Middle Grades Review

In a Spirit of Curiosity, Concern, Collaboration, and Humility: Considering the Work of Middle Grades Education in the Context of a Pandemic

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In a Spirit of Curiosity, Concern, Collaboration, and Humility: Considering the Work of Middle Grades Education in the Context of a Pandemic

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Abstract

When we envision the ideals of middle school, we so often think about the importance of physical setting. Physical setting helps to create a material space for so many of the tenets of the middle school mindset. For example, "A successful (middle) school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive, and safe place – a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In a school (with a material, physical setting), human relationships are paramount." (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 33). With the outbreak of COVID-19 and pandemic conditions forcing so many to shelter-in-place, our collective thinking about this ideal has been forced to shapeshift. Without prerequisite planning, the physical setting has become a digital setting. What are the challenges of such a sudden and unexpected shift? What are the trending topics scrolling our personal and professional timelines? What are the solutions?

This is the developing story, told in two voices, of middle grades educators reflecting on, living through, and teaching within the current reality of pandemic conditions that have shifted our personal and professional paradigms. In this essay, we will share some of our challenges and in-progress solutions. We consider shifts in our practices and professional mindsets as we seek to thrive and to serve middle grades educators and students in two different contexts. We pose questions that have incomplete answers and share our imperfect thinking as we seek answers. Our mindsets are evolving even as we write. We consider this topic in a spirit of curiosity, concern, collaboration, and humility.

Introduction

A year ago, if someone had told us, two middle school educators, that in the spring of 2020, there would be a global pandemic so vicious it would shutter the doors of every middle school we know, that face-to-face contact would be replaced by digital only, that middle school teachers, students, and teacher educators would find themselves at home, forced into virtual classrooms, digital meeting spaces, ready-or-digitally-literate/privileged-or-not, we would have regarded it as a disturbing dystopian yarn, or perhaps as a strange "part of a fourteen-year old science project?" (Lipton, 2020). This is now our reality.

This is the developing story, told in two voices, of middle grades educators reflecting on, living through, and teaching within the current reality of pandemic conditions that have shifted our personal and professional paradigms. We have different vantage points– as a P-12 teacher coach, and a university level teacher educator. And it is in these differences that we create breadth, texture, and complexity in our shared

voice and collaborative reflection. Together, we are able to consider, in real time, the toll of pandemic conditions on a range of middle grades teachers – from various stages of pre-service to various stages of in-service. Our reflections merge perspectives and cross contexts in a meaningful way.

While it is not our intention in writing to universalize our experiences so broadly as to present them as a template for all middle school teachers, we nonetheless find value in the kind of reflection we did on our developing experiences as they support our work to train and to professionally develop middle grades teachers. We also hope that the collective reflection and critical thinking about our experiences serve to enrich our continued work as we plan curriculum and professional development for future semesters. We want our work to invite other teacher educators to take similar deep looks at their own experiences during an unprecedented time of pandemic, and to use their reflections to help to inform and transform future work in the middle grades context. Our mindsets are evolving even as we

write. We consider this topic in a spirit of curiosity, concern, collaboration, and humility.

On a Normal Day

Kristie: If I consider my context of practice in social media terms, my hashtag would be #itscomplicated. The major details are as follows: I do literacy work for a large urban-suburban district in the southeast. My work has a public, middle school setting. The area where I live and serve as an educator is highly diverse – culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically. I coach teachers. I do professional development, and I very often get into the middle grades classroom to work with 6th, 7th, and 8th graders alongside their teachers. It is rewarding, demanding and complex work.

On a normal day, my work might be some combination of the following: meetings with teachers to coach literacy work; planning or implementing professional development; leading or supporting instructional planning in middle schools; working alongside 6th, 7th, and 8th graders on their reading, writing, speaking/listening, viewing work. It is always a busy day with multi-dimensions.

Kristina: Considering the context of my practice may be slightly less complicated as I am an Assistant Professor more than halfway to tenure. I work in one of the top middle level education programs in the Midwest. Our program is heavy in clinical experiences, so my courses are authentically embedded in experiences in middle schools. While a majority of my classes are face-to-face, I also teach online. In my online teaching, I pride myself in designing connected learning spaces like those described by the Connected Learning Research Network (Ito et al., 2020). Like in the professoriate, my time is divided into thirds with just a third of my time being allotted for teaching; my other time is divided between research and service. On a normal day, you would have found me on campus (between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.). I might have been in my office, in a classroom, in a meeting, or in a building across campus. While my day-to-day tasks might differ, my week-to-week responsibilities are normally fairly predictable.

Productivity and Practices Pre and Amid Pandemic

Kristie: In my pre-pandemic life, during-commute-podcast-listening was one of my favorite productivity/entertainment practices. One in particular – "Teaching in Higher Ed –" features Bonni Stachowiak, who always says, "We share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be more present for our students." On episode 290, in particular, Bonni and Dave Stachowiak (2020) discuss principles of productivity for "normal" (non-pandemic) conditions. They note, "We have to make systems (of productivity) work for us," "be intentional about creating (productivity) space," and "carve out time to reflect (and plan)." One day (during the pandemic), and working from my kitchen counter office, I listened again to episode 290. This time, I found myself a little less hopeful.

Also, I am finding that much of what supports productivity in the context of my work with middle grades teachers includes, and is quite dependent upon, "soft skill" competencies, such as communication, creativity, and collaboration. However, in my recent work, events of communication and moments of collaboration that happen so naturally in real time face-to-face, are less incidental.

Still, in the spirit of curiosity, I question – *What identity does productivity take in a digital, work-from-home context? What do we, as middle grades educators, lose, or gain in communicating via Zoom, Teams, Google Meets and other video-conferencing platforms? What does digital-only communication and collaboration mean for tasks that rely heavily on the cues, nuances, and synergy of face-to-face meetings?*

Kristina: In my pre-pandemic life, I was really beginning to explore and understand what productivity looked like for me. I was at a point of "settling in." In all other times of my adult life, I had either been pursuing a graduate degree or working a non-tenure track job while looking for a tenure track job. Finding myself three years into a tenure track appointment, I was getting to a point of wanting to reassess my productivity practices and to diminish my need to constantly be creating and producing. I was working on learning to value the steps in between.

Along with holding an intentional focus on my productivity practices, I had established boundaries (no email after 5:00, one hour at the gym uninterrupted by work, no teaching clerical work at home) that I worked hard to honor. However, two weeks into mandatory stay at home orders, and I had lost all sense of boundary keeping. Without a schedule, I was starting to feel out of control and a constant need to work. Questions always raced through my head – *If I am not working with students, how can I wrap up the manuscript I started? Should I start a new manuscript? Are my students okay?*

On top of my mind's racing questions and lost boundaries, with no daycare, my work schedule had become reduced to my child's nap and bedtimes. I added to that a loss of physical space. With my office doubling as my closet, I found myself physically struggling to honor previous productivity goals.

The Middle Grades Educator Conscience

As middle grades educators, we are always thinking and evaluating instructional contexts that we encounter through a very specific lens, as influenced by the unique needs and dispositions of the young adolescent learner and the professional needs of the middle level educator. In the context of pandemic, our collective "middle grades educator conscience" has been busy. We are wondering how the needs of the young adolescent learner are being met at a distance. In particular, we are thinking about issues of access and equity, socio-emotional needs of the young adolescent, and some of the attributes of 21st century learning. Through the lens of the middle level teacher coach and teacher educator, we are also wondering how the needs of the middle level teacher are being met at a distance.

The Virtual Middle Level Classroom Teacher

Kristie: In my coaching work with middle school teachers, I support curriculum and instruction. Almost as often, I am an empathetic ear. This has been such a long-standing role that I find myself wondering about the teachers and how things are going. In the digital space, I continue to wonder and check in. I am curious about how teachers, like their students, are coping with the loss of the material classroom. I wonder how teachers are managing the blurred line between

the sanctuary of home and the electric space of the adolescent-filled (now virtual) classroom,

Kristina: I am also wondering about the middle level educator in the context of pandemic. If I, a teacher educator with training in the design of online learning spaces, find myself perpetually connected with my students, how are middle level classroom teachers prioritizing personal needs? I know, through experience as an online instructor, that content creation, assessment, and feedback can more than double in an online delivery model. I know the level of instructor stress. This makes me wonder – W*ho is supporting middle level classroom teachers to do this work?*

Additionally, middle level teachers understand that teaching should not occur in isolation (Caskey & Carpenter, 2014). Middle schools have been specifically designed to provide opportunities for teachers to meet regularly with one another, to collaborate on curriculum, and to synergize for instructional support (Flowers et al., 2000). Ellerbrock et al. (2018), note the benefits of teaming. For example, "Such benefits include, but are not limited to, an increase in support from colleagues, teacher efficacy, professionalism, and professional growth" (p. 6). Using a social constructivist lens of inquiry, we raise several questions – *How are teachers able to maintain a sense of "teaming" in an online environment, and in an authentic way? How are teachers sharpening and refining their teaching without the benefit of face-to-face collegial conversation? How are middle level teachers utilizing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to improve teaching and learning collectively? What kinds of PLC work is happening effectively in remote teaching and learning environments?*

The Socially Distant Young Adolescent

When we consider the social nature of young adolescents, it leaves us wondering how, even the temporary loss of the physical social setting, it is impacting learning and life for middle schoolers. As Lounsbury (1991) notes about the adolescent need for the setting of the classroom as a community, "Young adolescents are very much social beings. When in school their great desire is to socialize, to communicate with one another. The most satisfying reward teachers can give students in school is time to talk to their friends" (Lounsbury 1991, p. 15). In pandemic conditions, we are wondering how to support

teachers in honoring this part of the whole adolescent child.

Equity and Access for Young Adolescents

Next, we turn our middle grades educator conscience lens to interrogate issues of equity and access in the context of pandemic. According to Hattie (2020), "The most likely implication of school closures relates to equity. Students who come from well-resourced families will fare much better than those from lower resourced families: The effect of home resources is powerful (d = .51)."

Kristie: With my literacy educator hat on I, like others, am wondering how, with public libraries shuttered, all students might find access to those "just right lighting conditions for their windows to be mirrors" (Bishop, 1990, p. ix) and to get books in hand and at home. I worry that some might forget to care that #We(STILL)NeedDiverseBooks, even in the midst of everyone needing assurances of public health and safety.

My mind races on as I think in terms of "what abouts." What about the "digital divide?" As OECD (n.d.) notes, "digital divide" "refers to the gaps in access to information and communication technology (ICT) – threatens the ICT 'have-nots,' whether individuals, groups or entire countries...." As we consider the middle grades students on the 'have-not' end of the spectrum, I appreciate the acknowledgements of Tobin and Delacroix (2020), that when it comes to student families accessing information digitally, "often, assignments (are) among the easiest resources to find. But assignments alone aren't all the information families need. At a minimum, expectations for student 'attendance' and workload should be extremely clear." They go on to explain that families need empathy and release from the expectation that school work is the highest priority.

Kristina: While attention is rightfully given to equity/access for our students, what about equity and access for the teachers? What about the digital 'have nots' among teachers? What about the systemic inequities that are rooted in the systems of professional development in American education systems? While teachers across the country are required to obtain continuing education units, what about the inequities in state funding? What about the places where few middle level teachers get access

to the skills and tools they need to be effective online educators? What do these kinds of professional development inequities mean in a time of global pandemic?

Additionally, what about the inequities that exist in the expectations around synchronous and asynchronous time? The expectations around grading and teaching new material? What about demands on teachers that impede on their "family time" as many strive to navigate the work day with children at home.

21st Century Teaching and Learning

As we consider how the challenge of a pandemic impacts middle grades educators' effectiveness in instruction through the lens of 21st century competencies, we invoke the "4 C's – critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity" (NEA, 2019). These skills are considered to be among the foremost that students need for the 21st century. Given the context of socially distant learning, we are wondering how middle level educators can adapt their work to foster the development of these skills in young adolescents.

Merely Human

At the end of the day, middle grades educators are only human. We are susceptible to worry. We have weird inner dialogue and irrational fears. We have emotions.

Kristie: As I shelter in place, I have found myself frequently visiting online sites that I trust for information. Probably more than is wise, I have visited CDC (2020) resources. When I came across information about the stress of pandemic, I lingered to understand the implications. Among the manifestations of (pandemic) outbreak stress, the CDC lists the following:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating

I concur. I have certainly spent time with worry, and sleep has been elusive. My concentration has been marginal, interrupted by running thoughts, about my health and the health of my loved ones.

Kristina: I started the semester with a commitment to find a better work/life balance. This was important for me as a new mother just returning from maternity leave. It was also important to me because, lately, in my teacher education program, we have experienced a growing trend of students (pre-service middle school teachers) already experiencing teacher burnout. With my goal of work/life balance in mind, I have wanted to be a role model for my students, showing them that a healthy balance between work and home is possible.

Also, along with the physical and cognitive demands of teaching, there is a hidden emotional labor (Kaplan, 2019). In pandemic times, I find myself carrying an emotional weight rooted in my desire to help guide my students through unprecedented times. I am finding that this creates an imbalance. How can I leave space for my students to navigate this, while still supporting their desires to become teachers, and maintaining that gatekeeper role that I place value in my profession? Why do I feel the need to "take care" of my students? While I struggle to meet the demands of this emotional labor, I wonder about the middle school teachers also struggling with this very human feeling of imbalance.

Conclusion

This is our developing story. In bringing together our voices and vantage points, we hope to broaden the scope of our reflections. As we go forward, not only do we strive to meet the challenges of this time with inquiry and problem solving, we also hope to stay in conversation and collaboration about the broad spectrum of experiences among pre-service and in-service middle grades teachers, as well as about the P-12 and university level educators to train and support them. Additionally, as we consider future endeavors in scholarship, we would like to expand our work to interrogate issues of equity around the distance learning context for middle grades, and to explore how the needs of the young adolescent learner are being met at a distance.

In the present, we, like others, are navigating the uncharted waters of a strange, and hopefully temporary, "new normal." In doing so, we seek to refine our practices and to construct new systems that meet the needs of our middle grades students and teachers. As we carry on, we hope to continue doing so in a spirit of curiosity, concern, collaboration, and humility.

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