

IN THE MIDDLE

Elementary Education Preservice Teachers' Experiences, Efficacy, and Interest in the Education of Young Adolescents

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Given the dearth of research on elementary education majors' experiences in middle level endorsement programs (Anderson, 2009), and the shortage of teachers aspiring to work with young adolescents, this case study examined the topic to provide insight into the experiences of preservice elementary education teachers. Specifically, this study focused on elementary education preservice teachers' perceptions of and experiences in a mandatory middle level education course and its required field experience, and the resulting effects on their interest and efficacy in relation to their preparedness for interacting with young adolescents. Further justifying the need for specific middle level education coursework, the study found preservice teachers in relatively diverse field placements increased feelings of efficacy, though not necessarily interest in working with young adolescents.

Preservice teachers come into teacher education programs with "preconceptions about how the world, and teaching, works" (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 359). When preservice teachers think about "middle school," their initial reaction is often negative, developed through their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975) while attending middle school and subsequent

interactions with young adolescents. This negative stereotype of middle school is one significant barrier to recruiting and retaining (Gootman, 2007; McEwin, Dickinson, & Smith, 2003) effective middle school teachers that are adequately prepared and value working with this age group (Association of Middle Level Education formerly the National Middle

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School Association [NMSA], 2010). Another challenge is the availability of specialized middle level teacher licensure. While 46 states provide for some specific middle level education training, only 28 states and the District of Columbia require middle level licensure (McEwin, 2007), which further aggravates this challenge. Eighteen of the states offer middle level endorsements/content area concentrations (McEwin, 2007), which some argue are insufficient for ensuring adequately prepared faculty for all young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996).

The current literature on middle level teacher preparation primarily focuses on determining the characteristics and qualities of appropriate middle level teacher preparation (Butler, Davies, & Dickinson, 1991; Dickinson & McEwin, 1997; Scales, 1993; Silverman, 1990), the status of middle level licensure as it relates to middle level preparation (Gaskill, 2002; McEwin, 2007), and justifying the need for specialized preparation (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson, et al., 2003; NMSA, 2010; Scales & McEwin, 1994; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996) rather than the examination of such programs (Conklin, 2009). Despite the fact that 18 states currently offer content area endorsements to teach middle school, almost no research exists regarding the nature of endorsement programs and the impact of such programs on the preparation of elementary education majors for teaching middle level students (Anderson, 2009; Conklin, 2007). Therefore, there is limited literature to inform a best practice approach to preparing teachers under these circumstances and how a course on middle school methods influences elementary education majors' decision to work with young adolescents.

This limited extent of research and the shortage of teachers that express a desire to work with young adolescents as a result of either stereotypes about middle school students or based on their own middle school experiences indicate a need to ensure the middle level education coursework for endorse-

ments is as effective as possible to both recruit and prepare effective middle level educators (Gootman, 2007; McEwin, Dickinson et al., 2003). Elementary education majors participating in a required middle level endorsement program do not necessarily choose to enter the field of teaching to work with young adolescents, but rather are obliged to complete preparatory coursework and activities based on university or state requirements. Therefore, important questions become how and which experiences in a middle level course affect or influence elementary education preservice teacher attitudes towards teaching at the middle level. Specifically, the research questions for this study were:

1. What are the primary course-based influences on preservice teachers' thinking about teaching young adolescents?
2. How do the middle level education course experiences influence preservice teachers' feelings of efficacy and interest in working with young adolescents?
3. What factors may influence the preservice teachers' feelings of efficacy and/or interest in working with young adolescents?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The decision to teach is predicated upon a variety of motivational factors. Perceived teaching ability was found to be one of the three most highly rated motivators for pursuing a career in education generally (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Differences between elementary and middle school educators' decisions to teach are tied to perceived teaching ability with a specific age group (Stiegelbauer, 1992). Stiegelbauer found that teachers who selected to teach middle school "felt that they had personal qualities or experience to offer children of this age" (p. 16). New middle school teachers indicated the "challenge of this age group and their own capacities to work with children of this age" (Stiegelbauer, 1992, p. 16) were the most

significant influences on their decision to work with young adolescents.

When elementary education preservice teachers enter a middle level education course for the first time, their belief that they can be effective teachers of young adolescents tends to be weak as evidenced by their selection of an elementary education degree. In states with overlapping licensure, such as the one where this study occurred, preservice teachers could pursue either an elementary or a secondary education degree if interested in teaching young adolescents. Given that elementary education majors tend to have a student-centered approach versus the subject-centered focus of secondary education students, this can have a significant impact on the decision to teach at various grade levels (Book & Freeman, 1986).

Elementary preservice teachers' lack of perceived ability, especially with knowledge of content, and expectancy for success likely influences their low interest in working with young adolescents where they may not view themselves as efficacious teachers. Bandura (1994) defined perceived *self-efficacy* as "people's beliefs about their abilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (¶1). Arguably, elementary education majors' interest in working with young adolescents could be a function of their feelings of self-efficacy to do so. Efficacy expectations, the belief "about whether one can effectively perform the behaviors necessary to produce the outcome" (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 111), also significantly influence an individual's choice to participate in an activity, in this case, selecting an age group to teach.

Efficacy expectations may be controlled by an external or internal locus of control. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) argued "one should expect to succeed to the extent that one feels in control of one's successes and failures" (p. 111). Slavin (2000) noted, the "locus of control can change and depends somewhat on the specific activity or situation" (p. 334). Therefore, it would be reasonable to argue that preservice teachers' feelings of self-efficacy will

vary depending on the grade level, nature of the students in the field, the field experience, other educational experiences, and will also influence interest in teaching at the middle level. McEwin, Dickinson, and Hamilton (2000) found that there is a direct link between the amount and quality of coursework in middle level education courses and levels of teacher self-efficacy in middle grades classrooms. Therefore, efficacy expectations and interest in working with young adolescents should be influenced by middle level education coursework and field experiences.

METHODS

This study was conducted to examine a group of elementary education students' experiences in a middle level education course and its related field experience. An instrumental case study approach was used to address the questions posed because the goal of the research was a "need for general understanding" of the questions at hand, rather than a focus on the case itself (Stake, 1995, p. 3). The goal of the research was to achieve understanding about "how all the parts" of the middle level education course "work together to make a whole" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) within a given context (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

Participants

Two sections of a middle level education course enrolled a total of 38 students, but only 19 consented to participate and completed both the pre- and postsurveys. The 19 participants (18 female, 1 male, 3 African American, 16 Caucasian, all between the ages of 20-25) were elementary education preservice teachers of junior or senior standing enrolled in the required middle level education "block." The majority of these preservice teachers entered the middle level block with minimal experience with young adolescents or middle schools since their own time as middle school students. Five of the 19 participants were purposefully

TABLE 1
Interest in Teaching Middle School, Initially and Postcourse

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Initial Interest</i>	<i>Postinterest</i>	<i>Would Take a Middle School Job</i>
Aliyah	Maybe	Very interested	Yes
Kelly	Maybe	Not at all	No
Sarah	Maybe	Maybe	Possible
Stephanie	Not at all	Maybe	Yes
Jeanne	Interested	Not at all	No

Note: *Pseudonyms are used throughout.

selected for interviews based on observations and the pre- and postsurvey responses to represent the spectrum of experiences (see Table 1). Sarah and Stephanie represent the majority of the preservice teachers in that they had mixed experiences and feelings about working with middle school students over time. Aliyah initially was “maybe” interested, but by the end of the semester, expressed that she was “very interested.” Kelly was initially “maybe” interested, but by the end determined she had no interest in working with middle school students. Jeanne was “interested” in the beginning of the semester, but by the end was “not at all” interested and, like Kelly, was unwilling to accept a middle school teaching position.

Context of the Study

The case in this study consisted of the elementary education preservice teachers enrolled in two sections of the middle level education general methods course. The study was bounded in three ways: a single university, a single course and temporally, within a single semester. The southeastern university where the study took place serves approximately 20,000 students. The college of education offers bachelor’s degrees in elementary, secondary, technology, and special education, as well as in teaching and coaching. Students in each degree program are deemed “highly qualified” as determined by No Child Left Behind requirements. Only the elementary program

requires specific middle level education coursework. Elementary education students participate in a “middle level block” of one general methods course and two middle level literacy courses, during the second semester of their education program. The middle level block is the primary preparation method for elementary education majors and is required for all elementary education students pursuing an elementary K-6 teaching license. There are required content endorsements in two areas for Grades 7 and 8. Students must participate in a 12 hour middle level field experience associated with the block. The field experience consists of classroom observations and four required literacy lessons completed with a focus student.

Nature of the Field Experience. The preservice teachers completed their field experience at the only local middle school serving Grades 7 and 8. This middle school subscribed to many tenets of the middle school philosophy put forward in the Association for Middle Level Education position statement, *This We Believe* (2010). With an average enrollment of 645 students, 65% of students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch. The district primarily services African American (65%) and Caucasian (32%) students. The faculty was relatively inexperienced with 11 of 28 core teachers having fewer than three years of experience. The more experienced faculty often had student teachers assigned to them, eliminating them from being observed by the middle level

education students. Preservice teachers were assigned a content area teacher related to one of the two self-selected endorsement areas for field experience completion. The preservice teachers observed and assisted the cooperating teachers and/or students as they were able. The cooperating teachers infrequently engaged preservice teachers in meaningful classroom activities. Therefore, the majority of the field experience was spent performing observation. The cooperating teacher also assigned the preservice teacher a focus child for completion of literacy-related lessons. Preservice teachers were encouraged to visit their assigned cooperating teacher during two different class periods in a given day to experience any change due to student composition or time of day.

Nature of the College Classroom Experience. No more than 25 students were enrolled in either of the sections of middle level education allowing for meaningful discussion and varied teaching activities. Each section met twice a week for one hour and fifteen minutes. Typical class periods consisted of direct presentation of material with the assistance of PowerPoint, discussion regarding field experiences, and group activities. Students were required to read two texts: *Introduction to Middle School* by Sarah Davis Powell (2011) and *Not Much Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers* by Linda Perlstein (2003). These texts were supplemented with additional resources, as well as a Moodle content management website where students could access course content, communicate with instructors and personally reflect on the field experience, and respond to prompts regarding *Not Much Just Chillin'* (NMJC).

Data Sources

Varied types of data were collected to provide an understanding of the nature of the middle level education course specifically focusing on the impact of the field experience on elementary education preservice teachers. Data collected included: (a) pre- and postsurveys regarding their expectations and experi-

ences in the middle level education course, (b) field experience observations, (c) field experience blogs collected throughout the course, (d) interview, and (e) related assignment artifacts.

Pre- and Postsurveys. Students in the middle level education course were asked to complete two open-ended surveys. The first survey was completed at the beginning of the field experience to determine attitudes toward working with young adolescents and grade level preferences. A second, follow-up survey was administered upon completion of the field experience to determine if any changes in attitudes or grade preference occurred. In addition, preservice teachers wrote about their positive and negative experiences, feelings of preparation to teach young adolescents, and the major influences on their thinking. These data were collected from all 19 participants and were used to identify the five participants selected for interviews.

Field Experience Blogs. Each preservice teacher was required to complete a blog about each of their 12 one-hour experiences in the field. In this blog, preservice teachers documented what was seen and heard during the field experience.

Field Experience Observations. All participant preservice teachers were observed in the field at least once. The purpose of the observations was to provide contextual understanding of preservice teachers' experiences in the field and the role those experiences played in shaping student beliefs regarding working with young adolescents. Each observation lasted 20-30 minutes.

Interviews. Five of the 19 preservice teachers were purposefully selected (Merriam, 1998) to complete individual semistructured interviews, to reflect stratified experiences and represent subgroups to facilitate comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interviews were shaped and influenced by the pre- and postsurveys, field observations, and assignment artifacts collected from each student. Interviews helped to provide greater insight and detail for each data source. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes each. Questions

focused on preservice teachers' experiences in the course, personal factors that influenced their experience, and clarification of experiences as reported in their surveys, blogs, and observations.

Data Analysis

Data from each source were collected, converted into text and imported into the NVivo 8 qualitative data analysis software. By using matrices to facilitate comparability (Miles & Huberman, 1994), pre- and postsurveys were analyzed to examine change over time, focusing on efficacy and interest in working with young adolescents. The matrices were then modified into checklist matrices to examine change over time with regard to efficacy, interest in working with young adolescents and grade level preferences from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. This initial analysis facilitated the selection of the five participants for follow-up interviews. Interviews were transcribed and checked against the audio recording for accuracy.

The interviews, observations, blogs, and the open-ended questions from the postsurveys were initially open-coded based on the research questions, conceptual framework, and the various aspects of the middle level education experience. For example, we created code categories for efficacy and interest in working with young adolescents and positive and negative field experiences. From the initial coding, additional codes and patterns were identified and added to the coding framework. A constant comparison of the data, and iterative coding to identify "tentative categories" yielded categories that were then "compared to each other and to other instances" (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). Initial categories of positive, negative, and neutral field experiences were generated across data sources (i.e., observations, class discussions, student blogs, and interviews). From this initial broad data categorization, we were able then to identify additional subcategories, such as issues of middle school student apathy, and issues with regard to preservice

teacher participation in the field. We were able to identify the essential themes that characterized the preservice teachers' experiences, and how these experiences influenced their efficacy and interest in working with young adolescents.

Trustworthiness. To further promote trustworthiness and internal validity, multiple sources of data were used to triangulate the findings (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Each data source helped to confirm beliefs and understandings. The five interviewees, as representative of the spectrum of experiences, are identified by pseudonyms, while other preservice teachers are not. In addition, the following will present the researchers' positionality to further address issues of trustworthiness.

Researchers' Positionality. Three researchers were involved with this study. Two of the three researchers were the instructors for the middle level education course and the third researcher served as a methodologist. The primary researcher, a former middle school teacher, had taught middle school for six years at a high poverty, high-performing school in California. Beginning her teaching career she had not initially been interested in working in middle schools and did not necessarily have field experiences that provided opportunities to work with young adolescents. The researcher's previous professional and personal experiences when determining whether to work in middle or high school created a lens through which her evaluation of the field experience and interaction with the preservice teachers would be viewed.

The primary researcher's relationship with the preservice teachers was "ongoing and evolving" (Berg, 2007). Given her role as primary researcher as well as instructor, the researcher had to break certain research norms, such as performing unobtrusive observation, in order to address the issues and concerns of the preservice teachers. In addition, the students often wanted to discuss or question what they were seeing in the classroom. As the students' instructor, the researcher could not, in good conscience, ignore their comments or inqui-

ries. Therefore, during the observations, the researcher often interacted with the students. The researcher's presence and participation may have had an impact on the students' opinions and beliefs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings are based on all data sources, with emphasis placed on data gathered from the follow-up interviews with the purpose sample of five especially selected preservice teachers. The findings and discussion are organized around the three research questions. First, the primary course-based influence on preservice teachers' thinking are presented. Second, the influence of the middle level education course experiences, and contributing factors, on feelings of efficacy and interest in working with young adolescents are addressed.

Course-Based Influences on Preservice Teachers' Thinking

The primary course-based influences on the preservice teachers' thinking about teaching young adolescents included the field experience and class discussions. Thirteen of the 19 preservice teachers indicated that class instruction and discussions influenced their thinking about young adolescents most. One preservice teacher stated,

I think the class discussions, stories, and power points [*sic*] had the most impact on my learning about young adolescents. I learn better by reading power points [*sic*] and then talking about how they can be applied in real life and I feel like we did this a lot.

Reflecting Caskey's (2003) findings on the importance of field experiences, 12 of the 19 preservice teachers also indicated that the field experience was one of the most significant influences on their learning and thoughts about working with young adolescents. A preservice teacher stated, "I enjoyed being able to work with this age group of students. If I had not

done the field experience I would have never been open to teaching middle school students." For eight of these preservice teachers both the field and class discussions were influential to their thinking; it was the ability to connect what they were learning to what they were seeing in the school that was paramount to their thinking. Sarah's statement about the most influential experiences expressed the feelings of the others. She said, "I think that the discussions and the field experience as far as observing the students had the most impact. Talking about them in class and then seeing what we were talking about in the classroom was great because it showed that it was definitely real."

Secondarily, several students mentioned two other course experiences that had significant influence on their thinking about young adolescents. The first was the reading of *Not Much Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers* (NMJC, Perlstein, 2003). In a postsurvey, one preservice teacher stated, "The most helpful [experience] would be NMJC because it gave sample situations for the information being portrayed in the [PowerPoint presentations] and discussions." Aliyah felt that reading NMJC was helpful because it allowed her to connect what she was learning with what she saw in the field. She said in her interview,

The NMJC book [had a strong influence] because I had no idea, well I knew because I have gone through middle school, but I didn't know like all middle schoolers go through some type of things that went on in NMJC, like the physical appearance, the whole sexual maturity thing, all that. Because a lot of stuff from that book you can see in the field experience.

Another experience that was mentioned as significant in regard to thinking about young adolescents was watching clips of the movie *Thirteen* (Bevan, Chasin, Fellner, Hunter, & Hardwick, 2003). Sarah stated, "The *Thirteen* project was great to me. I enjoyed analyzing the movie and relating it to class discussion. It was an extreme example of students, but it was very

insightful about the outside impacts on students now days.” For another preservice teacher, clearly the movie was meaningful, but showed a side of middle school students the she did not want to have to deal with. She stated,

Seeing *Thirteen* totally turned me off. To me, part of the beauty of teaching children is watching how joyful and carefree their personalities are. Middle schoolers have already entered the stage of life in which they are very stressed out about a multitude of things such as: their social lives, their images, their grades, and their futures.

Each of the influences, that is field experience, class discussions, reading NMJC, and watching *Thirteen* (2003), seemed to make the reality of the young adolescent become clearer for the preservice teachers. The nature of these experiences and the confrontation with the unique challenges of working with young adolescents had significant influences on the preservice teachers’ efficacy and interest in working with young adolescents in the future.

Feelings of Efficacy in Working With Young Adolescents: An Overview

Despite some of the complaints regarding the field, 15 of the 19 preservice teachers in the postsurvey indicated that they felt more prepared to work with young adolescents, but to widely varying degrees, much like Anderson (2009) found in his study. A brief overview of the five focus participant experiences will be followed with a more deconstructed discussion of the experiences of the preservice teachers.

Aliyah achieved the highest level of efficacy expectations of all the preservice teachers. The semester following the middle level block, preservice teachers have to select the age group with which they want to complete their student teaching internship. She only selected middle school. She explained her preference as follows,

because when I worked with them, working with them, there’s a lot of things to take into

consideration and I feel like you can offer a child a lot in middle level ... they have so many things that they have to deal with besides just actual classroom work. The teacher has to have, support; you have to create rapport and stuff like that and so yeah I mean I really enjoy working with them because like I said they go through a lot of different stages in their life and lot of different things.

Several components of her experience were unique. First, she worked with the most experienced cooperating teacher of the group, and one that has traditionally been very supportive of preservice teachers. Second, she was able to experience success in terms of dealing with student behavior and academics. During a researcher observation, the cooperating teacher had to leave the classroom to help break up a fight in the hallway, leaving the researcher and Aliyah alone in the classroom. Once the teacher left, the entire class of students stood up to move towards the door, but the researcher and Aliyah were able to quickly get the students to return to their seats and maintain classroom order. In discussions with the researcher, Aliyah indicated her surprise in her and the researcher’s ability to maintain such control, which we would argue increased her feelings of efficacy in the middle school classroom. She also had very successful experiences with her focus child, again providing her with evidence that she was capable of working effectively with young adolescents.

Sarah and Kelly indicated feeling only slightly more prepared to work with young adolescents. Stephanie, based on researcher observation, worked with an ineffective cooperating teacher, yet was not as discouraged by the field experience as Sarah and Kelly. In general, Sarah and Kelly did not have much opportunity to interact with the students during their field experience, which may have hindered the preservice teachers’ growth. Stephanie had more opportunities to interact with students on a personal level, but her cooperating teacher demonstrated poor classroom management and teaching skill, limiting her

opportunity to observe or participate in effective instructional experiences.

Jeanne represented the opposite end of the spectrum from Aliyah. At the beginning of the semester, she was interested in teaching Grades 3 and 4, with only some interest in working with middle school students. She expressed a significant amount of fear about entering the field experience, stating "I feel like they are going to eat me alive." Her fears came to fruition in the field experience with her negative encounters, including overt discussions of extreme sexual behavior amongst the students, sexualization of herself and the observation of the sexualization of her peers, and a seemingly unprovoked confrontation with a student at the end of the experience. Though she felt like she learned much in the field, and felt slightly more prepared to teach at the middle level, she expressed no interest in working with this age group, feeling that she was both incapable and unwilling to deal with the challenges that face young adolescents.

Sources of Efficacy

General sources of improved efficacy and challenges to increasing elementary education preservice educators' efficacy with working with young adolescents were identified, stemming from the field experience and course discussions. Sources of increased efficacy included a greater understanding of the unique developmental characteristics of young adolescents, positive interactions with students, and positive observational experiences with cooperating teachers. The challenges primarily consisted of negative experiences with students and cooperating teachers.

Increased Developmental Understanding of Young Adolescents. Preservice teachers indicated that as a result of the course, they had a better understanding of young adolescents than they did prior to the course, with four of them specifically addressing how a greater understanding of adolescent development helped them to feel more prepared to work with this age group. One preservice teacher

wrote in her postsurvey, "I definitely feel better prepared to deal with young adolescents after this course, because I have learned about their development and seen evidence of how it affects them while I was working in the field." Another preservice teacher stated, "I guess just the experience kind of more knowing what to expect makes me feel more like I am more prepared than I was before." This was affirmed by another preservice teacher in her postsurvey who stated, "I feel more prepared to know what comes with teaching adolescents, such as the changes they are going through that affects their school work." The responses of the preservice teachers support previous literature that argues that a strong understanding of young adolescent characteristics and development are key components to effective middle level teacher education (Dickinson & McEwin, 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson et al., 2003).

Positive Student Interactions. Positive student interactions included general feelings of relating and working with the students to more specific individual interactions with focus students. Stephanie stated "I learned that I have a way of relating to students of this age while still maintaining an authoritative role." Another preservice teacher stated "I am better with young adolescents that I thought I would be. This age interests me now more than ever." Aliyah described a significant growing experience as a result of her positive interactions with her focus student,

Having to actually take time out with a student to find out his or her weaknesses or strong points was the most positive thing to me. It was a positive moment to me because I was able to find her weakness, work on it with her, and improve it. Actually seeing her learn and comprehend what I was telling her really made me feel proud.

Her feelings of success with this student increased her feelings of efficacy and thereby increased her interest in working with this age group. Another student specifically explained that "Working with my focus child was a great

experience. He proved the saying “Don’t judge a book by its cover” because he looked like a big, tough guy on the outside, but he acted like a sweet young boy who was willing to do anything with my lessons that I needed him to.” Seeing this young adolescent as approachable, increased her feelings of comfort with young adolescents.

Positive Teacher Interactions. Several preservice teachers indicated that positive interactions or observations of cooperating teachers increased their perceived feelings of preparation for working with young adolescents. Seeing effective teaching promoted feelings of efficacy in one preservice teacher who stated she felt “more prepared because, from my teacher, I saw different ways to control the classroom and how to relate to the students.” Another preservice teacher stated the cooperating teacher, “really let me get involved with working with the students when they had questions,” making her feel more effective in the classroom.

Challenges to Efficacy and Feelings of Preparation

Despite survey responses that indicated feelings of greater preparation, four of the 19 preservice teachers in particular still did not feel capable of dealing with the challenges of this unique age group. In addition, others revealed significant doubts about their capabilities in working with young adolescents. Challenges to efficacy came from student behavior, inadequate time or experiences working with young adolescents, and ineffective cooperating teachers.

Student Behavior. Student behavior was a significant challenge for many of the preservice teachers. Behavioral issues included acting out (e.g., experiences with sexual conversations and behavior) and student apathy. One preservice teacher felt that she did not know how to handle experiences in the field. Another also felt uncomfortable with the behavior of the students, judging it as inappropriate and not knowing how to address it.

Stephanie stated in her interview, “I guess I was just uncomfortable. I really didn’t know how to handle certain situations.” Jeanne added, “Like I was raised in a really strict family, and all that kind of stuff. And these kids are just crazy, they say cuss words in class, they get up and walk around, they get physical with each other. I just can’t handle that.” She felt unable to address behavioral issues in the classroom while a different preservice teacher stated she had “a seventh grade boy tell [her] ‘work it girl,’ as [she] was leaving. I was shocked that kids would say things like that to adults.” She followed that, as a result, she had no interest at all in working with young adolescents. She stated “I feel that I am out of the loop with middle schoolers because times have changed and [I] am just not comfortable teaching these [*sic*] age [of] students.”

Apathy. Student apathy also had an impact on participant interest and efficacy for working with young adolescents. It is well-reported in the literature that early adolescence is characterized by a drop in motivation and decreased academic performance (Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995) and seeing this demonstrated in the field influenced the participants’ experiences. Sarah stated,

If you could keep them interested I think they would be a lot of fun to teach just because you can do so much with them, but, it is just keeping them interested. Because I know when I was their age, I wasn’t that interested either. I had other things on my mind. It is just looking at it now, you are just like wow, if you could really get them, it could be a lot of fun.

However, she did not feel like she was capable of gaining and maintaining their interest, demonstrating a lack of self-efficacy. Another preservice teacher stated, “The students did not have the slightest interest in learning or doing well in school.” During an observation, Jeanne said “I don’t remember feeling so unmotivated to do anything,” making a comparison between herself and the students she was observing. The preservice

teachers did not feel that they could enact a change to this apathy. Both attributed the student apathy to the students rather than the teachers, thereby placing the locus of control outside of themselves in their future roles as teachers.

In both areas of student behavior, the preservice teachers determined that the behavioral challenges observed or experienced were beyond their control. The preservice teachers did not feel that through their teaching or interpersonal skills, they could successfully address such behavior. This external locus of control thereby reinforced a low sense of efficacy.

A Lack of Opportunity to Work With Students to Gain More Direct Experience.

Unlike in elementary education classrooms, the preservice teachers often had fewer significant opportunities to work with students in the field, resulting in a lower degree of comfort with working with young adolescents. Sarah indicated her feelings of comfort with this age group were about the same, or only slightly improved from the beginning of the semester. She stated, "other than my focus child, I didn't really do a whole lot with the other students." Her cooperating teacher, like some others, did not engage her in helping in the classroom, a problem more notable in middle level than elementary level field experiences that occurred as a part of this program. Without significant experiences and cooperating teacher support, the preservice teachers were unable to gain the prerequisite skills to increase their feelings of efficacy with young adolescents.

Ineffective Cooperating Teachers: The Problem of Enactment. Not surprising, the perceived quality of the cooperating teacher played a role in how preservice teachers construed their own preparation to teach young adolescents. Ideally, the field would be a bridge between course content and its practical application. However, preservice teachers indicated a general concern with the disconnect between best practices being learned in the college classroom and those observed in the field. The preservice teachers were given an assignment to interview their cooperating

teacher about a wide variety of teaching issues. Both Sarah and Stephanie indicated that their cooperating teachers could provide the "right" answer, but they were not enacting those same beliefs or skills in the classroom, resulting in this disconnection and demonstrating the challenge of enactment (Hammerness et al., 2005; Kennedy, 1999). In this field school, approximately one third of the teachers had fewer than three years' teaching experience and many of the more experienced teachers could not be observed because student teachers were assigned to them. Stephanie said "It just felt like my whole practicum experience didn't really teach me anything because everything that I was seeing in the field was contradicting what I was learning in the classroom." Her cooperating teacher was in his first year. As a result she stated, "I didn't feel like I knew how to handle [working with the students]." She observed students cheating, and even tried to intervene, but the cooperating teacher did not address the issue, and left her feeling unsure about how to deal with specific challenges of teaching. Sarah and Kelly, who actually observed the same teacher, also indicated that this was an issue in their observations. Researcher observations confirmed Sarah and Kelly's concerns. When asked, Jeanne noted the same issue. Without models of effective teaching, it is particularly challenging for preservice teachers to increase their personal efficacy expectations for working with young adolescents.

Grade Level Preferences and Interest in Working with Young Adolescents

Overall, six of the 19 preservice teachers had no interest in teaching middle school at the end of the semester, with four, including Jeanne and Kelly, indicating less interest than when the semester began. Interestingly, although the preservice teachers indicated their interest in teaching at the middle level increased, grade level preferences, and even interest in working with this age group did not change for most. Only three indicated that they

were very interested in working at the middle school level at the end of the semester, with Aliyah being one of the three, and the two being very interested in working with middle schoolers at the outset of the course. It is likely participants' lack of interest in teaching middle school and their perceived lack of efficacy to do so resulted in their attitudes and beliefs changing little. The one participant who had a significant increase in interest in working with middle school students, Aliyah, worked with a particularly talented middle school teacher, which likely affected her increased efficacy for working with this age group.

Grade Level Preference. For five of the preservice teachers, grade level preferences remained static. For six of the preservice teachers, their grade level preference changed moving upward, but not beyond fifth grade. Of those that indicated an initial interest in teaching Grades 6, 7, or 8, three of the preservice teachers changed their grade level preference to omit interest in working with middle level students. Though they wanted to work with older students who were more independent, middle school was not the preferred age group. Still, despite the fact that only five of the preservice teachers were interested in working with young adolescents at the end of the course, only 2 of the 19 preservice teachers indicated that they absolutely would not accept a position as a middle level teacher, now that they felt more prepared to teach at that level.

Attribution of Interest. The preservice teachers attributed their affirmative interest in working with young adolescents to several sources. First, some identified the ability to do more with young adolescents, including communicate on a more adult level, made working with this age group more appealing. Anderson (2009) found that the ability of middle level students to understand and/or express complex ideas positively influenced preservice teacher interest in working with young adolescents. Stephanie found this to be true. She stated,

I think I like the level of communication you can have with them, rather than the younger kindergarten, first graders. You know there is

only so much you can really talk to them and get on their level because they are so young. But with the [seventh] and [eighth] graders, I mean I think they understand you a little bit better and you understand them a little bit better.

Preservice teachers attributed their interest to changes in their understanding of young adolescents and the challenge that they present. Aliyah and one of the two participants that indicated interest in middle school both pre and postexperience found that they liked the challenge of this age group, echoing the research by Stiegelbauer (1992) and Anderson (2009). Aliyah stated she liked the fact that, "No child will be the same. No day will be the same. Every day will be something different. I am mad, and 5 minutes later I am happy." Similarly, the other participant stated that middle school students "are challenging individuals who bring something new to the table every day." The other participant who indicated interest in teaching middle school both pre and postexperience attributed her interest to her desire to teach mathematics. She identified as a "mathematics teacher" and wanted to teach middle school to achieve this goal, and therefore is more similar to a secondary education teacher in being more subject centered (Book & Freeman, 1986).

The two participants who determined they no longer were interested in teaching middle school attributed the change in their thinking to the field experience, which elucidated several challenges to working with middle school students. Student behavior, apathy, and poor cooperating teachers all contributed to their diminished interest in working with young adolescents.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the fundamental goal of middle level teacher preparation is to develop preservice teachers "who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so" (NMSA, 2010, p. 15), it is important to ensure that those

teachers licensed to work with young adolescents are appropriately prepared and interested in working with this age group. Despite mixed feelings about the field experience, the majority of participants felt it was useful. At minimum, the preservice teachers perceived that they were more prepared, even though they were not more interested, to work with this age group than they were prior to participating in the middle level education course. A sense of efficacy to teach young adolescents developed in some cases despite the fact that several preservice teachers felt that their cooperating teachers were better examples of what not to do, than what to do. This supports the idea that field experiences can be beneficial, even if they are not ideal. Regardless, some of the experiences that were shocking and/or disconcerting need to be addressed in the middle level education course prior to preservice teachers being sent out to the field to avoid negatively influencing their self-efficacy in working with young adolescents. Although some topics (e.g., sexualization) were addressed by the instructors in this course, students still felt uncomfortable. It is possible that preservice teachers need more stringent warnings and additional strategies for dealing with unwanted attention or uncomfortable experiences.

This study found that certain experiences had more influence than others on preservice teachers thinking about teaching at the middle level. The field experience followed by discussions in class had the greatest influence on students' perceptions of middle level education. This finding supports the call by organizations such as Association of Middle Level Education (NMSA, 2006) and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (National Forum, 2002) for field experiences to be included in teacher preparation programs, both early and throughout teacher education programs. Although experiences on school sites apparently had the most significant role in the students' perceptions of working with middle school students, it is important to note the

influence was interrelated with class discussion and content.

Finally, the data from the follow-up interviews indicate that only the student with the very experienced teacher had a positive field experience. The other four cooperating teachers had less than one full year of teaching experience. Although this is a limitation of this research, it is also a limitation of field experiences overall. It is common for there to be significantly larger numbers of preservice teachers who need supervision than there are placements that would be characterized as high quality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

Additional research, both quantitative and qualitative, on the influence of middle level experiences for elementary education majors needs to be conducted to provide a greater research base. Given that 18 states offer only endorsement certification for teaching at the middle level (McEwin, 2007), this research would be beneficial. Although the endorsement preparation program is a reality in several states it may not be the best model for preparing middle grades teachers (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Therefore, it is imperative that best practices for such programs be determined in order to better inform middle level teacher preparation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

It is important for preservice teachers to have high-quality teaching models during their field experiences. The reality is that given the number of students in an education program in a community with only one local middle school, there likely will not be enough teachers to adequately model "best practices." Therefore, alternative field experience models are needed. In addition, given the significant role of the field experience in influencing the elementary education majors' understanding of young adolescents, field experience and field experi-

ence quality needs to be a primary focus in any program intending to prepare elementary education majors to work with middle grades students.

Recruitment and retention of middle school teachers is also a concern at the university in this study specifically, and in the nation in general (Theriot, Alcala, & Denson, 2004). Gootman (2007) wrote that in New York, there is a higher attrition rate for middle level educators than for educators at other levels. She also found that in Philadelphia, a larger percentage of middle level teachers quit in their first year, compared to their peers. This is likely an issue nationwide. Responding to the concern for retaining teachers it would be wise to better train and prepare teachers to work with this age group as well as to provide opportunities for preservice teachers to determine if middle school is the appropriate place for them as teachers. This study supports the idea that middle level experiences are beneficial for achieving this end, even for students who may not be initially interested in teaching young adolescents. Experiences at the middle level may help candidates feel more prepared; but at the same time, this study indicates that preservice teachers who have such preparation may not necessarily become more interested in working with young adolescents even though this is recommended practice for middle level teacher preparation programs (NMSA, 2010). This study also demonstrates a need for more specialized middle school teacher preparation beyond what is currently possible in a single semester to ensure that those teaching middle school are both interested and prepared to do so (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010).

As a result of this study, the instructors for the middle grades education course implemented an alternative model for field experience to ameliorate some of the negative aspects of preservice students' on-site experiences, such as a noncooperative or poor cooperating teacher. The following semester students were assigned to a teaching team and required to observe all members of the team instead of a single teacher. This provided more

opportunity to observe multiple teaching styles and gauge their effectiveness. In addition, students were provided with several focused observation activities that could be performed during the observations to better direct their learning and make the experiences more meaningful. Although there are shortcomings in any program that seeks to prepare effective middle level teachers helping to ensure that field experiences are truly representative of what is required to teach young adolescents effectively may help address the limitation of recruitment and retention.

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