

MLER Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group

The Chronicle of Middle Level Education Research



Micki M. Caskey
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Message from the Chair

Micki M. Caskey, Portland State University

As the academic calendar draws to a close, I find myself reviewing the events of the year.

What a productive year for the MLER SIG! We continued to pursue a major research initiative, the Common Planning Time Project, which is the first in our National Middle Grades Research Program. Not only did 60 participant researchers receive training in Phase I of the Common Planning Time Project, but a number of individual researchers and research teams also submitted their collected data for inclusion in the national database.

Notably, selected researchers presented papers that reported the results of their investigations at a symposium during the 2009 AERA Annual Meeting in April. To read the abstracts from the presented papers and learn more about the project, please visit the National Middle Grades Research Program web pages available at www.rmle.pdx.edu/research_project.htm.

The MLER SIG was also active at the NMSA Annual Conference in Denver, CO and the AERA Annual Meeting in San Diego, CA.

SIG members presented numerous sessions at both events and attended business meetings to disseminate research, exchange ideas, and network with middle grades practitioners and researchers. At NMSA, SIG members shared research and resources with practitioners and exchanged ideas for future research. At AERA, the MLER SIG program included four paper sessions (15 papers), two paper discussion sessions (10 papers), and two symposia (8 papers). Similarly, SIG officers participated in AERA governance and information sessions to keep

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MLER
MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION RESEARCH
SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Report from the AERA Program Chair

Penny Bishop, University of Vermont

Greetings! For many of us, summer brings an opportunity to delve more deeply into our research and to cross off a few items on our 'to do' lists. I hope one of the items on your list is to submit a proposal to our Middle Level Education Research SIG to present your research at AERA's annual conference in Denver, Colorado from April 30–May 4, 2010. This year's theme is *Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World*. I am confident that we, as middle level researchers, will have interesting and important research to share that reflects the complexity of

education for young adolescents through this lens.

Several important changes to the submission and review process were approved this year by the AERA Council in order to improve the quality of the annual meeting. I highlight several of these changes here.

The Submission Dates

The proposal submission deadline date is earlier this summer. The electronic submission system opened on June 1st and the proposal submission deadline is July 15th, 2009.

The Review Process

All SIGs and divisions are now required to have Expert Reviewer Panels to assess proposal submissions. Panels will be comprised of scholars who possess a range of appropriate expertise and who agree to complete the reviews within the necessary time frame. This change is an attempt to make the review process more transparent and provide for greater consistency in reviewing quality. If you are interested in being considered for the Expert Review Panel for our SIG, please register as a volunteer through the AERA

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Report from the Executive Director

Vincent A. Anfara, Jr., University of Tennessee Knoxville

It was great seeing many of you at the annual meeting of AERA in San Diego. I want to extend my thanks to the Program Chair and MLER SIG Chair for the great program they created and to the presenters for their research and insights into middle grades education.

On May 2002, I had the pleasure of attending a meeting in Washington, DC (sponsored by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education) to discuss the intersection of practitioners, professional organizations, and the research community across the PK-16 education pipeline

and the education agenda of the Obama administration. Even though we were a small group (25 attendees by design), those who were in attendance were very excited to hear about the MLER SIG and its special focus and expertise in middle grades research. I remain hopeful that this initial meeting will develop into future possibilities for MLER members and for the advancement of middle grades research.

On May 30, I will travel to Denver as a member of the AERA SIG Executive Committee to attend to many of the changes that are occurring in

the policies and procedures of the annual meeting. At that time I will find out about the status of our re-formatted bylaws, which were submitted prior to the April annual meeting in San Diego. Be assured that I will keep the MLER SIG leadership informed about new policies and procedures so that our SIG can remain on the forefront of what's happening in AERA.

For those who were not in San Diego, please note that as Executive Advisor I brought before the SIG officers and Executive Committee a proposal that would allow our Chair, Micki

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Middle Level Research SIG Business Meeting Minutes

Notes submitted by Kathleen F. Malu, Secretary

*AERA ANNUAL MEETING
SAN DIEGO MARRIOTT HOTEL AND MARINA, SAN DIEGO, CA
TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2009
6:15-7:45 PM*

Welcome/Introduction of Officers and Council members (Micki Caskey)

*Penny Bishop, Chair Elect/ Program Chair
Steve Mertens, Vice Chair/Treasurer
Kathleen Malu, Secretary
Vince Anfara, Executive Advisor
Council Members: Kezia McNeal, Cynthia Reyes, Karen Bostick Frederick, Donald Hackmann*

Chair Report (Micki Caskey)

a. Election Results
Council Members will serve for the 2009-2011 term.
Congratulations to: Kezia McNeal, Cynthia Reyes, Karen

Bostick Frederick, Donald Hackmann
Graduate Student:
Nicole Miller

b. Call for nominations:
Treasurer, Vice Chair, 3 Council Members

c. By-Laws
Were reformatted in accordance to AERA guidelines and submitted to AERA for review.

d. SIG History
Ron Williamson stepped down as historian for the SIG. The SIG will need to set up a process for identifying a new historian and updating the SIG history.

e. SIG Materials
SIG will create fresh and vibrant SIG materials

including business cards and brochures

Executive Advisor's Report (Vince Anfara)

Shared changes coming to 2010 Annual Meeting. Number of paper session will be reduced (only 1000 for 2010). New deadline for proposals is July 15, 2009. SIG will need to establish a review panel of experts to ensure quality of papers presented.

Program Chair Report (Micki Caskey)

Every paper was uploaded to the system this year.

More than 50 proposals were reviewed by 45 reviewers. Program includes four paper

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SIG Association Council Members

Karen Bostwick Frederick	(2009-11)
Christopher Cook	(2008-10)
Donald Hackmann	(2009-11)
Richard Lipka	(2008-10)
Kezia McNeal	(2007-09)
Nicole Miller	(2009-11)
Nancy Mizelle	(2008-10)
Cynthia Reyes	(2009-11)

Message from the Chair

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abreast of Association policy and learn about changes in the 2010 Annual Meeting.

At this juncture, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who have served the MLER SIG this past year including:

- The more than 50 SIG members who reviewed AERA proposals,
- The more than 50 SIG members who presented sessions or papers at the NMSA Annual Conference or the AERA Annual Meeting, and
- The project leaders of the Common Planning Time Project. You are the reason for our SIG's success!

Specifically, I want to thank our exiting SIG Council Members—Gayle Andrews, Dave Brown, Cary Gillenwater, and Susan Trimble—as well as our continuing SIG Council Members—Christopher Cook, Dick Lipka, and Kezia McNeal and for their service. I thank Kathleen Brinegar for her work as Editor of *The Chronicle of Middle Level Education Research*.

Moreover, I am most grateful for the work of the leadership team including Vince Anfara (Executive Advisor), Kathy Roney (Immediate Past Chair), Penny Bishop (Vice Chair), Steve Mertens (Treasurer), and Kathy Malu (Secretary). Your service has made a difference!

Additionally, I welcome our newly elected SIG Council Members—Karen Bostick Frederick, Donald Hackmann, Nicole Miller, and Cynthia Reyes. It also gives me great pleasure to announce the election of Steve Mertens as Vice Chair and the transition of Penny Bishop to Chair-Elect/Program Chair.

Now, to the year ahead of us. I urge you to consider submitting proposals for the 2010 AERA annual meeting, which will be in Denver, CO. Please note that the submission system opened June 1st and will close July 15, 2009—which is much earlier than in the past. As many of you know, our AERA session allocations are based on factors such as the number of

proposal submissions and SIG membership totals. If you have questions or need additional information, please contact Penny Bishop, Program Chair. Your quality proposals are essential for our presence at AERA.

During the upcoming academic year, you can anticipate additional changes. For example, you will see a reformatted set of SIG bylaws that align with AERA's bylaw template. You will be asked to review and vote on the adoption of these reformatted bylaws. We will continue to communicate changes and news using our SIG listserv, which is linked to your SIG membership.

As we look ahead, I encourage you to seek opportunities to either remain or become an active member of the SIG. We represent the largest group of middle grades researchers. Together, we can ensure a vibrant and productive future for the MLER SIG.

Have a wonderful summer!

Report from the AERA Program Chair

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Online Submission System www.aera.net. Invited reviewers will be notified in July and will be expected to review submissions between August 15 and September 15.

Conference Dates

This year's annual conference runs Friday, April 30 – Tuesday, May 4, 2010, in

contrast to the Monday through Friday format of earlier years.

I encourage you all to read about the changes in more detail by visiting http://aera.net/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3802/153-155_03EDR09.pdf

Please visit www.aera.net for more information about the conference, proposal submission, and participation limits.

The next opportunity we have to meet as a SIG will be at the National Middle School Conference in Indianapolis, IN, November 5-7, 2009. Please join us there!

Report from the Executive Director

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Caskey, to continue in her current position for one year. The proposal passed unanimously. The proposal was also discussed at the annual business meeting with support from those members present. This proposal was prompted by the unfortunate resignation of our incoming Chair, Sue Thompson. Due to personal reasons, Sue had to reluctantly step down prior to assuming her role as the new Chair. We all wish Sue the best. This additional year as Chair for Micki will

afford Penny Bishop the time to learn the responsibilities of Program Chair prior to her assuming the office of Chair at the conclusion of AERA 2010—Denver.

Please check this issue of the *Chronicle* for updates on the Common Planning Time Project and the newest volume of the *Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education*, *An International Look at Educating Young Adolescents*

(Mertens, Anfara, & Roney, 2009). Both of these are important projects of MLER and your continued support and awareness are vitally important.

I hope everyone has a restful and rejuvenating summer. This past academic year has been very busy for many MLER SIG members. I look forward to seeing many of you in Indianapolis for NMSA's annual meeting.

Middle Level Research SIG Business Meeting Minutes

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sessions (7 papers), two paper discussion sessions (10 papers), two symposia (8 papers), and SIG business meeting.

Finance Report (Steve Mertens)

Beginning balance for 2009 was \$3,985.02; increases were \$526; ending balance is \$4,511.70.

Awards and Recognitions (Micki Caskey, Penny Bishop, Kezia McNeal)

Exiting Council Members; Gayle Andrews, Dave Brown, Cary Gillenwater, Susan Trimble received recognition plaques.

Graduate Student Award: Kezia McNeal announced the 2009 recipient, Kathleen

Brinegar. Molly Lawrence, recipient of the 2008 award, presented her study.

National Middle Grades Research Project Report (Micki Caskey)

Micki provided an update of the Common Planning Time Project. For Phase I, to date, 60 participant-researchers are engaged in the project. Phase II of the Common Planning Time Project will be quantitative and it will be conducted in partnership with the Center for Prevention Research and Development.

Publications Report (Micki Caskey)

A list of publication opportunities in middle grades research was circulated. Outlets include:

- The Handbook in Middle Level Education Research Series (contact Vincent Anfara, series editor),
- The Chronicle of Middle Level Education Research, the SIG publication that keeps members “in the loop” includes a peer-reviewed section (contact Kathleen Brinegar and Penny Bishop, co-editors),
- Research in Middle Level Education Online (Micki Caskey, editor), and
- Middle Grades Research Journal (David Hough, editor). Announced and distributed “Call for Editor” for Research in Middle Level Education Online. Also shared that the SIG has been approached about an affiliation with Middle Grades Research Journal.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen F. Malu, PhD

William Paterson University of New Jersey

National Middle Grades Research Project on Common Planning Time – May 2009

Update submitted by CPT Project Leaders: Kathy Roney, Vince Anfara, Micki Caskey, Steve Mertens

Using Skype, project leaders (Vince Anfara, Micki Caskey, Steve Mertens and Kathy Roney) are hard at work in weekly meetings that keep the project alive. Here are some of the items on which they are working:

- Updating the MLER SIG website’s link to the project. <http://www.rmle.pdx.edu/>. Please notice that extensive information is available about items such as: program development, Phase One of the CPT Project, and a list of the participant researchers.
- Confirming the timeline for data collection and data submission. We have eight folders of data—observations and interviews—representing 11 participant researchers. All data will be submitted by December 2009.
- Organizing the project leaders’ summer meeting. Kathy, Steve, Micki and Vince will meet in Chicago in July to input the data on the secure server. This in turn will allow research participants to access the national data.
- Moving the project into its’ second phase—the quantitative phase. MLER-SIG has partnered with the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois for this phase of the project. Nancy Flowers of CPRD now serves as one of the project leaders for Phase Two. Please review the “Phase II Project Announcement” on our website at <http://www.rmle.pdx.edu/>
- Planning on publication opportunities. Three papers were presented at AERA/ San Diego this year (2009). We anticipate that an up-coming volume of the Handbook in Research in Middle Level Education series will be dedicated to Phase One of the CPT Project. A “Call for Manuscripts” will be issued by January 2010 with manuscripts due in August 2010.
- Dave Brown, David Strahan, and Larry Daniel are currently serving as members of an ad hoc committee to examine the creation and role of an advisory board whose primary duties would include oversight and further development of the National Middle Grades Research Program and its projects. Dave has agreed to serve as the chair of this group.

It is our hope that more of the MLER SIG members will join us in Phase Two of this exciting project. Please feel free to contact any of the project leaders should you have any questions.

School belonging: A necessary but often overlooked element in middle schools

Paige Shalter Bruening, The Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

Many educators know that middle school is a vital time in engaging students, yet research shows that young adolescents are often disengaged at school. Blum (2005) reports that as many as 40 to 60 percent of students are disengaged from school by the time they reach high school. One way of counteracting this disengagement is by increasing school belonging. A sense of school belonging not only promotes school spirit, but it has been linked to increased academic achievement and efficacy (Goodenow, 1993a; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), decreased likelihood to engage in risky behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997), and overall general well being (Anderman, 2002). This article examines both the benefits of school belonging and what schools can do to promote it in middle school settings.

Imagine this scenario: It is the end of the school year awards day and the students at Jefferson Middle School are buzzing with excitement. Today is the day they have been working for all year and they file eagerly into the gym for the ceremony. The principal looks out over the sea of students, teachers, administrators, and parents all dressed in the school's colors of green and white. The principal begins to announce all of the awards and accomplishments that students at Jefferson have received during the year. There are screams of support and loud applause for the school volleyball team and the Power of the Pen team; cheers and standing ovations for the drama club's third place finish and for the Science Olympiad who made it

to state competition. As every school organization is recognized, the students and teachers beam with excitement and pride. At the end of the ceremony, the students stand with their teachers and scream the school cheer. The students and teachers hug each other and give each other high fives. There are even tears and promises to return from the eighth graders who will be moving onto high school next year.

Compare this with the scenario at Floyd Middle School. This school is in the same part of town and serves the same population of students. There is an awards ceremony here, but it is brief and there are few visitors. Students sit talking to each other and do not pay attention to the principal who calls out awards. There is barely

any applause and no joy from the students. Even the students who are recognized only briefly acknowledge their names and they seem to be more embarrassed than proud. As soon as the ceremony is over students scream and clap because they are out of school. Both teachers and students rush out of the gym, barely even acknowledging each other. There are no tears shed by the eighth graders, in fact many can be overheard saying that they are finally "Free of Floyd!"

Unfortunately, these scenarios are not exaggerations. Blum (2005) cites that as many as 40 to 60 percent of students are disengaged from school by the time they reach high school. Other research supports these findings, reporting that perceptions of school belonging

decrease between the beginning of the sixth grade year and end of the seventh grade year (Anderman, 2003). School belonging is an important concept for middle school educators and researchers because it promotes school spirit, as well as provides several academic and personal benefits for students. Not only do students who perceive themselves as belonging at school report an overall general well being (Anderman, 2002), but they also display increased academic achievement and efficacy (Goodenow, 1993a; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), and a decreased tendency to engage in risky behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997). This article examines the benefits of school belonging, what schools can do to promote it, and why it is important to research in middle school settings.

WHAT IS SCHOOL BELONGING?

Researchers have defined school belonging as the perceived social climate of schools (Juvonen, 2006), and as a student's sense of membership and acceptance in school or the classroom (Goodenow, 1993b). Initial research on school belonging grew out of interviews with dropouts. When asked why they left school, these former students often stated that they did not feel like they belonged in school or that they did not identify with school (Juvonen). Research in motivation further expanded knowledge on school belonging. Davis (2003) reported that middle school students felt less connected with their schools and teachers than elementary students, and that 60 percent of middle school students felt disengaged with their teachers

and did not desire to form any type of relationship with them.

Several researchers have attempted to delineate what makes students perceive that they belong. Solomon, Battistich, Kim and Watson (1997) summarized the variables that students identified as leading to school belonging. These variables included: having secure, supportive, and positive relationships with adults, being allowed to make choices about academic activities, experiencing fair and democratic classrooms, and creating common goals and values. Other research has suggested that being involved in extra curricular activities, having quality peer relationships (Juvonen, 2006), feeling welcomed and valued by the school, and feeling that the school reflects students' interests also increased students' feelings of belonging (Solomon et al.).

Research has also identified factors that work against feelings of belonging, especially at the middle school level. In their study which examined adolescent development and middle school structures, Eccles et al. (1993) revealed that many middle school structures did not fit the developmental level and needs of adolescents and that this led to a sense of alienation and detachment from school. They reported that students perceived their middle school classrooms as having increased levels of teacher control and discipline, and providing fewer academic choices than their elementary school classrooms. Middle school students expressed that they were less involved in classroom decision-making

and they experienced less personal and positive relationships with their teachers. Whereas there was more personalized learning and differentiation in the elementary schools, the middle schools focused on whole-group work, ability grouping, and performance orientations. The middle school classrooms also were less cognitively demanding than elementary classrooms. Eccles et al determined that these factors worked in opposition to the adolescents' need for autonomy, peer affiliation, and identity formation, and contributed to students feeling that their schools did not meet their needs, so they disconnected.

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS IN CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING

The student-teacher relationship plays a vital role in creating a sense of school belonging. Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) pointed to the importance of student perceptions of teacher caring and how these affected student's attitudes and beliefs toward academics. Wentzel (2002) hypothesized that good teachers mirrored the style of the authoritative parent and suggested that this relationship was especially important in middle school. She cited research that demonstrated the parenting styles that were most beneficial for adolescent adjustment, which included the following: "consistent enforcement of fair standards for behavior, encouragement of bidirectional communication and valuing of adolescents' opinions, expectations for self-reliant and mature behavior, and concern for emotional and physical well-being" (p. 287). She proposed and found

that when teachers exhibited these same characteristics, adolescent students were more motivated and had more pro-social adjustment. In a study of sixth-grade students and teachers in two suburban schools, Wentzel observed that there were clear differences among teachers on expectations, fairness, rule setting, negative feedback, and teacher interest in the subject matter, and she revealed that these differences were related to the variances in student motivation, behavior, and academic performance. This confirmed her earlier findings that perceived support from teachers increased student interest in class, social responsibility behavior, and academic behavior (Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, 1997).

Other research supports Wentzel's findings. Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) reported that students who were interested in having positive relationships with their teachers, and who were more engaged and responsive, were the students who believed that their teacher cared about them. Turner and Patrick (2004) observed that teachers who were enthusiastic and positive about learning, who expressed a belief that all students could learn and provided support for this learning had more engaged students. They reasoned that teacher behaviors contributed to both the work and attitude of students.

Goldstein (1999) proposed that in order to be effective, teachers needed to be caring. Summarizing Nell Noddings' work, Goldstein reasoned that all teachers could demonstrate caring, because it was not an inherent trait, but a series

of behaviors. She proposed that teachers needed to develop receptive relationships with students and to support students in a caring way in order to assist them in reaching for goals that stretched their abilities. She suggested that when teachers were responsive to their students' needs and showed care and concern for them, then students' would be more willing to engage in cognitively difficult tasks (Goldstein). Goldstein's ideas were substantiated by one study, which revealed that perceived teacher support was the strongest indicator for predicting students' success expectancy (Anderman & Freeman, 2004).

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL BELONGING IN DIVERSE SETTINGS

School belonging is especially important for engaging youth in urban and low socioeconomic status schools. In their study of students' sense of community in schools, Solomon et al (1997) reported that the effects of having a sense of school community was consistent across poverty levels suggesting that school belonging is an effective practice for all types of schools. Anderman and Freeman (2004) summarized studies that revealed that school belonging also had an effect on the motivation of students, regardless of influence from peers. They noted that this finding was consistent across African American, Hispanic and White students. In a study of high poverty African American middle school students, Gutman and Midgley (2000) found that school belonging predicted increased

academic achievement in the form of grade point average.

Brown (2004) argued that school belonging and teacher caring are essential for culturally responsive teaching. He contended that when teachers were willing to understand their students' social and emotional needs, they helped students feel less alienated. He proposed that to be effective with urban youth, teachers needed to establish community – and family-types of classrooms. Mirroring Wentzel's (2002) arguments, Brown suggested that these types of classrooms should establish explicit expectations for behaviors, promote mutual respect between students and teachers, demonstrate care both verbally and nonverbally, and demand effort.

This demand for effort is echoed by the work of Turner and Meyer (2004) who reasoned that not only did students need to feel that their teachers cared for them as individuals, but as students as well. In their observational study of seventh grade classrooms, they found that students described their teachers as holding high but reasonable academic standards that challenged their thinking (academic press) while still maintaining a caring environment. These actions by the teacher led to more motivated students and better feelings toward school. It is important to note that Turner and Meyer observed a teacher who taught one class of high level students and one class of lower level students and that the teacher maintained the same standards of press and caring for both classes. The students in both classes reported increased

motivation, which suggests that motivation was not related to the ability level of students.

BENEFITS OF SCHOOL BELONGING

Research has connected a sense of school belonging to numerous academic and personal improvements for students. Resnick et al. (1997), found that students who were involved in more positive school environments engaged in less risky behaviors. In their study using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, they revealed that when students felt more school belonging they were less emotionally distressed, were less likely to engage in suicidal ideation and violent activities. These students also engaged in sexual activity later and used cigarettes, alcohol and drugs less. Davis (2003) suggested that positive and supportive student-teacher relationships helped reduce adolescents' risk for distress and deviance, as well as for academic failure.

As for academic benefits, Davis (2003) summarized research that indicated that students who perceived having good relationships with their teachers felt more competent of their abilities, liked school more, and tended to have higher grades. In fact, she noted that students' perceptions of teacher support were one of the strongest indicators for student engagement. Anderman (2002) reported that students who had higher levels of school belonging had higher grade point averages and were more optimistic in general.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS DO TO PROMOTE SCHOOL BELONGING?

School belonging has many implications for schools and teaching. Stipek (2006) reasoned that it was much easier for teachers to trust and support their students when they felt the same trust and support. She suggested that school administrators needed to work with teachers to develop positive staff relationships and common goals and values. Stipek also argued that smaller schools and class sizes, block scheduling, heterogeneous grouping, and advisory groups help teachers build stronger relationships with their students.

Blum (2005) contended that teachers could promote school belonging by making their content meaningful to students' lives and by providing consistent classroom structures. Other researchers have encouraged teachers to use language with their students that promote both caring and academic press and to demonstrate to students that they care about them as both learners and individuals (Turner & Meyer, 2004). As well, researchers have recommended that teachers design appropriately challenging learning situations that cognitively stretch student thinking without frustrating them (Goldstein, 1999; Turner & Meyer). These researchers also urged teachers to convey a belief that every child is capable of learning, and to provide the encouragement and support needed for each student to attain success (Turner & Meyer). Turner and Patrick (2004) suggested that when teachers speak to students they should emphasize

the importance of understanding the content and assist students in developing their understanding. They called for teachers to encourage effort and persistence, while expressing enthusiasm and joy about the content they teach. Stipek (2006) agreed, noting that to promote student engagement teachers needed to set high standards for their students, challenge them to reach their potential, and provide the support they need to meet those expectations.

Blum (2005) contended that it is often easier for teachers to develop positive and supportive relationships with high achieving students, yet the students who struggle are the ones most in need of positive student-teacher relationships. He argued that it was important for teachers to make

special efforts to show a personal interest in and interact positively with the students whom they find most difficult to teach – by going out of their way to compliment positive behaviors, showing an interest in the students' lives outside school, listening to the students' perspectives on the problems they are having, and collaborating with them on developing strategies to address these problems (p. 49).

Teachers also should be realistic and understand that they will not have great relationships with all students. Davis (2006) suggested that in the absence of closeness, teachers could still make students feel connected to their classroom and school. Thus, even when conflicts arose between students and teachers, as long as it was balanced with academic press and support, students

could still feel a sense of connection and respect. Researchers also reasoned that it is important to make sure that everyone feels a sense of place in the school community and that schools do not promote the belonging of some, while excluding others (Anderman & Freeman, 2004).

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUED RESEARCH ON SCHOOL BELONGING

As reported earlier, as students pass through middle school, their sense of school belonging declines (Anderman, 2003). Although research identified several factors that support school belonging, it remains a rather understudied construct, especially in the middle grades. Although academic press and caring are vital to school belonging, it is often unclear exactly what this looks like in middle school classrooms. What is it that teachers say and do to promote belonging of middle school students, while also maintaining high standards and providing the independence that

adolescents seek? More research also needs to be conducted on the structures of schools that support a sense of belonging and those that detract from such feelings. Beyond promoting positive student-teacher relationships, what else can schools do to promote belonging in their students? Finally, it is important to consider school belonging when examining any middle school setting. School belonging has been linked to motivation, achievement, pro-social behaviors, and efficacy, yet it remains a construct that is often disregarded when researching middle school students and settings. Can an understanding of belonging help better understand learning in the middle grades? Belonging seems to be vitally important in the middle grades, but more research needs to be done in order to expand on this concept.

CONCLUSION

School belonging is an important aspect of schooling, which is often overlooked in educational circles. In a time where many teachers point to their students' lack of emotion, school belonging is shown to increase engagement. Research also shows that schools and teachers are able to do things to promote a sense of community and belonging. Having students who like school and who are engaged, not only benefits the students, but it provides a better professional environment for their teachers. When teachers are happier and more satisfied, they tend to pass this on to their students. Thus, creating a sense of school belonging is dynamic and cyclical in nature, and it proves to be beneficial to all who are involved in the school. Research should continue to explore this relationship and to ensure that school belonging in the middle grades is understood from many different perspectives.

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2009 Graduate Student Award Recipient



Kathleen Brinegar
University of Vermont

Abstract:

The population of young adolescents entering this nation's middle schools continues to grow more diverse. One sub-population that adds to this diversity is immigrant children. The purpose of my study is to describe schooling from the perspective of immigrant and refugee students in order to portray the schooling experiences of young adolescents from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This dissertation addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee middle school students in a historically linguistically and culturally homogeneous setting?
2. What do the immigrant and refugee students in this community want their teachers, other school personnel, and peers to know and understand about them?

Immigrant families in the United States have increased seven times faster than native born families since 1990 (Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005). As of the year 2000, there were 2.84 million foreign-born United States

“I Feel Like I’m Safe Again”: The Middle School Experiences of Immigrants in a Multilingual/Multicultural Setting

residents under the age of eighteen (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2001*). However, little research on the schooling experiences of immigrant youth exists even today. The majority of discussion and research devoted to immigration has related to adults and the impact of immigration on the U.S. economy and foreign policy (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). While much debate has ensued regarding bilingual education, little beyond this issue is studied about the schooling experiences of immigrant students (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001.)

Middle grades research needs to be expanded to include the perspective of these newcomers. Chamberlain (2003) noted the lack of middle grades literature related to diverse populations. Brown (2005) shared this critique of middle grades literature by noting the hegemony of a movement centered on a white, middle class, male perception of identity. Students in middle school experience the nuances of early adolescence, but these young immigrants must also navigate the nuances of a new culture. Igoa (1995) described immigrant children as not merely “‘language minority’ children. They are children who have been uprooted from their own cultural environment and who need to be guided not to fling themselves overboard in their encounter with a new culture – for some, a ‘powerful’ culture...” (p. 9).

We therefore must understand more about the experiences of immigrant students in our nation's middle schools.

For this study I used an ethnographic approach to explore the schooling lives of immigrant and refugee middle level students. My research spanned three school years, beginning when the youngest participants were in sixth grade and ending during their eighth grade year. The three-year period allowed me to see how students perceived their schooling as they matured age wise and developmentally. Interviews, participant observation, and document analysis served as my primary methods of data collection. Of my fourteen student participants, nine were males and five were females. In terms of country of origin, three were from Somalia, one from the Congo, six were Bosnian, and four were Vietnamese. They varied in terms of the length of time they had been in the United States with one year being the shortest amount of time and ten years the longest. The one characteristic they all shared was their eligibility for English Language Learner (ELL) services. My observations occurred two to four days a week for three years. Observations included a full shadow day of eight of the fourteen participants, formal interviews with students, interviews with school personnel (principal, content area teachers, ELL teacher, and special educator).

I analyzed the data using a framework developed based on the work of Green, Harker, and Golden (1986), and utilized by Taylor (1993), which viewed the lessons that teachers present to their students as central to an understanding of classroom life. I used the five frames developed by Green et al (1986) as a preliminary coding tool for my observation data. As data was collected, it was divided into these frames and coded for emergent themes. These themes helped prompt specific interviews and questions. I removed observation data that was irrelevant to student data from the frames and new frames were developed to support the student data continuing with collection and analysis until I reached “theoretical saturation” (Glaser, Barney & Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999).

My findings fell under three main headings; school organization, student learning, and social interactions. In terms of organization, the middle grades structures utilized at Riverview Middle School showed much potential for improving the schooling experiences for immigrant and refugee students. In many ways my participants felt they were given a voice in their classrooms, saw most of their individual needs being met, and generally felt positively about their schooling experience. The multiage/year structure supported language acquisition as growth was easily monitored and pushed from year to year. In general, students

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2009 Graduate Student Award Recipient

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felt a positive sense of self-worth, a critical element of successful schooling in the literature for young adolescents (*Brighton, 2007; Stevenson, 2001*) and for immigrant students (*Fong, 2007; Igoa (1995)*). At the same time there were features of the organizational structure that resulted in negative consequences. The unequal and seemingly haphazard distribution of immigrant students across the three general teams silenced some students. Fong (2007) described the invisibility often felt by immigrant students. This was the case at Riverview for the students on a team with a pull-out ELL program. As these students were largely out of the classroom for academic classes and/or seated separately in the back of the room, they lacked the opportunity to participate as equal team members. In addition, students who were separated from other students with whom they shared a native language were forced to leave this language behind during the school day, silencing a part of their identity (*Igoa, 1995*).

The findings related to student learning were more disconcerting. I consistently struggled to identify the purpose of the lessons for the participants. The lack of clear expectations caused a significant self-identified problem for the students. Over and over they described tasks they were expected to accomplish for which they did not have the prerequisite skills. They often did not feel like the work they were given was fair and they distinguished between its being too hard and simply not understanding the directions or purpose. As a result of students' confusion and lack of prerequisite knowledge, they often ended up copying other students' work or classroom aides would complete it for them. While teachers described wanting to help students feel comfortable and safe, students shared a desire for more balance between the social and academic. Students also shared their concerns about the curriculum, feeling that their backgrounds and stories were often missing from it.

Immigrant students want the support of their fellow classmates, and in fact, they rely on it. When asked directly what they wanted their peers to know and understand about them, participants overwhelmingly responded with some variation of "we're like everyone else." However, there was a continuum of responses related to how much like everyone else immigrant students saw themselves. Although the participants did not specifically speak about the social pressure they felt to fit in, their actions and words showed how important this was to them. They were generally uncomfortable sharing anything about their cultures with their classmates. However, during interviews students expressed the desire for their peers to know "how cool" their native country was. At an age when students rely on peers to help them develop a sense of self-worth, negotiating who they were at home and who they were at school, proved challenging for many.

My findings suggest important implications for middle grades educators, policy makers, and researchers. Immigrant students need a safe space where they can have a voice and learn to advocate for themselves. The practice of organizing middle schools into smaller units, or teams, helped provide such an environment for students in this study. Even more significant were the benefits described by my participants of the multiyear and multiage elements of the teaming structure. Reducing transitions and maintaining consistency for multiple years, when the environment is having a positive influence on a student, was a valuable tool in alleviating immigrant stress and improving students' perceptions of their academic performance. At this same time, placing immigrant students on teams with teachers who were uncomfortable with immigrant students for multiple years had detrimental effects on student self-worth. Schools serving immigrant students should examine their grouping policies. The practice of distributing diverse groups of students across teams or classes was perceived by immigrant students as negatively

influencing their ability to make friends. While peer relationships are important for the identify formation of all young adolescents, they are critical for immigrant students (*Igoa, 1995*).

In addition, all teachers need to have clear expectations for their immigrant students, which will often differ from those of their regular education students and from student to student. Without such expectations teachers often assumed that immigrant students could do less than they could. Developing an assessment plan that collects baseline data on new immigrant students, and sharing these data with all teachers, would help differentiate an academic program for every immigrant student. General education teachers need professional development geared specifically toward working with immigrant learners. This needs to include, but surpass, instructional strategies. Schools need to not only provide opportunities for teachers to be exposed to such knowledge, but also hold teachers accountable for implementing it in their classrooms. Finally, schools need a balance in meeting immigrants' socioemotional and academic needs. The school in this study has done much to support the socioemotional development of its students. However teacher and student comments reflect that the focus on academic needs has been secondary to this, a focus the students found problematic.

Researchers need to recognize students as stakeholders in educational reform. Students must be invited into the dialogue about the future of their education. The thoughtful comments made by these fourteen middle grades students demonstrate the ability and importance of young adolescents' perspective on their schooling experiences. Providing immigrant students, in particular, with the opportunity to join the conversation about middle grades education, has the potential to help students view themselves in a more positive light. In addition, research

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on teacher dispositions and team characteristics that lead to improved outcomes for immigrant and refugee young adolescents has the potential to alter subtractive schooling practices. As the students in my study provide anecdotal evidence that multiage teaming lead to improved academic achievement over time, quantitative research should explore the validity of this claim with a broader group of participants.

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Book Review

Not much, just chillin': The hidden lives of middle schoolers

Nicole C. Miller, M.A., Mississippi State University

Not much, just chillin' recounts the observations and analyses of a journalist's experience as she follows the lives of a group of middle school students. Linda Perlstein, a former Washington Post reporter who spent one year observing the lives of middle schoolers in suburban Maryland. She shares her insights into the changes that young adolescents experience, emotionally, socially, and academically. This observation of middle school life traverses the daily struggles of young adolescents including: relationships with friends, parents and teachers; fears, the social hierarchy; sexual development; and physical, social, and emotional change.

Perlstein's observations focused on five students: Lily, Jimmy, Jackie, Elizabeth and Eric. Lily, a sixth grader, struggled with friendships and issues of social status. Jimmy, uncomfortable with his body, endured many physical changes during sixth grade. His first year in middle school was spent growing into himself. Elizabeth, a seventh grader, struggled with the push and pull of her relationship with her parents. She desired independence and space to determine who she was. Even though Elizabeth interacted with her parents only on her terms, she desperately desired their

approval. Jackie, also a seventh grader, typified the boy-crazy teen. Somewhat ironically, her parents watched over her closely, attempting to limit her access to age inappropriate material. Eric, an eighth grader, started the year out with high hopes, yet ended up barely passing. He wrestled with issue of belonging as he relocated to live with his father and step-mother. His mother tried to remain connected and help Eric, but was unable to give him the support he needed to be successful academically. Essentially, through these five students Perlstein imparted insight into the experiences and perspectives of middle schoolers regarding significant real world issues such as the attack on 9/11, bullying, family structures, Internet use, sexual encounters, and more.

Perlstein's writing style in Not much, just chillin' illustrated her experience as a journalist. The book was relatively readable, with periods of confusion due to her complex writing style and the large number of students being discussed beyond the core group of observed students. Organized into three sections based on the seasons of the school year, Perlstein's observations were recounted chronologically. Perlstein primarily

narrated the events, but also elaborated on her observations by providing limited yet succinct interpretation and analysis. She used research on adolescent development and middle school issues, seen in the notes and selected bibliography, to generate this elaboration. The book was written in an almost frenetic manner. This frenetic writing style helped to portray the rapid pace and tension of the middle school experience.

Not much, just chillin' is a solid introduction to the many and varied issues that face young adolescents. Most middle school teachers, at least those who have taken the opportunity to get to know their students, have "met" each one of the students in this book. The book is relevant reading for pre – and in-service teachers, parents, and administrators. It can be effectively used to explore many of the components of the middle school philosophy and experience. In particular, this book explains the need for specially prepared middle level teachers, developmentally responsive curriculum and instruction, and advocacy for young adolescents.

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So You Want To Be a Reviewer?

Anne Ogg and Kathleen F. Malu, PhD

As a new researcher, I (Anne) tossed my name in the hat to review conference proposals for the American Educational Research Association, our field's prestigious annual research conference. Undaunted, and as an eager, naïve member of many different special interest groups, I volunteered to review for four areas. Nine proposals arrived in my in-box. This turned out to be far too many for a novice reviewer, but I carefully read through all nine, and prefaced my comments with "I am new at this." A year later, I volunteered to become a reviewer for a Handbook series. This time, I grappled with the rating system on the review sheet. I contacted the editor, Dr. Kathleen Malu, and she discussed with me the issues involved in going from a consumer of scholarly writing to a reviewer.

Based on our conversation, here is a list of questions and answers about this process of reviewing that novice reviewers might find useful:

I (Kathy) would like to preface my answers with the following disclaimer. My answers are not definitive. I'm sure that if you ask these questions to different editors you will get a range of responses.

Do I need to be well versed in the methodology used in order to understand the article?

The key phrase in this first question is "well versed." Well versed may mean that we use this methodology in our own research. It might also mean that we've read and studied it in our master's and/or doctoral coursework or in our professional development work, post-doctorate. If you don't feel confident about your knowledge, mention it to the editor. Here's an example. I have been trained in statistical research but I don't feel confident in reviewing the statistical calculations in these types of studies. When I am sent a statistical study to review, I read through what I can and let the editor know which parts of the manuscript I was able to evaluate and which ones I wasn't.

Am I supposed to edit while I write, even minor edits?

As a reviewer myself, I try to make suggestions about edits, even minor ones, as much as I can because I think it helps the authors, particularly if I've noted that their clarity of writing is poor. I know for myself as an author I am always grateful for as much feedback as I can get. One last note, there are always going to be tiny errors that may pass by several reviewers and the editor; so as much as all of our eyes can pick up mistakes, the better our work will be.

What if I read the first page or two and think that the manuscript or proposal lacks editing or has grave organizational issues, but the content is valuable and moves the field forward?

Here's a question that I think different editors will answer differently. For me, there is a difference between a conference proposal and a manuscript for a journal or book. If a conference proposal is poorly written it suggests to me that the presentation will not be effective. Since there is no way to re-submit, I would have to take these issues into account in my scoring/review. I'd be inclined to reject such a proposal.

For a journal or book manuscript there is the "resubmit" option. If the content seems valuable then I would want my reviewer to note the concerns and mark the "revise and resubmit" box. This gives the editor the opportunity to return to the author with specific suggestions and directions for the author to follow that would make the manuscript acceptable.

What if I recognize that the document has been written by someone big in the field?

If you recognize the author then you should return the manuscript to the editor and explain that you cannot be a "blind" reviewer of that particular manuscript.

The editor wants me to "rate" the article in several categories, using numbers from 1-5. What is the best way to interpret the rating system on the review sheet?

Usually there is an explanation of the numbers and you should try to follow that

explanation. I wonder, though, if this question isn't hinting at other issues or concerns that individuals who are new to reviewing might have. Numbers suggest a good/bad, pass/fail making this a difficult call for a novice reviewer to make. I very much liked your prefacing of your reviews with "I am new to this." With such a statement you are letting both the editor and author know that you would like them to consider this as they read your comments. Also, keep in mind that there will be at least a second reviewer, probably a third and finally the editor. So, yours won't be the only call.

What is the difference between reviewing for a conference proposal and reviewing manuscripts for publication?

Although the same issues apply for both types of review, I suggest that novice reviewers consider serving on program review panels first. The length of the document that needs to be reviewed is shorter and the issues involved may not be as critical as they would be for a journal manuscript or book chapter. I'm thinking here about issues such as being sure that APA formatting has been followed.

What if I can't finish reviewing the document by the deadline given me?

You should contact the editor as soon as you can and see how she wants to handle this. She may be able to extend the deadline or she may want to pass it along to another reviewer.

With all of this said, I believe that most editors would agree that the bottom line in this review process is to stay in touch with them. Keep them up-to-date on your experience.

The role that reviewers play in our professional work is exceedingly important. Blind reviews give our work rigor and validity and help us grow in our professional endeavors. We should all encourage each other to put our names forward to review—AERA program proposals and wherever else there might be a call for reviewers. Good luck! Welcome all to this wonderfully exciting opportunity for professional growth and service!

Call For Manuscripts

Research in Middle Level Education Online

Research in Middle Level Education Online, an international peer-reviewed research journal, publishes quantitative and qualitative studies, mixed methods research studies, case studies, action research studies, research syntheses, and reviews of research literature. Published by the National Middle School Association and endorsed by the Middle Level Education Research SIG, RMLE Online is an open access journal that is freely available from the NMSA [website](#).

RMLE Online is indexed in educational databases including Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Professional Development Collection as well as the [Directory of Open](#)

[Access Journals](#), an international repository of free, full text, quality controlled scientific and scholarly journals.

Publishing 10 issues a year, RMLE Online has an acceptance rate of 21-24%.

Guidelines for contributors and members of the editorial review board are available on the NMSA [website](#).

For additional information, please contact Micki Caskey,
 Editor, RMLE
caskeym@pdx.edu
 503.725.4749

Call for Proposals – Middle Grades Education Researchers

NMSA Research Advisory Board Poster Session

The NMSA Research Advisory Board will sponsor the NMSA Spotlight on Research Session at the 36th Annual NMSA Conference in Indianapolis, Indiana, November 5-7, 2009. This poster session highlights research that addresses issues in middle grades education conducted by beginning and emergent researchers and scholars.

We invite assistant professors and doctoral, specialist, and master's level researchers to submit proposals about their research in middle level education. The Research Advisory Board will select the top ten proposals for poster presentation at the conference.

Submission Guidelines

To submit a proposal, send the following by June 30, 2009.

Cover Page that includes:

- Name
- Institution
- Title of research paper
- Research topic and/or questions addressed by the study
- Contact information (Address, Phone number, and Email address)
- Abstract (maximum of 250 words)

Note: Research papers of accepted proposals are due **September 1, 2009**. Papers need to follow APA 5th edition style guidelines and range from 15 to 25 pages.

Please direct questions and submit completed proposal to:

Penny A. Bishop
 University of Vermont
penny.bishop@uvm.edu

P. Gayle Andrews
 University of Georgia
gandrews@uga.edu

Notification of proposal acceptance: Week of August 10, 2009



Call for Manuscripts and Reviewers

Middle School Journal

Middle School Journal is a peer-reviewed publication of the National Middle School Association (NMSA). The journal editor is seeking research-based manuscripts that promote quality middle level education and contribute to an understanding of the educational and developmental needs of youth between the ages of 10 and 15. For more information about the journal or to submit a manuscript, please visit the Middle School Journal Guidelines for Authors at

<http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/GuidelinesforAuthors/tabid/405/Default.aspx>

NMSA is also seeking members with expertise in middle level education and experience writing for publication to serve as reviewers for the journal.

For more information about serving as a reviewer, contact:

Cheri Howman
Assistant Editor
howmanc@nmsa.org
1-800-528-NMSA.



Call for Submissions

The Chronicle of Middle Level Education Research

The Chronicle of Middle Level Education Research, the online publication of the Middle Level Education Research SIG, is seeking submissions. The MLER SIG publishes the Chronicle three times a year in January, June, and October. We invite you to submit book reviews, descriptions of research or publications, or other events/information of interest to MLER SIG members.

We are pleased to announce the addition of a peer-reviewed section to The Chronicle of Middle Level Education Research. This section will be in addition to the regular featured columns, announcements, and other SIG news. For this reason, The Chronicle is also encouraging MLER SIG members to submit brief articles of scholarly work, including original research and reviews of literature. We welcome manuscripts on an ongoing basis.

Submission Guidelines

- Manuscripts should be approximately 2,500 words in length
- Double-spaced with 1-inch margins in 12-point font
- Follow the 5th Edition of Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001) style guide
- Include a separate title page with author name, affiliation, and contact information. Aside from the title page, manuscripts should have no reference to the author(s) to ensure a blind review. Note: Manuscripts need to be prepared and submitted electronically as Word documents

Submit the manuscript and title page to

Kathleen Brinegar
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Kathleen.brinegar@uvm.edu

For additional information, please contact:

Kathleen Brinegar, Co-Editor,
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Update

Middle Grades Research Journal

The Editors and Editorial Board of the Middle Grades Research Journal (MGRJ) are pleased to announce that IAP – Information Age Publishing, Inc., has recently acquired publication rights to MGRJ. Beginning with volume 5 in January 2010, IAP will take over publication at its offices in Charlotte, North Carolina. The editorial office will also move from Springfield, Missouri, to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where the new Editor-in-Chief, Vicki L. Schmitt, Ph.D., University of Alabama, will assume editorial duties. Dr. Schmitt has worked in the publishing industry over the past ten years and has served as an associate editor of MGRJ from 2005 to 2008. She is an AERA MLER SIG member whose research has been prominently featured in national presentations and policy statements by middle grades organizations and leaders.

Along with these very positive publication and editorial changes to MGRJ are, once again, opportunities for MLER SIG members to participate. If you have any interest in serving as an editor or a member of the Editorial or Review Board, or if you would like to learn more about MGRJ and its very bright future as a premiere journal featuring middle grades research, please contact me to discuss options.

MGRJ will remain a quarterly publication featuring special themed issues from time to time. The Editorial Board holds semi-annual meetings, one in the spring during AERA and another in the fall. Members of the Review Board are asked to evaluate as many as six manuscripts per year. All submissions are sent to three different reviewers, and the acceptance rate is 23%.

I have been pleased to serve as Editor-in-Chief over the first four volume years; however, it is time to pass the baton and watch MGRJ soar to new heights. The Editorial Board is welcoming new ideas, new approaches, sponsorships, and organizational supports. Again, please feel free to contact me to discuss any interests you may have.

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