RMLE Online
Research in Middle Level Education

Micki M. Caskey, Ph.D., Editor
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon

2007 • Volume 30 • Number 7 ISSN 1084-8959

Attitudes of Middle Grades Principals Toward Online Teacher Preparation Programs in Middle Grades Education: Are Administrators Pushing "Delete"?

John A. Huss
Northern Kentucky University
Highland Heights, KY

Abstract

This descriptive study investigated the attitudes of middle school building principals toward the desirability of preservice teacher preparation programs conducted wholly or almost wholly online. This project included middle schools in the states of Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio where random cluster sampling was utilized to select participants from a population list of schools and districts. After districts were determined, each middle school principal in the selected district was provided with a questionnaire. Seventy-five of 120 principals (16 from Indiana, 36 from Kentucky, 23 from Ohio) completed questionnaires for a response rate of 63%. The principals expressed apprehension about teacher dispositions and the social aspects of teaching that may be compromised in an online program, as well as general ethical concerns surrounding online courses. If middle grades principals are to acknowledge ultimately the marketability of online teacher preparation, the degree-granting institutions need to address these concerns and actively seek the input of administrators in program design.

Introduction

The middle school model is grounded in a belief that teaching students ages 11–14 is inherently different from teaching students in elementary grades or high school. Proponents envision a protective environment for young adolescents in which psychological, social, intellectual, and emotional needs are both acknowledged and met. Translated into operational terms, the middle school "idea" is characterized organizationally by flexibility, instructionally by individualization, and environmentally by sensitivity to the changing needs of the age group served. Middle school teaching is often affective, with a clear emphasis on advisory and advocacy elements. Teachers must know their kids as well as their content. In its seminal document, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents,* the National Middle School Association (2003) calls for educators who value working with this age group and are equipped to do so through specific teacher preparation before entering the classroom and continuous professional development as they pursue their careers. Similarly, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* and Jackson and Davis (2000) in *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* recommend that middle schools be staffed with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents and who have the education and training necessary for the assignment.

A growing number of colleges and universities across the country are striving to develop both undergraduate and alternative online teacher preparation programs that lead to initial certification or licensure. In fall 2001, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a $10 million, five-year Star Schools grant to Western Governors

University (WGU), an online consortium of 19 western states and 45 universities, to develop a competency-based distance-learning program for teacher candidates. The WGU Teachers College offers K-8 licensure programs with a bachelor's degree or postbaccalaureate certificate, as well as an online bachelor's degree with licensure in secondary mathematics or science and a postbaccalaureate licensure program in math and science for uncertified teachers and mid-career professionals. Arizona, Nevada, and Texas have officially accepted WGU programs for licensure; through reciprocity agreements among these states, the WGU degree is recognized by 43 other states. In the same way, the University of Maryland was awarded a $2 million Department of Education grant to develop an online teacher certification program. The goal was to produce 300 new teachers for a high-need school district over the next five years (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Although clearly in a preliminary phase, the motivation to develop online undergraduate teacher preparation programs is increasing as universities seek to expand access to underserved populations, alleviate classroom capacity constraints, and capitalize on emerging market opportunities (Eastman & Swift, 2001; Volery & Lord, 2000).

Should the movement continue to gain momentum, middle grades principals may face an interesting quandary when they consider potential employees for the classrooms in their buildings. Spurred by state standards and a call for blended learning, the modern P–12 school actively promotes technology. Case in point, the Michigan State Board of Education has introduced a new graduation requirement that would make every high school student in the state take at least one online course before receiving a diploma. The aim is to ensure that students are prepared for a technology-focused society in which they will become a part (Carnevale, 2005). Despite such vocal support for technology, will principals ultimately express confidence, or incertitude, about new teachers who learned their foundations and teaching methodologies online?

The distance learning revolution could be both promising and problematic for most stakeholders who participate in the education arena. The effect may be particularly eventful for the modern middle school where teachers toil in a pronounced social context that requires a consistent integration of the cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of their chosen craft. A lack of specialized teacher training is already viewed as a perennial roadblock to excellence in middle grades education. Scales and McEwin (1994), for example, found that nearly half of the nation's middle school teachers had no special training for teaching young adolescents. Sixty percent of those surveyed said they had not even had a college student teaching assignment in a middle school. Ninety percent of public American universities and 89% of private universities and colleges currently offer online courses. Online tuition revenue totaled $7.1B in 2005 (up from $2.4 B in 2002) with 1.2 million students enrolled exclusively in online programs (Rodgers, 2005). Institutions have worked diligently to make this modality available for all students in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, including those candidates with physical disabilities, dyslexia, learning challenges, age-related issues, and carpal tunnel syndrome. This proliferation of online degree options has created minutiae for consumers who must dodge a bombardment of Internet pop-up advertisements, distinguish diploma mills from reputable institutions, and evaluate the marketability of a web-based graduation. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon has also stirred curiosity within the research community.

A Look at the Literature

Literature to examine the credibility of online degree programs, especially for P–12 education, is underdeveloped and no research base currently exists. Embryonic studies of a general nature have looked at faculty and the extent to which they accept the value of this new, still unproven, method of instructional delivery. A study conducted at West Texas A & M University (a Texas leader in online education that has offered online courses since 1997) surveyed 220 faculty members and found professors were generally favorable to the experience, but expressed unease about the steep learning curve associated with learning to teach online, the amount of time involved in the process, and the overall quality of the courses (Gerlich, 2005). Santilli and Beck (2005) correspondingly reported faculty concern about developing and maintaining quality online courses. They also indicated faculties believe assessment issues need to be addressed.

Other inquiries have examined whether students themselves embrace online education as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face classroom learning. Gallagher and Poroy (2005) conducted a national survey of prospective postsecondary education students and analyzed responses from 541 participants. Thirty-eight percent of students were unsure about the quality of online education compared to campus-based learning, 30% thought online and campus education were equal, 29% believed online learning was inferior to campus-based instruction, and 3% indicated online learning was superior.

Moffett (2005) surveyed first year graduates of a newly formed graduate educational leadership program and focused quantitatively and qualitatively on collecting data regarding participants' perceptions of quality of online courses in the degree program. Through post program anonymous surveys, participants reported that they expected to have only an average course experience in online classes and the greatest merit was convenience. On a 1 to 10 Likert scale, with 1 being lowest expectations for course quality and 10 being highest, data revealed a full four point gain in participants' expectations for quality in online courses (from a five to a nine). Participants reported that they enjoyed courses most that were designed to elicit high interaction with the instructor and others in the course, while they avoided online experiences where all participants had to meet online at the same time.

A large study conducted by the Sloan Consortium drew data from 1,100 colleges and universities and isolated several perceived advantages for students, including convenience, highly interactive discussion, intensive writing, and close sense of community (Allen & Seaman, 2003). In a dissenting study, Ouzts (2006) specifically measured the sense of community in online classes at a western, land grant university. Students taking online classes using the eCollege web platform completed the Classroom Community Scale developed by Rovai (2002). Results showed only that 15% of the students perceived a high sense of community in their courses. In addition, a troubling 10% of this same sample of students perceived a low sense of community, adding to the concern many faculty members express about online students' isolation and possible lack of socialization into the discipline. By integrating learning activities that promote interaction, negotiation, and debate in online courses, instructors may begin to build a learning community in which students collaborate to solve real life problems.

Thus far, there remains a conspicuous lack of empirical data on a central, yet seemingly overlooked, question: How do *employers and supervisors* view the quality and legitimacy of a degree garnered exclusively online? What will it matter when institutions, faculty, and students accept online degree programs, but prospective employers and instructional leaders question the value of such degrees? This study speaks to this disparity in the literature.

Seeking an alternative to on-campus classroom instruction is certainly not a novel idea. Correspondence schools and television courses have been part of the academic landscape for many decades. The contemporary incarnation of distance learning has indisputably made noteworthy strides and now includes both synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards, video clips, virtual simulations, and numerous opportunities for email interactions with the professor and classmates. Empirical studies (Perez-Prado & Thirunarayanan, 2002; Schulman & Sims, 1999) support the efficacy of online courses and have not demonstrated significant differences between online and traditional (or "face-to-face") performance. In fact, the online performances have often established greater gains (McCollum, 1997; Perez-Prado & Thirunarayanan; Ridley & Sammour, 1996).

Nonetheless, determining the credibility of an online degree has been viewed as a relatively new expedition—confined generally to the world of business and industry. Many employers believed online programs are good for teaching research skills and theory, but not so good for providing hands-on experiences in the training field (Dolezalek, 2003). Adams and DeFleur (2006) conducted a national survey of hiring executives (n = 269) to assess the acceptability of a job applicant's qualifications for employment that included a degree earned solely online or one that included a significant amount of online coursework. The researchers sent a questionnaire in response to job advertisements posted in newspapers in eight major metropolitan areas throughout the United States. It described three hypothetical applicants: One earned a degree through a "traditional" institution; a

second obtained a degree solely online from a "virtual" institution; and a third obtained a degree by "mixed" online and traditional coursework. The research question addressed was whether a job applicant who earned a bachelor's degree entirely or partially online has the same chance of being hired as one who completed a degree through traditional coursework. In the first pairing, when the respondents were asked to choose between an applicant with a traditional degree and one with an online degree, 96% (258 respondents) indicated they would choose the candidate with the traditional degree for employment in their organization. Only 4% (11 respondents) selected the candidate with the online degree. In the second pairing, the respondents were asked to choose either an applicant with a traditional degree or an applicant with half the coursework completed online. In this case, the answers were less dramatic but still very clear. Seventy-five percent (201 respondents) noted that they would prefer the applicant with a traditional degree. About 4% of the respondents did not answer this question; however, some of these choose to provide detailed written comments instead. The remaining 19% (51 respondents) selected the candidate with the mix of traditional and online coursework.

Acceptance of distance education has been increasing. According to Vogt (2001), a survey conducted by New York City-based employment research web site (www.vault.com) revealed that most employers (54%) still favor job applicants with traditional degrees over those with online degrees, but 45% indicated that they would give job candidates with both types of degrees equal consideration. Eighty-five percent of employers felt online degrees are more acceptable today than they were just five years ago. A survey conducted by the Distance Education and Training Council (2004) showed that almost 70% of corporate supervisors rated the value of a distance degree as "just as valuable" or "more valuable" as resident-school degrees in the same field. The respondents, however, were managers with at least one employee who had earned a degree through a Distance Education and Training Council accredited distance program, suggesting that familiarity may cultivate acceptance for online programs or possible bias.

Yet, when the attention moves to teacher education, the feedback has been less ebullient. For example, the American Federation of Teachers (2000) acknowledged the great potential of distance learning, yet expressed apprehension about online degrees for preservice candidates when they passed a resolution calling for face-to-face coursework in teacher preparation programs.

If principals who recommend new teachers for classroom positions are receptive to the online degree and view it no differently than a traditional degree, this would establish and reinforce online education for schools and colleges of education. If, however, a substantial number of principals express tentativeness about hiring online graduates for the middle school classroom, key areas of concern will be isolated and, perhaps, viable suggestions will be introduced to alleviate and overcome these undesirable perceptions. The major focus of this research is not on the educational merits or quality of such instruction, but on the acceptability and marketability of degrees earned online to those who make hiring decisions in middle grades education. Principal reaction to online teacher preparation cannot be minimized and will undoubtedly have significant implications for how instruction is delivered in higher education around the country (indeed around the world) and how the dynamics of teacher education are ultimately manifested in middle school classrooms. Those who develop online courses and software, teach online classes, and pay to take online classes should be apprised of principal reaction because it is ultimately the administrator who chooses to hire or not hire the candidates produced by those programs.

Method

Participants and Setting

This research project involved principals in the states of Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio where random cluster sampling was utilized to select participants from a population list of schools/districts in the aforementioned geographic region. After districts were determined, each middle grades principal in the chosen districts was sent a questionnaire. A "middle grades" school was designated as a school in between elementary and high school, *housed separately,* and covering at least two or three of the middle school years, beginning with grades five or six. The cluster sampling rendered an equitable representation of rural, suburban, and urban school districts. Seventy-five of 120 principals (16 from Indiana, 36 from Kentucky, 23 from Ohio) completed

questionnaires for a response rate of 63%. While falling short of the requirements for a classic probability sample, the views of these 75 principals were a useful source for gaining initial insights into the acceptability of the middle grades teacher certification earned through online coursework.

Research Design

This study followed the interpretive tradition of case research, although it maintained discrete elements of the positivist approach (i.e. predefined independent variable [online teacher preparation programs], limited use of quantitative analysis through the calculation of frequency tables depicting counts and percentages). An interpretive, rather than a positivist methodology was appropriate because there is no objective reality, which can be discovered by researchers and necessarily replicated by others (Broadbent & Shanks, 1998; Walsham, 1993). Interpretivism aims to understand phenomena from the point of view of participants directly involved with the phenomenon under study (Cavaye, 1996). No specific hypothesis testing occurred in this study.

Data Collection

Recognizing that online programs can be quite complex with intricacies often specific to a particular university, the element they would have in common would be the almost exclusive delivery of instruction via the web (typically through systematic software platforms that allow managed learning systems and course modules), as opposed to the mere inclusion of web-*enhanced* courses (i.e. a hybrid program). In short, a web-based program does not meet for instructional purposes in physical facilities, although students may sometimes be required to meet for an in-class orientation or to take an exam. The emphasis is strictly centered on principal reaction to the general medium itself as a means for preparing teachers, not on the idiosyncratic nature of individual courses. On that basis, principals were asked four key questions:

1. How aware are you of the growing aspiration within Colleges of Education to create full preservice teacher preparation programs wholly or almost wholly online leading to certification/licensure?
2. If a teaching candidate came to you for employment in your building and you knew his/her degree had been obtained wholly or almost wholly via the Internet, how would you describe your level of concern?
3. Does an online degree in teaching carry as much credibility with you as a teaching degree attained in a traditional offline manner?
4. You have narrowed your choice of a teaching hire to two candidates. One candidate attended a traditional bricks-and-mortar college or university, and the other candidate completed a web-based program online. Both interviewed well and have comparable transcripts. Who are you most inclined to hire?

The content of these items has a logical consistency in that each item first ascertains a respondent's familiarity with the availability of online teacher preparation programs and then gauges three levels of reaction to an online degree as it pertains to the marketability of a candidate. Question two garners information about a principal's overall level of concern about a candidate possessing an online degree. Question three asks the principal to consider his or her opinion toward the credibility of such a degree. Question 4 requires the principal to indicate which applicant he or she would be most likely to recommend for hiring if the candidates' favorable qualifications were the same except for the academic environment in which the degree was earned.

It is important to note that principals were asked to contribute their thoughts or comments regarding the credibility and desirability of online degrees for new teachers. Adequate space was provided for written comments that could be used to explain further the basis for the respondents' selections. Years of service for each participating principal were likewise recorded.

Although questionnaire data were stored, written, and displayed with computer assistance, the bulk of coding, indexing, and interpreting was performed manually. Questionnaire data were categorized into coding families based upon regularities and patterns. A content analysis of the written comments provided by the respondents was conducted to understand the nature of those remarks in context and to examine their written answers for evidence of overriding concerns. To accomplish this analysis, the written comments were first organized into categories and analyzed for thematic (or contextual) uses of keywords and phrases. To assess these issues, categories were developed by grouping together the most frequently occurring keywords. These can

provide insights that go beyond the checkmark answers made among the categorical selections provided in the questionnaire (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). A combined context of less frequently used keywords was used to form other categories.

This approach, known as open coding, pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of basic concepts, themes, and other phenomena through close examination of the databases (Strauss, 1987). Data were divided into discrete parts, or subcodes, and then, named using terms drawn from the literature, derived directly from the data, or generated by the researcher. Then, categories were organized into a schema or meaningful sequence used as the basis for writing findings. Each participant's codes were also compared to the others, again checking for commonalities and differences. A matrix of data patterns was created.

Reliability and Validity

Face and item validity were assessed through data gathered in a pilot study with local principals in middle grades education who were not included in the final sample. Ten pilot study participants completed the entire survey and answered the following questions about whether the survey allowed them to report accurately and fully their attitudes and perceptions of online teacher preparation programs. (1) Which, if any, items on the survey were unclear to you? Explain. (2) Which, if any, items did you find difficult to answer? Explain. (3) This survey uses fixed attitudinal responses. While completing the survey, did you feel that this scale adequately allowed you to express your opinion? If not, explain. (4) In your opinion, which, if any, items on the survey display a bias on the part of the research? Explain. (5) Provide any additional comments that you would like to make.

Analysis of respondents' comments to the survey questions did not reveal a pattern of misunderstanding for any item or any reported impediments to their understanding of, or ability to respond to, survey items. Comments from the pilot study included five requests for a neutral option on the fixed responses. Although a neutral opinion may have granted participants more flexibility in responding to survey items, this item was withheld from the fixed responses so that principals would make a positive or negative reaction to the questions.

Like Heraclitus who could not step into the same river twice (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), replication in a study of this nature can only be approximated, never achieved. Because this descriptive "snapshot" study utilized self-reporting and subsequently analyzed each item separately, a scale was not invoked and, therefore, internal consistency and inter-rater reliability ratings were not viable. Internal reliability was addressed, however, through mechanically recorded data, which, according to LeCompte and Preissle, "preserves all data, unabstracted" (p. 340). External reliability was addressed by a careful delineation of those who provided the data and explicit description of how participants were selected, the context in which surveys were conducted, and techniques used to acquire and analyze data.

Regarding validity, ethnographic analysis incorporates a researcher reflection, introspection, and self-monitoring that can be called "disciplined subjectivity" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), wherein all phases of the research are exposed to continual questioning and reevaluation. Threats to internal validity, such as history, maturation, and mortality were not factors. Credibility of participant reports was enhanced through independent corroboration from multiple informants and cross-group comparisons. The inclusion of quantitatively measured attributes, such as years served as an administrator, function to demonstrate what Wolcott (1973) calls the "typicality" of a phenomenon—the extent to which it may be compared and contrasted along relevant dimensions with other phenomena. Inasmuch as data generated in this study captured the *attitudes* of 75 principals and not necessarily an accurate depiction of the overall reality of all middle school administrators, the threat of spurious conclusions drawn by the researcher was minimized. In consideration of external validity, translatability was enhanced through the use of theoretical frames, definitions, and research techniques accessible to and understood by other researchers in the same or related disciplines.

Results

The questionnaires revealed a representative cross section of principals with various levels of administrative experience.

Table 1
Number of Years Served as School Administrator

0–3 years	3–6 years	6–10 years	10–15 years	More than 15 years
14 (0.19)	9 (0.12)	14 (0.19)	13 (0.17)	25 (0.33)

n = 75

When considering middle grades principals' awareness of the desire within higher education to create and market online teacher preparation programs, the numbers suggested varying degrees of disengagement between universities and local principals insofar as communication about program development and meeting the expectations of middle grades administrators.

Table 2
How aware are you of the growing aspiration within Colleges of Education to create full preservice teacher preparation programs wholly or almost wholly online leading to certification/licensure?

Not very aware	Somewhat aware	Very aware
16 (0.21)	46 (0.62)	13 (0.17)

n = 75

For the remainder of the questions, however, the principals' responses were direct and undeviating. While some principals were pragmatic (e.g., "I believe the online degree in teaching is inevitable, but my reservations at this time arise from a concern that presently the online programs may not have all the problems worked out, but that would be true of any type of innovation."), the overriding perceptions of middle grades teacher preparation programs administered via computer are anything but encouraging at this time. The results were consistent across the three states: the prospect of an online degree for middle grades teacher preparation was suspect at best and it mattered not the number of years the principal had served as an administrator.

Table 3
If a teaching candidate came to you for employment in your building, and you knew his/her degree had been attained wholly or almost wholly via the Internet, how would you describe your level of concern?

Not concerned at all	I would be somewhat concerned	I would be very concerned
0 (0.00)	36 (0.48)	39 (0.52)

n = 75

Table 4
Does an online degree in teaching carry as much credibility with you as a teaching degree obtained in a traditional offline manner?

Yes	No
4 (0.05)	71 (0.95)

n = 75

Table 5
You have narrowed your choice of a teaching hire to two candidates. One candidate attended a traditional bricks-and-mortar college or university, and the other candidate completed a web-based program online. Both interviewed well and have comparable transcripts. Who are you most inclined to hire?

Online Candidate	Traditional Candidate
1 (0.00)	74 (1.00)

n = 75

As displayed in Table 3, 52% of respondents indicated they would be *very* concerned if a teaching candidate applied for a position with a degree garnered wholly or almost wholly online. Forty-eight percent expressed that they would be somewhat concerned, while 0% of principals would not be concerned at all. Ninety-five percent of the principals did not believe an online degree was as credible as a traditional degree (see Table 4). For the final question, a lone principal indicated he/she would choose an online candidate over a traditional candidate if the other variables were believed to be equal (see Table 5).

The majority of the respondents, 55 of 75 principals (73%), offered a considerable number of detailed comments to elaborate upon their viewpoints. These provided a basis for a qualitative analysis that extended the understanding of the views of these gatekeepers. In addition to general hesitation about the overall quality of online courses and their perceived capacity to guide preservice teachers through the processes of designing instruction, creating effective classroom environments, and using discipline-specific "best practices," several overarching themes were evident in the questionnaire data.

Perhaps most glaringly, 36 principals revealed much consternation about the "social" aspects of teaching that might be compromised in an online program. While respondents in the study looked upon the need for classroom field experiences as non-negotiable, they also placed high value on the interpersonal aspects of traditional middle grades teacher preparation programs wherein students interact with a cohort group and begin to develop their cooperative and collegial skills. Many used the phrase "Teachers are *people* persons." Other comments included:

> I would be concerned the person has not networked face-to-face with human beings.
>
> I feel the human contact is missing.
>
> Quality time *must* be spent in planning instruction that is experiential and student-centered in order to engage early adolescent learners. This, coupled with the middle school emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches to learning, requires consistent, protracted pockets of time when teachers can meet in the flesh for true collaboration and coordination. In many ways the social dimension of a teaching program is more important than the academic.
>
> You can't beat face-to-face-interaction between students and learners through lab experiences, group work, and field experiences.
>
> Teaching is such a social thing; taking courses online with little or no live interaction with other students would hamper a new teacher.
>
> There are interpersonal skills and interactions that are of value to students that cannot be replicated in online studies.

> I think some of the course could be offered online (history of education, etc.), but what is missing is the interaction with classmates. We want teachers to collaborate, so shouldn't we want that as part of teacher training?
>
> We need to know that teaching candidates have conquered the "face factor," that is, the ability to successfully interact with staff and students on a daily basis in a real-life, real-time, real pressure situation. A recluse can be successful online, but not in person.
>
> Teaching is hands-on. Teacher preparation must be hands-on as well.

Twenty-nine principals pointed out candidate dispositions would be extremely difficult to fortify in an online environment. A sampling of comments included:

> We need professors to be able to weigh a candidate's reliability, personality, and dedication.
>
> Some candidates do not have the personality for a successful teaching career. I don't think this could be discovered online because it often goes unnoticed offline.
>
> An online course might promote the intellectual side of an individual, but not the affective side.
>
> To me, a middle grades teacher is flexible, has a keen sense of humor, has the ability to talk to and listen to middle school students, and, in general, supports the components of an exemplary middle school. How can I be assured a candidate possesses these traits if this person has taken his or her courses online? The universities won't know much about these teachers.
>
> I wouldn't even put an online person on my short list to interview. Hiring someone without a sound basis for judging his/her commitment, character, and integrity is unthinkable.

With regard to pedagogical knowledge, nine principals were concerned that strategies to encourage active learning may be compromised in an online format. Six of those nine principals, for example, wondered if teaching candidates would effectively accentuate positive interdependence and creative group problem solving if they have not had meaningful opportunities to participate fully in such face-to-face exercises themselves. Respondents did not specifically comment on the strength of a candidate's content area knowledge; more were inclined to comment on a candidate's ability to use research-based practices and available resources to meet the unique needs of middle grades students. Representative comments were:

> Teachers need to be able to use AV resources, technology and other equipment (overhead, smartboard, even an Ellison machine) to deliver instruction and engage students. Online candidates can obviously work with a computer, but not necessarily know how these things operate in a classroom setting and how to present material to middle schoolers with them.
>
> I want middle grades teachers who are ready to execute things like exploration, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and social instruction. I'm not sure an online candidate has experienced these strategies in sufficient proportions to be able to implement them successfully with pre-adolescent students.

Seven respondents were apprehensive about the motivation a student might have for choosing an online program in the first place. Principals fear some online students may be too independent and less collaborative than face-to-face students. They noted:

> I would question the "people skills" of someone who chose to complete an online teacher preparation program.

> We learn what we live. If we hide too often behind a computer I think it narrows our expertise to function in a live classroom and with colleagues. Online provides too much of a quick fix. Teaching in a building is all about relationships.

> Middle grades teachers really need to be compatible with the age group. Someone who prefers online instruction may not have the enthusiasm for interacting with these children that I would like to see evidenced.

Six principals expressed apprehension about fundamental ethical questions surrounding online courses and the authenticity of a teaching candidate's preservice work. They wrote:

> There is no way to have confidence the candidate before you is actually the one who did the work or studied the practices.

> How does one know a student is truthfully completing examinations, authoring papers, and creating chat room dialogue?

> I have concerns about who may have actually completed the work in an online program.

> Who is doing the online work? How can we verify that the answers/work is actually done by the candidate?

> There is definitely an ethical factor involved. If there could be a better monitoring method I would trust it more.

Only one principal commented on the reputation of the degree-granting institution as having a bearing on the credibility of the candidate. This principal shared:

> The online degree credibility would depend partly on the credibility of the institution that granted it. "No name" institutions would equal no credibility, while a respected institution would equal *some* credibility.

Interestingly, seven principals volunteered the information that they either had taken at least one online course themselves or had actually taught an online course in the role of an adjunct instructor, yet none of those seven indicated that they would select the online candidate over the traditional candidate.

Discussion

While acknowledging the data revealed perceptions as opposed to actual outcomes, the information gathered would strongly suggest middle grades building principals have collectively set a boundary as to the extent of online encroachment they are willing to accept at this time. Thus, if principals are to acknowledge ultimately the legitimacy of online teacher preparation, the degree-granting institutions are going to have to address their concerns. The information garnered in this study provides a starting point for initiating dialogue between the e-learning community and the building principals who must make decisions about the readiness of middle grades candidates. Field placements and student teaching will need to remain intact. Even if it were legally and logistically possible to do so, principals will recognize nothing less than genuine classroom interactions and experiences. Courses involving content methodologies and instructional delivery systems will also have to retain significant and mandatory on-campus components. Principals want assurance that preservice teachers have interacted frequently and successfully with others, because, as one principal expressed, "interdependency and synergy are crucial to overall middle grades teacher effectiveness."

Communication between local universities and principals on program design would prove invaluable and ensure mutual goals are conceived and met. Providing training that exposes local principals to quality online courses may afford them an opportunity to see firsthand how material is presented and the manner in which

students interact with both cyber classmates and the various middle grades methodologies. As suggested, acceptance is often linked to familiarity.

Principals remarked on teacher dispositions and questioned the ability of online programs to adequately rate the efficacy of potential candidates as well as their suitability for the middle grades classroom. Principals pointed out candidate dispositions are extremely difficult to fortify in an online environment. A preservice teacher may answer content questions successfully and score well on quizzes, but, in actuality, possess few of the intangible characteristics a middle school principal seeks in a classroom teacher.

Respondents voiced some unease over the motivation of certain preservice teachers to seek an online alternative. Such trepidation is consistent with Roblyer (1999) and Diaz and Cartnal (1999) when they report some online students have been found to value convenience and flexibility more than interaction with instructors and peers.

Because apprehension was also expressed about ethical concerns associated with online assessment, the issues pertaining to cheating and plagiarism likewise cannot be disregarded. Reasonable safeguards to address skepticism of online teaching candidates and the authenticity of their preservice work, while balancing adaptations for students with disabilities (which often call for extended time allowances and other considerations when completing tests and assignments), must be in place.

Recommendations and Future Research

Further research is recommended to expand this inquiry to additional states and additional principals to determine if the trends revealed within this study remain consistent in other regions of the country. While the data captured initial impressions of respondents, a systematic examination in the form of a longitudinal study would be helpful to track the evolving perceptions of principals, especially if online teacher preparation becomes a more established and publicized fixture in the training of professional candidates.

To conclude, the online revolution must prepare to meet potential resistance when it comes to preservice teacher preparation. Principals believe strongly in the primary and contiguous nature of traditional programs where preservice teachers mimic the roles of "real" teachers as they interact with classmates, faculty, and mentors to solve problems, reach consensus, build trust, and acquire team membership skills. While online teacher preparation may provide greater opportunities for paraprofessional candidates, working students, and individuals from diverse and remote areas, higher education will need both answers and aggressive marketing to turn aside this current hesitation among school administrators. Middle grades principals want the best candidates for their classrooms and actively seek new teachers who both understand the young adolescent and are equipped to engage the transescent learner. At present, data suggested that principals are not convinced that online programs for preservice teachers will necessarily produce those candidates. One respondent drew the following comparison, "Training online to be a middle school teacher is like training online to be a public speaker."

References

Adams, J., & DeFleur, M. (2006). The acceptability of online degrees earned as a credential for obtaining employment. *Communication Education, 55,* 32–45.

Allen, E. I., & Seaman, J. (2003). *Entering the mainstream: The quality and extent of online education in the United States.* Needham, MA: Sloan Center for Online Education.

American Federation of Teachers. (2000). Resolution on teacher education and teacher quality. Retrieved November 19, 2006, from http://www.aft.org/about/resolutions/2000/teacheredandqual.htm

Broadbent, M. P., & Shanks, G. (1998). Successfully completing case study research: Combining rigour, relevance and pragmatism. *Information Systems Journal, 4,* 273–289.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century.* New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Carnevale, D. (2005, December 13). Michigan considers requiring high school students to take at least one online course. *Chronicle of Higher Education Today's News.* Retrieved May 4, 2006, from http://chronicle.com/free/2005/12/2005121301t.htm?rss

Cavaye, A. L. M. (1996). Case study research: A multi-faceted research approach for IS. *Information Systems Journal, 6,* 227–242.

Diaz, D. P., & Cartnal, R. B. (1999). Students' learning styles in two classes: Online distance learning and equivalent on-campus. *College Teaching, 47*(4), 130–135.

Distance Education and Training Council. (2004). *Distance education survey: A report on course structure and educational services in distance education and training council member institutions.* Washington, DC: Author.

Dolezalek, H. (2003). Online degrees. *Training, 40*(5), 26–32.

Eastman, J., & Swift, C. (2001). New horizons in distance education: The online learner-centered marketing class. *Journal of Marketing Education, 23*(1), 25–34.

Gallagher, S., & Poroy, B. (2005). *Assessing consumer attitudes toward online education.* Boston, MA: Eduventures.

Gerlich, R. (2005). Faculty perceptions of distance learning. *Distance Learning Report, 8,* 1.

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

LeCompte, M., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2nd ed.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

McCollum, K. (1997). A professor divides his class in two to test value of on-line instruction. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 43,* A23.

McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. S. (1997). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction.* New York: Longman.

Moffett, D. (2005, November). A study of participant-perceived quality of online courses in the inaugural year of a Florida graduate educational leadership program. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Florida Educational Research Association, Miami, FL.

National Middle School Association. (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents.* Westerville, OH: Author.

Ouzts, K. (2006). Sense of community in online courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 7*(3), 285–296.

Perez-Prado, A., & Thirunarayanan, M. O. (2002). A qualitative comparison of online and classroom-based sections of a course: Exploring student perspectives. *Educational Media International, 39,* 195–203.

Ridley, D., & Sammour, H. (1996). Viable alternative means of instructional delivery: Online courses as an alternative teaching. *College Student Journal, 30*(3), 337–340.

Roblyer, M. D. (1999). Is choice important in distance learning? A study of student motives for taking Internet-based courses at the high school and community college levels. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education, 32*(1), 157.

Rodgers, G. (2005). Online degrees gaining acceptance, enrollment. *EduExec, 24*(12), 4.

Rovai, A. (2002). Development of an instrument to measure classroom community. *Internet and Higher Education, 5*(3), 197–211.

Santilli, S., & Beck, V. (2005). Graduate faculty perceptions of online teaching. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 6*(2), 155–160.

Scales, P., & McEwin, C. K. (1994). *Growing pains: The making of America's middle school teachers.* Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

Schulman, A., & Sims, R. (1999). Learning in an online format versus an in-class format: An experimental study. *T.H.E. Journal, 26,* 54–57.

Schumacher, S., & McMillan, J. (1993) *Research in education: A conceptual introduction.* New York: HarperCollins.

Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

United States Department of Education. (2003). *Meeting the highly qualified teachers challenge: The Secretary's second annual report on teacher quality.* Washington, DC: Author.

Vogt, P. (2001). Will employers value degrees earned online? *College Journal.* Retrieved November 19, 2006, from http://www.collegejournal.com/jobhunting/interviewing/20010730-vogt.html

Volery, T., & Lord, D. (2000). Critical success factors in online education. *The International Journal of Educational Management, 14*(5), 216–223.

Walsham, G. (1993). *Interpreting information systems in organizations.* Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Wolcott, H. (1973). *The man in the principal's office: An ethnography.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

