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## Teaching in the Middle Grades Today: Examining Teachers' Beliefs About Middle Grades Teaching

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## **Teaching in the Middle Grades Today: Examining Teachers' Beliefs About Middle Grades Teaching**

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### Abstract

Since the beginning of the middle school movement in the mid-1960s, middle level advocates have called for a school experience for young adolescents grounded in adolescent development that engages students in meaningful learning (Alexander & Williams, 1965; Eichhorn, 1966). The aim of this exploratory multi-case study was to understand middle level teachers' beliefs about middle level instruction in the current educational environment. To gain this understanding, researchers asked 10 current middle grades teachers with varying levels of experience to discuss their beliefs regarding their primary purpose as a middle grades teacher, the current status of middle level teaching, their best and worst instructional lessons, and their perceived barriers to teaching at the middle level. The teachers described the role of teaching in the middle grades as challenging and stressful, but of great importance. In general, they described instruction that included discovery, student engagement, and relevance in an effort to address students' academic development. There was minimal mention of the non-academic aspects of adolescent development. Finally, teachers viewed curriculum restrictions, students' attitudes toward learning, difficulty with differentiation, and lack of technology as significant barriers to their success in the classroom.

Since the beginning of the middle school movement in the mid-1960s, middle level advocates have called for a school experience for young adolescents that is both grounded in adolescent development (physical, social, emotional, moral, and cognitive needs) and engages students in relevant, integrated, challenging, and exploratory learning experiences (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010; Toepfer, 1997). To accomplish this goal, middle level schools are to provide specific organizational structures (e.g., teaming, advisory programs, common planning time, interdisciplinary units) to support a student-centered learning environment in which children receive a more individualized educational experience in a smaller, meaningful, learning community (Beane, 1997; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000). This developmentally responsive approach is commonly referred to as the middle school model. While support for the model has generally increased over the past 50 years, current educational challenges appear to be stalling any positive momentum. Due to teacher shortages, alternative certification options, decreased funding in public schools, increased emphasis on assessment demands, and inconsistent implementation of the specific

components of the middle school model in schools, the question exists as to whether this type of educational experience is still commonplace in middle grade schools across the US.

As teacher educators who spend time in numerous classrooms, we have noticed the seeming lack of understanding of the middle grades philosophy and reduced commitment to key middle school organizational structures and practices. While some teachers articulate the belief that the middle school model is a philosophical framework to guide their practice, their instructional decisions and practices within their current teaching context do not always reflect the beliefs they articulate. We were interested in examining the beliefs of teachers who completed a specialized middle level teacher preparation program and their perceptions about their own teaching. As such, this exploratory study sought to capture the perceptions of current middle grades teachers and their experiences and beliefs about teaching in a middle grades school. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of middle grades teachers about the current status of teaching at the middle level?
2. What do teachers consider their primary purpose as teachers of middle grades students?
3. What characteristics and activities are present in teachers' descriptions of the instructional lessons they are least and most proud of?
4. What are the barriers to teaching at the middle level?

### Framework

The framework for this study is grounded in the core tenets of the middle school model (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010), the core principles of effective teaching and learning at the middle level (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995, 1997; NMSA, 2010), and the understanding that teacher beliefs influence instructional decisions (Nespor, 1987; Richardson, 2003) and shape instructional practices (Cuban, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Niederhauser & Stoddart, 2001). As articulated in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), the middle school philosophy is grounded in 4 essential attributes and 16 characteristics that provide a foundation for effective schooling for young adolescents. The four essential attributes middle grades schools must address are being developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and advocating for equity. Further, the 16 characteristics are organized into three primary areas—curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community—and emphasize the importance of staffing classrooms with teachers specifically prepared to work with the age group. Teachers are expected to engage children in a challenging curriculum that meets their developmental needs through using a variety of instructional strategies designed to embrace meaningful and active learning.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) outlined recommendations for transforming middle grades schools. The Council emphasized the need to ensure academic success through student-centered learning communities led by teachers who are

experts at working with middle grades students. In *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Jackson and Davis (2000) address the need for middle grades schools to embrace a rigorous school experience that highlights meaningful curriculum and engages students with excellent instruction in small learning communities. Specifically, Jackson and Davis (2000) assert, “Schools grounded in the *Turning Points* design are dedicated to excellence and equity and to being responsive to the developmental needs of all young adolescents” (p.11). It is through addressing the developmental needs of young adolescents that provide the foundation for the specific organizational structures (e.g., advisory programs, interdisciplinary teams, common planning time) designed for middle grade schools. Howell and colleagues (2013) also highlighted the components of effective middle grades teaching in the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices*. This framework illustrates how the core components of adolescent development, organizational structures, teacher dispositions and professional behaviors, and relationships provide the lens for how content knowledge, assessment, classroom management, and curriculum and instruction should be addressed in the middle grades school.

To enhance the likelihood teachers are prepared to work with this age group, the AMLE (2015) has identified key essential elements that all teacher preparation programs that prepare middle grades teachers should ensure their graduates experienced. Specifically, teachers certified to teach middle grades should have a thorough understanding and appreciation of young adolescent development, middle level philosophy and organization, middle level curriculum, subject matter knowledge, middle level field experiences, and middle level planning, teaching, and assessment. Several organizations and advocacy groups called for specialized middle grades teacher preparation addressed through the elements of effective middle grades teaching (e.g., Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002; NMSA, 2010).

Philosopher Thomas Green (1971) stated, “Teaching is an activity which has to do, among other things, with the modification and formation of belief systems” (p. 48). Teacher beliefs can influence instructional decisions (Nespor, 1987; Richardson, 2003) and shape

instructional practices (Cuban, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Niederhauser & Stoddart, 2001). This is the case for all subject areas including math (Vacc & Brights, 1999), science (Bryan, 2011; Czerniak & Lumpe, 1996), history (Voet & DeWever, 2016; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988), literacy (Fang, 1996) as well as instructional technology use (Ertmer, 2005; Kim, Kim, Lee, Spector, & DeMeester, 2013). For example, teachers will spend more time on instructional practices they see as more valid or more important (Anning, 1988; Powers, Zippay, & Butler, 2006; Winograd & Johnson, 1987). The term “beliefs” has been difficult to define as researchers have often used beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, values, and perceptions interchangeably (Richardson, 2003). For the purposes of this paper we will use Harvey’s (1986) definition of beliefs. He describes them as a “set of conceptual representations which signify to its hold a reality or given state of affairs of sufficient validity, truth and/or trustworthiness to warrant reliance upon it as a guide to personal thought or action” (p. 660). In short, beliefs shape practice (Cuban, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Niederhauser & Stoddart, 2001).

Furthermore, beliefs can influence the expectations teachers have of students and student achievement (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). One of the characteristics of beliefs are existential qualities such as laziness (Nespor, 1987), which can affect expectations for students and their achievement by the teacher (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). For example, if a teacher believes a student is underachieving they could attribute that to laziness, not providing the adequate instruction for that student. While a great deal of empirical evidence has established the significance of beliefs for understating teacher behavior (see reviews by Calderhead 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002; Pajares, 1992), few have examined middle grades beliefs and how they can influence practice. Although little has been written about how teacher’s beliefs about middle grades are formed, there is little reason to think they follow a path different from that described for other beliefs.

When the tenets of effective middle level schooling and teaching are supported and implemented with integrity, studies have indicated positive outcomes in both student growth and performance (Anfara, 2004; Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Jackson

& Davis, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1993; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998). It is through this lens that we view the types of schooling and teaching experiences that should be provided to young adolescents in the middle grades. As such, the focus of this study was to capture the beliefs and practices of middle grades teachers within current middle grades schools.

## Methodology

This exploratory multi-case study examined the beliefs and practices of current middle grades teachers. After obtaining IRB approval, data were collected by focused, semi-structured interviews of current middle grades teachers who have varying levels of experience, in a range of school settings (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) from multiple school districts in the Midwest.

## Participants

To conduct this inquiry, we used a convenience sample of current middle grades teachers (with at least four years of experience) in schools in the mid-west. Initially, invitations were sent to 32 teachers asking for voluntary participation. Of the teachers who received invitations, 10 responded (27%). Participants represented 10 schools (three urban, two rural, and five suburban) in eight school districts in two Midwestern states.

Study participants were asked to complete a brief online demographic survey which included questions about years of teaching experience, teacher preparation, and subjects taught. Participants included five male and five female middle grades teachers (see Table 1). Of the 10 participants, eight reported completion of a traditional, undergraduate middle level teacher preparation program, while the remaining two earned certification through a middle grades extension certification program added to a secondary certification.

## Data Collection and Analysis

After agreeing to take part in the study, participants received an email with instructions and a URL directing them to an online demographic survey. We contacted the participants upon the completion of the online survey to schedule individual interviews. An online video conferencing tool was used when conducting the interviews. All interviews were

audio and video recorded through this tool's recording feature.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed using the middle grades concepts and philosophy. All interview items were open-ended to encourage in-depth reflection and response by the participants. In general, the 11 interview items asked participants to describe their purpose as a middle grades teacher, their best and worst lessons, and barriers they saw to their teaching. Sample prompts included: "What is your primary role as a middle grades teacher?"; "What would happen in an ideal class for middle school students?"; and "What barriers/challenges stand in your way of creating a positive learning environment in your classroom?" With each question, we probed for more complete responses when necessary. Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length.

Data were analyzed using the coding of qualitative data (Patton, 2002). Pre-conceived categories for coding were derived from the research literature on the middle level model, while emergent categories were derived inductively from the data, following the methods of the development of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2009). Sample codes included, *curriculum*, *adolescent development*, and *context*. We first read the transcripts holistically to gain a deep understanding of the data set and then coded the transcripts individually. Constant comparison was used to identify themes between all transcripts. Constant comparison is the process of examining differences and similarities to identify trends between multiple sections of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Coded transcripts were read and discussed until one hundred percent consensus was reached on all codes.

## Findings

### Primary Purpose of Middle Grades Teaching

In exploring teachers' perceptions of their primary purpose as teachers of middle grades students, it was evident teachers viewed themselves as facilitators of learning challenged with the task of creating lifelong learners. There was clear emphasis on the development of the whole child and establishing behaviors in students that will lead to a successful future. All teachers indicated some level of responsibility in helping prepare students for the future. For

instance, teachers' responses indicated their purpose was to engage students in meaningful learning, inspire students to want to learn, prepare children to be successful adults, create well-rounded problem solvers, teach children to become critical thinkers, create a safe place where children have opportunities to learn, prepare students for high school and long-term success, help children become active participants in a democratic society, and broaden students' horizons. All teachers acknowledged their role, as a teacher, was greater than simply teaching specific content areas. Teachers wanted students to have opportunities to discover who they are as learners and have opportunities to discover the potential in their future. David, a seventh grade math teacher, reported:

I don't care if I'm teaching math, or I'm teaching technology, or they are in a language arts class, I want students to set goals and have some foresight of where they want to be...I think it is our job to provide students opportunities to figure these things out.

In addition, Ryan, a mathematics and technology teacher revealed, "This is the point where kids are discovering themselves – they're going through changes physically, mentally, emotionally. Helping them handle these and still want to learn and keep them interested in learning is my primary purpose." Further, Michelle, a seventh grade mathematics teacher stated her desire was "to get a kid to want to learn and teach them skills where they are able to be self-reliant and problem solve through things." Next, teachers were asked to describe the current status of teaching in the middle grades.

While teachers reported their primary purpose in teaching was creating lifelong learners and helping prepare students for the future, several responses represent a contradiction from their beliefs to the actual implementation in the classroom. For example, Kimberly reported,

We teach all these terms (vocabulary) and we teach them how to do things, but when it comes to applying them to everyday life situations or the real world, the kids can't make those connections. I think we are teaching so much to the test and these kids are actually going to struggle in a career because they are so

used to learning for one specific purpose instead of applying what they have learned to many things.

Andrew also added,

It's hard to burn a lot of class minutes with open-ended stuff (student exploration) because you never know where the end result is going to lead you. If I need to teach system of equations, and I have a specific window to do that, it's hard to work in an open-ended lesson where they may or may not arrive at the fact.

Contextual factors appeared to be influencing several teachers' enactment of their primary purpose of teaching.

### **Teacher Perceptions on the Current Status of Teaching**

The general perceptions of teachers on the current status of teaching at the middle grade level are fairly consistent—teaching at the middle level is a stressful and continuously changing profession that is of great importance. While teachers reported increased stress levels, overall teachers viewed their professional life as a middle grades teacher in a positive manner. The teachers enjoyed their jobs, but were troubled by the changes and stresses present in middle schools today. The majority of stress today came from an increased emphasis on testing, a clear shift in instructional focus, and a diminished value on interdisciplinary teaming.

The greatest stressor reported by teachers was the increased emphasis on testing and the greater reliance on scripted and remedial curriculum programs. Kimberly, an eighth grade language arts teacher indicated, "I think education has turned to teaching to standardized tests, and we are steering away from what the kids should be learning to be successful in life. Instead, we teach them more about how to be successful on tests." Michael, an eighth grade mathematics teacher, also highlighted the increased emphasis placed on mathematics and language arts as tested subjects. He stated,

I would really like to see history and science getting more attention. Science class has half the time than math and language arts. So does history. We have a double block for math and language

arts...Science and history have gone to the wayside because it's not viewed as important anymore.

Stephanie acknowledged the disinterest students felt towards the scripted program, but felt motivated by the challenge of making it interesting for students. She stated, "I think students hate the scripted curriculum, and I think I find it a fun challenge to make it engaging and still be able to say to the administrators that I taught exactly what was on the page." Not all teachers experiencing a scripted curriculum viewed the challenge as motivating and relied heavily on their colleagues and teammates to develop meaningful and engaging lessons around the scripted curriculum. Christine, an eighth grade language arts teacher, responded, "So finally we learned to suck it up and deal. We did it on our own. I have a fabulous team of women, and we banded together. We were not going to be beat by this and we were going to give it our best." Unfortunately, due to restructuring of school organization, not all teachers had the benefit of teaming and had to establish partnerships on their own. Sarah, an eighth grade math teacher reported, "We used to talk about trying to have more collaboration in our middle schools, and then we went away from that, and we haven't done much collaboration...I still believe this is important even though we have become departmentalized again." Several teachers highlighted this as a concern.

### **Instructional Successes**

To analyze the middle grades teachers' current instructional practices, teachers were asked to describe lessons they have taught of which they were most and least proud. As stated previously, the teachers in this study articulated the belief that their purpose in teaching extended beyond teaching content. They wanted students to become self-reliant learners, problem solvers, and discoverers of knowledge. These themes were also identified in the teachers' descriptions of the lessons of which they were most proud. While the themes are not discrete, one can easily see how elements of each theme surfaced in nearly all of their descriptions.

**Discovery.** Several of the teachers emphasized the importance of discovery in their best teaching. In particular, three of the teachers in the sample incorporated elements of problem-based learning in their best lessons. Michael, an

eighth grade mathematics and science teacher in a small, rural school articulated one of the clearest examples of discovery. He described having his students build actual, working rollercoasters. The students were required to explain friction, inertia, positive and negative acceleration, and the rate of acceleration using the rollercoasters they built. The project concluded with the students giving presentations to the sixth grade during which they explained and demonstrated these concepts using the rollercoasters. Other teachers described similar projects that encouraged discovery on the part of the students. Ryan, a mathematics and technology teacher in an urban school, described his best lesson which required the students to build 3-D models of a playground using a computer program. Another teacher, Andrew, a mathematics teacher in an urban middle school, challenged his students to solve problems by engaging them in a real-life scenario. Students in Andrew's class were presented with a budget and specifications, and they were asked to research used cars on the Internet and determine which purchase would be the best value while still meeting the required specifications. Andrew shared, "Their instructions were to buy a solid used car that was going to be of good value, and they all started searching for Mercedes Benz and Hummers!" Students eventually found their limited budgets would not permit them to buy the cars they wanted. Whether the example involved purchasing a car, building a rollercoaster, or creating a playground, the principle was the same. These teachers found their "best" lessons to be those that encouraged students to discover, create, and explore using real-life scenarios, examples, and models.

**Engagement.** When describing their best lessons, the teachers also emphasized the engagement of students. The engagement took different forms depending on the content, the students, and the teacher. As previously stated, several teachers were proud of lessons that involved problem-based learning. In each of these cases, one key element was the engagement of students with the content being taught. When describing the projects, the teachers made comments such as "they really got engaged," "they were all working with each other," and "they got excited about the assignment, and it was probably because it was hands on." Christine, an eighth grade language arts teacher in a suburban school described student engagement in a slightly different manner. Though she did not describe a

particular activity, she described her best lessons as, "Ones that have the students doing the work, and with students doing the thinking, and with students doing the talking." She did not describe physical actions or hands on activities; nonetheless, she described student engagement with the content. She acknowledged, "They're interacting with it; they're working through questions." This form of engagement required her to view her role in the classroom differently. Whether the engagement of student took the form of active, physical engagement (e.g., giving presentations, building, creating) or mental engagement (e.g., thinking, processing, questioning), the teachers in this sample clearly believed their best lessons were ones in which the students were engaged with the content.

**Relevance.** When describing problem based learning, discovery, or engagement, several teachers specifically stated or inferred the importance of relevance. Sarah, an experienced teacher in a rural school, described an eighth grade investigative mathematics lesson in which she required students to collect "their own data" and present the data in the form of a graph. Describing the experience, she stated, "It's [the lesson] got a lot of hands-on, investigative work, but, what it involves is students actually having to experience first-hand data collection, and then, so it's making it in the real world, which I like." Another teacher, David, articulated a similar project in his mathematics classes in which students developed graphs to track their own academic performance in class, and Jonathan described a lesson in which students discovered their own learning preferences. Whether building rollercoasters, creating 3D playgrounds, or graphing real world data, the important element derived from the teachers' descriptions was the value of making learning relevant to the students. Lessons that had relevant content or required real-life skills were often viewed by the teachers as their best lessons.

### **Instructional Failures**

With only a couple of exceptions, when asked to describe a lesson of which they were not proud, most of the teachers spoke in general terms. They did not describe a specific lesson, but they gave general characteristics. When speaking generally, several teachers stated their worst lessons were ones for which they had not spent sufficient time in preparation or created lessons that required minimal engagement from

students. Michael described “paper and pencil” lessons that do not require the same level of preparation. Andrew highlighted his standard, teacher-focused math lesson when he said, “I’m going to show you three or four problems and then you practice on your own. These lessons inevitably show up on a regular basis.” Christine described a lesson for which she was not mentally prepared and did not have materials available; and Jonathan shared an experience in which his students listened to a recording and answered questions. In each of these cases, the teacher’s lack of preparation limited the engagement of the students, and likely had a negative impact on student learning.

In addition to lack of preparation, teachers also described their worst lessons as ones that either they or their students did not connect with the content being taught. David discussed some experiences during his first couple of years as a teacher when he taught content that was unfamiliar to him. He stated, “I wasn’t as familiar with the standards as I am now...I was just trying to patch some stuff together.” Ryan, a mathematics and technology teacher in an urban school, shared a lesson in which students were required to use metric and standard measurement. He stated,

Well, the lesson’s designed to be a day, or a day and a half. It took us five days. I felt like I was fighting with the kids to use the tools correctly... It just seemed like they weren’t getting it, and it wasn’t getting across. I don’t know if I was doing too much, or they just didn’t want to do it, but it just felt like an epic fail... I felt defeated at that point.

In both of these cases, the students, the teacher, or both were not making relevant connections to the content. As a result, the teachers perceived their teaching as ineffective.

In two instances, teachers described specific instructional approaches that resulted in their “worst” lessons. Ironically, both teachers experienced challenges with the same instructional approach – station teaching. Station teaching is an instructional approach that divides the classroom into different areas with various activities. The students are assigned to small groups and rotate to various stations, completing all station activities by the end of the class. In one instance, Michelle tried station teaching in her eighth grade mathematics

classroom, but was dissatisfied with the approach due to poor student outcomes. She stated,

I felt there were pockets of kids that we missed, and when I feel like a lesson is missing a kid somewhere or a group of kids is kind of not getting everything they need to, then it’s not successful in my opinion.

Stephanie, a language arts teacher in an urban middle school, had a similar experience when implementing station teaching. She said,

I do not like, at this school, my station activity lessons, and I previously loved stations...Stations have always been successful for me, but in the last two years at this school, they have bombed almost every time...I’m embarrassed of my ability to get them because I would previously give each person a role and say this is your job, and it could be successful, but I’m not so proud of station work. I don’t know how to make it successful in my current demographics.

In both cases, these teachers attempted to use an instructional approach that is generally deemed appropriate for middle school students, but the approach was unsuccessful. Interestingly, though, Michelle was dissatisfied with the approach because it yielded poor student outcomes (i.e., test scores) because she, as the teacher, was “missing kids.” Stephanie, on the other hand, believed the station approach was unsuccessful due to the demographics of her students, highlighting a deficit view of her students’ capabilities.

### **Teacher Perceptions on Barriers to Teaching**

In exploring teachers’ perceptions of the barriers to their teaching, middle grades teachers identified scripted curriculum, student attitudes toward learning, differentiation and technology as barriers.

**Curriculum.** Teachers noted curriculum as a barrier to their teaching. While, some teachers noted scripted curriculum made it more difficult to teach the skills that middle level students really needed, others felt the lack of a

common curriculum made it more difficult to teach content.

Kimberly felt frustrated by the strictness of the curriculum she was told to teach because it did not allow her to teach her kids to mastery. She used a nation-wide scripted curriculum where she had little control over content and pedagogy. She stated,

...we are told to follow it [scripted curriculum] to a 't' and not to teach to mastery. And we are told to move on even if kids don't understand, which makes it very frustrating to be a teacher of very low kids because I would see these kids not understand and have to move on anyway.

Kimberly also felt the restrictions resulting from scripted curricula made it more difficult for teachers to engage students in relevant and meaningful activities. She did not like the curriculum because she felt it made engaging students more difficult. She stated,

I definitely think the curriculum we are required to use makes it very difficult to engage students...There are no hands-on activities. A lot of the activities are just not interesting for the students, so I wish we could have a little more freedom with our curriculum so we could maybe try a little harder to engage these kids.

In addition, some teachers felt the curriculum did not leave room to teach more general skills, like problem solving. Michelle noted she wants,

...a curriculum that isn't so focused and mapped out that you have to do this in the time period and this in this time period to get through all your state standards. I wish to some degree that we could teach problem solving and I think through problem solving kids will figure out mathematics.

These curriculum barriers made the instructional process more challenging and complex for teachers.

On the other hand, some teachers felt that not having a standard product to address the curriculum made it more difficult to teach because they were unsure what students have learned in prior years. Jonathan stated, "I wish

our school gave us a more scripted curriculum, to be honest with you. ...we need to know what each other is teaching so we're not repeating the same things over and over." Michelle agreed. She felt that that students caught between the old curriculum and the new curriculum made it difficult to teach. She stated the difference in curriculum "...has definitely created a barrier because there's things that they should have got in 7<sup>th</sup> grade or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but because of the change, they didn't get those standards." While curriculum was seen as being a barrier for teaching and learning, student attitudes toward school and learning provided additional barriers.

#### **Student attitude toward learning.**

Many of the teachers believed students' attitudes about school and learning contributed to barriers in their instruction. Overall, teachers felt students were not as motivated to learn because they held negative attitudes towards school and were not coming to school prepared to learn.

Teachers felt students did not see the value in the education they were receiving and thus not motivated to work hard in their classes. When asked to discuss barriers to her teaching, Stephanie responded, "Students don't see the relevance of education, and they don't have any mindset at home that would make education worthwhile. Some of them just have a real apathy that we are constantly fighting against." Sarah agreed, believing that students are not thinking long term. She noted, "Sometimes I don't think they can picture themselves a month down the road, much less four years down the road. That's hard, when they're not seeing any reason for learning." Not seeing the value in education also seemed to lead to negative attitudes toward school, which in turn led to the barrier of having to teach some students who are motivated and some who are not. Andrew stated,

...the biggest problem I have is that I can't get kids to understand how important their education is, but it would be nice if the kids walked in the door and the kids that wanted to learn that day had an avenue to learn anything they wanted on that specific day and then the kids that showed up and just wanted to create problems, they would be somehow separated from the kids that wanted to learn.

Kimberly agreed. When asked about barriers she stated, “It makes our job so much more difficult when a group of students just hate life and hate school and hate their parents and hate everything about their life.” She, too, noted she preferred to work with students who wanted to be at the school. She stated, “...I tend to gravitate toward the students who want to be here and turn in their homework.” Kimberly had a number of students with negative attitudes toward school this year and noted, “This was my least favorite year of the last four years of teaching because it was just exhausting.”

Furthermore, teachers identified the difficulty of dealing with students who have had poor experiences with school. Ryan stated,

Sometimes you're just going to have a kid that no matter what you do he doesn't want to talk to you, they don't want to get involved or do anything, they've had a bad experience with a past teacher, or a bad experience in that content, they've got so much stuff going on at home that they just don't care about school and that's a huge barrier.

Teachers noted some frustration with school may be that students are not ready for middle school work. Kimberly believed this barrier stems from struggling with academics. She stated, “The students who struggle with academics are often times the ones who have bad attitudes, because they don't get it and that creates a huge barrier for any teacher.” Sarah felt the change in academic mindset was a difficult challenge for students and for teachers. She stated,

The kids understand that the minute they enter middle school we are all about process, and we are all about showing work, and we are not about just getting an answer down and moving on. That's hard when they live in a multiple choice world.

Teachers noted the difficulty of teaching students with different attitudes about school and learning. In addition to student attitudes, they also found differentiating instruction to ensure all students were learning to be a barrier.

**Differentiation.** Teachers were also concerned with how to teach all learners. They felt a barrier was attempting to reach all the

different types of learners in their classrooms. Ryan had difficulties meeting the needs of his large class. He believed because there are so many learners, it was difficult to reach all of them. He stated, “And even if you have 20 kids ready to move on and 10 kids that are stuck, I think this has been the question for years, is how do you move on with those 20 kids, but still help those other kids...” Stephanie found that differentiation was much more difficult than she had thought as a beginning teacher. When asked about barriers to her teaching she responded,

...the vast differentiation that is necessary, really to a place I didn't see as a new teacher. I knew I would need to take a high, medium, and low, but I have students who, oh my gosh, that have only been in the country for one week, only know Arabic, some who have strange ticks or behavioral medication problems that they need something I haven't even planned for in differentiation and that's difficult—to have enough strategies and enough willingness to collaborate with anyone and everyone to reach every student.

Jonathan struggled with having the necessary resources and meeting the needs of his special education and English language learner (ELL) populations. It became a barrier for him because he was not able to reach them. He stated, “I love the students that I have, it just feels like I'm not doing them enough justice in the way I teach and I need to figure out different ways to meet their needs.” Teachers also felt that the lack of technology they had access to was a barrier.

**Technology.** Participants also noted the need for more and current technology in their classrooms. Teachers saw technology not only as motivating for students, but familiarity with technology as being necessary for being prepared for the “real world.” When asked about barriers, Michelle discussed the need for updated technology in her classroom. She stated, “I would like technology that is actually current. I know I've said that, but our computers are outdated.” Because of this she does not use technology in her instruction. Ryan loved the idea of technology and when asked about his ideal classroom he stated, “I feel like kids love technology. They love that so if we could incorporate that into the class in any way possible, that would help.” Technology was seen as being a motivating factor for students. David

felt technology would get kids excited about school. Having more technology, such as a 3-D printer or a drone, would get kids to school. He stated, "I want all these things [technology] to help engage not only my classroom environment, but the whole school environment, to get all the kids excited to come to school." However, for these teachers getting technology in the classroom has served as a barrier. Michael discussed his plans if each student had a tablet computer. He would enjoy incorporating more technology in his classroom, but he had limited resources. He stated, "I'd try to incorporate things on a computer, but we don't have many computers. We have 30 computers for the whole eighth grade." These teachers felt strongly about the importance of technology in their classrooms. Michael stated, "The traditional classroom 10 years ago does not register with these kids." Technology, differentiation, students' attitudes, and scripted curriculum were all identified by current middle grades teachers as barriers to teaching.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this exploratory multi-case study was to gain an understanding of current middle level teachers' beliefs about teaching at the middle level. To examine their beliefs, current middle level teachers were asked to discuss the primary purpose of middle grades educators, current status of middle grades teaching, best and worst instructional lessons, and perceived barriers to teaching at the middle level. Findings suggest current middle level teachers in this study see their primary purpose as middle grades teachers to create lifelong learners and develop the whole child, but are working within an educational system that is currently designed to make this endeavor difficult. Furthermore, the teachers believe middle level teaching today is challenging and stressful, but of great importance. These teachers identify the importance of using discovery-based learning, student engagement, and making content relevant to students as important aspects to their successful lessons at the middle level; however, findings also indicate teachers believe this is difficult to accomplish on a consistent and regular basis and sometimes relied on teacher-focused lessons with minimal student engagement and opportunity for inquiry-based learning. Several teachers indicated the increased emphasis on testing and the greater dependency on scripted curriculums and remediation programs have negatively impacted

the school climate and instructional decision-making. While most teachers were able to identify examples of where they used effective practice to engage students in meaningful learning, they also consistently identified lessons they believed were not engaging and/or relevant to students and in which planning was rushed or provided for them. In addition, teachers identified the curriculum, student's attitudes toward learning, difficulty with differentiation, and lack of technology to be barriers to implementing the instruction they feel would be appropriate for middle grades students.

Teachers were also able to articulate aspects of the middle school model and its importance to students, but the results also highlight the disconnect between teachers' beliefs and actual enactment in the classroom. Many instructional practices teachers reported as successful were consistent with what one would expect in a developmentally responsive middle school. When teachers discussed their best and worst lessons, they were most proud of lessons in which students were engaged in inquiry-based projects relevant to the students' lives or engaged in hands-on learning experiences. For example, they described lessons requiring students to demonstrate concepts of physics by building rollercoasters, create 3-D models of playgrounds using computer-aided design software, and explore budgets and personal finance through the car buying process. These lessons involved inquiry-based instruction and real-life scenarios with relevant and meaningful content. Using only these examples, it seems evident teachers were able to deliver relevant, meaningful, and engaging instruction; however, teachers also shared several examples to indicate this type of instruction might be the exception. The consistent references to using a curriculum that led to minimal opportunities to engage students in hands-on activities, relying on teacher-based instruction where students complete practice problems, and adhering to a strict pacing guide that emphasizes covering material regardless of student mastery highlight this disconnect.

Furthermore, teachers discussed barriers to their teaching that would make this type of developmentally responsive instruction difficult on a regular basis. They struggled with differentiating instruction for all learners and motivating students in the context of the current educational climate. In addition, the constant challenges of classroom management and lack of

student motivation caused some teachers to articulate a deficit mindset regarding their students' capabilities, thus impacting their instructional decisions. For example, several teachers noted challenges with assisting English language learners and students with special needs. Also, some teachers found it difficult motivating students they perceived were disinterested in school. In fact, one teacher discontinued the use of station teaching because she believed the approach could not be implemented effectively with the demographics of her current class. This became such a difficulty that two participants discussed a desire to track students based on the students' proclivity to learn.

In addition to describing instruction, teachers also stated the importance of developing the whole child. For example, they highlighted the importance of inspiring students to want to learn, preparing students to be successful adults, creating well-rounded problem solvers, preparing students for high school and long-term success, and becoming active participants in a democratic society. However, these responses are primarily focused on the academic development and college and career readiness of young adolescents. The core tenets of the middle school model (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010) highlight the need to address not only the cognitive, but also the physical, social, emotional, and moral needs of students. As such, we assumed these non-academic needs would surface in teachers' responses. Minimal reference was made to classroom activities or teacher beliefs that were focused on enhancing the physical, social, moral, or emotional development of students. No emphasis was placed on engaging students in wellness activities, providing opportunities for students to socialize with their peers, offering experiences for students to learn more about themselves and who they are as individuals, or experiencing service learning and the opportunity to positively contribute to a community. The absence of these non-academic aspects of adolescent development in teachers' responses raises concerns regarding the value placed upon the non-academic developmental needs of students in the current school context.

Understanding beliefs impact practice, teacher educators invest a significant amount of time and energy attempting to shape the beliefs of teacher candidates with the hope these newly-

developed beliefs will impact the instructional practice of the novice teachers. Middle grades teacher educators also share the belief that adolescents are unique and require an educational experience that is responsive to their developmental needs delivered by teachers who are specially prepared, thus adding another essential component to the preparation of teachers for the middle grades. The teachers in this study all completed specialized middle level teacher preparation programs or endorsements, and when asked, each could articulate at least an understanding of key elements of the middle school model (e.g., developmentally responsive pedagogy, middle school organizational structures, meeting the needs of the "whole child") and effective middle grades instruction; however, the minimal connections made to the non-academic developmental needs of students (i.e., physical, social, emotional, and moral) seemed to contrast developmentally responsive practice. As such, it is important to explore this issue further. This study was limited by having 10 participants representing a small portion of the country and having a focus on self-report. Further research examining beliefs of a larger number of current middle level teachers in multiple states and in multiple contexts would present a clearer, more nuanced, picture of the current state of middle grades education according to middle grades teachers. Additionally, future research should include classroom observations and student interviews to triangulate teacher perception data.

No one would question the commitment of the teachers in this study. Each believed s/he had a professional responsibility to help students learn, but it appeared their instructional practices did not always reflect a firm commitment to the philosophical underpinnings of a specialized middle level teacher preparation program. Is this drift from the core principles of the middle level philosophy an indication these principles were not actually part of the teachers' belief system from the outset or an indication of the influence of school context on the enactment of one's beliefs? This phenomenon raised several critical questions of importance for those involved in specialized middle level teacher preparation to investigate more fully. Are middle grades teacher preparation programs firmly grounded in the tenets of the middle level philosophy, and do the programs reflect these tenets in a higher education context? How do we know program completers have internalized beliefs consistent with a middle level

philosophy? How can we ensure the consistent enactment of effective middle level practices even when one's school context may not support these practices? These are difficult questions, but certainly questions that must be answered for our work as middle level teacher educators to be as effective as it should be.

The experiences of these teachers raised another important consideration for middle level teacher educators to ponder. Upon completion of a specialized middle level teacher preparation program, each of these teachers pursued a career in a school that was identified as a middle school, yet, in many cases, the organization of the school and the instructional expectations within the school were not consistent with the middle level philosophy, thus potentially creating philosophical conflict for these newly minted teachers. The teachers entered the profession articulating an understanding of effective middle level practices, but unfortunately, the realities of the classroom and the demands of their school districts led these teachers to question the effectiveness of these practices or abandon them altogether. As middle grades teachers continue to deal with the increased pressures on their teaching, it is essential for middle grades educators, advocates, and researchers to acknowledge the complexities of teaching today and the potential influence of these pressures on daily decision-making in the classroom. Additionally, it raises several questions for further investigation. Are middle level teacher preparation programs preparing teachers for schools that no longer exist? Do developmentally responsive middle schools look different in today's context, and, if so, are we preparing new teachers for the *new* middle school or the schools the middle school founders envisioned? As teacher educators, how do we reconcile our own beliefs about effective middle level education with the changing context of 21<sup>st</sup> century middle schools? Or, how do we work with 21<sup>st</sup> century schools to ensure they remain committed to developmentally responsive, student-centered instruction even though their organization and practice may be evolving?

Middle grades teaching is a challenging profession. Regardless of how classrooms, schools, teaching, or teacher preparation programs change to meet these challenges, it is important that the focus of the work remains a priority—doing what is best for young adolescents.

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Table 1

*Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Gender	Content	Experience (years)	UG Major	School Setting
Andrew	M	Math	4-7	Middle Grades Education	Urban
Christine	F	Lang. Arts	8+	Sec. Ed; MG Endorsement	Suburban
David	M	Math	8+	Middle Grades Education	Rural
Jonathan	M	Lang. Arts	4-7	Middle Grades Education	Urban
Kimberly	F	Lang. Arts	4-7	Middle Grades Education	Suburban
Michael	M	Math	8+	Middle Grades Education	Rural
Michelle	F	Math	8+	Middle Grades Education	Suburban
Ryan	M	Technology	8+	Middle Grades Education	Urban
Sarah	F	Math	8+	Sec. Ed; MG Endorsement	Suburban
Stephanie	F	Soc. Studies	4-7	Middle Grades Education	Urban