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Clarion Calls for Change: Editorial Remarks

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As 2021 winds down, we are surrounded by reminders of the substantial challenges faced, and costs endured, for many over the past two years. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the thread connecting the articles in this year-ending issue of *Middle Grades Review* is one of calling for change. From essays to research to practitioner perspectives, the authors in this issue use their chosen genre to call for critical shifts in middle grades education.

This issue's opening essay, "Stimulating a Gradual and Progressive Shift to Personalize Learning for All: There is Magic in the Middle," is a call for a more personal and flexible approach to learning for middle grades students and teachers alike. Autumn Turk asserts that such personalization is a particularly good match at the middle level, as structures such as teams and block scheduling can facilitate the kind of flexibility and collaboration required for successful personalization. Acknowledging both the challenge and the opportunity inherent in the current pandemic, Turk speaks from personal experience in her school and district, and calls on leaders broadly to "reimagine what learning can feel like in their schools" (p. 9), contending that "personalized learning starts with a courageous vision for change, stimulates persistence and hope for a reimagined educational system, and promises a better future for our students by focusing on the whole child and promoting equity" (p. 9).

This call for greater equity is taken up in the issue's second essay: "Overcoming Barriers: De-Tracking to Teach for Social Justice." In it, Stephanie White extends Turk's focus on school structures as a lever for change by examining the racist effects of tracking. The essay details how tracking negatively impacts Black and Latinx learners and describes the obstacles that stand in the way of de-tracking, despite its more equitable outcomes. With a particular focus on mathematics, White observes that "the negative effects of tracking can only fully be dismantled by eliminating the policy" (p. 11) and recommends specific areas of future research that could inform such modifications.

Continuing the call for antiracist practices, Beschorner, Ferrero, & Burnett report on their single case study into how one middle school principal created space for middle school students to have inter- and intra- racial dialogues in "Creating Brave Space: Middle Schoolers Discuss Race." The researchers insightfully unpack the process and explore the role of mentorship in racial literacy development within the context of this study. They also underscore the importance of planning and relationships in this critically important work, shedding light on both successes and missed opportunities experienced along the way.

An explicit call for change is also seen in "America's Middle Schools: Examining Context, Organizational Structures, and Instructional Practices," Alverson, DiCicco, Faulkner, and Cook's report of survey research on the status of middle schools in the United States. Based on their analysis of over 1600 responses from principals and teachers, the authors conclude that the status of schools' implementation of the middle school concept remains largely unchanged in the past decade. These researchers observe, "While there are some glimmers of improvement, unfortunately the results seem to highlight the stagnant progress in implementing middle grades practices" (p. 16). They state that their "desire is for this status report to be a call to action" that will result in "a renewed focus to launch fundamental changes in policy, teacher preparation, school structures, and instruction, so young adolescents will have the schools they desperately deserve" (p. 17).

Alverson and colleagues' call to disturb the status quo is reflected in the next article, "Poverty and Middle Level Achievement in a Common Core State: What are We Missing?," in which we see, yet again, the disturbing relationship between material resources and student outcomes. In this study, Davis uses a nonexperimental quantitative case study with secondary data analysis to determine how socioeconomic status and student achievement on high-stakes assessments are related. Her study identifies an "inverse relationship between

school socioeconomic status... and school grades... that is, the poorer a school is, the lower the grades, and the wealthier a school, the higher the grades” (p. 8). Davis’s research adds a middle-grades specific emphasis to the considerable and longstanding body of work establishing the connection between socioeconomic status and student outcomes (e.g., Coleman, 1966), despite longstanding attempts at changes in policy, pedagogy, and curriculum. To promote change, Davis calls for educators to adopt a strengths-based model and a growth mindset and she includes related recommendations.

In the final research article in this issue, “Teacher Candidates Collaborate to Create Place-Based Integrated Curriculum,” Wall and Norman’s study suggests yet another kind of change for middle grades education. Recognizing the educative potential of interpreting sites through historical, natural, and cultural lenses, these researchers contend that place-based learning can be a vehicle for enacting the kind of challenging, exploratory, relevant, integrative, and diverse curriculum advocated for by the Association for Middle Level Education (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; National Middle School Association, 2010). Wall and Norman also note that, “collaboration is an expectation and reality in middle schools, so it is important for teacher candidates to experience a model of collaborating with professional peers” (p. 4). Using interpretive phenomenology analysis, they “foregrounded local sites as possibilities for learning” and then examined place-based learning as a catalyst for teacher candidate collaboration. Given the relative paucity of recent middle grades research into integrative curriculum, and despite having to truncate their study due to Covid-19 pandemic, Wall and Norman offer an important contribution to understanding how we increase the likelihood of meaningful and relevant learning opportunities in future middle grades classrooms.

Issues of *Middle Grades Review* close with a practitioner perspective, providing educators in the field with the final word. This issue is no exception. Nelson’s “Teaching Social Identity” offers readers a glimpse into a middle grades classroom that places “social identity as a central curricular pillar.” In this piece, Nelson considers social identity in the context of early adolescence and provides examples of engaging learning opportunities that both help students explore

social identity and make meaningful connections to disciplinary content. In keeping with this issue’s other calls for change, Nelson hopes this work will influence “... an American society where, of late, the look and feel of reckoning for social justice has significantly shifted.”

While this past year has required persistence and perseverance among educators and education researchers, it is a welcome relief to see the authors of these articles committed to a middle grades education that is equitable, authentic, and meaningful for all learners and educators.

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