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## **“A Brave Group of People”: Teacher Candidates’ Perceptions of Teaching in Middle School**

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### **Abstract**

We set out to create a middle grades program and to inform the field about the perceptions of our teacher candidates on teaching middle school. To accomplish these twin goals, we sought to better understand our teacher candidates’ perceptions of teaching middle school and how these perceptions might be changed if necessary. Our review of research included three themes to frame this work: (a) middle school philosophy, (b) motivations to teach, and (c) middle school teacher preparation. We chose an emergent, qualitative research design to cull rich data from diverse stakeholders including open-ended survey data. We found an overarching deficit narrative about middle school students even though teacher candidates expressed admiration for middle school teachers. Our teacher candidates professed a need for coursework on classroom management and adolescent psychology as well as more field experiences to better prepare them for careers in the middle grades. Implications for middle grades programs are discussed, including the structure of field experiences and teacher preparation curriculum. We explain specific revisions to our own program in the attempt to generate analytic generalizability.

The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] is projecting that employment of middle school teachers will grow 8% from 2016 to 2027 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). These projections indicate a greater need for teachers who can educate middle level students, which is complicated during times of teacher shortages (e.g., Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Motivating university students to make the teaching profession a viable choice continues to be an on-going goal of teacher education programs (Aragon, 2016). Thus, there is a need for middle school teacher preparation specifically that prepares teacher candidates (TCs) to value young adolescents as diverse and complete individuals (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

The purpose of the current study was twofold. As part of the creation of a new Master of Arts of Teaching degree at our university, we set out to create a middle grades specialization. However, to accomplish this goal, it was important to understand the perceptions of stakeholders on our campus: our TCs. Thus, we sought to better understand their perceptions of teaching middle school and how these perceptions might be changed if necessary. Additionally, we believed in the analytic generalizability (Yin, 2009) of our work since teacher education faculty

may be interested in the process we used to design a middle grades program as well as the perceptions of our TCs. The research questions guiding this study were: What are the perceptions of TCs at Mid-Atlantic University<sup>1</sup> regarding teaching in the middle grades? How do these TCs feel that their teacher preparation program could better prepare them to teach in the middle grades?

### Literature Review

Our study and ensuing program design are situated in the research on TCs' motivation to teach and middle school teacher preparation specifically. Our review of research includes three themes to frame this work: (a) middle school philosophy, (b) motivations to teach, and (c) middle school teacher preparation.

#### Middle School Philosophy

The Association for Middle Level Education recently published the fifth edition of its position paper *This We Believe, the Successful Middle School* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The authors laid out the five essential attributes of middle level education as well as the 18 characteristics of successful middle schools. What is particularly distinct about the middle school philosophy as denoted in this position paper is the importance placed on being responsive to the developmental levels of middle grades students and ensuring that curriculum is engaging, challenging, and democratic. It's also critical that the school is supported through distributed leadership that encourages a focus on students.

Middle grades education is distinct from other levels of education in other ways as well. An important characteristic of the middle school is its interdisciplinary emphasis (Edwards et al., 2014). Teachers collaborate with teachers in content areas unlike theirs (i.e., a teaming approach) to continue a central theme of study through alternative perspectives and "integration across subjects and across individual teachers and students" (Lesko, 2012, p. 81). Teams, or small communities, are also spaces that allow adults to manage, control, and protect adolescents whom educators believe to be in danger or at risk of bullying, misbehaving, or failing academically. Other potential benefits of interdisciplinary teaming include increased student achievement, more student engagement, and reduced discipline problems (Arhar & Irvin, 1995). The benefits of interdisciplinary teaming may be especially pronounced for students from low-income backgrounds and those who may feel alienated at school. These interdisciplinary teams provide benefits for teachers as well by creating spaces for teachers to talk, share, and collaborate (Childress, 2019).

As identified above, the developmental level of the students is also important in middle school (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Mee and colleagues (2012) noted the importance of middle school teachers' abilities to adjust their instruction to align with the cognitive development of their students. Steinberg (2011) pointed out that "Youth development is not in stages: it is culturally and socially defined by [youth's] surroundings and experience" (p. 273). George (2011) proposed, "It remains the job of middle level educators to bring to the current controversies the goals, purposes, values, and meanings of a worldview that affirms the dignity, worth, and opportunity of every child" (p. 51). Teachers of middle school students are, thus, given the opportunity to address the social, academic, and emotional needs of students while also acknowledging that adolescence is a social construct, adolescents are not homogenous, and

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

culture and class can influence understandings of adolescence (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994; Lesko, 2012; McLeod, 2012; Petrone & Lewis, 2012). Those who teach in middle school should be aware of the unique qualities of middle level education and the development of the students. However, educators must also interrogate assumptions about middle schools, adolescence, and pedagogical practices they are thought to need (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994; Finders, 1998/1999; Lesko, 2012; McLeod, 2012). We turn to the rationale for teaching middle school next.

### **Motivations to Teach**

There are several reasons why people choose the profession of teaching generally. Struyven and colleagues (2013) found that people are motivated to teach to prove that they can effectively teach students current concepts with purpose and determination. Others seek the teaching field to contribute to students' change of thought and actions regarding school that may affect their future endeavors (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017). In Edwards' (2013) study, she reported that her participants' main reason for choosing education was the professional skills that they were exposed to and their desire to use those skills to positively affect their students' lives.

Other concerns have motivated future teachers as well. For some future teachers, concerns about the lack of diversity represented in classrooms motivates them to pursue a career in education (Morettine, 2017). Most teachers, according to Curtis (2012), "went into teaching because of their desire to work with young people, love of [subject], and reasons of personal fulfillment or making a difference" (p. 789). The school calendar, including holidays and summers, is enticing to some TCs (Edwards, 2013). Most of the TCs going into the teaching profession are women (Curtis, 2012), and the benefit of the opportunity for family engagement is an incentive for them. Thus, TCs are motivated by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors to become teachers.

However, there are some unique reasons for choosing middle school specifically. Some TCs are influenced by their positive experiences as middle school students (Hill et al., 2007). For others, choosing to teach middle school allowed them to understand themselves, and improved their attitudes toward middle school in general. In addition, TCs have been able to view middle schoolers as respectable embodiments of adolescence. The job market projection for middle school teachers is also a contributing factor of increased career interest for TCs (Mee et al., 2012). However well intentioned, these motivations must be supported through robust teacher preparation.

### **Middle School Teacher Preparation**

Teacher preparation programs need to provide coursework and practical experiences that will answer the present and future demand for middle school teachers (Van Overschelde et al., 2017). Preservice coursework requirements need to develop TCs' understanding of the middle school in relationship to their subject knowledge classroom practice and the character of the middle school students (Irvine, 2013). Van Overschelde and colleagues (2017) argued,

The preparation of teachers must provide numerous opportunities for students to practice and critically reflect on pedagogical approaches that are based on middle level education research to ensure they can work effectively with this unique population of students throughout their careers. (p. 28)

Consequently, some preservice middle school teachers had expressed their dissatisfaction with their teacher preparation because they had difficulty transferring their learning from the

university classroom to the middle school classroom (Pinter et al., 2017). It is important to match the reality of being a middle school teacher with the TCs' university preparation (Curtis, 2012).

It is also important to recognize the links between understandings about the lessons, teacher preparation, and adolescence. Lewis and Petrone (2010) found TCs' perceptions of adolescence influenced how they developed curricular practices. Finders (1998/1999) highlighted a similar link and suggested teacher preparation needs to focus on disrupting and questioning normal or common-sense views of adolescence and discern how these constructions influence what gets taught and how. We ground our work in youth studies which we unpack next.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Youth studies scholars argue adolescence is a social construct to address society's economic, social, cultural, and political needs, including anxieties around race, immigration, gender, and nationhood (Finders, 1998/1999; Lesko, 2012; Petrone & Lewis, 2012). Yet, as Lesko (2012), McLeod (2012), and others have shared, adolescence is rarely thought of in this way (i.e., as a social construct influenced by a given moment in time). Instead, adolescence is imagined in ways that are deemed ahistorical, self-evident, commonplace, "natural," "true," and fixed (Finders, 1998/1999; Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Lesko, 2012; McLeod, 2012; Petrone & Lewis, 2012). There are established discourses or ways of reasoning about adolescence that are powerful (Lesko, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). For example, the idea that adolescence is determined strictly by biology, age, psychology, and/or a state of becoming is widely accepted and influential (Finders, 1998/1999; Lesko, 2012; Lewis & Petrone, 2010; McLeod, 2012; Petrone & Lewis, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). Also, adolescents are thought to be inextricably connected to peers, susceptible to peer pressure, and in need of protection (Lesko, 2012; McLeod, 2012). These "characterizations of adolescence" are accepted as given and remain largely unchallenged (Lesko, 2012).

A youth studies perspective also recognizes constructions of adolescence are often framed in deficit-oriented ways. What is more, youth studies scholars maintain these negative conceptions of adolescence have shaped how youth and adults engage, particularly in schools (Finders, 1998/1999; Lesko, 2012; McLeod, 2012; Petrone & Lewis, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). Finders (1998/1999), for example, found TCs had a pessimistic view of teaching middle school students and saw adolescents as incompetent, uncontrollable, rebellious, and homogenous. Finders also noted the TCs rarely shared what "they looked forward to in working with middle schoolers" (p. 252). Instead, the author found TCs' views of adolescents influenced how they imagined they would need to teach them, and rather than focusing on preparing to teach their future students literacy, they were preoccupied with goals of developing classroom management techniques in anticipation of having a classroom filled with the hormonal, angry, rambunctious youths society and popular culture have framed adolescents to be.

Youth studies researchers maintain school practices create the concept of adolescence rather than simply respond to how adolescents are as "naturally-existing beings" (Lesko, 1994, p. 143). Similarly, McLeod (2012) noted, "it could be argued that the organizational structure of middle schooling produced the identity of the middle-school student, but this can be inverted to consider how the invention of the middle-school student ... helped create the need for middle schools (p. 45). Thus, scholars surmise that "fictions" (Vadeboncoeur, 2005) or "inventions" (Finders, 1998/1999) of adolescence coupled with social, political, and economic fears led to the

development of middle schools and the policies and practices used within them. As such, Lesko (1994, 2012) and others argued middle school practices suggest students should be controlled, surveilled, protected, and regulated. A youth studies theoretical framework illuminates the persistence of deficit understandings of adolescence while drawing attention to how such reasoning should be taken into consideration when designing middle school programs. By highlighting this, we hope to join other scholars who have noted the need for middle level programs that identify, interrogate, and disrupt conceptions of adolescence and their implications for practice.

### **Methods**

The purpose of the study was to examine TCs' perceptions of teaching in middle school. We chose an emergent, qualitative survey design to cull rich data from diverse stakeholders. A survey was deemed most appropriate to our study goals because it allows researchers to describe trends and identify attitudes and beliefs of individuals (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, we distributed an open-ended survey to participants and conducted follow-up interviews as well. Only survey data will be reported here; the findings from our interviews are reported elsewhere (Lunsmann et al., under revision).

### **Researchers' Positionality**

We are a team of three teacher educators with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities working within the same department. The first author is a former middle grades special education teacher. She identifies as an African American, middle class woman who grew up in a middle class environment in an urban area. The second author is a former middle grades English Language Arts teacher who approaches education as an issue of equity. She identifies as a white, middle class, cisgender woman who grew up in a low socioeconomic area. The third author, who identifies as black and grew up poor in a rural town in North Carolina, was licensed to teach English in grades 6 through 12 and is currently a teacher educator.

### **Research Context**

Mid-Atlantic University is located in a mid-sized city on the east coast of the United States. The University offers over 120 undergraduate and 130 graduate programs serving over 24,000 students, which includes students who are currently or were previously in the military. In addition, the university serves a very diverse community that includes many first-generation students. The university has recently become a Minority Serving Institution, and serves approximately 25% African American students, 8% Latinx students, 4% Asian students, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, 0.3% American Indian or Alaskan Native students, and 50% white students (citation withheld to protect confidentiality). Six percent of students identify as bi- or multi-racial.

### ***Teacher Education Program***

Our teacher education program includes pathways in early childhood, elementary, and secondary education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The elementary education master's program currently in place offers candidates a concentration in middle grades which is defined as Grades 6, 7, and 8 in our state. However, a stand-alone middle grades program currently does not exist at the undergraduate or graduate level, but we are in the process of submitting a proposal for a Master's of Arts in Teaching program to the state department of education. All undergraduate students begin their teacher education coursework by completing a

foundations of education course that includes an asset approach to students and social justice issues in education. Candidates complete at least one practicum in addition to their student teaching experience and these field experiences are intentionally diversified. For example, elementary candidates who complete their practicum in the early elementary grades (K-2) are required to complete their student teaching in the upper elementary grades (3-6). Similarly, secondary candidates who complete their practicum in middle school (grades 6-8) are required to complete their student teaching internship in high school (grades 9-12). Thus, all of our candidates complete their programs with some sort of middle grades experience. Moreover, after our candidates graduate, they may find themselves teaching middle grades students despite their licensure because middle grades is currently considered one of the top ten critical shortage areas for teachers in the state. Also, in our state, elementary and secondary licensure overlaps with middle grades (i.e., elementary licensure is PK-6 and includes grade 6, and secondary licensure is 6-12 and includes grades 6 through 8), so it is quite likely that TCs would possibly teach middle school. As a result, program faculty strive to prepare TCs for the possibility of teaching middle school despite whether they are pursuing elementary or secondary licensure.

### Participants

The survey was distributed via email to 1,204 TCs in all teacher education programs in the College of Education including undergraduate and graduate programs in elementary education, secondary education, and special education. Because our goal was to create a new middle grades program through our Master of Arts in Teaching proposal, we felt it was important to include all of our TCs as potential participants. Furthermore, because our TCs complete observation, practicum, and student teaching internships that are intentionally diversified in terms of grade levels, and include middle school, we recognized that our TCs likely had previous experience and knowledge with middle school that could inform their participation and would be valuable to our study. It is also important to note that our secondary program has courses such as instructional methods that are designed to focus on both middle and high school practices in social studies, English, science, and math. In all, 191 TCs responded to the survey (15% response rate). For paper surveys, a 50% response rate is considered by some to be excellent (Creswell, 2012). However, it is generally understood that response rates for online surveys are often lower than paper surveys. Our goal in this study was not statistical generalizability because we used a qualitative survey. Participants' demographics are represented in Tables 1-4 below.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Academic Standing*

<b>Classification</b>	<b>N</b>
Freshmen	11
Sophomores	22
Juniors	49
Seniors	53
Graduate Students	56

**Table 2**

*Participants' Ages*

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>N</b>
18-20	37
21-23	48

24-26	24
27-30	20
31-34	16
35-38	18
39+	28

**Table 3***Participants' Demographics*

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<i>N</i>
White/European/White American/European/American/Caucasian/Other	139
Black/African/Black American/African American/French or English-Speaking Caribbean Islander/Other	25
Bi-Racial/-Ethnic/Multi-Racial/-Ethnic	12
Asian American/Asian/ Asian Pacific American/Pacific Islander/Other	8
Latin@/Mexican/Mexican American/Chan@/Puerto Rican/Central American/South American/Spanish or English-Speaking Caribbean Islander/Hispanic/Other	7

**Table 4***Participants' Genders*

<b>Gender</b>	<i>N</i>
Female	167
Male	24

**Data Collection**

We created the survey based on our two research questions: What are the perceptions of TCs at Mid-Atlantic University regarding teaching in the middle grades? How do these TCs feel that their teacher preparation program could better prepare them to teach in the middle grades? Our survey was open ended and qualitative because we wanted to explore our TCs' perceptions. Thus, we did not use a review of literature to guide our creation of the survey. A complete copy of the survey is provided in the appendix. To administer the survey, TC names and email addresses were solicited from an advising office within the College of Education. The survey was distributed twice between April 2018 and June 2018. The consent form was included at the beginning of the survey.

**Data Analysis**

After the survey was closed, the researchers downloaded all of the responses into an Excel spreadsheet. Multiple rounds of qualitative coding were conducted per Saldaña's (2009) recommendation. The research team first coded several open-ended items independently using initial coding and then met to reconcile these codes via analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002) in which they generated a code book. The research team then continued to code using the code book and continued to meet to ensure that all codes were agreed upon.

However, we recognized that this initial round of coding did not accurately capture the nuance of the data so two members of the research team conducted an additional round of



analysis using evaluation coding that reflected our theoretical framework. This coding was done in a separate spreadsheet so that frequencies could be generated on both types of coding. This round of coding was connected to a youth studies framework, particularly its attention to conceptualizations of adolescence as deficit oriented and deficient rather than asset based (e.g., Finders, 1998/1999; Lesko, 2012; Petrone & Lewis, 2012). Specifically, any response that indicated only a deficit narrative about middle schoolers was considered to be negative; only responses that indicated a truly asset view of middle school teachers or students was coded as positive. For example, one participant wrote, “Good middle school teachers are the superheroes of the education world.” This response indicated that middle school is so difficult (deficit narrative) that good teachers are superhuman. The first author ran frequencies in Excel for items 3a, 3b, and 4 in the initial coding file and items 3a and 3b in the evaluative coding file to identify which codes were used most frequently in each item; the top three most frequently occurring codes were reported for each research question so that there was space to explore the qualitative nature of these responses in depth.

**Table 5**  
*Example Codes and Coded Data*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Example Data</b>
Behavior	“Kids can be bratty due to their hormones.”
Transitions	“I think of the intense changes students are going through in their preteen years and how hard it may be.”
Judgment: negative	“It’s hard to be a middle school teacher.”
Judgment: positive	“Good educators.”
Middle school structure	“A place to help youth become successful.”

### **Trustworthiness**

We used two methods to ensure the credibility of our findings: triangulation and numbers (Maxwell, 2013). Specifically, we triangulated our data analysis so that all codes were negotiated between at least two researchers or, at times, three researchers. Additionally, we used frequencies to demonstrate how often particular codes occurred so that we could make accurate claims about how prevalent a particular sentiment was in our data—or the amount of evidence for our conclusions.

### **Findings**

Below we explore the answers to our research questions, What are the perceptions of TCs at Mid-Atlantic University regarding teaching in the middle grades? and, How do these TCs feel that their teacher preparation program could better prepare them to teach in the middle grades? We provide both quantitative (frequencies) and qualitative data (verbatim responses) to support our findings. Participants’ responses have been cleaned for reporting purposes (Poland, 2003).

### **Teacher Candidates’ Perceptions of Middle School**

This portion of our findings can be broken into two subthemes: perceptions of middle school students and perceptions of middle school teachers.

### ***Perceptions of Middle School Students***

Out of 175 responses to item 3a (some participants skipped this item), we coded 105 of those items (60%) as negative. This indicates a deficit narrative, of sorts, about middle school students. For example, the most common code on this item was *behavior* with 61 occurrences. Out of these 61 occurrences, we coded 46 of them as negative like this response from a participant, “Some [middle school students] can be disrespectful, both to their teachers and each other.” The themes of disrespect, attitudes, and rudeness reoccurred in these responses like the following, “They’re often rude and judgmental.” Others expressed concerns about bullying and cliques, “Students are trying to accept or find who they are which causes bullying/cliques.”

The next most common code was *transitions* which occurred 21 times and 10 of these instances were coded as negative. This often came through as confusion as demonstrated in this response, “I think that middle school students are going through the confused stage of getting to know themselves and are more under pressure when it comes to social standards.” Yet some participants tempered their language around transitions, “Middle school students are changing physically and emotionally. Their classes begin to get a little more difficult. They are in the beginning stages of finding out who they are.” Thus, some participants recognized that these emotional, physical, and cognitive transitions were normal.

Many participants also had a personal response to this question and this code (*personal response*) occurred 20 times for this item—only six of these responses were coded as negative. One participant provided a negative example, “It definitely wasn’t my favorite experience of teaching.” Other, more positive examples included the following, “I love the age group of middle schoolers. I like that they are independent yet still fun to teach,” and “I think middle school students are fantastic—this is my favorite age group. They are going through a big transition, but are generally still eager to learn and not yet too cynical.” Thus, some of our participants had a positive response to middle school students based on experience as well as simply personal preference.

### ***Perceptions of Middle School Teachers***

Seventeen participants skipped item 3b leaving us with 174 responses to analyze. Of these responses, we coded 90 (52%) as negative. With 54 instances, *disposition* was the most frequently occurring code for this item; 19 of these instances were coded as negative meaning that 35 were neutral or positive. Examples of the latter include, “They really care for the students as if they were their own children,” and “They are mentally strong and have a great love for teaching.” Many participants indicated that middle school teachers needed to be “patient” which we coded negatively since it implied a deficit narrative about middle school students. For example, one participant wrote, “I think middle school teachers have to be patient and deal with stress well,” and “I praise them for their patience and commitment.”

The other codes that occurred most frequently in this item were *judgment: negative* and *judgment: positive* with 67 and 18 responses respectively. Many of these negative judgments were couched as compliments to the teachers, “God sent,” and, “A brave group of people.” However, these words of praise for teachers imply that middle school students are difficult to work with. Yet, some participants did note negative qualities about middle school teachers such as, “Not always prepared to understand and assist with the transition from kid to teen” and, “They seem apathetic and disheartened.”

Eighteen participants evaluated middle school teachers positively. One participant wrote, “They are more helpful than high school teachers who expected some information to just be known when it wasn’t.” Another indicated, “I think highly of all the middle school teachers I know of.” Another response indicated the unique interdisciplinary nature of middle school teachers, “From my personal experience, they seem to work well together as a team.”

### **Improving Middle School Teacher Preparation**

A secondary goal of our study was to learn more about our participants’ perceptions regarding how they could be better prepared to teach middle school, as their elementary and secondary programs included some preparation for teaching grades considered middle level (e.g., grade 6 in the elementary program and grades 6-8 in the secondary program). Twenty-four participants skipped this question leaving us with 167 responses. The most frequently occurring codes were *teacher preparation curriculum*, *behavior management*, and *field experience*. Those responses related to teacher preparation curriculum often pertained to understanding the development and psychology of adolescents. Example responses include, “Psychology. I would like to see all teachers have at least a minor with classes required specific to youth,” and,

Social and emotional development of adolescents. I think it is very important for teachers in middle school to be fully aware of how their students are developing because it can be very different from elementary school and high school students.

Another participant reinforced this, “Child and adolescent development ABSOLUTELY needs to be a preservice training requirement. Understanding this vital and interesting life stage is important in understanding your students” (original emphasis).

Behavior management was another suggestion from participants. Example quotes include, “Classroom management, understanding the minds of teenagers,” and “conflict mediation, stress management.” Another participant indicated, “how to handle their attitude and disrespect in a way that would be appropriate.” This latter response harkens back to the overall deficit perceptions of middle school students noted above.

Finally, many participants stated the importance of field experiences in middle school teacher preparation. Often, participants cited the need for additional field experiences outside of the current sequence of practicum, observation, and student teaching. For example, one participant noted, “Basic trial runs, not a full 10 weeks of student teaching.” Another indicated “Greater observation and hands-on hours.” Another participant wrote, “Plenty of opportunities to actually teach lessons to middle schoolers.” Thus, many of our participants believed that middle level teacher preparation programs should include field experiences that highlight and capitalize on the nuances of middle level students and schools.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Middle Level Teacher Preparation**

The current study was revealing. Until we began to analyze our data, we did not understand the depth of the deficit narrative around middle school students in our own program. Here we describe conclusions and related implications for practice—for our own program, other programs, and for the future young adolescents we hope will be positively influenced.

The participants in our study expressed concerns about classroom management and student behavior. This is not surprising considering that classroom management is often a concern of new teachers (Conway & Clark, 2003). However, the prevalence of this concern in our study of middle school specifically may indicate that it is heightened for these grade levels—

perhaps due to the developmental stage of the students and the prevalent constructions of adolescents as unruly, rambunctious, rebellious, and in need of control (Lesko, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). Moreover, TCs may perceive that the structures and leadership provided to middle school students may be different than those provided for elementary or high school students, but it is just as likely that negative ideas about adolescence such as those mentioned above have long been viewed as natural and are to blame. Future research should continue to explore TCs' concerns around classroom management at the middle school level specifically. Our findings are consistent with Finders (1998/1999), who wrote, "Clearly, classroom management seems to be a central concern for all student teachers; at the middle school level, there appeared to be no other focus" (p. 253). TCs' deficit views of adolescence resulted in a preoccupation with the need to have strong classroom management skills. Regarding our program development, we will ensure that our classroom management coursework addresses the unique strengths and needs of middle school students and how to provide leadership for young adolescents.

In the same vein, our participants expressed a desire to better understand adolescent development and psychology which may be related to these classroom management concerns. If TCs understand what is happening to middle school students biologically, then they may be able to better understand what sorts of scaffolds and structures to provide to them. It may also decrease the deficit narrative around this time of transition. Our program design incorporates human development courses specifically on the young adolescent to provide the preparation our participants requested. Indeed, an asset approach will need to be infused throughout our program to dispel myths and challenge biases that seem to be present in our data. This has already been accomplished successfully in other middle years programs such as the one at Young Harris College in Georgia (C. Lunsmann, personal communication, January 21, 2019). This is also in line with *This We Believe* characteristics (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Finally, our participants described a need for more time in the field. Our current program includes an observation course, practicum course, and a standard student teaching experience. Recently, we have added site-based courses that are taught at public schools in our local districts. The second author of this study teaches her classroom management course on site at a middle school to allow TCs to interact with middle school students and teachers more informally and provide an additional, unscheduled field experience. This is an approach that has been used by other middle level teacher educators as well (e.g., Wall, 2019). These opportunities are low cost and may be one answer to providing the additional field experiences our participants requested and the clinical experiences endorsed by the field (e.g., National Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2010). Ensuring that these field experiences take place in diverse settings with positive climates and cultures (Ronfeldt, 2012) is in line with recommendations from research and would likely benefit young adolescents as well. We will, however, need to keep in mind Finders' (1998/1999) observation that field experiences often fortify ideas about adolescence. During field experiences, Finders (1998/1999) found that TCs "kept the dominant cultural narrative [of adolescence] as a backdrop" even when they interacted with adolescents with experiences that ran counter to the image they had of them" (p. 257). We will provide field experiences that allow TCs to both observe adolescents in whole classrooms and work closely with individual students in and outside of schools to allow for a greater opportunity to realize adolescents as diverse, complex people (Finders, 1998/1999; Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

The findings from this research have encouraged us to develop a program that actively seeks to problematize essentialized notions of adolescence and their impact on how students are taught. For instance, we will encourage TCs to study the history of the use of the label *adolescence* and how it has changed over time (Finders, 1998/1999; Lesko, 2012); recognize adolescence as a social construct influenced by social, cultural, economic, and political factors (e.g., McLeod, 2012; Lesko, 2012); and question long held beliefs about adolescents and examine their connection to how teachers navigate their role and employ pedagogical practices (e.g., Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994; Petrone & Lewis, 2012). In essence, what we learned from this research will help us design our program so it prepares TCs who know how to teach (and reach) young adolescents and who embrace the middle level philosophy, and we hope our work inspires others to do the same.

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## Appendix Survey Questions

**Directions:** Please provide your honest answer to each of the questions below by selecting the response that best corresponds to your own views or by providing a short answer response.

1. Have you ever considered teaching in a middle school?
  - 1.a. If so, which middle school content areas are you interested in teaching?
2. Have you ever done any observations, practicum, or other experience in a middle school? If so, describe it here.
3. What is your perception of middle school? What comes to mind when you think of middle school?
  3. a. What are your views or opinions of middle school students?
  3. b. What are your views or opinions of middle school teachers?
  3. c. What would change your views or opinions about middle school?
  3. d. What would encourage or entice you to teach in middle school?
4. What preservice training do you think you would need to teach middle school?
5. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your views or opinions about middle school teaching?
  - 6.a. Gender:  
 Man  
 Woman  
 Non-Binary Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - 6.b. Ethnicity (please choose as many as apply to you):  
 Asian American/Asian/Asian Pacific American/Pacific Islander/Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bi-racial/-ethnic/Multi-racial/-ethnic: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Black/African/Black American/African American/French or English Speaking Caribbean Islander/Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Indigenous/Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native/Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Latin@/Mexican/Mexican American/Chican@/Puerto Rican/Central American/South American/Spanish or English Speaking Caribbean Islander/Hispanic/Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 White/European/White American/European American/Caucasian/Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  6. c. Age:  
 18-20  
 21-23  
 24-26  
 27-30  
 31-34  
 35-38  
 Over 39
  - 6.d. Year or Graduate Standing:  
 Freshman  
 Sophomore  
 Junior  
 Senior  
 Graduate Student



6.e. What is your current major?

What is your current minor (if relevant)?

6.f. Do you identify as a traditional or a non-traditional student? Why?

7. We will also be holding follow-up focus groups to get more information about your perceptions of middle school. These focus groups will last approximately one hour and you will have the opportunity to talk with your peers about middle school teaching. Light refreshments will be provided. If you are interested in participating in a focus group please provide your contact information below:

Name:

Best contact phone number:

Best contact email address: