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The Middle Grades Principal: A Research Agenda

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Abstract

Advocates for middle grades education suggest that principals are critical to the implementation of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and organizational structures that meet young adolescent needs. Yet, there is little evidence associating principal practices outlined by middle grades proponents to outcomes or how principals learn the knowledge and practices middle grades advocates propose. This essay explores the limited research connecting middle grades principal leadership with school and student outcomes, how middle school principals learn the practices outlined by proponents of middle grades education, and proposes a research agenda and questions about middle grades principal learning.

Recently members of the American Educational Research Associations (AERA) Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER-SIG) developed a five-year agenda to guide researchers in efforts to understand and improve education for young adolescents (Mertens et al., 2016). Of the 147 distinct research questions within the eight broad areas of focus outlined in the agenda, only two questions specifically addressed the middle grades' principal. This limited focus on the middle grades (MG) principalship is not a new issue. Historically, there has been a paucity of research that defines effective MG principal leadership, determines whether effective MG leadership varies from general principal leadership, and delineates where and how MG principals learn to lead in the middle (Brown & Anfara, 2002; Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Research on general principal leadership has clearly outlined the importance of the principal in developing organizational structures, supporting effective teaching and learning, and developing a culture conducive to learning that leads to positive student outcomes (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Leithwood and colleagues (2004) provided a well-quoted summary of the importance of principal leadership, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). MG advocates have long outlined the need for implementing unique practices and school structures in schools in order to meet young adolescent needs and improve student outcomes (Alexander, 1965; Eichhorn, 1966). The MG literature suggests that effective

principal leadership is characterized by implementing these practices and structures (Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, & Kelly, 1969; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Missing in the MG literature is a research base that supports this contention. Additionally, little is known about how principals learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that advocates suggest are foundational for effective MG principal leadership.

The purpose of this essay is to extend the MLER-SIG research agenda to more specifically address MG principal leadership and how middle grades principals learn to lead. I do so by examining the research specific to the MG principalship and propose five targeted research questions that may guide those interested in advancing our understanding of MG principal leadership. I frame this proposed research agenda within three overarching areas: connecting specific MG principal knowledge, skills, and dispositions to student outcomes, MG principal preparation, and MG principal professional development.

Connecting MG Principal Leadership to Outcomes

Early MG advocates such as Alexander (1965), Eichhorn (1966), Lounsbury (1984), and Vars (1965) outlined educator practices, as well as organizational structures, that met the intellectual, moral, physical, emotional, and social needs for students ages 11-14. Though limited, evidence suggested that the combination of MG practices and structures positively influenced school and student outcomes (Felner, Jackson, & Kasak, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhull, 1999; Mertens &

Flowers, 2003).

The need for principals who understand young adolescent needs, as well as organizational structures and practices that support the developmental needs of these students, became a part of the 'middle grades concept' and a major theme in early middle school publications (Alexander & Kelly, 1969; Bickmore et al., 2003). The MG literature suggested effective principals should understand and advocate for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and organizational structures that meet young adolescent developmental needs, such as shared leadership, scheduling, and structures that promote student and teacher collaboration and real-life learning activities (Brown & Anfara, 2002; Clark & Clark, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000). More recent middle grades scholars have also suggested that educators support young adolescent needs beyond a strict developmental approach. These advocates suggest principals should also understand and provide for the contextual, socially constructed lives of young adolescents inherent in a pluralistic society (Brinegar, 2015; Nelson, 2015; Vagle, 2015).

Unfortunately, the research connection between those advocating for unique knowledge, skills, and disposition for MG principals and principal effectiveness is limited (Brinegar, 2015; Gale & Bishop, 2014), and most studies are over 10 years old. Although state and regional studies examined effective middle level leadership, these studies did not attempt to connect principal practices to actual student outcomes (Brown & Anfara, 2003; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011). However, three sets of national research programs in the US sponsored by the National Association of Secondary Principals (NASSP) are the basis for evidence connecting MG leadership with school and some student outcomes (Keefe, Clark, Nickerson, & Valentine, 1983; Valentine, Clark, Hackman, & Petzko, 2002, 2004; Valentine, Clark, Irvine, Keefe, & Melton, 1993; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, & Keefe, 1981). In each set (1981/82, 1993/1993, 2002/2004), the researchers surveyed the general population of MG school principals across the US and identified a subset of schools in which the principals were highly effective based on criteria that coincided with effective leadership in general, and effective leadership in the MG literature. In comparing principals in high performing schools with their peers, the principal was a key factor in moving the school

to implement MG practices and organizational structures.

Although the NASSP studies did not statistically correlate or predict MG leadership practices with student outcomes, they offered a perspective on practices that could be effective in the learning of MG students. NASSP discontinued its support for the national surveys of MG principals and there have been no national or regional studies on the practices of MG principals since 2004. However, the U.S. Department of Education's upcoming MG Longitudinal Study of 2017-18 will contain questions about MG principals. This research will provide data about the MG principalship and potential student outcomes, but it will not be as extensive as the NASSP survey related to principal practice, nor will the focus of the research be the middle level principal. Current research being conducted at the Center for Prevention Research and Development (2016), which examines effective principal practices associated with the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, may also identify unique effective practices of MG principals associated with student outcomes.

The paucity of research specific to MG principal practices and school and student outcomes leads to the first research question in the broader research agenda about MG principal leadership:

1. How are various MG principal practices, as outlined in the MG research and literature, associated with school, teacher, and student outcomes?

To address this question, researchers need to develop comprehensive regional and national studies that use common protocols that measure school and student outcomes.

MG Principal Preparation

The NASSP studies also opened questions about how MG principals learned to lead in the middle. Analysis of the last two sets of studies (Keefe et al., 1993; Valentine et al., 2002, 2004; Valentine et al., 1993) revealed that even the highly effective principals had little formal preparations in MG leadership. Only 6% of highly effective MG principals and 4% of all principals had MG administrative certification. The vast majority of all MG principals, including highly effective MG principals in the 2002/04 research, had generic K-12 or secondary certification (87% for highly

effective principals and 85% for the national sample). This concurred with Gaskill's 2002 U.S. study of MG administrative certification, which indicated that no states required MG certification and only five states required some type of MG credential as part of certification. Regrettably, the research about MG principal formal preparation, learning, and credentialing is more than 10 years old and predates student accountability policies. There are no national studies examining how any certification program may incorporate courses or a focus on how leading schools with young adolescents may be different.

McEwin, Smith, and Dickenson (2003) suggested political and practical reasons why government agencies do not require principal credentialing for MG leaders, including the need for flexibility in hiring and staffing, educator shortage, as well as cost. However, it is difficult to make a case that specific preparation for MG administrators is necessary without a basic understanding of if and how principals are prepared for MG leadership. The first step in connecting principal preparation to implementation of effective MG leadership practices is to replicate the Gaskill (2002) study. Gaskill suggested certification policies affect whether educators are prepared for middle level education. Thus, the second and third research questions of the proposed research agenda are:

2. Are states or nations certifying principals to lead middle level schools and if so, why do these policies exist?
3. How do credentialing policies affect principal preparation?

As a correlate to the above questions, I propose a third question related to principal preparation:

4. Are there traditional or alternative administrative preparation programs that prepare school administrators to specifically lead schools with young adolescents and, if so, how are the administrators prepared for those leadership roles?

Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, and Thompson's (2016) research explored MG teacher preparation across the country. This research may be a template for those interested in how MG principals are prepared.

MG Principal Professional Development

Without specific state credentialing requirements and with the dearth of research related to formal preparation for MG principals, the evidence suggests principals may learn about MG leadership outside of preparation. The 2004 NASSP research on highly effective principals indicated that MG principals learn to be effective MG leaders through professional learning, not preparation (Valentine et al., 2004). The authors noted that the largest discrepancy between the highly effective MG principals and the national sample was related to professional development activities. Highly effective principals were more likely to engage in and value MG professional development than the national sample.

Interestingly, the body of research outlining the professional development of MG principals is broader than that of the principals' effect on school and student outcomes or middle grade principal preparation. It is unclear why there is a larger volume of MG principal professional development research. Regardless, Brown, Anfara, Hartman, Mahar, and Mills (2001) summarized the state of research related to MG principal professional development, "Although middle level principals are essential to current school reform, their professional development is one of its most neglected aspects. Research, literature, and support in this area are scarce and poorly coordinated" (p. i). Since the Brown et al. (2001) study, scant research has been conducted examining the professional development of MG principals, even though it appears this is where principals may learn how to lead in MG schools.

Professional Development and Effective MG Principal Leadership

The MG literature touts the importance of MG principals engaging in professional development that supports young adolescent learning (Anfara, 2013; Clark & Clark, 2002; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2010; Petzko, 2003). A small body of research suggests a positive connection between professional development and implementation of principal practices associated with MG leadership. Several studies point to middle grade principals expressing the desire and need to engage in professional development that will enhance their effectiveness as MG principals (Anfara et al., 2000; Brown & Anfara, 2002; Neufeld, 1997; Ricciardi, 1999). However, the

first indication of a connection between professional development and improved MG principal practice came through the NASSP studies (Keefe et al., 1983; Valentine et al., 2002, 2004). Keefe et al. (1983) determined that highly effective MG principals spent more time in professional development activities, such as attending conferences or pursuing formal learning experiences, than the general MG principal populations. In subsequent 1993 and 2002 NASSP research of the general principal population (Petzko, Clark, Valentine, Hackmann, Nori, & Lucas, 2002; Valentine et al., 2002; Valentine et al., 1993), findings indicated MG principals participated in a number of professional development activities and the majority believed the learning was valuable. Findings from the 2002 general principal population study also indicated that MG principals participated to a greater extent in professional development activities than in the previous national studies.

The three sets of NASSP studies previously outlined were descriptive and did not support the premise that professional development correlated or predicted MG principals' practices as delineated by MG advocates (Keefe et al., 1983; Keefe et al., 1993; Valentine et al., 2002, 2004; Valentine et al., 1993; Valentine et al., 1981). Bickmore's 2012 study of MG principals appears to be the only research to date that statistical correlated professional development with MG leadership practices. Using Anfar, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, and Gross' (2006) Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire (MLLQ), Bickmore (2012) surveyed principals in a southern state and determined that there was a correlation between the principals' professional development activities and their MG leadership practices. Higher levels of engagement in informal learning experiences, such as book clubs and networking with other professional educators, correlated to and predicted principal practices directly related to MG tenets with respect to students, teachers, and the organization.

Professional Development Activities and Content for MG principals

Bickmore's (2012) research was built upon three previous studies of Neufeld (1997), Ricciardi (1999), and Brown, Anfar, Hartma, Mahar, and Mills (2002) that outlined the types of activities MG principals indicated they desired and that would support their practice as MG

principals. Neufeld (1997) interviewed MG principals to determine their perceptions of the usefulness of professional activities in which they participated as part of a professional development program for urban MG principals involved in school reform. These principals valued working in cohorts and engaging in activities that occurred over time, allowed them to practice content they learned, and involved them in shaping their own learning. They also appreciated effective coaching and reflecting on their own learning. Ricciardi (1999) also explored the types of professional development activities MG principals found useful as they were involved in reform activities. Analysis of the data indicated that principals found professional development useful and preferred activities that were highly individualized with varied delivery types. Additionally, Ricciardi (1999) determined that gender and years of experience predicted what types of professional development activities principals preferred. Brown et al. (2002) analyzed interviews of how principals learn best and resulted in findings similar to those of Neufeld (1997) and Ricciardi (1999). Principals described the best types of learning as including identification of their needs and involvement in planning; reflection within the school context; sharing with other colleagues; professional development supported by district time, money and resources; and instruction delivered by competent instructors using practical, adult learning processes.

Limited research of preferred learning experiences of MG principals follows tenets of effective middle level education as outlined in the literature. Principals favored collaborative activities that were authentic and connected to problems of practice and that promoted reflection, while suggesting that activities be supported with adequate and effective resources. Findings also suggested that effective MG principals might value professional learning activities more than their less effective peers (Valentine et al., 2004).

Neufeld (1997), Ricciardi (1999), and Brown et al. (2002) also explored the content MG principal preferred as they engaged in professional learning. Four themes emerged from Neufeld's study. First, MG principals wanted further knowledge and skill in implementing effective leadership practices as defined in the general leadership literature such as developing school vision. Second, they wanted to know how to create a collaborative culture for

change. Third, they wanted to know more about the pedagogy and curriculum being implemented by their teachers as part of MG reform efforts within their schools. Fourth, principals wanted to know how to assess the effectiveness of the implemented reforms.

Similarly, Ricciardi (1999) surveyed principals who were heavily involved in reforms specifically related to developmental responsiveness as outlined by the MG concept. Of the 21 content needs surveyed by Ricciardi (1999), all were perceived as important. However, when examining the data as a whole, Ricciardi suggested principals prioritized strategies advocated in the MG literature that improved student learning. Principals were particularly interested in understanding curriculum and instruction that met young adolescents' learning needs.

The findings of Brown et al. (2002) intersected with those of Neufeld (1997) and Ricciardi (1999) with respect to MG principals' perceived needs for culture, curriculum, and instructions. Specifically, Brown et al. (2002) identified three themes related to principals' perceived content needs, which were associated with how to: (1) nurture a collegial and collaborative learning environment; (2) implement and assess new instructional methods and strategies; and (3) remain current organizationally, legally, financially, and technologically.

These three studies indicated that MG principals appeared to value content that helped them better understand curricular and instructional practices in general and those specific to MG teaching and learning. The studies also suggested that MG principals wanted to know how to develop a collaborative school culture. Although the concept of a collaborative culture and leadership is gaining prominence in the general school leadership literature (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Murphy, Yff, & Shipman, 2000), it has long been a major tenet of MG education (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2010; The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2015).

As a whole, the research surrounding MG principal professional development is based on principal perceptions. Knowledge of professional development activities and content principals prefer can lead to changes in practices and the next iteration of professional development

research, which leads to the fifth and final research question:

5. How do various professional development activities, in association with content specific to MG leadership, influence principal practices?

The Big Picture

It is difficult to make any assertions about the MG principal based on so few empirical studies examining the specific knowledge, practices, and dispositions suggested by those advocating for young adolescents. This essay speaks to the need to develop a research agenda that can provide a chain of evidence to answer the question of whether MG principal leadership is substantially different from leadership at other grade levels and whether principals in the middle grades need to be educated specifically to lead in the middle. The fulcrum for this research is the connection between principal knowledge and practices that align with MG education and school/student outcomes.

The research proposed is complicated yet necessary to provide a rationale for educating MG principals with specific knowledge and practices to lead in the middle. The research reported in this essay suggests little availability for preparation or professional development specific to MG leadership. Research indicating aligning specific middle grade principal practices with student outcomes has the potential to heighten the need to require some type of credentialing for MG leaders. Credentialing (endorsement, certification and licensure) may increase access to pre-service programs and professional development specific to MG leadership (Gaskill, 2002; Howell et al., 2016). Leveraging research outlining how specific MG principal practices impact students may be a driver for such increased programming and development.

The connection between practice and outcomes also forms the basis for how best to prepare and develop MG principals. Although the studies presented in this essay suggest MG principals desire authentic, collaborative activities to prompt their learning, only one study correlates these activities to principal practices identified in the literature as effective MG leadership (Bickmore, 2012). Similarly, the extant research surrounding the content of professional development for MG principals provides only

tangential connection to effective MG leadership practices. Even though the content desired by MG principals included what advocates suggested are important knowledge, skills, and dispositions for MG principals, the existing research has not correlated this desired content to implementation of effective MG principal practice. Effective MG principal learning should be tied to principal practices, which in turn should be connected to school and student outcomes.

Additionally, the research questions posed strengthen methodological issues in the existing research surrounding MG principals. Research of MG principal professional learning relies almost exclusively on principal self-report. The research also relies heavily on qualitative designs and principal interviews. Only two reported studies provided more than descriptive analysis, thus limiting generalizability. Additionally, with the exception of the NASSP studies, the research is state or locally based, also limiting generalizability beyond participants in each study. Finally, the empirical research is dated, with few studies published since 2002.

Jackson and Davis (2000) contended, “No single individual is more important in initiating and sustain improvement in MG school students’ performance than the school principal” (p.157). This essay highlights the need for a robust research agenda that can support this statement by connecting practicing principal’s learning with the effective practices of MG principals outlined in the MG literature. This agenda is ambitious, but should be situated in a broader research agenda focused on school and student outcomes. The research illuminating MG principals’ practices and learning ultimately will be of value only if it leads to positive outcomes – effective MG leadership that meets the needs of young adolescents.

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