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Tapping the Experts in Effective Practices: Students as Educators in Middle Grades Professional Development

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Abstract: Although middle grades proponents call for specialist teacher preparation, and often herald student voice as critical to successful middle grades programs, young adolescents are rarely provided a role in teacher education. In this article, we explore the potential of student involvement in middle grades teacher education. We first briefly examine the benefits of student involvement in teacher education in general. Next, we describe the context of a summer professional development institute in which young adolescents assist and support the development of teachers, outlining the methods we used to examine our practices. Then, we share teachers' and students' perceptions of the model, highlighting specific approaches and promising practices. Finally, we offer recommendations and remaining questions for integrating students into middle grades teacher education.

Keywords: *professional development, student voice, middle grades, teacher education, teacher preparation*

This We Believe **characteristics:**

- Curriculum is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships

Introduction

Proponents of middle grades education have long asserted the need for specialized teacher education. The Association for Middle Level Education (formerly National Middle School Association [NMSA]) calls for educators who know and value young adolescents (NMSA, 1995, 2003, 2010). Others urge leaders to "staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp. 24–25). Still, others call for professional development that is "relevant to middle-grades education" and for teachers who "promote young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth" (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, n.d.).

Given this broad support for educators to know and understand 10 to 14 year olds, it is somewhat surprising that young adolescents themselves have not been more routinely invited into teacher education. In a field in which student voice has been heralded as critical (Jackson & Davis, 2000), the relative absence of young adolescents in the work of preparing teachers for the middle grades seems a startling omission. How might middle schoolers help us to better prepare their teachers? What happens when we shift perspectives and consider young adolescents as teacher educators?

For over 20 years, we have been asking—and trying to answer—these questions. As teacher educators who work with pre-service and in-service teachers, in teacher education institutions, schools, and other settings (Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014), we regularly integrate young adolescents as consultants on our faculty at a week-long summer institute designed for practicing middle grades teachers. During panels and focus groups, middle grades students routinely offer their insights, opinions, and expertise to teachers on matters of curriculum development, instructional approaches, and school structures. Many participating teachers glean from these experiences

fresh insights into how young adolescents can provide more direct, targeted, and compelling feedback than even trained adults. Through modeling and institute assessments, faculty encourage participants to co-design, implement, and evaluate new practices with students in their own schools. As such, we are pursuing a vision in which middle grades students routinely play their unique and critical roles among the ranks of teacher educators, defined by Lunenberg et al. (2014) as "all those who, in teacher education institutions and in schools, are responsible for teaching and coaching future, beginning and experienced teachers" (p. 5).

The purpose of this article is to explore the potential of embedding student consultations in middle grades teacher professional development. We begin by briefly considering the benefits of student involvement in teacher education in general. We, then, describe the summer institute, including the methods we used to examine our practices. Next, we share teachers' and students' perceptions of the consultation model applied throughout the week. We do so, first, by illustrating the use of different consultation formats, and, then, by describing underlying practices they found particularly effective. Drawing on these findings, we offer recommendations for improving student consultations at the institute. Finally, we propose possible implications and identify remaining questions for integrating students into middle grades teacher education.

Including students in teacher education

Although the systematic involvement of students in teacher professional development is rare (Cook-Sather, 2011; Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007), and studies of middle grades teacher-student consultations outside of regular school contexts are equally scarce (Downes, Nagle, & Bishop, 2010), the limited research base reveals several useful findings. First, teachers who consult with students about teaching and learning have been found to (1) rethink students' capabilities; (2) gain a capacity to see and act upon new perspectives; (3) sense a new excitement in their practice; (4) develop practical agendas for improvement; and (5) feel more confident in partnership-oriented relationships with students (Rudduck, 2007). Additionally, consultations can reposition students from "beneficiaries—or victims" of their teachers' pedagogies to "stakeholders who have a right to play an active role in the

co-construction of their learning, the development of pedagogical commitments and approaches, and the critical revision of educational and social structures" (Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007, p. 62), including traditional teacher-student roles and hierarchies (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011).

Further, consultations can be effective when teachers want to listen to students, create conditions of dialogue, provide feedback to students about the effects of their consultation (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007), and view students as knowledgeable (Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007). This small, but promising, research base suggests considerable potential for inviting young adolescents into the work of preparing middle grades teachers.

The Middle Grades Institute

At the annual Middle Grades Institute (MGI), teachers gather for a statewide, primarily residential program hosted on a college campus for 1 week in the summer. Most teachers elect to earn graduate credit for this intensive professional development, which is primarily paid for by their school districts. The cost of these credits and related fees, in turn, fund the institute. Teachers enroll in one of several middle grades teacher education courses, or "strands," which are offered concurrently. Strand topics evolve from year to year but consistently include areas such as middle grades curriculum, middle grades organization, embedded literacy, technology in the middle grades, personalized learning and the young adolescent, and the nature and needs of young adolescents. A typical day at the MGI models an effective middle school by featuring key structures and practices. For example, teachers are assigned to interdisciplinary teams and begin their days by attending an institute-wide town meeting. They meet in small groups in teacher advisory, learn with colleagues in consistent strand time, and explore new ideas in choice time.

The MGI faculty team that teaches the week-long strands is a mix of university professors and experienced middle school teachers. The team is supported by 20 young adolescents invited from three or four different local schools each year. These students spend 2 to 3 hours each afternoon consulting with teacher participants across the strands. The consultations take the form of small group teacher-student collaborations on curriculum projects; student panels or focus groups about student needs, interests and perceptions; and co-experimentation with

new teaching methods. Except in rare instances, teachers have not previously known, nor would they expect to teach in the future, the students with whom they consult at the institute. When not consulting, the middle schoolers participate in "Career Camp," the MGI strand designed specifically for them, aimed at career exploration and promoting postsecondary career and college success.

In order to examine the utility of these student consultations, we invited the perspectives of participating teachers and students alike. The 72 participating teachers constituted the 2014 cohort. They represented a range of rural, suburban, and urban geographic regions and their teaching experience ran from 0 (pre-service) to 32 years, with an average of 14 years. The teachers were predominantly White and approximately 70% were female, fairly representative of the national teacher labor market. The 20 participating students, drawn from four nearby middle schools, had been identified by their teachers as belonging to a traditionally underrepresented population in postsecondary education (e.g., from low income homes; having parents who had not attended college; having ethnic minority status) who could benefit from Career Camp attendance.

We interviewed four teacher focus groups, each with between eight and 14 educators and lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. We also interviewed 10 teachers individually for 30–45 minutes each, and we administered a teacher survey comprised of selected response and open-ended questions, including the open-ended prompt, "How, if at all, did consulting with students influence your thinking and work this week?" Five students participated in individual interviews and an additional eight students took part in a focus group interview. Finally, students and teachers were observed and audio recorded as they participated in three of the strands: middle grades curriculum, middle grades organization, and embedded literacy.

Experiences with students as consultants

Throughout the MGI, students informed teacher learning via different formats of consultation. In two instructional strands, students partnered with teams of teachers in simulations of curriculum design and the development of interdisciplinary teaching teams. At times, students served as co-experimenters, enabling teachers to try out a new instructional strategy with young adolescents—in the relative safety of the institute context—and collaboratively

reflect with them on the strategy immediately after the lesson. In other cases, students served as advisors to small groups of teachers, or as panelists to larger groups, adding their young adolescent perspectives to discussions about middle grades organizational practices, such as grouping, scheduling, teaming, and teacher advisory.

Middle grades curriculum

One of the strands at the MGI invites teachers to explore the fundamentals of "challenging, exploratory, integrative and relevant" (NMSA, 2010, p. 17) curriculum. The foundation of the middle grades curriculum strand is a simulated, negotiated curriculum development process that grounds integrated, thematic learning in students' questions about themselves and the world (Beane, 1997). Accordingly, in that course's first few consultations, teachers and students are tasked with generating and categorizing students' questions in order to identify a theme for their unit development.

When asked to describe the role of the student consultation in their professional learning, teachers noted considerable student investment in the process and expressed gratitude for students' genuine contributions to curriculum planning. This teacher commented on the enthusiasm of the students for this work:

> … it was great to hear their investment and their ideas and how they were so excited about—like one of our students that we worked with was starting to draw one of the activities we talked about. She just couldn't wait, so she started to draw some of her ideas.

The deep student investment was evident in the student responses as well. One boy explained that, in the social studies class at his school, students had been able to choose Australia as the continent they would learn about. He felt selecting a continent, however, was different than designing curriculum based on his interests. He said:

> Instead of learning about boring things, [here at MGI] I picked evolution, and I really want to know more about that … I mean I don't really want to learn about Australia. I want to learn about something big and cool and how our human race came to be and all these awesome things!

Teachers were impressed by the productivity of the sessions and wished they had more time with the students. Many felt that the consultations helped them move forward with their ideas and planning. As one teacher

explained, working with students was more than merely "paying lip service" to the idea of student voice; instead, "We were able to actually do work together. It wasn't just [to] ask some questions about their middle school experience."

Another teacher described:

We were privileged to work with kids to develop a simulated curriculum model … they provided input in terms of the products they'd like to produce to demonstrate their knowledge of what they learned. I wish we had them more often because … they had lots of good stuff to share. And they were good at articulating what they like to do.

> **Bringing students into a course on middle grades curriculum shifted teachers' thinking about a democratic design process and students as legitimate partners in creating more relevant learning opportunities.**

The student consultations in this strand shifted some teachers' perspectives on the nature and content of curriculum, as expressed in this comment: "During curriculum building they showed how philosophical their thinking can be, how they are concerned with the bigger meanings of why we are here and how the curriculum should reflect that." Another respondent explained that the curriculum development simulation "reinforced the need for student voice when developing curriculum." Another teacher with more than 10 years of teaching experience revealed:

I feel like I've, over the years, developed a way to encourage student engagement and problem solving in the social arenas at school. But working with students in the Curriculum Strand toward curriculum integration gave me a great sense of how to democratize content.

Bringing students into a course on middle grades curriculum shifted teachers' thinking about a democratic design process and students as legitimate partners in creating more relevant learning opportunities. Similar shifts occurred in the strand on middle grades organization.

Middle grades organization

The primary objective of the middle grades organization strand is to examine "the ways schools organize teachers and group and schedule students" (NMSA, 2010, p. 31), including interdisciplinary teams, common planning time,

block scheduling, and de-tracking. If a teaching team attends the MGI as a group, they spend the week working together; if teachers attend MGI alone, they are assigned to a simulated teaching team for the week. Either way, they are tasked with designing key components of highly effective teams, including a team name, mission statement, use of common planning time, family involvement plan, service learning agenda, scheduling and grouping strategies, and transition plans. They draw on regular consultations with students to hone their work, including direct discussions, posing questions to a student panel, or collaboratively creating a presentation for a simulated school board meeting.

Teachers on both actual and simulated teams in this strand described the importance of student consultations to their learning. In a survey response, one teacher wrote, "The students were instrumental in providing a unique point of view in the design of an 'ideal' middle school." Noted another, "It helped us to understand what students want to do/see in their homerooms/advisories, which is the basis of our action research project."

The following exchange between an interdisciplinary team of three teachers and their consulting student illustrates the collaborative nature of the discussions. As the teachers brainstormed ways to help fifth graders and their families transition from several elementary schools onto their team, the consulting student's ideas were appreciated and integrated.

Teacher 1: We need to plan three information nights.

Teacher 2: Well, we could do one information night, like they could all come to the school but I was thinking that we could have three different trips to the schools.

Teacher 2: On the informational night, do we want all the kids coming together that night?

Student: And when the fifth graders meet the fifth graders [from another elementary school], what if all the fifth graders came up to the sixth graders? Because then they could meet each other, too.

Teacher 3: That's good, too.

Teacher 2: [Verbalizing as she takes notes] Fifth graders come to the sixth graders.

Teacher 3: Right. I think yeah, we're going to kind of do both of those, right? Cool.

Students reported appreciating this opportunity to discuss effective middle schooling. Describing his consultation on transition planning, one boy remarked, "We've talked a lot

about our change from elementary school to middle school. It was fun telling them what was scary about it, what I liked about it and all that." Other students brought unique perspectives to conversations about establishing and improving teacher advisory programs. One rising eighth grade girl recalled, "… I talked to them about like teacher advisories, and we don't have them in our school, and they wanted to see like if we think those were good ideas and stuff." Similarly, a rising seventh grade girl reported sharing her insights into the subtleties of implementing advisory:

> And then we were talking about TA's and advisories. And I really like talking about that because it's kind of an issue in my school, too.… One teacher might be really focused in the morning and he'll say all the announcements and then another teacher won't even pay attention to the students. And that's an issue that we have to face and so I like talking about that because it was just a lot to say.

The collaborative and productive nature of the consultation was appreciated by teachers and students alike. One teacher reflected on his consultant's role in providing feedback on proposed family involvement and transition plans. He recalled asking his student consultant, "Would you be doing this? Would you be okay to take this survey? Would you feel comfortable doing this?" "Whatever we're doing," he pointed out, "they're there." He further observed, "They're not here today, and we notice it…. She totally added to the group, the dynamics." For teachers in this strand, the consulting students became valued partners in planning the implementation of important organizational practices to improve middle schools.

Embedded literacy

The focus of the embedded literacy strand is to consider developmental responsiveness, engagement with text, and multi-literacies in 21st century middle grades classrooms. Participants in this strand plan instruction and assessment in their content areas while integrating literacy practices from the Common Core State Standards in English language arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In particular, they use the elements of genre-based pedagogy to address learning needs of English learners and struggling readers.

Unlike in the previous two strands, the participating teachers developed lessons in line with the course concepts, tried out the lessons with consulting students,

and then debriefed with the students afterward to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons. This consultation format struck several teachers as particularly valuable and unusual. As one teacher acknowledged:

> I haven't taken a class before that was actually with students so we could apply what we learned immediately in the context of the class. It's usually take this with you, try it out and talk about how you think it went. But even though it was a little nerve wracking, like, "Whoa, we're actually going to be teaching students tomorrow!" I mean it made sense that if we're learning how to teach these concepts that we would get to practice during a class and I'm actually wondering why that doesn't happen more often!

Teachers also appreciated the chance to receive feedback from students immediately after the lesson. A number of teachers were unaccustomed to inviting student perspectives on their instruction, usually relying instead on their own self-reflection. As one explained, "I found that incredibly valuable, particularly to ask like, 'Well, how did that go for you?' It isn't something we're typically taught to ask. It's usually our own opinion about, well, how do I think the lesson went?"

Finally, teachers were quick to point out that the feedback provided by students resulted in actual changes to lessons. As a result of his debrief with the students, one teacher noted that, "There were several things I jotted down, that when I teach this lesson again, I would change. That came right from the students."

Students took note of the teachers' attitudes, observing the authenticity the teachers offered. "They were really nice and it wasn't awkward or anything," observed one student. "They were open minded about all of our ideas and never put us down," another added. As one student concluded, "It was definitely different, but I have to admit that I did like it." Another student admitted, "I mean it's kind of cool to kind of tell them what to do instead of letting them boss you around."

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Productive practices

Participating teachers and students alike were remarkably consistent in their overall appreciation for including young adolescents in teacher education. In general, teachers found the students' insights and interactions valuable to their professional learning. Students were similarly positive, noting that, "It feels good that they're listening to you," and that, "It was really cool how they listened to all of the ideas and not like just keep [the conversation] to themselves." When teachers and students discussed the consultations at MGI, they revealed four key components of the model that contributed to this positive learning environment: intentional framing, active listening, professional distance, and supportive ratios.

Intentional framing

From beginning to end, MGI faculty consistently legitimized the presence and role of the student consultants, framing for teachers and students alike the purpose and significance of consultations. At the opening session of MGI, students were introduced as resident experts on what works for them in middle grades classrooms. Throughout the week, faculty members framed the consultations, including the curriculum, teaming and literacy teaching simulations, as rare opportunities to solicit expert input from students.

This expert status was carefully tended and maintained during the institute, including when speaking to the students themselves. For example, a faculty member of the curriculum strand offered the following explanation to students about the curriculum design process they had just begun, and the consultations with teachers that would follow later in the day:

> You guys worked this morning on questions and concerns you have about yourself and questions and concerns you have about the world…. And you're going to be working with the adults in the room to help them think about how they could create classroom activities and curriculum that is based on your interests. And I'm not sure if anybody's ever done that before, but you're going to kind of experience this process with the adults. And you are really the experts. You're serving as experts here for them. So we value everything you say and we're really looking forward to working with you today and tomorrow.

Some MGI teacher participants picked up on the importance of this framing and integrated it into their own interactions with their middle school-aged consultants. In

the middle grades organization strand, for example, one teacher used the following language to ask her consulting student, Margaret, about a move-up event in her school: "So the next transition activity is in the spring. And I think Margaret's an expert on this. I really liked your ideas about how you had your meeting where they came to your school."

Active listening

Several students noted the importance of active listening as key to a successful experience. One boy explained how he perceived teachers' taking notes during a consultation as an indicator of his being heard:

> I know that they will listen to me and they will [write] it down. If I had one of my teachers [at my school] … I wouldn't think they would put it down. Like I wouldn't think they would care what I said. These teachers [at MGI] that I didn't know, they actually cared about what I said…. And like I think if we hear them, then they will hear us back because I think if we respect them, they'll respect us, too…. It's like, if they're talking to us and they have an idea, we would write it down and we would care about it. And I think that would be the same way if we told them something, they would write it down and they would actually care about it.

During a lesson consultation, two teachers were very deliberate in acknowledging and soliciting student input. "I want to read you some of your answers because they were very interesting," said one, prior to reading the student's words aloud so she could hear them. Another teacher observed how active listening paid off: "We had two [students] who were very talkative and one who was very quiet. But the quiet one began to talk, I think, as she began to feel comfortable with us asking questions and not judging answers."

Professional distance

Participants often spoke about MGI's unique opportunity for consultations among teachers and students who had never previously met. One teacher voiced a common perspective:

> Often I try to encourage feedback and input from my own students to better my practice as an educator. However, because the students are connected to me, I don't know that they are as straightforward as I would like them to be. Because these students [at MGI] were

not connected to me as their classroom teacher, I believe they were more open and honest about their experiences—this is important.

Similarly, a first-year teacher, self-described as "struggling with just being a new teacher," acknowledged that "there are advantages if they're not my kids that I've had all year. I think it gives them a fresh start and me a fresh start." Another educator surmised, "They might feel safer." Still another asserted:

> I have a feeling—because I was probably one of those kids myself when I was younger—if I sat and had these discussions with my own students, they're going to try to say what they think I want them to say. These kids, they don't have that filter.

Some teachers expressed confidence that their own students were up to the task of consultations. One teacher noted, "When I've asked my own students the same kinds of questions, they've been very forthcoming." Another teacher cautioned, however, "I think a lot of them are honest enough to tell me what they honestly think, but I think that's a developmental level that a lot of kids aren't at. They want to please."

Although some students shared this preference for consulting with strangers, one student offered a more nuanced perspective:

> I don't think it would be too terribly different [to consult with my own teachers], but if we were trying to talk about an issue in school and it may have been involved with that teacher it probably would have been a little harder to say it because you don't want to hurt their feelings or something. But besides that, I wouldn't really have a problem saying what I said to them to my other teachers.

His peer elaborated, "When you're talking to your teacher, you're usually more scared and apt to not say that much. But like since these aren't our actual teachers and we feel comfortable around them … it feels more easy to express what we feel."

Supportive ratios

Teachers and students also saw the benefits of having more than one student in a consultation. Teachers worried that small consulting groups with only one student may be uncomfortable for the student. A teacher in the curriculum strand who spent several days developing curriculum in a group with one student suggested that "having one student and three adults may be a good mix to

have sometimes but … I felt like sometimes we were just sucking the life out of her." In her assessment, "There's plusses, that you really get to know a kid, but the minus is that you only get one perspective and one perspective is not enough." Another teacher described the ideal group as "two or three adults, couple of kids."

Students agreed. One student noted, "I like to be with another student because when they're talking, I can have time to think." Another student also appreciated the chance to think "instead of getting the answer right away." Some teachers encouraged a higher student to adult ratio, "So instead of having three students and four adults, it was more like you could have two adults and three students or something." And regardless of ratio, many teachers simply requested more time with students. As one offered, "It was amazing how much help the students were able to provide. I would love to see even more time spent with students in the future."

Ongoing challenges

As teachers and students acquired a new appreciation for the role students can play as pedagogues, their perceptions of each other shifted from more familiar teacher-student and adult-child roles to ones marked by humanness and partnership. Students particularly appreciated a shift in teacher-student dynamics during MGI consultations; their traditional role of conscientious listener was taken up instead by teachers. The work of integrating middle schoolers into teacher education is not without its challenges. As Cook-Sather (2015) asserted:

> It is essential that anyone engaged in student voice work critically analyze the politics in play, the way power dynamics between students and teachers (and administrators and researchers) play out in that work, and what the underlying assumptions about the purpose of education are. An approach that addresses all of these questions is the movement away from speaking *about* and *for* students toward a more dialogic alternative of speaking *with* them. (p. 2)

One dilemma worth critically analyzing emerged from a consultation in the middle grades organization strand, aimed at creating a name for the group's simulated team. A consulting student's passion for the rock band, the Grateful Dead, led her to suggest "Deadheads" as a possible team name. One newer teacher, who also enjoyed the band, tried to work with her idea, being careful not to

reject her suggestion out of hand. Eventually, a more veteran teacher in the group said plainly:

> I think Deadhead has a whole lot of connotations that really are middle school not appropriate. Because in our school, the ultimate term for deadhead is drug user. You know? And I just don't think that that's like middle school appropriate.

A subsequent conversation raised questions about whether or not teachers and students should be friends, the slippery slope for new teachers wanting to be cool. It highlighted the compromises inherent in cultivating student voice while also exuding the strength and values students ultimately need from the adults around them. In her debrief with teachers later in the day, the older teacher shared, "I rained on their parade. Like an old person. Like I know you have to give kids a voice but you also have to give them a framework for what's appropriate."

This discussion spoke to the sometimes subtle challenges that accompany a shift in voice and authority. The dialogue resonated with one of the newer teachers:

> I was open to the idea of maybe incorporating [The Grateful Dead] into the team name, but as soon as one of the older educators [objected] … that really sparked something interesting for me. I wanted to involve [the student's] voice in the name of the team but was I compromising something by just overlooking that? And maybe it's me wanting to incorporate her voice so much that I should have stopped myself and kind of lost my own judgment there.

Although he continued to wrestle with how the group might have best handled the incident, this teacher concluded that it "goes miles for me thinking about next year." He explained, "You know, when this comes up again, now that I've had that experience, I can say, oh, wait a minute, I think I've handled this situation before." That even tricky or difficult situations can contribute positively to teacher learning suggests that, while not always easy, inviting students into the work of teacher education holds great potential.

Next steps

Implementing characteristics of effective middle schools is challenging work. Our work demonstrates that consultations at a summer institute, between teachers and middle schoolers who did not know each other, were perceived positively by most teachers and students. The consultations repositioned students as educators, introduced alternatives to traditional teacher-student hierarchies, and advanced the practical work of teachers trying to create schools responsive to young adolescents. The productive practices described by participants may help others successfully integrate student consultation into professional development institutes. However, the dilemma described above reminds us to be diligent about constantly improving student-teacher consultations at MGI. As we look forward look ahead, we infer a number of suggestions from our study.

Teachers could be better prepared for consultations, such as preparing questions and lines of inquiry ahead of time and reviewing active listening skills, such as taking notes about and restating students' comments. Steps could be taken to make sure teachers are fully aware of the value students themselves placed on being embraced as experts and pedagogues. We also want to understand how the role of young adolescent as a teacher educator at the institute might expand beyond that of consultant. We wonder how technology might increase the diversity, availability, and variety of consultation opportunities, and we are interested in how student-teacher consultations might be integrated into school-based teacher learning and comprehensive programs for professional development and teacher preparation.

Most importantly, we wonder how teachers can reposition their own students and solicit the honest insights and critiques heard from students they did not previously know. Rudduck (2007) found that one benefit of student consultations was a more open perception of young people's capabilities on the part of teachers. Nelson (2015) argued for authentic voice as regimes of truth that students and teachers forge together. In a field known for attending to student voice, we found teachers' new appreciation for students to be somewhat unexpected. As one experienced teacher admitted, "I felt bad that I didn't expect it already; I'm very impressed with how open these kids are and how well spoken they are." Another teacher added, "They are articulate and they're verbal and they really are interested in this process." Another teacher's comments captured other frequently shared impressions:

> What I was amazed about was their self-confidence. They didn't know us from Adam and they just came in and seemed so happy to answer us and work with us. They were poised. If they were a bit shy, they worked off each other.

The past several decades were characterized by withering critiques of traditional teacher preparation and the rapid proliferation of alternative credentialing bodies, such as

Teach for America and Troops to Teachers. Researchers and policymakers are asking, who should do the work of teacher education, and what qualifies them to do such work? We propose that middle grades students, and their valued insights into teaching and learning, are part of the answer.

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