

# A Call for Self-Study in Middle Level Teacher Education

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## Abstract

To promote dialogue and in response to calls for rigorous, large-scale, empirical studies as the standard that will move the field of middle level education forward, a collaborative of middle level teacher researchers submit three counterpoints to the appeals for consideration by the research community: 1) the power of the insights the authors gained from using the alternative research method of self-study; 2) the authenticity of using alternative research methods that mirror the uniqueness of a field predicated on the distinctiveness of educating diverse young adolescents; and 3) a reframing of “generalizability” from a “results” perspective to one of generalizability of the process that self-study methodology offers.

## INTRODUCTION

In their 2016 essay about the state of middle level research, Mertens, Caskey, and Flowers (2016) specifically call for large-scale, longitudinal empirical studies in middle level education research to advance our field. Furthermore, Yoon, Malu, Schaefer, Reyes, and Brinegar (2015) make the point that “research methods in middle level research are limited and need significant improvement,” and that current research practices in the middle grades do not represent “rigorous research methods” (p. 11). While we agree that investigating large data sets might allow researchers to shed light on informative practices to use in some work with young adolescents, and that a timely critique of inquiry in middle level education is in order, we cannot help but wonder whether these rather prosaic responses to a particular problem overshadow the myriad of insights that could be made more compelling to policy makers or that might offer a more viable way forward for studying middle level education as a distinctive field.

Through this essay we will contend that there are alternative research methodologies that capture more substantive distinctions in our field and that better position us to accomplish the shared goals of the research community—to improve educational outcomes for all young adolescents. We will focus on one alternative methodology known as Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP). We are uneasy with a quest for informing constituent groups for whom the terms ‘rigor’ and ‘generalizability’

suggest quality and for whom ‘better’ automatically begets ‘bigger.’ Such an outlook may submerge crucial ‘small moments’ where credible perspectives for studying middle level education in ways that deepen our field will be altogether lost. We are not suggesting that our colleagues have been attempting to render either/or dictates in their calls. In fact, papers presented at the most recent American Educational Research Association conference sponsored by the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group indicate that the research focus remains on rather small-scale environments such as a single program or a single school. However, we are concerned that these calls for rigor and generalizability reduce the likelihood that alternative methodologies will be selected for conducting valuable inquiry or be used in order to disseminate findings within premiere research journals that could offer our field visibility and prominence. At issue for us is the taken-for-granted assumption that replicability and generalizability of findings is the most appropriate means for academicians, scholars, theorists, and researchers to advance the education of diverse young adolescents.

We explicate three areas for consideration as counterpoints to these appeals: (a) our experience with valuable insights gained as a result of using the alternative research method of self-study to identify our work habits and dispositions as middle level teacher educators; (b) the authenticity of using S-STEP as an alternative research method that mirrors the uniqueness of a field predicated on the distinctiveness of educating diverse young adolescents; and (c) a reframing of

“generalizability” from a “results” perspective to one of generalizability of the process that self-study methodology offers.

### **Self-Study as an Alternative Methodology**

As a collaborative of middle level teacher educators, we have been using self-study methodology for three years to understand the nuanced connections between our work and success in preparing middle level teachers, and the power of being a community of practice. One specific subset of self-study is self-study of teacher education practices, S-STEP. Hamilton and Pinnegar (2014) define S-STEP as “a research methodology that enables teacher educators and teachers to study their practice in order to understand and improve it” (p. 143). They go on to explain that the inquiry is stimulated through creative means to lead to the ‘tacit knowledge’ of what is being studied. We have interpreted these means as imagery, metaphorical thinking, memoir, acts of writing, and disclosing uncertainties and dissenting with Critical Friends. While it has similar features to action research and other qualitative approaches, self-study is catalyzed by the internal ‘self’ as opposed to the external ‘action’ (Samaras & Freese, 2009) and is undertaken with others (Samaras, 2011). It is less about an individual changing an unsatisfactory practice or studying a particular change in teaching strategy but more geared toward exploration and questioning particular perturbations that otherwise might be ignored. We thrived upon the strong sense of open-endedness and the exploratory quality of the proceedings when we came together as an inquiry community.

The methodology of self-study has been relatively recently introduced to the research community, having its roots in the late 1990s. As a qualitative approach, it relies upon the intersection of the researched and the researcher. In his chapter on the history of S-STEP, Loughran (2007) noted that S-STEP emerged “not so much as alignment with a particular method but rather through distinguishing aspects which not only shape the nature of self-study, but also offer: insights into the learning outcomes; relevance for others; and, applicability in different contexts” (p. 7). Just as function often dictates form, S-STEP inquiries may take a variety of formats based on the purpose of the study. We have found self-study to be a responsive tool to be used in a variety of contexts where close scrutiny is warranted.

Adding this methodology to our repertoire of research tools has been challenging as the methods and analytic schemes were not ones that we had engaged in previously as systematically and purposefully. The complexity from examining our tacit knowledge led to much uncertainty and materialized numerous tensions for us. Looking back on our process holistically, we recognize that using the S-STEP methodology was transformative for us as individuals, as a collaborative, as teacher educators, and as researchers as we were able to discover micro-elements of our practice.

While self-study suited our circumstances, we were also struck by its utility and practicability for a variety of research questions and contexts. For example, in addition to understanding S-STEP methodology, we have used the framework to explore concepts such as professional identity, intellectual dispositions, social metacognition, collective efficacy, “the struggle,” hybrid disciplines, and self-directed professional development. For us, we note that the use of self-study as a methodology allows us to engage in the reflective and inquiry-based practices that are definitive of the middle grades philosophy and that we wish to model for teacher candidates; it helped us to uncover nuanced pieces of our work—making the implicit explicit—and creates a model of ongoing inquiry and research that can be sustained and expanded. For example, we were surprised to find from our examination of our work habits that they were both intentional as well as casual. While we recognized the number of deliberate interactions we scheduled, there were also informal “check ins” to share resources, to co-reflect on outcomes of learning activities that took place immediately after class, and to offer social-emotional support to one another, which were instances of our modeling the disposition of collective efficacy.

To illustrate how we operationalized these dimensions we share one of the pivotal juxtapositions we discovered from a recent inquiry wherein we used dialogue as both the tool and the product, both as method and the theoretical framework. As a tool, dialogue was used to explore questions about each other, our practice, and our work together. We were drawn to use this tool because Schein (1993) had indicated that dialogue is a technique used by groups to help them reach higher levels of consciousness and be more creative. This was certainly our experience. Other scholars (Placier,

Pinnegar, Hamilton, & Guilfoyle, 2005) used dialogue as both a method and a methodology in their work as a long-standing self-study collaborative that they began in graduate school and enabled them to sustain over their careers. We, too, hope this will be the longer-term outcome of our collaboration.

We also found that dialogue was the product of our collaborative work as it provided the opportunity to identify and analyze data other tools had not generated and to understand each other's perspectives differently. It allowed us to disagree, which is something that often creates tension yet, when embraced, can lead to the generation of new ideas in the group. In retrospect we have noticed how many of these insights have come from tensions within the group so we no longer fear it when it arises. When we each understood something differently or questioned to clarify a colleague's views, there was an opportunity for us to turn into the tension and explore it. While traditional methods might expect us to claim poor fitting data as outliers, in self-study we find that the breach becomes the centerpiece for fruitful investigation. Moreover, the discontinuity often spirals outward opening new dimensions for further study and dialogue.

### **Reflecting the Field Authentically**

As scholars of middle level teacher education and middle level education researchers, we take the position that our field, which aims to have a positive impact on the education of the most complex of human beings, young adolescents, might demand more intricate and less standardized methodologies because there is a natural propensity for complexity in middle level education. We question whether the assurance of generalizability might be obstructing attempts to value the particular, the situated, the very uniqueness of working with young adolescents that is central to our efforts. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) cautions us to acknowledge the labyrinthine nature of 10-15 year olds by being responsive to the wide spectrum of variability that characterizes these learners. Moreover, given that 'transition' is the hallmark of early adolescence, implying that individuals are neither fully at one stage nor another, but rather have elements of both in the mix, that research landscape is additionally complicated (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). By definition, then, working with such complexity demands a less

straightforward response than traditional empirical perspectives essentialize. We hold that our field demands more authentic methodologies that attend to and examine small moments that operate often from a micro level and that then lend themselves to inference as to how they might operate on a macro level. If we already embrace that much about the middle grades requires specialization, how can we locate ourselves foremost in matter-of-course research traditions? Are we not then slighting our commitment to authenticity that we uphold for our central focus, young adolescents? It thus follows for us that making this attempt to imbue habits of 'paying attention' and 'noticing' (van Es & Sherin, 2002) across our research community, through more open methodologies such as self-study (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014), that benefits to middle level education research on a broader scale will accrue.

To illustrate how important it is to use authentic inquiry methods appropriate to our field, take the case of what we understand about decision making in complex situations, or what can be understood as the nature of middle level education. Complexity requires adaptation such as using 'rules of thumb' or a heuristic rather than application of black and white formulas. In the field of cognitive psychology, heuristics are identified as less formal ways that the brain has developed for dealing with cognitive complexity. Theorist Gigerenzer (1991) explained that in the face of much complexity, cognitive tools become adapted in ways that foster creative reasoning and inventive thinking. One such adaptation he outlines is the heuristic of discovery by which impressions rather than data inform decision-making.

More recently, Kahneman (2011) further contrasted the reliance on impressions with the use of data for interpreting complex situations in his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, categorizing them as the two systems of thinking. He described System 1 as fast and emotional and System 2 as more deliberative and logical. By arguing for the importance of alternative methodologies for advancing research in middle level education here, we contend there is a third way of knowing that can deepen our understanding while opening the field to more significant findings. The third way brings together the emotion of Kahneman's System 1 with the logic of System 2. From what we have learned about self-study methodologies, while employing them to inquire on a small scale

about our own work habits and dispositions, particular pedagogies contribute to creating successful middle level teacher preparation programs. The many graduates who are becoming the next generation of middle level academicians, researchers, and leaders provide us with evidence that slowing down in order to pay attention to emotion-laden events can also be an alternative focus for inquiry. This inquiry must also be deliberate and creative as well as generalizable and rigorous to become well-established practice in our field, perhaps even catapulting our work to top tier journals and creative venues.

We reason further that if teaching is complex, then middle school teaching with its various structures and goals is more complex. If learning and learners are multi-layered, then young adolescent learners are multi-dimensional (NMSA, 2010). Thus, middle level education research is better addressed through adaptive heuristic rather than staid 'scientific method.' We think that criticism from some quantitative researchers for more studies that have generalizability overlooks the importance of developing expertise with a methodology in which all could engage, namely self-study. Here the generalizability emerges from the fact that there is no context that cannot be problematized and examined deliberately from a more creative stance. We want to remind our colleagues that in making continued calls for generalizable research with a focus on breadth we overlook our philosophical commitments to diversity of thought and diversity of the very people we are dedicated to educating that may keep us afloat at the surface but obscures insights that are only revealed by seeking depth.

### **Reframing Generalizability**

Some of our colleagues have recommended to the middle level research community that rigorous methods leading to generalizable findings is the most promising approach for advancing our field at this time (Mertens et al., 2016; Yoon et al., 2016). We suggest there may be others ways to understand the concept of 'generalizability' that would also serve our community well. If the goal of generalizability—in the traditional meaning—is to transport insights across locations to be used widely and to foster informed discussion, that same outcome is possible if what becomes portable, generalizable, are the values exhibited through our practice of engaging with tension and embracing those

insights that emerge from attention to detail and unpacking tacit knowledge. With a refocus of generalized findings from one that spans across locations to a commonplace skill and disposition toward 'noticing' that more researchers could employ, alternative methodologies then could be considered generalizable. We grant that technically the two views are not the same, but a reframing of generalizability in outcome could have the potential to bridge a gap that we suspect currently prevents our field from maturing. Although using this qualitative approach as a research method may not generate *findings* that are extremely generalizable in a quantifiable manner (Maxwell, 2005), we suggest consideration for reframing the measurement descriptor 'generalizable' to extend to one of the *process* in order for future research outcomes due to a shared capacity for appreciating all scales to have greater impact across our field.

Thus, we are advocating for more discussion as to how the middle level education research community might commit to developing wider expertise inclusive of members representing all types of institutions working with their abundant, nonstandard contexts through methodologies in which all could engage. In concert with this discussion we ask that our community comes together to consider how the insights uncovered through alternative methodologies, such as self-study, could be made more compelling to policy makers.

### **Conclusion**

The democratic principles and ideals that serve as foundational to our work as middle level teacher educators compel us to remain inclusive, invitational, and inquisitive in our interactions with others, in our pedagogy, and in our research endeavors. We draw upon these beliefs and values to provide us solid terrain for informing our decisions across a host of responsibilities that we are charged to undertake.

- *Inclusive:* We contend that using a diverse range of research methods is one way to unearth and consider multiple perspectives and processes as we seek to more deeply understand and advance our profession. As we strive to help teacher candidates and young adolescents extend beyond dualistic,

binary thinking, our work—as educators and researchers—should also reflect this belief.

- *Invitational*: Just as classrooms are microcosms of our larger ‘real-world’ communities, in which we emphasize and expect respect for others and their ideas, so too should our profession welcome and consider diverse ideas and research methods.
- *Inquisitive*: Fostering curiosity and exploring possibilities are essential components in constructing and generating knowledge. Employing different methods to investigate diverse questions about our profession may help us to advance our field and enrich the lives of young adolescents.

As developmentalists, we view ourselves as works in progress just as are the young adolescents to whom we are committed. Because “every young adolescent is a living work in progress with growth along the road to maturity occurring at different times and rates” (NMSA, 2010, p. 11), responsive educators create and implement learning experiences that include a diverse range of ways for students to explore, construct, and assess their development where the emphasis is on the *process* of learning rather than solely on the result. Placing emphasis on, analyzing, and valuing the diverse *processes* should be a focus of our work as educators; we should also emphasize this in our work as researchers.

Indeed, we need high quality research studies that yield useful findings; we also need to engage in diverse research methodologies that capture substantive yet more elusive phenomena, which can often evade detection or vivid description. We have offered three counterpoints for reconsideration of acceptance of rigorous, large-scale, empirical research as the standard that will move our field forward. Especially at this time in the history of middle level education, when almost daily some aspect is challenged or is all-too-often dismissed, it behooves our community to rethink what is lost when we fail to be creative and open to diverse ways of generating knowledge. We ask our colleagues to come together to examine productive ways of knowing that will enlarge our capacity to more robustly inform the education of young adolescents. It is our goal to identify those moves that show the most promise for middle level education research being further recognized as a distinctive field with much to

offer those whose futures are materially affected by this crucial work.

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