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Methods and the Middle: Elementary and Secondary Preservice Teachers' Views on Their Preparation for Teaching Middle School Social Studies

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Abstract

The majority of middle school teachers are prepared in either generalist elementary programs or subject-specific secondary programs, yet researchers and teacher educators have little understanding of the ways in which these divergent pathways prepare teachers for working at the middle school level. In this study, preservice teachers from an elementary and a secondary preparation program were interviewed about their conceptions of teaching social studies at the middle school level. The results indicated that the social studies methods course in each pathway strongly influenced the preservice teachers' ideas about pedagogical strategies for teaching social studies, but did little to facilitate the preservice teachers' understanding of teaching young adolescents. These findings draw attention to the need for more research and teacher education focused on teaching at the middle school level.

Introduction

At Midwestern University,[1] in the context of a single institution, two divergent teacher education programs are preparing middle school social studies teachers. One is an elementary education program that provides a multi-subject preparation for teaching children in grades 3–8. The other is a secondary education program that focuses on the teaching of social studies to students in grades 6–12. Upon successful completion of each program, prospective teachers will be certified to teach social studies in the middle grades.

Midwestern's dual pathways typify the arrangement through which many middle school teachers are prepared. Though middle school advocates have argued for many years that specialized preparation is necessary for teaching at the middle level (e.g., Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Dickinson & McEwin, 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003), the majority of teachers who work with young adolescents continue to lack this specialized training (McEwin et al., 2003). Only 41% of states require a specific middle school credential for teaching in middle grades classrooms (Gaskill, 2002), and many states continue to offer overlapping licensure (Gaskill; McEwin et al.). As a result, many middle school teachers are prepared through generalist elementary programs or subject-specific secondary programs. The elementary and secondary pathways represent very different assumptions about the kinds of knowledge that middle school teachers require, but researchers and teacher educators know little about what teachers learn related to these pathways.

At the same time, growing evidence reveals that the intellectual needs of young adolescents are not being met in schools. Researchers found that schoolwork does not provide enough cognitive challenge for young adolescents (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993), and that, paradoxically, as young adolescents' cognitive abilities are increasing, there is a decrease in demand for higher order thinking in the classrooms they attend (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles et al., 1993). Ten years after the release of the landmark *Turning Points* report (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), Jackson and Davis (2000) similarly reported that curriculum, assessment, and instruction continue to be poorly matched to the needs of young adolescents in most middle schools.

How then are prospective teachers learning to teach at the middle level? What is it that prospective teachers are learning about middle school students and how to engage these students in social studies learning? Why are teachers failing to engage young adolescents intellectually?

In this study, I investigate Midwestern University's elementary and secondary preparation pathways as a case for understanding how middle school social studies teachers are prepared for their work. Drawing from interviews with preservice teachers in each pathway and their social studies methods instructors, I explore the following questions:

1. How are the elementary and secondary preparation pathways related to preservice teachers' conceptions of pedagogical strategies for teaching social studies at the middle school level?
2. How are the elementary and secondary preparation pathways related to preservice teachers' conceptions of middle school students' intellectual capabilities in the context of social studies?

Theoretical Framework

Sociological and cognitive psychological perspectives on how teachers learn provide the theoretical framing for this study. Feiman-Nemser and Remillard (1995) offer a helpful framework which argues that, to understand teacher learning, we must look at the "who," the "when and where," the "what," and the "how" of teacher learning. They argued that teachers' learning is influenced by prospective teachers' backgrounds and beliefs (who); the times and places that they learn to teach (when/where); the content of what they learn to teach (what); and the ways in which their learning occurs (how).

In this study, I focus particularly on the "how" and the "what" of teacher learning. Borko and Putnam's (1996) and Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford's (2005) cognitive psychological perspectives are helpful in elaborating these aspects of teacher learning. These authors suggested that the process of teacher learning—the "how"—happens best when it is facilitated, intentionally structured, scaffolded, and context-based. According to this view, teacher learning should mirror the way student learning occurs by providing opportunities that engage teachers and build from their prior knowledge and understandings. This can be facilitated by helping teachers learn in the context of classroom practice and by providing many opportunities for reflection and collaboration with others.

Hammerness et al. (2005) also offered a useful way to conceptualize the substance of what teachers learn. They explained that teachers need to learn about their subject matter and their students as well as about specific practices and ways of thinking that enable them to put a particular type of teaching into practice. Teachers' understanding of subject matter, students, and learning is often described as pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and has been well-articulated within the context of history and social studies (Barton, McCully, & Marks, 2004; McDiarmid, 1994; Wilson, 1991; Wilson & Sykes, 1989; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991, 2001a, 2001b). These authors concluded that social studies teachers need to have (a) deep knowledge of their students' needs, abilities, and ways of thinking within the context of social studies; (b) strong conceptions of the subject matter itself; and, (c) knowledge of ways to represent the subject matter to their students. Thus, middle school social studies teachers should have a strong understanding of young adolescents' capabilities and needs as learners in the context of social studies, as well as knowledge of ways to represent social studies content to students at this age.

In sum, this study is guided by the view that teacher learning is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by many different factors. I focus on the substance of what teachers learn about teaching middle school social studies in these two programs, coming from the perspective that successful middle school social studies teachers will have deep understandings of their young adolescents' capabilities and ways to make social studies accessible to these students.

Program and Institutional Context

This study was conducted at Midwestern University, a large, public research university in the United States' Midwest. The elementary and secondary education programs are housed within Midwestern's large School of Education. Both undergraduate programs offer Bachelor's degrees upon completion. In keeping with the strong reputation of the institution itself, the teacher education programs at Midwestern are well known for preparing excellent teachers.

In the elementary education program, prospective teachers choose either the early childhood-middle childhood (EC-MC) program or the middle childhood-early adolescence (MC-EA) program, depending on the age level they prefer to teach. This study included only the preservice teachers in the MC-EA cohort because they earn certification to teach children in the upper elementary and middle school grades. Through this five-semester elementary education program, preservice teachers complete subject-specific methods courses in literacy, math, art, science, social studies, physical education, and music; and coursework in general education and child psychology. The social studies methods course occurs in the fourth semester of the sequence. In addition, the elementary preservice teachers complete part-time practicum field experiences in each of the first four semesters, followed by a full-time student teaching field experience in the final semester—with at least one of the field placements completed in a middle school.

The secondary social studies program, by contrast, is a four-semester program focused exclusively on the teaching of social studies. In the first and third semesters of this program, preservice teachers complete education and adolescent psychology coursework accompanied by practicum field placements. In the second and fourth semesters, they take a social studies methods course accompanied by full-time student teaching. During these four semesters, two consecutive semesters of fieldwork are in a middle school, while the other two semesters of field experience are in a high school.

Data Sources and Methods

Because the social studies methods courses seemed to be likely sites for teachers to learn about teaching social studies in a deliberately facilitated way, I focused this research on preservice teachers enrolled in the social studies methods courses in the elementary and secondary preparation programs at Midwestern. Through interview questions, I also investigated other courses or experiences that might have influenced the preservice teachers' learning about teaching middle school social studies.

With the permission of each methods instructor, I attended each methods course in the spring of 2004 and recruited volunteers to participate in a single interview. From the group of volunteers, I selected three students from each program to interview who varied along "attributes of interest" (Stake, 2000, p. 447): Anissa, Emma, and Irene who were enrolled in the elementary education program, and Paul, Brock, and Mira who were enrolled in the secondary social studies program.[2] I selected Anissa, Emma, and Irene because they were white females and representative of their cohort in terms of gender and race. Similarly, I selected Brock (male), Paul (male), and Mira (female) because they were also white and were representative of the secondary program's racial homogeneity and greater proportion of males.

I conducted single, semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) with these six preservice teachers during the final weeks of the spring semester, after the majority of the social studies methods class sessions. During the interviews, I asked the preservice teachers to discuss their disciplinary and educational backgrounds, their experience with and knowledge of middle school students, their ideas about teaching

social studies at the middle school level, and the possible origins of their ideas (see Appendix). Participants also responded to three hypothetical situations related to teaching social studies at the middle school. Many of the interview questions drew on strategies that Grossman (1990) used in her teacher learning study. For example, during the interviews, Grossman had teachers sort, rank, and discuss cards that listed different influences on their ideas about teaching. She also posed hypothetical situations to her teachers, asking them to discuss how they might teach a particular topic or how they might plan a unit or a course.

I also interviewed the social studies methods instructors from each program, Annie and Rebecca, to find out what they hoped preservice teachers would learn from their courses and to learn about their teaching and disciplinary backgrounds. In addition, I asked the instructors the same set of questions as the preservice teachers, including their experience with and knowledge of middle school students, ideas about teaching social studies at the middle school level, and responses to the hypothetical situations. Finally, I requested a copy of each methods instructor's course syllabus.

Each interview lasted about one hour and was audiotaped. Then, I transcribed each interview and coded the transcripts and course syllabi deductively (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The codes were based on themes from the theoretical lenses and research questions discussed above. For example, I created coding categories to denote the content of what teachers were learning, such as "conceptions of young adolescents' intellectual capabilities" or "conceptions of pedagogies appropriate for middle school." To further organize and analyze these data, I created comparison charts in which I examined trends and differences among the preservice teachers and between the two methods instructors and their courses. I also used inductive analysis to uncover significant themes to guide future research. For example, preservice teachers' gender emerged as a factor worthy of future investigation in relation to teachers' learning about middle school social studies.

Opportunities for Learning: The Social Studies Methods Courses

Elementary Social Studies Methods

Annie, a doctoral student, taught the elementary social studies methods course, though she had only a week to prepare. As a former high school English teacher, Annie admitted that she was not the optimal choice for teaching an elementary level social studies methods course. She revealed,

> [This was] a course that I put a lot of heart in, and a lot of work into, that provided me with a lot of anxiety because I was not the ideal candidate to teach this course, and you take what you can get … the university needed someone and I was the best available candidate at that juncture.

Annie viewed her methods course as having two primary strands: helping preservice teachers become reflective practitioners and helping them learn to teach using inquiry-based instruction. She explained,

> One of the things that I continually tried to emphasize, as a reflective practitioner, you are engaging in inquiry yourself, and so what you will be asking of your students is what you'll be doing. You will be making a hypothesis, putting out some material, going back and looking to see, 'if I collect this data which is the results of how students have done, how well did it go? Where else could I go from here?' And, it's the same with the students, providing them with opportunities to ask questions, collect data … make some claims about the data, and then share those claims … make an argument or test something out.

In addition, Annie wanted her preservice teachers to learn how to teach concrete skills to students and to integrate social studies with other subjects. She noted,

> You can't ask a student to research something if you haven't taught them the skills to do so. And, especially since we're talking about middle school, integration I thought was key, bringing in the language arts or science or math, whatever would help bolster the work that was being done with social studies.

In addition to focusing on how to model and scaffold skills for students, Annie emphasized how to design thematic units that were based around overarching questions and key skill objectives.

The elementary methods course assignments included writing a two-part social studies statement of purpose, writing a unit rationale, working with a group of peers to teach a National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) thematic strand to the methods class, and creating a social studies unit for the grade of the preservice teacher's choice. Course readings were a variety of practical and theoretical social studies articles and a series of children's and young adult fiction books. Over the course of the semester, Annie modeled various lesson practices and brought in guest teachers to model different methods of teaching social studies.

Secondary Social Studies Methods

In the secondary program, Rebecca's social studies methods course was informed by her expertise as a professor of social studies education and her previous experience teaching the course. Rebecca spent many years as a high school social studies teacher and a social studies curriculum designer before becoming a professor at Midwestern. As part of her current role, she conducts social studies professional development with middle and high school teachers and is integrally involved with the secondary social studies teacher education program.

The methods course she discussed with me—in which the secondary preservice teachers were enrolled—was the first of two methods courses in the secondary social studies program. Rebecca explained that one goal for this first methods course was for students to develop informed answers to five central questions, which were clearly laid out in her syllabus:

- What is social studies?
- Why should students learn social studies?
- What should be taught in social studies?
- How should meaningful learning activities be constructed in social studies?
- How should students' learning be assessed in social studies?

Rebecca wanted her students to approach these questions from a particular theoretical perspective that guides the class:

> That's the framework that's embedded in the Powerful and Authentic Social Studies (PASS) standards, and that standards framework is a combination of Fred Newmann's research on authentic intellectual work and the work of the National Council for the Social Studies on powerful social studies. It's a constructivist approach to social studies that has a democratic education theoretical piece attached to it.

Drawing on this framework, Rebecca also taught her students how to implement a small number of challenging social studies methods that align with this conception of social studies. These methods included inquiry teaching, structured academic controversy, Socratic seminars, public issues discussions, and simulations.

As they were learning these different methods, the secondary preservice teachers created their own lessons and implemented them in their field placement classrooms. Rebecca described,

> Because the students are student teaching while they're in methods, it's really a great laboratory I think. So the way that the course is designed is that they'll learn these methods, and then they'll develop lessons using those methods that they have to teach. And, then they have to reflect on them using the rubrics that are part of PASS, and then they develop portfolio entries around them.

Thus, the preservice teachers' assignments in this course included constructing, teaching, and reflecting on three different lessons, as well as developing an electronic teaching portfolio. In addition, Rebecca required students to participate in a "social studies event," such as attending a social studies conference, to encourage students to keep learning as teachers.

Rebecca explained that this first social studies methods course focuses on curriculum planning at the lesson level, while the second methods course examines curriculum from the unit and course level. The second course also centers on unit planning and assessment as well as how to teach concepts and how to provide meaningful feedback.

Thus, both Annie and Rebecca hoped their preservice teachers would learn student-centered, constructivist approaches to teaching social studies. Annie's class focused on teaching preservice teachers an inquiry approach to learning, helping them integrate different content areas, encouraging them to develop student skills through scaffolded instruction, and pushing them to think deeply and intellectually as teachers. Rebecca's class focused on having preservice teachers learn specific discussion-based teaching methods that met the Powerful and Authentic Social Studies standards, having them create and implement lessons that used these methods, and helping them clarify the purposes and goals of teaching social studies.

Learning about Methods: Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Social Studies

What, then, did the preservice teachers take away from these courses about teaching social studies to middle school students? The interviews revealed that, in both programs, the preservice teachers learned similar, engaging approaches to teaching social studies from their methods courses. All of the preservice teachers articulated student-centered, constructivist strategies for helping students learn social studies that mirrored the general approach that each methods instructor endorsed. For example, when I asked these preservice teachers to discuss how they might teach the U.S. Declaration of Independence to a group of seventh grade students, their responses were strikingly similar. Anissa, from the elementary program, suggested,

> I think having a copy of the Declaration of Independence would be important. Letting them examine it, and what it says … definitely looking at the time period, like why they thought it was important to make this document at the time and who was involved, who opposed it, how it was received both by England and by other colonists. … What does it mean to be independent, another person, a country? … Maybe they could write essays on that or give presentations … have a structured argument where they decide those things.

Paul, from the secondary social studies program, had some similar ideas:

> I might break the document down into stations, where I'd have students reading different parts of the Declaration of Independence and answering some follow-up questions. After they've finished reading the document I'd remind them of the context, the historical context, the points being made. … I would probably have them write something about that historical context, what Jefferson is referring to when he's talking about "X," and then … maybe come up with their own sort of Declaration of rights as students.

As these quotes reveal, both Anissa and Paul proposed having students examine the document itself, consider the historical context in which it was created, and subsequently engage in a written or oral task in which students must examine the ideas in the Declaration. Anissa and Paul's suggestions were much like their peers', all of whom recommended getting seventh graders actively involved in reading, writing, or discussion about the Declaration, and almost all of whom suggested that the seventh graders should examine the primary source in some way.

The distinctions that emerged among the preservice teachers and their ideas about pedagogical strategies reflected the different emphases of each methods instructor and the specific methods taught in each course. Among the secondary preservice teachers, for instance, Rebecca's teaching of different discussion methods was a strong influence. Mira explained how she might try teaching the Declaration of Independence:

> We learned a method in our class, a Socratic seminar, where the kids would be assigned a task related to the reading maybe for homework to do after we read it, and then they would come to class the next day with their work that they prepared, and then we would go into a discussion about it.

Beyond their discussion of this hypothetical situation, the secondary preservice teachers were clearly influenced by the methods that Rebecca had taught them. All of them appreciated the various strategies that she had modeled for teaching social studies. Brock enthusiastically recounted his class's participation in the inquiry lesson:

> [The inquiry] was extremely memorable … [Rebecca] taught it that day about the Titanic. She opened class by asking, 'what was the tragedy of the Titanic?' And, obviously lots of people had lots of different answers, and then you introduce new data and you have students rethink it—'okay now you've learned

> that they had shoddy equipment on the boat, now what do you think the real tragedy is?' And I just thought it was cool how your hypothesis kept evolving. You realize that there's lots of different answers a lot of times to a question. I just had a blast participating in it, and then when I taught it, it worked really well, too.

Similarly, the elementary education preservice teachers found Annie's class to be a helpful source of ideas for different social studies teaching strategies. All three elementary preservice teachers appreciated learning the inquiry approach to teaching that Annie emphasized. In addition, Annie's use of historical fiction and her integration of literature with social studies were influential to her students' thinking. Anissa noted,

> My favorite readings in this subject were all the young adult books, mostly because I really like the literature aspect of it. I think the most powerful one was *Maus I and II,* as a comic book description of the Holocaust and just really powerful images in a nontraditional form. I feel like they'd be a great starting point to talk about the issues that happened in the books. *Out of the Dust* was another really good one—historical fiction that made you think more about what the dustbowl really was.

Thus, the strategies that each methods instructor intended to teach clearly influenced the preservice teachers' thinking about methods for teaching social studies.

Learning about the Middle: Sorting out Strategies and Contemplating Capabilities

Strategies for Teaching at the Middle Level

While both methods courses had clear connections to the preservice teachers' ideas about general pedagogical strategies for teaching social studies, there was far less clarity when it came to preservice teachers' ideas about specific strategies that might be appropriate for the middle school level. All of the elementary teachers suggested distinctions in terms of the complexity of the content a teacher would provide at the elementary versus middle grades. Middle school students would pursue topics in greater depth, with more content, and at greater levels of complexity. Preservice teachers from both programs also thought that scaffolding for middle school students is important. Mira explained,

> At a middle school, you need more scaffolding of instruction, just in order for them to get it. You need to break it down into more parts, lay out the format clearer for them so they can understand it. For high school students, you may not need to go through all the same steps. But the processes, the methods that you're using, if you're using more creative, imaginative, effective methods I mean those are things that you can use with middle and high school students.

Paul and Brock were less certain that teaching strategies would be as similar at the middle school and high school levels. Brock tried to sort this out in his response:

> Even though I did [previously] give the example of a seminar working in seventh grade, I think seminars would be something I would use a lot more in high school. … Again, *more,* not saying it's *just* in high school, but trying to do that in middle school, although I've been impressed with the results, I also realize they haven't gotten a lot of this yet, they're not used to doing discussion work.

Paul also suggested that there might be differences in teaching strategies between the middle and high school levels, though he was not certain about these:

> I don't think lecturing in the middle school level is very effective. I think students in the middle school level, I think they need to be involved in the learning process. They need to be, I don't want to say hands-on, but they need something to occupy their attention so they're not left out to dry without a helping hand. So I think the activities should build on a certain theme or thought process that draws out their thinking … (pause) … and I don't have enough experience to really say what practices that includes.

Irene pointed out her sense that different strategies might be used at the middle and elementary levels, but she was not sure what those are:

> I think that there can be different strategies and I think the teachers I've seen relate to middle school age students the best have a very different way of teaching than most elementary school teachers. And I don't

> know that I can pinpoint what exactly that difference is, but I think there is a difference in how they're connecting with the students and how they present the information to them.

Middle School Students' Intellectual Capabilities

When it came to discussing middle school students' intellectual capabilities in the context of social studies, further discrepancies emerged. The elementary preservice teachers had remarkably similar, high expectations for what middle school students could accomplish. The secondary preservice teachers, by contrast, had mixed and inconsistent ideas about middle school students' intellectual capabilities.

All of the preservice teachers characterized middle school students as going through a transition period cognitively. They noted that young adolescents are developing and moving from concrete to abstract thinking or from guided study to learning that is more independent. The elementary teachers noted that the social aspect of young adolescents' lives plays an important role in their thinking, but that young adolescents have strong intellectual capabilities. Irene explained, "I think they're definitely capable of doing a lot of remarkable things, but it needs to be framed in a way that they would be interested in because they've got so many other things running through their mind at that point."

While the secondary preservice teachers also believed that young adolescence is a transitional time, they had mixed interpretations of how this translates into intellectual capabilities. Paul described middle school students in relation to older high school students, noting what middle school students could *not* do:

> I don't think they're capable of reading really challenging texts on philosophy or political theory or primary source type documents, which is true of early high schoolers, too. I just don't think they can pull out the information and use it in ways to make points argumentatively or factually, that older students, juniors or seniors would be able to do.

On the other hand, Brock made this observation about middle school students: Probably the biggest thing as far as cognitive ability that I've learned this year is to not underestimate it … and not to play to what I think is the lowest common denominator—to strive for something higher for them."

The hypothetical situations that I posed to the preservice teachers revealed further consistency among the elementary teachers and discrepancies among the secondary group. For example, I asked the preservice teachers to discuss possible topics that they felt would be well suited for seventh graders to discuss (see Table 1). The four women—the three elementary preservice teachers and Mira from the secondary group—felt that all of these topics would be valuable and appropriate for seventh graders to discuss, given the proper structuring.

Table 1
Elementary and Secondary Preservice Teachers' Choices of Middle School Discussion Topics

Topics you think would be well-suited for 7th graders to discuss	**Anissa**	**Emma**	**Irene**	**Paul**	**Brock**	**Mira**
whether students should be allowed to wear hats in school or not	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
whether the local community should raise the minimum wage or not	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
whether convicted felons should have the right to vote or not	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
presidential candidates' positions on healthcare	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
the Israeli-Palestinian conflict	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Mira's explanation was representative of how the four women responded. She said,

> I think all of these could be [used with seventh graders]. I think it would really depend how you structured the lesson, though. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they're going to need a lot more background information about that in order to have a substantial, meaningful discussion than whether students should be allowed to wear hats in school or not. I think it really depends on what materials you brought in.

Irene elaborated on the value of each topic for seventh graders and how the discussion could be implemented:

> I think that any of them could be framed in a way that seventh graders could have the conversation about them. The ones about hats, minimum wage, and felons could very easily fit into a debate situation, where students could find information that supports either side. … I think as far as the presidential candidates, I think that the sooner that students are exposed to things such as presidential candidacy and the politics of the United States, I think the better. … And, I think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as an adult, I hear about it all the time and I don't fully understand what's going on … that's part of what I think social studies is about is to give you an understanding of the world around you. I think it's something that is valid for them to know and be able to discuss.

However, both men selected only two of the topics as advisable for seventh grade students. Paul felt that the two local issues were the only ones that seemed appropriate or feasible for seventh graders to discuss:

> I have to say that, for seventh graders, I think whether students should be allowed to wear hats in school is a topic that would be appropriate and have enough content and be beneficial enough that I think they'd get a lot out of it. I think it's something personal and also mundane enough that they're not divorced from the issue necessarily, but it's not two countries fighting each other, it's not an issue that adults really deal with exclusively … and I think something about the minimum wage would be appropriate, too. I don't think the concept of wages is difficult for them to understand. A lot of them babysit, they're familiar with getting money for that. I don't know if they'd be too sophisticated with economics, but I think they could appreciate a discussion on what a minimum wage should be. And the other three [topics] … not for seventh graders.

Brock, on the other hand, selected only the local issue combined with the global issue, explaining that his student teaching placement had influenced his response:

> …[the Israeli-Palestinian conflict], I'm sorry, I'm prejudiced to—I just taught it! (laughs) and it was one of the ones I thought was not going to work and it worked. And I had to simplify it. I taught this one as a SAC, as a structured academic controversy. So, we read about a page and a half of background, and it was real broad, and then I broke them into groups and had one side have pro-Israeli arguments and one side pro-Palestinian, and all they had to do was pick the best three they thought and then present them. And, that was great. By the end of it, that lesson worked so well for something like this because the kids are exposed to both sides, and having the groups try to reach a consensus at the end was really cool, too, because some of them really tried to get creative with a solution to the problem. I was impressed.

The final interview question produced the most striking differences between the elementary and secondary preservice teachers. I asked the students to discuss the final assessment they felt would be best suited to seventh grade students following a unit on Ancient Greece and Rome (see Table 2). All three elementary teachers felt the assessment that required the highest level thinking was best for seventh graders, while all three secondary teachers selected the median level.

Table 2
Elementary and Secondary Preservice Teachers' Choices of Middle School Assessments

Possible final unit assessment after the study of Ancient Greek and Roman cultures	Anissa	Emma	Irene	Paul	Brock	Mira
A: students *summarize the characteristics* of each ancient culture						
B: students *compare and contrast characteristics* of the two ancient cultures				X	X	X
C: students *evaluate the lasting impact* of these two ancient cultures	X	X	X			

The elementary preservice teachers explained that middle school students are capable of evaluating the lasting impact of the two cultures, Assessment C, and went on to comment that Assessment C requires the highest level of thinking and is the most meaningful assessment. They did not select the other two options because these did not require as much thinking or the same depth. Irene commented: "If they have to evaluate the impact then you can see cause and effect and have to formulate their own opinions about things. I think that's useful for students to be able to formulate their own opinions about things."

Among the secondary preservice teachers, all three felt Assessment B, comparing and contrasting the characteristics of the two ancient cultures, was the most appropriate for seventh grade students. They commented that Assessment C was too challenging, too broad, and that students did not need to know the impact of these civilizations. Paul explained, "I think Assessment C is probably too challenging. I could see using Assessment C for a final on a class on European History. I don't know that the lasting impact of these two cultures … I mean, whoa! You're talking about all of western civilization—how do you define western civilization? Where do you begin?"

Making Sense of Methods and the Middle

Influences of Instructors

In the case of the elementary preservice teachers, Annie, their methods instructor, may have influenced their ideas about middle school students' capabilities. However, it appears that this influence came about unintentionally and perhaps because of the high school-focused background that Annie brought to teaching the methods course. Emma commented, "[Annie has] really broadened my mind to think about how much middle school students are capable of and if you give them the freedom to ask the questions, how much you'll be impressed with what they'll come up with." Though Emma's ideas were clearly shaped by conversations with Annie, Annie revealed that she and the preservice teachers were figuring these things out together:

> I think [the preservice teachers] taught me a lot actually this semester! (laughs). I think that I tend to err on the side of being too complicated and too intellectual in terms of what we should do in the classroom, and I was constantly pushing them even in their unit rationales when they were writing, 'Well, you need to do more research, you need to make this more interesting intellectually.' And, they would say, 'But I'm just teaching a unit on family to 4th graders, why do I have to do all this research on the history of issues related to family?' So, I think that they had a better sense of what kids need.

Thus, the elementary methods course was not designed to facilitate this kind of learning, but the conversations that emerged between Annie and her students appeared to have some influence on the preservice teachers' ideas, as well as on Annie's.

In the secondary program, however, there was little evidence that the social studies methods course had played a role in shaping the preservice teachers' ideas about middle school students' capabilities. Rebecca, in fact, had strong faith in middle school students' intellectual abilities. She commented, "I'm struck by how low the demands are on middle school kids. I think they can do a lot more. I think we generally think that middle school kids' cognitive abilities are much lower than they really are." Yet, despite Rebecca's own views on the matter, her students had disparate understandings of the same issue.

Modeling the Methods, Missing the Middle

These responses suggest that the elementary and secondary social studies methods courses at Midwestern are strongly related to preservice teachers' conceptions of pedagogical strategies for teaching social studies, but not as well connected to the teachers' understandings of teaching social studies at the middle school level. The six preservice teachers learned high quality, student-centered, social studies teaching strategies from their methods courses, but the preservice teachers held less clearly developed and consistent ideas about how these approaches to teaching social studies work with middle school students.

Though both programs at Midwestern include middle school in their certification range, neither program focuses on this age level. Two of the secondary preservice teachers observed that their social studies methods course focused on high school level teaching. Paul commented,

> We've had to read the [state] model academic standards which have standards for middle school students. I think that's about as close as we've come to something that specifically addresses middle school. The methods class overall has been sort of geared towards high school teaching, not middle school.

Brock also noted the focus on high school methods:

> I felt like a lot of the stuff we learned and a lot of the stuff [Rebecca] gave us was high school examples of stuff, and in there, there would be a paragraph you know, 'this could be adaptable to middle school,' you know, 'trust us' … but I would have loved to have gotten an example of, 'here's a seventh grade middle school lesson that was taught.'

In the elementary program, it appeared that Annie might have been the first instructor to bring any kind of focus to middle school teaching, through her choice of resources. Emma commented,

> This is one of the first classes that we've actually gotten books that aren't geared towards elementary school students and much more geared toward middle school and high school, so it's actually been really nice to have that experience of looking at more chapter books than picture books 'cause in previous semesters we've spent a lot of time looking at picture books.

Though Emma clearly appreciated Annie's inclusion of these upper level resources, another comment she made suggested that these resources were only a small piece of learning to teach at the middle school level. At the end of our interview, Emma said, "I haven't even grappled with how I [differentiate] elementary thinking from middle school thinking, so I think it's hard for me to articulate exactly what I think the differences are." Thus, as Gaskill (2002) notes, these preservice teachers are, "being 'certified' to teach in the middle grades without being 'prepared' to teaching in the middle grades" (p. 39).

It is important here to note that neither methods course claims to offer specific guidance on how to teach young adolescents or the intellectual capabilities of young adolescents. Rather, each course proposes to offer social studies methods that will presumably be applicable to students in the range of preservice teachers' certification. In the elementary methods course, the only mention of middle school is in the course title: "Methods of Teaching Social Studies: Middle Childhood-Early Adolescence." In the secondary program, the methods course is titled, "Teaching of History and Other Social Sciences—Social Studies Methods," and the first sentence of the course goals reads: "This is the first course in a sequence designed for preservice social studies teachers who wish to teach one or more of the courses under the social studies umbrella in middle and high schools." Thus, according to the methods instructors' goals, these methods courses are doing exactly what they intend.

Sites for Learning about the Middle

Where, then, should preservice teachers learn about teaching young adolescents? Many would propose that educational psychology courses in human development are logical sites for teachers to gain this kind of knowledge. Unfortunately, when the preservice teachers ranked possible places that their ideas on teaching middle school social studies had come from, their classes in human development were not among the top influences.[3] Given the variation in the preservice teachers' understandings of teaching young adolescents, this effect was clearly not strong.

Others might suggest that field experiences are the place where preservice teachers should gain expertise at teaching young adolescents. Indeed, this research suggests that field experiences had a powerful influence on the preservice teachers' thinking. Recall Brock's comment about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "[The Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a topic], I'm sorry I'm prejudiced to, I just taught it! (laughs) and it was one of the ones I thought was not going to work and it worked." Brock thought his middle school students would not be capable of discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but when he actually tried it, with the appropriate scaffolding, he realized they could. However, despite making this observation, he was still not convinced that other topics or pedagogical strategies were appropriate for middle school students. Again, recall Brock's comment about the use of Socratic seminars: "Even though I did [previously] give the example of a seminar working in seventh grade, I think seminars would be something I would use a lot more in high school."

Brock's comment illustrates that preservice teachers made observations about middle school students in their field placements, but did not have the opportunity to examine these observations and their assumptions about middle school students in a formal, facilitated manner with their colleagues (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Hammerness et al., 2005). If Brock had had such an opportunity, he might have been more convinced that Socratic seminars are an excellent tool for engaging seventh graders in thoughtful, intellectual discussions on a regular basis. Similarly, a facilitated discussion about middle school students might have persuaded Paul to give young adolescents more credit. In addition, Irene might have learned some of the specific practices included in the "very different way of teaching" that she observed among good middle school teachers.

These preservice teachers need to have the same kinds of learning opportunities that enabled them to learn about social studies teaching methods to allow them to learn about teaching middle school students. When they are left to learn about middle school students on their own, this research illustrates that preservice teachers will develop varied interpretations of how best to teach middle school students and what young adolescents' capabilities are. Such interpretations may be problematic or inaccurate, and may lead to these teachers shortchanging their middle school students intellectually, as Lexmond (2003) has also found, and thereby denying them important opportunities to learn. Thus, as middle school researchers have often noted (e.g., Lexmond; McEwin et al., 2003), these preservice teachers are not adequately prepared to work with young adolescents. This study establishes an empirical need for teacher education programs to incorporate deliberate discussion about young adolescents and teaching particular subject areas at the middle school. The elementary and secondary program faculty at Midwestern must determine how such intentional discussions can be integrated into preservice teachers' preparation.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has a number of important limitations. First, this research is based on a small number of participants at one institution; it is not clear how representative the preservice teachers were of their cohorts, or how representative Midwestern's programs are of other elementary and secondary teacher education programs. Second, interview data provide one window into the preservice teachers' thinking, but they do not tell us how these preservice teachers actually teach or implement the ideas they discussed. As a way of addressing some of these limitations, I have recently completed an in-depth, multi-dimensional case study that involves observations of teaching practice, observations in methods courses, pre- and post-surveys, and multiple interviews over time.

Despite the limitations of the present study, however, this research highlights several important factors that can inform future research and teacher education practice. First, these data suggest that gender is an important factor to investigate further in terms of how preservice teachers view young adolescents and their capabilities. In this research, in some cases, the female participants had higher expectations for middle school students than did the males. Researchers should examine further the ways in which gender may be linked to expectations for middle school students and their learning. Second, considering that Annie, the elementary methods instructor, was a former high school English teacher teaching an elementary social studies methods course, it seems important to gain a better understanding of how methods instructors' own preparation for the course they teach influences what preservice teachers learn. Future research should take into account the teaching backgrounds of teacher educators in relation to preparing middle school teachers.

Finally, and most significantly, this study draws attention to the need for more research and teacher education that is focused on teaching at the middle school level. At Midwestern, two teacher education programs are preparing middle school social studies teachers, but neither program is adequately helping preservice teachers understand how to teach their future young adolescent students. Among the important aspects of pedagogical content knowledge in social studies are a deep knowledge of students' needs, abilities, and ways of thinking within the context of social studies, and knowledge of ways to represent the subject matter to students. If we want middle school teachers who can engage and challenge their students in social studies learning, we need to pay more attention to how preservice teachers are being prepared to do so (e.g., Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin et al., 2003).

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Footnotes

[1]The name of the institution and the names of participants are pseudonyms.

[2]All research participants affiliated with the elementary education program have pseudonyms beginning with a vowel (Anissa, Emma, Irene), while participants from the secondary program have pseudonyms beginning with a consonant (Brock, Paul, Mira).

[3]Out of six possible influences, only Mira ranked her human development class in the top three, placing its influence as third. None of the other preservice teachers placed this course among the top three influences on their ideas about teaching middle school social studies.

Appendix

Interview Questions for Prospective Teachers

Overview: These questions are intended to get at your understanding of teaching social studies at the middle school level. I will ask you some general questions about your background and your ideas about social studies and middle school students; then I will ask you to respond to some hypothetical situations. I am not looking for any particular responses, but am just trying to understand how you think about these issues, and where your ideas have come from.

1. Why did you choose the program you are in? (elementary—middle childhood-early adolescence or secondary)
2. What grade level(s) and subject(s) would you ideally like to teach? Why?
3. What college courses related to social studies have you taken? (both within the school of education and in arts and sciences)
4. What experiences have you had working with middle school students?
5. How would you describe middle school students/young adolescents in general and in terms of their cognitive or intellectual abilities?
6. Could you talk about what you see as the main reasons for teaching social studies? Do you think there are or should be different goals depending on whether you are teaching social studies to middle school students or to (elementary/high school) students?
7. Thinking about the topics you teach, pedagogical strategies you use, and the types of thinking you

want students to do, do you think teaching social studies at the middle school level is different than teaching social studies at the (elementary/high school) level? If so, how?

8. The following cards describe possible places that your ideas on teaching middle school social studies may have come from:
   - Your own experience as a middle school student
   - Experiences working with middle school students
   - College classes on child and adolescent development
   - Education and/or methods classes
   - College classes in history/social sciences
   - Other influences

   Could you please put these cards in order of most influential to least influential on your thinking about teaching middle school social studies?
9. Looking at your syllabus from your social studies methods class, could you identify any readings, assignments, or class activities that have been particularly influential in the way you think about teaching social studies? Have you had readings, assignments, or class activities that addressed middle school in particular?
10. Suppose you were going to teach the Declaration of Independence to a group of seventh grade students.

    Could you brainstorm ways that you might teach this? What pedagogical strategies would you use? What kinds of work would you ask the students to do? What would you want the students to learn?
11. Here are some possible topics that you could engage middle school students in discussions about (written on cards):
    - Whether students should be allowed to wear hats in school or not
    - Whether the local community should raise the minimum wage or not
    - Whether convicted felons should have the right to vote or not
    - Presidential candidates' positions on healthcare
    - The Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

    Selecting as few or many as you think appropriate, which of these topics do you think would be well-suited for seventh graders to discuss and why?
12. Suppose you were teaching a unit on Ancient Greece and Rome to a group of seventh grade students and had the following options for a final unit assessment:
    - An assessment in which students summarize the characteristics of each ancient culture
    - An assessment in which students compare and contrast characteristics of the two ancient cultures
    - An assessment in which students evaluate the lasting impact of these two ancient cultures

    Which of these assessments would you think would be best suited for your seventh grade students and why? Why would you NOT select the other options?

Interview Questions for Methods Course Instructors

Overview: These questions are intended to get at your goals for helping prospective teachers learn to teach social studies at the middle school level. I will ask you some general questions about your background and your ideas about social studies and middle school students; then I will ask you to respond to some hypothetical situations. I am not looking for any particular responses, but am just trying to understand how you think about these issues, and how you hope your students will think about these issues.

1. When you taught K–12 school, what subjects and grade levels did you teach?
2. What preparation or certification did you have for teaching K–12 school?
3. What kinds of knowledge and experiences do you have with teaching social studies at the middle school level?
4. How would you describe middle school students/young adolescents in general and in terms of their cognitive or intellectual abilities?
5. Looking at your syllabus from your social studies methods class, could you talk about what you hope your students (prospective teachers) will learn from this class? How do the assignments, readings, and class activities you have incorporated relate to what you are hoping to accomplish in this class?
6. Considering the topics that are taught, pedagogical strategies that are used, and the types of thinking

you want students to do, do you think teaching social studies at the middle school level is different than teaching social studies at the (elementary/high school) level? If so, how?

7. Could you talk about what you see as the main reasons for teaching social studies? Do you think there are or should be different goals depending on whether you are teaching social studies to middle school students or to (elementary/high school) students?
8. Suppose one of the students in your class was going to teach the Declaration of Independence to a group of seventh grade students. How would you suggest that they teach this? What pedagogical strategies would you suggest they use? What kinds of work would you suggest their students should do? What would you suggest their students should learn?
9. Here are some possible topics that your students could engage middle school students in discussions about:
   - Whether students should be allowed to wear hats in school or not
   - Whether the local community should raise the minimum wage or not
   - Whether convicted felons should have the right to vote or not
   - Presidential candidates' positions on healthcare
   - The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

   Selecting as few or many as you think appropriate, which of these topics do you think would be well-suited for seventh graders to discuss and why?
10. Suppose your students were teaching a unit on Ancient Greece and Rome to a group of seventh grade students and had the following options for a final unit assessment:
    - An assessment in which students summarize the characteristics of each ancient culture
    - An assessment in which students compare and contrast characteristics of the two ancient cultures
    - An assessment in which students evaluate the lasting impact of these two ancient cultures

    Which of these assessments would you think would be best suited for the seventh grade students and why? Why would you NOT select the other options?