

## Parallels between a Collaborative Research Process and the Middle Level Philosophy

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*The characteristics of the middle level philosophy as described in *This We Believe* closely parallel the collaborative research process. The journey of one research team is described in relationship to these characteristics. The collaborative process includes strengths such as professional relationships, professional development, courageous leadership, and a shared vision. Barriers to the process were also evident, including physical factors such as time and weather, differences in backgrounds and perspectives, and lack of support from respective universities. Despite these barriers, the researchers were able to use the characteristics of the middle level philosophy to guide their research.*

Studies of the effects of licensure programs on the success of candidates in middle childhood teacher preparation have rarely involved collaborative reflection and research; furthermore, existing research, which typically focused on and determined whether a product or process is effective, excluded the effect of the study on the researchers. We, as authors, researchers, and members of Ohio Middle Level Professors (OMLP), not only engaged in collaborative reflection, but we also became cognizant of the way our research ultimately affected us. We found that our collaborative research process actually resembled working in a middle school, practicing middle level philosophy. The purpose of this article was to show how the collaborative process we used as researchers and teacher educators paralleled best practice for middle level educators as stated in *This We Believe (TWB)* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010).

### **Background**

In preparation for middle childhood licensure, established in Ohio in 1998, Dr. John Swain and Dr. David Kommer invited middle level professors from around the state to work together to support a middle childhood license faithful to *TWB* and the middle level teacher preparation standards of the time. As a result a group called Ohio Middle Level Professors (OMLP) was

formed, comprising professors from competing institutions, both private and public, collaborating to design quality preparation for teachers of young adolescents in the state of Ohio. Initially operating without defined membership requirements, dues, fees, constitution, or other formal structure, this ad hoc group eventually developed strong research interests to support and advocate for middle level education in Ohio.

As early as 2005, OMLP members discussed conducting research that would support the preparation of middle level teachers. From the outset, the two-subject license for teachers of students in Grades 4–9 represented a significant departure from the previous certification structure for teachers of students in Grades K–8 and Grades 7–12 in Ohio. Not only did this change require a complete overhaul of teacher education programs, but it also presented challenges for public school systems in hiring and building configuration. Concerns about licensure and hiring surfaced at the state level and led to pressure on policy makers to revise or even dismantle the Grades 4–9 license. The initial purpose of the research conducted by OMLP was to prove that what teacher educators do in middle level teacher preparation mattered and that the middle childhood license should be preserved. Initially, a subcommittee of nine members of OMLP met to brainstorm potential research questions and possible proto-

cols. They discussed wide-ranging topics, such as the impact of licensure on student learning and staffing, the importance of knowledge of young adolescent development, implementation of the middle school concept across the state, and the impact of licensure on enrollment in middle level teacher preparation programs. Potential research questions based on National Middle School Association/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NMSA/NCATE) Initial Standards for Teacher Preparation were discussed. The final research question for this study focused on middle level teachers' perceptions of their practice after completing an Ohio Grades 4–9 teacher education program. At this time NMSA had not transitioned to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), which adopted new standards of initial teacher preparation in 2013.

Thus, we embarked on a statewide study of how the middle level license was perceived in the state of Ohio. We examined 14 teachers who were licensed through Ohio teacher preparation programs after the initiation of the middle level license. Teachers, their students, and their administrators were interviewed using a protocol based on NMSA/NCATE Initial Standards for Teacher Preparation that were in place at the time. This research project showed that middle level teachers have a strong knowledge of their students and they use that knowledge to establish rapport, plan curriculum, and manage behavior. Most schools where the teachers were employed did not have an advisory period, and most teachers were unfamiliar with the concept of advisory programs. At the time of this study, we found that teachers viewed curriculum, instruction, and assessment as separate concepts. Few were able to identify interdisciplinary curriculum in their own classrooms or across teams or grade levels. The final conclusion was that these middle level teachers struggled to solicit the voices or involvement of parents, families, or community members in their schools or classrooms in more than single, isolated events (White, Ross, Miller, Dever & Jones, 2013).

### Philosophical Base

The guiding principles of the current study are rooted in the philosophy of NMSA as stated in *TWB*, which maintains that young adolescents are rapidly changing and are required to “make critical and complex life choices” (NMSA, 2010, p. 3) in addition to forming decisions, values, and dispositions that will serve as a foundation for them as adults. Based on this understanding, NMSA created a set of 16 characteristics as the philosophical base for effective middle level education. These characteristics provide educators with an outline to ensure that middle level students receive an education that will support their growth as “lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient individuals who are optimistic about the future” (NMSA, 2010, p. 3).

The characteristics noted in *TWB* (NMSA, 2010) are not isolated and should be implemented in concert with one another. A shared vision, courageous leadership, and professional roles are not to be viewed as individual characteristics but ones that need to be implemented as a cohesive unit in order to achieve the

highest level of education of young adolescents. Ultimately, these characteristics grew out of “an awareness of and respect for the nature of . . . distinctive young adolescents” (NMSA, 2010, p. 9). Middle level educators understand the complexities of young adolescents and make informed decisions about how to address their needs.

## How Our Research Process Reflected Middle Level Philosophy

### Strengths

The foundation described above was the impetus for the collaborative research process of our group of middle level professors. The following discussion enumerates the strengths and weaknesses of conducting a collaborative, statewide research project, including a correlation with the characteristics of a successful middle school as stated in *TWB* (NMSA, 2010), the philosophical foundation from which our research process derived.

**Collaboration.** According to *TWB*, one of the components of a successful middle school is that “leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration” (NMSA, 2010, p. 29). We followed this tenet in our collaborative research process as members of OMLP. In fact, extensive collaboration was required in order to complete this project. From the larger OMLP membership, a collaborative writing team was established. Initially, 12 individuals agreed to serve on the writing team, and 29 other members agreed to serve as field researchers to conduct interviews. Once the initial interviews were completed, the writing team shrank to five members who completed the data analysis and writing of the research. Members of this team were required to work together with a larger group of collaborators in order to gather data and also to work more intimately with the smaller writing team. Collaboration at these varied levels led to increased understanding of the research tasks at hand and a holistic view of the research agenda.

The research team valued the opportunity to practice what we preach. In our respective teacher education programs, middle childhood education candidates are taught best practices that contribute to successful teaching, one of which is collaboration. As researchers, we believed that we “put knowledge and beliefs into action” (NMSA, 2010, p. 29). All members of the research team modeled the collaborative process and discussed its strengths and barriers to it with their students, helping them apply it and see its value for middle schools teachers.

**Courageous leadership.** In order for the research team to lead, we had to be courageous. Tackling a statewide research agenda with limited resources and support from our universities was an undertaking that required us to find a strong voice that could be heard across the state and to explore ways to conduct this study using the available resources. Limited resources and support did not deter us from moving forward but instead motivated us to be courageous and coordinate the study.

The members of the research team were tasked with a comprehensive research agenda designed to facilitate an examination of the need for a middle childhood license in the state of Ohio. During the course of the research, Ohio Middle Level Professors

took the lead in an argument about whether or not the middle level license should be continued in Ohio. As a result, the message of the research has been disseminated to others to continue the conversation on both a state and national levels. This study helped facilitate an on-going conversation between the representatives of the State of Ohio and Ohio Middle Level Professors regarding the middle level license. Meetings with members of the Ohio Department of Education allowed the researchers to strengthen the argument to keep the Grade 4–9 license.

Assuming leadership on a national level, the researchers made multiple conference presentations, including at the conferences of the National Middle School Association and the Symposium for Middle Level Educators. Our research was also accepted for publication in *Research of Middle Level Education* online (White et al., 2013). The research protocols have been requested by several other researchers nationwide and have been used in other studies, including one that examined the middle childhood endorsement in the state of California (Deringer & McDaniel, 2012). This study has allowed us to lead and support middle level education.

The outcomes of this study could have easily failed to support the notion of maintaining a middle childhood license. The study derived from the idea that our data would support the license, but the team was fully aware that the results may not have been favorable. If the results had been unfavorable, it would have been our task to “confront those issues or situations that are out of alignment with the school’s vision” (NMSA, 2010, p. 29). Some of the data showed that current middle school teachers lack knowledge about various aspects of middle level philosophy or were not implementing them. These data could reflect negatively upon institutions of higher education and individual teacher preparation programs; however, we decided that all results required examination, even those that did not support the intended outcome or those that reflected poorly on higher education programs. Thus, the courage to carry on was essential to our process.

The conversation regarding the existence of the middle grades license in Ohio has been on-going and often very heated. Only a courageous group of people can stand up to a state agency and advocate for what they feel is in the best interest of another group of people, in this case middle school students; but this study as well as the backing of Ohio Middle Level Professors also supported the argument that the middle childhood license is a necessity and to remove it would be a disservice to the education of middle level students.

**Professional learning relationships.** According to *TWB* a successful middle school “fosters professional learning and meaningful relationships” (NMSA, 2010, p. 31). Similarly, our group of researchers enjoyed beneficial relationships, in which using one another’s background and diverse perspectives served as a tool for professional growth.

Another characteristic of the collaborative research team involved the nature of team members and the institutions we represented. All but one member of the research team worked at small liberal arts institutions. Common to each of these institu-

tions is a focus on teaching; however, professors who teach at them are also expected to engage in scholarly and creative work because such work supports the mission of an educational institution. For us as teacher educators, this research project facilitated scholarly work to inform members’ teaching, including changing teaching methods and course content, thus supporting teacher educators and the missions of our institutions.

Not only did we frequently marvel at our own enactment of the philosophy stated in *TWB*, but we also recognized the significance of our employment in small, liberal arts institutions. None of the team members were granted release time specifically for this project, nor did any of us receive additional funding or resources from our institutions to carry out this study. The group convened, conducted interviews, recorded and transcribed them, analyzed the data, and met to discuss our progress and process on our own time because of our commitment to our young adolescents and the teachers specifically prepared to work with them. Through this research and collaboration we held ourselves accountable to the research expectations of our institutions without forfeiting our primary responsibility to teaching. Thus, we engaged in a multifaceted model of scholarship described by Boyer (1990) in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Boyer defined four types of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching. Our original project gave us experience in the scholarship of discovery as we designed an original research project, but as we met to analyze the data and discuss our findings, we found ourselves engaging in all aspects of scholarship. As a group, we created this project with the express purpose of serving young adolescents in Ohio. We wanted to advocate for continuing to prepare teachers specifically to meet the needs of young adolescents, and we needed a research base to do so. Boyer would have labeled this scholarship of application. As we worked together, we taught one another new research analysis methods and brought together different teaching backgrounds and content specialties, exemplifying the scholarship of integration. As we took what we learned back to our respective classrooms and campuses, we engaged in the scholarship of teaching by continually examining our own curricula and classroom practices in light of what we discovered through our research.

This body of researchers brought to the table many different scholarly points of view during the development of the project, providing for rich discussions that included a blend of holistic perspectives merging quantitative with qualitative approaches.

Because of the varied backgrounds of all the members of our group, this process also presented each of us with an opportunity for professional development. Members whose research background had been predominantly quantitative stretched their skills in the direction of the qualitative. In order for our group to reach a consensus on which research method to use, those with strong backgrounds in various methods found themselves teaching or reteaching the others about a particular research method. From these conversations, professional development oc-

curred as an unintentional yet positive outcome of this process.

**Shared vision.** As middle childhood teacher educators we built awareness of middle level licensure and strengthened our advocacy for this grade level. Doing so served as a reality check for us with regard to what happens in schools. We were challenged to see disconnects between teacher education and public school expectations and to meet those challenges head on as we considered how we prepare teachers.

Having a “shared vision . . . that guides every decision” (NMSA, 2010, p. 27) is another characteristic of the successful middle school promoted in *TWB*. According to this vision special preparation for middle level teachers is in the best interest of middle level education and best helps meet the needs of middle level students. This central vision was the underlying principle that led to the formation of OMLP, motivated the discussion across the state regarding the middle level license, and sparked the need for this research. Throughout the research process, we frequently asked, “What is the purpose of this research?” Detailed conversations were held in which possible answers to this question were examined. By asking this question, the true purpose and vision of the study remained at the forefront of all we accomplished.

Educational research has shown that teacher candidates teach in the manner in which they were taught; therefore, it is essential that we model best practice if we expect our future middle level teachers to demonstrate how they were prepared in their own teaching. The strengths of this process ultimately inspired us as reflective middle childhood teacher educators who embodied the change we sought in our profession.

### **Barriers**

Despite the numerous strengths of this process, the research team had to overcome several barriers. If one of the strengths of the research was the collaboration among team members, it also contributed to obstacles that needed to be overcome. These include basic geography, weather, time, lack of value placed on research, and various levels of participation.

**Collaboration.** Basic geography and weather impeded our ability to be physically present with one another to discuss and collaborate. The members of this research group lived an average of two hours away from one another. Finding the time to meet to complete this process was often difficult. When meeting dates and times were established, winter weather typical in Ohio often prevented travel; however, the increased use of technology allowed communication to continue despite distance.

Further constraining members’ time were higher education commitments. At the traditional small liberal institutions where the members of the research teams taught, teaching was the main responsibility. Faculty research was often seen as elective and given less than full support of the administration; therefore, finding a balance between heavy teaching loads and completing research became increasingly difficult, especially when course releases are not granted to complete research.

**Professional learning relationships.** The reality that each member of the research team came to this project with different levels of qualitative research experience was seen as a strength but was simultaneously recognized as an additional barrier. Each member brought forth different perspectives on how to design, implement, and analyze data based on their own research backgrounds and experiences. These differences led to lengthy discussions about how to proceed with the research. Although these conversations were rich in ideas, they slowed down the process as members often became mired in beliefs that their method or way of thinking was the best and only way to proceed. Several times during the process, items were changed, rearranged, or deleted after the fact, derailing progress.

**Shared vision.** The most daunting barrier to the effectiveness of this research process was the challenge for each of us to relinquish the checklist version of what good teaching looks like and to seek a holistic understanding of middle level philosophy as it is enacted in practice. It is only through this understanding that we as middle level teacher educators can reform our practice and thus, reform middle level education for the future; yet as members of the research team, we often wanted to analyze data based on predetermined criteria for a successful middle school teacher instead of letting the data determine the categories in the manner of true qualitative research. This was not the direction the researchers intended to take, and often members had to regroup and refocus on the priorities of the research and middle level philosophy as viewed through a wider lens, ensuring that the team was focused on the whole and not the parts.

These barriers were reflected in the dwindling population of the research team. We began with 29 people, who expressed interest in taking part in this study and attending a training session on the research protocol. That number was reduced to 16 when it came time actually to contact schools and commit to journey out in the field to interview teachers, principals, and students. Sixteen became seven when it came time to transcribe and analyze data, and seven became five when we divided data into categories and themes and attempted to write an initial draft. For the most part, people left the study because of the demands on their time at their institutions and the inability to include time to transcribe and analyze data and travel across the state for team meetings while fulfilling teaching and service commitments required on their campuses. The dedication and drive of the final five members never dwindled; these members were extremely passionate about the mission of the research, willing to see it through to the end.

### **Connection to Middle Level Practitioners**

The barriers encountered by the research team resembled those that a middle school team collaborating for the sake of their middle level students typically face. When these teachers attempted to collaborate, one of the most troublesome barriers was time. Teachers are very busy, and planning time is often consumed by grading papers, meeting with administrators, and contacting parents along with myriad other activities. Some teams are fortunate

to have a common planning time dedicated to collaborating with teammates; however, this time is often used for discussing field trips, discipline issues, and day-to-day operational issues instead of aligning curriculum and assessments. Teachers truly committed to making improvements are left on their own to go above and beyond expectations to see their goals come to fruition, much like the researchers on our team.

Typically, a middle school team comprises teachers who specialize in various content areas. When working with one another, they bring to the table diverse backgrounds and expertise. They each have their own set of priorities and teaching methods, and their diversity often hinders agreement on issues that affect the entire team, such as creating interdisciplinary units or ways to have advisory periods. Teachers need to work together within their teams, see one another's perspectives, and agree to what is best for their students and the greater good of the team. Our research team found that differences among them sometimes delayed the process, but in the end those differences gave the members of our team the opportunity to look through new lenses. The ultimate result was agreement that served the entire project well, not merely the personal interests of the team members.

Becoming caught up in the details of a "checklist" mentality was the researchers' most formidable barrier; similarly, seeing a project as a whole is also a necessity for a middle school team. Teachers are held to a set of standards. They often see these as a checklist of what they need to accomplish during the course of an academic year; however, they need to step back at times and see that overall education entails far more than their standards and requires educating each child socially, mentally, physically, and academically. Within the research team, the members often found themselves restrained by the idea of a checklist of qualities that make a successful middle school teacher; however, they needed to keep the broader picture in focus just as it does for teachers on a middle school team.

### Conclusion

From the outset, collaboration was key for the members of OMLP and the research process; however, both our perceptions of how collaboration would work and impact us as researchers as well as the outcome of the research as a whole evolved. Throughout our study, working with others became not a necessity for completing specific tasks but instead the driving force to making connections between what we explored and how it impacted our professional lives. We saw that our collaborative practices coincided with what we believed, what we taught, and how we enacted those beliefs in our research. In the end, we discovered that *TWB* (NMSA, 2010) had been the driving force not only in our lives as researchers but also in our lives as educators, colleagues, and advocates of middle level education. We realized that *TWB* conveys not merely a philosophy in a book that we have our students read, a philosophy that we teach in our courses; instead it is a mantra that epitomizes who we are as middle level researchers, educators, and advocates. It is more than a

shared vision because a shared vision exists in a vacuum if it is not based on lived experience. In this research project, we lived the experience.

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