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# Making Middle Grades Education More Accessible and Engaging: Editorial Remarks

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## **Making Middle Grades Education More Accessible and Engaging: Editorial Remarks**

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Our most recent issue of *Middle Grades Review* features several articles that focus on addressing the needs of students who historically have been underserved or marginalized. Two essays, one by Lewis and Sembiante on Transgender students and another by Dotson Davis on students who experience adverse childhood events, review relevant research literature and address educational gaps in middle level practice. Huss's research report focuses on how to make middle school websites more accessible to students and families with disabilities. Finally, the practitioner perspectives of Rivers, Gratton, and Chadburn illustrate how student voice and choice can address contemporary social and political issues while engaging young adolescents in authentic and meaningful ways.

The issue begins with Lewis and Sembiante's essay, in which the authors argue for researchers, teachers and administrators to become change agents in support of Transgender students to transform school structures, culture, and individual beliefs from hetero-/cisnormative to those that more fully attend to "Transgender-specific needs, issues, and rights." Lewis and Sembiante first discuss how research can more fully explicate the lived experiences of Transgender middle grades students by advocating a shift from studies that either "pathologize Transgender identity as a form of mental illness or biological malady" or rely primarily on large scale surveys, toward more toward in-depth qualitative, ethnographic, and phenomenological studies that are "responsive to and reflective" of the lived experiences of Transgender students. The authors assert such studies can document "spontaneous instances in which Transgender students negotiate and make sense of the hetero-/cisnormative cultures within their schools." Lewis and Sembiante also describe instances of how middle school structures and cultures, as well as individual beliefs, can become sources of support for Transgender students rather than barriers and obstacles. Finally, after summarizing the current state of research and conditions for Transgender students, these authors recommend that scholars refocus research and that practitioners develop school structures and policies so as to validate and

acknowledge Transgender individuals in middle schools and more broadly in the larger community.

The second essay centers on the foundational middle grades principle of addressing the developmental, social and emotional needs of young adolescents. In it, Dotson Davis contends that students who experience adverse childhood events (ACEs) deserve trauma-informed practices that can lead to improved resilience, social emotional behavior, and increased academic success. Her essay lays out the research on ACEs and describes how it affects students' performance in middle schools. She then discusses research-based practices, which are also important middle level practices, that can address students with ACEs both at the classroom level and at the school level. She concludes by stating, "While additional research is needed in this area, preliminary findings of implementing trauma-informed strategies in the middle grades indicate promising outcomes for the distinctive academic, social, and emotional needs of the middle level learner."

Huss's research report examines the accessibility of middle school websites in the mid Atlantic states of Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio by selecting a random sample of 150 schools and using the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Workforce Rehabilitation Act. In our ever increasingly technological society, schools have shifted (slowly in some cases and more rapidly in others) in communicating to students and their families via websites, email, and social media. After identifying a relative dearth of literature on accessibility of school websites for middle level students with disabilities, Huss notes current school websites could hinder access to school portals, teacher and team webpages, and to resources such as Khan Academy and Google Classroom. Using the Web Accessibility Versatile Evaluator (WAVE) for each homepage of the selected school websites, Huss found over half of these homepages had errors that would limit the access of students or families with disabilities. The errors included a lack of captions to describe visual content (photos, diagrams, or videos), empty links, and "click here" links. Each these

errors on the website prevents students or families using keyboard and screen readers from accessing content on the webpage. In light of these findings, Huss suggests ways to address these gaps such as including captions for images and embedding links within descriptive text.

In the final two articles of this issue, both practitioner perspectives, middle grades teachers report on their process of exposing students to real world issues in engaging, authentic, and meaningful ways. First, Rivers describes how his middle grades team at Brattleboro Area Middle School tackles the Vermont education reforms of Content Proficiencies, Transferable Skills, Flexible Pathways and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support through their Community Historical Interest Project (CHIP). CHIP started off as a small pilot project of volunteer students, one community-based organization and Rivers, a social studies teacher. It later expanded into a team-wide project that included all teachers and students on the seventh-grade team and three community-based organizations - Vermont Folklife Center, Brattleboro Historical Society, and the Brattleboro Reformer, which is the local newspaper. In each CHIP, students investigated an historical issue in their town, created podcasts that were broadcast on a weekly local radio show, and wrote articles that were then published in the local newspaper. Rivers' comment about the program points to the purpose and power of the project: "Having watched students learn about our community, and interact with members of our community, I have seen them become more comfortable with who they are and where they might fit in the world outside of school."

In the second practitioner perspective, Gratton and Chadburn, teachers on a seven/eight team in a rural K-8 Vermont school, describe another project that authentically engages students. Using student leadership teams, Gratton and Chadburn coached two groups of students to enact real change at their school. Seeing a need to shift school culture toward a more accepting and empowering place for children, two teams were created – one focused on making school more inclusive – the Culture team, and another focused on acknowledging all students – the Justice team. Each team met weekly to determine ambitious yet manageable projects that would improve the school environment. The Culture team evaluated the quarterly student awards ceremony and recommended changing

the process so that the awards honored what students thought were important. The Justice team worked on educating both students and teachers about language connected to gender identity. These students taught a lesson on gender identity to the teachers at one of their faculty professional development sessions and created a word wall in the middle grades hallway of the school. In each case, Gratton and Chadburn detail the process of working with students as they brainstorm, develop and implement these projects, while illustrating the accomplishments and challenges of such work.

Each of the pieces in this issue of *Middle Grades Review* reminds us of the powerful work happening with, by, and for young adolescents each day. The issue as a whole also reminds us of how much more work there is to do. We hope you are equally inspired by these authors, who are championing the improvement of education for young adolescents by advocating for, and attending to, the needs of all learners in the middle grades.