The Evolution of a Middle Level Education Program: Where We Have Been and Where We Are Going

Nicole L. Thompson
DeAnna N. Owens
Allen H. Seed
Shirley G. Key
The University of Memphis

Tennessee began its movement toward Middle Level Licensure during the 2002-2003 school year. Only 14 years later, in 2016, Middle Level Licensure in Tennessee will change. In this article, the background and experiences of seven middle level education teacher candidates at the University of Memphis who were the first candidates to complete the Residency model for student teaching and the program's evolution from traditional to the new program are described. From its inception until today, the middle level teacher preparation program has adapted to state mandates and made changes to better meet the needs of teacher candidates committed to educating young adolescents. Tailoring to the needs of the students, the new program offers a year-long residency allowing candidates to spend more time in the classroom, a balanced assessment course, and adoption of the edTPA to assess candidates' overall aptitude for teaching. These changes have added rigor to the program. This qualitative case study discusses the "how and why" associated with changes, and what the course of action was in order to meet candidates' needs. Despite its growth and success, the future of the program and how middle level licensure will be awarded in the state of Tennessee remains unknown.

In 1963, Alexander (1995) called for "schools to meet the needs of students in the middle", he gave a name to the "middle level education" movement. Since then, multiple groups of people and organizations have been advocating for middle level licensure and teacher education programs to be established at colleges and universities across the country (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996). To date, 45 of 50 states have some provisions for middle level licensure, certification, or endorsement (McEwin, n.d.). In this article, the experiences of faculty designing a middle level teacher preparation program, that program's evolution within the state of Tennessee, and teacher candidates' perceptions and experiences are described.

The Move to Middle Level Licensure in Tennessee

The state of Tennessee began its movement toward Middle Level Licensure during the 2002-2003 school year. Tennessee policy-makers were beginning to recognize the unique instructional needs of young adolescents and the need for educators trained to meet those needs. As a result, colleges and universities across the state began developing middle level teacher preparation programs that would meet the state licensure requirements.

Initial Program Development at the University of Memphis

At the University of Memphis, the department chair and several faculty members in the Instruction and Curriculum Leadership (ICL) Department embraced the challenge associated with new program development, and crafted a Middle School Education program for both undergraduate and graduate students alike. Using the National Middle School Association (2001) standards as a guide, the ICL faculty created undergraduate and graduate programs that would allow teacher candidates to choose two content areas on which to focus during their initial preparation programs (see Appendix A). Following the example of other universities with established Middle Level Education programs, the faculty decided to offer choices to the potential candidates. Rather than limiting the choices to mathematics and science or language arts and social studies, the plan was to allow any combination of the four content areas listed which meant preparing for six possible academic combinations.

The College of Education and ICL department administrators requested that the middle school education degree use as many existing courses as possible. As such, only five new courses were developed: four methods courses and a fundamentals of middle level education course. The courses were designed to satisfy the requirements for both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Throughout fall 2004 and spring 2005, a committee comprised of faculty with middle level education backgrounds and a keen interest worked to develop the program folio, the methods courses, and identify the content area courses to be taken from the College of Arts and Science. Content education specialists from the ICL Department wrote the syllabi for the methods courses while a faculty member researched the Praxis Test topics and

Middle Level Content Area Standards to help identify appropriate courses from the College of Arts and Sciences (Tennessee Board of Education, 2004). See Appendix B for further descriptions. After consulting with the content education specialists, the Middle School Program Development Committee sent a list of courses to the content area departments for recommendations or approval. Interestingly, the various departments had different ideas concerning the classes that future middle school education candidates would need to teach their chosen fields. The Arts and Sciences content experts were familiar with their subject matter, but not with the NMSA content standards and Praxis test topics. This disconnect was especially apparent with the Mathematics Department's proposed course sequence which included several unnecessarily difficult classes and eliminated some that would have been more appropriate. However, the final sequence (Appendix C) reflects the compromises made to ensure our candidates graduated possessing strong content knowledge applicable to the Mathematics Content Standards.

Methodology

The use of qualitative research seems aptly suited to describe the evolution of a middle level education program at a large urban university. This narrative is a subjective review of participants' perceptions and program analysis that allows readers to develop a deep understanding of the complexity involved in developing a middle level teacher education program in the context of accountability, standardization, and diminished resources. Historical research methods and case study methods were utilized to study the middle level education program's evolution. Historical perspectives give researchers the context of the social environment (Patton, 2002). Case studies seek to understand the "why" and "how", if any, of the experiences and perceptions of teacher candidates and how they were impacted by the middle level education program. This is central to understanding the impact and evolution of the middle level education program overall, and on teacher candidates' development specifically. "The key to historical case studies, organizational or otherwise, is the notion of investigating the phenomenon over time. The researcher still presents a holistic description and analysis of a specific phenomenon (the case) but presents it from a historical perspective" (Merriam, 2009, p. 47). In this research, qualitative methodologies were used to examine the experiences and perceptions of teacher candidates in relation to their middle level teacher education program; and will offer researchers the ability to compare the intentions for the program to the reality of experiences. The research questions that guided this study were: What are your perceptions of the Middle School Program; and, how has it met your needs? Overall, researchers were trying to understand how the transition from the original middle school program to the new program influenced the development of teacher candidates.

Context of the Study

The Middle School Education Program began being offered in fall of 2006. However, before launching, the state of Tennessee adjusted the license and by default, the preparation of middle level teachers by changing the license to a generalist license rather than a two-specialty fields license. The new generalist license allowed principals to hire graduates to teach language arts, mathematics, science, or social studies and teach in elementary school self-contained classrooms, as candidates would earn a fourth through eighth-grade license. The flexibility offered to principals—especially rural principals—by creating a generalist license was of benefit to the principals, but not necessarily to the young adolescents being taught. This change in licensure resulted in the preparation of a middle level teacher who was not necessarily a content area specialist as is advocated by the NMSA (name change took place in 2011 to Association of Middle Level Education) and others such as Alexander (1995), the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), Jackson and Davis (2000) to name but a few.

Initially, two faculty members were assigned to the Middle School Education Program, which was then coordinated through the combined Middle School/Secondary Education Program. One member taught the science methods course while the other taught the fundamentals of Middle Level Education course. Carefully selected and highly qualified part-time instructors taught the remaining three methods courses. In 2011, four additional faculty began working in the program, and were able to assist with the redesign so as to better prepare candidates for the classroom. And, student enrollment increased to a point where the Middle School Program was able to separate from Secondary Education and become its own academic program area

Participants

Teacher candidates participating in the interviews were the first set of candidates to complete the "new" program in the Residency Model instituted during the 2011-2012 academic year. Of the seven candidates, four were male, three were female, and all were Caucasian. The majority of candidates transferred into the University of Memphis Middle School Education program from a local community college. All had ties to the local community, intended to remain in it, and selected the University of Memphis because of the Middle School Education Programs' existing, i.e., "old program" reputation.

Data Collection and Analysis

As researchers, we collect data through multiple sources allowing us to see the big picture that is then carefully described through the interpretations and explanations of the phenomenon under study. The data was gathered through individual and focus group interviews and programmatic document analysis with the chair of the Middle School Program Development Team. Data were analyzed using constant comparative methods (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Individually, two of the four researchers reviewed and coded the individual and focus group interview transcripts. Iterative transcript reviews led to the generation of final codes by each researcher and were compared for consistency and agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher who conducted the interviews did not participate in the analysis process so as to reduce the potential for bias. The other researcher analyzed the historical data and identified codes from it. Use of analyst

triangulation served to strengthen trustworthiness and offer validity to the findings (Merriam, 2009, Patton, 2002). Further, member checks (Merriam, 2009; Patton 2002) were conducted with five of the seven participants. Codes from the interview transcripts were compared across participants and to historical documents to generate overall themes.

Results and Discussion

The research questions that guided this study were: What are your perceptions of the Middle School Program; and, how has it met your needs? The overall research was focused on the impact changes in the Middle Grades Teacher Education program had on teacher candidates and how those changes influenced their perception of the program and its utility.

Before delving into teacher candidates' programmatic experiences and perceptions of them, researchers wanted to ascertain the commitment of each candidate toward teaching young adolescents. Thus, at the start of each individual interview, candidates were asked: "Why do you want to teach middle school/young adolescents?" Answers described a love of young adolescents or fascination with stage of adolescence and developmental changes experienced during this time. For example, as Anna explains:

I'm just fascinated with the development, that they are trying to figure out where their independence is, how far their independence goes, but they still have to conform. There are going through so many things at this stage, and this is the grade that set the foundation. You [middle school student] are not a baby anymore, you are not in elementary school, you have to start finding your own morals and deciding things, and they [middle school student] can easily go the wrong way. I want to teach this age so that I can help motivate them to continue their education and realize how important it is in their life.

Before entering the University of Memphis, many of the candidates began their post-secondary education in other programs such as Pre-Medicine, Law, Criminal Justice and Pharmacy. The candidates realized they had a love for a particular content area, but they had a stronger passion for educating young adolescents. As Maddie notes, "I started out in Pre-Med, like I said, specifically in Biology and Chemistry with the intention to teach medicine eventually. I wasn't ever real keen on practicing, but I wanted to teach." As candidates possessed a sincere desire to teach at the middle level and were committed to educating young adolescents, program faculty worked with great intentionality to ensure that their needs were met even as additional changes were being passed down from the legislature.

Middle level field experiences. While all the middle level preparation courses required field experiences, there was little coordination of this essential program component. The research provides multiple reasons for extensive field experiences including: introducing candidates to the role of teacher, connecting the schools with the university, immersing candidates in an environment that illuminates young adolescents' unique developmental issues, and dispels the negative stereotypes of young adolescents and their schools (Butler, Davies, & Dickinson, 1991). As such, field experiences individually developed by the pro-

fessors of record of each course had to be revised so as to provide purpose and attach meaning to them. Initially, the field assignments provided more experience in what not to do, rather than what to do. For example, unstructured observations served little purpose given that candidates possess little schema to attach observed behaviors to and provided minimal academic benefit to candidates. Given that candidates desiring to teach young adolescents needs to have purposeful, authentic, and focused interactions with them, faculty organized the field experiences to build upon one another effectively. Candidates were gradually introduced to young adolescents, interacting with them, and learning about the school environment in which they reside. Further, instructional and management strategies modeled in courses were able to be used by candidates in the field. Candidates expressed pleasure with the changes and with their decision to teach young adolescents. As Charlie notes:

I'm happy in the program, I'm glad I chose to stay in education and actually make the choice to come to education and stay in education. It's been a natural fit, and I feel like the minute I stepped in a classroom in Residency this semester it's been nothing but positive learning experiences and great learning opportunities.

While some programmatic changes were state level mandates, all of the changes associated with field experiences and methods course instructional activities were designed so that candidates would have more of an authentic and relevant classroom experience. Candidates gained experience planning for diverse learners, making adaptations quickly in response to students' level of concept/skill understanding, and modifying instruction to ensure success for all students. Feedback from candidates was positive, as Charlie explained "I liked the whole model of it though. You are learning about what you need to do when you're teaching the subject". Further, candidates' ability to create short and long term instructional plans was enhanced as well. Candidates were actively involved in planning processes and learning how to build lessons with clear connections using prior knowledge and requisite skills. Sam explained, "I had to learn how to plan way ahead. I've never had to do that before... it allowed me to go through planning boot camp."

Gaining traction and program reform. Even though the process of creating the Middle School Education Program encountered some challenges, and elements of the program needed to be enhanced as it started, the program did flourish. In fall of 2011, two sections of each methods course were needed to accommodate growing enrollment. However, shortly after the start of the Middle School Education Program, the Tennessee Board of Education mandated reform of all teacher education programs. The primary change focused on the restructuring of student teaching, which extended the traditional student teaching semester into a year-long residency and required that all candidates complete the Education Teacher Performance Assessment, edTPA, (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, & Equity, 2013).

Year-long residency. These changes actually increased the rigor of the program because candidates would now experience what it is like to be a teacher from the first day of school to the last. By being assigned to one classroom

for an entire school year, candidates became academic partners with their mentor teachers as they engaged in planning, differentiating instruction, selecting various instructional strategies, delivering lessons, assessing—both formally and informally—students, and managing all aspects of the classroom. Candidates were also able to establish rapport and develop relationships with their students and test their management strategies. As a whole, the changes enhanced the candidates' instructional experiences and in theory, should make them better qualified to enter their first year of teaching.

Other curricular changes. In addition to the year-long residency, two courses were added to the Middle School Education Program; one course focused on various types of assessment and the other on the edTPA. The Student Assessment and Instructional Decision Making course introduced candidates to the fundamentals of formal and informal assessment, but perhaps more importantly, candidates learned how to use data from assessments to drive their instructional decisions. Through this course, candidates are reminded that one size does not fit all; therefore, all students should not be assessed in the same ways.

Impact of edTPA. Elements of edTPA are now also embedded in all of the methods and pedagogical courses that candidates take. However, during the second semester of the residency year, candidates participated in a seminar type course where various professional topics are covered, e.g., interview preparation, classroom management, legal issues related to education and the profession, deeper exploration of the Common Core State Standards. Completion and submission of the edTPA takes place at this time as well. By following the guidelines of the edTPA, candidates demonstrated their knowledge of effective teaching. The edTPA captured the candidates thinking and performance related to the instructional cycle. Candidates are required to create a three to five lesson sequence where lesson plans build on each other and demonstrate clear connections of skills to be mastered. Candidates must consider the academic and language development of their students to ensure they are meeting their students' needs. In addition, the edTPA required candidates to reflect on what went well, document how students were engaged, provide evidence of building rapport with students, explain how students deepened their understanding of the content, and identify what would be done differently if the lessons were taught again. In essence, the edTPA assesses completely if a candidate is ready to teach. Completion of the edTPA allows the candidates to demonstrate their content and pedagogical knowledge; and, if candidates earn passing scores, then they are prepared to teach and assess students effectively.

Conclusion

The Middle School Education Program at The University of Memphis has evolved significantly since its inception in 2002. During its short life span, the program did show growth and reinvented itself in response to state mandates. Candidates indicated satisfaction with the middle level education program and that it prepared them for them for success in the classroom even as it was changed while they were enrolled. The year-long residency and additional courses strengthened candidates' experiences and

helped to prepare them for the reality of their first years of teaching.

Yet, from a state perspective, the generalist 4th-8th grade license was not as effective as the state hoped in preparing middle school teachers. Thus, the state has decided to change licensure for the middle level. Initial changes were to go into effect in 2016, and, licensure offerings would be K-5, 6-12, 6-8 mathematics, or 6-8 science. A small group of middle school faculty from universities across Tennessee began conversing with people at the State Department of Education, Educator Licensure and Preparation Office about the loss of specific licensure for English/language arts and social sciences. It appears that faculty voices were heard; as of spring 2014, the Educator Licensure and Preparation office will be recommending 6-8 licensure in all four content areas to the State Board of Education, but an official, formal decision has yet to be made (Personal Communication, February 24, 2014). These changes almost bring the middle school program faculty at the University of Memphis full circle. The original plan for middle level teachers prepared to teach in two content areas will be revisited and, the one constant in the program from its inception—change—will once again cause faculty to re-envision the program and work within state mandates to craft a middle level teacher education program that meets state mandates, aligns with national standards, and prepares teacher candidates to become highly effective teachers of young adolescents.

References

Alexander, W. M. (1995). The junior high school: A changing view. *Middle School Journal, 26*(3), 20-24.

Association of Middle Level Education. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents.* Westerville, OH: Author.

Butler, D. A., Davies, M. A., & Dickinson, T. S. (1991). *On site: Preparing middle level teachers through field experiences.* Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century.* Washington, D.C.: Author.

Jackson, A., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

McEwin, C. K. (n.d.). Certification/licensure by state. Retrieved from http://www.amle.org/AboutAMLE ProfessionalPreparation/Certification-LicensurebyState.aspx

Merriam, S. (2009) *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

National Middle School Association. (2001). *Middle level teacher preparation standards.* Westerville, OH: Author.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Swaim, J. H., & Stefanich, G. P. (1996) *Meeting the standards: Improving middle level education.* Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, & Equity. (2013). *edTPA assessment handbook.* Amherst, MA: Pearson.

Tennessee Board of Education. (2004). *Tennessee teacher licensure standards middle grade education, 4-8.* Nashville, TN: Author.

Appendix A
National Middle School Association
Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards
2001

Standard 1 Young Adolescent Development
Middle level teacher candidates understand the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to young adolescent development, and they provide opportunities that support student development and learning.

Standard 2 Middle Level Philosophy and School Organization
Middle level teacher candidates understand the major concepts, principles, theories, and research underlying the philosophical foundations of developmentally responsive middle level programs and schools, and they work successfully within these organizational components.

Standard 3 Middle Level Curriculum and Assessment
Middle level teacher candidates understand the major concepts, principles, theories, standards, and research related to middle level curriculum and assessment, and they use this knowledge in their practice.

Standard 4 Middle Level Teaching Fields
Middle level teacher candidates understand and use the central concepts, tools of inquiry, standards, and structures of content in their chosen teaching fields, and they create meaningful learning experiences that develop all young adolescents' competence in subject matter and skills.

Standard 5 Middle Level Instruction and Assessment
Middle level teacher candidates understand and use the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to effective instruction and assessment, and they employ a variety of strategies for a developmentally appropriate climate to meet the varying abilities and learning styles of all young adolescents.

Standard 6 Family and Community Involvement
Middle level teacher candidates understand the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to working collaboratively with family and community members, and they use that knowledge to maximize the learning of all young adolescents.

Standard 7 Middle Level Professional Roles
Middle level teacher candidates understand the complexity of teaching young adolescents, and they engage in practices and behaviors that develop their competence as professionals.

Appendix B

Tennessee Teacher Licensure Standards
Middle Grade Middle Grades Education, 4-8
August 27, 2004
Content Area Standards

Middle Grades Education
Standard 1: Middle Childhood and Young Adolescent Development
Candidates demonstrate understanding of the major concepts, principles, and theories of middle childhood and young adolescent development.
Standard 2: Middle Level Philosophy, Organization and Instruction
Candidates understand the major concepts, principles, theories, and research underlying the philosophical foundations of developmentally responsive middle level programs and schools.
English Language Arts
Standard 1: Reading
Candidates know, understand, and use appropriate practices for promoting and developing literacy skills, for integrating reading instruction across all subject matter areas, and for enabling all students to become proficient and motivated readers.
Standard 2: Writing
Candidates know, understand, and use the writing process for communication, expression, and reflection in all subject areas, for a variety of purposes, in a range of modes, and for multiple audiences.
Standard 3: Elements of Language
Candidates know and understand basic English usage, mechanics, spelling, grammar, and sentence structure as tools to facilitate the writing process.
Standard 4: Speaking and Listening
Candidates know, understand, and model appropriate oral language and listening skills. They understand that listening and speaking involve complex language structures and that development of these structures is necessary for students to communicate orally, write effectively, and make meaning from text.
Mathematics
Standard 1: Mathematical Processes
Candidates demonstrate an understanding of effective instructional strategies that integrate mathematics content and processes.
Standard 2: Number and Operations
Candidates work flexibly with rational numbers to solve problems and create learning experiences that develop student comprehension of mathematical concepts, operations, properties and relations necessary for number and operation sense.
Standard 3: Algebra
Candidates know, understand, and use algebraic concepts and create learning experiences that develop algebraic thinking in students.
Standard 4: Geometry
Candidates know, understand and use geometric concepts and create learning experiences that develop geometric concepts and spatial reasoning in students.
Standard 5: Measurement
Candidates know, understand and use measurement and create learning opportunities that teach students to apply the units and processes of measurement in mathematical and real-world problems.
Standard 6: Data Analysis and Probability
Candidates know, understand and use data analysis and probability concepts and design instructional activities to teach students to understand and apply basic statistical and probability concepts.
Science
Standard 1: Elements of Effective Science Instruction
Candidates demonstrate understanding of science and technology in daily life through the use of inquiry-based, open-ended and materials-based laboratory investigation including student-designed investigation. They incorporate habits of mind and pedagogical techniques required to deliver effectively the content in a safe environment.
Standards 2: Life Science
Candidates know, understand and use the central concepts of life science.
Standard 3: Earth/Space Science
Candidates know, understand and use the central concepts of earth/space science.
Standard 4: Physical Science
Candidates know, understand and use the central concepts of physical science.
Social Studies
Standard 1: Social Studies Processes
Candidates use effective instructional strategies that integrate social studies content and knowledge.
Standard 2: Culture

Candidates understand and demonstrate appreciation of the variety of human cultures including the similarities and differences in beliefs, knowledge bases, changes, values and traditions.

Standard 3: Economics

Candidates understand basic economic concepts and recognize the effects of globalization, population growth, technological changes and international competition on production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.

Standard 4: Geography

Candidates use knowledge of geography to explain the web of relationships among people, places, and environments.

Standard 5: Governance and Civics

Candidates understand the concepts of governance and civics.

Standard 6: History

Candidates understand the importance of history and its relationship to informed decisions in contemporary life.

Standard 7: Individuals, Groups, and Interactions

Candidates understand that personal development and identity are shaped by factors including culture, groups, and institutions and highlight the exploration, identification, and analysis of how individuals and groups work independently and cooperatively.

Arts Education

Standard 1

Candidates know, understand, and use basic knowledge and skills in the arts to integrate them with other subject areas and to coordinate with arts specialists to support knowledge and skill development in the arts.

Health/Wellness

Standard 1

Candidates know, understand, and use basic health knowledge and skills to introduce and reinforce learning about healthy life-styles and how to integrate wellness concepts and practices in all other subject disciplines of the school curriculum.

Physical Activity and Physical Education

Standard 1

Candidates know, understand, and use physical activity to enhance and reinforce learning in all subject areas and coordinate with physical education specialists to support physical fitness knowledge and skill development for children.

Standard 1: Mathematical Processes Candidates demonstrate an understanding of effective instructional strategies that integrate mathematics content and processes.	MATH 1420 Foundations of Mathematics II
	MATH 1730 College Algebra & Trigonometry
	MATH 4611 Intro to Applied Statistics
Standard 2: Number and Operations Candidates work flexibly with rational numbers to solve problems and create learning experiences that develop student comprehension of mathematical concepts, operations, properties and relations necessary for number and operation sense.	MATH 4028 Workshop Middle School Math
	MATH 3221 Elementary Number Theory
Standard 3: Algebra Candidates know, understand, and use algebraic concepts and create learning experiences that develop algebraic thinking in students.	
Standard 4: Geometry Candidates know, understand and use geometric concepts and create learning experiences that develop geometric concepts and spatial reasoning in students.	
Standard 5: Measurement Candidates know, understand and use measurement and create learning opportunities that teach students to apply the units and processes of measurement in mathematical and real-world problems.	
Standard 6: Data Analysis and Probability Candidates know, understand and use data analysis and probability concepts and design instructional activities to teach students to understand and apply basic statistical and probability concepts.	