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Amanda Wall

Georgia Southern University, awall@georgiasouthern.edu

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Encouraging Teacher Candidates to Cultivate Habits of Reflection

Amanda Wall
Georgia Southern University

Abstract: The conceptual framework for the College of Education at Georgia Southern University is: *Reflective Practitioners for a Diverse World*. Three of the five Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards from the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE, 2012) also specify reflection as a habit. Standard 5 on Middle Level Professional Roles, for example, states: “Middle level teacher candidates understand, reflect on, and are successful in their unique roles as middle level professionals.” In order for teacher candidates to become reflective, they need multiple opportunities to engage in reflection.

Throughout an introductory middle grades course I teach, teacher candidates engage in a range of structured reflections. A variety of tasks in the course include components that prompt teacher candidates to reflect. These reflections afford teacher candidates structured ways to connect and synthesize concepts, theories, and principles in light of their increasing classroom experiences. This paper provides an overview of some of these tasks.

Ongoing Assignments

Ongoing assignments in the course afford teacher candidates to reflect in structured ways in low-stakes graded items. The two types of ongoing assignments that cultivate habits of reflection are reading reflections and structured observations.

Reading Reflections. For several weeks during the semester, teacher candidates complete assigned reading reflections. Each reflection pairs a reading with a related video. The

readings come from one of their assigned course texts, *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2010) and *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* (Brown & Knowles, 2014). The videos have been selected to complement topics in the readings. For example, when teacher candidates read the introductory pages in *This We Believe*, they watch a video titled “Being 12: The Year Everything Changes” produced by WNYC in New York (link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3Gxgv6-H3E>). They summarize each and then make connections between the reading and video. After their placements have started, they also connect the ideas in the reading and the video to their field experiences. They also state insights from the reading and video that are important for their teaching. Finally, they pose questions for discussion in class. Through several structured prompts, teacher candidates reflect on concepts.

Structured Observations. Over the course of the semester, teacher candidates complete a few structured observations on different topics. One of these focuses on the middle level concept and prompts them to reflect on aspects of their assigned classroom and school in terms of keywords about middle level curriculum from *This We Believe*, that it be challenging, relevant, integrative, and exploratory. The different observation protocols variously prompt teacher candidates to make explicit connections to concepts in course texts or to pose questions for discussion and reflection.

Major Assignments

Major assignments in the course are linked to course objectives, which in turn are informed by standards from CAEP and AMLE in addition the College’s conceptual framework and teacher education competencies. A few major assignments specifically focus on elements of reflection.

Letter to Families. In this assignment, teacher candidates position themselves as new middle level teachers. The Letter to Families assignment is designed for teacher candidates to describe their class and their goals to an imagined audience of their future students' family members. They are supposed to explain middle level concepts such as integrated curriculum, project-based learning, or other approaches to curriculum and instruction to a general audience. This requires them to communicate course concepts in accessible, everyday language. This assignment is written as a formal letter.

Effective Middle School Project. Teacher candidates write a handbook of sorts for their imagined effective middle school. This paper is a program Key Assessment through which candidates need to demonstrate their understanding of middle level concepts and philosophy. They need to describe program features of their school with connections to course concepts.

Vision for Teaching. Through this assignment, teacher candidates are encouraged to think through their goals for themselves and for their students. Teacher candidates read Duffy's (1998) article about the ways that a vision can help a teacher "balance round stones" and navigate complexities of teaching. Lounsbury's (1991) essay encourages teacher candidates to set their ideas about teaching in writing. Through this exercise, teacher candidates reflect on their goals for themselves and their students in light of middle level philosophy, their selected content concentrations, and other motivations.

Conclusion

Through these ongoing and major assignments, and through class discussion throughout the semester, teacher candidates have structured opportunities to reflect on course concepts, their development as teachers, their understanding of young adolescents, and other concepts and ideas

related to teaching. One of the characteristics of effective middle schools according to *This We Believe* is that middle level educators “value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.” These habits of reflection are designed to better prepare teacher candidates for the complexities and realities of middle level classrooms.

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Amanda Wall, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Middle Grades and Secondary Education at Georgia Southern University.