Specialized Middle Level Teacher Preparation: Moving from Advocacy to Actualization

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Abstract

Is specialized middle level teacher preparation necessary? This essay offers the authors' thoughts regarding middle level teaching and the necessity of specialized middle level teacher preparation. The reader is encouraged to further the discussion of middle level teacher preparation from advocacy to actualization.

Is middle level teacher preparation necessary? While this question may have the tone of a condescending remark, or demeaning query, as middle level education proponents, we believe this question represents the growth and maturation of the field of middle level education. Our predecessors, William Alexander, John Lounsbury, Gordon Vars, Kenneth McEwin, Paul George, Nancy Doda, and many others spent much of their careers providing passionate responses to their generation's question: "Is middle level *education* necessary*?*" Through their advocacy, multiple national organizations developed from the grassroots efforts to change the educational practices and policies related to how schools were organized and young adolescents were educated. This shift in schooling for 10- to 15-year-old students raised critical questions about the preparation of teachers for the middle grades. Our predecessors adamantly called for specialized teacher preparation, and many middle level groups responded with position statements, standards, and policy changes. Changes in licensure options for specifically prepared middle grades teachers did occur; however, there continues to be a lack of regard for specialized middle level teacher preparation. The question of necessity is posed at a critical juncture in the process of growth and change and represents an adjustment in focus that has moved beyond the need for schools organized for young adolescents, to the obligation of preparing teachers for these schools.

Is "Good Teaching Just Good Teaching?"

Many opponents of specialized middle level teacher preparation often rely on the adage "good teaching is just good teaching" as a means of defending a general approach to teacher preparation. Generally speaking, it is difficult to argue against the merits of this statement. Good teaching is good teaching. Teachers typically know it when they see it. In fact, it is usually easy to identify examples of good teaching—students excited about learning, teachers skillfully facilitating a class discussion, authentic opportunities to explore a topic. Good teaching simply addresses some of the core elements of teaching (e.g., assessment, classroom management, instruction, curriculum, content knowledge, student engagement). However, the question regarding good teaching should really focus on whether good teaching looks the same across grade bands, and this is where the variation typically takes place in schools. Educational practices and good teaching do not look the same from elementary school to middle school to high school to college. While many of the same elements will be present, for good teaching to be most effective, the specific population being served should be carefully considered and thus, greatly influence the teaching decisions that are made. As such,

school communities should respond with a specialized approach to meet the developmental needs of the specific age group. Elementary and secondary programs currently exist with little question of whether they are necessary. Why would middle grades education be any different? In fact, due to the tremendous variability and personal changes that take place during puberty, there is no greater need for this specialized approach than during young adolescents' middle grades years.

Providing a developmentally responsive educational experience for middle grades students is essential for academic success, and middle grades advocates and organizations have called for a specialized approach to teaching middle grades adolescents since the late 1960s through various positions statements and research projects (Eichhorn, 1966; Howell, Cook & Faulkner, 2013b; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2014b; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). There is no shortage of information about how middle grades students should be taught. Each of these documents addressed the fundamental pedagogy and practices necessary for ensuring effective and meaningful middle grades schools for students. Specifically, each highlighted the need for middle grades students to encounter meaningful curriculum and engaging learning experiences delivered from highly qualified teachers passionate about working with young adolescents.

The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) provided the foundation for middle grades education with *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, a core document that identified the essential attributes and characteristics of successful middle level education (NMSA, 2010). Providing a developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable educational experience that emphasizes curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community are the key components to effective middle grades schools. Jackson and Davis (2000) also highlighted seven key design elements to ensure success for middle grades students – rigorous curriculum, appropriate instructional methods, highly-qualified teachers prepared to teach young adolescents, relationships for learning, democratic governance, safe and healthy school environment, and parent and community involvement. Jackson and Davis stated, "The goals of excellence and equity can be reached only through comprehensive, ongoing change involving all the design elements" (p. 219), and each of these elements is critical for school and student success.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform asserted "high performing middle-grades schools are academically excellent (challenge all students to use their minds), developmentally responsive (sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence), socially equitable (democratic and fair and provide every student with high-quality teachers), and embrace organizational structures to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence" (National Forum, 2014b). Finally, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006) produced *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform,* a document grounded in reforming middle grade schools through collaborative leadership and professional learning communities; personalizing the school environment; and curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The strategies in this book stress the importance of the middle school philosophy to provide rigorous, personalized learning environments that engage students in meaningful learning.

Howell, Cook, and Faulkner, in their *Framework of Effective Middle Level Practices,* also emphasized the specialized nature of teaching middle grades students (Faulkner et al., 2013; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013). They identified the relationship between eight key constructs of effective middle level practice—developmental spectrum, organizational

structures, teacher dispositions and professional behaviors, relationships, content knowledge, curriculum and instruction, assessment, and classroom management. While all eight of the constructs are important in providing meaningful learning experiences to students, they emphasized the importance of viewing the core of the *Framework* (i.e., developmental spectrum, organizational structures, teacher dispositions and professional behaviors, and relationships) as the primary lens through which one should view the constructs situated outside of the core (i.e., content knowledge, curriculum, and instruction, classroom management, and assessment). For instance, having a thorough understanding of the developmental spectrum of adolescents (i.e., cognitive, physical, social, emotional, cultural, and moral) and the organizational structures of middle grades schools (e.g., common planning time, interdisciplinary teams, integrated units of instruction), should allow teachers the appropriate lens to reflect on the required content knowledge to plan and implement integrated units that offer a more relevant, rigorous, and meaningful curriculum that challenge students.

While an adequate amount of information exists on how to teach and organize middle grades schools, much of the challenge in ensuring all middle grades young adolescents encounter this type of educational experience lies with initial teacher preparation. Many teachers who teach in middle grades schools were not specifically prepared to do so (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Providing specialized middle level teacher preparation in universities across the country is an essential step for ensuring middle grades students receive effective middle grades teaching.

What is High Quality Middle Level Teacher Preparation?

Every child deserves to have a competent, effective classroom teacher, but if that goal is to be actualized, high quality teacher preparation is essential. Though teacher preparation programs have been a staple of nearly every college or university curriculum for decades, the preparation of teachers continues to find its way into the national conversation. Various entities—public, private, and even entrepreneurial—define "high quality teacher preparation" in a manner that best suits their needs. Most teacher educators, like the authors, believe high quality teacher preparation is best achieved through a clearly defined, university-based curriculum, while others believe similar results can be realized by engaging motivated college graduates in an intense, non-university-based alternative certification program (American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, 2016; Teach for America, 2015). Interestingly, one does not hear similar national debates about the preparation of professionals in other disciplines; however, for some reason, the preparation of teachers, and ultimately the education of our children, is still fodder for policymakers, pundits, and entrepreneurs.

Several programmatic elements will generate little controversy when discussing high quality teacher preparation. Throughout a candidate's preparation, most would agree new teachers should develop a deep understanding of the content they will be teaching (AMLE, 2012; Ball & Forzani, 2010; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2015; Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2011; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010; National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2015); demonstrate a thorough knowledge of pedagogy, including a broad range of instructional strategies appropriate for the content (AMLE; Ball & Forzani; CAEP; CCSSO; Jackson, & Davis; NCATE; NCTQ; National Forum, 2014a; NMSA); engage in clinical experiences integrated throughout the candidates preparation (AMLE; Ball & Forzani; CAEP; Jackson & Davis; NCATE); and demonstrate an understanding of professional roles and ethics (AMLE; CCSSO). Though these are widely accepted components of high quality teacher preparation in general, in its position statement, the AMLE advocated for "specific

middle grades professional preparation prior to teaching young adolescents" (NMSA, 2010, p. 15). So, this begs the question, "What is high quality *middle level* teacher preparation?"

In addition to content and pedagogical knowledge, integrated clinical experiences, and an understanding of professional roles and ethics, high quality *middle level* teacher preparation includes several unique elements that set it apart from teacher preparation in general. First, it includes a thorough understanding of the developmental spectrum of young adolescents (AMLE, 2012; Howell et al., 2013; Jackson, & Davis, 2000; National Forum, 2014a; NMSA, 2010). Middle level teachers must understand and acknowledge the unique cognitive, physical, social, emotional, cultural, and moral characteristics of young adolescents so they can design instruction and programming that is responsive to their students' developmental needs. When considering the uniqueness of 10- to 15-year-old students, middle level teachers can more effectively provide instruction that is relevant, integrated, challenging, and exploratory (NMSA).

Second, high quality middle level teacher preparation must include instruction in the effective use of organizational structures that support the learning of young adolescents (AMLE, 2012; Howell et al., 2013; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum, 2014a; NMSA, 2010). Structures such as the interdisciplinary team, common planning time, advisory programs, and exploratory curriculum are hallmarks of effective middle schools and are all intended to directly address the developmental needs of middle level students and to create a school climate that supports teachers and students alike.

Third, high quality middle level teacher preparation should seek to identify those individuals who display the dispositional qualities and professional behaviors that will enable them to be successful teaching young adolescents (AMLE, 2012; Howell et al., 2013). Not everyone is well-suited for a career teaching young adolescents. As stated by AMLE, middle level educators need to "value young adolescents," "enjoy being with young adolescents," "understand the dynamics of ever-changing youth culture," and accept the inevitability they will be "role models for students" (NMSA, 2010, p. 15).

When working in concert, an understanding of adolescent development and middle level organizational structures and the modeling of appropriate dispositions and professional behaviors enables relationships to flourish (Howell et al., 2013). These relationships—teacher-student, student-student, teacher-community—are at the heart of the effective middle school, and, by extension, must be at the heart of high quality middle level teacher preparation.

Do We *Really* Need Specialized Middle Level Teacher Preparation?

It is not surprising for advocates of middle level education to call for specialized middle level teacher preparation for the teachers of young adolescents. What some may find surprising is that critics of the field have also called for more specific preparation for teachers in middle schools. Over the past several years, those who have questioned the idea of the middle school concept (Yecke, 2005), the validity of claims of the uniqueness of the middle level school (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004), and the need for middle level schools in general (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Juvonen et al.) have also recognized the need for better-prepared teachers of 10- to 15-year-olds. For example, Yecke has been very critical of the lack of rigor in middle schools, but acknowledged dilemmas faced by students being taught by teachers lacking specialized preparation for the students they teach. She pointed out, "in 1999-2000 school year alarming percentages of middle grade students were taught by teachers who lacked a college major or certification in the areas they were teaching…" (p. 54). While her focus is on subject area certification, she noted that preparing teachers to find the "balance

between academic achievement and nurturing environment is a challenge…" (p. 55) and encouraged schools to equip teachers for the task. Eccles and Midgley suggested the mismatch between school structures and the young adolescents was problematic and supported the recommendation of "preparing teachers for the middle grades" (Juvonen et al., p. 15). Juvonen and colleagues clearly noted that they "*challenge the rationale of a separate middle school*" (p. 19, italics original) but included as one of their recommendations better training and support for both middle school teachers and middle school administrators.

These recommendations are consistent with similar calls from within the field of middle level education (e.g., Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2010). Teachers of 10- to 15-year-olds must be prepared to meet the developmental and academic needs of their students through preparation programs focused on understanding the historical, sociopolitical, and contextual demands of teaching and learning, middle level schools, and young adolescents. There has been progress in the number of states with middle level licensure or endorsements. Currently, there are 45 states that have some form of credential for teachers seeking to teach in grades 5 through 9 (AMLE, 2016). However, in their recent study, Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, and Thompson (2016) found the extent to which the licensure structure actually translated into specialized middle level teacher preparation was inconsistent across the country and nonexistent in some states—even those with a middle level license or endorsement. Of the 1,324 institutions preparing teachers in the United States, only 336 had programs solely focused on the education teachers of young adolescents. While this represents growth from two middle level teacher preparation programs in 1972, it is still only one quarter of the institutions who prepare teachers at the undergraduate level are preparing them with a specialized focus on middle grades. Furthermore, of the 45 states with middle level licensure, 17 states did not have a single specialized middle level teacher preparation program (Howell et al.). With recommendations for more specific preparation from critics and supporters alike, the question seems to not be one of necessity but rather one of consistency.

The hard work and advocacy of middle grades pioneers like William Alexander, John Lounsbury, and many others has been instrumental in establishing middle grade schools. With over 13,000 middle schools in the US (AMLE, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2015), they are clearly an integral component of the educational system in our country. As such, advocacy efforts must place more emphasis on actualization in order for all middle grades students to be taught by a highly-qualified teacher specifically prepared to work with this age group. To accomplish this endeavor, it is critical for teacher preparation programs to examine the current pathways to teaching at the middle level and ensure that each option includes a specialized curriculum that addresses the specific needs of middle grades students. ❖

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