

## Embracing a Common Focus: A Framework for Middle Level Teacher Preparation

*Shawn A. Faulkner, Ph.D.*  
*Northern Kentucky University*  
*Penny B. Howell, Ed.D.*  
*University of Louisville*  
*Chris M. Cook, Ph.D.*  
*Northern Kentucky University*

*As more and more states make a commitment to specialized middle level teacher preparation, teacher education programs across the country must make the necessary adjustments to ensure middle level teachers are prepared to be successful. Unfortunately, individual state and institutional requirements often make this challenging and can result in inconsistent experiences, expectations, and requirements. In an effort to provide a common focus for middle level teacher preparation, this piece proposes the Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices through the analysis of three key documents in middle level teacher preparation—National Middle School Association’s position statement on the Professional Preparation of Middle Level Teachers (2006), National Middle School Association’s *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), and Anfara and Schmid’s (2007) synthesis of research on effective teaching practices at the middle level. Illustrative practices are suggested for the use of the Framework in middle level teacher preparation.*

“...learning to teach middle level students by ‘trial and error’ teaching may eventually lead to successful teaching, but this is an ineffective teacher preparation model. This situation leaves too much to chance...” (McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003, p. 10)

In 2003, McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson wrote “middle level teacher preparation is more widespread now than ever before” (p.7). Ten years later it remains true with 45 states and the District of Columbia requiring specialized middle level teacher preparation through an endorsement or licensure (Association for Middle Level Education, 2013). While it is important to acknowledge this as progress for the middle level movement, it is also important to consider the complications this growth brings to the landscape of specialized teacher preparation for the middle grades. As states change licensure requirements, teacher education institutions must follow suit to ensure its candidates will be fully certified upon completion of the program. When these mandates require programs to prepare candidates for an endorsement or licensure to teach early adolescents, many times the quality and content of these programs become idiosyncratic to the institutions, states, and regions in which they are located. These idiosyncrasies lead to preparation that is inconsistent in focus, experiences, and expectations across pro-

grams. Further, some programs prepare candidates through a generalist elementary program, and others are prepared through a specialized middle grades program. Still, others are prepared through subject-specific secondary programs (McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003). Each of these routes leads to certification that allows the candidate to teach in a middle school, each with very different assumptions about the kind of preparation teachers of early adolescents require. Many acknowledge this approach is not as effective as a specialized middle grades professional preparation program (Jackson & Davis, 2000). As such, this paper highlights the different constructs of middle grades education that must be emphasized regardless of the approach and requirements institutions follow when training teachers.

Various organizations have worked as advocates to provide guidance to teacher preparation institutions that offer specialized programs for middle level teacher candidates (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003). These organizations have produced position and belief statements (e.g., *This We Believe and Now We Must Act; This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents; Position Statement on Teacher Preparation; Turning Points 2000*) about middle schools, early adolescents, and those preparing to be middle grades teachers. All of these statements and papers have a consistent message about the unique-

ness of middle schools, the needs of early adolescent students, and the importance of understanding how development interacts with every aspect of schooling at this level.

Even though the Association for Middle Level Education (National Middle School Association, 2006), the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (2002), and the Carnegie Foundation (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986) have all established standards of preparation for middle level teachers, or essential components of middle level teacher preparation programs, variability continues to exist across preparation programs mainly because of the inconsistencies of state licensure, institutional philosophy, and program size and structure. These variables often influence teacher educations' policies and procedures which, in turn, significantly impact middle level preparation (e.g. grade configuration of certificates, field experience requirements, number of credit hours of specialty courses) by forcing institutions to generalize all teacher preparation to fit the goals of the entire unit.

In an effort to provide a common focus and advocate for specialized middle grades teacher preparation, this article presents a conceptual framework for middle level teacher preparation that articulates the constructs of the middle school concept referenced in a variety of publications on middle level teacher preparation. Bringing those position/belief statements together into a conceptual framework for effective practices provides a clear, coherent guide to middle level educator preparation that values the components of the middle school philosophy, upholds the tenants of the middle school concept, and is consistent with effective teacher preparation regardless of the individual institutional challenges. Drawing on the seminal literature in middle level education, the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices* (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013) was developed to support and shape consistent practices in an effort to ensure that the middle school concept is fully realized for all early adolescent students through the preparation of their teachers. With the aforementioned irregularities found in state licensure and teacher preparation programs, middle level teacher preparation programs often are allowed to take a "cafeteria" approach when preparing middle level teachers. This leads to both the constructs (e.g., organizational structures, assessment, relationships) and elements (e.g., teaming, advisory programs, interdisciplinary instruction) of effective middle level practice frequently being taught in isolation and presented to candidates as components from which they can "pick and choose," rather than a holistic approach to teaching middle grade students. In turn, the results are a lack of understanding of the interconnected and holistic nature of the constructs of middle level practice, spotty implementation, and a lack

of field and clinical experiences that demonstrate the constructs.

### ***The Framework for Effective Middle Level Practice***

As advocates for developmentally responsive instruction, high-quality classroom teachers that are specifically trained to teach in a middle school, and organizational structures (e.g., interdisciplinary teams with common planning time, advisory programs, enrichment programs) that support the development of middle school students (McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003; NMSA, 2010), the authors have developed the proposed conceptual framework to serve as a guide to research and practice that is grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of the middle school concept (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010), best practices in teaching and learning at the middle level (McEwin & Dickinson, 1995, 1997; NMSA, 2010), and relevant research on effective middle level teaching practices (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). It considers the needs of young adolescents alongside the needs of middle level educators and draws on three relevant pieces of work that have been widely disseminated and discussed: (a) NMSA's position statement on the Professional Preparation of Middle Level Teachers (2006), (b) NMSA's *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), and (c) Anfara and Schmid's (2007) synthesis of research on effective teaching practices at the middle level.

The NMSA position statement on the *Professional Preparation of Middle Level Teachers* highlights six key components that are essential to address. The six components are (a) young adolescent development; (b) middle level philosophy and organization; (c) middle level curriculum; (d) subject matter knowledge; (e) middle level planning, teaching, and assessment; and (f) middle level field experiences (NMSA, 2006). *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) outlined the key attributes and characteristics needed to establish a successful middle level school. The four attributes identified are as follows: (a) developmentally responsive, (b) challenging, (c) empowering, and (d) equitable; and the 16 characteristics fall under three primary areas: (a) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (b) leadership and organization; and (c) culture and community. Finally, Anfara and Schmid's (2007) synthesis identified the characteristics, competencies, and behaviors of effective teachers. The authors' analysis of the three core documents led to the development of the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practice*.

The *Framework* (Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2012; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013) highlights eight different constructs of middle level practice that, when implemented and used comprehensively, enhance the likelihood of

high-quality, effective learning experiences for all students. Furthermore, the *Framework* also articulates how the eight constructs interact to influence this effectiveness. The interaction of the eight constructs is important because it allows those involved in middle level teacher preparation to be “on the same page” regardless of accreditation or institutional demands. Further, the manner in which the eight constructs interact also distinguishes teaching in the middle grades as unique from other models of teacher effectiveness. The eight constructs are developmental spectrum, dispositions and professional behaviors, organizational structures, relationships, content knowledge, classroom management, assessment, and curriculum and instruction.

**Developmental spectrum.** This framework construct focuses on practices that are responsive to the social, emotional, intellectual, physical, sexual, and cultural development of early adolescent students. It is not only important for all stakeholders to be aware of the developmental diversity of the early adolescent, but also to utilize that information to inform every decision in the classroom and school (Horowitz, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). To address the developmental needs of students, it is important for curriculum and instruction to be engaging, hands-on, relevant to the students’ lives, and differentiated (Bean, 1993). Teachers should foster an appropriate climate with choice, movement, collaboration, and discussion (Stevenson, 2002). Finally, effective middle level practices must include culturally responsive pedagogy that promotes tolerance, acceptance, and inclusivity (Gay, 2010).

**Dispositions and professional behaviors.** Dispositions and professional behaviors refer to the personal and professional beliefs, values, and character traits teachers possess and reflect in their middle grades teaching. Teacher dispositions play a tremendous role in the success or failure of students (Wasicsko, 2002; Combs, 1991), and teachers should engage in a professional and responsible manner at all times. As such, middle grades teachers must be effective collaborators, embrace diversity, value the unique developmental needs of students, and enjoy working with young adolescents (NMSA, 2010). In addition, teachers should work to motivate and inspire students, understanding their actions constantly serve as a model for students.

**Organizational structures.** The organizational structures construct consists of the various programs specifically designed to allow middle grade schools and teachers to meet the various needs of young adolescents and to address the tenets of the middle level philosophy. These structures include elements such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, health programs, common planning time, and intramurals (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). These elements are designed for teachers to provide appropriate opportunities to challenge, enrich, support, and nurture the academic, emotional, social, and personal success of each student. When implemented effectively, these organizational structures often lead to higher levels of academic achievement and improved school culture for both teachers and students (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Erb, 2001).

**Relationships.** The intersection of the developmental spectrum, organizational structures, and teacher dispositions and professional behaviors creates a climate that allows relationships to flourish. Positive, healthy relationships among and between school personnel (teachers, administrators, support staff, etc.) and students in the middle level classroom and school (e.g., all school staff, community members, and parents) are built on trust and mutual respect that honor the developmental diversity of young adolescents and impact every aspect of teaching and learning at the middle level (Lumpkin, 2007). When students feel cared for, understood, and supported by adults in an educational environment, they learn more and feel more successful (Kohn, 2005; Williams, 2011).

**Content knowledge.** The content knowledge construct addresses both the specific content knowledge (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies, language arts) and the pedagogical content knowledge necessary to provide meaningful and engaging learning experiences for students. Teachers must have a deep understanding of the discipline they are teaching and understand how various concepts connect within the discipline and across disciplines (Danielson, 2007). In addition to having a deep understanding of the discipline, teachers must have a pedagogical knowledge base that allows them to connect disciplinary concepts to the real life experiences of the students, as well as promote learning across disciplines, problem solving, and critical thinking. Teachers must master both content knowledge and instructional skills, but they must also know the students they teach (Danielson, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000). In doing so, they can design learning experiences that address the needs of all students, thus emphasizing the importance of the developmental spectrum on multiple aspects of the teaching and learning process.

**Classroom management.** The classroom rules, policies, and cultural expectations embraced in both the school community and individual classroom make up the construct of classroom management. In order for instruction to be effective, the environment of the classroom must be conducive to learning, and this environment is highly dependent upon the teacher’s efforts to know and understand his or her students and their special needs (Weinstein & Novodvorsky, 2011), as well as the relationships established between teachers and students (Danielson, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Weinstein & Novodvorsky, 2011). Classroom management includes designing and organizing the learning environment; establishing rules, procedures, and consequences for behavior; monitoring student behavior; and managing instructional time and resources (Danielson, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Marzano, 2003). Ultimately, the well-managed learning climate is “inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all” (NMSA, 2010, p. 33).

**Assessment.** Assessment encompasses the use of ongoing, multiple, and varied means to determine student progress and inform instructional choices (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). Appropriate assessment in the middle grades includes a balance of both formative and summative assessments and provides quality feedback to students

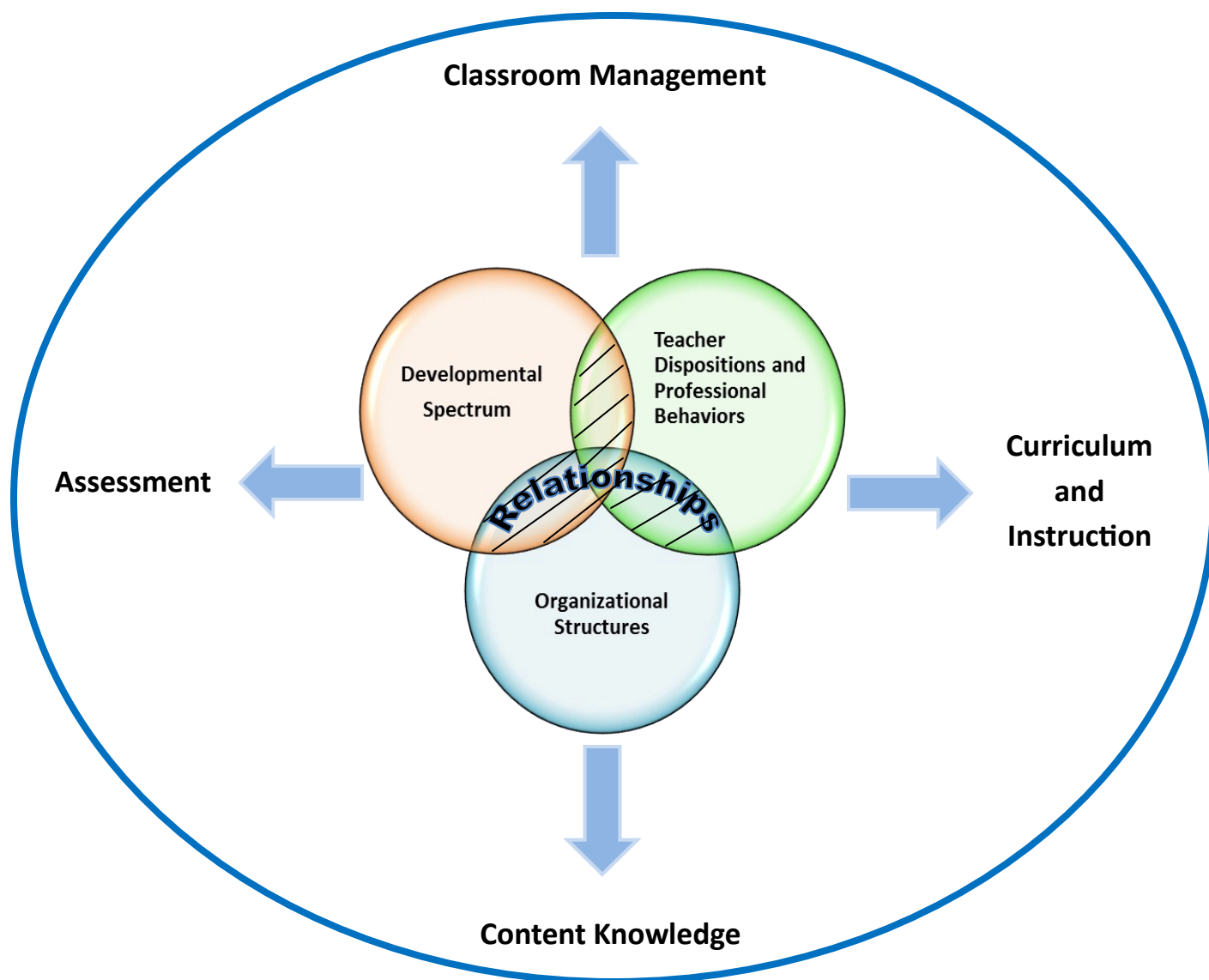
to enhance their learning. These assessments likely include traditional paper-and-pencil measures such as tests and quizzes, but the range of assessment techniques might also include informal checks for understanding, interviews and conferences with students, student self-assessment, performance tasks, portfolios, and projects (Danielson, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA 2010). Developmentally responsive assessment practices focus on individual student progress rather than on competition and comparison among students (NMSA, 2010).

**Curriculum and instruction.** Pedagogy at the middle level includes relevant, meaningful, integrated, and challenging curriculum enacted with instructional strategies that are student-centered, hands on, and engaging to the students (Bean, 1993;

Casas, 2011; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). Curriculum is integrated and interdisciplinary focusing on connections between and among the core subjects and lives of early adolescent students (Casas, 2011; NCATE, 2010). (See figure 1)

At the core of the framework are developmental spectrum, dispositions and professional behaviors, organizational structures, and relationships. These four constructs provide the philosophical and organizational foundation necessary for effective middle level practices to be established and flourish. When implemented effectively, these four constructs are what distinguish middle grades education from other age levels. In turn, they have a profound influence on the other four constructs of the framework – content knowledge, classroom management, assessment,

*Figure 1. Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices.*



Howell, P., Cook, C., & Faulkner, S. (2013). Effective middle level teaching: Perceptions on the preparedness of newly hired teachers. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 8(1), 36. Figure reprinted with permission of Information Age Publishing, Inc.

curriculum and instruction – and help to make education at the middle level unique. Ideally, pre-service teachers who have experiences with, develop an understanding of, and embrace the interconnectedness of the eight constructs of the *Framework* are more likely to have the skill set needed to be an effective middle level teacher who is caring, values each child, and believes every child can learn, understands the developmental needs of his or her students, develops positive relationships with students, collaborates with colleagues, and utilizes the appropriate content and pedagogy to provide high-quality educational experiences for students.

### Shaping Middle Grades Teacher Preparation

At first glance, the *Framework* proposed for effective practices at the middle level may resemble frameworks or models proposed for teacher education in general. However, upon closer examination, it is clear that this *Framework* gives primacy to the interdependency of the core constructs that represent the unique demands of an effective middle level teacher. Without a simultaneous commitment to all of the core constructs, the *Framework* becomes general in nature and defaults to a model of teacher education for all school levels. The authors have identified practices that explicitly illustrate the interdependency and mutually supportive relationships between the core constructs of the *Framework* and the work of learning to teach at the middle level.

### Illustrative Practices of the *Framework*

Regardless of state regulations related to licensure or institutional demands, programs preparing teacher candidates to teach early adolescent students can utilize the *Framework* to ensure:

- candidate selection includes significant consideration of appropriate dispositions for teaching in the middle grades, provides opportunities for candidates to self-reflect and analyze progress, and offers regular feedback to candidates about their dispositions and professional behaviors;
- candidates construct an understanding of the historical, sociocultural, and political contexts of middle grades teacher preparation (e.g., foundational leaders, context of middle school movement, educational reform efforts) in order to enhance the understanding of the uniqueness of teaching at the middle level;
- professional preparation is grounded in a thorough and deep understanding of all aspects of the developmental spectrum of young adolescents (i.e., physical, social, emotional, moral, cognitive, cultural) and fully embraces a developmentally responsive approach;
- candidates are familiar with the organizational structures associated with effective middle level practice (e.g., teaming, common planning, advisory, interdisciplinary units, intramurals, exploratory programs), develop an understanding of how each structure supports effective middle level practice, and experience opportunities to engage with these organizational structures;

- pedagogical and content knowledge courses are built around the core of the *Framework*; candidates develop the understanding that grounding all curriculum, assessment, and classroom management decisions to the core of the *Framework* is what separates effective middle level practice from effective practice in general;

- meaningful field and clinical experiences are in settings that model and embrace effective middle level philosophy and practice; and
- teacher preparation programs model the development of positive, professional relationships (i.e., colleague to colleague, professor to students, student to student) and afford opportunities for pre-service teachers to practice building positive relationships with middle grades students and other professionals.

### Discussion

The preparation of middle level teachers, whether pre-service or inservice, is best accomplished when there is a thorough understanding of effective practices drawn from research and guided by a conceptual framework. Drawing upon current literature related to effective middle level practice (AMLE, 2013; Anfara & Schmid, 2007; NMSA, 2006), the proposed framework provides a structure to guide consistent and comprehensive teacher preparation regardless of institutional demands or the licensure and accreditation regulations in place.

First, and foremost, the development of the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices* brings together the constructs that are documented in middle level literature and known to be critical to the foundational understanding of effective middle level practice. One could easily argue that the eight constructs of the *Framework* are important regardless of the level one teaches, and the authors would agree. However, as middle level educators, the authors believe the core constructs of the *Framework* are particularly important for middle level teachers due to the unique nature of middle level students. The *Framework* clearly demonstrates the heart and soul of the middle school philosophy – attention to the developmental spectrum of the students by teachers who exhibit the appropriate dispositions and professional behaviors within school settings with supportive organizational structures that allow relationships to flourish. It is through this lens that the constructs of classroom management, assessment, curriculum and instruction, and content knowledge should be viewed. The *Framework* allows those involved in teacher preparation to maintain focus on the critical components of effective middle level practice and to avoid “drift” from the core values on which the middle level movement was built.

The standard established by the *Framework* can guide the development and redesign of middle level teacher preparation programs to teach and model the components of the *Framework* in a holistic, integrated manner while not over-

emphasizing one element to the exclusion of the others. Further, the *Framework* can serve as a valuable tool for program evaluation and self-assessment, allowing programs to discuss how these constructs are embedded within the program.

Last, the *Framework* provides an outline for future research and the development of new research questions. Current middle level research tends to focus on particular elements of interest to researchers (e.g., teaming, advisory, teaching strategies); however, the *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices* encourages inquiry into the integration and implementation of the eight constructs and the elements that support those constructs. The result will be a stronger body of research that either supports current practice or causes teacher preparation programs to change how they prepare new teachers. Ultimately, the goals of high-quality teachers and maximized P-12 student learning will be realized, goals upon which we all agree.

With middle level teacher preparation programs varying from one institution to the next based on state certification regulations and program dynamics, it is critical that the beliefs and vision of the middle school philosophy are brought together and clearly articulated in a framework that can guide practices for in-service and pre-service teachers and administrators. A conceptual framework with the central constructs of middle level teacher preparation in one model articulates the various components needed in programs to prepare effective middle level teachers and illustrates the unique nature of teacher education at the middle level. Moreover, a model that brings together the essential constructs of middle level education clearly illustrates the integrated nature of the constructs and supports the practice of embracing *all* constructs instead of choosing a few that are convenient or address the thrust of current educational reforms. While teacher learning is a complex and social process, a consistent framework to guide the practices of middle level teacher educators can address the variety and inconsistency found in middle level teacher preparation programs.

## References

- Anfara, V., & Schmid, J. (2007). Defining the effectiveness of middle grades teachers. *Middle School Journal*, 38(5), 54-62.
- Association for Middle Level Education. (2013). *Certification/Licensure by state: Middle level teacher certification/licensure patterns by state*.** Retrieved from <http://www.aml.org/ProfessionalPreparation/CertificationLicensurebyState/tabid/1235/Default.aspx>.
- Bean, J. A. (1993). *A middle school curriculum: From rhetoric to reality* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.
- Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. (1986). *A nation prepared: Teachers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.
- Casas, M. (2011). *Enhancing student learning in middle school*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Combs, A. (1991). *The schools we need: New assumptions for educational reform*. University Press of America.
- Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Erb, T. (2001). Transforming organizational structures for young adolescents and adult learning. In T. Dickinson (Ed.) *Reinventing the middle school* (pp. 176-200). New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Faulkner, S., Howell, P., & Cook, C. (2012, April). *Middle level principals' perceptions of effective middle level teaching practices and preparation*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Flowers, N., Mertens, S., & Mulhall, P. (1999). The impact of teaming. *Middle School Journal*, 31(2), 57-60.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Horowitz, F. D., Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (2005). Educating teachers for developmentally appropriate practice. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 88-125). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Howell, P., Cook, C., & Faulkner, S. (2013). Effective middle level teaching: Perceptions on the preparedness of newly hired teachers. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 8(1), 36.
- Jackson, A. & Davis, G. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kohn, A. (2005). Unconditional teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 63(1), 20-24.
- Lumpkin, A. (2007). Caring teachers: The key to student learning. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 43(4), 158-160.
- Marzano, R. (2003). *Classroom management that works: Research-based strategies for every teacher*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- McEwin, C. K., & Dickinson, T. S. (1995). *The professional preparation of middle level teachers: Profiles of successful programs*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

- McEwin, C. K., & Dickinson, T. S. (1997). Middle level teacher preparation and licensure. In J. L. Irvin (Ed.) *What research says to the middle level practitioners* (pp. 223-229). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- McEwin, C. K., Smith, T. W., & Dickinson, T. S. (2003). Middle level teacher preparation: Status, progress, and challenges. In G. Andrews & V. Anfara (Eds.), *Leaders for a movement: Professional preparation and development of middle level teachers and administrators* (pp. 3-26). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2010). *The road less traveled: How the developmental sciences can prepare educators to improve student achievement: Policy recommendations*. Washington, DC: Author.
- National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. (2002). *Policy statement: Teacher preparation, licensure, and recruitment*. Newton, MA: Author.
- National Middle School Association. (2006). *Position statement on the professional preparation of middle level teachers*. Westerville, OH: NMSA.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: NMSA.
- Stevenson, C. (2002). *Teaching 10 to 14 year olds* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson, Allyn, and Bacon.
- Wasicsko, M. (2002). Only the best for our kids: Refashioning the framework for preparing future educators. *The Eastern Scholar*, 1(1), 18-27.
- Weinstein, C., & Novodvorsky, I. (2011). *Middle and secondary classroom management: Lessons from research and practice* (4th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Williams, D. M. (2011). *Teacher empathy and middle school students' perception of care*. Herstellung, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.