

## **Guest Editor's Introduction: Middle Level Teacher Education**

**By Janet E. McDaniel**

The vast majority of new teachers of young adolescents enter their middle school classrooms with no professional preparation to teach in the middle grades. By and large, they have completed teacher education programs designed to prepare competent elementary or high school teachers. Coursework or field experience

connected to middle schooling has been more serendipitous than planned. Their state teacher licensure boards do not require special preparation to teach in middle schools. Their institutions of higher education do not offer the choice of a middle school path along with elementary or secondary programs. They have learned to be child-centered generalists or content area specialists. Their teacher preparation for middle schooling will be "on the job training." One can only hope for the guidance of a good colleague, or ongoing professional development by an enlightened school district, or the careful nurturing of an experienced middle school principal—or, better yet, all three. It is no wonder that many middle school

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teachers feel “caught in the middle”—by their own inadequate knowledge base of their students and level of schooling, by the sometimes baffling and rapid changes their 10- to 14-year old students are experiencing, by the often-conflicting demands of high academic standards and the non-academic lives of their students. And it is no wonder that many teachers give up on teaching, at least in the middle grades, before their “on the job training” proves to them that working with young adolescents is the most stimulating and delightful opportunity they will have in their careers.

This is a bleak picture of middle school teacher preparation. On the brighter side, a great number of teachers overcome their lack of initial preparation and eventually become exemplary middle school educators. They in turn mentor the next generation of teachers of young adolescents. In many cases, they seek out and complete advanced study in middle school education in graduate school. They become active in middle level professional organizations and share their knowledge with others at local and national conferences. Some contribute to teacher preparation by accepting student teachers into their classrooms; some become guest lecturers or adjunct instructors in an education course that otherwise lacks middle school content.

The fact remains that in 39 of 50 states, there is no requirement that middle school teachers be specially licensed to teach young adolescents. Overlapping grade levels in licensure effectively means that, even in these states, many middle school teachers are teaching with essentially elementary or secondary licenses. A series of research studies leads to the estimate that nation-wide, about 15 to 20 percent of middle school teachers have had some special preparation to teach at that level—and even that “special preparation” may have consisted of a course or two in an elementary or secondary education program. Most of this handful of teachers are in those states—Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, and Virginia—where specialized teacher education for middle school teachers has been accepted and promoted.

In recent years, as research into middle level teaching and learning has grown, interest in appropriate preparation for middle level teachers has also increased. Practicing teachers report their belief that middle level teaching requires special preparation; these teachers and their administrators have joined forces with professional organizations to pressure licensing boards and institutions of higher education to provide incentive and opportunities to better prepare prospective middle level teachers. In California, the re-examination of all teacher credentials currently underway has given middle level educators reason to believe that the state will adopt a mandatory preparation rule for the first time. The state’s Commission on Teacher Credentialing has adopted such a recommendation. If the proposal is included in the final legislation, teacher preparation institutions in California will need to greatly accelerate their efforts to meet the demand for new middle level teachers.

There are some states and teacher education institutions in the United States that have put the “Should we...?” question behind them and are actively engaged in

preparing preservice teachers for their work in middle level schools. Teacher educators in these states and institutions are also keeping track of their work through thoughtful study. The eight articles in this thematic issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* exemplify the maturity of the literature on middle level teacher education. Collectively, they relate the comprehensive picture of the national scene, the best practices of local efforts, attention to subject-specific teacher preparation, qualitative and quantitative studies of undergraduate and post-baccalaureate programs, and critical examination of the generally-accepted principles and practices of middle level teacher educators.

The quartet of authors in the lead article—Ken McEwin, Tom Dickinson, Tom Erb, and Peter Scales—have collectively and individually conducted and published the major nation-wide research studies of middle level teacher education in the past decade. The lessons they have learned from this extensive body of research are summarized as organizing principles to guide exemplary teacher preparation programs.

Dan Young of the University of New Mexico introduces and examines four texts from the bookshelves of middle level teacher educators. Their usefulness as primers for preservice students—their strengths and limitations, their points of view and contributions—are presented for prospective and experienced instructors of middle level education courses.

Robin Loflin Smith of Salem College and David Strahan of the University of North Carolina Greensboro offer a multiple-case study of middle school teacher education students who are in the process of negotiating the sometimes conflicting influences of their coursework, experiences in classrooms, and practices of their cooperating teachers. The relative impact of structured reflection and collaboration with cooperating teachers suggest that both may be beneficial, though the latter is most crucial.

Elizabeth Doster, David Jackson, and Darwin Smith of the University of Georgia describe their combined efforts to provide an innovative course of study to prospective middle school science teachers. Theoretically grounded in pedagogical content knowledge, the course was taught by an instructional team of scientists, science educators, and practicing middle school teachers. Deliberately integrating university instruction and middle school classroom practice, the course raised many issues that have implications for any middle school methods experience.

Francisco Ríos, Laurie Stowell, Patty Christopher and Janet McDaniel—a team of teacher educators from California State University San Marcos (CSUSM)—have worked to place social justice and equity at the center of their middle level program. The evolution of the importance of multicultural/multilingual education in the curriculum and instruction of the program is described through an examination of five principles that bring together the reform movements in middle level education and teacher education at CSUSM.

The efficacy of specific middle level teacher education is the subject of the

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article by Sue Yerian of Pacific Lutheran University and Pam Grossman of the University of Washington. They compare the preparedness of novice middle school teachers who are graduates of either a traditional teacher education program or a professional development school program for middle level teachers. Their study provides lessons related to both middle level preparation and school/university partnerships.

Cheryl Taylor Desmond and Barbara Senkowski Stengel describe the Professional Development Practicum they have developed for middle school student teachers at Millersville University (MU). The concepts of situated knowing and collaborative inquiry are central to the practicum. The students' and cooperating teachers' assessments of the practicum have strengthened the MU teacher educators' commitment to these key concepts.

Natalie Adams of Georgia Southern University challenges university educators to consider the theoretical perspective of feminist poststructuralism as an alternative to a more mainstream point of view of middle level teacher education. In her instruction of a middle school methods course, Adams raises issues with her students that challenge much of the "conventional wisdom" of the middle school reform movement. This critique provides an opening for continued discourse among those who are committed to preparing teachers well to teach young adolescents.

To those readers who are already convinced that young adolescence and middle schools are concepts worthy of special attention by teacher educators, I invite you to glean from the authors in this issue the lessons they have learned about how best to prepare teachers to teach 10- to 14-year-olds. To those readers who are either unaware or skeptical of efforts to specially prepare middle level teachers, I invite you to consider these authors' collective experiences as a stimulus to your thinking. Young adolescents, no less than any other students in our schools, deserve high quality teaching by professionals who have been as well-prepared as possible to meet their many needs. Indeed, given the "turning point" character of many young adolescents' experiences, they deserve teachers who are both knowledgeable and caring about their intellectual, social, physical, personal, and moral development. Successful teaching in middle schools requires dedication of tall order; preparing such teachers well is another tall order. The articles that follow demonstrate the uncommon commitment that characterizes so many middle school teachers and the teacher educators behind them.