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Middle Level Teacher Preparation: Principals' Perceptions of New Teacher Preparedness *RESEARCH*

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Abstract

Drawing on the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching* (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, Faulkner, 2013), this interpretive, exploratory study utilized survey methodology to analyze 38 middle level principals' perceptions of effective teaching practices and the preparedness of newly hired middle level teachers. The findings suggest there is difference in perceptions of new teacher preparedness between principals with middle level teacher certification and principals that were prepared to teach at other grade levels. While both groups acknowledged the need for better teacher preparation, principals with middle level teacher certification reported that newly hired teachers were less prepared for effective middle level teaching. The researchers identified two primary conclusions that impact the field of middle grades teacher preparation: (a) beginning middle grades teachers need to be better prepared for effective teaching and (b) principals perceive the preparation of new teachers differently depending upon their own teaching certification, with principals holding middle grades teaching certification being more critical of the level of preparation. While both strengths and weaknesses of preparation were identified in each of the six constructs, the most relevant and important conclusion is that middle level principals perceive beginning middle grades teachers as not being adequately prepared to address the demands of effective middle grades teaching in several constructs from the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching*.

Keywords: middle grades, teacher preparation, principals, preparedness

The classroom teacher is the critical factor in a child's success and achievement in school (D'Amico, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2010; Mehaan, Cowley, Schumacher, Hauser, & Croom, 2003; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Researchers, policymakers, educators and other stakeholders agree that the quality of the teacher is the most significant school-related factor with the greatest influence on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2010). With the emphasis placed on teacher quality, it is also important to recognize the role of the principal in establishing and maintaining a school climate that is productive, collaborative, and enriching for students and teachers (Anfara & Brown, 2003). For middle schools in particular, "no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students' performance than the school principal..." (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 157). The literature on middle level leadership clearly suggests it is imperative

for middle level principals to understand the unique nature of middle grades schools and the structures and staff that should be in place to create a climate that is developmentally responsive (Arth, Lounsbury, McEwin, & Swaim, 1995; Brown, Anfara, & Gross, 2002; Doda, 2009; Petzko, Clark, Valentine, Hackmann, Nori, & Lucas, 2002).

Organizations like the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly the National Middle School Association (NMSA), advocate for school leaders to have a deep understanding of the specific needs of the students they serve by recognizing the central role of the building principal in establishing the school culture and direction, including influencing student achievement and teacher effectiveness (NMSA, 2010). Brown, Anfara, & Gross (2002) suggest that in order for middle level principals to establish and sustain an effective learning environment, they must be grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of

middle school philosophy and understand the importance of establishing the appropriate organizational structures and instructional practices that are developmentally responsive to the learning needs of early adolescent students. Given that middle level principals have the responsibility of making curricular, staffing, and organizational decisions (Doda, 2009; Brown et al., 2002), they not only need to have the aforementioned knowledge, but also an awareness of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for teachers to be effective.

As teacher educators preparing the candidates for middle level schools, it is important for us to consider what middle level principals value, seek, and acknowledge in graduates seeking employment in a middle school. We desire to prepare new teachers who are ready to assume the responsibilities of the middle school classroom upon program completion. Though many new teachers exhibit the professional expertise that we know to be critical to success in a middle school classroom, not all exhibit these traits. To inform our work as teacher educators, we conducted an earlier exploratory study (Howell, Faulkner, & Cook, 2012) to analyze middle level principals' perceptions of effective teaching practices at the middle level and their perceptions of the preparedness of newly hired teachers. The results of the earlier study indicated middle school principals' descriptions of "effective teaching" differ from their descriptions of "effective teachers." In addition, the middle school principals generally reported dissatisfaction with the preparation of middle school teachers who were hired within the past five years. The principals perceived these teachers as adequately prepared in their content knowledge, but lacking preparedness in classroom management, assessment, curriculum and

instruction, and culturally and developmentally appropriate practice.

Understanding how middle school principals describe effective teaching at the middle level and whether or not their descriptions align with the standards and position of the AMLE is critical to those engaged in the preparation of new middle grades teachers. Furthermore, considering the preparation and certification of the principals could potentially shed light on how the principals' description of effective teaching at the middle level differs between principals who hold certification to teach at the middle level and those who do not. Due to the fact that the findings of our previous study (Howell, Faulkner, & Cook, 2012) indicated that principals perceived new middle grades teachers as underprepared in several areas of importance to those in middle level teacher preparation, we felt that the data deserved additional analysis. Therefore, to inform our work as teacher education researchers, we felt it was also important to consider how a principal's preparation influences his/her perceptions of effective middle level practices. The following questions guided our analysis for this study:

1. How, if at all, do principals holding middle grades teacher certification perceive the preparation of new middle school teachers differently than principals who do not hold middle grades teacher certification?
2. How, if at all, do principals holding middle grades teacher certification describe effective middle level teaching differently than principals who do not hold middle grades teacher certification?

Inquiry into the principals' description of effective middle level teaching and the preparedness of newly hired teachers is potentially significant in that it can identify for teacher educators and

teacher preparation programs those areas of preparation for which teacher candidates are not adequately prepared. By identifying these areas, programs can be revised to address the needs of teacher candidates and, in turn, address the needs of middle schools and the students they serve. In addition, this study can inform the discussion about the struggle that exists when attempting to put theory into practice.

Conceptual Framework

We utilized the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching* (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013) as we designed, conducted, and reported this study. This conceptual framework is grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of the middle school concept (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2006, 2010), our understanding of teaching and learning at the middle level (McEwin & Dickinson, 1995, 1997; NMSA, 2010), and relevant research on effective middle level teaching practices (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). Critical to our work as teacher educators, this framework considers the developmental spectrum of young adolescents and the relationships they have with their teachers as the core of effective middle level practices. We work from the premise that these two aspects of middle level educational environment should influence all other aspects of effective middle level teaching including classroom management, curriculum and instruction, assessment, and content knowledge. The *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching* guided our thinking and dialogue about how principal's certification influenced, or not, their perceptions of the preparedness of newly hired middle level teachers. By focusing on the six constructs of the *Framework*, we

grounded our analysis in the critical aspects of effective middle level teaching. The six constructs were simply defined in the following manner: (a) Developmental Spectrum – understanding of the social, emotional, intellectual, physical, sexual, and cultural/identity of students; (b) Content Knowledge – having deep understanding of the central concepts of the discipline one is teaching; (c) Classroom Management – creating a classroom climate that is conducive to learning; (d) Curriculum & Instruction – understanding and using appropriate pedagogy; (e) Assessment – understanding and using various forms of assessment to inform instruction and monitor student progress; and (f) Relationships – building and maintaining appropriate, supportive relationships with students, parents, and other professionals (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013).

Methodology

This study was an interpretive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), exploratory study that used a cross-sectional survey design (Fink, 2009). Using survey methodology allowed us to capture a current snapshot of middle level principals' perceptions of middle level practices and preparation.

Data Collection. The sample was one of convenience (Fink, 2009; Kent, 2001; Sue & Ritter, 2007) that included middle level principals from schools across central and northern Kentucky. Since Kentucky is one of 45 states that requires specific middle level teacher preparation and certification (grades 5-9) (AMLE, 2013), we believed principals in Kentucky middle schools would be familiar with the certification and preparation standards for middle level teachers in the state. In all, the sample included 71 middle school principals. Thirty-eight of the 71 principals in the sample completed the survey for a response

rate of 53.5%. Nineteen of the respondents held middle grades teacher certification while the others held teacher certification for other levels – elementary (4), secondary (9), and P-12 (6).

The survey instrument was created using an online survey tool, which allowed for greater access to the study participants during the summer months (Sue & Ritter, 2007). The online tool made it possible to ensure participants' anonymity. The survey included a series of demographic items to capture information about the participants' schools, professional preparation, and experience. Following the demographic items, participants answered a series of open-ended items in which they described effective teaching and effective teachers. The survey concluded with 32 statements that were aligned with the six constructs of the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching* (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013). Participants responded to the 32 statements using a Likert scale of extremely prepared, adequately prepared, somewhat prepared, or not prepared. For all survey items, participants were instructed to limit their descriptions and perceptions to newly-hired teachers defined in this study as those that were hired in the past five years. Since teacher preparation programs and practices are constantly evolving, we wanted to capture the participants' perceptions related to current practices in teacher preparation.

Data Analysis. Quantitative data included participants' responses to Likert-style items that were organized as statements corresponding to one of the six constructs of the Framework. Participants' responses of extremely prepared and adequately prepared were combined to represent an acceptable perception of teacher candidates' professional preparation. Responses of somewhat prepared and not prepared were combined to indicate inadequate

professional preparation. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Qualitative data included participants' responses to open-ended items regarding effective teaching practices. All responses to the open-ended items were downloaded from the online survey tool, printed, and distributed to each researcher for analysis. Independent coding, categorizing, and interpreting of the data occurred manually by each researcher based upon key words and phrases that corresponded with predetermined categories aligned with the constructs of our conceptual framework. After the first phase of independent coding, each researcher shared his/her independent results with the other researchers and discussed any differences. The researchers arrived at consensus on the definitions of the six constructs and agreed upon the system of coding being used. The responses were read and coded independently a second time with consistency across all six constructs.

Following analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, responses were sorted based upon the reported teaching certificate held by the respondents (elementary, middle, secondary, P-12). Responses were then separated into two categories – responses from principals holding a middle grades teaching certificate and responses from principals holding non-middle grades teaching certification (elementary, secondary, P-12) – thereby allowing for comparison between the two groups.

Findings

In analyzing the survey responses, it is evident that both principals with and without middle grades teaching certification indicate the need for improved levels of preparation for beginning middle grades teachers (see Table 1). While principals without middle grades certification have a

more favorable perception and the majority indicate an overall level of adequate preparation in each of the six constructs, the percentages only range from 50.7% to 70.6%. On the other hand, principals with middle grades certification indicate an overall adequate level of preparation in only one of the six constructs, with percentages ranging from 38.9% to 54.6%, indicating a much greater need for improved preparation. While the overall categories show the need for improved preparation, the individual statements under each construct show great disparity, revealing both areas of strong preparation and key areas for improvement. Of the 32 statements on the survey, principals with middle grades certification revealed that beginning teachers were not adequately prepared on 22 of the 32 statements, and principals without middle grades certification indicated beginning teachers were not adequately prepared on 12 of the 32 statements.

Examining the developmental spectrum construct revealed one key strength and four areas for improvement. Both groups, principals with and principals without middle grades teaching certification, indicated that beginning teachers are willing to serve as a role model and advocate for adolescents (72.2% and 82.4%, respectively). Some key areas that need improvement involve understanding the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, cultural, sexual, and moral development of adolescents (33.3% and 52.9%); making instructional decisions based on a thorough understanding of the students' developmental characteristics (22.2% and 47.1%); understanding culturally responsive practices in all areas of teaching and learning (33.3% and 41.2%); and understanding the components and purpose of middle grades advisory programs (44.4% and 41.2%).

The content knowledge construct revealed the greatest strength and overall best prepared component of the six constructs. Key areas of strength were demonstrating expertise in their content area (72.2% and 94.1%) and exhibiting enthusiasm about the subject matter (94.4% and 94.1%). Presenting content at a developmentally appropriate level (55.6% and 76.5%) also received adequate levels of preparation. However, relating content to real-life situations (44.4% and 52.9%), presenting multiple perspectives through a variety of sources (27.8% and 52.9%), and understanding the different components of the middle grades concept (33.3% and 52.9%) were key areas that needed improvement.

Classroom management was a construct that received mixed perceptions in terms of preparation. The two components beginning teachers were adequately prepared for were providing a pleasant environment for teaching and learning that reflects a commitment to the students (50% and 64.7%) and using nonverbal behavior such as gestures, walking around, and eye contact (50% and 58.9%). One component principals had disagreement on focused on creating and maintaining learning environments that are emotionally, intellectually, and socially safe. Only 38.8% of principals with middle grades teaching certification acknowledged adequate levels of preparation in this regard, compared to almost 71% of principals without middle grades teaching certification. Additionally, arranging learning events to avoid disruption of learning time (27.8% and 47.1%), maintaining flexible grouping to promote effective instruction (33.3% and 58.9%), and enforcing clear and consistent discipline policies that are developmentally and culturally responsive (33.3% and 58.9%) were key areas for improvement.

The curriculum and instruction construct had a key area of strength and several areas that needed improvement. Using technology to enhance instruction and student learning was clearly the component that received the highest level of perceived preparation (73% and 88%, respectively). However, a few of the components within the construct received mixed results, with principals without middle grades certification reporting higher levels of preparation. About 83% of the principals without middle grades teaching certification indicated beginning teachers were adequately prepared to set high expectations for student learning and about 77% acknowledged beginning teachers were prepared to use a variety of instructional strategies. Conversely, only 44% of the principals with middle grades certification indicated beginning teachers were adequately prepared to set high expectations for student learning and 50% said beginning teachers were prepared to use a variety of instructional strategies. Five components under the curriculum and instruction construct were identified as weaknesses. Setting clear goals and intellectual challenges for student learning (38.9% and 47%), actively involving learners by encouraging students' questions and opinions (38.9% and 41.2%), identifying and planning for individual differences (27.8% and 17.6%), responding to diverse talents and learning styles (27.8% and 17.6%), and planning lessons and units that are interdisciplinary (27.8% and 35.3%) were items that beginning teachers were clearly not prepared to address.

Both groups of principals identified praising students appropriately as a key strength, with about 61% and 94% of the principal groups reporting adequate preparation. Providing prompt feedback to students concerning their performance had split results, with almost 59% of principals

without middle grades teaching certification indicating adequate levels of preparation and only 33% of principals with middle grades teaching certification reporting adequate levels of preparation. However, both groups agreed that using appropriate and effective assessment techniques to reflect on, monitor, and improve teaching practices was an area that needed improvement. Only about 22% of principals with middle grades teaching certification and 47% of principals without middle grades teaching certification reported that beginning teachers were prepared to do this.

Two areas under the relationship construct received adequate levels of preparation by both groups of principals. Communicating and interacting effectively with other school personnel (72.2% and 94.1%) and understanding the purpose of middle grades teaming (50% and 70.6%) both had the majority of principals reporting adequate levels of preparation. Communicating and interacting effectively with parents (38.9% and 41.2%) and seeking community involvement in the instructional program (16.7% and 29.4%) were both areas of needed improvement and inadequate preparation.

While it is clear from both groups of principals that beginning teachers need to be better prepared to handle the responsibilities of middle grades teaching, the difference of perceived preparation often varied greatly between the principals who were middle grades certified and those who were not, especially on questions specifically related to the middle school philosophy. In many cases, the perceived differences between the two is often greater than 20% or more, with principals with middle grades teaching certification indicating the level of preparation is not as high. For instance, principals with a middle grades certificate reported that only 22% of teachers were adequately prepared to make instructional

decisions based on a thorough understanding of students' developmental characteristics, 33% understood the different components of the middle grade concept, 33% were adequately prepared to understand the developmental needs of adolescents, 33% were prepared to enforce clear and consistent discipline policies that are developmentally responsive, and 50% were adequately prepared to understand the purpose of middle grades teaming. In comparison, non-middle grades-certified principals indicated 47% of beginning teachers were adequately prepared to make instructional decisions based on student development, 53% understood the components of the middle grades concept, 53% were prepared to understand the development of adolescents, 59% were prepared to enforce consistent discipline policies, and 71% were adequately prepared to understand the purpose of middle grades teaming.

Through coding of the qualitative responses, there were no noticeable differences between the two groups in describing effective middle level teaching. Both groups consistently mentioned all six categories of our conceptual framework, with Curriculum and Instruction, Developmental Spectrum, and Relationships being mentioned most frequently. For example, one principal with middle grades certification described effective teaching as "a student-centered, whole child approach where children are engaged in rigorous learning with high expectations." In similar fashion, a principal without middle grades certification stated, "first and foremost, building a climate of trust and a school culture where students know the teachers care about their success in academics and extra-curricular activities." These comments were typical of both groups of principals. Based on these responses, principals with middle grades teacher certificates and those

with other types of certificates describe effective teaching in a similar manner.

Conclusions and Implications

When examining the findings of this study, the researchers identified two primary conclusions that impact the field of middle grades teacher preparation: (a) beginning middle grades teachers need to be better prepared for effective teaching and (b) principals perceive the preparation of new teachers differently depending upon their own teaching certification, with principals holding middle grades teaching certification being more critical of the level of preparation. While both strengths and weaknesses of preparation were identified in each of the six constructs, the most relevant and important conclusion is that middle level principals perceive beginning middle grades teachers as not being adequately prepared to address the demands of effective middle grades teaching in the majority of constructs from the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching* (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013). Further, the Curriculum and Instruction, Developmental Spectrum, and Relationships constructs were the three lowest categories, each of which has strong connections to the core of the middle grades philosophy. This should be an area of concern for teacher preparation programs and should encourage middle grades teacher preparation units to examine the curriculum being offered to ensure pre-service teachers receive the training necessary to be effective teachers on their first day. It also raises the question of whether programs are offering middle grades-specific teacher training as recommended by Jackson and Davis (2000) and others, or are deferring to a one-size-fits-all approach.

While it is clear from both groups of principals that beginning teachers need to be better prepared to handle the responsibilities

of middle grades teaching, the difference of perceived preparation often varied greatly between the principals who were middle grades certified and those who were not, especially on questions specifically related to the core of the middle school philosophy. In many cases, the perceived differences between the two is often greater than 20%, with principals with middle grades teaching certification indicating the level of preparation is not as high. Though the perception of preparation differed based upon the principals' teaching certification, there were no noticeable differences between the two groups when defining and describing the characteristics of effective teaching. Both groups consistently mentioned all six categories of our conceptual framework and described effective teaching in a similar fashion. As a result, this raises the question as to what would cause the substantial difference between the two groups in several constructs. Clearly, our analysis seems to suggest a principal's experience and preparation to work in the middle grades influences his or her perceptions of new teacher preparedness.

The findings have several implications for the field of middle grades teacher preparation. First, and probably most clearly evident, were the differences in perceived teacher preparation when examined through the lens of the principals' own teacher certification. In most areas of preparation, principals who were middle grades certified reported a greater percentage of newly-hired teachers were only somewhat prepared or not prepared for various aspects of their teaching assignments; whereas, principals who were not middle grades certified found greater percentages of newly hired teachers extremely prepared or adequately prepared. This finding highlights a distinct difference in the way principals view preparedness.

Those principals who had been prepared as middle grades teachers felt more strongly that newly hired teachers were not adequately prepared to teach in a middle school. This is of particular concern to those who prepare middle grades teachers. Does this finding indicate shortcomings or omissions in the program requirements of middle grades teacher preparation programs, or are teacher candidates having difficulty transferring the theory of their college coursework into actual practice in middle level schools? As teacher educators, these questions prompt us to evaluate our own programs for effectiveness and consider how our practices are aligned with the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Teaching*.

Additionally, the variation in perceived levels of preparedness highlights a potential struggle for newly-hired teachers. Depending upon the training his or her principal received, performance expectations for the newly-hired teacher may differ. It is important for future research to explore the expectations principals have for new teacher performance in order to develop a common understanding of what a new teacher should know and be able to do, including the specific teaching practices and behaviors one would expect to observe in an effective middle grades setting. It may also suggest the need for principals to be specifically trained to teach at the level at which they are administrators or that they should receive specific training in their principal preparation program regarding the distinguishing characteristics of effective instruction at that level.

Finally, this study is significant for teacher preparation programs. It is unfortunate that many principals, regardless of certification, still believe some of their newly-hired teachers are inadequately prepared for the rigors of the classroom, particularly in several key middle school

constructs. Not only does this suggest the need for more rigorous teacher preparation programs in general, but also a need for

teacher candidates to develop a thorough understanding of what constitutes effective instruction in the middle grades.

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Table 1
Overall Level of Preparation

Constructs	Principals With MG Certification		Principals Without MG Certification	
	Prepared (%)	Not Prepared (%)	Prepared (%)	Not Prepared (%)
Developmental Spectrum	41.1	58.9	53.0	47.0
Content Knowledge	54.6	45.4	70.6	29.4
Classroom Management	38.9	61.1	59.9	40.1
Curriculum & Instruction	41.0	59.0	50.7	49.3
Assessment	38.9	61.1	66.7	33.3
Relationships	42.2	57.8	58.8	41.2