

PREFACE

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Managing Editor

“School Culture, Teacher Regard and Academic Aspirations Among Middle School Students,” by Elan C. McCollum and Nicholas P. Yoder, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is the first study presented in this issue of the *Middle Grades Research Journal*. McCollum and Yoder begin with a basic premise, that is, middle grades academic learning environments are related to school outcomes such as academic achievement, and the environment is formed, in part, by teacher-student interactions and individual school culture. All of these important features are exhibited at high levels only when they are predicated on the developmental needs of young adolescent learners, however.

To explore the inner workings and connections among these variables, researchers conducted a validation study of the “*Homework Purpose Scale*” (HPS) by Jianzhong Xu of Mississippi State University. Not incidentally, that study was published in the Spring 2011 issue of *Middle Grades Research Journal* 6(1). In the study presented in this issue, McCollum and Yoder examined 1,376 middle grades students’ perceptions of school academic culture, “teacher regard” and “academic aspirations.” Data indicate that “a significant mediation of

teacher regard on the relationship between academic culture and academic aspirations” exist. In addition, “both perception of school culture and perception of student-teacher relationships are relevant factors when considering middle school students’ academic aspirations.” The HPS subscales were found to be negatively correlated to students’ participation in class whenever they had not completed prior homework assignments.

Our second study titled “Impact of a Technology-Infused Middle School Writing Program on Sixth-Grade Students’ Writing Ability and Engagement,” was conducted by Lauren Goldenberg and Terri Meade, Education Development Center, and Emily Midouhas, Institute of Education, University of London, and Naomi Cooperman, Teaching Matters. These authors examined a widely recognized process approach to the teaching of writing known as “writing workshop that is perceived by some to be difficult for some language arts teachers to utilize unless they have a number of “supports.” Using a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the program’s effectiveness when “technological supports, professional development, and study units of various writing genres” are

provided, the team of researchers assessed changes in middle grades student participants' writing abilities during the course of one academic school year. The specific writing workshop program that was examined is called "Writing Matters." A total of 371 students in 17 classes in two middle schools constituted the sample. Data indicate that while "students who were exposed to Writing Matters ... did not make gains in writing ability ... students with the lowest initial writing ability ... made significantly greater gains than those with the lowest initial writing ability who were not exposed to Writing Matters." This study is important to middle grades educators and especially noteworthy because few others have evaluated writing program effectiveness in a robust, scientific manner.

"A Critical Pedagogy of Cafeterias and Communities: The Power of Multiple Voices in Diverse Settings" by Courtney Kelly, Manhattanville College, Purchase, New York, is the third study in this issue. The author examines an English Language Learner (ELL) after-school program that included collaboration among ELL students and their mainstreamed peers. An urban middle school was the site of the study that included the production of a multilingual video that focused on a social issue. The project studied encouraged young adolescents "to mobilize their social and cultural resources to attempt to solve a problem in their community. The data presented reveal how projects that build on shared knowledge bases can serve to create a sense of community that allows diverse students to recognize each other's contributions as they work together to promote change."

The fourth study titled "Development of a Multidisciplinary Middle School Mathematics Infusion Model" is by Maria Russo and Deborah Hecht, Center for Advanced Study in Education, Graduate Center of The City University of New York, M. David Burghardt and

Michael Hacker, Hofstra University, and Laura Saxman, Center for Advanced Study in Education, Graduate Center of The City University of New York. This team of researchers used funding from the National Science Foundation Mathematics, Science, and Technology Partnership project to develop a middle grades multidisciplinary instructional approach to connect mathematics to other subjects. Known as the "STEM" curriculum, this mathematics infused curriculum includes a teacher planning tool designed to facilitate professional development for middle grades schools participating in the project. Teachers, administrators, and other study participants reported an overall level of satisfaction with the approach, and "STEM teachers were able to successfully increase their own mathematics pedagogy and content knowledge, and students were able to grasp mathematical concepts when they were applied in science, technology, or engineering content areas."

Among the four studies presented in this issue of *Middle Grades Research Journal* are those that were originally presented to the American Educational Research Association 2010 annual meeting. Some were presented by seasoned professional researchers and others were conducted by graduate students focusing on middle grades issues. As a group, they represent a diverse assortment of topics, designs, and geographic boundaries—demonstrating how middle grades research continues to expand and extend beyond parochial groups and organizations. The *MGRJ* editorial team extends our thanks to these contributing authors as well as to scores of others who have focused their research on a wide variety of middle grades educational topics, issues, theories, and programs. This community of scholars' dedication to middle grades research is noteworthy and important as the knowledge they to which they contribute continues to build, thus improving education for young adolescents.