The Status of Middle Schools in the Southeastern United States: Perceptions and Implementation of the Middle School Model

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Abstract

For more than 100 years, education communities have debated how best to educate the young adolescent. Proponents of both the junior high school model and the current middle school model have advocated for a specialized approach to educating adolescents that emphasizes the developmental needs of students. To accomplish this, various organizational structures and instructional approaches are recommended. This survey study examines the perceptions of these middle school practices and the implementation of those practices in middle schools in the Southeastern region of the United States. We note several key trends in our results and highlight key differences in perception of importance and implementation of middle school components and strategies compared to the most recent large scale survey administered by McEwin and Greene (2011).

Introduction

Since the inception of the junior high school in the early 1900s to the emergence of the middle school in the late 1960s, the education of the young adolescent (10- to 15-year-old child) has been a complex and challenging issue for schools to navigate. Advocates for both models recommended a specialized approach to educating the young adolescent with more emphasis placed on the individual child's developmental needs and their transition into high school (Alexander, 1968; Briggs, 1920). Today, engaging in developmentally appropriate and responsible practices continues to be a chief concern of middle level schools (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). We argue that Alexander's (1968b) middle school concept and the assertions of other researchers (i.e., Georgia Department of Education, 1998; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin & Greene, 2011) concerning highly successful middle schools and their willingness to embrace the middle school concept are as important today as they were during the last several decades of middle grades research. The purpose of this study of middle school practices focuses on the Southeastern region of the United States and attempts to capture the perceptions of middle school practices and components, as well as to understand the alignment between perceptions of the importance and actual implementation of these practices and the potential challenges to implementation.

Conceptual Framework

Since the establishment of formal schooling structures in the US, educational communities have debated on how to best educate the young adolescent. Using the foundational knowledge of the junior high school model of the early 1900s and the more current middle school model, we grounded this study in the importance of providing developmentally responsive educational experiences for young adolescents. The research base of the past 100 years provides a solid framework for the types of schooling experiences young adolescents should experience in school and emphasizes the critical importance of the individual needs of students.

In *The Junior High School*, Briggs (1920) provided a clear description of the junior high school and how to best meet the needs of the young adolescent. Building off the core elements of *Organization* (p. 93), *Special Functions* (p. 127), *Curricula* (p. 162), *Methods of Teaching* (p. 201), and *Social Organization and Control* (p. 252), Briggs called for teachers to engage students through a variety of instructional strategies, differentiate curriculum to meet individual student needs, and establish an advisory system to help students develop personal life skills. Several years later, Gruhn

and Douglas (1947) expanded on these ideas and added the importance of teachers being specially prepared to work with this age group, embracing a curriculum focused on the needs of junior high school students, greater focus on problem solving and personal character traits, collaboration among teachers to meet student needs, increased emphasis on guidance for students, and a variety of classes to foster student interests. Later, Alexander (1968b) proposed a reinvigorated vision with increased emphasis on the needs of the young adolescent and the opportunity to use organizational structures (e.g., flexible schedule, common planning time, interdisciplinary teams) to help meet student needs. From this, the modern middle school was established.

The NMSA (1982) produced *This We Believe* which outlined essential characteristics for middle schools (e.g., educators knowledgeable about the age group, varied instruction, exploratory program, guidance opportunities). This document has been continuously revisited, most recently in 2010, and continues to advocate for an educational experience focused on the developmental needs of young adolescents. The current version, NMSA, 2010, is grounded in four essential attributes (i.e., developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering and equitable) and 16 characteristics focused on three primary areas—curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community. Of note, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) highlights the importance of students engaged in active learning, multiple teaching and learning strategies to challenge students, organizational structures to support meaningful relationships, an adult advocate for every child, and the use of a variety of assessments to guide student learning and encourage the development of lifelong learning.

Turning Points (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) articulated the importance of ensuring students were taught by experts prepared to work with this age group, fostering health and wellness, involving parents and communities in the school, and creating smaller communities of learning. Providing its support for middle grades education, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006) also called for comprehensive advisory programs, flexible schedules, common planning time, and the use of a variety of assessments to measure the progress of a rigorous curriculum. In addition, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (2018) established its Schools to Watch program in 1999 and produced a rubric outlining the essential criteria for schools to foster an academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable school environment with organizational structures that support student learning and development.

The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (2012), formerly known as the National Middle School Association, also developed the Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards to guide the professional development and preparation of middle grades teachers. These five standards addressed the expertise well-prepared middle grades teachers should possess and focused on young adolescent development (Standard 1), middle level curriculum (Standard 2), middle level philosophy and school organization (Standard 3), middle level instruction and assessment (Standard 4), and middle level professional roles (Standard 5). Ensuring all middle grades students are taught by teachers who are specifically prepared to work with young adolescents, as well as appreciate working with this specific age group, has been a common call for more than 70 years (AMLE, 2012; Gruhn & Douglas, 1947; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 1982).

Specifically examining the research on the implementation of the middle school philosophy from the past 25 years provides a favorable, but complicated outlook. The Georgia Department of Education (1998) found that, “students who attend schools that more fully implement certain elements of the middle school concept are more likely to be academically successful…and are better supported to make the transition from childhood to adolescence” (p. 6). Factors like support for the middle school concept from stakeholders, use of interdisciplinary teams, strong community involvement, and positive school culture were more present in these schools. Meeks & Stepka (2005) examined the implementation of the middle school concept in the state of Arkansas and the results indicated that support for the concept was strong, but specific implementation of elements varied. Interdisciplinary teams (72%) and common planning time (88%) were most commonly present, but integrated curriculum (52%), flexible scheduling (51%), intramurals (39%) and advisory (37%) were less commonly implemented. Huss and Eastep (2011) captured

the attitudes of teachers about the current implementation of the key elements of the middle school concept in a tri-state area. Using the responses from approximately 100 teachers, they found that while many components are still present, they are less frequent than in previous years. Extracurricular activities (87%) and interdisciplinary teams (67%) were most commonly implemented, and interdisciplinary curriculum (49%), flexible schedule (33%), and advisory (33%) were less implemented. Most recently, Ellerbrock, Main, Falbe, and Franz (2018) examined the literature on middle school organizational structures in the US and Australia and discovered a downward trend in interdisciplinary teaming since 2000. Across the board, support for the middle school concept appears strong overall, but the level of implementation and consistency of elements present in middle grades schools varies greatly.

Building off the research base of the past 100 years, we designed the current study of the Southeastern US to gain insights into the current middle school practices and components and to examine for alignment of these practices and components with the framework for middle grades education. Based on the common knowledge base focused on middle grades education, professional standards for middle grades teacher preparation, and the current research base, it is assumed most middle school educators have beliefs that align with the middle school philosophy, but may not necessarily practice, or have opportunities to practice, these beliefs. Over the past 50 years, several studies have reported on the status of middle school practices nationally (Alexander, 1968a; Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Brooks & Edwards, 1978; Compton, 1976; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; McEwin et al., 1996, 2003; McEwin & Greene, 2011; Valentine et al., 2002). Using the series of national status reports by Alexander, McEwin, and others as our model (Alexander, 1968a; Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin et al.), intent is to capture a snapshot of middle grades education in the Southeastern US. As such, we address several research questions with our study:

RQ1: What is the current status of middle grades organizational structures in the Southeastern United States?
RQ2: What is the current status of middle grades instructional practices in the Southeastern United States?
RQ3: What is the current status of middle grades culture and community in the Southeastern United States?
RQ4: What gap, if any, exists between perceptions and implementation of middle school components and teaching strategies in the Southeastern United States?
RQ5: What are the barriers, if any, to implementation of middle school components and teaching strategies in the Southeastern United States?

Methods

This survey study examines the perceived importance of various middle school practices and components and the actual implementation of those components in middle school in the Southeastern US. In our methodology, we explain in detail our data collection processes, sampling technique, and the number of responses from participants that we have received. We also describe our survey instrument and how we have adapted it from the most recent national middle school survey (McEwin & Greene, 2011).

Data Collection

We limited our survey data collection to the Southeast Sunbelt Region 4 as established by the U.S. General Services Administration (2017). Region 4 consists of eight states including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. A complete listing of all public and state-recognized charter schools in the state was generated using search features on publicly accessible governmental websites, generally, through the state's Department of Education. We filtered the lists to include those schools that contained any of the possible grade configurations for middle schools, e.g., 5-8, 6-7, 7-8, or similar. Some schools in the population were named "junior high" and others included various elementary, secondary, and K-12 grade configurations. Then, we generated a simple randomized sample of 25% from the total number of schools in each state that met the criteria for inclusion in the study (see Table 1). Previous researchers (e.g., McEwin & Greene, 2011) conducted a 20% random sample for the purposes of their study. We conducted a random sample of 25% to account for possible attrition rates of schools and respondents in our sample during the planning stages of the survey.

Table 1

Southeastern Region States

State	Total Number of Schools	Sample Number of Schools	Total Responses from Each State	Teacher Responses	Administrator Responses
Alabama	268	36	18	14	4
Florida	580	142	52	41	11
Georgia	462	100	72	51	21
Kentucky	216	54	90	68	22
Mississippi	135	21	15	10	5
North Carolina	488	110	71	54	17
South Carolina	254	47	24	17	7
Tennessee	309	51	27	18	9
Total	2,712	561*	369**	273	96

Note: * 561 reflects the actual number of schools included in the survey sample, taking into account schools without publicly available email information. **Out of the 373 total responses, four participants did not list their respective state.

A total of 561 schools were included in the 25% random sample of schools in Region 4, taking into account the number of schools without contact information. After identifying the random sample of schools, each school's website was accessed, and when publicly available, the staff directory was located. If email addresses were provided in the directory, up to three school administrators and five random teachers were selected to receive an email recruiting them to voluntarily participate. It should be noted that some schools did not make staff email addresses available on their websites. In those cases, the school was deleted from the random sample of schools. In total, 3,554 email addresses of administrators and teachers were collected to receive the recruitment email. Out of the 3,554 total email addresses, 564 were undelivered due to email system restrictions, outdated email addresses, and other issues. This resulted in a total of 2,990 viable email addresses that actually received a survey invitation. The recruitment email requested the administrators' and teachers' voluntary participation, informed them of their rights per the Institutional Review Board, and provided them with a link to the online survey. A follow-up email was sent one week after the initial recruitment email to encourage participation. From the 2,990 recruitment emails sent, 373 participants

completed at least a portion of the survey for an estimated response rate of 12.47%. Due to the nature of our survey sample, we cannot be sure that it provided us with a true representative sample of schools. However, our sampling procedures (i.e., simple random sampling and the inclusion of multiple teacher and administrator responses) were designed to give us a snapshot of middle schools in the Southeastern US. Furthermore, respondents were asked to provide their respective geographic region, the answers of which were reported in the results section. This helped to provide more details regarding the background information of our survey respondents and the schools at which they teach.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that there were 630,300 total middle school teacher jobs in the US in 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Using this total number for our population (*N*), we calculated, using an online confidence interval calculator (Creative Research Systems, 2012), that our sample size of 373 gives us a margin of error close to 5%, using a confidence level of 95%. This is a very conservative estimate for our sample, given that the Southeastern US has many fewer middle school teachers. Taking into consideration our lower response rates for certain individual items (e.g., around 258 for instructional practices, see Table 4), we concluded that some of these individual items had a margin of error somewhere between 6% and 7%, using a confidence level of 95%. These were conservative estimates, given the Southeastern region that we sampled.

Instrument

Using Qualtrics, an anonymous, online survey was developed to gather the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the current status of the middle school model in the Southeastern US. The survey, adapted from McEwin and Greene's (2011) national surveys of randomly selected and highly successful middle level schools, consisted of 32 items designed to capture the current perceptions, implementation, and barriers to implementation of organizational structures and instructional practices in the region's middle schools. The survey instrument consisted of four sections. In Section 1, participants provided descriptive details about themselves and their schools, such as teacher certification, school size, location, grade configuration, and curricular offerings. Sections 2 and 3 measured the perceived importance and implementation of middle school organizational structures and instructional strategies. These sections consisted of ordinal, 3-point Likert-type items. Respondents' answers ranged from 1-3 for perceptions of importance (not important, somewhat important, very important) and levels of implementation (rarely or never implemented, occasionally implemented, regularly implemented). In Section 4, space was provided for respondents to offer additional comments.

Data Analysis

We conducted a descriptive analysis to capture the overall picture of middle schools in the region. We also examined percentages of perceived importance of organizational structures and strategies and the implementation of these structures and strategies. Likert-type items were developed and scored in the same direction to allow for analysis of median differences between perceptions and actual implementation of the middle school components and teaching strategies. We compared median scores, because of the ordinal nature of our data (Boone & Boone, 2012). We used median comparisons because the medians were a better measure of central tendency of our data than using modes (Thompson, 2009), which would have been better suited for nominal categories of data. We did not conduct means analysis because we believed that taking the mean of "not important, somewhat important, and very important" and "rarely or never implemented, occasionally implemented, regularly implemented" was taking too much liberty with respect to our analysis of this data (i.e., because of the subjective nature of these items, it is difficult to operationalize them and also inappropriate to take the average of these items). Therefore, median was believed to be the appropriate measure of central tendency. To aid in the interpretation of median differences we assigned rankings to the Likert-type items. For example, "not important" was assigned "1," "somewhat important" was assigned "2," and "very important" was assigned a value of "3." "Rarely or never implemented" was assigned a value of "1," "occasionally implemented" was assigned a value of "2," "regularly implemented" was assigned a value of "3."

Results

The anonymous, online survey asked participants to provide information regarding themselves, their schools, and the programs and practices implemented within their schools. An analysis of the responses from 373 randomly selected middle school teachers and administrators gave an overall view of the middle schools in Southeast Sunbelt Region 4 including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

School Information

Participants in the study included both teachers and principals. Of the 373 respondents, 73.99% were teachers (n = 276), and 26.01% were principals (n = 97). Regarding certification, 51.45% reported having middle school teacher certification upon completion of their teacher preparation program; while the remaining respondents were certified as elementary (20.29%) or secondary (28.26%) teachers. Just over 95% of respondents indicated they believed it was somewhat important or very important for teachers in middle school to hold middle level certification. When asked about their administrative certification, the largest percentage of school administrators reported having elementary/middle certification (58.18%) followed by P-12 (19.39%), middle/secondary (13.33%), and elementary (9.09%).

Teachers and principals also provided specific information about their schools. More than half of the respondents (50.36%) characterized their schools as moderate in size with 401-800 students enrolled, while 33.46% said their schools enrolled more than 800 students, and 16.19% taught in small middle schools of fewer than 400 students. Participants also described the location of their school community as either urban (28.26%), suburban (24.38%), or rural/town (47.35%). These classifications were based on definitions provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2019).

When describing the economic condition of the students in their schools, a majority of the respondents (70.49%) indicated more than half of their students qualified for free and/or reduced-price lunch services, with 43.18% reporting 80% or more of their students qualified for the program.

Teachers and principals were not asked to identify the grade configuration of their schools since there are numerous possible configurations; however, they did indicate which grades were present in their schools. From the responses, it was clear the most common grade configuration is grades 6-8 with 68% to 71% of the respondents indicating their schools included grades 6 (68.7%), 7 (71.1%), or 8 (70.3%). There was a clear decrease in the reported percentage of inclusion for grades 5 (9.1%) and 9 (2.7%).

From a list of possible elective courses offered by the middle schools in the region, only principals were asked to indicate which elective courses were available at their schools (see Table 2). The most commonly offered electives were band (88), physical education (81), art (76), chorus (66), health (58), STEM/Technology (53), and computer science (52).

Table 2

Rank Ordered Electives Available at Schools (Only Principals Responded)

Elective	Number of Principal Responses	Percent of Responding Principals (n = 88)
Band	88	100.00
Physical Education	81	92.04
Art	76	86.36
Chorus	66	76.00
Health	58	65.90

STEM/Technology (other than computing)	53	60.22
Computer Science	52	59.09
Word Processing / Keyboarding	51	57.95
General Music	44	50.00
Foreign Language	42	47.72
Career Education	41	46.59
Reading	31	35.22
Orchestra	29	32.95
Family and Consumer Science	26	29.54
Journalism	17	19.31
Life Skills	13	14.77
Sex Education	12	13.63
Creative Writing	11	12.50
Industrial Arts	11	12.50
Speech	7	7.95

As an indicator of school performance, the survey asked participants to indicate if their school had been named a "School to Watch." The School to Watch program is a middle school recognition program created by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and administered by participating states. The program recognizes schools on a trajectory of excellence as indicated by performance in four domains – academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures. Of the eight states in Southeast Sunbelt Region 4, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina are participating states. Of the participating states, 9.7% of respondents indicated their school had been named a School to Watch; however, they were not asked to identify how recently their school received the designation.

Organizational Structures

We asked participants to report their perceptions of importance and level of actual implementation for several key middle school organizational structures. With respect to interdisciplinary team organization, we found that 93.55% of respondents believed interdisciplinary teams are somewhat (36.41%) or very important (57.14%), while only 75.11% of respondents reported regular implementation (44.34%) or occasional implementation (30.77%). Common planning periods most often happened five times a week (50.00%) with 16.15% reporting no common planning time. Over 84% of respondents reported the existence of content-based professional learning communities (PLCs). We found that 7.63% of respondents use flexible block scheduling, while 75.50% use daily periods of uniform length and 15.26% use periods of varying length. Respondents strongly believed flexible scheduling was important with over 52% of respondents stating it was very important. More than 41% believed flexible scheduling and grouping were somewhat important. When asked about the implementation of flexible scheduling and grouping, nearly a quarter (21.62%) of respondents noted it was rarely or never implemented. About 45% noted it was only occasionally implemented.

Regarding advisory programs, we found that 70.87% of respondents from our random sample reported having advisory programs at their schools. Of schools with advisory programs, 34.55% reported using advisory to address academic needs (i.e., RTI, Academic Goal Setting, and Intensive Work), 21.47% used advisory for homeroom activities, 22.51% for

mentoring, and 11.52% for Social Emotional Learning. Over 26% reported having more than 40 minutes per advisory session, and 41.71% report having advisory group meetings daily. Principals and teachers believed advisory programs were important to middle school. With respect to advisory programs, 92.02% reported advisory programs as somewhat (45.54%) or very (46.48%) important. However, 24.89% noted that advisory programs are rarely or never implemented in their school.

We found 84% of respondents noted the use of tracking, or ability grouping, in their school with 40.08% reporting tracking was used at all grade levels, but restricted to only certain subjects (e.g., reading, math) and 26.72% reported using tracking in all grade levels in all basic subjects. Participants reported ability grouping happening in math (83.87%), language arts (63.70%), and reading (46.37%) classes.

Other Middle School Components

Respondents noted a number of middle school components as important, but not regularly implemented to the same degree. Table 3 notes components with large percentages of respondents indicating the component was "very important" with considerably lower rates of actual implementation.

Table 3

Reported Differences between Importance and Implementation of Key Middle School Components

Component	Number	% Very Important	% Regular Implementation	% Difference
Educators who value working with young adolescents	223	94.62	67.57	-27.05
Inviting, supportive, and safe environments	224	94.64	74.32	-20.32
Students and teachers engaged in active learning	223	94.17	62.61	-31.56
Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory	223	68.16	36.36	-31.80
Multiple learning and teaching approaches	222	91.93	61.54	-30.39

When reporting median gaps, or differences, we wanted to report considerable differences between the implementation ratings and importance ratings, using the assigned rankings to the Likert-type responses (see Table 4). We noted median gaps in two middle school components. For the component "all students are well known," over 96% of respondents noted this was either somewhat (23.53%) or very (72.85%) important; however, only 50% of participants reported it was regularly implemented. The component "rules are clearly and consistently applied" was selected by 89.14% of respondents as very important with 9.05% indicating that it was somewhat important. Nearly 50% of respondents noted this was regularly implemented; while 37.84% of respondents noted it was only occasionally implemented, and 13.51% stated it was rarely or never implemented.

Instructional Practices

Table 4 provides a look at the perceptions and implementation of teaching strategies/methods of the middle school model and examine median differences between the perceptions and implementation of the strategies. As far as

teaching strategies are concerned, 80.76% of respondents in our sample reported direct instruction as being regularly implemented. Respondents also perceived direct instruction as important with 60.14% stating it is very important and 35.74% stating it is somewhat important. We found that cooperative learning is implemented regularly at 71.38% and occasionally at 27.59%. Participants also felt cooperative learning was very (75.26%) or somewhat (24.05%) important.

Table 4

Median Differences between Perceived Importance and Implementation of Instructional Methods and Strategies

Method / Strategy	% NI (1)	% SI (2)	% VI (3)	Median Value	% R/N (1)	% OU (2)	% RU (3)	Median Value
Inquiry Learning	3.11	32.87	64.01	3	6.19	52.23	41.58	2
Service Learning	34.02	47.08	18.90	2	60.21	32.53	7.27	1
Use Other Learning Spaces	32.87	46.37	20.76	2	47.08	43.07	9.85	1
Socratic Seminars	39.66	42.76	17.59	2	54.58	33.70	11.72	1
Independent Study	5.17	51.72	43.10	2	6.90	42.07	51.03	3
Online Instruction	9.97	51.20	38.83	2	8.59	42.96	48.45	3

Note: Not Important (NI), Somewhat Important (SI), Very Important (VI), Rarely or Never Used (R/N), Occasionally Used (OU), Regularly Used (RU).

For this set of strategies, "inquiry teaching," "service learning," "use of other learning spaces," and "Socratic Seminars" received greater median ratings of importance than ratings of implementation. "Independent study" and "on-line instructional practices" received greater median ratings of implementation than ratings of importance. Therefore, independent study and on-line instructional practices are happening more often than it is believed they should be occurring in classrooms.

Challenges of the Middle School Model

Multiple challenges were identified across different components of the middle school model. The three most challenging components, according to participants, were academic achievement in general, remediation practices, and curricular rigor and clarity. University/ school partnerships, teaming, and teacher planning time were marked as having the fewest challenges to implementation.

The middle school component with the most challenges, as indicated by respondents, was academic achievement in general which 83.81% of participants felt there were challenges. Participants rated student behavior (28.57%) and testing requirements (19.52%) as the largest challenges for academic achievement in general. Nearly 70% of participants noted challenges with remediation practices. Those challenges included insufficient time (22.11%) and lack of staff or other support (13.57%). Finally, 69.31% of participants found challenges to curricular

rigor and clarity. In particular, lack of professional development (11.88%), testing requirements (9.90%), and lack of knowledge or support (9.41%) were noted as challenges. Challenges regarding instructional delivery were equally distributed between faculty resistance, lack of knowledge or support, and student behavior (10%, 11%, and 11%, respectively), but 38.50% reported no challenges. Nearly 47.72% of respondents noted no challenges to professional development. However, the primary challenge to professional development was seen as insufficient time (19.80%).

Regarding organizational structures, respondents noted some challenges. For advisory programs, challenges included insufficient time (27.36%) as its biggest challenge, but 37.81% noted there were no challenges implementing advisory. Lack of staff or other support (22.73%) and insufficient time (10.61%) were the greatest challenges to having electives/enrichment activities with 37.88% stating that there are no challenges. There were similar challenges to implementing flexible scheduling with lack of staff or other support (11.11%), insufficient time (10.61%), and administrative resistance (8.59%) being noted. Nearly 41% of participants noted no challenges to flexible scheduling. Over half (54.77%) stated there were no challenges to teacher planning time; while in the other hand, 33.17% reported insufficient time was the greatest challenge to implementation. Challenges with teaming included insufficient time (11.46%), but 59.38% of respondents stated there was no challenge with implementing teaming. Over 52% of participants felt there were no challenges regarding school climate. Those who saw challenges, saw them with regards to student behavior (15.66%), faculty resistance (9.60%), and administrative resistance (7.07%). More challenges were noted with commitment to family involvement as 64.47% noted challenges. Community resistance (34.01%), insufficient time (10.15%), and faculty resistance (6.09%) were seen as the largest challenges. Finally, nearly 59% of participants saw no challenges to university and school partnerships. The lack of knowledge and support (14.36%) was seen as the greatest challenge with the lack of staff and other support (7.18%) being the second hardest challenge according to participants.

Overall, the most commonly reported barriers to implementation (across all components) were insufficient time (20.75% of all components), lack of staff or other support (12.36%), and lack of knowledge or support (9.87%), with faculty resistance (9.54%) coming in as the fourth biggest challenge. Philosophically misaligned with school mission (1.87%), lack of facilities (3.14%), and lack of professional development (4.69%) were the least significant challenges across all middle school components.

Discussion and Significance

Our results provide an interesting snapshot of current middle grades practices and beliefs across Southeast Sunbelt Region 4. The most recent survey of this type was McEwin and Greene (2011) in which the authors reported the results of two national surveys of middle school programs and practices; therefore, as a point of comparison, the results of this study will be compared to McEwin and Greene's results. It should be noted, however, that McEwin and Greene's study was a reporting of two national surveys; whereas the current study is regional study of the Southeast Sunbelt Region 4. Also, the participants in McEwin and Greene's study were principals of randomly selected schools, and the current study includes responses from randomly selected teachers and principals from randomly selected schools in Region 4. Due to these differences between McEwin and Greene (2011) and the current study, exact comparisons cannot be made; however, items can be compared and possible trends identified.

School Information

Respondents in this study reported on various aspects of their individual schools and their own qualifications. Slightly more than 51% of the respondents indicated they attained middle school teacher certification at the completion of their teacher preparation programs. This finding is consistent with the findings of McEwin and Greene (2011) in which principals reported 51% of their teachers held middle school teacher certification. When asked about the importance of middle level teacher certification, teachers and principals in the Southeast Region place greater importance on being a certified teacher. In the Southeast Region, 95% of the respondents believed middle level certification was very important or somewhat important compared to the principals (84%) in the McEwin and Greene study. The AMLE (2010) has long-advocated for specific middle grades preparation to equip teachers to teach young adolescents effectively. Though the results of this study indicate the

respondents believe middle grades teacher preparation and certification is important, actual implementation is lagging. While this could be an issue of certification regulations and policies within each state (Howell et al., 2018), it would still appear there is work to be done regarding middle level teacher certification in the Southeastern region.

When describing the size, location, and economic condition of their schools and communities, the respondents of this study indicated some similarities and differences with the national McEwin and Greene (2011) study. In the current study, 16.19% described their school as small compared to 27% in the 2009 national survey of principals. Additionally, 50.36% of current respondents described their schools as moderate in size (401-800), and 33.46% said their schools were large (800 or greater). McEwin and Greene (2011) reported 49% of middle schools as moderate in size and 9% as large. While the percentage of moderately-sized schools in this study and the national study are relatively consistent, the schools in the Southeast Region tend to be larger than the schools reported nationally. This trend would be inconsistent with the recommendations of Jackson and Davis (2000). It was their recommendation that no school should be larger than 600 students, and schools teaching young adolescents should be smaller than 600.

The location of the schools in this study showed a range of school communities as did the national survey (McEwin & Greene, 2011). The current respondents described their school communities as urban (28.26%), suburban (24.38%), or rural/town (47.35%) as compared to the national study of 21%, 38%, and 41%, respectively. However, there were noticeable differences when comparing the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch services. McEwin and Greene (2011) reported 36% of the respondents in their study indicated 50% or more of their students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch services, and 16% indicated the qualifying percentage of students was 80% or higher. The current study seems to indicate higher levels of poverty as measured by the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch services with 70.49% indicating 50% or more of their students qualify for services compared to 36% in the national study, and of those 43.18% indicated, 80% of students or more qualified for the program.

The majority of schools in the current study clearly report having grades 6, 7, or 8 in the building, leading us to believe most of those schools have a 6-8 grade configuration. Though most recent middle level literature minimizes the focus on grade configuration, a preference for the 6-8 grade configuration is consistent with McEwin and Greene's (2011) findings.

The elective offerings reported in this study appear to largely mirror the findings of McEwin and Green (2011), who reported elective course offerings by grade level with band, chorus, art, orchestra, computers, and general music as the most frequently offered elective courses in sixth grade. In seventh and eighth grades, foreign language replaced general music as a more frequently offered elective. In the current study, band, art, and chorus are also offered most frequently, but "computers" from the earlier studies has been expanded to include computer science and STEM/Technology. The current study also indicates higher levels of physical education and health electives; however, this could be confounded by the fact that physical education and health may be elective courses in some schools and required courses in others.

McEwin and Greene (2011) conducted a separate study of schools identified as highly successful middle schools. Schools were deemed highly successful if they had been recognized as a School to Watch by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform or recognized as a Breakthrough Middle School by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Their study included a random sample of schools with either of these designations. The current study simply asked respondents if their schools had been named a School to Watch, to which they replied "yes" or "no." Though 9.7% of the respondents from states participating in the program reported being a School to Watch, specific comparisons between this study's findings and McEwin and Greene or comparisons between Schools to Watch and non-Schools to Watch were not the focus of this study. Comparisons will be made in future analyses of the data.

Organizational Structures

Schools in our study reported fairly regular use of organizational structures, such as interdisciplinary teaming (75.11%), advisory (68%), and common planning time (50%). These results are similar to what was found in McEwin

and Greene's (2011) survey. Compared with McEwin and Greene's survey results, schools in the Southeast Region have slightly higher implementation of interdisciplinary teaming (75% compared to 72%) and advisory programs (68% compared to 50%) and lower implementation of common planning time (50% compared to 77%). McEwin and Greene (2011) noted random instructional grouping was declining, while more schools were grouping based on ability. Our findings support this concern revealing educators most often used ability grouping across all grades for certain subjects, with mathematics, language arts, and reading being the most common subjects. The current study found some evidence of random grouping (16%) occurring in the classroom for participating educators, which is down from 23% in the McEwin and Greene study.

While the implementation of these structures show some worry and some promise, there seems to be a strong disconnect between how important participants believe these structures are and their actual implementation. There is a 68 percentage point difference between how important participants believed in teaming (93.55%) and teaming being implemented rarely or never (24.89%). This is particularly interesting as participants noted the implementation of teaming as having the fewest barriers. A similar difference occurs with flexible scheduling (66 percentage point difference).

McEwin and Greene (2011) found about half of all middle schools in their random sample have advisory programs while 68% of our respondents reported implementing advisory programs. While this increase is encouraging, results of how advisory time is being used raises questions about how advisory is being defined and how it is being implemented. Of schools in this study, 56.02% stated the focus of advisory was related solely to academic purposes (i.e., RTI, academic goal setting, and intensive work). Advisory time as described by Jackson and Davis (2000) is meant for students to connect with an adult advocate and focus on social and emotional skills and personal development. It may be difficult to address topics related to interpersonal relationships, heath, or students' interests, which are topics young adolescents would discuss with an adult advocate, within the framework of, say, Response to Intervention (RTI). Further, only 11% of respondents reported using advisory for social emotional learning. The median difference found between the perception of importance and implementation of the component "all students are well known" further suggests programs labeled as advisory are functioning primarily as academic remediation rather than how advisory is traditionally defined.

Instructional Practices

Mismatches between perceptions and implementation were also highlighted regarding instructional beliefs and practices. Relating to the overall curriculum, participants noted "engaging in active learning," "multiple teaching approaches," and "curriculum that is relevant, engaging, and challenging" as important, but implemented either occasionally, rarely, or never. Specific strategies participants noted as important, but implemented rarely align with these curricular issues, such as "inquiry learning," "service learning," "other learning places," and "Socratic Seminars." However, participants noted the use of "online learning" and "independent study" as being implemented more than it is believed to be important. These results seem to suggest an incongruity between what is being implemented and what is believed to be important. The curricular issues and instructional strategies noted as being important largely align with instruction and curricula supportive of young adolescents suggesting teachers and principals largely have an understanding of what instruction they would like to take place in their schools even though it may not be regularly implemented.

Further, participants noted academic issues (i.e., "academic achievement in general," "remediation practices," and "curricular rigor and clarity") as the greatest challenges overall. Participants noted the barriers for these instructional challenges include "testing requirements," "insufficient time," and "lack of support and knowledge." These barriers largely mirror barriers across all components in the study with "insufficient time" and "lack of time/support" being noted most often as barriers. There was some expectation that "test requirements" would be selected as barrier across a number of items in the survey, but this was not the case. However, it was a strong factor with regards to instructional and academic achievement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, testing and time constraints were the biggest barriers to addressing instructional and academic achievement. Of interest is "lack of knowledge or support" being selected often as a barrier across a number of components. This barrier may be

related to the lack of support overall as it relates to insufficient time noted above, where teachers and principals want additional time to focus on instruction. One of the weakest barriers overall was "lack of professional development," suggesting participants felt they are receiving enough professional development which seems to contradict the original item. However, it may not be the quantity, but quality of professional development that may be the issue. In any case, it seems clear from these results teachers and principals desire to implement collaborative, active, and inquiry learning, but are struggling with finding the time for implementation.

Environment

In addition to gaps between perception importance and implementation for organizational structures and instruction and curriculum, there were a number of gaps related to the overall school environment. Participants noted "student behavior" was the largest barrier to "academic achievement in general," suggesting issues with rules and procedures within the classroom or the school that have an effect on instruction. This is supported by the median difference for the component "rules are clearly and consistently applied." Further, gaps in other components suggest potential issues with the overall school environment. A gap was also shown between belief and implementation for an "inviting, supportive, and safe environments," as well as "educators who value working with young adolescents." Additionally, as noted above, a median difference for "all students are well known" was also shown. These results suggest a mismatch between how participants believe the school environment should be regulated and how it is currently structured. One explanation for these gaps may be a difference between the participants' view of the school environment and what was happening in their schools. However, "philosophically misaligned with school mission" was one of the least selected challenges overall. It would be amiss to not mention the potential role of advisory for addressing some of these challenges regarding environment. Student behavior and inviting, safe environments could potentially be addressed, at least partially, through effective advisory programs. Overall, these results suggest the need to further examine school environments.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusion

We note several limitations to our study as it currently stands. The first limitation is that the data from our study is not stratified across the distribution of middle schools throughout the Southeastern region. We conducted a simple random sample designed to provide a snapshot of schools in this region. Also, our data are based on a single region. We surveyed teachers and principals in the Southeastern US, and some of our findings may not generalize to other areas of the country. In the future, we plan to expand data collection to the entire US, allowing us to report on perceptions of importance and implementation nationally. Another limitation, though we may just consider this to be a difference from past national middle school surveys (i.e., McEwin & Greene, 2011), is that our survey used a randomized sample of middle schools, with multiple potential participants from each school. The 2009 survey (McEwin & Greene, 2011) had one response per school, because it was an administrator-completed survey. Our participants include both administrators and teachers, which we cannot track by school. However, we feel that we will be able to paint a more complete picture of middle schools based on the diverse nature (i.e., inclusion of teacher perceptions) of our participants. We believe that including the perceptions and beliefs of teachers is important.

In conclusion, middle school educators gave us some interesting insights into challenges they have faced, as well as suggestions for successful middle schools. A couple of key themes included the need to address some of the issues (e.g., gaps in perceived importance and implementation), as well as the chief challenges facing middle school educators today. Future studies need to more closely explore the implementation of teaming and the purpose of advisory programs. Teaming is not being implemented to the same degree as it is being viewed as important. Too often, advisory programs are being used for academic purposes, at the expense of addressing the social and emotional needs of our students. This could partly explain the absence of making sure "all students are well known" in middle schools today, and could possibly be detrimental to our middle school student's well-being and success. We also need to examine ways to confront the barriers (e.g., testing requirements and insufficient time) to academic achievement, remediation practices, and curricular rigor, as

these were noted as key challenges facing schools. Additional work could try to understand the processes mediating the relationship among these particular barriers and the main challenges, as reported by the educators in our study.

This study has provided a look into the perceptions of middle school educators in the Southeastern region of the US. We believe it has given us some insight into the issues facing middle school educators in this part of the country, and perhaps beyond this region. Our future, national randomized sample will help us to better understand the broader picture of trends and issues within middle school education across the country.

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