

# ***FOR THE LOVE OF THE MIDDLE***

## ***A Glimpse Into Why One Group of Preservice Teachers Chose Middle Grades Education***

**Molly Mee, Heather Rogers Haverback, Jeff Passe**  
*Towson University*

This article reports on a study that investigated the reasons why one group of secondary education students chose to major in middle school education. Data were collected via interviews and meeting and observational notes with prospective middle school majors at a mid-Atlantic public university during the 2010/2011 academic year. Findings indicate that students choose middle school because they (1) love the subject(s) they plan to teach, (2) believe they have a calling to the profession, (3) believe they can relate to young adolescents and they can make a difference in their lives, (4) believe there is a need for middle school teachers thus making them more marketable, and (5) are influenced by parents or other family members in the teaching profession. These findings support the premise that teacher career choice is based on an interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

### ***WHY PRESERVICE TEACHERS CHOOSE MIDDLE GRADES EDUCATION***

The Association for Middle Level Education, formerly National Middle School Association, position statement *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010) delineates the characteristics of effective middle grades education into the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community. Specifically, the statement emphasizes the impor-

tance of middle grades teachers who choose to work with and advocate for the young adolescent. Additionally, it reports on the need for middle grades teachers to “have a zest for living; enjoy being with young adolescents and understand the dynamics of the ever-changing youth culture” (p. 9). While the role of a middle grades educator is well defined, why an individual chooses to become a middle grades educator is more of a mystery. This article reports on a study that investigated the reasons why one group of secondary education students chose to major in middle school education.

---

**Molle Mee**, Assistant Professor. Phone: 410-704-4572. E-mail: [mmee@towson.edu](mailto:mmee@towson.edu)

---

Middle Grades Research Journal, Volume 7(4), 2012, pp. 1–14  
Copyright © 2012 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1937-0814  
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

## ***THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE***

The goal of this study was to begin to understand why teachers choose to teach middle school rather than elementary or high school. To do this, the researchers chose to study one group of teachers who had recently decided to major in middle school education. To frame the study, the researchers reviewed the literature on reasons why teachers choose teaching as a career and specifically why they choose to teach middle school. Additionally, in an effort to set the study within a larger context, it was important to review the literature on the history of middle school and the current state of middle grades education and certification in the United States.

### ***The Choice of Teaching as a Career***

Motivation is a key in choosing a career in teaching. Intrinsic motivators for those entering the education profession appear to be idealism and altruism. In a landmark study of teacher beliefs and attitudes, Goodlad (1984) concluded that teachers' desire to teach centered on the nature of teaching itself or the desire to teach, in general. Only 22% of those surveyed claimed to enter the field to teach a particular subject. In a literature review that extended through the 1990s, Brookhart and Freeman (1992) suggested that "altruistic, service-oriented goals and other intrinsic motivations are the source of the primary reasons entering teacher candidates report for why they chose teaching as a career" (p. 46).

Further support for intrinsic motivation was provided in 2000. In a survey conducted by the Fordham Foundation, Farkas, Johnson, and Foleno (2000) compared teachers' career-oriented beliefs with those of other young graduates. Teachers overwhelmingly (83%) cited "work that you love to do" as essential in one's job, compared to 60% of young graduates overall. Choosing a job that "contributes to society and helps others" was deemed essential by 72% compared to just

39% of young graduates overall. In a study of teachers-in-training at two Australian universities (Watt & Richardson, 2007), a different set of motivators emerged. The researchers found that six factors combined to motivate the subjects in their sample: perceived teaching ability; intrinsic career value; opportunity to shape the future of children/adolescents; the chance to make a social contribution; the opportunity to work with children/adolescents; and prior teaching and learning experiences. The absence of reference to particular grades or subject areas is notable.

Extrinsic rewards such as salary, vacations, job security, and job status are other important factors in the choice of teaching (Brown, 1992; Yong, 1995). A market-responsive model has been developed to explain why people, not just teachers, choose their careers. According to this model, individuals make career choices based on demand and the grades of compensation (Somon & Ochsner, 1979). This model predicts that students prepare for an occupation that will be in high demand and will maximize their earnings. At one time, this model may have been rejected for educators because of teachers' orientation toward altruistic goals, but the recent economic situation may now make it relevant.

A small British study (Jarvis & Woodrow, 2005) applied a finer analysis in a survey of why preservice teachers entered the field. While intrinsic satisfaction was mentioned most often, the second most popular reason was subject related. However, only 16% of mathematics and 18% of the English candidates indicated this subject-orientation motivation. The reasons given were then divided into vocational commitment (i.e., love of the subject, wanting to work with children, always having wanted to teach) and career-related reasons (i.e., wanting a challenging, stable, or rewarding career, changing one's career, wanting to formalize teaching qualifications). The researchers found only 38% of trainees had vocational reasons for choosing teaching. More English and humanities interns were motivated for vocational reasons than those career-minded mathematics

interns. In sum, the literature suggests that a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators guide the decision to teach, with variations according to one's subject area.

### ***The Choice of Middle School Teaching***

In a search for research regarding teachers' decisions to teach middle school, there was a surprising absence of data. One of the most comprehensive surveys of middle school teacher attitudes (Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990) did not address that question. A search of the *Middle School Journal* yielded no articles on the topic. In personal communication with Joyce Epstein and Paul George, two leaders in middle grades education, neither could not recollect any studies on why teachers choose to teach middle school. Only one article (Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007) was uncovered that explored what attracts candidates to middle grades education. In this study, 110 preservice and in-service teachers were surveyed on why they chose to teach middle school. Findings revealed that student age, content area, and marketability were three of the reasons. While this study serves as a foundation for understanding middle grades teachers, more in-depth research is needed. Given that there is minimal research on the aforementioned topics and the notion that middle grades education is a fairly new field, a summary of the history of middle school certification is in order.

### ***History of Middle School Certification and Research***

In 1909 the first junior high school was established in the United States in Columbus, Ohio (Ohio History Central, 2011). Before this time, students attended elementary school until eighth grade and then went directly to high school. The 1960s highlight an important time in middle grades education as the primary consideration moved to the distinct developmental characteristics of the young adolescent. There was a movement away from the junior high school model to the middle school model as

more middle schools were established. Slowly the focus shifted to this unique age group with the creation of organizations like the Association for Middle Level Education in 1973 (NMSA, 2011), which gave teachers and researchers a venue to study, discuss, and become advocates for middle schools. In 1989, the Carnegie Corporation of New York issued "Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century," a landmark report which called for focusing on the academic and the physical, social, and emotional needs of the young adolescent. In conjunction with the need for new school structures that focus on the young adolescent, came a call for teacher preparation programs to prepare teachers to work with this age group.

In 1982, McEwin and Alexander reported that middle grades teacher education programs were offered in 162 out of 538 institutions of higher education, of which the majority were master's degree programs. This shows that the field of education and institutions of higher education were interested in preparing more teachers to teach the middle grades. However, these findings also show many institutions of higher education, in this case 70% of those surveyed, had not yet created such programs.

Today, support for middle grades education continues to grow. The Association for Middle Level Education has 33,000 members including principals, teachers, office personnel, professors, college students, community leaders, parents, and educational consultants across the United States, Canada, and 46 other countries (NMSA, 2011). However, middle grades education is still fairly young and the research is scarce. Therefore there is a necessity for further investigation into various aspects of middle grades teacher certification programs and the students who are attending such programs, as the programs vary by state.

### ***Today's Middle School Certification***

Middle grades teacher certification and licensure patterns differ by state, with many offering certification in two subject areas.

Certification in two subject areas means that middle grades educators are able to be certified in two areas of their choice, including mathematics, science, social studies, English, and others.

Other factors to consider when making state-by-state comparisons are licensure, certification, and endorsements. On their website, the Association for Middle Level Education (NMSA, 2011) reports 46 states (and Washington, DC) have either a licensure/certificate or an endorsement option. Specifically, 28 states (and Washington, DC) have a licensure option and 18 states have an endorsement option. Only California, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana do not offer a certificate or licensure in middle grades teacher education.

### ***BACKGROUND OF THE UNIVERSITY***

During the 2010/2011 academic year the selected group of preservice teachers ( $n = 17$ ) elected to pursue the new middle school major at Atlantic University (a pseudonym) scheduled to begin in the 2011/2012 academic year. The new major leads to certification to teach middle school (Grades 4-9 in the state) and differs from the university's secondary education program, which leads to certification in both middle and high school (Grades 7-12) and from the elementary education major, which leads to certification in Grades 1-6. The impetus for the middle school major comes from a new state certification category in middle school education. Atlantic University has a student population of about 21,000 students and is located a few miles outside of a major mid-Atlantic city. The university, the second largest public university in its state, offers 100 bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs in the liberal arts and sciences and the applied professions. The College of Education at Atlantic University is the oldest and largest producer of teachers in the state and offers programs in secondary education, early childhood education, elementary education, special edu-

cation, educational technology and leadership, instructional leadership and professional development, and most recently middle school education. The College of Education is accredited by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Educators. All programs in the college are approved by the state and upon graduation the students are eligible for certification in the state. The College of Education is comprised of 4,611 students, of which 82% are female and 18% are male. Further, 76% are Caucasian.

The secondary education program has 461 students, of which 41% are male, 59% are female with 78% of the students being Caucasian. Students from the secondary education program become certified to teach Grades 7-12 in their major subject area. The two concentrations within which most students are enrolled are English and history. The secondary education program offers 12 certification programs in the following secondary subject areas: biology, chemistry, earth-space science, English, French, geography, German, history, mathematics, physics, social science, and Spanish. A master of education in the secondary education program and a master of arts in teaching are also offered.

The elementary education program consists of 757 pre-elementary and elementary education students (7%, male; 93%, female; 76%, Caucasian). Students from the elementary education program become certified to teach Grades 1-6. The elementary education program offers a major in elementary education, a major in elementary education with eligibility for early childhood certification, an integrated major of elementary education and special education, an elementary education major with a minor in various disciplines, the master of arts in teaching, and the master of education in elementary education.

### ***Middle School Major***

After a state task force called for greater attention to the needs of young adolescents, the president of Atlantic University established a

middle school program as one of the university's main goals. In response, the College of Education collaborated with representatives from six other departments to create a new major in middle school education. The program was officially approved in spring 2011. When the middle school program was announced, several students came to the Department of Secondary Education seeking more information. At that time, several committed to switch to the new major. This study's sample was drawn from this population of students.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study focused on the following research questions:

1. Why do preservice teachers in this group want to become teachers?
2. What influenced this group of preservice teachers to specifically choose the Middle School major?
3. How do these preservice teachers feel about certification in two content areas?

### **NEED FOR THE STUDY**

This study is important for both scholarly and practical reasons. First, research on why preservice teachers are interested in teaching middle school is scant. Second, the researchers were interested in the disproportionate number of teacher candidates entering the secondary education program with an interest in solely teaching high school. Preliminary investigations revealed an overwhelming number of students at Atlantic University desired to teach high school versus middle school. This is despite the fact that employment statistics of Atlantic University graduates reveal that many of the school's graduates become employed in middle schools. Third, Atlantic University is in the process of constructing a middle grades education major and wanted to investigate why this group of students was interested in middle

school rather than high school or elementary school teaching. To that end, the findings of this research can help other institutions of higher education as they seek to establish middle level teacher education programs.

### **METHOD**

This is a case study of one group of college students who plan to enroll in the new middle school major at Atlantic University. The purpose of the study was to investigate why these students chose to become middle school teachers rather than elementary or high school teachers. Therefore, the students selected for the study are those who expressed an interest in majoring in middle school education. Data were collected via individual interviews ( $n = 7$ ), notes from meetings with prospective middle school majors ( $n = 17$ ), and observational notes from information sessions with prospective middle school majors.

### **Triangulating the Data**

In qualitative research it is essential to triangulate the data for the purpose of ensuring rigor. This study employed individual interviews coupled with meetings notes and observational data. One could rightly argue that one of these data collection methods alone would not provide robust findings. Thus, it is essential that three or more methods are used and data are compared to confirm findings.

### **The Interview**

The interview consisted of four primary questions and several sub questions (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in person and on the phone, and each interview took approximately 15 minutes to conduct. The interview evolved in an iterative manner with each successive interview. In other words, as data were collected new sub questions (see Appendix B) evolved from student responses to the four primary questions. For

example, in the first few interviews students noted a defining moment in their lives that led to their career choice. Thus the interviewer asked each successive interviewee, "Was there a defining moment in your life that led you to your decision to teach?"

### ***Meeting Notes***

The second set of data analyzed was meeting notes taken by the Secondary Education Department chairperson during individual and small group advising meetings with prospective middle school majors. During the advising sessions the chairperson took notes about student interests and perceptions of the new major. These notes were analyzed for this project.

### ***General Observational Data***

During fall and spring semesters of 2010 and 2011, the Secondary Education Department chairperson spoke to classes of students in their Foundations of Secondary Education courses to discuss the new middle school major. Following the meetings, the chairperson made general observational notes. These notes were analyzed later for this project.

### ***The Preservice Teachers***

Seventeen teacher candidates were invited to be interviewed for the study. Because the researchers were interested in why the candidates selected middle school as their field of study, all candidates who decided to enter the new middle school major were purposely selected to be interviewed. All 17 students

were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study. Three students decided not to pursue the middle school major and seven did not respond to the invitation. The remaining seven ( $n = 7$ ) students were interviewed.

### ***Reliability and Validity of Data Sources***

Inherent with qualitative studies is the possibility of subjectivity. To maintain reliability and validity for the study, the researchers strengthened their findings by employing individual interviews coupled with meetings notes and observational data. Additionally, the researchers followed a scripted protocol to ensure the interviewers remained consistent in the questions they asked and the manner in which the interviews were conducted. Four primary questions were asked (see Appendix A). Follow-up questions and probing techniques were scripted and consistent among interviewers. Interviewers recorded responses to the questions verbatim. Yin (1989) suggests that in order to ensure construct validity, a chain of evidence should be accessible and demonstrate that protocol is followed. Thus, a strength of this study is that a direct trail of evidence can be made between the findings and the raw data, and this can be accessed by a critical reader, if need be.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Two researchers conducted the seven interviews. Verbatim transcripts were produced from the interviews. First, each interviewer read all seven transcripts and made general notations about patterns in the data. The

TABLE 1  
Middle School Study Data

<i>Data</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
Interview	7
Meeting notes	17
Information sessions	17

TABLE 2  
Middle School Study Participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Content</i>
Seth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English</li> <li>• Science</li> </ul>
Alexa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Math</li> <li>• Science</li> </ul>
Lydia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Science</li> <li>• English</li> </ul>
Dennis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social studies</li> <li>• English</li> </ul>
Amy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English</li> <li>• Science</li> </ul>
Derek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English</li> <li>• Social studies</li> </ul>
Lisa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social studies</li> <li>• English</li> </ul>

researchers followed Glaser and Strauss' (1967) inductive category coding procedures, meaning they looked for categories and themes that helped them to conceptualize the data. Next, an outside researcher, without preconceived ideas on the research, was asked to look at the data and confirm or disconfirm the thematic findings. The themes were condensed into the following (1) subject matter (SM), (2) calling to the profession and defining life moment (CALL), (3) ability to relate to the young adolescent and belief that he/she can make a difference in the lives of the adolescent (REL), (4) marketability of the middle school teacher (MARK), and (5) family influence (FAM). Finally, the researchers recoded all interview data and coded the meeting notes and information session observation notes according to the themes. For clarity purposes, the researchers constructed a matrix with thematic categories in which chunks of evidence were placed (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

## **RESULTS**

Each preservice teacher in the study displayed an excitement for and an interest in teaching

middle school. Like many neophytes entering the education profession, they seek lofty and admirable goals such as transmitting excitement for their subject matter to their students and the desire to make a difference in the lives of the young adolescent. More specifically, the students in this study indicate they chose to major in middle school education and ultimately teach middle school because they (1) love the subject(s) they plan to teach, (2) have a calling to the profession or cite one defining life moment that led them to the profession, (3) can relate to young adolescents and believe they can make a difference in their lives, (4) believe there is a need for middle school teachers thus making them more marketable, and (5) are influenced by parents or other family members in the teaching profession. These findings are consistent with the previous research on the topic and with current theory on middle grades education. Table 3 is a visual depiction of the results as they relate to each research question.

### ***Love of the Subject***

The seven preservice teachers in the study discussed their love of the subject areas and all

TABLE 3  
Middle School Study Themes

<i>Question</i>	<i>Associated Theme</i>	<i>Associated Theme</i>	<i>Associated Theme</i>
1. Why do preservice teachers in this group want to become teachers?	Love the subject(s) they plan to teach	Have a calling to the profession	Are influenced by parents/family/friends
2. What influenced this group of preservice teachers to specifically choose the middle school major?	Relate to the young adolescent and can make a difference in their lives	Desire to instill love of subject in middle school students	
3. How do these preservice teachers feel about certification in two content areas?	Makes them more marketable		

expressed the desire to instill this love in future middle school students. In the interview, subject matter was mentioned by all preservice teachers in all four questions asked. In response to interview Question 1, “*What attracted you to the field of education?*” and to Question 2, “*Why do you want to be a middle school teacher as opposed to an elementary or high school teacher?*” six of the preservice teachers responded first and foremost that they love the subject matter they plan to teach. This finding is significant considering the abundance of possible reasons they could have given. Further, these findings support Radcliff and Mandeville’s (2007) research that lists interest in subject area as one of the most frequently reported reasons teachers choose to teach middle school.

During the interview, the preservice teachers were provided the opportunity to speak at length on the topic. In regard to selecting two content areas, they said they liked both subject areas they selected for the program but all discussed having a greater passion for one over the other. When discussing the second subject area, they all mentioned selecting this subject, not because they have a passion for the subject but rather because they dislike the remaining subjects. In other words, they selected their second content area by process of elimination. For example, in the case of Alexa, she has a true passion and love for mathematics but she selected science as her second content area

because she said, “I am not an English person and I am not a history buff.” Similarly, Lisa, who plans to teach science, said in regard to a second content area, “I would probably head more toward English because I am not a math person.”

Beyond a love of the subject, several of the preservice teachers expressed the desire to pass that same passion for the subject matter to middle school students or, conversely, to help students with difficulties they experienced with the subject as young adolescents. For example, regarding Amy’s love-hate relationship with science she said, “I chose science because I have always found it interesting and it was my favorite subject in middle school and once I got to high school I hated it. And as a teacher I hope to keep people loving science.” In her one-on-one meeting with the department chairperson, Amy spoke at length about her love for both science and English, and about the middle school teachers she had in these subjects. She recalled enjoying both subjects in middle school and spoke about how her middle school teachers instilled this passion within her. David, a professional musician making a career change to teaching, had a passion for teaching social studies. He said, “There is so much wrong in the world and education is the key to fixing it. I want to help create citizens who are willing to learn from their past and not repeat the mistakes we have already made.”

In sum, the preservice teachers love the content areas they plan to teach and are eager and excited to pass both knowledge of and excitement for the content on to their students. This love of subject is often based on fervor for the subject from their past experiences. While some of these experiences are based on years of educational or professional experiences, others were based on defining moments.

### ***Calling or Defining Moment***

All of the preservice teachers stated they believe they have a calling to be a teacher, and in several cases they identified one defining moment when they recognized this call to the profession. When asked “*What attracted you to the field of education?*” Amy said, “I always had a passion for teaching. When I was growing up everyone was playing house and I was teaching” and Alexa said, “Ever since I was little I wanted to be a teacher. I even bought an overhead projector when I was 8 years old.” Similarly, Seth said, “I have a talent for teaching and explaining things.” It should be noted that the preservice teachers did not make references to a calling specifically for middle school. The desire for teaching middle school was revealed later in the interview when they were asked why they chose middle school rather than high school or elementary school.

Two preservice teachers described compelling moments in their lives when they experienced epiphanies that led them to the decision to teach. Alexa, a vibrant former theater major, passionately details her epiphany: “I was taking a general education math class and there was a lady in that class that needed my help so I helped her and she really appreciated it and I was like ‘Wow, this is what I should do.’ After that I called my dad in tears and told him I wanted to be a math teacher.” A similarly moving story is the one Amy told: “It was a defining moment when I was 10 years old and I decided to be a teacher. My dad was diagnosed with cancer and I realized life is short and you should do what you want. People have tried to change my mind but I say ‘No, I want

to be happy and I want to be happy teaching.’” In essence, they felt there was a defining moment or calling that led them to teaching. Some defined this moment as a personal experience and others felt they would be great teachers who would relate well to young adolescents.

### ***Relate to the Young Adolescent and Can Make a Difference in Their Lives***

Theoretical and empirical research (Arth, Lounsbury, McEwin, & Swaim, 1995; Lipsitz, 1984, NMSA, 2010) on middle grades education emphasizes the importance of middle grades teachers’ ability to relate to and address the developmental needs of the young adolescent. Other research (Eccles & Midgely, 1989; Eccles, Midgely, & Lord, 1991) addresses the vulnerability of the young adolescent and the importance of middle grades teachers to guide the adolescent toward a healthy trajectory. Middle grades advocates (Darling-Hammond, 2000; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006; NMSA, 2011) maintain there is an undeniable connection between the teacher quality and student success. As early as 1966, Eichhorn, a prominent figure in the middle school movement, was calling for teachers to understand young adolescent development when planning middle school curriculum and instruction. In general, middle school scholars deem it critical that middle school teachers be able to relate to their students and adjust their instruction according to the development of the young adolescent. This emphasis has been a cornerstone of the middle grades movement since its inception.

To that end, it is important to note a significant finding of this study is that this group of preservice teachers wants to teach middle school because they believe they can relate to the young adolescent student and can make a difference in their lives. The data are broken down in two ways. First, the preservice teachers believe they have the ability to relate to

young adolescents because they understand their developmental stages. Second, then because of their ability to relate to this age group the preservice teachers believe, they will be able to affect the lives of the young adolescents they will teach.

Applicable to the theme of relating to the young adolescent, the preservice teachers used words and phrases such as “challenge,” “inspirational,” “like the age group,” “understand them,” and “awkward stage.” Throughout the interview, the preservice teachers said things like, “I really like this age and understand them” and “I am comfortable with them and can help them.” Comments like this one from Amy were typical, “It was an awkward stage for me and because of that I can help them because I made it through.”

Because the preservice teachers feel they can relate to young adolescents, they also believe they can make a difference in their lives and this is what draws them to middle grades. Consistent in the data were words and phrases the preservice teachers used to describe the young adolescent such as “malleable,” “able to influence,” “will listen to me,” “formative years,” and “impressionable.”

The distinct comparison the preservice teachers make between the high school student and the middle school student is noteworthy. It is in this comparison that we see why these students want to teach middle school rather than high school. For example, Dennis referenced the difference between high school and middle school when he said, “I look forward to the challenge to teaching malleable minds rather than trying to teach minds that are already made up about things.” Similarly Lydia said, “With middle school there is that spark and that excitement and I feel like I can be the one to foster that excitement.” The preservice teachers’ memories of their own middle and high school teachers and their experiences as students themselves also influenced them. Amy said, “I really do not want to teach high school because I remember in high school we were awful to our teachers. We had attitudes

and thought we were better than everyone else. When students feel that way you are not helping them and my goal is to make difference in the child’s life.” Derek echoed her sentiments: “High school kids don’t seem like they want to learn. They don’t really want to hear what you have to say. Middle school kids are eager to learn as opposed to high school kids. High school kids have attitudes and think they know everything and don’t really need your help as much.”

Overall, this group of preservice teachers was optimistic about the possibilities of teaching middle school based on the social and cognitive developmental attributes of young adolescents. Students agreed that middle school students are still eager to learn, and they are eager to teach them. Simultaneously, they were also aware of the fact that there were available jobs in teaching the young adolescent in this difficult market.

### **MARKETABILITY**

The interview question that asked about certification in two content areas resulted in comments about financial stability, job security, and marketability. Data suggest there is a perception that (1) being certified to teach two content areas as opposed to one makes the graduate more marketable and (2) because teaching middle school is not “popular” there is a greater chance of getting a job upon graduation.

In regard to certification in two content areas comments like this one from Amy, whose primary interest is in teaching English but suspects that due to the market she will end up teaching science, were typical: “I know that there is more need for science teachers and I will probably be a science teacher and it may help me above someone else because I have a background in English.” Another science teacher, Lydia concurred when she said, “I feel like there is a sense of security in being a science teacher and there are not that many [science teachers] with the economy going down

and not a lot of funding.” In meetings with the chairperson, both Derek and Lisa expressed concerns about the current job market for social studies teachers and appeared hopeful that majoring in middle school with a focus on two content areas would increase their chances of getting a job in this demanding market. Derek specifically said, “I think it [two content areas] makes you more marketable within the middle school sphere.”

In regard to the perceived unpopularity for working with the young adolescent, the preservice teachers believe it is viewed as more favorable to teach elementary or high school thus creating a greater demand for middle school teachers and making them more marketable. Dennis summed up this belief well when he said, “it seems that every person I speak to about wanting to teach the middle school kid expresses horror.” He continued to talk about conversations he has had with people who tried to talk him out of teaching middle school because of a belief that it is “a horrible age.” Alexa’s confidence in getting a job was clear when she said, “I think I can get a job the day I graduate because they need middle school math teachers especially.” And furthermore, during individual meetings with the department chairperson, a unifying theme expressed among social studies majors, whose job prospects were particularly worrisome, was the attraction to certification in two content areas because of the increased job opportunities.

In sum, being marketable in today’s competitive job market is important to the preservice teachers who are continually being reminded in the media and elsewhere of the slowing job market and of the difficulty of teaching the young adolescent. Of note is the fact that the preservice teachers have family and friends in the education field, and despite the poor job market, they remain inspired by these relationships.

### ***Influence of Family and Friends***

It is not surprising that many of the students in the study expressed an interest in teaching

because of influence from family members who either are in the profession or friends who have told the students they would make a good teacher. Derek’s mother runs a day care center and he said he sees “being a teacher as a rewarding job that [he] would not mind going to every day.” Lydia’s two sisters are teachers who she reported have been “pushing me and inspiring me to become a teacher.” Lisa explained, “My mom, grandma, and great grandmother were all teachers so I am following in their footsteps.”

Others reported that although they do not have immediate family members in the profession, they are influenced by family opinions and by the opinions of friends. Seth, for example, explained that his parents did not think “English as a major had enough going for it” so he decided to major in science and become a teacher. Amy, Dennis, and Jared all reported they have friends who have told them they would make great teachers and these opinions have influenced their decision. Thus, family and friends have played an influential role in these students’ decision to follow their calling and become a teacher.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

Before discussing the implications of this research, it is important to discuss its limitations. One limitation is the fact that it is based on students from one university and therefore limited to the demographics of this student body. Further, this study is based on a limited number of students. Having said that, the fact that the numbers were limited offered an opportunity for the researchers to delve into this small group and probe deeper into the information the students offered. We feel this enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomena as to why these students chose to teach middle school. Finally, as with many studies, this research is based on the participants who volunteered to let us interview them. This is a limitation, as we do not have information on the students who did not volunteer. Perhaps

these volunteers differed in their eagerness and excitement about their future teaching.

## ***DISCUSSION***

This study begins to answer the question as to why college students choose to become teachers, and more specifically, why they choose to become middle school teachers. First, findings revealed that this group of students had a desire to teach, which stemmed from their love of the subject matter they were going to teach, a calling to the profession, and parental influence. In particular, these students reported they wanted to become middle school teachers due to the above-mentioned factors, as well as the notion that they can relate to young adolescents and make a difference in their lives. These findings are in line with the study by Radcliffe and Mandeville (2007) as they, too, found middle grades teachers liked the student age and content they would teach.

Revealed in this study is the interesting intersection of teaching the young adolescent within the confines of a subject the teacher has chosen. Perhaps some of these teachers believe these factors make teaching in the middle school the “best of both worlds.” It seems this study reveals that while teacher candidates have a desire to teach students who are eager to learn and are malleable (like younger children), they also want the freedom to teach in a content area in which they are interested. This is different from the elementary school teacher, where the children are malleable, but the teacher instructs children in every subject matter. Moreover, it is different than the high school teacher, wherein the students were perceived as less malleable and already set in their ways. Thus, middle school teaching combines benefits of both elementary and high school teaching.

With regard to a calling to the profession and parental influence, it seems the students in this study have been influenced by their own love of and experiences in education, as well as how others perceive them. Past research

(Kagan, 1992) has reported many teachers are likely to gravitate toward teaching in the same manner in which they themselves were taught. Thus, these students felt passionate about teaching in a subject area due to the fact they had a teacher in the classroom or family that acted as a teaching model or influence. This is of interest to educational researchers as it shows a trend in the cyclical pattern of teaching. Thus, one good experience with a teacher begets another.

Finally, in terms of contributing factors, marketability was a major consideration in how students perceived middle grades education, and the perception they would be able to find jobs. In a slowing economy it is known that teacher layoffs are a real possibility with a resulting loss in compensation. However, middle school teachers who are knowledgeable of and dedicated to the young adolescent are described by school systems as committed to middle level education. This reasoning, along with the idea that certification in two content areas offers more areas within which to teach, helped the teachers in this study to make the decision to teach middle school.

Overall, the data support the conception of teacher career decisions being rooted in a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic variables. The desire to teach, the interest in meeting the needs of young adolescents, and the love of subject are all intrinsic motivators. Marketability, which played a distinct role in most students’ reasoning, is clearly an extrinsic motivator.

Of the three intrinsic motivators (i.e., desire to teach, interest in meeting young adolescents’ needs, and love of subject), only the second is relevant to middle school education. Without this factor, the students would probably be content with a high school position.

The extrinsic factor of marketability, in this study, is particularly relevant because of the perception that a specialization in middle school education would facilitate entry into the profession. This twofold expectation is based on (1) a perceived need for middle school, as opposed to high school teachers, and (2) the

significant benefits of adding a second content area, especially science or mathematics, to a social studies or English certification. It is this combination of interest in meeting the needs of young adolescents along with the perceived marketability of dual-content middle school specialization that set these students on the path to becoming middle school educators.

### ***FUTURE RESEARCH***

This study is a glimpse into why preservice teachers choose to teach middle school. There is much more to be explored. For example, future research could investigate how students at other universities make the decision to enter a middle grades education major. Perhaps students in other parts of the country see teaching differently, specifically in regard to varying economic conditions in different states. Moreover, each of the five findings is significant in its own right and therefore, it would be interesting for future researchers to delve into each of these findings to gain an even deeper perspective on the issues. It may also be useful to develop longitudinal data on teachers' decisions to teach middle school, which may influence school systems' programs for attracting and retaining teachers at this level.

### ***CONCLUSION***

While we know research has indicated that the quality of teachers has the greatest impact on student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), it is important to study why students choose to become teachers. Through unlocking the ideas of preservice teacher choice, teacher educators and researchers may understand better college students and their desired careers. Based on this research, preservice teachers' desire to teach middle school appears to be based on many factors including, their desire to make a difference, love of subject, and the age group. This study is one of the first to explore the reasons why teacher candidates who may have pursued careers teaching

high school have chosen the road of middle grades education, and it begins to shed light on why some preservice teachers love the middle.

### ***APPENDIX A***

1. What attracted you to the field of education?
2. Why do you want to be a middle school teacher as opposed to an elementary or high school teacher?
3. What two subject areas have you chosen and why did you select those?
4. How do you feel about certification in two content areas?

### ***APPENDIX B***

1. What attracted you to the field of education?
- 1b. Was there a defining moment in your life that led you to the decision to become a teacher?
2. Why do you want to be a middle school teacher as opposed to an elementary or high school teacher?
3. What two subject areas have you chosen and why did you select those?
4. How do you feel about certification in two content areas?
- 4b. Does the current job market have any impact on your decision to major in middle school?

### ***REFERENCES***

- Arth, A. E., Lounsbury, J. H., McEwin, C. K., & Swaim, J. H. (1995). *Middle level teachers: Portraits of excellence*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School.
- Brookhart, S. M., & Freeman, D. J. (1992). Characteristics of entering teacher candidates. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 37-60.
- Brown, M. M. (1992). Caribbean first-year teachers' reasons for choosing teaching as a career. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 18, 185-195.

- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(1). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1/>
- Eccles, J. S., & Midgley, C. (1989). Stage-environment fit: Developmentally appropriate classrooms for young adolescents. In C. Ames & R. Ames (Eds.), *Research on motivation in education: Goals and cognitions* (Vol. 3, pp. 139-186). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., & Lord, S. (1991). What are we doing to early adolescents? The impact of educational contexts on early adolescents. *American Journal of Education*, 99, 521-542.
- Eichhorn, D. (1966). *The middle school*. New York, NY: Center for Applied Research in Education.
- Epstein, J., & Mac Iver, D. J. (1990). *Education in the middle grades: Overview of national practices and trends*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Farkas, S., Johnson, J., & Foleno, T. (2000). *A sense of calling: Who teaches and why*. New York, NY: Public Agenda.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1984). *A place called school*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Jarvis, J., & Woodrow, D. (2005). Reasons for choosing a teacher training course. *Research in Education*, 73, 29-35.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Professional growth among pre-service and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 129-169.
- Lipsitz, J. (1984). *Successful schools for young adolescents*. New Brunswick, CT: Transaction Books.
- McEwin, C. K., & Alexander, W. M. (1982). *The status of middle/junior high school teacher education programs: A research report*. Boone, NC: Appalachian State University.
- McEwin, C. K., & Dickinson, T. S. (1995). *The professional preparation of middle grades teachers: Profiles of successful programs*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A source book of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2006). *Breaking ranks in the middle: Strategies for leading middle level reform*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.
- National Middle School Association. (2011). Retrieved from <http://nmsa.org/AboutNMSA/tabid/76/Default.aspx>
- Ohio History Central. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=2690>
- Radcliffe, R. A., & Mandeville, T. F. (2007). Teacher preferences for middle grades: Insight into attracting teacher candidates. *The Clearing House*, 80(6), 261-266.
- Soman, L., & Ochsner, N. (1979). *Using longitudinal data in career counseling*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Secretary, Office of Public Affairs. (2004). *A guide to education and no child left behind*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2007). Motivational factors influencing teaching as a career choice: Development and validation of the FIT-Choice Scale. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 75(3), 167-202.
- Yin, R. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Rev. ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.
- Yong, B. C. S. (1995). Teacher trainees' motives for entering into a teaching career in Brunei Darussalam. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11, 275-280.