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A Content Analysis of Four Peer-Reviewed Middle Grades Publications: Are We Really Paying Attention to *Every* Young Adolescent?

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Abstract

The field of middle grades education clearly articulates a vision for education focused on supporting the needs and interests of every young adolescent (National Middle School Association, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000). This study sought to identify the ways in which recent middle grades research intersects with this vision by utilizing qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify current topics explored in middle grades research over the past 13 years (2000-2013). In total the content of 691 articles and chapters was analyzed from the following publications: *Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education* series, *Middle Grades Research Journal* (MGRJ), *Middle School Journal* (MSJ), and *Research in Middle Level Education* (RMLE) *Online*. In many ways the body of research examined was diverse in its breadth and depth related to a variety of thematic areas such as curriculum and instruction. However, there is a dearth of published research in areas that are critical to developing systems and practices meant to support the needs of every young adolescent, including specific populations (e.g., males, African Americans, students with disabilities), diversity (e.g., broad topics related to equity, discrimination, social justice, multicultural education), motivation and engagement, student voice, leadership, and family/community connections. Given that these are important publications in the field of middle grades education, the gaps identified within them cannot be ignored if the goal is to provide a positive schooling experience for every young adolescent.

Introduction

The field of middle grades education clearly articulates a vision for education focused on supporting the needs and interests of young adolescents (National Middle School Association, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000). This study seeks to identify the ways in which recent middle grades research intersects with this vision. For example, does the published research trajectory of the field align with the ideas presented in seminal documents used to drive policy? Are there aspects of current research not represented in this vision? Are there major gaps in the research that if filled would strengthen the existing vision? The first step in the process of examining these and related questions was to conduct a conventional content analysis (Story & Resnick, 1986) to identify the themes prevalent in 21st century middle grades research. What follows are a description of this process, a description of the topics that emerged, as well as a discussion of implications and next steps.

Perspectives

Middle grades research in general is based on the notion that traditional forms of schooling for this age group, namely the junior high model, have neglected the needs of young adolescent students (see David, 1998, for samples of the earliest writings on junior highs and middle schools). Early critiques identified the following problems with the traditional junior high: curriculum was too subject-centered, teachers were unprepared to teach young adolescents, classrooms were teacher and textbook centered, and students were tracked (Powell, 2005). Stage-environment fit theory further extended such notions by claiming that a young adolescent's schooling environment must be a match with her developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993). Supporters of a middle school philosophy have promoted the need for schools that are developmentally responsive. As such, structures and concepts such as teaming, advisory, student-centered learning, and integrated curricula (Andrews, 2013; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Association for Middle Level

Education, 2010; Stevenson, 2002) have become the cornerstones of such schooling models.

The middle level philosophy of education promotes an awareness of the young adolescent so that educators can create their own thoughtful visions and policies centered on the unique needs of this age group (NMSA, 2010; Brinegar, 2009; Jackson & Davis, 2000). While the middle grades model is centered on the notion that there is no one way to meet the needs of young adolescents, critics note the hegemony of a field centered on a white, middle class, and male perception of identity (Brown, 2005). Such critics argue that a strong research base focused on multicultural and multilingual middle school settings needs to be established before the middle grades concept can be deemed successful in diverse settings and thus applied to every young adolescent learner. Examining current topics in middle grades research can help the middle grades movement identify gaps in the research disseminated by these four important publications.

Methodology and Data Sources

This study applied qualitative content analysis to identify current topics explored in middle grades research over a 13-year span (2000-2013). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Specifically this study relied on conventional content analysis methods to inductively cluster data into thematic groups (Story & Resnick, 1986).

The first step in conducting any content analysis is to identify the sources of data. In this case four publication sources were analyzed: all volumes and issues from 2000-2013 of *Middle School Journal* (MSJ), all articles published from 2001-2013 by *Research in Middle Level Education (RMLE) Online*, all editions of the *Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education series*, and all volumes of *Middle Grades Research Journal* (MGRJ) from its inception in 2006 to 2013.

Although a fully comprehensive study would necessitate including articles from a broader array of publications, I chose each because of its endorsement by the Middle Level Education Research (MLER) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and/or the AMLE. In total the content of 691 articles and chapters was analyzed.

Table 1
Data Sources

Publication	Years	Volumes	# of Article/Chapter
<i>Middle School Journal</i>	2000-2013	31-42	331
<i>Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education Series</i>	2001-2013	1-9	126
<i>Research in Middle Level Education Online</i>	2001-2013	23-36	115
<i>Middle Grades Research Journal</i>	2006-2013	1-8	119

To begin this inductive analysis, the title of each article/chapter was reviewed and coded by two separate researchers. Articles were assigned into as many categories as appropriate. To diminish reliability issues common to conventional content analysis methods (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), two researchers independently completed the initial coding using article titles. One researcher, the author of this paper, is very familiar with and an active contributor to middle grades research. The second is a graduate student seeking initial licensure in middle grades education. Having someone new to middle grades research analyze the data along with the author served to increase

the likelihood of identifying all key categories in the data. During this stage of data analysis, the researchers met periodically to discuss their emerging thematic groups. After a substantial number of articles were coded and the same themes continued to be populated by the data, the researchers agreed upon a preliminary coding scheme. The thematic groups were each defined and a spreadsheet containing the initial themes and place for “other” was developed. The researchers each continued to code independently, now using the spreadsheet, and met to discuss the “other” categories that emerged. When consensus was reached, a topic was defined, moved from “other,” and gained status as an independent theme.

Once all 691 articles and chapters were coded by title, the researchers met to review each article one at a time, this time using abstracts and full-text versions of the articles, and coming to consensus on each one. During this process, new thematic groups were developed and defined and others folded into already established ones. Once

this process was complete and the thematic groups were clearly defined, the author reviewed each article one final time to make sure it was coded appropriately. Articles and chapters were ultimately placed into as many categorical clusters as appropriate.

Findings

Summary and Description of Categorical Clusters

Table 2 depicts the findings of the conventional content analysis. The first column lists the 15 categorical clusters identified within the data. Each surfaced repeatedly in the analysis of the four data sources. The middle column provides a brief summary of each cluster by identifying relevant keywords and phrases. The column on the right describes the percentage of articles whose content fell within that categorical cluster. The clusters are depicted from highest percent of representation (40%) in the data to the lowest (2%).

Table 2
Categorical Clusters.

Categorical Clusters	Subcategories	~Percent of Total Articles
Curriculum & Instruction	Content area instruction, teaching methods, curriculum integration; technology, enrichment; service-learning; differentiation; outdoor education; unified arts instruction	40%
Organization	School or classroom climate, interdisciplinary teaming, teacher advisory, transitions in and out of middle school; safety; coordinating enrichment; after school programs; physical space; grade/school configurations	21%
Special Populations	Gender, race, social class, special education, disabilities, English Language Learners; poverty; at-risk youth; urban; rural; underachieving; struggling readers; gifted and talented	17%
Literacy	Vocabulary; reading instruction; writing instruction; new literacies; poetry; reading engagement	17%
Student Achievement	Evaluations of a preventive or predictive nature, standardized testing, content area standards; assessment; portfolios; classroom grading; learning outcomes	17%
Adolescent Development	Moral reasoning, health & wellness, conflict resolution, identity, agency, psychology; social skills; social development; emotional development	17%
Middle School Reform	The middle school movement; exemplary middle level schools and practices; policy, and law	15%
Teacher Education	Pre-service teachers and reflection, professional development schools; student teaching, pre-service portfolios; pre-service assessment; middle	11%

	level endorsement programs	
Diversity	Equity, discrimination, international comparisons, social justice	10%
Teachers' Practice & Beliefs	Reflective teaching; professional learning communities; effectiveness of professional development; collaboration; perceptions of students; characteristics of; retention of; hiring of; national board certification; teacher knowledge	10%
Student Voice	The importance of/use of middle grades students' perceptions, attitudes, and personal agency on educational topics	7%
Motivation/Engagement	Methods to motivate & engage; relevant theories	6%
Leadership	Building level administrators, teacher leaders, and content area coaches	4%
Family/Community	Parents, families, and community members	4%
Research Methods	Significance and use of research methods	3%
Behavior Management	Behavior management; in-class bullying; Applied Behavior Analysis	2%

Table 2 begins to paint a picture of a field whose recent research trajectory is indeed diverse in its breadth and depth related to a variety of thematic areas. However, there appears to be a dearth of published research in areas that are critical to developing systems and practices meant to support the needs of every young adolescent. In particular, the categories of diversity, motivation/engagement, student voice, leadership, and family/community connections are underrepresented in the literature explored. The following sections of this analysis provide deeper analysis of some of the lesser-explored categorical clusters.

Underrepresented Categorical Clusters

The special populations categorical cluster represents articles and chapters with content focused on the schooling and educational needs of specific populations of young adolescents. Subcategories include males, English Language Learners, youth living in poverty, rural youth, underachieving students, and gifted and talented students. Only 17% of the total number of articles analyzed fell in this category and a closer examination of the data presents major gaps in the literature. 24% of the studies in this category focused on gender groups with 36% of the 24% focusing on the schooling and education of girls and 18% focusing on the same for boys (some focused on both genders, resulting in a combined percentage over the total).

The second largest subcategory was English Language Learners with 18%, and clear focus on curriculum and instruction. In terms of location, another 18% of the studies in this category examined urban student populations, while a mere 2% explored education for students in rural areas. Only 8% of this 17% of the research explored specific racial and ethnic groups. In other words, all published work focused on any racial and ethnic group is represented in this mere 8%. This includes studies that explore schooling for blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic groups. The LGBTQ population falls at the bottom of populations represented in the literature (along with rural young adolescents) with only 2% of articles read addressing schooling for this vulnerable population.

Another theme underrepresented in the literature is diversity, which is comprised of articles that can be divided into two distinct categories that as a topic represent less than 10% of all of the total 691 articles and chapters. The first category, international perspectives, makes up 32% of the articles in this category. The second contains articles focused on general issues of diversity and represents 68% of the cluster's articles. This category differs from the special populations cluster in that its articles and chapters specifically examine issues related to discrimination, social justice, and multicultural education. Although some of the articles in the special populations

cluster also fall into this category as well, they are two distinct clusters. 50% of the articles in this cluster also fit into the curriculum and instruction focus.

The student voice cluster represents less than 7% of the articles. Although student voice could have been a methodological strategy applied to more than 7% of the studies, it is still significant that less than 7% explored the importance or use of middle grades students' perceptions, attitudes, and personal agency as a topic of the research. Similar to previous clusters, 40% of the manuscripts in this cluster also fall into the curriculum and instruction cluster, with most relating to curriculum integration. 26% were also coded into the adolescent development cluster and 16% of these articles and chapters also focused on engagement and motivation.

The motivation/engagement cluster represents less than 6% of the total articles and chapters analyzed. These publications explored the methods and relevant theories related to motivating and engaging young adolescent learners. Of this small percentage, 54% focused on motivation and engagement in relation to curriculum and instruction and 26% also centered on student achievement. 23% explored ways of motivating special populations of students such as males or Hispanic students. Motivation and engagement within a literacy framework were explored in 21% of this small overall percentage. The same percentage (21%) made the connection between motivation and engagement and student voice.

One of the least represented categorical clusters is that related to family and community. Less than 4% of all manuscripts focused on this important topic. Of this 4%, 23% related to middle grades organization and 20% connected both to family involvement for specific populations and 20% also centered on curricular and instructional issues.

Discussion and Implications

The strong focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment noted throughout the findings is not surprising given the political climate of education since the beginning of this millennium. Amid continuing debates surrounding the No Child Left Behind legislation, Race to the Top grants, the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards, and more stringent teacher evaluation systems, one might wonder whether focusing largely on these topics is how the field of middle grades education aspires to be known.

However, if a goal of middle grades education is to provide a positive schooling experience for *every* young adolescent, the gaps identified should not be ignored. US census data shows that approximately 20% of all Americans live in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), yet only two of the articles in this study specifically explored the unique needs of rural youth. Further, despite the fact that 50% of the children born in the United States are members of racial and ethnic minorities (Nhan, 2012), only 10 articles centered on the educational experiences of specific racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, while 22% of all American children reportedly live in households with incomes under the poverty line (Gates, 2011), only seven articles examined ways to improve the schooling experiences of young adolescents in poverty. Along these same lines one must ask why only 36 manuscripts explored the topics of equity, discrimination, and social justice and half of those centered on curricular and instructional issues?

As a group of researchers investigating the needs and desires of young adolescent learners, we need to broaden our understanding of young adolescents to include factors such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, family/home life, and value systems and the ways these impact schooling for middle grades learners. One of the Essential Attributes of Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, according to AMLE's *This We Believe* statement, is that an education for young adolescents must be equitable (NMSA, 2010). In order to explore and develop practices that

promote equity for middle grades learners, we should first identify and examine factors that lead to inequity and discrimination in our middle schools. As a whole the research analyzed in this paper is insufficient.

These research gaps not only impact the work of researchers but also of practitioners. Many middle grades educators rely on these publications to improve and hone their craft. As researchers we do these teachers and their students a disservice by depicting a homogenized middle school experience that may not reflect the reality of many teachers and their students. In the same vein we want to provide research that reflects the hard work teachers do every day on behalf of young adolescents in today's schools so that our research is relevant and can be used in their current teaching practice.

If the goal of middle grades education is to promote positive schooling experiences for every young adolescent, we need to identify specific topics to be addressed through regular and themed issues of the examined journals, as well as others. Similarly, new editions of the Handbook series should help both researchers and practitioners weave important work happening outside of our field with the significant work happening within it. Finally, we need to encourage researchers and practitioners to share their work and experiences as they relate to these under-explored areas. ❖

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