International Handbook of Middle Level Education Theory, Research, and Policy

DAVID C. VIRTUE

INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION THEORY, RESEARCH, AND POLICY

The *International Handbook of Middle Level Education Theory, Research, and Policy* is a landmark resource for researchers, graduate students, policy makers, and practitioners who work in middle level education and associated fields of study. The volume provides an overview of the current state of middle level education theory, research, and policy; offers analysis and critique of the extant literature in the field; and maps new directions for research and theory development in middle level education. The handbook meets a pressing need in the field for a resource that is comprehensive in its treatment of middle level research and international in scope.

Chapter authors provide rationales for middle level education research and definitions of the field; discuss philosophical approaches and underpinnings for middle level education research; describe and critique frameworks for quality in middle level education; review research about young adolescent learners, middle level school programming, and educator preparation; and analyze public policies affecting middle level education at national, regional, and local levels.

David C. Virtue is professor and head of the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Auburn University. His areas of scholarly interest include social studies instruction, comparative and international education, and middle level teacher education and certification policy.

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PART I

Introduction to the Volume

1

CAPTURING A MOMENT IN MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION THEORY, RESEARCH, AND POLICY[1]

David C. Virtue

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the release of *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, a report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York that put a spotlight on the condition of young adolescents in the United States. The report called attention to the unique nature of human development during early adolescence, highlighted the many risk factors young people face at this critical time in their lives, and described the status of educational opportunities for young adolescents with an emphasis on the status of middle schools in the United States. *Turning Points* was an authoritative wake-up call that resonated with educators, health and human services professionals, government leaders, and philanthropists alike.

A year after the release of *Turning Points*, the Carnegie Corporation launched the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (MGSSPI) as a way to incentivize states to implement the report's eight reform principles and to provide targeted support to schools serving low-income students. During the 1990s, MGSSPI awarded 27 states planning grants to develop middle level reform initiatives, and 15 states received implementation awards that led to lasting reforms in the middle grades ranging from school organization, classroom instructional strategies, educator preparation, and innovative curricula. Other foundations that invested in middle grades reform at this time included the Lilly Endowment, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Kronley & Handley, 2003). These investments led to numerous research studies that documented the effectiveness and impacts of these reforms. Eight years after *Turning Points* was published, several philanthropic foundations supported the formation of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, an organization that seeks "to make every middle-grades school academically excellent, responsive to the developmental needs and interests of young adolescents, and socially equitable" (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018, Vision section, para. 1). In 1999, the National Forum launched its "Schools to Watch" program, which currently operates in 18 states, for identifying high–performing middle level schools.

Along with investment in middle level research and reform, the 1990s witnessed the founding of the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) of the American

Educational Research Association in 1991, and National Middle School Association (NMSA) published its first comprehensive research agenda (NMSA, 1997). This attention on young adolescents and middle grades education in the United States during the late 1980s and through the 1990s mirrored work in other countries, including Australia, Canada, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and New Zealand (see, e.g., Barratt, 1997; Hargreaves & Earl, 1990; Prosser, 2008).

When I was in graduate school, a professor suggested that education trends and reforms operate on a 30-year generational cycle. The publication of *Turning Points*, and the resources that followed, engendered a wave of middle level reform that began in 1989 and accelerated through the 1990s; and now, 30 years later, middle level education is again at a turning point. Current trends in research and policy offer favorable conditions for the advancement of middle level education:

- The emphasis on the integration of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)—as well as arts (STEAM) and social sciences (STEAMSS)—has engendered P–20 curriculum reform and opens unique opportunities to realize meaningful, student-focused curriculum integration in the middle grades (Weilbacher, 2019).
- The reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the United States relaxed some of the rigidity in testing and accountability provisions and offers opportunities for educators to implement more useful systems of assessment, as Turner notes in this volume.
- Ongoing large-scale and longitudinal research opens new horizons for inquiry in middle level education. For example, the Middle Grades Longitudinal Study of 2017–18 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) will offer researchers opportunities to investigate relationships between contextual factors and student outcomes in mathematics and literacy, and the Global Early Adolescent Study (Institute for Reproductive Health, 2018) may present middle level scholars opportunities for collaborative and translational research connecting health, education, and human development.
- The MLER SIG drafted a bold research agenda to provide focus and direction for middle level education research. *The MLER SIG Research Agenda* (Mertens et al., 2016) reflects the efforts of more than 40 scholars from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand and is endorsed by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform.

This is, indeed, an important moment in middle level education.

Purpose and Organization of the Volume

The purpose of this volume is to provide an overview of the current state of middle level education theory, research, and policy; offer analysis and critique of the extant literature in the field; and map new directions for research and theory development in middle level education. Contributing authors critique, analyze, and synthesize existing theoretical, conceptual, and empirical literature related to middle level education. In the chapters that follow, they describe rationales for middle level education research and definitions of the field; discuss philosophical approaches and underpinnings for middle level education research; describe and critique frameworks for quality in middle level education; review research about young adolescent learners, middle level school programming, and educator preparation; and analyze public policies affecting middle level education at national, regional, and local levels.

The volume is organized into seven parts, including this introductory chapter that constitutes Part I.

Rather than treat theory, research, and policy as separate topics or foci, the authors in the volume weave the three together in their analyses. The chapters illustrate the ways in which research informs theory, theory often drives behavior and shapes policy, and policy may constrain or engender research and theory development. A central idea in many of the chapters is that middle level schools are learning communities—sites of transformation—in which experienced, adult learners and novice, young adolescent learners learn and grow together. Therefore, chapters focusing on young adolescent students and in-service or pre-service teachers are not organized into separate parts but, instead, are presented in tandem.

Overview of the Volume

Following the introduction, the authors of chapters in Part II critically explore visions of "good" middle level education. Authors offer analyses of well-established frameworks from the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (Leonard & Andrews), International Baccalaureate (IB; Dever), and Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE; Deering and colleagues), and they propose new frameworks to help inform the education of adult learners (Kleine and colleagues) and young adolescent learners (Williams & Long) in middle level schools. Considered together, the analyses of the established frameworks highlight the orthodoxy of "good" or "quality" middle level education evident in the intersection of ideas across frameworks and in the mainstream middle level literature (see, e.g., the crosswalk between the IB's Middle Years Programme and AMLE's *This We Believe* in Dever & Raven, 2017). Despite the widespread agreement about essential middle level principles, Leonard and Andrews argue that middle level education will fall short of its mandate to serve every student if the field does not confront and challenge the systems, structures, and practices that perpetuate inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes. A path forward is to conceptualize middle level learning spaces as sites of democratic living and learning, as Kleine and colleagues recommend for middle level teacher preparation, and as sites of culturally-relevant caring, as Williams and Long propose. Finally, Deering and colleagues remind us that education—as it is enacted and practiced—is highly contingent and contextual. While frameworks attempt to provide common language and shared understandings about middle level education, the English language does not adequately express certain indigenous ways of knowing and communicating important ideas (e.g., *akamai, fa'aaloalo,'aiga*).

The authors of the chapters in Part III focus attention on the characteristics of learners in middle level communities—both novice, young adolescent learners and experienced, adult learners. Daniels explores the ways in which knowledge from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and pedagogical sciences influence theoretical understandings of developmentally-appropriate practices in middle level education. Importantly, her discussion takes a critical turn as she privileges the understandings of young adolescents themselves and positions their words alongside the ideas of adult "experts." The chapters by Cardullo and by Poehner and Brown explore the intersections of digital technology and young adolescent learning and development. Grounded in theories of cognition and metacognition (Flavell, 1979; Sternberg, 1988), Cardullo illustrates how educators

can use a cognitive apprenticeship approach (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1988) to make digital learning visible for students and empower them to regulate their own learning. While educators can leverage technology to enhance student learning, Poehner and Brown offer a compelling analysis of the effects technology use can have on young adolescent learning and development in multiple domains including sensory awareness, reading comprehension, cognitive engagement, and overall wellness. McFarlane calls attention to young adolescent boys in the middle grades. Writing from the perspective of a practitioner with oversight of boys' education in a school in Australia, he argues that male students are often misunderstood, inaccurately stereotyped, and poorly supported in the middle grades. Like Daniels, he tethers his arguments to the words of young adolescents themselves and offers a set of recommendations for practice. Thornton turns attention to adult learners in middle level settings—specifically, teachers—and explores the particular dispositions that make teachers well suited to teach young adolescents. Drawing on knowledge from cognitive, developmental, and personality psychology (e.g., Carducci, 2006; Dweck, 2006; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005), she offers a practice-based framework for responsive dispositions in action that calls for teachers who are critical, challenging, facilitative, creative, empowering, connected, change-driven, and inclusive.

Part IV focuses on characteristics of middle level learning environments, including organizational structures, curricula, and instructional practices. Kiefer and Ellerbrock propose to enhance student motivation in the middle grades by implementing an adolescent-centered community of care framework in which school organizational structures, teacher characteristics and instructional practices, and peer relations are responsive to and aligned with the nature and needs of young adolescents. Peel describes a research-based, self-regulatory approach to classroom behavior management that is grounded in psychological theories of motivation and cognition (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Csíkszentmihályi, 2008; Flavell, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978) and is specifically designed to empower students to take control of their learning. The chapters by Bailey and Lyda and colleagues explore two vitally important, yet underemphasized, aspects of middle level education—play and creativity. Bailey offers a conceptualization of young adolescent play as a fundamental human right that is too often neglected in middle level schools, particularly in the United States. She reviews research and theoretical literature related to play in middle level schools and includes an analysis of play in specific subject areas. Lyda and colleagues challenge the traditional content and structure of traditional music programs in the middle grades and call for developmentally-appropriate, non-traditional music options that incorporate creativity and informal music learning strategies. Main and Pendergast focus on adult learners—middle level teachers—and the optimal ways to provide continuous professional development. They contend that professional learning for middle level teachers must be focused, relevant, and continuous, and they emphasize the importance of evaluation measures that focus on student learning.

The authors of chapters in Part V address the microcontexts in which middle level education is situated, including schools, classrooms, and local communities. Stormer and colleagues provide a definition of culturally responsiveness at the middle level and offer a framework developed from a review of relevant research and theoretical literature (e.g., Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). They contend that culturally responsive practitioners must recognize and affirm students' ethnic and racial identities, provide multicultural texts and teaching materials, and leverage the funds of knowledge in students' homes and local communities so they can build bridges between them and school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Similarly, Kulow and Caskey offer an assets-based approach to academic programming that is responsive to middle level students' developmental needs and integrates their personal assets—cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences—with academic content. Irvin and colleagues discuss the concept of place-based education, which is grounded in contextual and constructivist approaches to pedagogy and offers

a powerful framework for career development at the middle level. Baker and colleagues illustrate through personal narratives the power and potential of clinically-intensive, school-based educator preparation. Their chapter highlights the reciprocal nature of learning in these environments—where young adolescents and adults at all stages of the profession learn together. Wozolek and Gershon conclude the part with an overview of ethnography, an under-utilized research methodology in middle level education that offers great possibilities for understanding the interrelationships among people, places, and ideas within microcontexts such as schools and classrooms.

The authors of the chapters in Part VI situate their work in macrocontexts—large-scale national or regional perspectives. Seward-Linger identifies six key factors that challenge middle years' reform in the Australian context, and she proposes a capacity-building approach (see, e.g., Crowther, 2011; Fullan, 2010; Harris, 2011) that holds promise for fostering lasting, sustainable change. Flenley and colleagues review literature related to middle level student engagement within the last three decades (e.g.,Csíkszentmihályi, 2008; Dweck, 2006), and they explore how student engagement became a public policy concern in Australia. They document how explanations of disengagement converged on the mismatch between the developmental characteristics of young adolescents and the organizational structures and practices in schools (Eccles et al., 1993), and they discuss policies and practices implemented to remedy the issue. While the authors focus on the Australian case, they note that adolescent engagement in school has been an international concern. Hanssen and Jensvoll explore recent developments in Norwegian education policy that impact middle grades English education. They discuss a humanities-forward shift in policy related to teaching and learning English that affects teacher preparation, curriculum, and the status of English as an arena for lifelong learning. İbrahimoğlu traces the historical development of social studies and citizenship education programs in Turkey today, with a focus on the curriculum taught to middle grades students. The chapter concludes with a discussion of teacher training and explains briefly its historical development process and the current teacher training system. Part VI concludes with two chapters set in the United States. Turner reviews research examining how measuring school accountability by standardized test scores is influencing middle level education. He views the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—titled the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA)—as a window of opportunity to reform middle grades accountability systems in the United States and to rethink measures of scholastic achievement so schools "measure what matters." Moulton frames his chapter about young adolescents who experience homelessness using the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001. He describes the nature and extent of homelessness in the United States and reviews relevant literature. Moulton concludes with a plea for further work "with and for" young adolescents experiencing homelessness. Echoing calls throughout this volume to re-center middle level education on young adolescents themselves, Moulton urges educators to listen to the voices to youth experiencing homelessness and ensure they contribute to the discourse.

Part VII concludes the volume with two chapters that call for new directions for middle level education. Faulkner and colleagues take a historical perspective on middle level reform and use that vantage point to look ahead to the future and recommend "next steps" to enhance the educational experiences of middle grades students. Virtue concludes the volume with an essay calling for a "grassroots epistemology" in middle level education research and he advocates for more translational and applied research to push the frontiers of knowledge in the field.

Conclusion

According to Dan Westergren (2013), director of photography for *National Geographic Traveler* magazine, "Almost every good shot captures a unique moment in time" (para. 2). Like a good photograph, this volume captures middle level education theory, research, and policy at a unique

moment in the history of the field. The *International Handbook of Middle Level Education Theory, Research, and Policy* is a resource for researchers, graduate students, policy makers, practitioners, and others who work in middle level education and associated fields of study. The volume—which includes contributions from American Samoa, Australia, Norway, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Turkey, and the United States—provides analyses that reflect the current state of middle level education theory, research, and policy; offers critiques of the extant literature in the field; and maps new directions for research and theory development in middle level education.

Note

1 An early draft of the ideas in the introduction to the essay appeared in Virtue (2019).

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Visions and Frameworks for Quality and Equity in Middle Level Education

2

HOPE IS WORK

A Critical Vision for Middle Grades Education

Susan Y. Leonard and P. Gayle Andrews

In 2003, the Task Force on Developing Research in Education Leadership asserted that schools need "visions that embody the best thinking about teaching and learning" (p. 3). Vision statements represent "the good" in education, encompassing shared goals and aligning stakeholder efforts. As such, vision statements inherently reflect a larger contemporary American discourse about education (Laitsch, 2013). For example, the discourses at play in vision statements influence how schools construct youth identities, enact teaching and learning, build relationships, and pursue student achievement.

In the introduction to an issue of *Middle School Journal* that focused on conceptualizing curriculum as a means to cultivate social justice, Harrison, Hurd and Brinegar (2018) argued that the discourse in middle grades education must be open to critique if we are to move "towards a more inclusive and liberating middle level education" (p. 3). In this chapter, we will use a method adapted from Bakhtinian critical discourse analysis (Bakhtin, 1984; Tobin, 2000) to analyze the vision statement of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (1998). We contend that the National Forum's vision for high-performing middle grades schools both synthesizes the narrative in middle grades education dating back to the late 19th century and serves as the lighthouse guiding current and future efforts to improve schooling for young adolescents (Andrews, 2013a; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lesko, 2005; Lounsbury, 2013). We aim to critically analyze the National Forum's vision to explore how ideologies intersect to guide middle grades education philosophy. Investigating the National Forum's vision may inform justice and equity-oriented work in middle grades education.

Historical Context of Visions

In their piece on critical literacies, Jones and Woglom (2016, p. 443) asked, "From where do you read the world?" They argued that educators should consider how their cultural and historical locations—those forces that "existed prior to their birth and will continue throughout life" (p. 443)—inevitably affect how we perceive and interact with the world. We further contend that the historical and cultural locations of middle grades education inevitably, even inexorably, affect the visions we construct to represent "the good" in middle grades schools. As a field, we cannot disconnect ourselves from our origins, experiences, and the network of systems in which we always already participate (e.g., Andrews, Moulton & Hughes, 2018). To acknowledge the

powerful influence of the cultural and historical locations of middle grades education and set the stage for our analysis, we outline the historical and cultural locations of visions for middle grades schooling.

As John Lounsbury (2013) described in his compelling and thorough chronological history of middle grades education, visions that represent the best thinking about teaching and learning for and with young adolescents, youth ages 10 to 15, can be traced back to 1888 with Harvard President Charles W. Eliot's landmark speech, *Shortening and Enriching the Grammar School Course*. As Andrews (2013a) noted, Eliot offered the first widely acknowledged public complaint about the quality of schooling for young adolescents. The Harvard president was far from the last to embed that complaint in a concern about how well the middle grades prepared young people for college and career, linking "secondary school reforms with concerns for economic productivity and social unity" (Lesko, 2005, p. 193). That rhetoric seems to resonate with calls for college and career readiness as the goal of all schooling as demonstrated, for example, in the resources devoted to supporting state standards and strategies by the federally funded College and Career Readiness and Success Center (American Institutes for Research, 2018).

Take a quantum leap forward a century from Eliot's speech and one can trace the thread of attention to concerns about the quality of middle level schooling to the late 1980s. From 1987 to 1989, Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) provided support for a task force to study education for young adolescents. Carnegie Corporation published the report that resulted from the task force's discussions: *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

The vision that drove the 1989 *Turning Points* report described a 15-year-old who has been well served in the middle grades and has emerged intellectually reflective, en route to a lifetime of meaningful work, a good citizen, caring and ethical, and healthy. The report outlined eight recommendations for achieving that vision of a 15-year-old. Considered groundbreaking at the time for its attention to the systems that intersect and influence the lives of youth inside school and outside of it, those recommendations touched on everything from curriculum to community resources and re-engaging families. The task force designed the recommendations to serve as a conceptual framework for middle grades schooling that positions the school as central to achieving the report's vision of a 15-year-old well served in the middle grades.

For many people in middle grades education through the 1990s, the original *Turning Points* report became almost biblical. In fact, the 1989 *Turning Points* report generated tremendous publicity for efforts to improve middle grades education that helped to launch a decade of philanthropic initiatives across the nation. Taken together, the *Turning Points* vision and recommendations informed other subsequent noteworthy vision statements for middle grades education. The elements of the 1989 report's vision can also be seen as the steel girders that support the National Forum vision that we spotlight in this chapter.

In the halcyon days of the 1990s, four key foundations were funding a great deal of work in middle grades education: Carnegie Corporation of New York (think steel), the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (think Avon money), the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (think breakfast cereal), and the Lilly Endowment (think pharmaceuticals). Each foundation had a program officer assigned to oversee the foundation's program tied to middle grades education. Here's a list of the foundations, programs related to middle grades schooling, and the program officers:

- Carnegie Corporation of New York. *Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative* (MGSSPI). Program Officer: Anthony W. Jackson, also lead author of the 1989 original *Turning Points* report and co-author with Gayle Andrews (then Davis) of *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

- Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. *Program for Disadvantaged Youth/Program for Student Achievement*. Program Officer: M. Hayes Mizell.
- W. K. Kellogg Foundation. *Middle Start*. Program Officer: Leah Meyer Austin.
- Lilly Endowment. *Middle Grades Improvement Program* (MGIP). Program Officer: Joan Lipsitz, who also founded the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Someone in the foundation community knew the work of all four program officers well, and he also knew that they were not consistently collaborating or even communicating with each other. He suggested that they get together, along with key leaders from their respective funded middle grades education programs, and talk about how they might work together and support each other's efforts. Andrews (second author), as national director of Carnegie's MGSSPI, was one of the key leaders involved in the conversations about how to collaborate and communicate around strengthening middle grades schools. In 1997, after two years of conversations, these four program officers and the leaders from their respective initiatives created the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform with the idea that speaking with one voice to advocate for improving schooling for young adolescents would "accelerate" the process of improving middle grades education.

The National Forum is an alliance of about 60 people who represent researchers, middle grades educators and teacher educators, policymakers, and every major national organization that has an intersection with the field of middle grades education: e.g., the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (now formally known as NASSP), the National Association of Elementary School Principals, ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Learning Forward (formerly known as the National Staff Development Council).

After a year's worth of conversations about a vision for high-performing middle grades schools, the National Forum published its vision statement in 1998 (see Appendix A). As a founding member of the National Forum, Andrews was involved in all of the conversations that led to the vision statement. The National Forum's members agreed that a vision for great middle grades schools was all well and good, but it needed what Joan Lipsitz called *demonstration proof* (personal communication, July 31, 2009). A vision on its own could be criticized as pie-in-the-sky, unrealistic in light of the gritty reality of endlessly varied contexts and the constraints on educators and students embodied in ever-expanding systems of accountability in the days surrounding the passage of the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind Act (2002), that encoded accountability into law. Demonstration proof of the National Forum's vision would live in the examples of middle grades schools, in a huge variety of settings and contexts, that were on a promising trajectory toward fulfilling the vision's key dimensions: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, organizational structures, and social equity and supports that make those first three dimensions possible.

With the National Forum's vision statement as a launch pad, in 1999 the Forum's members generated a set of criteria for a middle grades School to Watch (rev. 2013a) and created a comprehensive rubric (rev. 2013b) with indicators for each of the four key dimensions in the Forum's vision. What would a high-performing middle grades school look, feel, and sound like? What is happening in those settings? Schools to Watch are not like the Blue Ribbon Schools identified by the U.S. Department of Education (2018). A Blue Ribbon School can keep the sign out front celebrating that designation until the building falls down. In contrast, Schools to Watch must go through a rigorous application process—including a one- to two-day site visit by a team of experts—to earn designation for three years. The school must apply for re-designation

at the end of that three-year period—going through the whole process again—to be re-designated and maintain status as a School to Watch.

The National Forum started with a national search for Schools to Watch, and then launched a state-level Schools to Watch program in 2002. At the last count, 18 states have state Schools to Watch programs and well over 400 middle grades schools across the country have been designated Schools to Watch. Some of those schools have been re-designated as many as three or four times, representing a sustained journey on that promising trajectory.

Journey of "The Good" in Education

Many voices have contributed to conceptions of what "the good" in education entails and what it does not. We briefly trace the journey of the good in middle grades education in developmental perspectives on young adolescents and the implications for their schools, progressive conceptions of schooling as centered on students, and what we are calling the critical turn that links to progressive influences in middle grades education and delineates a path that leads to equity- and justice-oriented middle grades schools.

The psychological studies of G. Stanley Hall (1905) are the most oft-cited source of the attention to early adolescence as a stage of development set apart and characterized by "storm and stress." Hall's research helped to naturalize that young adolescents share certain defining characteristics—e.g., they are driven by hormones, impulses, peers, mass media. This idea that young adolescents universally share naturally occurring characteristics also supports the assertion that young adolescents share certain developmental needs (e.g., Dorman, 1984; Lipsitz, 1977; Nesin & Brazee, 2013). If middle grades students share developmental needs, then "good" middle grades schools are responsive to those needs. Advocates for junior high schools as educational organizations set apart from both elementary and high schools called for developmental responsiveness in their visions and recommendations for the junior high (e.g., Briggs, 1920; Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; Koos, 1920, 1927). In a similar fashion, middle school advocates have woven calls for addressing young adolescents' developmental needs into their conceptions and recommendations of middle grades schooling since the middle school movement launched in the 1960s (e.g., Dorman, 1984; Lipsitz, 1977; Lounsbury, 1991; Stevenson, 2002).

However, Lesko (1996) critiqued the developmental perspective of young adolescents, arguing that early adolescence was a social construction and that efforts to improve school programs without examining such assumptions create barriers that slow educational reform efforts. Lesko (2005) argued for "denaturalizing" adolescence, challenging the notion that young adolescents are doomed by their hormones and desire to fit in and contending that they instead could and should be seen as critical actors in their own lives.

Walkerdine (1993) asserted that the ways in which teachers and students understand their psychological and pedagogical roles inform and constitute ideas that describe practices of "progressive education" and determine what is acceptable and normal. These ideas are always cultural and gained through social interactions and observations of others (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

In describing the field of middle grades education as fertile ground for attention to issues of social justice, Andrews, Moulton and Hughes (2018) depicted the field's roots in "progressive conceptions of schooling that center on students as engaged, active agents in their own learning and communities." One could argue that conceiving of middle grades students as change agents actually runs counter to developmentalist depictions of young adolescents as passive puppets controlled by hormones, impulses, and desires to please their peers. Progressive scholar and philosopher John Dewey argued that students' learning should address societal issues and challenges, positioning curriculum as a means for social change (Dewey, 1910; Spencer, 1870). Legacy leaders in middle grades education (Smith & McEwin, 2011) picked up Dewey's charge, placing

young adolescents and the schools that serve them as leaders in democratic education (e.g., George, 2009a, 2009b; Lounsbury, 1991: Lounsbury & Vars, 1978).

Curriculum theorist and middle grades scholar James Beane (1997) published *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education*, a book in which he claimed curriculum is shaped by policies and goals that mandate certain practices as well as the beliefs, desires, and demands of school stakeholders he designated as "local politics." Beane pointed out, over time, middle grades curriculum has demonstrated "the sad fact … is [that] both social integration and democratic practice has largely eluded the schools … and their traditional curriculum organizations have too often been among the persistent sources of inequity and 'disintegration' found across the whole society" (Beane, 1997, p. 6).

Beane (1997) picked up the threads of progressivism that reach back to Dewey in his call for a reorientation of knowledge that seeks "meaningful integration of experience and knowledge" (p. 5) rather than fragmentation into content-specific subjects. The curriculum integration that Beane described is organized around young adolescents' questions and concerns about themselves and the world, a move toward the critical turn in middle grades education that leads to Freire (1970/2000).

According to Freire (1970/2000), a "banking education" molds students into the "passive role imposed on them … [and] tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (p. 54). A banking education seems to mirror much of the standards-focused and accountability-obsessed culture in schools that Beane pushed back against (2005). That testing culture seems particularly dominant in the middle grades where No Child Left Behind (2002) required annual testing in grades 3 through 8, with all the anxieties for adults and youth that mandated standardized tests represent.

To distinguish between banking education and the critical turn that he advocated, Freire (1973) discussed the important differences in the effects that adaptation versus integration has on students.

> Integration with one's context, as distinguished from adaptation, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decision is no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated. Rather, he has adapted. He has 'adjusted'…The integrated person is person as Subject. In contrast, that adaptive person is person as object. If a man is incapable of changing reality, he adjusts himself instead. Adaptation…is symptomatic of his dehumanization.
>
> *(p. 4)*

Freire believed that banking education was oppressive to students and that education needed emancipation from such practices because "literacy could not merely be transmitted through instruction in established bodies of knowledge" (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 163) but rather had to be constituted together. Freire's (1973) literacy program positioned students as active creators who could develop "vivacity which characterizes search and invention" (p. 43) and promote man's ability to attain his full humanity. Such an emancipatory program came to be known as critical pedagogy.

In this chapter, ideas, beliefs, and practices that reflect critical pedagogy will be referenced as a critical perspective. For the purpose of this work, we define critical perspectives in two ways that represent "the good" in education:

- Students co-construct knowledge and question, analyze, and act on their world as beings of power and influence.
- Schools and its members critically analyzing their practices and act to push back against practices that marginalize or oppress any student.

Investigation and identification of the discourses present in the National Forum's vision may not only reveal the social and cultural histories present but also dominant discourses currently driving or slowing efforts. Freire (1973) claimed that the difference between adaptation and integration is a critical attitude and critical capacity to make choices and transform reality. For critical perspectives to be represented in the National Forum's (1998) vision statement, evidence of such a mindset should be present.

Conceptual Framework

Our work draws from literary analyst Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic theory, which posits that our speech and communications are filled with other voices from our social histories. For example, in his essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin (1984) made the argument that words always bring context with them—through what he called *heteroglossia*—and that words are always "entangled in someone else's discourse about it" (p. 330) and "associated with an ideological motif and occupies a definite ideological position" (p. 334). Bakhtin (1984) believed that "our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values" (p. 346). To what extent are critical perspectives integrated in the National Forum's vision?

In search of this answer, we conducted a critical discourse analysis. According to van Dijk (1993a),

> Control of knowledge crucially shapes our interpretation of the world, as well as our discourse and other actions. Hence the relevance of a critical analysis of those forms of text and talk, e.g. in the media and education, that essentially aim to construct such knowledge.
>
> *(p. 258)*

Because knowledge and ideologies are shared social constructions and understood through the texts that are produced to enact them, a critical discourse analysis allowed us to explore the National Forum's vision statement in search of rhetoric that may support seemingly rational and commonsensical language but mask inequitable ideologies that "play a role in the reproduction of or resistance against dominance or inequality" (van Dijk, 1993b, p. 18). Van Dijk asserted that underlying critical discourse analysis "requires good theories of the role of discourse in enactment and reproduction of social dominance and resistance" (1993b, p. 19), which we will do through identifying ideologies through the multiple heteroglossic voices present (Bakhtin, 1984) in the National Forum's vision statement, which was co-constructed by researchers, educators, policymakers, and educational organizations.

Data Collection

Our study aimed to investigate how equity and social justice are or are not present throughout vision statements and frameworks that guide middle grade philosophy. Middle grades education philosophies have transformed throughout time as developmentalist, progressive, and now critical perspectives influence the decisions schools make to prepare students for successful futures. As a leader in middle grades education, the National Forum's criteria for Schools to Watch (2013a) sets the bar for what excellence in schools looks like. Subsequently, the practices that the Forum identifies as excellent represent ideologies about what is "the good" in education and the beacon towards which schools should strive to achieve. Due to its position of power in dictating, identifying, and evaluating "the good" in schools across the nation, we decided to analyze the National Forum's vision statement.

Taking a critical perspective on the vision statement allowed us to investigate a chronic problem: Social justice continues to be emphasized in education but is too often perceived as a checkmark—an

isolated professional development session, a diversity bulletin board, or a cultural night to name a few. The more we continue to position social justice in this manner, the more we continue to reinforce social justice as an option rather than a necessity. Our recent history has been filled with protests (e.g., Black Lives Matter and #MeToo) that highlight continued equities we face in our society, and Harrison, Hurd and Brinegar (2018) asserted that "since schools are a microcosm of society, these protests also echo the inequities that are present within educational spaces" (p. 2). Schools that hope to tackle the reform must continuously resist the ideologies, structures, and policies that sustain inequities in education. They must promote critical reflection, analysis, and action to push back against such practices in order to create meaningful change and model a new path forward for the future generations we serve as educators.

Analysis

In our analysis, we looked for evidence of developmentalist and progressive perspectives that built the foundation of and continue to guide middle level philosophies, with a specific focus on how critical perspectives are adapted to or integrated into the vision statement. We began by looking at the structure of the vision statement. Then, we looked for key terms or phrases that were repeated or emphasized. Next, we identified phrases and statements that served as qualifications of a "good" education and associated the text with developmentalist, progressive, and/or critical perspectives as we were able. We read through the vision statement separately, adding our own comments, and then responded to each other's comments. The discussion eliminated some of the initial themes and categories identified. Then, we wrote around the text, identifying perspectives, making connections between related statements and ideas, and analyzing the discourse represented in the text. We recognize that, as teachers, we carry assumptions and biases that influence our interpretation and analysis of the vision statement. We approached the vision statement from a place of respect and appreciation for the work that organizations like the National Forum do in the field of education.

Vision Organizational Structure

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform Vision Statement (1998) is organized into four paragraphs:

1. Statement of belief and goal for middle grades schools
2. Description of high-performing middle grades schools as academically excellent.
3. Description of high-performing middle grades schools as developmentally responsive.
4. Description of high-performing middle grades schools as socially equitable.

The vision identifies three main focus areas that characterize high-performing schools. The order in which the categories are arranged implies levels of priority, positioning academics first and social equity last. Creating a separate category for social equity creates an implicit divide between equity and the ways in which equity relates to academics and development.

"Good" as Academic Excellence

Academic excellence is defined in terms that are familiar to the field of education, and the first sentence introduces "excellent" schools: "*They challenge all students to use their minds well, providing them with the curriculum, instruction, assessment, support, and time they need to meet rigorous academic standards.*" The first and deepest belief about middle grades schools is that they prioritize academics and support other student needs (e.g., intellectual, emotional, and social). Emphasis on

academic rigor can be traced back to criticisms of developmental perspectives by Cheri Yecke, the former state school superintendent in Florida, who argued that the middle school concept leads a "war against excellence" by diminishing the role of academics in favor of attention to the whole child, engendering a "rising tide of mediocrity" that derails the upward trajectories of young adolescents identified as gifted (Yecke, 2003). Andrews recalled Rick Wormeli (personal communication, October 10, 2016) once saying to her that the word "rigor" makes him think of *rigor mortis*, with all the inflexibility that term implies.

Test scores are not mentioned, though it is implicit that for students to prove they have mastered the "rigorous academic standards" they must also produce high test scores. Buzz words such as "challenge" and "rigorous" reinforce beliefs that curriculum with those qualities will enable students to learn. The term "challenge" appears only twice in the vision statement and both times are in this paragraph on academic excellence. The vision dictates that schools, curriculum, and standards challenge students. The way "challenge" is positioned in the vision statement states that schools, meaning the adults, challenge students, capturing only one direction of what should be a bidirectional dynamic in which both schools and students challenge curriculum, ideas, and each other with a shared goal of acting positively on their reality. Students demonstrate learning by "meeting" standards.

The rest of the paragraph on academic excellence is largely devoted to describing "excellent" curriculum.

> *They recognize that early adolescence is characterized by dramatic cognitive growth, which enables students to think in more abstract and complex ways. The curriculum and extra-curricular programs in such schools are challenging and engaging, tapping young adolescents' boundless energy, interests, and curiosity.*

Developmentalist perspectives through phrases such as "dramatic cognitive growth" and "young adolescents' boundless energy" seem to convey a deep understanding of middle grades students. Simultaneously, the phrases appear to essentialize young adolescents and may reinforce stereotypes and social constructions of young adolescents, which could unintentionally create binaries that designate perceptions of "normal" and "abnormal" student behavior. The vision emphasizes a traditional relationship between adult and child: the adult—represented as "school"—is the knower and the child is the learner. *Turning Points* (CCAD, 1989) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) both talked about rapid cognitive development, and the focus on cognitive development may have reinforced and substantiated the need to emphasize academics in the middle grades. Additionally, positioning adolescents as having "boundless energy'makes us think of the stereotype identifying young adolescents as "hormones with feet" (Andrews, 2013b) and evokes an image reminiscent of Tigger from Winnie the Pooh who said, "Their tops are made out of rubber, their bottoms are made out of springs."

Ideas about "extra-curricular," "interests," and "curiosity" build on the progressive perspective that schools can be rigorous and simultaneously a place that students enjoy. The student outcomes of an academically excellent school are categorized as follows: "*Students learn to understand important concepts, develop essential skills, and apply what they learn to real-world problems.*" The paragraph thus circles back to reiterate that the vision of academic excellence is meeting standards through concepts, skills, and connection to the real world. We had many questions about this statement: Who decides what concepts are important? Who are the actors making those designations? Whose knowledge is privileged? What knowledge is privileged? Whose knowledge is ignored and/or silenced? What knowledge is ignored or silenced? It is unclear who determines what counts as "important," "essential," and "problems." However, students are designated solely as recipients of all such choices.

The decisions about what is important and what is not have implications for society's cultural and historical locations. Consider, for example, the implications of deciding that what is important to know about Christopher Columbus is the year that he "discovered" America. The knowledge that has not been deemed important—the devastating impacts on cultures, the environment, indigenous peoples, etc.—means that those cultural and historical locations are absent and the implications of those locations can be dismissed. White privilege has been created, designed as Mckesson points out (2018a), in the absence of the complexities that "important" concepts ignore. The decisions about what is important and what is not have implications for society's cultural and historical locations.

Learning related to real-world problems ties to progressive and critical education. Indeed, progressive and critical perspectives might argue that students choosing real-world problems and revolving instruction around addressing those problems would present an integrated approach to curriculum (Beane, 1997). However, advocates of the critical turn might suggest going a step further: real-world problems should be the central focus that guides *all* learning.

The vision statement completes its picture of academic excellence by outlining the responsibilities that adults have for supporting this vision: "*Adults in these schools maintain a rich academic environment by working with colleagues in their schools and communities to deepen their own knowledge and improve their practice.*" Drawing from the statement, we wonder what knowledge schools seek to deepen in order to improve their practice. Teachers are generally the stakeholders identified as responsible for the academic component of student learning. The designation of "adults," "colleagues," and "communities" implies that teachers are not the only ones responsible for student academic achievement and evokes the "it takes a village" proverb to expand the responsibility of successfully raising children to an entire community. Undoubtedly, "it takes a village" seems to weave together developmentalist (adults who "supervise" youth because youth need supervision); progressive (communities are involved in enculturating youth), and critical (the collective has responsibility for co-creating with youth) perspectives into this vision of a "good" education. However, given the ambiguous nature of this statement about adults in the vision, we took a closer look at the indicators for demonstrating this outcome as described with more detail within the Schools to Watch rubric (National Forum, 2013b).

General Criteria: *The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.*

Detailed Evidence of Criteria:

- *Teachers collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work.*
- *The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement.*

Within the rubric, the criteria related to this specific statement identify a focus on improving standards-based practice. This seems to point to teachers, an argument which is supported in the subsequent detailed evidence. The evidence asserts that teachers make the decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment and the professional learning community is focused specifically on instructional improvement and, thus, answers our previous question about what "knowledge" schools seek to deepen in support of student achievement. The criteria do not outline specific evidence for how administration, staff, families, and community partners maintain the rich environment. Our conclusion is that teachers are valued as having the biggest impact on student achievement and, thus, are mostly responsible for making the academically excellent component of this vision come to fruition.

"Good" as Developmental Responsiveness

In transitioning to the second major component of its vision, the National Forum describes high-performing middle grades schools as developmentally responsive. In the second paragraph, the vision outlines how schools know and respond to their students' needs. We kept asking why the vision statement emphasized developmental responsiveness instead of, for example, cultural responsiveness. The second sentence sets the tone for the remainder of the paragraph: "*Such schools create small learning communities of adults and students in which stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships support all students' intellectual, ethical, and social growth*."

Communities are introduced at the end of the first paragraph and reintroduced as the hero of this paragraph on responsiveness. The developmentalist perspective of adults having the knowledge and means to cultivate healthy students appears. Adults and students are positioned as the two main characters in the school story. Adults are teachers, staff, and parents while students are everyone else. The "good" described in this part of the vision statement is defined by students benefiting from positive relationships with the adults in the school. How might the adults benefit from their relationships with the students? In the Schools to Watch rubric, the visibility of "stable, close, and mutually respectful" relationships serve as evidence that the "*staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.*"

Student development is framed underneath structures created by the staff thus gives control of subjective terms including "stable," "close," "respectful," and "ethical" to the staff. With college education programs continuing to be dominated by middle class, white females who have shared cultural and social histories can conceal behaviors that are subjective, and teachers can claim them to be objective behaviors that are punishable to students who do not conform. Lesko (2005) pointed out that "community" can be a seemingly innocuous enactment of social control "as a basis for order, stability, and progress" (p. 189). Much of the language in this section on developmental responsiveness could be seen through the lens of control. As Lesko (2005) noted:

> The *Turning Points* image of a good middle school emphasizes affectional ties among adults and youth. Such relationships may seem unequivocally good to White, middle class professionals, but they are institutional creations that use emotional connections to shape behavior and thinking.
>
> *(p. 190)*

The good feelings that the word "community" evokes could actually be used to manipulate children; what Schlossman (1977) called "their capacity to receive and reciprocate affection" (p. 53).

The vision recognizes various types of development, beyond academic, that are necessary for students to be successful. The second paragraph lends itself to the developmental perspective and even seems to include the voices of health professionals when it states that schools "*provide comprehensive services to foster healthy physical and emotional development.*" Health care language and the influence of pediatricians and other professionals concerned with public health appear in this education discourse, including Joy Dryfoos's work on full-service schools with wraparound services (e.g., Dryfoos, 1998).

The paragraph turns to focus on what developmental responsiveness looks like for students in the academic sense: "*Students have opportunities for both independent inquiry and learning in cooperation with others. They have time to be reflective and numerous opportunities to make decisions about their learning.*" Words and phrases that are emphasized to delineate responsiveness center on academics and are provided to students through "numerous opportunities" as opposed to a regular component of learning. While the paragraph on academic excellence discusses cognitive growth, energy level, and sense of curiosity, this paragraph on developmental responsiveness emphasizes more

academic language such as "*inquiry*," "*cooperation*," "*reflection*," and "*decision making.*" All of these terms reflect progressive perspectives in education and center the idea that students need time to be reflective and that they should have a voice in decisions about their learning (Nesin & Brazee, 2013). The fact that the language is so intertwined in the vision's beliefs about students and learning conveys a deep integration of developmentalist and progressive perspectives.

The developmental perspective in this part of the vision turns to specifically name and incorporate families for the first time in the complete statement.

> *Developmentally responsive schools involve families as partners in the education of their children. They welcome families, keep them well informed, help them develop their expectations and skills to support learning, and assure their participation in decision making. These schools are deeply rooted in their communities.*

Families are emphasized as the beneficiaries of schools who "welcome," "inform," and "help" them support student learning. The inclusion of family reflects influences of Joyce Epstein's work on parent and family involvement in the middle grades and Mapp's (1997) meta-analysis of "studies conducted over the last 30 years [that] have identified a relationship between parent involvement and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, and better student attendance" (p. 1).

Community is brought back into the forefront as the vision states that "*schools are deeply rooted in their communities. Students have opportunities for active citizenship. They use the community as a classroom, and community members provide resources, connections, and active support.*" We believe that the last sentence above reflects an asset-based approach to describing communities with the idea that communities, by definition, have resources, connections, and the potential for support for schools. The word "opportunities" continues to be used to convey "instances of" rather than continuous integration into the curriculum. Does it reflect that adults can giveth and taketh away opportunities? Once again, the adults are the actors in "responding."

When are the kids the actors? We received a response to this question when we looked into the criteria for schools using "community as a classroom." The criteria clarify that "*Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world.*" This language identifies students as actors whose work relates to positive change at local to global levels. While progressive and critical perspectives are present here, we wondered why the identified projects are a practice that students "have opportunities" to do rather than it becoming an integral part of school curriculum.

"Good" as Socially Equitable

The vision statement discusses schools that "are" rather than schools that "strive to be." One effect of doing so is that schools may think they have "arrived," so to speak. We contend that schools face chronic challenges related to integrating social justice practices into school cultures that have been dominated for centuries by a colonized curriculum that represents and normalizes whiteness. Because whiteness others those who are not white, schools may unintentionally reinforce whiteness through curriculum, policies, and interactions that reinforce racism and marginalize students of color.

The vision states, "*High-performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable. They seek to keep their students' future options open.*" In reading this statement above, our first thought went directly to "college and career readiness;" but we did not want to make assumptions, so we referred to the Schools to Watch rubric. Unlike other concepts shared in the vision statement, we were unable to locate language that explicitly outlined what "future options" means. Is it up

to the schools, parents, or students to determine its meaning? Either way, the vision statement does not make its intent clear. We also noticed that the language of schools keeping students' options open seems to convey the belief that schools are gatekeepers with people who have power over students to hold the door open or allow it to swing shut. Where is student efficacy in this concept? Why is it necessary to state that kids' future options need to be held open? Without educators, the implication goes, those doors would close. The emphasis that schools must work to keep doors open for students speaks to the recognition that there are many threats that can close doors for students. Perhaps the most pervasive threats to students are the ways in which issues of race, class, and gender, to name a few, influence society's ideas of who can be successful and who cannot.

Intentional acts of social justice require moving away from a conception of "all students," when that often means "most students" in reality and towards a focus on "every student" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 24). Throughout the vision statement, students are grouped as "all" every time except for twice, one appearing in the excerpt below:

> [Schools] have high expectations for all their students and are committed to helping **each** [emphasis added] child produce work of high quality. These schools make sure that all students are in academically rigorous classes staffed by experienced and expertly prepared teachers.

The phrase referencing "each child" is in regards to work production, which evokes the factory model of education. Students are positioned as workers on the line of our economy who require our guidance to ensure they reach success rather than students who create, discover, and affect change. We believe that the vision's claim that "*all students are in academically rigorous classes*" is intended to be an act of equity in the sense that all students are challenged by the curriculum (as stated in the first paragraph on academic excellence) at the level they need. We also acknowledge that placing students in classes that "challenge" them often means the use of tracking, which is an epidemic across schools. Disguised as a means for being responsive to individual student needs, we know tracking is a harmful practice that sustains white supremacy (Welner & Burris, 2013). In the first section of the analysis on academic excellence, we identified developmental and progressive perspectives in the vision's description of curriculum and instruction. We perceive the reference to academic rigor in this paragraph to be the vision's efforts to integrate critical perspectives into ideas about academic excellence.

Until this point, the vision statement dictates what schools and adults should be doing to enact high-performing schools but fails to identify specific titles or positions within those categories. We have already discussed potential reasons why the National Forum chose to do this. However, there is one statement in the vision that explicitly references teachers, and it happens within this section on social equity: "*These teachers acknowledge and honor their students' histories and cultures. They work to educate every child well and to overcome systematic variation in resources and outcomes related to race, class, gender and ability.*"

The expectation that teachers acknowledge and honor their students' backgrounds reflects progressive and critical perspectives that advocate for student learning to integrate student experiences and ways of knowing that stem from their historical and cultural backgrounds that form their funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). At the same time, the words "acknowledge" and "honor" seem out of place and almost represent a surface level incorporation into the school as in, for example, Black History Month and Women's History Month. These are designated periods that serve as checkmarks through which teachers can acknowledge and honor cultures of non-white persons. The fact that teachers are specifically assigned this duty seems to position culture as something that exists along the outskirts of the school culture.

The National Forum envisions social equity as teachers educating "every child well," but does not define what "well" means. We compared this word usage to the way it was presented when

described in academic excellence, where the Forum provides examples of how students will "use their minds well" that, as we previously analyzed, clearly draw from developmental and progressive perspectives. In the same sentence, teachers are called to ensure the equitable distribution of resources and outcomes for students. It is only in the second to last sentence of this paragraph on social equity—and in the vision statement as a whole—that the National Forum acknowledges inequalities in schools that affect outcomes, which we translate to mean academic achievement.

Communities appear yet again in this last paragraph, almost repeating a phrase from the previous paragraph on developmental responsiveness regarding how communities are involved in creating high-performing schools: *(a) [Schools] engage their communities in supporting all students' learning and growth (from paragraph on social equity). (b) [Students] use the community as a classroom, and community members provide resources, connections, and active support (from the paragraph on developmental responsiveness).* Communities are characterized as partners in education throughout the vision statement. Again, we see each perspective included in the idea that every person within a community shares responsibility for every student's education. Community is pulled together in this abstract idea of a unit that blurs the diversity and cultural differences that exist, much like the use of *all* versus *every* student. In this section on social equity, it may clarify how community involvement supports equity by identifying the community as culturally diverse and connecting that diversity to the community's power to support students' learning.

Findings and Discussion

Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic theory asserts that heteroglossia reflects multiple voices present in words and ideas communicated verbally and in text. As seems to be the case in the National Forum's vision statement, a wide variety of perspectives allowed people to "communicate by cobbling together a text composed of citations, allusions, and repetitions of the words of others" (Tobin, 2000, p. 143) to establish "the good" in educational institutions. Such vision statements infused with heteroglossia often create contradictions that generate both satisfaction and skepticism because they represent "various common ideological positions from the larger social discourse" (Tobin, 2000, p. 22) that cannot be essentialized into one unified ideology. Our analysis found that "the good" in middle grades education continues to be described through developmentalist and progressive perspectives, with the critical turn adapted to the vision rather than integrated into it.

Progressive perspectives appear throughout all parts of the vision. In the paragraph on academic excellence, "good" education is articulated as meeting rigorous standards, a challenging and engaging curriculum, knowledge of students' interests, and learning of important concepts and skills and applying them to the real world. Collaboration occurs with and between students. A variety of characteristics unite as learning communities, both inside and outside of the school, to influence and support student learning. As a result, students will be prepared to be "good" citizens because of their "good" education.

Developmentalist perspectives supplement the progressive perspectives, providing all of the justifications for how "good" schools are prepared to support young adolescents, based on the characteristics youth demonstrate at this age. For example, because young adolescents experience "dramatic cognitive growth," the curriculum must be challenging and engage students in complex thinking. Most evident of the developmentalist perspective is the way that many of the sentence structures in the statement identify the schools and adults as the providers and young adolescents as the beneficiaries of the collective adult knowledge around them. "Experienced and expertly prepared teachers" know how to provide all students with the level of academic rigor they need. Developmentally responsive schools welcome families and "develop their expectations and skills to support learning" because they know how to help parents support students in this

stage of growth. From the developmentalist perspective, schools and adults do *for* students as opposed to *with* them.

Critical perspectives may appear throughout the statement in a variety of ways. Students use their learning for real-world application, problem-solving, and decision making. Students are ethical, reflective, and active citizens whose cultures are recognized in school by teachers who care about them. They are independent inquirers and collaborative learners who are regularly challenged by the curriculum. Students are given voice and choice through various methods. These beliefs appear throughout each section of the vision statement.

However, while we see the ideologies of the three different perspectives within the vision, we believe that the critical perspectives are much less integrated into what "good" middle grades schools do than are developmentalist and progressive perspectives. Drawing on many of the principles of progressives, the critical turn must include a shift away from traditional schooling that has produced the problem that the National Forum sought to address: high-performing middle grades schools are the exception, not the rule. Critical perspectives might contradict much of the National Forum's conception of social equity. As previously stated, one of the main themes present in "the good" in middle grades education is what schools do *for* students. Integration of a critical perspective would see middle grades schools treat students as subjects who *act*, rather than objects who *receive*, and co-create knowledge *with* students rather than decide *for* them what is "good." Critical perspectives assert that all stakeholders are change agents who can work to improve their world and the world of those around them through raising cultural consciousness. Acknowledging and honoring students includes creating policies, materials, and structures that respect the ways students are similar and different.

Integrating a justice and equity-oriented vision into the day-to-day decisions that mark the days of educators and youth alike is very difficult. The vision ostensibly addresses social equity; in fact, one of the three paragraphs is devoted solely to valuing equity as an essential part of a vision for high-performing middle grades schools. However, pulling social equity into a separate paragraph seems to reinforce the idea that equity somehow stands apart from the rest of the ideal middle grades school. The other two paragraphs feature academic excellence and developmental responsiveness, respectively, and seem to assume elements of inequity and injustice as part of the natural order, (unintentionally) ignoring the inequities inherent in ideas about academic excellence and developmental responsiveness. Adapting to and thus accommodating oppressive systems can seem like a *fait accompli*, simply accepted as necessary and unavoidable practice beneath the crushing weight of inevitability.

Conclusion

In analyzing the National Forum's vision statement, we did our best to read generously, keeping in mind the cultural and historical locations from which the vision statement was drawn, including the context of when it was written. In 1989, the National Governors Association (NGA, 1990) released their clarion call for standardization, *Goals 2000*. With its focus on schools a means for ensuring "U.S. economic and educational competitiveness," (Kearney, 2010, p. 410) *Goals 2000* was the seemingly inevitable result of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which served as an arguably unwarranted "panic button" of sorts about the quality of American schooling. During the 1990s, the middle grades leaders who would eventually become the founders of the National Forum could see the tsunami of standards and accountability looming on the horizon, with *Goals 2000* as the latest in a series of earthquake tremors leading to the tidal wave. How could we protect the villages—the communities of practice centered on young adolescents that we had been building for decades—from the flood? Testing, rigor, and standardization all cast long shadows on the work that middle grades advocates