

Introduction

In 1997, the National Middle School Association (now the Association for Middle Level Education) published, *A 21st Century Research Agenda: Issues, Topics, and Questions Guiding Inquiry into Middle Level Theory and Practice*. This comprehensive agenda served as a guide to promote ongoing conversations and foster new research studies. It was comprised of more than 200 research questions organized around the 12 characteristics outlined in NMSA's vision statement, *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (NMSA, 1995).

In 2015, the Middle Level Education Research (MLER) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) revisited the need for a revised research agenda, one that could reflect the issues and concerns of the ever-changing world of middle grades education. The SIG represents the largest group of researchers focusing on middle grades education in the world, and according to its bylaws, the purpose of the MLER SIG is to improve, promote, and disseminate educational research reflecting early adolescence and middle grades education. It seemed appropriate that such a group should consider creating a revised middle grades education research agenda. In April 2015, the SIG held a meeting in Chicago, IL to determine the level of interest SIG members would have in developing a revised research agenda focusing on early adolescence and middle grades education. What follows reflects the work of more than 40 SIG members over the course of nearly 18 months.

Purpose of Research Agenda

The primary purpose of the MLER SIG Research Agenda was to develop a set of questions that provide direction to the field of middle grades education research. The research questions are intended to initiate and guide conversations, generate research projects, and contribute new knowledge to the field. The research agenda

also provides guidance to new faculty members in higher education seeking to establish research agendas and graduate students seeking topics of study for dissertation studies and theses.

During the inaugural project meeting in April 2015, the group decided that the MLER SIG Research Agenda would be designed to address the most critical issues and concerns facing the field over the course of the next five years. At the end of the five-year period, the research agenda would be re-evaluated to determine what new topics, issues, and research questions were of concern to the field.

Process for Developing the MLER SIG Research Agenda

In April 2015, prior to the annual AERA meetings in Chicago, IL, an inaugural meeting of 22 MLER SIG members was held to discuss the need for and development of a new middle grades education research agenda. After reviewing NMSA's *A 21st Century Research Agenda* (1997), the group discussed and identified the various topics and issues currently deemed important to middle grades education and the education of young adolescents. In discussing and reaching consensus concerning the specific research areas, it was agreed that these topics and components would be the focus of collaborative research efforts for the next five years. Eight workgroups, and co-chairs for each group, were established after the inaugural meeting:

1. Educator development (teachers preservice & professional development, administrators, and teachers as leaders)
2. Organizational structures that support learning;
3. Cultural responsiveness (including diversity, social justice, equity, etc.);
4. Special populations;

5. Developmental aspects of young adolescents;
6. Social-emotional learning (climate and culture);
7. Digital technologies; and
8. Pedagogy (curriculum, instruction, and assessment).

SIG members were notified of the project and encouraged to participate by joining one of the workgroups. The workgroups were charged with initiating an extensive literature review of their topic or issue to identify current research efforts and gaps in the research literature.

In early November 2015, the SIG formed a project Advisory Committee, whose membership included SIG members with extensive research experience, including a few of the workgroup leaders, as well as representation of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Research Advisory Committee. The responsibilities of the Advisory Committee included advising the workgroups, developing the format for the final workgroup reports, reviewing the workgroup reports, and compiling and editing the final research agenda. The Advisory Committee members included Gayle Andrews, Penny Bishop, Micki Caskey, Larry Daniel, Nancy Flowers, David Strahan, and Steve Mertens.

Subsequent project meetings were held during the 2015 annual Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) conference in Columbus, OH and at the 2016 annual American Educational Research Association (AERA) meetings in Washington, DC. During the Washington, DC meeting, the Research Advisory Committee of AMLE invited the MLER SIG to present the new research agenda at an invited session at the AMLE annual conference in Austin, TX in October 2016.

Organization of Research Agenda

The Research Agenda contains reports focusing on the eight research areas or topics identified during the April 2015 meeting. The individual reports include a list of the contributing workgroup members, a working definition of the research area or topic of study, a description of the literature review process followed by the workgroup, the list of research questions, and a list of influential publications relevant to the research area or topic.

Recommendations for Using the Research Agenda

A research agenda such as this can serve multiple purposes. The MLER SIG Research Agenda was developed primarily to serve as a guide for middle grades educational research for the next five years; providing guidance for large- and small-scale research projects, doctoral dissertations, master's theses, and undergraduate honor theses. Given the depth and breadth of the research questions contained in this agenda, it is feasible that the SIG would design, develop, and implement research projects to address one or more aspects of the Research Agenda.

The literature reviews contained in the reports serve as beneficial resources as they describe the various approaches the workgroups used in reviewing the relevant research literature. The groups used a variety of approaches, accessing a variety of databases and keyword searches. The Advisory Committee believed that these literature reviews constituted a valuable resource for existing and future middle grades education researchers.

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