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Well-Prepared Middle School Teachers: Common Ground or Subtle Divide Between Practitioners and University Faculty in the State of Oregon, United States

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Abstract

This qualitative study followed a survey study that investigated university faculty, classroom teachers, and principals' perceptions of well-prepared middle school teachers in the state of Oregon in the United States. A qualitative approach allowed the researchers to explore and interpret the participants' views (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In spite of many similarities, a number of differences in emphasis or priority were found among the groups, including views on assessment, curriculum development, and the importance of family and community connections for beginning classroom teachers. This study provides a foundation for deeper analysis and discussion among university faculty and practitioners concerning the "what" of middle school teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: middle grades, teacher preparation, teacher educators, qualitative research, collaborative teacher preparation

Introduction

In teacher preparation, traditionally there is a perceived mismatch between university faculty and practitioners in the field—classroom teachers and principals—regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be an effective teacher. Repeatedly, university faculty lament the lack of good instructional models, while practitioners complain about the disconnect between theory and practice (Caskey, Samek, Musser, Greene, & Casbon, 2008). Zionts, Shellady, and Zionts cited university faculty who declared, “How can we expect novice teachers to demonstrate best practices and standards when their mentors or experienced teachers do not ascribe to or model them” (2006, p. 7). Practitioners assert that there is a mismatch between the field and the university regarding the effectiveness of teacher education programs and their relevance to the real world of teaching. Levine quoted one teacher who stated, “I do not feel I was prepared for the realities of life in a school and a classroom as a teacher” (2006, p. 41). Another teacher reported finding “an abyss between theory and practice” (Levine, p. 39). In Oregon, this problem is three-fold: (1) different emphases on the national middle grades standards, (2) a dearth of middle schools implementing the middle school philosophy, and (3) inconsistent use of exemplary practices.

The purpose of this investigative study was to identify specific points of mismatch and congruence in perceptions among teacher educators in the northwest region of the U.S.—university faculty, classroom teachers, and principals—of what constitutes a well-prepared middle school teacher. Specifically, the study explored the following research questions:

- (1) What are the perceptions of middle grades university faculty, classroom teachers, and principals regarding well-prepared middle grades teachers?
- (2) Where does congruence and divergence exist among these groups?
- (3) What are the implications for preservice teacher preparation?

By addressing these questions, researchers began to fill the gap in the knowledge base regarding the connection in middle school education between teacher preparation and the teachers’ practice. The goal is for all teacher educators to prepare middle school teachers who are competent in meeting the challenges of the “reality” of the classroom and have the ability to reform practice in order to serve young adolescents well.

Literature review

Teacher preparation

Teacher education and teacher quality have been the topic of continuous scrutiny by various commissions, task forces, and professional associations in recent years. In the United States, a number of groups have studied what it means to be a well-prepared teacher (e.g., American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2009, 2010; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986, 1995; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 1996, 1997; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008). Some groups articulated the need for greater content area competence and stronger pedagogical foundations for teacher candidates (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching; Holmes Group). In response, some higher education institutions established fifth year graduate teacher preparation programs with features such as content specific pedagogy and reflective practice. Yet, many teacher preparation programs suffered from fragmentation (NCTAF, 1996), prompting the Commission's call to "get serious about standards" and "to reinvent teacher preparation" (p. 64). Subsequently, a number of teacher education institutions implemented rigorous standards for teacher competence and redesigned their teacher licensure programs.

Evidence suggests that teacher education matters (AACTE, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Fully licensed graduates of teacher education programs "are generally better rated and more successful with students" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 40). A review of teacher education research (i.e., an analysis of 57 studies) found that teacher preparation programs produce teachers who are more effective (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Not only does teacher education matter, but the kind of teacher education also matters (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2010). Successful teacher preparation programs create "a tightly coherent set of learning experiences, grounded in strong, research-based vision of good teaching, represented both in coursework and clinical placement where candidates can see good teaching modeled and enacted" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 213). Teacher preparation needs to be a clinical practice profession where the preparation program and the schools are closely linked (AACTE, 2010).

Internationally, teacher preparation for the middle grades varies widely. In one study of middle school mathematics teachers in six countries—Taiwan, Korea, Bulgaria, Germany, Mexico, and the United States—researchers found a preparation gap indicating "substantial differences associated with the preparation of future teachers [in the United States] when contrasted with that of the other [five] countries, especially the high performing ones" (Schmidt et al., 2007, p. 42). Basing performance on results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in which US middle school students

scored below the mean in mathematics among 40 countries, the report indicated the top achieving countries had curriculum that was focused, coherent, and rigorous. The study concludes by observing that “the countries whose students continuously perform well on the international benchmark tests have the teachers who have been trained with extensive educational opportunities in mathematics as well as in the practical aspects of teaching mathematics to students in the middle grades” (p. 42).

Many teacher preparation programs in the U.S. have adopted rigorous standards for teacher proficiency. To improve teacher preparation, numerous teacher education institutions in the U.S. aligned their programs to the standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] (2008). The NCATE has posited that the alignment of accreditation and state licensure (at the initial and advanced levels) will foster a coherent system of teacher education and development (Wise, 2004). Nevertheless, teacher accreditation has been criticized because scant empirical evidence supports the professional standards (Zionts, Shellady, & Zionts, 2006).

Middle school teacher preparation

Widespread agreement exists among professional associations (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002; National Middle School Association, 2006, 2010) and middle school advocates (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson, & Smith 2003) in the U.S. regarding the importance of specialized professional preparation for middle grades teachers. Middle schools need to have teachers with the education and skill necessary for effectively teaching young adolescents. To this end, the National Middle School Association [NMSA] (2010) recommended that state departments of education, professional practice boards, and teacher education institutions develop programs (initial and graduate levels) for specific middle grades licensure. In addition to consensus about the value of specialized professional preparation, there has been agreement about the essential components of middle grades programs (Jackson & Davis; McEwin, Dickinson, & Smith; National Forum to Accelerate Middle – Grades Reform). These essential components include young adolescent development; middle grades philosophy and organization; middle grades curriculum; subject matter knowledge; middle grades planning, teaching, and assessment; and middle grades field experiences (NMSA, 2006).

As the specialized professional association (SPA) for middle school education, the NMSA (2005) developed standards for middle grades teacher preparation. The NCATE approved the NMSA teacher preparation standards, which are used as guidelines for program development and approval. Programmatic standards were designed to address middle level courses and experiences and to ensure qualified middle level faculty, while performance-based standards focus on initial middle

level preparation. These seven broadly stated standards are (1) young adolescent development, (2) middle level philosophy and school organization, (3) middle level curriculum and assessment, (4) middle level teaching fields, (5) middle level instruction and assessment, (6) family and community involvement, and (7) middle level professional roles.

What has remained unclear is how the national standards for middle grades teacher preparation align with the expectations of middle grades principals and teachers. How do teacher preparation program requirements and principals' expectations of middle grades teachers match? In other words, are teacher education programs preparing middle grades teachers that principals need and want? In one mixed methods study, Caskey, Samek, Musser, Greene, and Casbon (2008) examined how the national middle grades standards teacher preparation (NMSA, 2005) aligned with the expectations of middle school principals and the realities facing middle school teachers. Using an online survey tool and semi-structured interviews, they collected quantitative and qualitative data from a statewide sample of principals, teachers, and university faculty. Caskey and colleagues found differences between the groups in three categories: (1) the importance of middle grades knowledge, (2) the emphasis of middle grades standards in teacher preparation, and (3) the challenge of implementing the middle grades standards in classrooms.

In a study that investigated Australian perceptions of effective teaching among Aboriginal middle school students, researchers identified the following characteristics: an understanding of Aboriginal culture, knowledge of the students' history and home backgrounds; an ability to develop good relationships with the Aboriginal students and their families, a sense of humor, and a preparedness to invest time to interact with the Aboriginal students out of the classroom in order to strengthen relationships (Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, & Richer, 2000). Another Australian study on pedagogy in the middle school years noted the special challenge of teaching during the physical, social, emotional and intellectual changes occurring in early adolescence (Keamy & Bottrell, 2005).

Making sense of the data gathered and, at the same time, considering implications for preparing middle grades teachers is complex. As illustrated in Figure 1, all teacher educators have expectations for effective middle school teachers. Principals need teachers to be effective in schools and classrooms, as they now exist, while university faculty focus on an ongoing commitment to powerful middle level philosophy and practices that promote reform in middle schools. At the same time, classroom teachers need competent and collaborative colleagues.

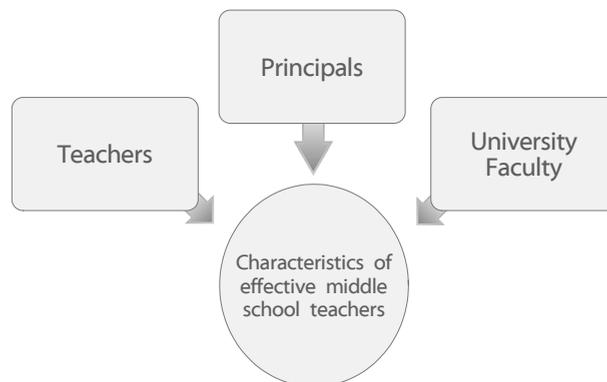


Figure 1. Complexity of input from stakeholders regarding expectations for effective middle school teachers

Method

A qualitative research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) using individual interviews allowed us to explore and compare perceptions of what constitutes a well-prepared middle school teacher. Through data gathered from three distinct groups of stakeholders, we sought to reveal guiding ideals and beliefs that surfaced in responses about teaching in middle school. This study builds upon previous research (Caskey, Samek, Musser, Greene, & Casbon, 2008) that examined how university faculty, teachers, and principals view middle grades teacher preparation standards.

Participants

Using convenience sampling through the researchers' own professional networks, participants representing three groups of educators from around the state of Oregon (U.S.) were selected: middle school teachers ($n = 6$), middle school principals ($n = 6$), and university faculty ($n = 12$). The selected university faculty had the responsibility for the preparation of middle school teacher candidates at private colleges (with populations of 500-4000 students) and public universities (with populations of up to 25,000 students) in different regions of the state. Names of potential faculty members were gathered from the deans of their respective departments, schools, or colleges of education. All were invited to participate in an initial survey and were given the opportunity to participate in the in-depth interviews. The practitioners were from middle schools located in urban, suburban, small town, and rural communities with district student

populations ranging from small (about 125 students) to large (over 47,000 students). The practitioners had participated in an earlier survey and indicated an interest in further participation. See Appendix A for participant information.

Interviews

The research team developed a set of open-ended, ideal-position questions (Merriam, 1998) and used them to construct an interview guide or schedule for each group: classroom teachers, principals, and university faculty. After an explanation of the research objectives, the interviews included four common questions as well as three additional questions for each specific group. The common questions asked to all participants were:

- (1) Please describe a well-prepared middle grades teacher – a teacher who teaches sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.
- (2) Now, please articulate specifically what middle grades teachers should know.
- (3) Next, please tell me specifically what middle grades teachers should be able to do.
- (4) Additionally, please share what middle grades teachers should value or believe about middle grades education.

The additional set of two questions differed slightly by group in reference to the participants' current roles and shifted the focus to their opinions and experiences related to the instruction of middle school youth (See Appendix B.) Probes were used individually to elicit elaboration or clarification of specific responses within each interview.

In 2008 and the spring of 2009, members of the research team conducted individual interviews with classroom teachers, principals, and university faculty using both face-to-face and telephone formats that ranged in length from 15 minutes to 45 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a reputable e-transcription service, Verbal Ink (online at www.verbalink.com). Transcripts ranged in length from 4-15 pages, single-spaced, and collectively totaled over 100 pages.

Data analysis

Following the focus of the research questions reflected in the interview protocol, categories were developed that aligned with the middle school teacher preparation standards (NMSA, 2005). These categories were assigned codes that guided our initial examination of the data. The six members of the research team individually read and re-read their sets of transcript data. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the interview responses, segments of the text were compared for similarities and differences within the existing categorical framework and grouped together accordingly by assigning

codes from the categories that matched segments of text. Each member of the team noted new categories and patterns within the data and how these might be integrated into the existing framework of codes. Next, the research team met to discuss the similarities and differences in the way they individually coded the data. This resulted in eliminating, altering, or agreeing on new categories to reflect the content of the data. Our attempts to strengthen inter-rater reliability through integrating collaboration into each step of the analysis illuminated differing ways of looking at or interpreting the same data. In cases where interpretation of a coded passage appeared ambiguous or when coding did not match among team members, discussion over the reliability of interpretation led to a consensual process of redefining or clarifying the meaning of a given category. In this way, the team created a master copy of all coded passages in the data that represented the collective agreement of at least three team members. The final version of categories and codes appears in Appendix C.

Data and codes were transferred into *QSR NVivo 2.0*, and using that software, the research team generated documents that displayed data by category and participant groups. Pairs of researchers were assigned the task of reading and comparing each category within one group of participants: teachers, principals, or university faculty. The pairs discussed and agreed upon key points of similarity and difference across all coded categories for their assigned group. In this way, single interpretations were not carried forward until both members of the pair concurred. Next, the whole team came together to show and synthesize their findings. It was decided that another layer of analysis should occur to broaden each pair's analytical lens from looking at one group of participants across all categories to looking at all groups of participants across three categories, an equal division among the three pairs of researchers. One category, assessment, was common to all pairs and was examined and discussed to validate criteria used for making judgments about the other categories within and across participant groups. This process provided a level of confidence in our sense of overall consistency as we moved into the data reduction phase of creating visual comparisons of our findings. Again, findings from each pair were shared, discussed by the whole research team, and synthesized into tables and charts used in the narrative analysis.

Limitations

Several issues limit the external validity of this study. Regarding participant selection, while an effort was made to draw participants from diverse regions, school districts, and universities across the state, the sampling method represented one of convenience rather than random selection. The relatively low sample size, the uneven number of teachers (6), principals (6), and university faculty (12), and the relatively small number of higher education institutions and school districts represented here constrains a discussion of outcomes to

highlighting personal points of view with cautious and tentative categorical comparisons. A larger and more representative sample size would have provided greater confidence in making these comparisons and would have permitted a more specific analysis of the data using demographic variables (e.g., regions of the state, years of experience, subjects taught) within and between groups of participants.

The single interview method for data gathering limited the participants' contributions to a particular point in time. Therefore, we are not able to say with any degree of certainty that the responses reflected the range or entirety of their perceptions and beliefs about a well-prepared middle grades teacher. Instead, we are left with the participants' impressions of what may first come to mind when asked about this topic without time to re-think, discuss, or add to their original response. Interview sessions were assigned to different members of the research team who each used the same set of interview questions. Some interviews were conducted by telephone and others occurred face-to-face. These differences, along with variations in protocol, personal style, probes, and time constraints, may all have affected the quantity and substance of the comments given.

Some interviewees were known by the researchers prior to conducting interviews. Although care was taken to conduct interviews without changes to the question protocol, it is possible that some bias could have been introduced into the exchange as a result of prior relationship.

Results

Classroom teachers, middle school principals, and university faculty all found the opportunity to share their views on important characteristics of effective middle school teachers to be an occasion they could use to summarize their varying perspectives on teacher preparation. Although their responses had much in common, there were also significant differences in the characteristics they chose to highlight.

Perceptions of teacher educators

A complete report of the perceptions of classroom teachers, middle school principals, and university faculty is available in a paper by the researchers titled "Programs, Principals, and Practitioners: Alignment of Expectations and Realities" (Caskey, Samek, Musser, Greene, & Casbon, 2008). The narrative that follows summarizes both the commonalities and the differences between the three respondent groups.

Assessment

There was strong emphasis among university faculty and principals around the use of data to inform practice and to gauge the effectiveness of instruction. All respondent groups agreed that a variety of assessment tools are critical for good practice, though university faculty and principals placed more emphasis on the design elements of assessment. A teacher noted a concern with standardized testing and ESOL students. As a summary statement, Teacher 5 said, "I think that teachers really need to be able to monitor learning in more authentic ways and in real formative ways so that there's ongoing – that they have really – they have ongoing data of how their kids are learning and progressing."

Collaboration

There was widespread agreement that collaboration matters. Principals and university faculty noted that collaboration and negotiation are learned skills. When referring to collaboration, one university faculty member asserted, "It's not just an innate disposition but something that's actually been taught and practiced" (F2). Teachers emphasized their willingness to collaborate. "You have to be willing to participate, to collaborate, probably give 120 percent implementing new ideas" (T6). Principals and university faculty articulated the importance of organizational structures (i.e., interdisciplinary teams, block schedules) that encourage collaboration. Teachers, on the other hand, focused more on their own ability to be flexible.

Content knowledge

Concerning content knowledge, respondents in all categories affirmed the importance of strong content knowledge. University faculty highlighted the limitations of the lack of pedagogical content knowledge. One principal, but no classroom teachers, noted this limitation. In addition, both faculty and principals talked about the need for knowledge in multiple content areas and the ability to integrate content.

Across the three groups, differences were found concerning the importance of caring and connecting with students. Two faculty members considered connecting with students to be a higher priority than content knowledge. One stated, "...the one that actually comes first ... is caring about kids" (F9). A classroom teacher was the only respondent to mention the need to be "highly qualified" (T1) in a content area.

Curriculum

With respect to curriculum, all respondent groups emphasized the importance

of an understanding of curriculum design with the curriculum tightly tied to standards. Additionally, university faculty singled out the importance of cross-disciplinary curriculum. Teachers and faculty stressed relevant learning, while only teachers noted the importance of student contributions to the curriculum. The teacher noted, "...the student owns what you are presenting to them. They're the contributors" (T4). University faculty and principals concurred on the importance of knowing scope and sequence across school curricula.

Development

References to understanding and teaching to the whole child came from all three groups. While principals mentioned that knowing the individual student is important, teachers and the university faculty specifically talked about the areas of emotional, cognitive, psychosocial, and physical development. For example, one teacher described that "if the teacher's gonna be well-prepared in the middle grades, they're just gonna have to understand the development of the kids, their intellectual and social, emotional and physical development..." (T1). Likewise, examples from all three groups indicated the need to be sensitive and responsive to the frequent fluctuations of changes that occur in the lives of middle school students. Practitioners (principals and teachers) commented on responding to a range of differences and changes, reflecting an attunement to the changes adolescents go through on a daily basis. Teachers and university faculty commented on the importance of identity in adolescent development. Teachers also mentioned self-esteem and self-image while university faculty commented on gender, bullying, and other significant issues during this period. All three groups seemed to recognize the importance of being familiar with individual differences. The principals referred to the importance of knowing each student, teachers referred to the developmental uniqueness of each student, and university faculty distinguished the middle school grades as uniquely different from both elementary and high school grades. Three university faculty members linked an understanding of adolescent development with planning and classroom management.

Dispositions

Student-focused dispositions – honoring and valuing students – appeared in all three groups. For instance, principals talked about the importance of relationships as evidenced in this comment from one: "I have to value relationships above all. And it's my belief that if you have that relationship you can do anything. You can teach'em anything. You can lead'em anywhere. You can make them a healthier, happier, wiser kid if relationship is present" (P3). Other examples of student-focused dispositions came from teachers who referred to valuing where students are and being forgiving, and from university faculty who cited being

empathetic. Teachers and university faculty shared references to the importance of being caring and exhibiting a sense of humor; making connections was important to both principals and teachers. Both principals and university faculty mentioned valuing a positive environment for learning. Flexibility was a commonly mentioned disposition from all three groups. In addition, the following dispositions appeared only in the comments from university faculty: patience, kindness, passion, reflectivity, love, communicativeness, and self-regulation. Collectively, university faculty generated twice as many items that were coded as dispositions as did either principals or teachers.

Family/community

With regard to family and community, there appeared to be universal agreement among teachers, principals, and university faculty that communication with parents is important. While principals and university faculty noted the need to build relationships with parents, teachers appeared to be focused on contacting and informing parents. As one faculty member articulated, “teachers need to...connect well with families and communities” (F6). Teachers and university faculty also commented about the need to value parents. In the same vein, the principals’ comments centered on building relationships and communicating with parents. Additionally, principals and university faculty mentioned connections with the community, though none of the teachers did.

Instruction, differentiation, and management

All categories of respondents agreed with the critical nature of developmentally appropriate practice and differentiated instruction. Teacher 4 noted, “... it’s interesting to me that teaching in general has little to do with the content, but more as a maturation process of a child.” Both university faculty and classroom teachers commented on the need to scaffold learning for early adolescents. Teacher 5 commented, “But having that ability to scaffold and meet every student’s need seems to be critical, and I think there needs to be much more of a focus on that than just content area specialization...” While principals emphasized a strong foundation in classroom management including transitions, university faculty and teachers emphasized building positive, caring relationships with students. All three respondent groups noted that creating communities with safe, respectful environments is important in the middle grades. University faculty noted specific categories of special needs learners including non-readers and gifted and talented students.

Philosophy

No teacher comments were coded as philosophy. Principal and university faculty

data did not contain clear references to middle school philosophy. The items that were originally coded as philosophy seemed not to be coded appropriately on additional analysis, or they did not clearly align with middle level philosophy.

University / field dissonance

Across all groups, there appeared to be consensus that a gap exists between what teacher candidates learn in their preservice preparation programs and what they need in the field. As one teacher lamented, “That first year of teaching had nothing to do with what I learned in the [university] classroom” (T4). Likewise, a university faculty member expressed, “Too often our candidates see a disconnect between what we, as teacher educators, tell them and what they see in their student teaching practicum experiences” (F12). While not a new complaint, the divide between the theories espoused in university courses and the practical application of those theories remains. Additionally, university faculty pointed to the paucity of exemplary models for student teachers.

Summary of responses

Important characteristics that were noted across all three respondent groups, classroom teachers, principals, and university faculty, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Congruent perceptions of respondents of well-prepared middle grades teachers

Assessment	Collaboration	Content knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using a variety of method - Importance of formative assessment - Using data to inform practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acknowledgment that collaboration matters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong content knowledge needed
Disposition	Development	Curriculum
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Honoring and valuing students - Flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding and teaching to the whole child - Valuing individuality of student - Being sensitive and responsive to changes and fluctuating needs of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to design and modify - Understanding scope and sequence - Use of standards to guide lesson planning
Family/Community	Instruction/Differentiation/Management	University/Field dissonance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication with parents - Ability to build relationships with students/family/community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating communities with safe, respectful environments, developmentally appropriate practice and differentiation is critical - Possession of multiple strategies for classroom management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gap between university preparation and classroom application

Areas where different ideas were voiced by different categories of interviewees are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Dissonant or differing perceptions of respondents

	Teachers	Principals	University faculty
Assessment	Fairness	Ability to create differentiated classroom assessments	Self-assessment
Collaboration	Support network Resourcefulness	Collaboration/negotiation are learned skills Interpersonal skills Importance of organizational structure	<i>Resourcefulness*</i> Learning communities
Content Knowledge	Differentiation	Need pedagogical content knowledge Multiple content areas Ability to integrate	Content less critical than connecting with students
Curriculum	Student ownership Relevance to students	Scope and sequence Know the school's curricular program	Cross-disciplinary <i>Relevance to student*</i>
Development	Identity formation Self-esteem and self-image Attunement to daily changes		<i>Identity formation*</i> Gender and bullying Linking development to planning and management
Dispositions	Valuing where students are Being forgiving Caring Sense of humor	Valuing positive environment for learning	Passion, reflectivity, communicativeness, and self-regulation Empathy <i>Caring*</i> <i>Sense of humor*</i>
Family/Community	Focused on contacting and informing parents	Stressed connections with the community	
Instruction /Differentiation /Management	Scaffold learning for early adolescents Building positive and caring relationships with students	Strong foundation in classroom management and transitions	Included learners with special needs
University/Field Dissonance			Scarcity of exemplary models for student teachers
Philosophy			Referenced foundations of middle level education

Implications for preservice teacher preparation

The perceived mismatch among teacher educators (university faculty, principals, and classroom teachers) regarding the relevance of various standards for middle school teacher preparation appears to be one of priority or emphasis rather than the inclusion of particular standards in preparation programs. University faculty members focus on more philosophical and theoretical aspects of preparation, with a view of preparing middle grades teachers to be change agents and to hold to the tenets of recommended middle grades practices. Practitioners tend to focus on the more pragmatic aspects of the daily management of middle grades students, classrooms, and learning. Areas with much common ground include:

- Knowledge of a variety of assessment methods
- Understanding of the importance of formative assessment
- Possession of strong content knowledge
- Ability to design/modify curriculum
- Understanding of curriculum scope and sequence
- Use of standards to guide lesson planning
- Valuing of individual students
- Flexibility
- Ability to build relationships with students/family/community
- Possession of multiple strategies for classroom management

This study lays a foundation for deeper analysis and discussion among university faculty and the practitioner community concerning the "what" of middle grades teacher preparation programs and inservice teacher development. The findings indicate that much common ground exists on which to build collaborative conversations. It is imperative that all teacher educators contribute fully to preparing middle grades teachers who are both competent in daily practice and who hold a vision for reformed practice that may better serve the academic, social, and emotional needs of young adolescents.

To this end, we believe there are a number of cross-sections of practice that should be engaged by the full teacher preparation community. Some of these points of conversation between practitioners (principals and classroom teachers) and university faculty include:

- Implementing the full range of possible assessments and leveraging them for instructional design: This is one way to demystify and tie the discussion around assessment into conversations about content knowledge and curriculum. Pervasive assessment belongs to both the university and to the field.
- Asking questions that lead to classroom inquiry done collaboratively between university faculty and practitioners (Darling Hammond, 2010): In times of scarce resources, collaboration becomes essential to the enhancement of education at all levels.

- Developing a dispositions framework for active engagement through conversations that create a foundation for continued growth in the profession: Although all three respondent groups acknowledge the importance of dispositions, this is an area that needs to flow into the field and continue developing in early career teachers.
- Using the "zone of reflective capacity" (Tinsley & Lebak, 2009) to explore practice: Collaborative work around improving practice could and should involve all stakeholders, classroom teachers, principals, university faculty, and preservice teachers.
- Integrating families and communities into school life: Practitioners tend to particularize the role of families in schools, while university faculty look at the issue more broadly while thinking about the social capacity of families and communities to enhance schooling. There is a strong research base indicating that school, family, and community partnerships have a positive influence on student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In addition, the NMSA provides information regarding how to effectively engage families in middle schools (Loucks & Waggoner, 1998). Yet, few schools consistently engage families in meaningful ways in middle schools. All stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, preservice teachers, and university faculty must learn to value and promote partnerships and active family and community involvement in middle schools.
- Addressing dissonance between practitioners and university faculty, particularly around the purpose and practice of clinical experiences: As clinical experience is more and more in the spotlight (AACTE, 2010), we must partner to maximize the experience and integrate theory in constructive ways.
- Operationalizing the philosophy of teaching in ways that take the conversation between university faculty and practitioners to a deep level of understanding: This means acknowledging multiple perspectives concerning the inner work of a teacher. We are preparing teachers for the future, not just for the first day or week in the classroom. All stakeholders should contribute to the growth and development of effective middle grades teachers.

We believe these conversations can change the culture of teacher preparation by integrating theory and practice in ways we have not done in the past.

Summary

In summary, all teacher educators—classroom teachers, principals, and university faculty—have a responsibility to collaboratively work to ensure that highly effective middle school teachers are completing programs and moving into positions of practice. We can begin on common grounds and address the areas of

dissonance that continue to appear. We have been conducting these conversations for decades with little noticeable progress in the U.S. However, there are hopeful signs that the culture of teacher preparation, with its rather rigid boundaries between the practitioner world and the university world, are melding into a new culture that fully values the gifts and insights of everyone involved.

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Appendix A

Interview participants

Identifying Code	School/Institution demographics
Teacher 1 (T1)	Medium sized suburban school district, low SES
T2	Medium sized suburban school district, medium SES
T3	Small sized suburban school district, high SES
T4	Small sized rural school district, medium SES
T5	Medium sized suburban school district, medium SES
T6	Very small rural school district, low SES
Principal 1 (P1)	Medium sized rural school district, medium SES
P2	Large sized suburban school district, medium SES
P3	Small sized rural school district, medium SES
P4	Medium sized suburban school district, medium SES
P5	Large sized urban school district, low SES
P6	Medium sized rural school district, medium SES
University Faculty 1 (F1)	Small private college
F2	Medium private university
F3	Small private university
F4	Medium private university
F5	Small private university
F6	Medium private university
F7	Large public urban university
F8	Medium public university
F9	Medium public university
F10	Medium private university
F11	Medium private university
F12	Medium private university

Appendix B

Alignment study: Interview protocol

Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to interview you regarding your insights, ideas, and thoughts about well-prepared and effective middle grades teachers. Your signature on the Informed Consent Form indicates that you will allow me to record this session to ensure that we have an accurate account. Remember that everything you say is confidential and that your name or school's will not appear in any report related to this research. In this interview, I am interested in understanding what you think about well-prepared and effective middle grades teachers.

General questions

1. Please describe a well-prepared middle grades teacher – a teacher who teaches sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.
2. Now, please articulate specifically what middle grades teachers should know.
3. Next, please tell me specifically what middle grades teachers should be able to do.
4. Additionally, please share what middle grades teachers should value or believe about middle grades education.

I would like to shift our conversation to focus on students. Please remember that I am interested in your opinions and experiences related the instruction of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

Teacher questions

5. How do you respond to the developmental characteristics of young adolescents when teaching your students?
6. What are the challenges you face in designing learning experiences that help all your students master the content?

I would like to shift our conversation to focus on students. Please remember that I am interested in your opinions and experiences related the instruction of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

Principal questions

5. What do you look for that would indicate that teachers are using knowledge of young adolescent development in their instruction?

6. What are the challenges that your teachers face in designing learning experiences that help all their students master the content?

I would like to shift our conversation to focus on preservice candidates. Please remember that I am interested in your opinions and experiences related the instruction of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

University faculty questions

5. What do you look for as evidence that a preservice teacher is using knowledge of young adolescent development in their instruction?
6. What are the challenges your candidates face in designing learning experiences that help all of the students master the content?

Appendix C

Coding – Alignment study

- 1.0 Young adolescent development
 - 1.1 Brain research
 - 1.2 Diversity
 - 1.3 Learning styles
 - 1.4 Culture - classroom
- 2.0 Middle level philosophy
 - 2.1 Critical thinking/systems thinking
 - 2.2 School Organization
- 3.0 Middle level teaching fields
 - 3.1 Content knowledge
 - 3.2 Basic skills
- 4.0 Middle level curriculum
- 5.0 Middle level instruction
 - 5.1 Differentiation
 - 5.2 Classroom management
- 6.0 Assessment
- 7.0 Family and community involvement
- 8.0 Middle level professional roles
 - 8.1 Change – process of change
 - 8.2 Collaboration
- 9.0 Dispositions
 - 9.1 Strong sense of self
 - 9.2 ~~Negotiation skills~~
 - 9.3 ~~Entertainer~~
 - 9.4 Humor
 - 9.5 Loves students
- 10.0 Preservice teacher development
 - 10.1 Dissonance between university and field
 - 10.2 Mentoring
- 11.0 Other

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