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Organizing Principles for Middle Grades Teacher Preparation

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A Vision of Excellence: Organizing Principles for Middle Grades Teacher Preparation (McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995) was written to strengthen the knowledge base of middle grades teacher preparation and is designed to complement several existing documents. As such, it is situated between National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) standards that focus on licensure and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) statements which define advanced certification of excellent teachers. All of these documents are part of an effort to provide a highly articulated system of recruitment, induction, licensure, and advanced certification for middle grades teachers. Yet while these and other important

Organizing Principles

resources are helpful to those designing preparation programs, none of these documents is designed specifically to present a coherent set of principles to guide the design of *exemplary* middle grades teacher preparation programs for beginning teachers:

- ◆ The influential *National Middle School Association/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education-approved Curriculum Guidelines* for middle grades teacher preparation were written to be part of the NCATE unit accreditation process and therefore focus on specific program components;
- ◆ The new National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification *Outcome-Based Teacher Education Standards for the Elementary, Middle, and High School Levels* were designed to satisfy state licensing requirements across the nation;
- ◆ The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards defines what highly accomplished, experienced middle grades teachers should know and be able to do.

A Vision of Excellence: Organizing Principles for Middle Grades Teacher Preparation (McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995) both reflects and expands the knowledge base of beginning middle grades teacher preparation and presents a total program in a manner that allows those utilizing it the flexibility to create their own visions of how the curriculum can be implemented. These principles, when used in concert with other resources, should provide a foundation on which to build a solid, research-based program which will attract and prepare capable middle grades teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become highly accomplished teachers of young adolescents.

The Organizing Principles

An excellent middle grades teacher education program can be divided into three major components. The first component, foundations, consists of two major subdivisions: a broad liberal education and the knowledge base upon which the teaching profession rests. The second component consists of what is conventionally called teaching fields, depth beyond the basics in some area(s) of academic inquiry. The third component, middle grades specialization, consists of those experiences which are specific to learning to function effectively in a school designed for the education of young adolescents. This third component involves the study of young adolescent development and the implications of that knowledge for the organization, curriculum, instruction, and community relations necessary to promote healthy growth among 10-to-15-year-olds. This component of middle grades specialization is best developed through a strong school site relationship.

Foundations

Several areas of knowledge and habits of mind undergird the profession of

teaching, including an intellectually challenging, liberal post-secondary education and study of 11 areas that form the basis for sound educational practice. These foundations need not be defined in terms of traditional foundations of education disciplines: psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy of education. There are, however, certain skills and conceptual understandings that teachers need to master in order to function in modern schools and school systems. Parts of these foundations would require the collaboration of a college of liberal arts and sciences to offer learning opportunities prior to, or parallel with, the site-based components of the total teacher education program.

Liberal Education. A liberal arts education has as its major goal the grounding of a person in his or her historical and cultural time and place. To accomplish that end, one studies the liberal arts disciplines to gain critical awareness: both disciplinary knowledge and the ability to think for oneself about that knowledge. The outcome of applying one's critical faculties to the liberal disciplines leads one to place oneself historically, culturally, scientifically, ethically, and aesthetically in the intellectual heritage of humankind.

Child Development. A middle grades teacher needs to be able to place young adolescent development into a broader lifespan context. Consequently, teachers need to understand human development from conception to death. Teachers of young adolescents must especially understand both the period of late childhood that their students are moving out of and the subsequent periods of human development to better understand the consequences of various patterns of young adolescent development on later health and well being.

Consultation Skills. No longer can teachers be prepared only to teach as isolates in separate classrooms. Especially in people-oriented environments such as schools, teachers must be able to communicate in a larger variety of situations than ever before. Teachers must, first of all, be able to collaborate with other teachers to make decisions about the operation of their teams and schools. They must be able to communicate with a wide variety of parents and with an expanding variety of support staff and administrators as equal partners in the decision making processes. Finally, teachers must be able to function as advisors to their students on a number of matters related to successfully negotiating the school environment.

Diversity. Teachers in the schools of the 1990s and beyond must understand and respond to students who differ from each other on a wide range of dimensions. Teachers must understand students whose race and ethnicity may vary from their own. Overlapping race and ethnicity are students' socioeconomic circumstances. Teachers will also encounter students who exhibit a variety of identified exceptionalities, from developmental delays to learning and behavior problems. The differential treatment of the genders remains a major concern for educators as well as dozens of variables upon which students differ that influence their achievement, including academic self-concept, field dependence, learning style, attribution of success, type of intelligence, and general and domain specific ability.

Organizing Principles

Against this backdrop of other forms of diversity, teachers must deal with developmental diversity which itself is multidimensional: physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and moral. Understanding this array of diversity is the first step toward being responsive to it.

Technology. Teachers must be able to apply computer and multimedia technology to instruction. Today's teacher must be prepared to access remote data bases, interact via networks, communicate through e-mail, create interactive video programs, perform desktop publishing, and use a whole host of new applications that did not even exist ten, five, or three years ago.

Management. All teachers must understand how to manage human behavior. In part this consists of understanding human motivation. Teachers must know the options for setting incentives that will cause students to learn without having to resort to coercion. Management also involves understanding how to plan for successful learning experiences.

Instruction. Instruction is a decision-making process that involves many elements. Teachers must be able to relate learning experiences to students' prior knowledge and to desired curricular outcomes. The first decision then relates to what to teach. Once it is determined what the intended student outcomes are and what needs to be taught to lead students to these outcomes, the teacher must design two types of activities: those that promote student learning in the first place and those that allow students to demonstrate what they have learned. Finally, teachers must determine what their own actions will be to promote student learning. This means that teachers must find ways to engage students with the subject matter to be learned, a different issue than determining what teaching performance the teacher will carry out.

Methods. As opposed to instruction, which is the action phase of curriculum, methods are conceived as the technical understanding and knowledge that teachers need in order to successfully organize and present learning experiences for students. The study of methods includes learning about print and non-print, audio-visual, and electronic teaching materials. It involves knowing about community resources, both human and material, that can be used to promote learning. Methods involve learning strategies for incorporating alternatives into the planning of instruction for a diverse set of learners.

Changing Society. Regardless of subject area or level, teachers must be aware of how our society is changing in ways that affect the learning of young people. At the very least teachers need to be sensitive to four major trends:

- ◆ Accelerating change in the rate of communications technology;
- ◆ Our changing social structure;
- ◆ Changes in the workplace; and
- ◆ Globalization of our economy.

To teach today, teachers must keep abreast of societal change and adapt their own

behavior to avoid obsolescence.

Families and Community. Teachers at all levels today must be able and willing to collaborate with parents/guardians/caregivers and representatives of other social agencies to provide the conditions that promote student learning. With one quarter of all school children in the United States living in poverty, a circumstance that greatly diminishes prospects for learning, the role of the teacher extends beyond that of the traditional subject expert performing for a captive audience in an isolated classroom.

Organizational Renewal/Reform. Teachers must understand that organizations that are successful in the Information Age are organized differently than those that were successful in the Industrial Age. Failure to recognize the paradigm shift in the structure of successful organizations is a formula for failure. Teachers have to be part of the solution to creating successful schools—schools that change in response to changing forces in the larger society. Therefore, teachers must have knowledge of the change process in organizations.

Teaching Fields

The knowledge needed to be a successful teacher of young adolescents goes beyond that of the traditional single-subject-matter specialist. Therefore, the prospective middle grades teacher should be prepared in at least two teaching fields and those fields should be different (e.g., mathematics and science, not biology and chemistry). These teaching fields should be broad and interdisciplinary and encompass the major areas within those fields. Because of the importance of the core curriculum in the middle grades school and the need for interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction, at least one of the teaching fields should be drawn from the core content areas—language arts, mathematics, social studies, or science.

In addition to being knowledgeable in two or more teaching fields, including at least one core area, prospective middle grades teachers draw upon their firm grounding in the academic subjects that comprise middle grades curriculum. Their knowledge of subject matter should include basic academic content and key concepts that young adolescents need to understand. This allows prospective teachers to make curricular and instructional decisions about their teaching and helps students make connections among the disciplines.

Prospective middle grades teachers need broad content knowledge so that appropriate curricular goals and instructional plans that facilitate student learning from within and across the teaching areas can be established. Middle grades teachers frequently teach more than one subject as members of interdisciplinary teams and work with colleagues in teaching an integrated curriculum. Those not a part of a team also benefit from knowledge in more than one teaching field. Knowledge of multiple teaching areas increases the likelihood that instruction, no matter what the instructional organization, will be richer, more interesting, and more meaningful for young adolescents.

Middle Grades Specialization

Young Adolescents. Prospective middle grades teachers must be afforded the opportunity to engage in both formal study of young adolescent development and reflection in practice with young adolescents. They must study and observe both particular aspects of development (*e.g.*, physical development) and the integration of these aspects into the personalities of distinct individuals. In addition, this understanding must be integrated into curricular and instructional opportunities and find its way into the emerging definition of teacher roles. The necessity to engage in reflective analysis with a variety of instructional personnel will enable the prospective middle grades teacher to begin to establish what the profession has always aspired to create—developmentally responsive programs and practices.

Prospective middle grades teachers must also study and actively engage in activities with various social, cultural, and societal aspects that impact youth. This active engagement may be accomplished through the role of the advisor while working on site in a middle grades school, through a community service internship established outside the school setting, or by working in a youth service agency. The increased understanding that comes from this broader frame of reference should be used to inform the prospective teacher's relations with students and their families, as well as provide additional information for creating meaningful curriculum and instruction.

The developmental realities of early adolescence mean that issues related to health, and especially to sexuality, become critically important to young adolescents and therefore to those who work with them. Their interest in health and sexuality topics is pervasive and intense. Prospective middle grades teachers must begin to accept these increased demands and confront these issues of total well-being through formal study and site experiences. Prospective middle grades teachers should engage in both formal study and site experience with a variety of health and sexuality topics and develop skills that enable them to effectively integrate health and sexuality issues that arise spontaneously in their classrooms. Prospective middle grades teachers must be able to create safe classroom environments for readily discussing these issues, incorporate health and sexuality content into their own teaching, develop interdisciplinary curriculum with health education teachers, and refer students to appropriate school and/or community resources.

Finally, prospective middle grades teachers must come to see young adolescents as individuals with hopes and dreams, with emerging abilities, needs, and pursuits. They must be thoroughly grounded in both what makes up the individual personality and how this personality is developed. A rigorous investigation of young adolescent growth—through formal study, observation, and direct participation—will enable the prospective middle grades teacher to create meaningful learning situations for their students.

Curriculum. In the formal study of middle grades curriculum, prospective

middle grades teachers must learn to see the “big picture,” even though they are predisposed to focus on the specific subjects they will be licensed to teach. Seeing how these subjects fit into the total program for students is one of the challenges of teaching curriculum to neophytes as is helping them see that their curricular responsibilities extend beyond teaching these subjects. In the first place they need to learn not only about the role of math or English or art, but how all of these areas of study fit together to provide young adolescents with an appropriate education.

Prospective middle grades teachers must also understand how the activities program—consisting of clubs, competitions, social events, athletics, and performances—fits into the total curriculum. The special contributions of the advisory program in the overall curriculum must be understood. Prospective middle grades teachers must engage in formal study to understand the foundations these varied curricular components are based upon: the developmental characteristics of young adolescent learners, the nature and changing conditions of the larger society, as well as the content and modes of inquiry associated with various areas of human knowledge. Finally, the various concepts of integrated/interdisciplinary curriculum must be studied.

In the site-based experiences of learning about curriculum, prospective middle grades teachers should first become a part of an interdisciplinary team. On that team, they engage in the planning and execution of interdisciplinary instruction. The focus here would be on how the subject areas of their own specialization relate to the other areas taught on the team. This activity is a two-way street: Not only would the prospective teacher grapple with how their areas of expertise could enhance other areas, but also how other areas would enhance their own.

Prospective middle grades teachers on site learn how they can contribute to the total curriculum. They would work with mentor teachers on teams and committees to plan activities and advisory functions. They would follow this planning experience by taking an active part in the execution of these programs by engaging in such activities as assisting in club sponsorship, coaching, and advisory activities. At the conclusion of their program, the prospective middle grades teacher would be able to see the big picture and would have experienced active engagement with several curricular components both as planner and teacher.

Instruction. In the formal study of instruction, prospective middle grades teachers should understand the array of instructional options available to them and the research base that underlies these options. This formal study of instruction should include not only instructional strategies but a study of assessment alternatives, including portfolios, exhibitions, and other performance measures, and how to construct and evaluate them. In addition, prospective teachers should become familiar with the impact of technological advances on instruction. Rigorous formal study would assist the prospective teacher to understand the complementary relationship between instructional strategies, assessment procedures, and intended learning outcomes.

Organizing Principles

Through increasingly complex site-based instructional experiences the prospective middle grades teacher would practice instruction and assessment with real learners. Prospective middle grades teachers would put into practice the backwards planning of multiple multisensory tasks that provide for student decision making. These teachers-to-be would move from such planning for limited numbers of students for limited periods of time to planning with a team to deliver an interdisciplinary thematic unit to a whole team of students for an extended period of time.

Community Service. Young adolescent students do not exist in a world populated only by teachers, classrooms, and schools. Nor do they exist only between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Prospective middle grades teachers must come to know, through formal study and direct engagement, the life of young adolescents within the larger community context of family, peers, neighborhood, and community. To accomplish this learning task, they must extend their horizons beyond the school to the family and a variety of community settings. The prospective teacher observes how schools engage families through parent conferences, back-to-school nights, school-community forums, and other meeting points and then begins to integrate this knowledge through practice in advisory settings and through the assumption of responsibilities with the families of young adolescents.

The prospective middle grades teacher must also engage in extended experiences with out-of-school agencies that work with youth. These extended experiences should be structured and guided by mentors who broaden the prospective teacher's knowledge and understanding of the community's role in rearing the child. This knowledge, imported back into the classroom, provides prospective teachers with a base of information to expand curricular opportunities as well as to define the role of teacher in new ways.

School Organization. Prospective middle grades teachers should be knowledgeable about the multiple school organization patterns that house middle grades programs, the research base of school organization, and the importance of developmentally responsive schooling. This knowledge should include organizational plans that function within various schools (*i.e.*, school-within-a-school, interdisciplinary team organization, flexible scheduling, teacher-based guidance). As well, prospective middle grades teachers should have site experiences which provide direct participation with school organizational issues and related matters.

Teacher Roles. Once prospective middle grades teachers have had formal study of young adolescent development, middle school curriculum, instruction, and school organization, the study of teacher roles provides a synthesis of these studies. Prospective middle grades teachers should understand the complex role of the teacher through site-based experiences under the guidance of a variety of mentors. The prospective middle grades teacher should have rich and varied opportunities to observe teachers collaborating, advising, solving problems, and taking collective responsibility for promoting young adolescent development. Then prospective teachers would have multiple opportunities to practice these skills, abilities, and

dispositions and gain feedback on their efforts. In this manner, prospective teachers, through reflection in practice, develop their own personal sense of what it is to be a successful teacher of young adolescents.

School Site Program Delivery

An excellent middle grades teacher education program is directed toward one goal—the development of an excellent middle grades teacher. There are two complimentary elements that are embedded in this singular goal which further characterize an excellent middle grades teacher education program:

- ◆ The initiation of a context for lifelong learning about young adolescents and their developmentally responsive education;
- ◆ The empowerment of an individual teacher through the rigorous investigation and application of knowledge about teaching young adolescents.

These complimentary elements are aimed at initiating the development of middle grades teachers and both context and individual empowerment are significantly impacted by the location of preparation.

How a prospective middle grades teacher ultimately functions in a school setting with young adolescents determines whether or not the goals of the program are met. Because all of the contexts within which a prospective middle grades teacher will eventually operate—with students, curriculum, instruction, teacher roles, school organization, and family and community relations—are present at a school site, the ideal location for the delivery of all of the middle grades specialization elements is the middle grades school. At the middle grades school the prospective teacher can engage in formal study and reflection in practice, be taught by both college and school faculty, and both observe and teach young adolescents. The power of the site experience is the power of learning in meaningful contexts, in real schools, with young adolescents.

The four distinct purposes of middle grades site experiences—expanding and enriching developmental knowledge, contact with diverse learners, practice in teaching and finding one's teaching self, and practice in operating within a middle grades school organization—are strengthened by the site-based delivery of a program. These purposes are intended to bridge the theory-practice continuum and it is the site-based situation that further contributes to this effort.

The delivery of the program on site should be characterized by four criteria: early, annual, teamed, and varied. Work in the school site should begin early in a prospective teacher's career. This early beginning affords the prospective middle grades teacher (and the program) the opportunity to make important career decisions relative to teaching young adolescents, subject matter concentrations, and the formation of a teaching identity. As well, it allows the profession to make judgments relative to the prospective teacher's suitability for entry into the

Organizing Principles

profession. The provision of early work allows both formal study and reflection in practice to begin simultaneously and in a healthy balance.

The delivery of an on-site program provides annual contact with young adolescent students and the middle grades school. Prospective middle grades teachers can proceed through a sequence of flexibly arranged contacts that move from structured observation and study, through initial engagement in structured teaching situations, to extended contact and responsibility, culminating in formal internships. This sequence of increasing intensity and responsibility is balanced at the site by necessary formal study and enriched by the opportunity to analyze, reflect, and discuss experiences with both college and school faculty.

An on-site program allows middle grades teacher educators to engage a variety of personnel in the shaping of a new teacher. Various teams operate in the field: the supervision triad of college, school teachers, and the prospective middle grades teacher; the instructional delivery team of college and school teachers; and the school's interdisciplinary teacher teams. By operating in a teamed situation on site the prospective middle grades teacher is afforded a variety of mentors, models, colleagues, coaches, instructors, supervisors, and "trusted friends," as well as direct experience with teams, all of which provide the opportunity to apply this learning to young adolescent students.

Schools house diversity—in race and ethnicity, gender and development, social circumstances and leaning styles, and ability and interest. Middle grades preparation programs operating on site provide prospective middle grades teachers with opportunities to acquaint themselves with this complex and stimulating variety of young adolescents and apply their emerging knowledge base in real world contexts. Furthermore, on site experiences are flexible so that other resources—social agencies, libraries, and museums—can be directly incorporated into young adolescent students' learning. Again, formal study as well as reflection in practice are continually offered in these varied contexts.

A Vision of Excellence

The ultimate goal of middle grades teacher preparation programs is to prepare excellent teachers of young adolescents. Reaching this goal successfully depends on many different factors that allow and encourage prospective teachers to actively continue their professional development while avoiding a loss of momentum or even becoming static. Middle grades teacher preparation programs which lead to initial licensure are only the beginning step in this career-long process. However, without high quality, specialized middle grades teacher preparation which provides beginning teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for success, it becomes far less likely that they will recognize their full potential. This lack of fulfillment of professional potential not only penalizes young adolescents who spend significant amounts of time with their teachers, but the teachers themselves.

Beginning teachers continue their professional development by working with young adolescents and their colleagues, taking graduate classes, attending professional conferences, and reading professional publications. Quality middle grades teacher preparation programs play an essential role in this development by assisting entry level professionals as they become well prepared for success. This success, in turn, greatly enhances the chances that these teachers will not only be effective, but passionate about their profession and their students. Perhaps just as importantly, this effectiveness, passion, and caring will be based on accurate knowledge and perceptions—visions—of what developmentally based teaching and learning is, rather than a set of well intentioned, but sometimes random efforts that do not always end in positive results.

The new National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification (1992, 1993) for highly accomplished teachers of young adolescents adds an essential component to the professional development ladder that has historically been missing—an endpoint. Of course, this endpoint does not signal the end of professional development for those certified, but does provide national recognition and a knowledge base desired by highly accomplished middle grades teachers. This knowledge base, in turn, serves as one of the resources to be used in middle grades teacher preparation program design. This knowledge is important in the design of both undergraduate and graduate middle grades teacher preparation programs, whether or not those enrolled in them plan to seek national certification.

Clearly, the journey to excellence traveled by prospective and practicing middle grades teachers is not the sole responsibility of initial, or even graduate level, teacher preparation programs. However, such teacher preparation programs serve a crucial role, with the potential to either launch beginning teachers who are well-equipped for success in middle grades classrooms or to fail them by sending them through programs designed to serve those wishing to teach young children or senior high students. The latter choice is highly likely to result in disappointing, unsuccessful experiences which serve neither teachers nor their students well. In contrast, the organizing principles we have presented, and their expanded view of professional development, in concert with other resources, provide a vision of what programs focused directly at preparing teachers of young adolescents must reflect.

We often speak in terms of “musts” and “shoulds.” This is not done to be prescriptive. Rather, if readers seek to realize our vision of the ideal, we believe they must implement the organizing principles we present. We fully recognize that there may be as many ways of addressing the various organizing principles as there are middle grades teacher preparation programs.

If the professional development of middle grades teachers is to reach its full potential, individuals, institutions, professional associations, and other key stakeholders must play major roles. This means not only that these stakeholders must be willing to cooperate and contribute, but that teacher educators must be willing to seek that assistance with open minds and sincere desires to put the more

Organizing Principles

traditional roles of teacher preparation behind them. The knowledge needed is available and the vision is clear. It beckons all middle grades educators to follow.

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