

PREFACE

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Volume 9, Issue 2, of *Middle Grades Research Journal* is an “open call” issue that contains the latest research covering a wide range of topics. Open call issues are always exciting to compile, because the middle grades research community is as diverse and multifaceted as the population it seeks to explore. Researchers interested in the middle grades can justifiably explore cognitive, developmental, and emotional questions, as well as the pedagogy and sociology surrounding those questions. Consequently, this collection of peer reviewed research in the middle grades provides a mosaic of understanding, with each component contributing unique findings to the composite picture of the most recent explorations that have addressed the target population of students in the middle grades.

The first three articles in this issue address a critically important factor in student success in the middle grades, that is, perceptions of connectedness to institutional agents in the school. Ellerbrock, Keifer, and Alley have presented a qualitative case study in which they explored responsive teacher-student and student-student relationships that fostered a sense of belonging among students in Grades 6 through 8. Their findings suggest that responsive interpersonal relationships promote school belonging. They discuss the implications for teachers seeking to bolster a sense of belonging among young adolescents.

Matteson, on the other hand, tackled the lack of a sense of belonging among those students for whom she has coined the term “ghost children,” that she defines as “academically capable” but apparently unmotivated or disengaged young adolescents. What contributes to the disconnect among these students from the school environment? Working with observations by 119 preservice teachers, she elicited strong themes in the characteristics of these students, particularly classroom demeanor, social skills, and attitudes toward school activities that have implications for preservice and in-service teacher education programs.

McHatten and her colleagues sought to pursue similar questions by exploring student drawings as a means of understanding their perceptions of their learning environments, based on the service delivery model they experienced (i.e., general education, gifted education, and special education). This study represents a novel approach to reaching understanding of the students’ experience. Her findings suggest that middle grade students perceive differential experiences in the middle grades, based on the instructional methods employed, their interactions with peers, and the behavior management techniques employed in each setting.

Using a different lens to understand middle grades experiences, the next two articles present findings regarding the Common Core State

Standards (CCSS) and literacy acquisition in the middle grades. Watkins and Liang conducted an extensive analysis of middle grades literature anthologies using the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress framework for text classification. They found that, despite the focus of the CCSS on informational texts, these anthologies are only one avenue for developing literacy skills using informational texts. Dinkins added to the discourse on literacy and the CCCS by exploring students' perspectives on strategic revision instruction and their responses to specific strategy instruction. She found that specific strategy instruction may provide a foundation for both students and teachers to understand how the revision process can be a starting point for additional learning.

The next two articles focus on the ladder of success beyond the middle grades, specifically the challenge of college and career readiness skills, yet another facet of the CCSS. Schaeffer and Rivera examined a program that provides early college exposure for high-need seventh grade students in urban areas as a means by which middle grades students can reach an understanding of how college readiness is central to their learning. This developmentally appropriate program was the result of a unique collaboration between an urban college and an urban middle school. Their findings suggest that this type of authentic learning can be both challenging and stimulating. The authors further explored the implications for the future success of the students in this program.

Carpenter and Clayton also addressed college readiness by focusing on middle grades students who are potentially the first generation in their families to attend college. Using Sources of Self Efficacy in Mathematics, they examined the validity of the instrument for the target population. Using confirmatory factor analysis they achieved acceptable model fit for first-generation and nonfirst generation students. Their findings suggest a significant positive relationship between math self-efficacy and math course grades, as well as in increase

in self-efficacy related to increased math performance. This study suggests further implications for middle grades educators, especially math teachers.

Finally, Kasten and her colleagues bring the reader back full circle to the essential problem of the teacher's role in the middle grades, specifically math teachers. She explored the reflections of 68 preservice middle school teachers to determine whether they identified themselves as teachers of mathematics or middle grades teachers. This is a crucial difference for those who find themselves teaching in the middle grades, either by choice or circumstance. How teachers see themselves, in relationship to their content and to their students, will necessarily affect how they interact with their students.

In all, these articles provide a wide range of information that allows the reader to explore the various facets of education in the middle grades. Individually and collectively, these articles provide sound insights, interesting findings, and thought-provoking implications for those interested in serving students in the middle grades. We are grateful for the authors for their diligent work on these studies and to our reviewers for their conscientious attention to the manuscripts that have resulted in the articles we present in this volume. We are pleased to present these studies to add to our collective understanding of the concerns and challenges of education in the middle grades.

Editorial Note: At its annual meeting in April, 2014, the Editorial Board of *Middle Grades Research Journal* voted to move forward proactively to involve graduate students in the review process for manuscripts submitted to this journal. The intention of this decision is to foster growth among younger scholars and to strengthen the scholarship pipeline in this critically important research arena. To that end, we are pleased to include in this issue the, "Graduate Students' Guide to Involvement in the Peer Review Process," with gratitude to Associate Editor Robert Capraro for his work in drafting this document.