s and into the 2000s that can be attributed, at least in part, to U.S. performance on international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

### **An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents: 2009**

Twenty years after the Toronto NMSA conference and the publication of the international-themed issue of *Middle School Journal*, Mertens et al. (2009) edited *An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents*. In the introductory chapter to the volume, Virtue (2009) asserted that the field of middle level education had focused largely on the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, while most young adolescents in the world live in other countries and speak languages other than English. In the foreword, the editors argued:

We can no longer afford to wait to increase cross-national and cross-cultural understandings of the educational processes that are involved in structuring schools and the teaching and learning environments for students 10–15 years old. ... We need to engage in global educational discourses where we can learn from others and find out if there are any generalized statements about the schooling of young adolescents that are valid across the world. We need to benefit from the collective knowledge that can be generated from across the globe as we face challenges associated with educating young adolescents. (Mertens et al., p. ix)

This groundbreaking volume, which was sponsored by the MLER SIG and NMSA, represented an important pivot from prior international work in the field. While international work in middle level education had, up to that point, primarily focused on describing or comparing a particular practice or issue in one or more national contexts, the editors of this volume intended to promote cross-national dialogue and inquiry into a

number of common challenges in middle level education.

The volume included contributions from 14 countries: Australia, Brazil, China, India, Ireland, Germany, Lebanon, New Zealand, Russia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. Moreover, because each author followed a common template based on various aspects of middle level education, the editors could look across chapters to draw generalizations about the status of middle grades education worldwide. Anfara (2009) observed that the issues and reform agendas in these countries could be clustered in five categories: (a) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (b) teacher-related issues, including training, supply, and motivation; (c) accessibility to schooling as it relates to such issues as social class, gender, and rurality; (d) accountability systems and high-stakes testing; (e) and other issues particular to one or a few countries such as leadership, student motivation, or school transitions.

*An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents* marked a turning point in middle level education scholarship, and it “served as a framework for publications with an international focus in the decade to come” (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 14). During the next decade, both the scope and depth of analysis expanded in comparative and international middle level scholarship.

### **Expanding the Scope of International Scholarship: 2010–2019**

Schaefer et al. (2016) conducted a content analysis of refereed publications from AMLE (and, formerly, NMSA), the handbook series sponsored by the MLER SIG, and *Middle Grades Research Journal*. They identified three distinct categories of international studies evident in scholarship published since 2009, “Studies that addressed the influences of various international practices on American settings; studies that compared middle level settings and/or practices among nations; and international reports that described middle level practices found in various countries—predominately English-speaking ones” (p. 15). A discussion in the following paragraphs of these studies, as well as more recent work published since the review by Schaefer and colleagues, helps illustrate the expanded scope of middle level education scholarship during the last decade.

*Middle Grades Research Journal*, established in 2006, published five international studies since 2010. Topics and settings included STEM education in Turkey (Ayas et al., 2013), literacy in Canada (Peterson et al., 2010), and reading education in Belgium (Merchie & Van Keer, 2013; Van Keer & Vanderlinde, 2010) as well as a comparative study about middle grades science teaching practices in Japan and the US (Sachiko, 2011). Since it was launched in 2015, the journal *Middle Grades Review* has published work from scholars in Canada (Mitchell, 2016) and New Zealand (Milne, 2016; Nelson, 2015) as well as a cross-cultural study involving participants from the US and Taiwan (Hsu et al., 2017).

Information Age publishes the *Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education* series and the *Handbook of Resources in Middle Level Education* series, both of which are endorsed by the MLER SIG. Six volumes of each series were published in the decade since 2009. The volumes in the *Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education* included contributions from Australia (Bahr & Pendergast, 2010; Humphrey, 2015; Main, 2018; Vicars & Senior, 2015) and Canada (Campbell, 2015; Chan & Schlein, 2015), and the volumes in the *Handbook of Resources in Middle Level Education* included contributions from Australia (Main, 2016a, 2016b; Main & O'Neil, 2018; Pendergast, 2016a, 2016b) and Israel (Goldfus & Karni-Tagger, 2016). It is worth noting that the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Middle Grades Education* (Mertens et al., 2016) included five entries authored by scholars based outside the US, while the first edition sponsored by NMSA in 2005 included none (Anfara et al., 2005). MLER SIG sessions at the annual AERA conference also provide an important venue for the dissemination of middle grades scholarship. Between 2010 and 2019, five presentations featured scholars based outside the US.

Adolescent Success, based in Australia, publishes *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling* twice per year with one to three refereed articles in each issue. While most contributions have come from Australia, some of the refereed articles published in recent years were from New Zealand (e.g., Dowden & Fogarty-Perry, 2017; Poskitt, 2016; Poskitt & Bonne, 2016).

AMLE publishes two refereed journals, *Middle School Journal* and *Research in Middle Level Education Online*. The September 2012 issue of

*Middle School Journal* was an international-themed issue: Educating Adolescents Around the World. The issue included articles about transition programs in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the US (Andrews & Bishop, 2012), area-based initiatives in France and the United Kingdom (Miller et al., 2012), preparation of teachers in American Samoa (Zuercher et al., 2012), applied learning and community partnerships in Australia (Pridham & Deed, 2012), and writing in the context of a school-community partnership in Canada (McClay et al., 2012). The issue also included essays that called for increasing internationalization in the field of middle level education (Stacki, 2012; Virtue, 2012) and incorporating global competencies in middle grades programs (Conk, 2012). In addition to the international articles in the September 2012 themed issue, *Middle School Journal* included contributions from Canada in volumes 41 (Dooner et al., 2010) and 44 (Portier et al., 2013) and from New Zealand in volume 45 (Nelson & Bishop, 2013).

*Research in Middle Level Education Online* published six articles with authors from outside the US during the last decade. Topics and locations included teachers' perceptions of new literacies and technology in China and the US (Spires et al., 2012), teachers' perceptions of struggling readers in Canada (Moreau, 2014), preservice math teacher training (Avcu, 2019) and students' vocabulary development (Ilter, 2019) in Turkey, and school transitions (Coffey et al., 2013) and features of effective professional development (Main & Pendergast, 2015) in Australia. The journal had an increase in submissions from outside the US between 2010 and 2019 (see Table 1). Approximately 9% of submissions to the journal were from outside the US from 2010 to 2014, while the percentage increased to more than 12% over the next five-year period.

The increase in submissions to *Research in Middle Level Education Online* from a wider range of countries may be related to significant changes to the dissemination infrastructure that included AMLE partnering with Taylor and Francis as the publisher of both *Middle School Journal* and *Research in Middle Level Education Online* beginning in 2015. During the first two years of the relationship, full text downloads of articles increased from approximately 500 per quarter to nearly 9,000, and the number of submissions increased approximately 30%. By 2019, the journal logged

nearly 20,000 downloads per quarter, with 45% of downloads coming from outside the United States. Leading countries for downloads of articles

from 2018 to 2019 were Philippines, India, United Kingdom, Australia, Nigeria, Canada, and Norway.

**Table 1**

*Number of Submissions to Research in Middle Level Education Online by Country of Author, 2010–2019*

| Country of Author or Co-Author | Number of Submissions 2010–2014 | Number of Submissions 2015–2019 | Total Number of Submissions 2010–2019 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Australia                      | 3                               | 0                               | 3                                     |
| Canada                         | 5                               | 2                               | 7                                     |
| China                          | 1                               | 0                               | 7                                     |
| Ethiopia                       | 0                               | 2                               | 2                                     |
| Finland                        | 1                               | 0                               | 1                                     |
| Iran                           | 0                               | 1                               | 1                                     |
| New Zealand                    | 1                               | 1                               | 2                                     |
| Rwanda                         | 0                               | 2                               | 2                                     |
| South Africa                   | 0                               | 1                               | 4                                     |
| Turkey                         | 3                               | 9                               | 12                                    |
| United Arab Emirates           | 1                               | 0                               | 1                                     |
| United Kingdom                 | 0                               | 1                               | 1                                     |
| United States                  | 140                             | 136                             | 276                                   |

### **Recommendations for 2020 and Beyond**

Since 1989, the field of middle level education has clearly demonstrated a shift toward increased internationalization of scholarship and a greater recognition of the need for global perspectives. To help move the field forward in this regard, we offer three recommendations.

#### **Recommendation 1: Expand and Strengthen Worldwide Networks of Scholars**

We recommend members of the field expand and strengthen worldwide networks of middle grades scholars. AMLE and Adolescent Success both have international memberships and a worldwide network of members and affiliate

organizations. Three AMLE affiliates are based in Canada—the Middle Years Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Manitoba Middle Years Association, and the Saskatchewan Middle Years Association—and nearly 35% of AMLE's international members (N = 1,627) are from Canada, as depicted in Table 2. The European League of Middle Level Education (ELMLE) is an AMLE affiliate formed in the 1980s that has member schools in every corner of Europe and in the Middle East and India. While ELMLE member schools are geographically diverse, the schools tend to be international schools or American schools in which the language of instruction is English. AMLE hosts an annual conference that draws attendees and presenters from outside the US, and AMLE online resources are accessed by

educators from more than 100 countries around the world. While AMLE has a large American membership base, the organization's strategic plan aims to position itself as "the preeminent national and international organization for middle level education" (AMLE CEO Stephanie Auditore, personal communication, August 28,

2020). The organization has planned and implemented recent initiatives to engage with educators in India, South Korea, Guatemala, and Canada, and these activities may open up new opportunities for middle level researchers to generate scholarship from these locales.

**Table 2**

*AMLE International Membership by Type, 2020*

| <b>Member Type</b>        | <b>Canada</b> | <b>Other International</b> |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| Individual Members        | 181           | 75                         |
| School Members (Building) | 15            | 38                         |
| School Members (Staff)    | 385           | 986                        |

*Source: AMLE*

Adolescent Success has formal affiliations with the New Zealand Association of Intermediate and Middle Schools and AMLE. The annual conference is promoted as The International Conference for Adolescent Success (formerly, The International Conference for the Middle Years of Schooling). In an attempt to better reflect the international aspirations of Adolescent Success, its annual conference was held in Singapore at the Australian International School in September 2014. Although a smaller conference, it drew a wider international attendance with participants from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Adolescent Success's annual conference was held in Singapore again in 2016. In 2018 an Action Research Professional Development Program was launched in Singapore and included three school teams from Singapore, four from Australia, and one from New Zealand. Adolescent Success has also linked its members to global experiences through their Finland Study Tours in 2018 and 2019 and planned Bali Green School Tour and High Tech High school in California, USA. The impetus behind these tours is to provide members opportunities to learn from other schools and cultures around intentional practices that are effective when educating the young adolescent learner.

The MLER SIG currently has 138 members, most of whom are from the US. Only 3.6% of the

membership is from countries outside the US, including New Zealand, Australia, Austria, and China. In contrast, 14% of the overall membership of AERA is international. Notably, the SIG sessions included no presentations from Canada at the 2019 conference in Toronto, even though Canadian scholars have contributed to the middle level literature base more frequently than scholars from other countries outside the US. MLER SIG leadership should seek ways to connect with AERA members who do research on young adolescent education but are not members of the SIG and connect with investigators on ongoing international research projects, like Global Early Adolescent Study (<https://www.geastudy.org/>). The SIG may want to also consider placing a strategic focus on international middle grades research by, for example, hosting international middle grades symposia or highlighting the research contributions of international scholars at SIG events.

### **Recommendation 2: Build a Research Agenda with an International Dimension**

We recommend members of the field build consensus around a middle grades research agenda that has an international dimension. The current *MLER SIG Research Agenda* (MLER SIG, 2016), endorsed by AMLE and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, was drafted with input from scholars based in

Australia and New Zealand; however, it lacks any explicit attention to international perspectives or a call for cross-national or comparative study of the issues it encompasses. Calling for increased internationalization and comparative research, Virtue (2009) proposed a set of questions that could help inform an agenda for comparative and international research in middle level education:

- What kinds of curricula, instructional practices, assessment systems, and school organizational structures exist for young adolescent learners (a) in places outside the USA, (b) in non-English speaking and/or non-Western countries, or (c) in cross-cultural contexts in the United States or elsewhere?
- How is the concept of “young” or “early” adolescence constructed in societies within which such concepts exist? How is young adolescence defined by educational policies and practices in different cultural contexts around the world?
- What can international, comparative, or cross-cultural research teach us about effective education for young adolescent learners?
- How are educators prepared to teach and counsel young adolescent learners in countries throughout the world? What policies govern their preparation and licensure? (Virtue, 2009, p. xxiii)

Anfara (2009) noted that the editors of *An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents* identified seven areas in which major research efforts were under way in the 14 countries featured in the volume:

1. student achievement, assessment, and accountability in Australia, Germany, India, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates;
2. teacher education/preparation and professional development in Australia, Germany, India, South Africa, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates;
3. young adolescent health and wellness in Brazil, Russia, and Rwanda;
4. young adolescent development in Australia, Brazil, China, India, Lebanon, and Russia;

5. technology and integration of technology in Australia, China, India, Lebanon, Russia, Rwanda, and Turkey;
6. curricular and pedagogical issues in New Zealand, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates; and
7. issues of heterogeneous grouping and student diversity, including gender, race, ethnicity, and poverty in India, Ireland, New Zealand, Russia, and Rwanda. (Anfara, 2009, p. 66)

Some of the seven areas could provide a basis for an international middle grades research agenda and serve as a starting point for building a network of scholars in key countries. Teacher education/preparation and professional development (item 2) is one particular area MLE SIG members identified as a focus for cross-national investigation (Ellerbrock et al., 2020). Related to issues of diversity (item 7), Stacki (2012) issued a particularly pointed call for comparative and international studies of gender in the middle grades in the guest editorial for the 2012 international-themed *Middle School Journal* issue:

Many researchers, myself included, believe gender is a key area of focus for comparative and international studies at the middle level. As students move into the middle grades, physical and social development brings new concerns for young women who are often without empowered female role models and teachers to help them succeed. Young women may face harassment, lack of developmentally appropriate spaces, and lack of guidance for self-esteem and affective concerns. They struggle to stay in school, often in male-dominated environments that can be hostile and not conducive to their continued success. (p. 6)

### **Recommendation 3: Promote and Engage in More High Quality International Scholarship**

We recommend members of the field promote and engage in more international scholarship that is theory-driven, uses rigorous, appropriate comparative methodologies, and draws on perspectives from cultures and countries not well represented in the literature. We highlighted several studies that used an international comparative approach (e.g., Sachiko, 2011; Spires et al., 2012), and *An International Look at Educating Young*

*Adolescents* was structured in a way that enabled the volume editors to draw comparisons across sites (Anfara, 2009; Mertens et al., 2009). Such rigorous, appropriate comparative methodologies and approaches can yield valuable insights that will inform the field of middle level education and should be a priority moving forward (see, e.g., Bray et al., [2007] for a more thorough treatment of these methodologies and approaches).

While some international studies were grounded in a strong, explicit theoretical framework (e.g., Dooner et al., 2010; Hsu et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2010; Van Keer & Vanderlinde, 2010), many articles offered descriptions of practices or programs without connecting the ideas to theoretical constructs that help to build the knowledge base. This pattern in the international literature echoed the concerns Reyes and Netcoh (2015) raised about the inconsistent explication and application of theoretical frameworks in middle level education research, in general. Future international and comparative work in middle level education should have strong, explicit theoretical and conceptual frameworks that help scholars engage in dialogue and the search for knowledge across cultural and national contexts.

Middle level education scholars should also seek to learn from and with their peers from places not well represented in the middle level literature or from scholars of young adolescent education who may do their work in other fields or discourse communities. The editors of *An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents* (Mertens et al., 2009) succeeded at amplifying many voices from places not well represented in the middle level literature, such as Brazil, China, India, Ireland, Germany, Lebanon, Russia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Korea, and United Arab Emirates. More recently, *The International Handbook of Middle Level Education Theory, Research, and Policy* (Virtue, 2020b) published by Routledge included contributors from American Samoa, Norway, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Turkey.

Places in Africa, Asia, and Latin America remain underrepresented in the middle level literature, and journal and book editors in middle level education must be strategic and intentional in seeking to build a knowledge base informed by perspectives from everywhere young adolescents are educated in the world. A notable exception is

the book *Educating Adolescent Girls Around the Globe: Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Stacki and Baily (2015), which included chapters from Cameroon, China, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Malawi, Peru, and South Africa.

### Concluding Thoughts

We illustrated in this essay that the field of middle level education has been informed to varying rates and degrees by scholars from many countries, and we also observed that the editorial slant of much of the scholarship in the field has appeared to have a notably Americentric bias that has hindered the pursuit of universal truths about young adolescent education. As Cummings (2003) observed in *The Institutions of Education*:

Most who comment on and work in education have a surprisingly limited perspective, either because they have not been exposed to educational practice in other settings or because they filter their exposure through the lenses of a particular discipline or national experience. (p. 7)

Leading scholars in the field have tended to consider America as “ground zero” for middle grades education reform and the rest of the world is merely trying to catch up. For example, reflecting on accounts of middle grades reforms in the 14 countries featured in *An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents*, Anfara (2009) asked, “Are the tenets of the middle school philosophy that are consistently agreed upon by all of the major American players ... *now* [emphasis added] taking on some degree of international importance?” (p. 65). Similarly, two decades earlier Lounsbury (1989) wrote, “It appears that the movement to establish distinctive middle level schools *has finally caught the attention* [emphasis added] of the public, perhaps even the world” (p. 3). While the international handbook (Mertens et al., 2009) marked a significant shift in its treatment of international perspectives compared to the 1989 *Middle School Journal* themed issue, certain underlying assumptions about the exceptional position of American middle level education globally had not changed. Indeed, the Americentric paradigm in the field of middle level education has been persistent. As Cummings (2003) explained:

Arguably, the dominant paradigm for thinking about change, at least in the USA, is

to assume that societies constantly improve through a graduated series of thoughtful reforms. An additional twist on this paradigm is to assume that these changes are occurring around the world and converging in a common direction, and that that direction has a striking resemblance to the American system. (p. 29)

To move the field of middle level education forward, scholars must embrace and promote a paradigm shift grounded in recognition that the reforms American scholars call “the middle school concept” are but a particular manifestation of worldwide trends in educational reform as societies around the world have addressed the needs of students during early adolescence. Every society has had to grapple with the tensions, conditions, and dilemmas that gave rise to the “middle school concept” in the US half a century ago—growing school-age population, new knowledge about human development, political and social upheaval and the recognition of civil and human rights, globalization of the economy, and recognition of the need for responsive primary to secondary school transitions or “bridging” institutions, to name just a few. In Australia, for example, the introduction of middle schooling as a third tier of schooling was not driven by political or economic imperatives, as in the United Kingdom (Griffin & Brock, 2002) but, rather, the need to provide a more developmentally appropriate educational experience for young adolescent learners (Barratt, 1998; Main, 2016c). Increased understanding of brain development, the malleability of the brain, and the significant window of opportunity afforded during early adolescence to capitalize on this developmental period have been particularly influential drivers of Australian middle grades reform. During the last 30 years, the field of middle level education has expanded to include contributions from scholars from more than a dozen countries. This trend must continue, and the field must work to reposition these “other” perspectives and voices from the margins to the middle as members of the field seek a more unified, global approach to the generation and dissemination of knowledge. This can be achieved by expanding and strengthening international networks of middle grades scholars, defining a middle level research agenda with an international dimension, and promoting rigorous, high-quality comparative and international

scholarship focused on young adolescent education.

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