

*Practitioner Perspective*

# **From Dreamers to Doers: Reimagining the Middle Grades with Preservice Teacher Inquiry-Based Mentoring**

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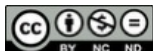
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Bonner, S., & Ousley-Exum, D. (2026). From dreamers to doers: Reimagining the middle grades with preservice teacher inquiry-based mentoring. *Middle Grades Review*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.70793/mgr.235>

## From Dreamers to Doers: Reimagining the Middle Grades with Preservice Teacher Inquiry-Based Mentoring

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### Abstract

This practitioner perspective examines an inquiry-based mentorship model designed to disrupt conventional, standardized approaches in middle grades teacher education. This work also explores how personalized inquiry can foster meaningful educator-student relationships and promote strong pedagogical development. Implemented within a teacher preparation program, the inquiry mentorship experience paired preservice teachers (mentors) with adolescent learners (mentees) in one-on-one partnerships that emphasized co-constructed, interdisciplinary inquiry grounded in students' interests. Rather than relying on traditional lesson planning, preservice teachers engaged with a flexible inquiry guide framework designed to scaffold exploration, cultural responsiveness, and reflective practice. The inquiry mentorship model revealed that preservice teachers, when supported in community and positioned as facilitators rather than content deliverers, developed greater confidence, empathy, and advocacy for student-centered teaching practices.

Middle grades education currently sits at a crossroads, caught between the rigid demands of high-stakes testing and the urgent developmental need for student agency. While standard protocols prioritize data points, the human element of learning often fades into the background. The following tale of Ethan, a student, and Kiara, a teacher, illustrates the potential that emerges when we pivot from standardized curriculum to personalized inquiry and the power of student mentorship.

Ethan was a 12-year-old middle school student with a big imagination, a love of learning, and a strong distaste for school. His middle school experience had been flooded predominantly with canned curriculum, computer-based learning, and never-ending test preparations. Ethan was rarely given the opportunity to stretch his imagination or demonstrate learning in other ways beyond a worksheet packet. Unfortunately, Ethan lost his joy for learning, and his parents knew he needed another outlet to engage in the curiosities he was deeply connected to in his world. These conditions prompted them to register Ethan in the inquiry mentorship program at our university. It was that moment when Ethan first met Kiara.

Kiara was a rising middle school preservice teacher in the program led by Sarah Bonner [co-author]. Kiara worked as a teacher's assistant at a local middle school where testing and

uniformed lessons dominated the classroom culture. Throughout her time in the middle grades program, Kiara knew what she experienced in her current job and wanted better for her own practice. Tasked with an inquiry mentorship for her literacy coursework, Kiara realized that "inquiry" was a term she knew better in conversation than in practice. Despite hearing the word often, she had yet to see it modeled in a classroom or experience its impact as a student herself.

Ethan and Kiara built a trusting relationship with each other. In their mentorship experience, Kiara discovered that Ethan had a passion for theater, storytelling, and Disney Imagineering. Together, they began thinking about different ways in which these concepts could intersect in an effort to design a meaningful learning experience. The inquiry mentorship process afforded Ethan to be in the driver's seat of his learning, and Kiara guided his curiosities around his passions each week. Ethan was overheard speaking to his dad as they were about to meet with Kiara one day, saying, "C'mon, Dad — I don't want to miss the EdLab [Education Lab, the university space where the inquiry mentorship took place] — it's the best part of my week!" (K. J., personal communication, 2025)

As part of our work to transform the trajectory of our profession, we believe that middle grades teachers who participate in meaningful inquiry

practices with adolescent learners will leave a lasting positive effect on their students and open a world of personalized learning. These experiences can increase the chances of practicing authentic inquiry beyond their preparation programs, as well as solidifying their own developing professional practices through a student-centered lens. To engage teachers with designing authentic inquiry experiences for learners but also not to fully take away from the spirit of inquiry itself, we constructed an inquiry mentorship for our preservice teachers.

### **Disrupting Middle Grades Teacher Education**

According to *Student Testing in America's Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis* (Hart et al., 2015), students in the United States take an average of 112 standardized tests from kindergarten through high school graduation, spanning an average of 19 hours per year—not including the amount of test preparation that is often pressed upon educators. Along with the push for standardization, the Pew Research Center (Horowitz and Graf, 2019) noted that both anxiety and depression are viewed as a more serious problem at the secondary school level: 57% of middle school teachers, specifically, say this is a major problem among their students. The need to rethink and reimagine our teaching and learning spaces is clearly overdue.

Vygotsky (1978) reminds us still that each educator “must orient his work not yesterday’s development in the child but on tomorrow’s” (p. 211). This reminder plays into the needs of our learners in today’s ever-changing world. The Association of Middle Level Education’s (AMLE) *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* model (Bishop and Harrison, 2021) emphasizes that our middle school students should experience an education that is engaging, equitable, challenging, responsive, and empowering. By centering on the learner’s curiosity, this inquiry mentorship model directly operationalizes the AMLE model, moving beyond mere theoretical alignment to lived classroom practice. Further, Pferdt (2024) narrates a list of qualities needed to live by what he calls “future ready.” To expand, being “future-ready” (Pferdt) establishes a proactive mental state centered on radical curiosity, empathy, and a high tolerance for ambiguity. Rather than predicting what is to come, he argues that we prepare for the future by intentionally choosing our “future

self” today and treating life as a series of creative prototypes. For preservice teachers, becoming future-ready means moving beyond the role of a content delivery system and embracing the role of a co-designer who can navigate the ambiguity of a student’s unfolding curiosity. Ultimately, it is a shift from being a passive observer of change to an active designer of one’s own possibilities. Such qualities are becoming essential in our contemporary classrooms. Standardization will not lean into the needs of a successful middle school model or being future ready. In fact, it readily achieves the opposite. The focus must shift from rigid instruction toward flexible, student-centered frameworks that prioritize agency and iteration. In practice, this means replacing standardized compliance with inquiry-based models where middle grade learners are encouraged to explore and test solutions to real-world problems. By centering curiosity and empathy in learning experiences, the classroom becomes a space for self-discovery, allowing students to navigate ambiguity and actively rehearse the versions of themselves they wish to become.

This realization became the genesis for our work with preservice teachers. For educators, inquiry is everywhere. We see the word “inquiry” in our learning standards — *Common Core State Standards* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010); *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013); and *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2024) — as well as threaded throughout professional development platforms. But do middle grades educators truly practice inquiry? Are they practicing inquiry for inquiry’s sake? Or are they facilitating inquiry authentically with their adolescent learners? We embarked on a journey to examine these questions within our own clinical and classroom partnerships.

### **The Inquiry Mentorship Experience**

At our institution, the middle grades program is designed to prepare teachers for the academic and emotional needs of students in grades 6 through 9. Students choose a primary concentration in language arts, math, science, or social studies and gain extensive experience through field work in

diverse middle schools. Prior to going into middle schools, our preservice teachers participate in a one-to-one mentoring experience with middle grades learners in our Education Lab during the first semester of the program. Traditionally, this work resembled a tutoring experience and often left both teachers and students unfulfilled. We saw this environment as an entry point to introduce inquiry-based practices.

In lieu of the traditional lesson plan, we created a series of inquiry guides (see Appendices) to help our preservice teachers understand the phases of inquiry — exploring, investigating, processing, and creating (Ontario Library Association, 2010) — with the justifiable need for structure without being prescriptive in co-constructing learning with students. Using these inquiry guides also invited preservice teachers to think critically about their adolescent learner by incorporating culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2000; Muhammad and Love, 2020) and therefore created space to think deeply about identity, power, equity, and design. Practically, this is achieved by using the inquiry guides as a lens to design meaningful learning, moving beyond a “one-size-fits-all” approach to one that mirrors the lived experiences of their middle grades students. Preservice teachers used these tools to identify students’ cultural assets and linguistic strengths, intentionally weaving them into the inquiry process rather than treating them as extracurricular additions. By analyzing classroom power dynamics and designing choices that offer students genuine agency, our preservice teachers transform the inquiry guide from a static document into a roadmap for more equitable and inclusive instructional design.

Preservice teachers, or mentors, met with their assigned mentee each week for two hours over a period of 10 weeks. This work is generally completed throughout the spring semester of their junior year and two semesters away from their full-time student internship. In preparation for the weekly mentoring experience, preservice teachers met in their literacy classes taught by Sarah Bonner and Denise Ousley-Exum [co-authors], the literacy teacher educators in the program, and accessed the inquiry guides (see Appendices). The inquiry guides were divided into activities and reflections. The activities prompted teachers to map out the “why,” “how,” and “what” of their designs across every phase of inquiry. By prioritizing student interests

from the very beginning, teachers were able to build a learning experience that was directly responsive to their learners’ passions. This served two purposes: 1) It allowed our preservice teachers to build meaningful relationships with their middle grade learners; and 2) It created a roadmap into the types of topics, questions, and interdisciplinary learning experiences that live within an inquiry study.

On a weekly basis, our mentors designed inquiry guides for their mentees. Following each mentoring session, they engaged in a metacognitive exercise by constructing reflections through the framework of “head” (academic inquiry), “heart” (emotional connection), and “conscience” (social justice and power). This process was not designed to dictate the following week’s learning experiences, but rather to reshape the mentor’s internal lens regarding identity and power. By wrestling with questions like, “Are we talking about ideas like fairness or justice/injustice?” mentors were tasked to confront their own professional positionality. This internal work developed advocacy and culturally responsive awareness by sensitizing the preservice teachers to the “hidden” dynamics of the middle school experience. While their reflections did not necessarily change the tasks for the next session with their mentees, it did provide an opportunity to alter how the teacher mentors interpreted their students’ actions. This shift in perspective, fortified by the inquiry cycle, is what ultimately equipped our mentors for advocacy; it built the critical consciousness necessary to challenge the status quo and envision a middle school experience rooted in equity.

### **Inquiry Mentorship Discoveries**

Early in our program, preservice teachers’ reflections highlighted a significant tension: the discomfort of vulnerability. Traditionally, these teachers operated in a teacher-centered tutoring environment. By transitioning to an inquiry framework, we required them to step back and let students lead. This repositioning into student-centered facilitation often felt unsettling. We realized that while inquiry is a pedagogical tool, it is also an emotional experience. By centering our mentorship on the “why” — the belief that inquiry depends on trust and vulnerability — we now prioritize the affective needs of teachers as they navigate the unknown. The reflection process outlined in the appendices asks mentors to balance

the logistical requirements of their roles with the deeper, more personal “heart-work” of teaching.

Going back to the tale of Ethan and Kiara, their collaboration extended beyond the technical design of Disney Imagineering and theme park rides to also include a comprehensive vacation plan for Ethan’s family. This was not a curriculum Kiara imposed; rather, it was a trajectory Ethan claimed. By affording him the autonomy to sit in the “driver’s seat” of his own inquiry, Kiara witnessed the profound change that occurs when a student’s lived interests are centered. Ethan’s reflection — “this was ‘the best part of my week’” (K. J., personal communication, 2025) — served as a critical catalyst for our preservice teachers that semester. It moved our collective understanding beyond the “how” of instruction and into the essential “why,” and solidified the belief that for middle-level learners, school should be a site of joy rather than compliance. We intentionally designed these experiences during the first semester of their junior year to ensure preservice teachers witness this impact early in their teacher identity development. Ultimately, these encounters establish a new expectation of belonging: one that frames connection and student advocacy as the non-negotiable foundations of middle-level practice.

Lastly, we noticed from our work with preservice teachers that this type of work thrives in community. Many of our mentors noted how much they valued connecting with their mentees through inquiry but also felt that they could have benefitted from participating in a community to discuss new ideas as well as to receive positive reinforcement on their developing ideas. In listening to our educators’ needs, we also held space for our preservice teachers to meet with us weekly in a virtual conference. Being available to our preservice teachers while they continued to engage their learners in inquiry, we strengthened their outlook on the importance of student-centered learning.

By maintaining a consistent, side-by-side presence as facilitators, we were able to provide the real-time scaffolding our preservice teachers needed to navigate the unpredictability of student-led work. Our availability functioned as a pedagogical safety net; when a student’s inquiry took an unexpected turn, we were there to help our preservice teachers lean into that uncertainty rather than retreating to a teacher-centered script. This immediate support allowed them to witness how flexible facilitation

fosters deeper student engagement, thereby strengthening their belief that student-centered learning is not only manageable, but best for all learners.

To see this transformation in practice, it is important to look at the structural evolution of Kiara’s inquiry guides. Her mentor approach seemed most visible in the structural evolution of her inquiry guides. In the initial weeks, Kiara’s guides showed a general, structured format, reflecting a traditional desire to maintain a predictable path for Ethan. However, as Ethan’s curiosity deepened over time, she abandoned her predetermined plans in an effort to keep pace with his shifting interests.

While Ethan began with the technical design of a Disney theme park ride, his inquiry naturally branched into the complexities of planning a full vacation for his family. Kiara’s inquiry guides mirrored this ebb and flow; her prompts shifted from broad, safe inquiries like “What does it mean to be a Disney Imagineer?” to highly specific, integrated challenges such as, “How can we budget for a family of three while still focusing on the goals of a Disney Imagineer?” (K. J., personal communication, 2025) Our consistent availability as mentors during these moments functioned as a pedagogical safety net. Not only were we able to help Kiara lean into the messiness of this transition, we encouraged her to keep Ethan in the forefront of her decision making rather than retreating to teacher-centered designs. By constantly redesigning her guides to accommodate Ethan’s dual interests in Imagineering and family advocacy, Kiara moved beyond simply tutoring and into true facilitation. This flexibility, valuing the learner’s journey over the lesson plan, culminated in her final reflection:

Although I did not know much about his chosen topic, he immediately became the teacher and encouraged me to ask questions ... this experience has allowed me to always remember my “why” in becoming a teacher and I have Ethan to thank for that (K. J., personal communication, 2025).

Kiara’s realization underscores the central focus of our current work: When we support preservice teachers in embracing all aspects of inquiry, they move beyond being deliverers of content and become advocates for the learner’s

whole experience. By centering the emotional and intellectual “why” early in their teacher development, we prepare our candidates to navigate the complexities of middle-level education with both heart and conscience.

### Conclusion

The current landscape of middle grades education demands a departure from the “sage-on-the-stage” model and a move toward pedagogy that honors the unique curiosities of adolescent learners. The inquiry-based mentorship model presented here demonstrates that when preservice teachers are empowered to act as facilitators, they develop an empathy and responsiveness toward their learners which leads to disrupting traditional teacher-centered practices. By grounding their practice through the phases of inquiry and a reflective framework of head, heart, and conscience, mentors like Kiara can move beyond content delivery to foster deep, student-centered connections that

make school, in the words of students like Ethan, “the best part of [the] week.”

However, this transition is not without its challenges. The vulnerability inherent in relinquishing control requires that teacher preparation programs provide strong community support and continuous reflective practices to guide preservice teachers through the inevitable discomfort of pedagogical change. Ultimately, this pilot experience affirms that inquiry can be practiced authentically in the middle grades. When facilitated with intentionality and grounded in students’ lived experiences, inquiry transcends being a mere strategy: It becomes a pathway to a more equitable, engaging, and “future-ready” middle school experience. By preparing the next generation of educators to be doers of inquiry rather than just dreamers of it, we ensure that middle-level education orients itself toward the limitless potential of tomorrow’s learners.

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## Appendix A: “Exploring Phase” Inquiry Guide & Teacher Reflection

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Child: \_\_\_\_\_ Lesson Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching Site: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of Lesson: \_\_\_\_\_

EXPLORING PHASE: “Initiating Inquiry” Mentor Plan	
Mentor Plan Summary for the Week	Culturally Responsive Literacy Objectives
Mentor Plan Agenda for the Week <sup>1</sup>	<p><b>Identity</b> (<i>How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others?</i>):</p> <p><b>Joy</b> (<i>How will my instruction spark joy in learning?</i>):</p> <p><b>Family Connections</b> (<i>How can families or caretakers support or do together to support learning?</i>):</p>
<p><b>Exploring:</b>                      Initiating inquiry</p> <p>Choosing the topic</p> <p>Developing questions</p>	

Mentor Mapping for the Week		
WHY this lesson?	HOW will you engage your learner?	WHAT do you need for this lesson?
Think about the purpose of this work - why are you choosing this activity? Why does this matter in the big picture?	How will you approach this work? Discussion? Writing? Reading? Speaking? Listening?	What materials and resources do you need in order to do this work?

**Note:**

<sup>1</sup>Prompts listed in this area are inspired by “A Model for Inquiry” as illustrated by the Ontario Library Association.

Ontario Library Association. (2010). *Together for learning: School libraries and the emergence of the learning commons. A vision for the 21st century*. Ontario School Library Association. [https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010\\_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf](https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf)

**Appendix A (continued): “Exploring Phase” Inquiry Guide & Teacher Reflection**

<b>TEACHER REFLECTION</b>		
<b>Type of Reflection</b>	<b>Guiding Questions</b>	<b>Your Thoughts</b> <i>*These can be full sentence narratives or bulleted thoughts</i>
<b>HEART</b>	<p>What emotions did this experience raise for you?</p> <p>Are there particular moments, images, or stories that stand out to you? If so, why?</p>	
<b>HEAD</b>	<p>What went well this week?</p> <p>How did this experience impact your teacher mindset? What did it reaffirm? Change?</p> <p>How might you rethink this experience if given the chance to implement it again?</p> <p>What are you thinking about for your next session?</p>	
<b>CONSCIENCE</b>	<p>What questions about right or wrong, fairness or injustice, does this experience raise for you?</p>	

## Appendix B: “Investigating Phase” Inquiry Guide

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Child: \_\_\_\_\_ Lesson Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Teaching Site: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of Lesson: \_\_\_\_\_

INVESTIGATING PHASE: “Selecting Information”	
Mentor Plan Summary for the Week	Culturally Responsive Literacy Objectives
Mentor Plan Agenda for the Week <sup>1</sup>	<p><b>Identity</b> (<i>How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others?</i>):</p> <p><b>Skills</b> (<i>How will my instruction build students' skills for the content areas?</i>):</p> <p><b>Intellect</b> (<i>How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?</i>):</p> <p><b>Joy</b> (<i>How will my instruction spark joy in learning?</i>):</p> <p><b>Family Connections</b> (<i>How can families or caretakers support or do together to support learning?</i>):</p>
<p><b>Investigating</b></p> <p>Designing the plan</p> <p>Selecting information</p> <p>Formulating the focus</p>	

**Note:**

<sup>1</sup>Prompts listed in this area are inspired by “A Model for Inquiry” as illustrated by the Ontario Library Association.

Ontario Library Association. (2010). *Together for learning: School libraries and the emergence of the learning commons. A vision for the 21st century*. Ontario School Library Association. [https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010\\_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf](https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf)

## Appendix C: “Processing Phase” Inquiry Guide

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Child: \_\_\_\_\_ Lesson Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching Site: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of Lesson: \_\_\_\_\_

PROCESSING PHASE: “Analyzing and Synthesizing Information”	
Mentor Plan Summary for the Week	Culturally Responsive Literacy Objectives
Mentor Plan Agenda for the Week <sup>1</sup>	<p><b>Identity</b> (<i>How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others?</i>):</p> <p><b>Skills</b> (<i>How will my instruction build students' skills for the content areas?</i>):</p> <p><b>Intellect</b> (<i>How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?</i>):</p> <p><b>Criticality</b> (<i>How will my instruction engage students' thinking about equity and power?</i>):</p> <p><b>Joy</b> (<i>How will my instruction spark joy in learning?</i>):</p> <p><b>Family Connections</b> (<i>How can families or caretakers support or do together to support learning?</i>):</p>
<p><b>Processing</b></p> <p>Organizing and synthesizing findings</p> <p>Evaluating ideas</p> <p>Analyzing information</p>	

**Note:**

<sup>1</sup>Prompts listed in this area are inspired by “A Model for Inquiry” as illustrated by the Ontario Library Association.

Ontario Library Association. (2010). *Together for learning: School libraries and the emergence of the learning commons. A vision for the 21st century*. Ontario School Library Association. [https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010\\_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf](https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf)

## Appendix D: “Creating Phase” Inquiry Guide

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Child: \_\_\_\_\_ Lesson Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching Site: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of Lesson: \_\_\_\_\_

CREATING PHASE: “Making and Presenting a Product”	
Mentor Plan Summary for the Week	Culturally Responsive Literacy Objectives
Mentor Plan Agenda for the Week <sup>1</sup>	<p><b>Identity</b> (<i>How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others?</i>):</p> <p><b>Skills</b> (<i>How will my instruction build students’ skills for the content areas?</i>):</p> <p><b>Intellect</b> (<i>How will my instruction build students’ knowledge and mental powers?</i>):</p> <p><b>Criticality</b> (<i>How will my instruction engage students’ thinking about equity and power?</i>):</p> <p><b>Joy</b> (<i>How will my instruction spark joy in learning?</i>):</p> <p><b>Family Connections</b> (<i>How can families or caretakers support or do together to support learning?</i>):</p>
<p><b>Creating</b> Extending and transferring learning</p> <p>Assessing product and process</p> <p>Making and presenting product</p>	

**Note:**

<sup>1</sup>Prompts listed in this area are inspired by “A Model for Inquiry” as illustrated by the Ontario Library Association.

Ontario Library Association. (2010). *Together for learning: School libraries and the emergence of the learning commons. A vision for the 21st century*. Ontario School Library Association. [https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010\\_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf](https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2010_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf)