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Editorial

Engaging in Transformative Middle Level Education through Critical Reflection & Social Justice-Based Pedagogical Practices

Within the last five years, there has been significant momentum to conduct and publish scholarship that integrates a critical perspective into middle level education. Some notable highlights within this direction include the 2015 inaugural issue of *Middle Grades Review*, which is a journal that focuses on democratic education, innovation, and social justice. In 2018, the *Middle School Journal* published a special issue entitled *Conceptualizing Curriculum as a Means to Cultivate Social Justice*. Most recently, *Equity and Cultural Responsiveness in the Middle Grades* (Brinegar, Harrison, and Hurd, 2019) became the twelfth book published in the *Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education* series.

It is within this trajectory of scholarship that we bring the 2019 issue of the *Electronic Journal for the Ohio Middle Level Association*. The two articles within this issue highlight the transformative powers of middle level education. In the first article Gaskill and Felton explore middle school mathematics teachers' views about integrating real-world applications, including social justice into their curriculum. This article tackles a core component of middle level philosophy; curriculum integration. Some view curriculum integration as simply an approach that organizes curriculum around broad themes or topics that cut across disciplines. However, Beane (1995) argued that "the central focus of curriculum integration is the search for self and social meaning" (p. 616). Beane provides a more student centered understanding of curriculum

integration where curriculum should be guided by helping students better understand themselves and the world around them. If middle level educators are to engage in true curriculum integration, it becomes necessary for us to develop a curriculum that is not decontextual and arbitrary, but rather grounded in real life application.

In the second article, Murdock, Hamel, Glover, and Powell turn our focus to middle level teacher education preparation. Their article focuses on the importance of teacher educators engaging in critical reflection. If teacher educators are going to prepare middle school teachers who can support young adolescents understanding of the world and self, middle level educators as all educators must first critically examine their own understandings, biases, and positionalities (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2003). This type of critical reflection represents a core action that must be embedded and sustained in every educator's teaching practice regardless of the content area, grade level, student, and teacher demographic. Critical reflection is rooted in critical educational philosophies that name educational injustices that many students, including students of color experience, and acknowledge the importance of addressing race and culture in an effort to eliminate these injustices (Banks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Critical reflection allows us to reflect on our identities and understanding of our students' identities, which influences how we teach and engage with them, as well as what we teach them. We must consider how we provide educational spaces to do this through teacher training programs, workshops, and conferences (Everett & Gibbs Grey, 2015; Tidwell & Thompson, 2008).

Furthermore, we must remember that critical reflection is one of multiple steps educators must engage in, and is not representative of a stopping point. Our commitment to ourselves and our students must not end at the reflection stage, but should continue and result in critical awareness and critical teaching practices. The result of teachers' critical reflection should be

visible in their pedagogical practices as demonstrated in the feature articles and the longstanding equity and justice-based scholarship. In addition to the practical examples provided in the feature articles, we also encourage educators to continuously consider the following non-exhaustive critical questions as a part of their practice:

1. In what ways throughout my teaching career have I committed to acknowledging and addressing educational social injustices in my teaching?
2. In what ways and how often do I not only reflect on my content knowledge and delivery, but also on how factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality influence my students and my teaching practice?
3. What experiences have shaped the way that I see and understand my students and their families?
4. What topics do I feel comfortable reflecting on and integrating into my teaching? Are there any topics that I avoid if they discomfort me?
5. In what ways do I demonstrate possessing an asset-based understanding of my students?
In what ways might I demonstrate a deficit-based understanding of my students?

As we move forward, continuing to transform middle level education, we must embody the practices supportive of our arrival at such spaces. We assert that among other factors educators must be prepared to critically reflect with the intent to create more justice-oriented and humanizing educational spaces that embrace all students.

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