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The Case for Specialized Middle Grades Teacher Preparation

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When we announced this issue's theme, querying the need for specialized middle grades teacher preparation, it was met with audible gasps and a ripple of laughter. Granted, it was spoken to a room full of middle grades teacher educators, many of whom have dedicated entire careers to this important work. A strong reaction was expected. As middle grades teacher educators ourselves, we can appreciate this reaction. Knowing the nature of early adolescence as we do, and being familiar with the well established literature calling for schools that address that nature, we certainly see the logic in calling for specially prepared teachers for this age group. At the same time, the field of education has for years defined and re-defined the components of effective teaching. It is not unusual to hear educators from other fields claim that "good teaching is good teaching," regardless of the learning environment, the subject, or the characteristics of the learner. How does one respond to this assertion? What evidence, research-based or theoretical, exists on either side of this debate?

The broad field of teacher education focuses on research and policy related to issues such as learning theory, curriculum and assessment, diversity, the teacher pipeline, and teacher education program design, among many others. Well known discussions of these issues are featured in the *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts* (Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser & McIntyre, 2008) and *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). In these works, sponsored by the the Association of Teacher Educators and the Academy of Education respectively, we note the dearth of discussion about preparing teachers for the education of

young adolescents. In fact, when examples of successful teacher education programs are provided, they typically describe elementary or secondary programs. Rarely are middle level examples included. In light of this context, we ask, is specialized middle level teacher preparation necessary?

Several scholars took up the challenge of examining this question and we are pleased to share their perspectives, research and experience in this special issue of *Middle Grades Review*. Cook, Howell and Faulkner begin the conversation with their essay, outlining the necessity of "moving from advocacy to actualization." They rightly recognized the respectful intent of our question, acknowledging that "while this question may have the tone of a condescending remark, or demeaning query, as middle level education proponents, we believe this question represents the growth and maturation of the field of middle level education." In their well conceptualized piece, Cook and colleagues view the question as a mile marker in the field's development, as we move "beyond the need for schools organized for young adolescents, to the obligation of preparing teachers for these schools." They ask readers to consider several unique elements of high quality middle level teacher preparation that set it apart from teacher preparation in general.

Next, Eisenbach places the preparation of middle grades teachers soundly in a 21st century context. She observes that more than 2 million K-12 students currently participate in some form of online course, with middle level students constituting 28% of the 200,000 students enrolled full time in virtual schools. In her essay, Eisenbach speaks from personal experience as she articulates the mismatch between the social, emotional and cognitive needs of the young

adolescent and some of the more widely used virtual pedagogies. She raises concern that middle level learners may be restricted to independent work and interactions with only the teacher, experiencing “limited social interactions, as students (work) in an asynchronous manner throughout the course, thereby limiting the ability to address adolescent needs for social engagement and dialogue.” Importantly, Eisenbach calls for middle grades teacher educators to remember this growing constituency by infusing virtual field experiences into our preparation programs, making the case that even teachers who teach within a physical middle school classroom will require skills necessary for effective virtual instruction within blended learning environments.

This emphasis on field experiences emerges in Hesson’s research on middle level teacher preparation as well, as she posed the question: Do selected novice middle level teachers feel more prepared when they hold an elementary certification, a secondary certification, or middle level certification? Overall she found few differences between feelings of preparedness among participants from the three certification pathways. However, Hesson discerned that, regardless of pathway, field experiences were ranked as a highly influential program component on participants’ ideas about teaching at the middle level. Further, while acknowledging the small sample size, Hesson found that a majority of the study’s participants wanted to leave teaching at the middle level, and that “all three of the middle level certified participants fell into this category.” She ponders, “Is this desire to exit the middle level due to social-cognitive reasons (the middle level is a default option) or is it due to poor preparation from the certification programs at PU?” The fact that all middle level certified participants in Hesson’s study chose their program to avoid additional and/or difficult content coursework, rather than because they desired to work with young adolescents, suggests important areas for future research.

Ochanji and colleagues also observed that

middle school often becomes a “last choice option’ for elementary and secondary credentialed novice teachers.” Their examination of licensure pathways with a sample of more veteran teachers provides an interesting contrast to Hesson’s study of novice educators. Ochanji et al. found that, “compared to the teachers who took the elementary or secondary licensure pathways, the teachers who received specialized preparation reported persistence in dealing with the challenges and struggles in teaching young adolescents.” This persistence was attributed to a growing sense of self-efficacy as the teachers navigated their first few years in the profession. These researchers frame the issue as one of social justice, both for the young adolescent who “deserve to be a first choice option” and for the new teacher who may “only have access to elementary and secondary credential programs (yet) who may desire to teach middle school.”

The next article in this issue picks up this theme of social justice by focusing on preparing middle grades educators to teach in culturally responsive ways. In her research, Bennett sheds light on the particular challenges of rural education and proposes place-based education as one way to help teachers conceptualize their own sense of place and the world in which their students live. She does so by introducing multi-literacies, an emphasis particularly well suited to this generation growing up in a technology rich era. Through these multi-literacies, the participants in her study, all middle grades teachers with rural and culturally diverse schooling experience, reflected on the idea “that their family and the community they grew up in comprised their sense of place and helped mold them into the people they are today.” Given young adolescents’ strong desire for a sense of community, affiliation and belonging, place-based education as examined by Bennett holds great potential as pedagogy, both within middle school and middle grades teacher education.

Finally, in his self-study, veteran middle school teacher Podsiadlik thoughtfully reflects on the question of how to best prepare middle grades educators. After generating a list of topics he

deemed central to effective middle schooling, including differentiated strategies, positive classroom climate, student-centered instruction, and content expertise, he “realized (rather despairingly) that these considerations, critical as they are, were not exclusive to middle school.” This, we suspect, is at the heart of what many mean when they say, “good teaching is good teaching.” Divulging that his “previously unquestioned confidence and unwavering support for middle grades teacher preparation were shaken,” Podsiadlik offers his thoughtful and systematic analysis to ultimately propose helpful criteria for distinguishing ‘good *middle school* teaching’ from the more generic and expansive ‘good teaching.’

Clearly, the preparation and education of teachers for the middle grades remains a complex task. Each of these contributions to the

collective discussion helps pave a way forward. We encourage readers to submit commentary on this topic and concomitantly urge researchers to continue robust examinations of the issue. It is only through further research and discussion that the field will advance our understanding of this crucial work. ❖

References

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