

May 2022

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Recommended Citation

Nagle, J. F., & Bishop, P. A. (2022). The Importance of Relationships in Middle Grades Education: Editorial Remarks. *Middle Grades Review*, 8(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol8/iss1/1>

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The Importance of Relationships in Middle Grades Education: Editorial Remarks

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The publication of this issue of the *Middle Grades Review* coincides with the tragic timing of two mass shootings by 18-year-old boys, one at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, and another at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. At the time of this publication there is very little public information about these boys' lives - how they grew up, what they were like in school, who their friends were, how they were supported in their families, at their schools, or in their communities. A lingering question for many involves the quality of relationships these boys experienced as they made their respective ways through school. While this was not a theme issue for the *Review*, we cannot help but observe how the articles focus on the importance of relationships and meaningful conversations.

The issue begins with Nicole Hesson's essay, entitled "#MeToo and the Middle Level." In it, Hesson includes both anecdotes and statistical data about the need to provide meaningful and comprehensive sex education in elementary and middle schools. Hesson advocates for a rights-based approach in which young adolescents have bodily autonomy, the curriculum goes beyond contraception and STIs and includes social issues around sexuality (LGBTQ topics, gender norms, harassment, and pleasure), and relationship dynamics are explicitly taught (Berglas et al., 2014). At the core of Hesson's argument, we see that developing trusting relationships is critical in order to have real and authentic discussions about gender, sex, and power.

In "The Middle School Concept Implementation Gap: A Leadership Lens," we note another focus on relationships. Julia Rheume examined two case studies about middle school leadership, one looking at Canadian middle schools and another investigating U.S. schools using the three criteria of the Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership (DRMLL) model (Brown et al., 2002). Rheume offers three findings. First, while middle level educational leaders valued developmentally responsive practices for young adolescents, there were gaps in implementation,

especially in practices such as acknowledging the importance of student voice. Second, to be responsive to their staff's development, middle school leaders needed to empower, support, and encourage risk taking to support adolescents' growth and development. Third, middle level leaders valued some middle school organizational structures over others. That is, they prioritized teaming, common planning time and flexible scheduling over advisory and curriculum integration. Rheume synthesizes these findings by noting that "relationships underpin much of the work of middle school leaders. In addition to being developmentally responsive, middle school leaders would benefit from seeing relationships as another major lens through which to view their work."

In a quantitative study using descriptive statistics and odds ratio effect sizes Edosomwan, Young, Young, and Tholen found that taking advanced (i.e., algebra in eighth grade) mathematics courses greatly increased a student's chances of earning calculus credit in high school. However, the results indicated that taking double advanced (i.e., geometry in eighth grade) only statistically significantly improved the odds of Asian students earning calculus credit in high school while statistically significantly lowered the odds of earning calculus credit for Black and Latinx students. The authors assert that African American and Latinx students may be victims of *elusive opportunities*, which is a lack of access to opportunities that are needed due to a lack of resources at the schools they attend. This lack of resources is both organizational and relational. From an organizational perspective, 50% of high schools do not offer calculus at all and several states require three or fewer mathematics courses in high school. From a relational perspective, Edosomwan and colleagues observe that African American and Latinx students may elect not to enroll in advanced STEM courses in high school due to a lack of a critical mass of counterparts. Lack of effective counseling support was another primary factor contributing

to African American and Latinx student underrepresentation.

As the first three articles conveyed, meaningful curriculum, a relational leadership framework, and organizational structures and policies can all contribute to a more productive middle school experience for young adolescents. In the fourth-- "Creating Brave and Productive Learning Environments for Young Adolescents: Parents' Perspectives of Teacher-Parent and Teacher-Student Relationships"-- Rogers and Hyson reviewed eight studies that examined teacher-parent relationships in order to delve into the perceptions of parents with students who have disabilities. They locate their review within family systems and ecological systems theories to frame their analysis. Both theories argue that strength of relations among family members and between teachers and family members ultimately contribute to the experiences of students with disabilities. In describing the eight studies, Rogers and Hyson found that while personal relationships between teachers and students were important, parents felt teachers' understanding of students' needs was more so. They note that parents who had constant, honest, regular conversations with teachers tended to view support of their children in a more positively. While Rogers and Hyson acknowledge existing survey instruments in these studies provide a general understanding of the perspectives of parents, they recommend that future studies focus on parents of color to be more inclusive of and equitable for all families.

In the final article, a practitioner perspective, Nicole Thompson describes the hopes and challenges of a mostly white rural middle school as educators work toward including students in the antibias and antiracist education reform. Thompson walks the reader through the process her school used to first adopt antibias and antiracist education reform at her school, the professional development for the faculty, and the ways in which the students were included the process. While some of the practices were successful, such as using a curriculum auditing tools (Haslam, 2020) and creating student activism through extra-curricular clubs, other practices were less so, such as developing an advisory program to have courageous conversations about antibias and antiracist education. Throughout the process Thompson recognized that implementation of all the facets of middle level education (Bishop & Harrison,

2021) were crucial in providing authentic opportunities for antibias and antiracist education.

While teachers alone cannot prevent mass shootings by adolescents, schools can and do implement structures, policies, and practices that promote productive and meaningful relationships-- relationships among students, parents, educators, and community members-- so that all young adolescents feel a sense of belonging to a caring and compassionate community. We applaud and offer our utmost support to the educators who create this space each and every day.

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