

(Un)Knowingly Made for the Middle:
Why Teacher Candidates Decide to Teach in Middle Schools

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Abstract

This study used a mixed methods approach to examine why teacher candidates choose to teach in a middle school. The study analyzed two populations of pre-service teachers in The College of New Jersey's (TCNJ) Secondary Education department: (a) students completing their first field experience in a middle school and (b) students who were part of TCNJ's first two middle school specialization cohorts. The first group of participants completed pre and post surveys surrounding their field experience and a sub-set of participants engaged in interviews. The second group of participants engaged in semi-structured interviews. The data revealed four major themes to underpin teacher candidates' motivations to teach in either a middle or high school: (a) impact; (b) perceptions of middle school; (c) content; and (d) job prospects. This knowledge is necessary for understanding how middle level teacher preparation programs recruit and retain strong candidates to teach in middle schools.

(Un)Knowingly Made for the Middle: Why Teacher Candidates Decide to Teach in Middle Schools

Teaching middle school is a unique experience. Students in their pre-teens are in the midst of developmental changes that require developmentally appropriate and responsive organizational school structures, curricula, programs, and practices to support their growth (Dickinson, 2001; Lounsbury, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011; National Middle School Association, 2010). To meet these needs, school districts began moving toward a junior high school model (usually grades 7 to 9) in the early 20th century; then, over the past half-century, the movement shifted to a middle school model (usually grades 6-8), which has grown from nearly 5,000 public middle schools to over 15,000 (McEwin & Greene, 2011; Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016).

With the growth of middle schools has come an increase in research focused on the characteristics that contribute to effective middle level education (McEwin & Greene, 2011; National Middle Schools Association, 2010). For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is conducting a federal longitudinal study – The Middle Grades Longitudinal Study of 2017-18 (MGLS:2017) – that will follow 20,000 students from 900 U.S. schools and provide invaluable data on predictors of middle grade student success (NCES, 2017). However, with this increased focus on the characteristics of highly effective middle schools (McEwin & Greene, 2011; NCES 2017), the introduction of standards specific to middle level education (Association for Middle Level Education, 2012), and designations like “Schools to Watch” to celebrate model middle schools (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grade Reform, 2018), there has not been a similar attention paid to why pre-service teachers choose to teach in middle grades (Mee, Rogers Haverback, & Passe, 2012). This critical knowledge regarding why teacher

candidates (TCs) decide to teach in middle schools will significantly impact how middle level teacher preparation programs recruit and retain strong candidates to teach in middle schools (Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007).

There are currently more than 1,300 undergraduate middle level teacher preparation programs in the United States across all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Howell et al., 2016). Many of these programs have gained legitimacy with the creation of the 2012 Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards, which were approved by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) (Association for Middle Level Education, 2015) to help programs align their standards to meet the needs of pre-service middle level educators. Seeing this trend and need for specialized middle level teacher preparation, The College of New Jersey's (TCNJ) School of Education embarked four years ago in creating a middle school specialization (MSS) program. With an intended goal of growing the program's numbers, we decided to conduct a program self-study to evaluate: Why secondary education students choose to teach in a middle school?

Literature Review

Uniqueness of Teaching Middle School

Before exploring what factors affect secondary education TCs' decision to teach in a middle school, it is important to examine what makes middle level education unique. Middle schools are situated to support students as they go through vast changes in their adolescent development. As Brown and Knowles (2014) noted, middle level students are concurrently going through physical development, unique brain growth and cognitive development, social development, and emotional development as students search for their identities. Therefore, middle level teachers must be cognizant of and take into account: (a) students' physical changes

and their perception of body image (Harter, 2006); (b) ways in which the adolescent brain is growing while processing and analysis shift from concrete to formal thought (Ojose, 2008; Piaget, 1977); (c) how adolescents attempt to navigate interpersonal relationships in new, contextualized ways (Santrock, 2013); and (d) how their students grapple with the complexity of what comprises one's identity (Brown & Knowles, 2014). Moreover, when the school context does not support the expression and discourse around changes like emotion, it can limit students' "ability to develop as motivated, engaged learners and socially and emotionally competent individuals" (Horner, Wallace, & Bundick, 2015, p. 24).

The challenge of supporting adolescents going through so many developmental changes is heightened by the staggered nature in which it occurs. According to AMLE, formerly National Middle School Association (2010), developmental "changes occur irregularly, as young adolescents enter puberty at different times and progress at different rates. Individual differences proliferate, making dubious such assumptions as, 'All seventh graders are...'" (p. 6). While adolescents are developing at different times, they are often met with expectations that middle school students should act like an adult when they are still being treated like children (Brown & Knowles, 2014). In all, it is important for middle school educators to remember that their students must be accepted for who they are – adolescents going through myriad changes that need support from those around them.

Pre-Service Teachers' Choice to Teach Middle Grades

Since teaching middle school is so unique, it is important to note the characteristics of an effective middle level educator (AMLE, 2010; Brown & Knowles, 2014); yet it also imperative to examine why pre-service teachers decide to become middle level educators. To this point, few scholars have explored this critical question. In a survey of 110 pre-service and in-service middle

and high school teachers, Radcliffe & Mandeville (2007) found, “Middle grades teachers have high interest in working with middle level students because of the students’ age, expect positive teacher–student relationships with middle grades students, and believe that these students are relatively mature and ready to learn” (p. 265). Mee, Rogers Haverback, and Passe (2012) built on the findings of Radcliffe and Mandeville with their case study of 17 middle level pre-service educators and determined pre-service teachers selected teaching middle school because they:

1. Love the subject(s) they plan to teach
2. Believe they have a calling to the profession
3. Believe they can relate to young adolescents and they can make a difference in their lives
4. Believe there is a need for middle school teachers thus making them more marketable
5. Are influenced by parents or other family members in the teaching profession

(p. 1).

Outside of these two studies, there is a gap in the research on why pre-service teachers decide to teach the middle grades, which this study hopes to fill.

TCNJ’s Middle School Specialization Program

In response to the national push for more specialized middle grade teacher preparation, The College of New Jersey’s School of Education decided to develop its own middle school specialization program in 2014. With limited flexibility in changing the academic programs for students interested in joining the middle school specialization (MSS), TCNJ decided to add middle level experiences that would not require any disruption to student programs. Therefore, TCNJ developed a monthly colloquia series that brings panels of speakers to speak about key

middle level issues grounded in AMLE's 16 characteristics of effective middle level education (National Middle School Association, 2010). Students who join the specialization are required to attend five colloquia prior to graduation. Additionally, to enhance students' field experiences, students are required to take their first clinical methods course in a middle school-focused section where they are placed in a middle school; students are again placed in a middle school for their second clinical experience. Although not required, TCs are also encouraged to join TCNJ's chapter of the Collegiate Middle Level Association (CMLA).

After the first two years of the specialization, our program wanted to enhance the students' preparation; therefore, we developed a middle school mentoring program so MSS could work on building relationships with middle school students outside the classroom context. To be part of the MSS, students must serve as mentors for a minimum of one semester prior to graduating. Then, in response to this study's completion, we developed and are currently offering an introduction to teaching middle level education course that introduces students to the philosophy and organization of middle level education.

As we looked to develop and grow the MSS, we decided to conduct this study to determine why students were deciding to be part of the specialization.

Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach by determine quantitative trends, which then informed the qualitative investigation.

Quantitative Study: Pre and Post Surveys

To determine trends in teacher candidate preferences in teaching middle school, three sections of TCNJ TCs in Secondary Education were surveyed during their first education course that required a middle school field experience. The field experience is observation-based where

students take notes to reflect on the presence and breadth of concepts they are learning in their corresponding educational foundations class, including: (a) impact of resources; (b) authority, power, and leadership style; (c) communication; and (d) social-emotional learning. Depending on the comfort level of the teacher, TCs may interact with students in small groups or individually. This practicum typically occurs in the Fall or Spring semester of a TC's second year, which varies for non-traditional students and students who have transferred from other programs and institutions. TCs were given a survey prior to their first day at the placement and a follow up survey at the conclusion of their field placement. Questions in the pre and post surveys mirrored one another to determine TC's preference and willingness to teach at the middle school and/or high school level. The quantitative part of the study included 84 TCs ($n = 84$) who completed both the pre-observation and post-observations surveys.

Qualitative Study: Interviews

Trends from the pre and post surveys informed the development of the study's interview questions. Each participant in the surveys was emailed and asked to participate in a semi-structured, 15-30 minute interview about the TCs reasons for wanting or not wanting to teach in a middle school. Additionally, initial participants in TCNJ's Middle School Specialization (MSS) program were asked to participate in an interview. In total, 18 TCs ($n=18$) were interviewed, 11 of which were part of the MSS at the time.¹ Interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded unless a participant was unable to make an in-person interview; in those cases, the participant responded to the interview questions via email.

To answer the study's research question, each interview examined TC's attitudes, beliefs, and experiences following the completion of their practicum and during the subsequent semester.

¹ We anticipate the disproportionate number of interview participants who were in the MSS can be attributed to their vested interest in the success of the program compared to survey participants who might not have had the same interest in evaluating the MSS.

Findings/Discussion

Eighty-four TCs ($n = 84$) across three sections of the class completed both the pre-observation and post-observations surveys. The distribution of answers are displayed in Tables 1 and 2 below. The content areas represented included English, History, Math, and Science. Of these 84 TCs that were offered interviews, seven responded and completed interviews; their more in-depth answers are included in the discussion of these findings below.

Table 1

Pre and Post Observation Teaching Preference

School Preference	Pre- Observation Preference	Post-Observation Preference
High School	75	74
Middle School	7	10
Both	1	0
Unsure	1	0

As Table 1 indicates, there was not a significant change in teaching preference for participants, with only an increase of three participants wanting to teach in a middle school. Further, as Table 2 indicates, four students who had previously wanted to teach in high schools exclusively were willing to consider teaching in a middle school after their observation.

Table 2

Pre and Post Observation School Teaching Consideration

School Consideration	Pre- Observation Consideration	Post- Observation Consideration
High School	23	19
Middle School	0	2
Elementary School	0	0
High/Middle	53	55
High/Elementary	3	3

High/Middle/Elementary	5	5
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While the data did not reveal significant trends, an open-ended question on the pre and post surveys allowed participants to explain their reason preferring middle or high school. Some respondents chose not to provide this qualitative information. All of the students who did, however, indicated high school as their preferred level. The themes that emerged from these responses for preferring high school included: (a) impact; (b) perceptions of middle school; (c) content; and (d) job prospects. These themes, similarly to the reasons compiled by Mee, Rogers Haverback, and Passe (2012), revealed TC motivation in choosing middle school. The next section explores the experiences that impacted the seven non-MSS TCs choice to teach (or not teach) in a middle school.

Choice to Teach in Middle School: Non-Middle School Specialization Teacher Candidates

Impact. Many students acknowledged that middle school is one in which teachers have the potential to positively affect their students. As one student reflected on their experience, “It showed me how much need there are [sic] for middle school level teachers as well as how it is such an important transition period where students need guidance.” Another echoed this sentiment in their feedback, saying, “The idea of teaching middle school is appealing to me because I like kids and think middle school kids are at a pivotal age...” One student also alluded to the fact that as a teacher they could influence their students’ middle school experience, expressing, “I wanted to teach middle school before practicum because I had a hard time in middle school myself.” The practicum in the middle school classroom both introduced and reaffirmed these various feelings for several TCs.

Perceptions of middle school. During the pre-survey, several survey respondents gave responses that pulled from or specifically mentioned their personal middle school experiences as

informing their preference. Two TCs specifically stated that they "didn't enjoy" middle school themselves, and so would not want to "go back." The interview data revealed a more complex relationship between respondents' experiences in middle school and their desire to teach middle school. Some interviewees indicated that they enjoyed middle school academically, but not socially. Some enjoyed middle school in general. Others explained how middle school was "alright" or that they had nothing bad to say about it, but that the time period encompassing the middle school age was "rough" in other areas of their lives, such as family or personal relations.

This personal experience may be the reason several TCs indicated they anticipated being able to "relate more" to older students, or perceived high schoolers as "more relatable." One respondent noted, "I would prefer to teach older students, especially because of the behavioral issues that come with middle school aged students." This extended to the abilities TCs perceived these different age groups to have. One respondent wrote they could have "more discussion in the classroom with older students." Another TC wrote they believed there to be "more content in high schools[,] student's knowledge more developed, have more of a personality and goals."

However, for many respondents, their initial negative impression of teaching middle school was altered by their middle school field placement. After completing the field experience, one respondent explained, "I never wanted to work in a middle school because my only experience in middle school was my own, which was not pleasant. However, after observing a middle school very different than my own, I could see myself teaching at a similar middle school." Respondents' experience with the immaturity of middle school students also initially affected their decision to teach in a middle school. Yet after the practicum, one respondent stated, "At first I thought middle school would be a horrible place to teach because of the age and the stages the students are going through. But my experience was so positive and my

cooperating teachers had nothing but nice things to say. It opened my mind up to it.” This idea of “undoing” continued in other responses, such as, “Before the practicum I had very low expectations for me wanting to teach students who I thought were extremely immature. After this practicum experience I have realized that my assumptions were wrong.” These, and several other stories like them, expressed the definitive benefit of the middle school observation experience.

Another component that influenced TC’s middle school perception was how other individuals in a TC’s life talked about middle schools. For example, one TC indicated, “Being placed in a middle school, I now see it is not as bad as most people say, in fact it was a lot of fun. But I am unsure if I would want to do it as much as teach high school.” Another reiterated this deterring by others: “When I initially thought about teaching at a middle school, I was totally against it. Many people told me middle school would be the toughest grades to teach, so it turned me away from wanting to teach there. After this practicum, I met such nice, funny, and smart kids who were all so sweet. My experience with them and the teacher was amazing and made me more willing to try middle school.”

Content. Many of the respondents who preferred high school focused on the content difference between teaching middle and high school. One TC noted, “Specifically in my content area, I feel that the curriculum is broader [in middle school] than I would like to teach (ex. in high school I had the option to take specific classes like Holocaust and Genocide Studies).” Another TC stated, “I prefer the pace at which high school history is taught. High school history deals with deeper concepts and themes, as opposed to mere memorization that is common in lower level history classes.” Regarding the content-student relationship, one interviewee, Erin, expressed her expectations going into the classroom that students “may not understand fully going a lot in depth into a subject, like you mostly have to maybe stay towards [sic] the top

general areas, because they may have trouble understanding it.” The issue of content seemed to be surrounding both the level of depth students are perceived to be able to achieve, as Erin’s comment demonstrated, as well as the very specific topic or subject that can be taught; as one TC wrote, “[I] want to eventually teach AP students.” Numerous respondents cited specific subjects, such as calculus and physics, that would not be offered in middle school.

At the conclusion of the field experience, content appeared to be the strongest indicator of how likely a TC was to remain interested in high school. Those respondents who expressed a strong feeling toward teaching a specific content were unlikely to be swayed by the practicum experience in a middle school. They mentioned such facets as depth of content, interest level of students, and variety of curriculum. For instance, one respondent noted, “I saw that, at the middle school level, kids had a lot less interest in history than they do in high school. Also, middle school teachers, in history, basically teach the same lesson all day, while, in high school there are different subjects.” Some respondents described the content at the middle school level as “tedious” and “elementary.” Others echoed this perception of middle school content as broad, mentioning wanting to “teach specific material” and “not everything,” and not getting “to use [my minor] much in a middle school setting.” Even some respondents who expressed more openness to the middle school content after their practicum still seemed to hold onto a similar perception, such as one respondent who wrote, “Being in the middle school environment opened my eyes more to what level of students I would like to teach. While I would prefer to teach tougher material, middle school curriculum is still very interesting.”

Several of the interviewees reflected this last sentiment, being open to the difference in level of content but still maintaining this perception of “tough” versus “broad” content. Tyler, for example, differentiated between the levels of curriculum, though was open: “I mean, I enjoy

talking about history on a more advanced level I guess, but I also enjoy teaching the basics, too." Sarah said regarding her perception of middle schoolers' interaction with the curriculum, "I always think about how at the lower levels... I have a very fixed idea that I won't be able to go as deep into my content area if I'm in middle school."

Job prospects. Access to jobs played a significant role in determining respondents' school teaching preference. One respondent shared in their written response, "I have heard from other teachers that if you specialize in middle school then this limits you if you are also looking at high school." Other employment considerations mentioned by survey respondents included the prospects for obtaining a coaching position in addition to their teaching position, and moving to more administrative roles in the future. TCs' answers revealed they perceived these ambitions to be more promising in a high school setting. On the other hand, some TCs saw job prospects as a reason to remain open to middle school. Alex revealed in discussing his initial preferences, "My personal preference is high school, but in this day and age I really won't complain with what [grade] I get."

A number of other respondents, after completing their field experience, noted a willingness to teach in middle school if there was a job available. One respondent explained, "In case I don't find a high school teaching job quickly, I might look for middle schools. It seems middle schoolers are more energetic and eager to learn." Another respondent expressed an openness to the idea while also implying a desire to teach more advanced material, saying, "The basis of math is learned in middle school, but wherever I get a job, that is where I will teach." Another said, "It would be something that I do if I had to but otherwise would avoid. High school is my passion." Each of these three respondents had marked on the survey that their interest in teaching middle school had "somewhat increased" following their observation,

indicating exposure to the positive elements of the middle level environment can affect one's willingness to teach middle school.

Choice to Teach in Middle School: Middle School Specialization Teacher Candidates

As Tables 3 and 4 indicate below, respondents in the MSS specialization demonstrated a much higher rate of change in desire to teach middle school than non-MSS respondents. Four MSS interviewees (see Table 3) expressed that they originally entered college wanting to teach

Table 3

Pre-Observation Interview Participants Teaching Preference

School Preference	MSS	Non-MSS
High School	4	5
Middle School	6	0
Both	0	1
Unsure	1	1

high school, but changed their minds after a middle school observation; conversely, six MSS respondents said they knew they wanted to teach middle school since coming into college, or even earlier.

Table 4

Post-Observation Interview Participants Teaching Preference

School Preference	MSS	Non-MSS
High School	0	0
Middle School	11	1
Both	0	5
Unsure	0	1

Beyond the number of MSS respondents who changed their teaching preference, MSS interview data revealed why the TCs wanted to teach middle school based on: (a) students' age-

specific development (impact); (b) perceptions of middle school; and (c) academic needs (content).

Impact. MSS students recognized a unique developmental moment in which middle school students are situated and wanting to address that moment in their teaching. One TC, Gloria, said, "I feel like they're at a really major crossroads in their lives...They're coming into their own." Similarly, Rick felt, "It's really like a tumultuous period for them. They're growing, they're changing, and they're abrasive, and they're all self-centered, but it's a lot about teaching them to step outside of that and see the world beyond the sort of small container that their lives are in." Sunal said that, with math being a difficult subject for many students, "knowing that I could make a difference for those students in terms of mathematics" is what caused her to take an interest specifically in middle school teaching.

Interestingly several TCs specifically mentioned feeling that middle-school-age students were the "forgotten" group, with Elementary Education programs catering to young students, and Secondary Education programs being geared toward high school students. They wanted to pursue the specialization in order to fill that gap, and, as Rick put it, find out "what made middle school or middle level learners so much different than the high schoolers."

Perceptions of middle school. TCs' personal middle experiences and the impact of their own middle school teachers influenced many MSS student to choose teaching middle school. Brad said these were both reasons why he knew so definitively he wanted to teach middle school. He stated, "This is not school to me; this is actually fun...And also why I wanted to become a teacher was also my eighth grade teacher's influence. She always taught us in a way that was very conducive to my learning style, but was also very fun and genuine and authentic."

While another TC, Rick, did not specifically label his experience as positive or “fun” like Brad did, he did acknowledge it as a significant time of learning.

Exposure played an important role for these TCs as well. Again, four MSS respondents had said that without their first pre-service field experience in a middle school, they anticipated teaching in a high school classroom for their careers. Bridget said she was grateful she was placed in a Middle School, "or else I wouldn't have known I wanted to do it." Even Brad, who had emphatically recounted his discovery of wanting to be a middle school teacher while under his eighth grade teacher's instruction, revealed, "I honestly came into TCNJ going to teach high school, to be honest. It was almost like because I was so used to the high school environment that I kind of forgot about the middle school environment." Even for TCs with a strong inclination for the age group, exposure to the middle level environment as a pre-service teacher is a critical part of a teacher preparation program.

Content. Four TCs mentioned their content at the middle school level as influencing their admiration for the level. Brad remembered enjoying the content while in middle school while Rick enjoyed learning about how to teach middle level content in his college courses. Rick noted, "I just love, like, the literature that we read; I think it's a really teachable - and yeah I love a lot of the strategies that you can teach during that period." Compared to impact and perceptions of middle school, content played a smaller, but still visible role in affecting TCs' decision to teach middle school.

Conclusion

This study found, like Mee, Rogers Haverback, and Passe (2012), there are common trends in the reasons TCs give for wanting to teach middle school. In addition to revealing reasons why some teacher candidates chose to teach middle school, the study uncovered reasons

why other TCs decided not to teach middle school. Both TCs who wanted and did not want to teach middle school cited the same themes in influencing their decision to teach middle school: (a) impact; (b) middle school perceptions; (c) content; and (d) job prospects; however, their rationales for how each theme influenced their decision differed significantly. Many of the study's TCs ended up changing their minds and became open to teaching middle school once they were exposed to the environment. Middle school exposure also affirmed TCs' decision to teach middle school for students who were already interested in teaching middle level education. Keeping this in mind, as well as the fact that middle school students require instruction and care unique within a secondary education framework (Ojose, 2008; National Middle School Association, 2010), it is important that teacher preparation programs attract and retain strong candidates who are willing to work in the middle school setting (Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007). As demonstrated by the variety of thought and experiences found in the pre-observation surveys, many of these candidates did not begin their program knowing that they fit this description. Therefore a strong middle school teacher preparation program will integrate middle level experiences and exposure into the larger secondary education structure in which it is situated, to address the needs of the potential spectrum of TCs that may or may not be initially drawn to it.

To determine the generalizability of this study's findings, it is important to gather and analyze a larger sample size of data analyzing TC decisions to teach middle school. This larger data set would also likely reveal themes not represented in this study, such as TCs who entered the program wanting to teach middle school and who changed their mind to only wanting to teach high school. Together, these data would continue to guide teacher preparation and MSS programs in tailoring their curricula to meet the needs of middle level (and all) teacher candidates.

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