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## Three Rs for Middle Level Education: The 2022 NCPOMLE John VanHoose Lecture

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## **Three Rs for Middle Level Education: The 2022 NCPOMLE John VanHoose Lecture**

**David C. Virtue**, *Western Carolina University*

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### **Abstract**

The author contends the most prominent challenges and conditions facing middle level education now and in the near future point to three imperatives for the field: middle level education must be relevant, resilient, and robust. After conceptualizing the field of middle level education as an interdisciplinary, applied field of study concerned with the formal education of young adolescent learners in school settings, the author discusses each of the three imperatives and provides recommendations for scholars to move forward alongside professionals in middle level schools and classrooms to achieve a bright educational future for young adolescents.

### **Preface**

This essay is an edited transcript of the 2022 John Van Hoose Lecture, which the author delivered on March 14, 2022, at the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education annual conference held in Charlotte, NC. The audience was the North Carolina Professors of Middle Level Education, an organization of college and university faculty affiliated with middle level teacher education programs throughout the state.

### **Perspective and Prominence**

To set the stage, I want to pose a question, “*What’s important?*” What is important for those of us who work in the field of middle level education? What is important for us as researchers and teacher educators? What is important for us as advocates for young adolescents?

Congaree National Park is about 100 miles from where we sit here in Charlotte, just a short ride east of Columbia, South Carolina. The park contains the largest intact expanse of old growth bottomland hardwood forest remaining in the southeastern US and one of the highest deciduous forest canopies in the entire world. If you ever fly into Columbia Metropolitan Airport during the day, you can’t miss this prominent green canopy. But from above, you “can’t see the forest for the trees,” as the saying goes. You have to get on the ground and enter the park to see the impressive trees, some of which are more than 150 feet tall. When you enter the park, you cannot help being awestruck by the prominent, massive tree trunks. Some of the cypress trees in

the forest are more than 500 years old! But go further, and what stands out as prominent—at least to me—are the cypress knees that rise up from the swamp and forest floor. Have you ever seen cypress knees? They look almost like fingers or tentacles rising from the earth. These knobby protrusions are part of the trees’ root systems, and they are a prominent feature of landscape that is only visible once you are deep within the forest. My point? What is important—what is prominent—can vary based on your vantage point. *It is all a matter of perspective.*

In that spirit, I think it is important for me to share a bit about me and my perspective; the point of view I bring to middle level education. It is a point of view informed by my background as the son of two educators who grew up in a small, tight-knit, historic mining community in northwestern New Jersey. My middle grades experience occurred in a red brick public K-12 school that served as the center of the community until a regional high school was built in 1982—my sophomore year of high school. After college, I worked in industrial sales for three years in New Jersey and California before changing careers to teaching about 30 years ago. I completed a certification program in social science education at the master’s level at the University of Georgia, then I continued in graduate school to earn a Ph.D. I have had a number of professional roles over the last 20-25 years at several different institutions. I am now a husband and father of three young adolescents ages 11, 13, and 15; and I am a professor of middle grades education at Western Carolina University, which is my current professional role. My remarks today about what I think is important for middle level education to a great extent come from these experiences, and

especially my work in two roles—first, as an academic unit leader at the University of South Carolina and Auburn University where I was responsible for two large teacher education departments and had to understand personnel, finance, curriculum, and partnerships; and, second, as an editor with the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly National Middle School Association. I edited AMLE’s flagship journal, *Middle School Journal*, from 2009-2013, and after a one-year break I returned to take the helm of *Research in Middle Level Education (RMLE) Online*, AMLE’s research journal.

### The Three Rs

From my vantage point—as a former middle grades teacher, a university professor and administrator, an author and editor, and a researcher—the most prominent challenges and conditions facing middle level education now and in the near future point to three imperatives for the field:

- Middle level education must be *RELEVANT*. (“Having significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand” [Merriam-Webster, n.d.a.] )
- Middle level education must be *RESILIENT*. (“Able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions” [Oxford Languages, n.d.] )
- Middle level education must be *ROBUST*. (“Strong and healthy” [Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, n.d.] )

I am going to discuss each of these three Rs; but before I do, I think we need to clarify “the matter at hand” for professors of middle level education in the definition for *relevant*. I think we need to consider the existential question: *What is the field of middle level education?*

### Defining the Field

What is the field of middle level education? I grapple with this question all the time as an editor; or, at least, I used to. In journal editing there are three workflows: the manuscript process, the editorial process, and the production process. The first step in manuscript intake is a technical check in which the editor determines, among other things, whether the manuscript is situated within the scope of the journal. Is it appropriate to the field? Over the years, I have formulated a definition that has

helped me make those judgments for *RMLE Online*: Middle level education is an interdisciplinary, applied field of study concerned with the formal education of young adolescent learners in school settings. Now let’s look at the three Rs.

### Relevant

To be relevant, middle level education must have “*significant and demonstrable bearing*” on the formal education of young adolescent learners in school settings (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a.). I want to zero-in on this idea of “significance.”

To be relevant, we must be clear about for whom our work has significance; we must know our audience(s) and their needs. We must listen to our constituents and colleagues. For example, as middle level professors begin discussions about updating the 2016 research agenda developed by the American Educational Research Association’s Middle Level Education Research group (Mertens et al., 2016a), I believe we must first listen to middle grades teachers and administrators. We should ask them questions like:

- What are the three to five biggest problems or challenges you face?
- Where do you see the need for deeper knowledge or more clarity about an idea or practice?
- What ideas do you want to see tested in the field?

We must begin the process with these perspectives from practitioners—not by asking for their blessing or endorsement of our agenda on the back end; we must listen, and, perhaps, yield a bit and follow their lead.

To make significant contributions, our scholarship must have implications for the practice of young adolescent education. Scholars should demonstrate how their work impacts some practical aspect(s) of young adolescent education. Contributors to middle level journals and conference programs from within the field are generally very diligent about this; they tend to be very clear about the practical implications of their work. However, as an interdisciplinary, applied field, middle level journals and conferences receive contributions from scholars in many related areas (e.g., educational psychology, counseling). Contributors from other fields may need some help bridging this

gap—that sometimes is more a perceived gap than an actual one—between research and the practical implications of research for those who work in middle grades schools and classrooms.

To make significant contributions, scholars must be clear and explicit about how their work connects with existing literature in the field. Authors who want to write for an audience of middle level education researchers should familiarize themselves with conventions and ongoing conversations in the field. They should participate in middle level education conferences and symposia, and they must read *RMLE Online*, *Middle Grades Review*, *Middle Grades Research Journal*, and other scholarly publications focused on middle level education and cite relevant works in their manuscripts. They should know and explain to the reader how their work adds to the conversation, takes it in a different direction, reframes it, or refutes it. Serving as a reviewer for middle level journals and conference programs is a great way to join the conversation in the field and learn more about the scholarly review process.

To make significant contributions, middle level scholarship must be theoretically sound. As a field, we have got to double-down on theory. Citing Kerlinger (1979), Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined a theory as “a set of interrelated constructs (variables), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining natural phenomena” (p. 52). In very basic terms, a theory is an evidence-based explanation about some aspect of reality. Middle level education research both informs and is informed by theories about pedagogy; human behavior, cognition, development, and health; and organizational health and dynamics.

As an interdisciplinary, applied field of study, middle level education draws on theories from a wide range of disciplines and allied fields (Andrews, 2013). Too often, though, middle level education researchers do not use theory to frame their research design or establish the significance of their findings. Reyes and Netcoh (2015) systematically reviewed the theoretical frameworks used in two middle level education research journals—*Middle Grades Research Journal* and *Research in Middle Level Education Online*. They found two-thirds of articles in the sample lacked an explicit theoretical framework and characterized the use

of theory in the field as “inconsistent.” The results of their analysis “suggest a need for more explicit treatment of how a study’s findings contribute to the middle level field” (p. 8).

Why is theory important? I view theory as the connective tissue that holds a body of knowledge together and allows it to grow. By explicating the theoretical basis for a study or the implications for theory of a study’s findings, middle level researchers situate their ideas in the broader ecosystem of ideas that constitutes the field. Following Anfara (2008), Reyes and Netcoh (2015) recommended researchers “view the theoretical framework as the ‘structure’ or ‘scaffolding’ of middle level education, then we may endeavor to continue making more fluid and viable associations between theory and middle level education” (p. 8).

Perhaps theory gets short shrift in middle level education research because middle level education is an applied field, and consumers of research are often scholar-practitioners whose primary concerns are the implications of research for practice. However, I contend that the gap between theory and practice is not so wide, if one exists at all. In fact, practitioners apply “theories in practice” in their day-to-day work (Argyris & Schön, 1974), whether or not they explicitly connect the theories in practice to formal theories.

Reyes and Netcoh (2015) observed that middle level scholars often join theory with ideas in seminal middle level literature by, for example, connecting theories of cultural identity development with tenets of the middle school concept (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2016). Researchers make many such connections in the recent book, *Dialogues in Middle Level Education Research* (Virtue, 2022), which is based on articles published in *RMLE Online*. For example, Giles and Yazan (2020) used positioning theory (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) to explain the ways in which the language arts teacher, the ESL teacher, and the students positioned themselves and each other in the context of the language arts classroom. Kearney and Garfield (2019) used social cognitive theory (see Bandura, 1989, 2012) as a basis for their work in mathematics education. DeMink-Carthew et al. (2023) revisited their studies of personalized, “hands-joined” learning (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2019) in relation to culturally responsive pedagogy (see Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Participants in the middle level education research enterprise—researchers, authors, editors, manuscript and proposal reviewers—*need to double-down on theory and make sure every study connects to a solid theoretical frame*. In addition, we must continually reexamine and reflect upon the theoretical assumptions that undergird our work. For example, Vagle (2012, 2015) has encouraged middle level scholars to break from the dominant theoretical discourse in middle level education that centers stage developmentalism and to challenge the sacrosanct idea that early adolescence is a structured, conceptually stable stage of human development. He pondered, “Why there has not been a robust debate about the limits of developmentalism” and why middle level education has apparently lacked the will “to join others in similar fields, such as early childhood education, to explore how critical and post-structural theories might help the field continually re-imagine itself in a new time and place” (Vagle, 2015, pp. 1-2). When they engage in theoretical introspection and critical reflection, researchers participate in the lives of theories—the influential ideas that form the very foundation of middle level education.

### Resilient

To be *resilient*, middle level education must be “able to *withstand* or *recover* from difficult conditions” (Oxford Languages, n.d., Def. 1). There is no shortage of difficult situations these days; let us start with global public health crises (i.e., COVID) coupled with economic uncertainty and a wonky labor market.

The COVID pandemic has, of course, sent ripples through all sectors of society—it has affected the economy, social institutions, politics. I think we need to look at the pandemic, our response, and the lessons we have learned from the standpoint of resilience—that is, in terms of both how we recover and how we withstand such events in the future. Recovery means focusing on aspects of middle level education most acutely disrupted by the pandemic. How are we addressing the need to differentiate for learners along a readiness spectrum that may be much wider than we have experienced before? How are we addressing the social and emotional needs of students—and of teachers? How are we addressing gaps in skills and capacity for new and early career educators whose professional growth has been disrupted? Moving toward recovery on these and other

questions could include many types of actions of which I will suggest a few:

- *Prioritizing recovery areas in the curriculum*. Emphasize areas of the curriculum for preservice and in-service professional learning that will build educators’ capacity to support recovery, such as social-emotional learning, differentiation, and trauma-informed practice.
- *Partnering to boost capacity*. Find win-win situations, such as university-provided tutoring to both address student readiness gaps and provide preservice candidates opportunities to teach.
- *Valuing performance that contributes to recovery*. Academic unit leaders should work with deans, performance review committees, and faculty leaders to ensure faculty and staff efforts to support recovery are valued and “count” in performance reviews and promotion and tenure decisions.

Being prepared to withstand future challenges to a great extent means being flexible—able to bend without breaking—and nimble—able to adapt and change course quickly. I think one positive outcome of the pandemic experience is that we have stretched the limits of what we think is possible, especially in terms of technology-enhanced learning and distance or remote learning. Flexing those muscles for two years has caused some pain, but it has strengthened our ability to better support learning in the event of a future disruption—pandemic or otherwise.

Economic uncertainty is taking its toll on all sectors of society; and it is starting to feel like the 2008 economic downturn all over again, except in slow motion—like we are in a giant bus easing toward the edge of the Grand Canyon. Maybe that is too dramatic. How about easing toward the edge of a giant pothole big enough to mess up the front end of the bus very badly? Economic uncertainty today is coupled with teacher labor market volatility—a double-whammy for middle level education which is an area that has been perennially underfunded and short staffed. However you choose to look at these economic times, I suggest that in the face of uncertainty we can withstand educational catastrophe—and maybe even thrive—by focusing on the free stuff. In the following few paragraphs, I am going to offer some ideas I

shared with *Middle School Journal* readers in an editorial I wrote in the wake of the economic recession of 2008 titled, “The Best Things in Life—and Education—Are Free” (see Virtue, 2009).

Over the years I have spoken with hundreds of adults about the things that mattered most to them during the middle grades, and, most often, they remember their favorite teachers, their best friends, and other people who made their school experiences good, bad, or just plain memorable. Many also recall “cool” projects and “aha moments” when learning was particularly exciting, enjoyable, or meaningful. Rarely do they talk about school facilities, their schedules, or the textbooks they used. As the old song goes, the best things in life—and education—are the free things that awaken our senses, inspire our hearts and minds, and connect us in meaningful ways to other people. When middle grades educators address these less tangible and often relational aspects of school climate and culture, they lay the foundation for powerful student learning and growth.

Even in an environment of tight budgets and economic uncertainty, middle grades educators can focus on improving school climate and culture. They can start by establishing and maintaining a culture of high expectations for students. As Bishop and Harrison (2021) observed, “In successful middle schools, learning tasks are perceived as achievable, even if difficult, and reflect *high expectations for all students* [emphasis added]” (p. 28). School culture and climate are especially important areas of focus for school improvement at a time when high levels of teacher turnover exact high costs on school budgets and disrupt the learning process for students. The cultures in effective middle grades schools are grounded in trusting, respectful relationships, and such relationships make these schools places where teachers want to teach. They are also places where students want to learn. Just as far too many middle grades teachers leave the profession prematurely, far too many middle grades students will one day leave school prematurely. Classroom teachers and other adult members of school communities must intentionally create a culture of caring and belonging for students (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2020).

I would be naïve and irresponsible to suggest that a high-quality education is free or without cost. Faculty and staff salaries, utilities, facilities

construction and maintenance, instructional supplies, textbooks, and foodservice are but some of the necessities that cost schools a lot of money. However, schools and communities can establish high expectations for every student without asking taxpayers for an additional cent. School administrators can foster collegial, trusting relationships among faculty and staff without increasing their budgets by a single cent. Teachers can commit to treating each of their students and colleagues with care and respect without spending a cent. All of these changes involve cultural shifts within schools and districts that do not have monetary price tags but do involve other kinds of costs. Taxpayers, school leaders, and other stakeholders will have to forfeit their long-held and sometimes deeply entrenched negative assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices about middle grades students, teachers, and schools (see, e.g., Bradley, 1998; Meyer, 2011; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; West & Schwerdt, 2012; Yecke, 2006). These are costs too many have been unwilling to pay for far too long (Virtue, 2009).

### **Robust**

A *robust* field of study is “strong and healthy” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d., Def. 1). I want to focus on two areas where I see potential for middle level professors to secure a more robust future for our field—teacher recruitment and retention and the knowledge building enterprise (i.e., research).

### **Teacher Recruitment**

In addition to COVID and the economy, middle level education must reckon with a labor market characterized by teacher shortages. To withstand labor market volatility, we need to have diverse and flexible pathways *into* the profession and *back into* the profession. Numerous successful programs offer flexibility for career changers and non-traditional students, for example, or for students who are place-bound. Of course, we are in a highly regulated profession with rules and regulations that sometimes presents obstacles to such initiatives.

Drawing from my own administrative experiences, I am very encouraged by the progress one of my former institutions is making to offer teacher education programs to learners from diverse circumstances through distributed learning formats, and to some extent the local political and regulatory climate in the state

supports these kinds of initiatives. On the other hand, creating new pathways into teacher education in other places where I have worked can be extremely challenging, due both to institutional cultures that resist these kinds of changes and to rigid state regulatory frameworks.

I mentioned pathways *back* into the profession. When I worked on this issue in South Carolina, I learned that there were enough certified teachers in the state—or teachers with expired certificates—to fill every existing vacancy and then some. That did not include the many teachers who had retired to places like the Carolina coast and might have considered teaching again on some basis. My point is that there is some existing capacity we need to tap into, and middle level professors ought to think about how we can encourage and help people prepare themselves for reentry into teaching.

Moreover, we need to embrace the fact that this extra capacity will always be there. It is an untapped, underutilized component of the educator labor pool, and it may even get bigger. Teachers seem to be leaving the classroom at a higher and higher rate. Some of that is due to fatigue, displeasure, and sometimes even incompetence—teaching is not for everyone; at least not classroom teaching. Some of this movement, though, simply reflects the mobility of today's workforce. People increasingly think in terms of what I am going to do for the next three years, not the next 30 years. We need to have effective ways to reintegrate educators back into the profession through such avenues as coursework, formal professional development, or institutes.

*The main pathway into the profession is and ought to be middle grades teacher preparation programs.* I think we need a three-pronged effort to boost the flow of teacher candidates to and through the pipeline. First, we need to begin early—in the middle grades—by engaging with the career exploration curriculum. AMLE is doing great work in partnership with American Student Assistance with career exploration, and I believe we need to connect young adolescents who have the dispositions for and/or interest in teaching with opportunities to explore the profession. And then we have to build and scaffold those experiences up the ladder through high school, into higher education, and beyond.

Second, we need to know who the potential teachers are right on our campuses. How often do undergraduates change majors? Once? Twice? It's not uncommon for undergraduates to change majors three or more times—even during their first two years. The 10 undergraduate programs in my department at one institution where I worked had freshman-to-sophomore attrition rates between 13-83%, with a mean attrition rate of 37%. In all, 206 people who were majors in one of our programs as freshmen in the fall were not on our rolls the next fall. We did not have systems in place to track those students, and the data I just shared are data I had to mine from enrollment reports generated centrally at the institution. The outlier programs in my department were agriscience education and music education. What is special about those programs, you may wonder? Agriscience education had a Collegiate FFA organization and an Agriscience Education Ambassadors program that faculty created to build unity among students. Music education had the marching band and music ensembles—programs in the Music Department that bring students together. These programs in agriscience education and music education created a strong sense of community and connection for freshmen right from the start. Moreover, faculty in those programs worked closely and regularly with their colleagues across campus, and my department had shared and joint faculty appointments in those areas. Connecting with prospective teacher candidates early in their collegiate experience can help improve rates of retention in middle level teacher preparation programs and might even help with new candidate recruitment.

Third, we need to look carefully and critically at our curricula, admissions policies and practices, and all other aspects of our programs to determine whether these program elements make a positive difference or if they act as barriers and obstacles to progression. Some pre-majors at one institution I served had contact with advisors in education before changing majors, and they completed surveys that indicated their reasons for leaving. Do you know what the top reasons were? The top reasons were program requirements and time to graduation, and I suspect those issues affect candidate progression at many institutions. I encourage middle level teacher educators to look critically at their programs and ask questions like:

- Are testing requirements an obstacle?
- Are transfer students getting credit they deserve for the work they have already completed?
- Is there adequate support to help candidates navigate all credentialing requirements?
- Does your program expect students to have access to a car to get to field-based classes or internships?

All of these factors can be barriers or obstacles to students' progress and completion, and these obstacles often have more to do with factors like a candidate's socio-economic status rather than their dispositions or competencies for teaching.

### ***The Knowledge-Building Enterprise***

To make the knowledge-building enterprise more robust, we must widen the tent. Middle level education needs a body of research that is theoretically robust and "wide and varied" in terms of methodology (Nagle & Bishop, 2016). This can be achieved by taking a collaborative, "big tent" approach to middle level education research (Caskey et al., 2010), welcoming scholars from diverse disciplines and research traditions into dialogue about common areas of concern.

Middle level education is an important focus for researchers in many fields of study. For example, a recent ERIC search for peer-reviewed journal articles published in the last 10 years with "middle schools" as a descriptor generated 1,424 hits. Twenty-two sources each published 10 or more articles with "middle schools" as a descriptor during this time period, only five of which were middle level-specific journals—*Middle School Journal* ( $n = 33$ ), *Current Issues in Middle Level Education* ( $n = 23$ ), *Research in Middle Level Education Online* ( $n = 22$ ), *Middle Grades Research Journal* ( $n = 18$ ), and *Middle Grades Review* ( $n = 17$ ). Five STEM-related journals accounted for 109 articles—*Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School* ( $n = 50$ ), *Journal of Chemical Education* ( $n = 17$ ), *Science Scope* ( $n = 16$ ), *School Science and Mathematics* ( $n = 14$ ), and *Technology and Engineering Teacher* ( $n = 12$ ). Four journals in educational leadership and administration accounted for 62 articles—*Journal of School Leadership* ( $n = 23$ ), *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* ( $n = 17$ ), *NASSP Bulletin* ( $n = 12$ ), and *Leadership and Policy in Schools* ( $n = 10$ ). The source list also included

journals in health and nursing, counseling, library and media, and English language arts. In addition, of the 10 most frequently occurring authors of articles with "middle schools" as a descriptor, half published in areas outside middle level education, such as educational policy studies, educational psychology, and curriculum studies. A "big tent" approach to middle level research will intentionally seek to bring all of these voices and perspectives into conversations in the field.

Furthermore, a "big tent" approach to growing and enriching the middle level research base "is an endeavor that must extend beyond national boundaries" (Virtue et al., 2020, p. 2) and encompass comparative and international research (Caskey et al., 2010). In the cursory ERIC search described above, 269 articles with "middle schools" as a descriptor also had "foreign countries" as a descriptor. The list of locations spanned more than 20 countries, including Turkey ( $n = 61$ ), China ( $n = 36$ ), Australia ( $n = 16$ ), United Kingdom ( $n = 16$ ), Canada ( $n = 13$ ), Israel ( $n = 11$ ), and South Korea ( $n = 10$ ). Middle level education researchers should seek to learn about young adolescent education with scholars from around the world and synergize with international initiatives like the Global Early Adolescent Study (n.d.) which "seeks to better understand how gender socialization in early adolescence occurs around the world, and how it shapes health and wellness for individuals and their communities" (para. 2).

Finally, I believe grassroots epistemology—building knowledge up and out from the classroom—coupled with a networked approach grounded in the principles of improvement science is the key to a robust future for middle level education research. In 2015, Mertens and colleagues published a piece in *Middle Grades Review* titled: "The Need for Large-Scale, Longitudinal Empirical Studies in Middle Level Education Research." They drew the following conclusion:

Despite the recent development of a number of large-scale studies and research efforts, middle grades education research remains woefully behind in producing the types of large-scale, longitudinal, scientific, and rigorous studies necessary to measure the effectiveness of the middle school philosophy in improving the educational settings, practices, and programs for young adolescents of the 21st century. For middle



grades education research to once again get “ahead of its time,” *we need to focus our attention and efforts on more largescale, longitudinal, empirical research efforts* [emphasis added]. (p. 8)

Actually, I disagree. While such studies may provide one piece (or some pieces) of the puzzle, I do not think large-scale longitudinal studies can get answers to the most pressing questions our constituents need answered (see also Kleine et al., 2018). Grassroots epistemology in middle level education refers to the knowledge building enterprise—an iterative program of discovery, dissemination, and praxis—that begins with practitioners in middle grades schools.

Middle grades classrooms and other educational settings serve as the laboratories in which new knowledge about educational practice is constructed, enacted, and reflected upon daily. Teachers test new teaching ideas and interventions, or, more often, they modify ideas they borrow and customize them to the unique conditions of their classrooms. Principals and counselors experiment with schedule configurations, advising structures, and organizational arrangements. Change is a constant in middle level schools, and the daily practice of middle grades education may best be characterized as a complex, problem-solving activity. (Virtue, 2020, pp. 398-399)

Grassroots epistemology leverages the intellectual power of these professional problem solvers at the school and classroom levels to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in middle level education. Recent studies by Strahan and Poteat (2020), DeMink-Carthew and Netcoh (2019), and Giles and Yazan (2020) are exemplars of research that builds new knowledge up and out from the middle grades classroom. Moving forward, an imperative for middle level education research is to link these local, grassroots knowledge-building efforts through translational and networked approaches (see e.g., Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2020; Virtue, 2020) and leverage the power of the ideas they generate to improve education for young adolescents.

## Conclusion

*Relevant, resilient, and robust*—I believe our attention to these three characteristics will define the future of middle level education research. Middle level education scholars—together with colleagues in allied fields of study—must move forward alongside professionals in middle level schools and classrooms to achieve a bright educational future for young adolescents.

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