

Middle Grades Review

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Middle Grades Teacher Preparation: Is it
Necessary?*

Article 7

June 2016

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Recommended Citation

Podsiadlik, E. (2016). Re-Viewing, Re-Imaging, and Re-Invigorating Middle School Teacher Education. *Middle Grades Review*, 2(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol2/iss1/7>

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Re-Viewing, Re-Imaging, and Re-Invigorating Middle School Teacher Education

Edward Podsiadlik, III (University of Illinois at Chicago)

Abstract

How do we best prepare educators for teaching in the middle grades? This essay reviews authentic middle student feedback and two comprehensive units of instruction in order to re-view and re-imagine the potential of middle school teacher education to become re-invigorated in its capacity to offer relevant and critical instructional experiences. Essential questions explored are: 1) what do effective middle school teaching and learning uniquely look and sound like?; and 2) what singular components, considerations, and challenges does middle school teacher education need to specifically address? Evidence is examined that demonstrates pedagogical components, strategies, and a wide-range of resources that exemplify instructional planning and decision-making specific to meaningful middle school instruction. Specific implications and recommendations for teacher education are offered that address considerations specific to providing middle school instruction relevant to contemporary student lives and pertinent to their (individual and collective) emerging and evolving identities and values.

How do we best prepare educators for teaching in the middle grades? Professional discourse, highlighted by the provocative 2005 Thomas B. Fordham Institute study, *Mayhem in the Middle* (Yecke, 2005), has raised serious questions in terms of the overall effectiveness, efficiency, and necessity of middle school teacher education. Although I had been aware of these criticisms, the intricate complexities and nuances of this question only came crashing onto my consciousness after I was invited to teach the *Curriculum and Instruction in the Middle Schools* course for an urban university teacher preparation program. As a 20-year veteran middle school teacher (currently in his third year as a clinical assistant professor in a teacher preparation program), I generated a list of topics I felt were central to effective middle school teaching and learning: Differentiated strategies, special needs supports, multiple modalities, ethical/multicultural considerations, varied assessments, positive classroom climate, student-centered instruction, and content expertise. Upon examining my list, I realized (rather despairingly) that these considerations, critical as they are, were not exclusive to middle school. What could I add to the comprehensive coursework students already received from

specialists in content areas, special education, educational psychology, bilingual education, and so on? My previously unquestioned confidence and unwavering support for middle grades teacher preparation were shaken.

Determined not to become mired in what former Louisiana Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard called the “Bermuda triangle of education” (Yecke, 2005), I set out to methodically draw upon my middle school experiences in order to more clearly ascertain: 1) what effective middle school teaching and learning uniquely look and sound like; and 2) what singular components, considerations, and challenges middle school teacher education needs to specifically address. I designated two sets of data to explore these considerations. First, I would revisit student-generated feedback (collected over 20 years of middle school teaching) looking to identify patterns, trends, and tenets indicative of distinctive middle school best practice. Second, I would re-examine two of my middle school units of study (Shakespeare and U.S. Constitution). By critically examining these units, I aimed to clarify the extent to which they demonstrate not only good teaching, but specifically good middle school teaching. I was

aware heading into this exploration, however, that I was vulnerable to the possibility of discovering that middle school teaching is, in fact, nothing more than good teaching. Nevertheless, this vulnerability is a small price to pay in order to prevent being what Jonah Rockoff and Benjamin Lockwood (2010) describe as educators and students being ‘stuck in the middle’ – academically and developmentally stagnant.

Middle School Voices

Having retrieved approximately 200 surveys, letters, and formative feedback commentaries from my personal teacher archives, I began searching for patterns that would indicate distinctive middle school best practices. The journal-like narratives I had collected between 1992 and 2010 represented a random cross-section of my former middle school students. Whether I was ready or not, authentic middle school student voices (of my literacy and social studies middle school students journaling at various points during their middle school instructional years) began to educate me. Eventually patterns emerged that suggested specific criteria of what distinguishes ‘good middle school teaching’ from the more generic and expansive ‘good teaching’.

Throughout their reflective letters and journals, middle school students expressed that what stood out to them the most were classroom discussions and experiences that challenged them to consider ethical values and moral dispositions. Kindness, generosity, empathy, and patience were frequent descriptors students used to describe their middle school instructional experiences. Student voices informed me that strategically infusing middle school experiences with opportunities to consider and explore ethical dispositions helps transform good teaching into good *middles school* teaching. For example, many students referenced our unit on Elie Wiesel’s memoir *Night* (1960) by describing activities including classroom dramatic reconstructions of Nuremburg Trials, poetic narratives written

from multiple perspectives, and current event research investigations into contemporary situations around the world that paralleled the civil rights atrocities of the Holocaust. I realized from the student comments that providing relevant opportunities to examine ethical underpinnings of historical events is what resonated most meaningfully to the middle schoolers. These sorts of learning experiences allowed students the space within which to search for what Nel Noddings (2005) calls the ‘ethic of caring’ (understanding, empathy, and appreciation). Devising these kinds of learning experiences that bridge the gap between facts and values became a critical focus of my middle school course. I included specific anchor texts (i.e., Harris, 2010; Hillman, 1996; Noddings; Schubert, 2009) in the syllabus that explore these sorts of multi-disciplinary learning experiences that allow students to experience different ways of thinking and behaving along what Sam Harris (2010) calls ‘the moral landscape’.

To this end, I suggest that middle school teacher education needs to facilitate a *re-viewing* of middle school content that *re-imagines* it as much more than linear facts, skills, and strategies. Feedback from my former middle school students reminded me that academic content is most critical in its role as a catalyst for critical and ethical thinking and exploration. My U.S. Constitution unit is real world demonstration of ‘content as catalyst’. Although grounded in content rich information and resources, middle schoolers and I entered ‘the moral landscape’ when we contrasted specific tenets of the Preamble (i.e., “provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare”) with Charlie Chaplin’s famous speech (1940) as *The Great Dictator* (“I should like to help everyone if possible – Jew, Gentile, black man, white. We all want to help each other. Human beings are like that”). During World War II, to what extent was the ‘common welfare’ for people of the Jewish faith, Japanese-Americans, and women provided for and defended? In 2016, to what extent is ‘building a wall’ defending the migrant worker or promoting the common

welfare of immigrants/refugees? Chaplin goes on to famously remark: “Soldiers! Don’t give yourselves to brutes – who regiment your lives – tell you what to do – what to think and how to feel! Who drill you, diet you, and treat you as cattle.” To what extent do these words resonate with (or against) citizens of various social or economic backgrounds? Although addressing these kinds of questions is difficult and perhaps uncomfortable for the middle school teacher, meaningful middle school teaching and learning depends upon taking on these critical educational challenges. In this way, middle school success is not gauged by skill or strategy, but by the extent to which student personal philosophies, identities, and values are shaped or challenged.

This marks an aspect of middle school preparation distinct from broader elementary education considerations. Exemplary middle school planning and instructional delivery are less about providing information than about opening minds to new ways of thinking; less about covering content than about making cognitive and affective connections; and less about practicing skills, than about creating pathways of understanding and reflection. To paraphrase John Dewey (1938), my former students were reminding me that middle school is not preparation for life, but that middle school is life. This means that middle school teacher education needs to go beyond my generic checklist of good teaching (i.e., differentiated instruction, skills-based criteria, etc.) by: 1) prioritizing strategic searches for relevant resources and activities; 2) modeling and practicing realignment of lesson plans in order to more cohesively develop paths toward understanding and reflection; and 3) sharpening the depth and expanse of classroom discourse and engagement along dispositional and philosophical (individual and collective) pathways of critical thinking.

Unit of Study: Literacy

The middle school student voices I revisited were sending me clear yet challenging criteria

for distinctively meaningful middle school teaching and learning: content that challenged ethical and dispositional points of view; discourse that promoted personal and collective introspection; and relevant experiences that created connections which promoted opportunities to see what is familiar in new ways and to see what is new to them in familiar ways. This prompted me to question to what extent my middle school instruction actually met these goals. I retrieved from my teacher archives two units of study that I would now examine for evidence of these middle school good teaching criteria. Again I understood that this investigation left me vulnerable. Would I find evidence to support good teaching specific to middle school? Or would I find good teaching artifacts applicable for all elementary grades?

Looking through my curriculum resource file for teaching William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, I found artifacts that once again hearkened back to my initial list of good teaching considerations: audio and visual scaffolds, collaborative reading circle activities, skills-based lessons focusing on figurative language, vocabulary, and narrative style; and varied formative assessments reflecting a variety of learning styles. Although these reflect valid teaching practices, they are not unique to middle school instruction. Because teacher education courses in literacy, special education, and English language learners address these strategies, it would be redundant to reiterate them in a middle school course. Returning my focus to the nature of the feedback my middle school students provided, I re-examined my unit file. Instead of speaking specifically to our Shakespeare studies, student discussions and activities reflected on whether their philosophy of life aligned more to Romeo, Juliet, or Tybalt; or whether their lives were similarly more a matter of free will or fate.

Upon deeper inspection of my teaching artifacts, I began to see that what made my unit good middle school teaching were the strategic instructional decisions that invited students to connect to Shakespeare on ethical, creative, and

philosophical levels. Essay writing that explored the role of fate versus free will, for example, intentionally integrated the literary (Romeo's choices) with the personal (the evolving personal perspective of students). Presentations of oxymoron allowed students to examine and express what is often perceived as emotionally inexpressible (i.e., paintings or sculptures of 'brawling love' and 'loving hate'; dramatic monologues/soliloquies detailing 'heavy lightness' and 'serious vanity'; collages using current periodicals to demonstrate real world examples of 'cold fire' and 'sick health'; and performances (dance, rap, musical) to embody 'my only love sprung from my only hate'). A scavenger hunt of contemporary music and media that echoed the themes, conflicts, and images of Romeo and Juliet, I recall, was an especially provocative and engaging assignment. Critical discussions on how individuals (real and imaginary) might choose the right (moral) action for the wrong reason or an immoral action for an ethical reason were especially memorable to the students.

These examples demonstrate instructional planning and decision-making specific to middle school. They emphasize critical considerations of why, how, and when instruction is likely to be most meaningful. Unless middle schoolers (due to their emerging critical thinking skills) understand and accept why content is being taught, even the most content-rich lessons may be less effective. The efficiency and effectiveness of how instruction is delivered depends less on formulaic lesson planning and checklists of interventions and more on establishing clear connections between the content and student lives. Ascertaining the optimal sequence of content, strategies, and resources is a matter of strategically ascertaining when developmental, cognitive, and emotional variables are appropriate. These tenets, gleaned from examining middle school feedback and reviewing a comprehensive middle school instructional unit, demonstrate the unique complexity of successful middle school instruction.

Unit of Study: Social Studies

Encouraged by insights I have reflected upon thus far, I optimistically proceeded to examine my middle school U.S. Constitution file. As I suspected, content knowledge, special education and ELL modifications, and diverse learner modalities (all components of good teaching) are addressed. Based on my investigation so far, and the conclusions I inferred, I was now looking for evidence of strategies unique to middle school instruction. Two instructional plans I revisited (Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence) clearly demonstrated the difference between good teaching and good middle school teaching in terms of student relevancy, connectedness, and critical reflection.

In terms of the Bill of Rights, content was covered via primary and secondary source materials, differentiation was reached per multi-reading level adopted texts, and multiple modalities were touched upon via visual and auditory supports. These are components of good teaching demonstrated in a variety of existing teacher education courses. What I was discovering through my investigation is that these components alone did not define good middle school teaching. The difference lay in the nuances of how and why the lessons were planned and delivered. In order to draw clear connections between content and student lives and to inspire relevant pathways of reflection and discussion, clips from the Seinfeld television series (1991-98) were used. Episodes 35 ("The Boyfriend"), 88 ("The Big Salad"), 112 ("The Postponement"), and 122 ("The Caddy") each dealt with legal issues ranging from trial by jury, search and seizure, and the right to a speedy trial in ways that engaged middle schoolers in discourse reflection, and debate that touched upon legal, ethical, and real world scenarios using humor, satire, and parody.

Teaching the Declaration of Independence in ways that promoted meaningful introspection and connected to their immediate lives, I devised a series of lessons that compared and contrasted

Thomas Jefferson's words with the lyrics of the politically-charged Greenday album *21st Century Breakdown* (2009). Instead of examining Jefferson's words "that these United Colonies are and of Right ought to be Free and Independent" as a single 18th Century entity, we considered its relevancy when contrasted to Greenday's *21st Century Breakdown* anthem that proclaimed, "I praise liberty; the freedom to obey is the song that strangles me." When has the freedom that we fought for become the freedom that now strangles us? Jefferson famously writes that, "All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" while Greenday's counter-dialogue observes that, "My generation is zero... once was lost but never was found... The scars on my hands and the means to an end is all that I have to show." Do middle schoolers have the audacity to question the "wisdom" of Thomas Jefferson? Meaningful middle school teaching and learning requires educators with imagination and courage to engage students in critical debates, projects, and conversations that explore these more intrinsic issues that extend far beyond surface skills and strategies.

Implications for Teacher Education

After examining and reflecting on authentic student voices and specific middle school units of study, I am ready to return to my initial query: How do we best prepare educators for teaching in the middle grades? Effective middle school teaching and learning needs to be relevant to students' lives and pertinent to their (individual and collective) emerging and evolving identities and values. Whereas educational psychology courses address the characteristics of the young adolescent, middle school pedagogy coursework needs to tap into strategies and resources that rely upon creativity and imagination to *re-invigorate* (i.e., Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1979; Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014); the instruction along philosophical (i.e., Mayes, 2005; Surya Das, 2007; Weiming & Ikeda, 2011); and humanistic (i.e., Erickson, 2007;

Hopkins, 1954; Kinget, 1975;) pathways.

Upon reviewing and reflecting on letters from my former middle school students and upon my previously implemented middle school instructional units, I prioritized that a middle school educator course needs to delve deeply into the less mechanical but critically important resources of teacher imagination. Middle school teachers need to have a sense of the expanse of possibilities that must be considered in order for instruction to be relevant and meaningful. They need to expand their palette of potential points of entry, connectivity, and (collective and individual) introspection. The content is the starting point. What *relevance* does this hold for the middle schooler? What is the *entry point* through which a variety of middle schoolers are enticed to investigate further? What are the collective and individual *pathways* through which middle schoolers are inclined to explore? These are the kinds of pedagogical questions needed to *re-invigorate* middle school teacher education.

To this end, students in my middle school education courses are constantly surprised at resources I share in class each week. These include instructional choices ranging from videos (i.e., *The Best of Mr. Bean*, 2006; *The Crocodile Hunter's Greatest Adventures*, 1999; *Love's Labour's Lost*, 2000); picture books (i.e., *Dr. Seuss' Butter Battle Book*, 1984; *The Three Questions*, 2002; *Mr. Peabody's Apples*, 2003); kinesthetic collections (i.e., models of Greek mythological monsters; action figures of U.S. presidents; postcards of fine art paintings and sculptures); and audio recordings (i.e., Adam Guettel's *Myths and Hymns*, 2002; Greenday's *American Idiot*, 2004; Peter, Paul, and Mary's *In the Wind*, 1990).

The eclectic nature of these resources intentionally serves a variety of pedagogical purposes specific to middle school teaching: 1) to demonstrate the expanse of resources that need to be considered to increase the relevance and connectivity of middle school curriculum; 2) to sample the vast potential of resourcefulness

critical to engaging and extending discourse and introspection; 3) to liberate future middle school teachers from the narrow restraints of content information and uniform strategies; and 4) to strategically facilitate what Rajni Shankar-Brown (2013) calls the shift from “subject-centeredness to life-centeredness” that demands intentional planning to provide middle school instruction relevant to contemporary students’ lives and pertinent to (individual and collective) emerging and evolving identities and values. These criteria, I propose, comprise what meaningful middle school teacher education needs to specifically address.

Conclusions

How do we best prepare educators for teaching in the middle grades? How do we avoid what former Louisiana Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard (2005) called the “Bermuda triangle of education”? If we rely primarily on reiterating what is already presented in other teacher preparation courses or if we focus exclusively on the mechanics of lesson planning, delivery, and assessment, middle school teacher preparation, I fear, will remain ‘academically and developmentally stagnant’ (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). My review of feedback from former middle school students has allowed me to re-view and re-imagine the potential of middle school teacher education to become re-invigorated in its capacity to offer relevant and critical instructional experiences.

This essay began with a list of descriptors for ascertaining good teaching. To conclude, I propose descriptors of good *middle school* teaching: instructional content relevant to students’ lives; explicit connectedness to the emerging and evolving identities of middle schoolers; philosophical and ethical dimensions beyond rote mechanical skills and strategies; and scope and depth that exceeds quantitative markers while addressing more humanistic, imaginative, and ethical possibilities. ❖

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