In the Middle: Do We Share the Vision?
Do Principals and Teachers Agree about the
Middle School Concept?

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In 2009, the Tennessee Professors of Middle Level Education (TPOMLE) examined how Tennessee schools implemented the middle school concept. Of concern was the impact that emphasis on accountability and achievement had on the middle school concept which emphasizes the development of the whole child. A survey was developed based on the tenets of middle level reform presented by George and Anderson (1989). The survey was then distributed to all Tennessee schools which contained middle level grades. The intent of the survey was to determine the degree to which the principles and tenets of the middle school concept were considered important and implemented in Tennessee schools. The results indicated that middle level educators considered the principles of the middle school concept to be important and that most felt that their school implemented these principles. The researchers then examined if teachers and administrators agreed or disagreed on the importance and implementation of the middle school concept.

This study addressed the extent to which the stakeholders in middle level education agree with the importance of the middle school philosophy and support its precepts in schools. *This We Believe*, the mission statement of the Association of Middle Level Education, articulates 16 characteristics and four essential attributes as the vision for successful middle level schools (see Table 1). Without a clear vision of educational pathways, teachers lose direction and students do not achieve (DuBois, 2012). The key to implementing this vision is the principal of the middle school.

Principals, as leaders of schools, provide the leadership in middle level education. Research on middle level schools supported the importance of the shared vision of the organization and role of middle level education (George & Anderson, 1989). Foundational to promoting this shared vision is school leadership which promotes middle level organization, keeps the school focused on instructional and learning improvement, and promotes collaboration among educators (Epstein & Mayers, 2002). The role of the principal is essential to the success of middle level schools. It is important to have all stakeholders with eyes on the same vision.

In the summer of 2009, the Tennessee Professors of Middle Level Education (TPOMLE) in collaboration with the Tennessee

Association of Middle Schools (TAMS) examined how Tennessee schools implemented the middle school concept. Of concern was the impact that emphasis on high academic achievement from the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation had on the middle school concept which emphasizes the development of the whole child (Watts & Seed, 2010). It was hypothesized that "many middle level administrators and teachers feel pressured to focus on improving test scores rather than on integrating curricula, developing strong teams, or providing for the emotional and physical well-being of their students" (Watts & Seed, 2010, p.61). By using *The Exemplary Middle School* (2003) as a guide, a survey was developed based on the tenets of middle level reform presented by George and Alexander (Watts & Seed, 2010). The middle school concept was defined using 17 themes cited by George and Alexander. These characteristics were compared to the position statement from the Association of Middle Level Educators, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010).

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tors (Watts & Seed, 2010). The second area of interest was the "degree to which those concepts are implemented into the respondents' school settings" (Watts & Seed, 2010, p. 62). The results generally indicated that middle level educators considered the principles of the middle school concept to be important; the second set of results indicated that these middle level educators felt that their school implemented these principles (Watts & Seed, 2010).

Table 1
Characteristics Compared

Exemplary Middle School Characteristics	This We Believe Characteristics (2010, p. 2-3)
Curricular • Curricula that integrate multiple academic disciplines • Articulation of middle level curricula with high school curricula/expectations • Exploratory/encore courses in the arts, athletics, or careers • Emphasis on students' social and emotional growth • Concern for students' health, wellness, and safety • Shared responsibility for students' literacy and numeracy skills **Instructing and Advising** • Teachers specifically interested/trained in working with young adolescents • Professional development explicitly focused on the middle school • Interdisciplinary teams of teachers having common planning time • One or more guidance counselors working intensively with students • Assessment that makes use of "real world" tasks • Flexible scheduling that may span the school day/week/year • Heterogeneous and/or multiage student grouping arrangements **Governance** • Participatory and inclusive decision making processes • Parental involvement in student learning • Parental/Community involvement in school governance	**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics** • Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. • Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning. • Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. • Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches. • Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it. **Leadership and Organization Characteristics** • A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. • Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices. • Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. • Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. • Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. • **Culture and Community Characteristics** • The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. • Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate. • Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents. • Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies. • The school actively involves families in the education of their children. • The school includes community and business partners.

The survey was distributed to middle level teachers and administrators throughout the state of Tennessee. The researchers also wanted to determine the extent to which teachers and administrators responding to the survey agreed or disagreed on the importance of the middle school concept and the extent to which those concepts are implemented in the respondents' school.

The role of the administrator of middle level schools is extremely important. As stated by Kellough and Kellough (2003), "The effective middle level school principal is well aware of the importance and ramifications, and is a proponent of, the key components of exemplary middle level school organiza-

tion…" (p. 17). They also asserted that effective principals establish "a collaborative climate in which teachers and students share the responsibility for determining the appropriate use of time and facilities" (p.17).

Recent research confirms the importance of the principal's role in middle level education.

Walker and Slear (2011) reported a positive relationship "between high levels of teacher efficacy and increased student achievement as well as a positive link between principal behavior and teacher efficacy" (p.46). They go on to assert:

Strong principals contribute to the success of their schools, in large part, through their instructional expertise, their management skills, and their interpersonal skills (Ebmeier, 2003; Hallinger, Biecman, & Davis, 1996; Holland, 2004). Principal leadership characteristics, such as an ability to encourage feelings of effectiveness and confidence on the part of the faculty are essential in order to maximize teacher impact on the achievement of students (Barnett & McCormick, 2004, p.46).

The relationship between the behaviors of principals and middle level learning communities has been examined in multiple studies (Keys, 2010; Lovell, 2009; Frias 2010). The studies generally indicate the importance of the role of the principal in promoting teacher efficacy and student achievement. Walker and Slear (2011) identified 11 characteristics found to be important in improving teacher efficacy: communication, consideration, discipline, empowering staff, flexibility, influence with supervisors, inspiring group purpose, modeling instructional expectations, monitoring and evaluating instruction, providing contingent rewards, and situational awareness. In order to implement the middle school concept as identified by George and Alexander (1989) and articulated by the Association of Middle Level Educators, many of these same characteristics are important. Support by the leadership of the school is essential for the implementation of a the middle school concept; leadership is also important in promoting the vision of the middle school and including the important aspects of the concept. In *This We Believe,* under leadership and organization the following precepts are stated:

A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices. Lead-

ers demonstrate courage and collaboration. Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships (NMSA, 2003).

From these statements, it is apparent that the role of the principal in middle level leadership is important. Shared vision is articulated by the leader of the school; professional development is planned by the leader; the structures of the organization are planned by the principal. Team assignments, advising, and common planning time are organizational structures which the principal arranges. In order to implement middle level concepts, leadership is essential. In order to share the vision of the middle level concept, principals need to articulate the vision to stakeholders, be knowledgeable, demonstrate collaboration, and organize the structures to implement the concepts.

This study is a further examination of the responses of principals in relation to the middle level concept and the degree to which it is implemented. Knowing the extent of the commitment of principals to the concept in relation to the teachers' commitment gives some indication of the health of the concept in middle level schools in Tennessee.

The following questions guide this research, while the tables display survey results:

- Are there significant differences in principals' and teachers' perceptions of the importance of middle level best practices in the instructional program?

- Are there significant differences in the teachers' and principals' perceptions of the implementation of middle level best practices in their schools?

Table 2

Comparison of teacher and principal beliefs about curriculum

	Teachers			Principals				
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*g*
1) Curricula that integrate multiple academic disciplines.	503	4.57	0.97	80	4.63	1.02	-0.48	-0.06
2) Articulation of middle level curricula with high school curricula/expectations.	504	4.66	0.97	79	4.73	0.89	-0.63	-0.08
3) Exploratory/encore courses in the arts, athletics, or careers.	502	4.33	1.12	80	4.18	1.05	1.16	0.14
4) Emphasis on students' social and emotional growth.	504	4.59	1.00	79	4.76	0.94	-1.38	-0.17
5) Concern for students' health, wellness, and safety.	502	4.88	0.99	80	4.93	0.85	-0.39	-0.04
6) Shared responsibility for students' literacy and numeracy skills.	501	4.81	0.93	80	4.95	0.88	-1.25	-0.15
Mean: Curriculum Importance	505	4.64	0.76	80	4.70	0.70	-0.62	-0.07

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 2 illustrates that teachers and principals are much in agreement about the importance of the key curricular components of the middle school concept.

Table 3
Comparison of teacher and principal perceptions of implementation of curricular practices

	Teachers			Principals			t	g
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD		
1) Curricula that integrate multiple academic disciplines.	501	4.32	1.05	78	4.71	0.79	-3.77***	-0.37
2) Articulation of middle level curricula with high school curricula/expectations.	500	4.39	1.06	77	4.55	0.97	-1.20	-0.15
3) Exploratory/encore courses in the arts, athletics, or careers.	502	4.16	1.22	78	4.31	1.27	-1.01	-0.12
4) Emphasis on students' social and emotional growth.	501	4.37	1.14	78	4.60	0.89	-2.11*	-0.21
5) Concern for students' health, wellness, and safety.	501	4.84	1.02	76	5.04	0.72	-2.15*	-0.21
6) Shared responsibility for students' literacy and numeracy skills.	491	4.50	1.14	76	4.76	0.96	-2.15*	-0.23
Mean: Curriculum Implementation	502	4.43	0.86	78	4.66	0.67	-2.72**	-0.28

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

While Table 3 shows that principals and teachers mainly agree about the implementation of key curricular middle level practices, there is some disagreement. Principals tend to perceive that curriculum integration is being implemented more than teachers do.

Table 4
Comparison of teacher and principal beliefs concerning instruction and advising

	Teachers			Principals			t	g
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD		
1) Teachers specifically interested/trained in working with young adolescents.	504	5.00	0.90	80	5.11	0.90	-1.04	-0.13
2) Professional development explicitly focused on the middle school.	503	4.87	0.95	80	5.19	0.80	-2.80**	-0.34
3) Interdisciplinary teams of teachers having common planning time.	502	4.87	1.07	80	4.96	1.00	-0.70	-0.08
4) One or more guidance counselors working intensively with students.	504	4.86	1.03	80	4.95	0.90	-0.86	-0.09
5) Assessment that makes use of "real world" tasks.	503	4.85	0.98	80	5.00	0.90	-1.28	-0.15
6) Flexible scheduling that may span the school day/week/year.	502	4.40	1.16	79	4.62	1.10	-1.60	-0.19
7) Heterogeneous and/or multiage student grouping arrangements.	501	3.98	1.31	79	4.13	1.35	-0.91	-0.11
Mean: Instructional Importance	504	4.69	0.79	80	4.85	0.77	-1.71	-0.21

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 4 again displays much agreement between teachers and principals about the importance of recommended middle level instructional and advising practices. The most significant difference concerns professional development explicitly focused on the middle school with principals ranking its importance higher than teachers.

Table 5

Comparison of teacher and principal perceptions of implementation of instruction and advising

	Teachers			Principals					
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*g*
1) Teachers specifically interested/trained in working with young adolescents.	503	4.74	0.99	808	4.78	0.89	-0.27		-0.03
2) Professional development explicitly focused on the middle school.	504	4.48	1.15	80	4.66	1.04	-1.37		-0.16
3) Interdisciplinary teams of teachers having common planning time.	503	4.48	1.39	80	4.80	1.23	-2.12	*	-0.23
4) One or more guidance counselors working intensively with students.	503	4.17	1.35	80	4.45	1.17	-1.75		-0.21
5) Assessment that makes use of "real world" tasks.	502	4.01	1.12	79	4.24	0.92	-1.76		-0.21
6) Flexible scheduling that may span the school day/week/year.	503	3.79	1.38	79	4.15	1.35	-2.19	*	-0.27
7) Heterogeneous and/or multiage student grouping arrangements.	503	3.78	1.37	79	4.05	1.40	-1.63		-0.20
Mean: Instructional Implementation	504	4.21	0.91	80	4.45	0.77	-2.26	*	-0.27

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Principals and teachers are also concur about the implementation of middle level instructional and advising best practices as shown in Table 5.

Table 6

Comparison of teacher and principal beliefs on governance

	Teachers			Principals					
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*g*
1) Participatory and inclusive decision making processes.	503	4.68	0.98	80	4.83	0.90	-1.28		-0.15
2) Data-driven and evidence-based school improvement planning.	503	4.81	1.07	80	5.40	0.79	-5.86	***	-0.57
3) Parental involvement in student learning.	503	5.01	1.00	80	4.98	0.97	0.32		0.04
4) Parental/Community involvement in school governance.	500	4.54	1.18	79	4.42	1.07	0.88		0.11
Mean: Governance Importance	503	4.77	0.84	80	4.91	0.75	-1.43		-0.17

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Table 6 again illustrates much agreement between teachers and principals about the importance of recommended middle level governance practices. A significant difference arises over the importance of data-driven and evidenced-based school improvement planning with principals ranking its importance significantly higher than teachers.

Table 7

Comparison of teacher and principal perceptions of implementation of governance principles

	Teachers			Principals					
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	t	p	g
1) Participatory and inclusive decision making processes.	53	4.20	1.22	80	4.90	0.92	-6.03	***	-0.59
2) Data-driven and evidence-based school improvement planning.	53	4.93	1.04	80	5.36	0.82	-3.52	***	-0.42
3) Parental involvement in student learning.	52	3.89	1.20	80	4.29	1.06	-2.77	***	-0.33
4) Parental/Community involvement in school governance.	51	3.85	1.29	78	3.94	1.15	-0.53		-0.06
Mean: Governance Implementation	53	4.22	0.97	80	4.62	0.78	-3.53	***	-0.42

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 7 reveals the most disagreement between teachers and principals. Discrepancies exist on the implementation of data-driven planning and parental involvement in student learning. The largest discrepancy however, centers on the implementation of participatory decision making where principals rate this higher than teachers.

Generally, teachers and principals tend to agree about the importance of the middle school concept. In the area of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, both school leaders and teachers supported the integration of curriculum, high expectations for students, exploratory opportunities for students, concern for wellness, and shared responsibility for literacy and numeracy. This convergence of educational focus is helpful in promoting instructional practices across schools which foster student learning and growth. Table 2 does indicate that there is a divergence in teacher and principal perceptions of actual implementation in the area of curriculum integration. Principals perceive that it is being implemented more frequently than do teachers. This difference might be attributed to the ability of the principal to observe what is going on in the whole school; teachers may only know what is happening in a few classrooms. An interesting follow up question to principals would be to ask what evidence they used to make their rating on this issue.

There are some significant differences in principals' and teachers' perceptions of the importance of middle level best practices in their schools. Significant differences concern the importance of professional development explicitly focused on the middle school and data-driven and evidenced-based school improvement planning. Principals rank the importance of these practices higher than teachers. A possible reason for this divergence may be the result of these items more often being in the purview of administrators. The leadership of a school has responsibility for seeing and articulating the direction of the school. Professional development focused on middle level education is important because of the unique needs of this group of students. Administrators often see patterns and problems that teachers may miss. Data-driven and evidence based school planning originally fell to the leadership of the school, but is now the purview of the entire school. Teachers now must use data and evidence to inform their instruction; schools take that data to develop plans and measure progress. What was once the responsibility of the principal is now the responsibility of all the educators in the school.

There is also much agreement between principals and teachers about the implementation of the middle school concept in their schools. However, there are some significant differences in the teachers' and principals' perceptions of the implementation of middle level best practices in their schools. Discrepancies also exist in relation to parental involvement in student learning. This discrepancy again may be the result of perspective. Principals are often aware of the involvement of parents in the school and the overall parent involvement in student learning. Teachers may not have the pertinent information.

The largest discrepancy found focuses on the implementation of participatory decision-making. Principals rate each of these items higher than teachers. Teachers are often not aware of the influence they may have in the decision-making process. Principals may not communicate to teachers the reasons for specific decisions. Unless there are specific organizational structures in place, the school may not have true participatory decision-making. Consultation with stakeholders without the structure to support participatory decision-making is probably not considered the sharing of the decision making process.

In summary, this study found that principals and teachers in Tennessee both support the middle school philosophy and implement those practices in their schools. There are perceptual discrepancies about the degree of implementation and importance of some elements. For the most part, it appears that principals and teachers in Tennessee middle level education share a vision of middle level education which supports the middle school concept and its implementation in schools.

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