

IN SEARCH OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER Navigating Research, Reality, and Mission

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The Middle Level Program at California State University San Marcos is the only middle level teacher credential program in the state of California. The program is based on a set of goals and philosophy of middle grades education, recognizing the developmental needs of young adolescents in Grades 5 through 9, and the socially equitable experience of the whole student in pursuit of academic excellence. In this article we discuss the California credentialing policies and realities that significantly influence our practices. We also describe our program and 3 vital tools we use to navigate these realities and challenges. Indeed, our program is founded upon the theoretical framework and principles embedded in these tools, and they have helped us get through tough times and confront challenges. We are able to maintain the integrity of the program and continue to collaboratively prepare thoughtful educators and advance professional practices.

Middle school teacher education is situated in a nexus of research, realities of state policies and adolescent needs, and institutional values. Each of these elements and the interactions among them provide a field of possibilities where particular practices and principles are fruitful for effectively preparing preservice teachers to teach young adolescents. However, while these elements can support and inform each other, they are not always well aligned in terms of their philosophical expectancies as to what makes a good middle school teacher. In

fact, at times, they represent competing philosophies. Therefore, teacher educators find it necessary to navigate policy mandates, reality, and institutional mission to provide the best possible learning experience for preservice middle school teachers.

The Middle Level Teacher Education Program at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) is the only teacher preparation program in the state of California geared specifically for teachers of young adolescents. The program is based on a set of goals and phi-

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losophy of middle grades education, recognizing the developmental needs of students in grades five through nine. A key belief pertains to cultural characteristics for successful middle schools, including a challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant curriculum; educators who value young adolescents and are well-prepared to teach them; organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships; and an inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive school environment (National Middle School Association, 2010b).

In this article, we first present the theoretical framework underlying the design of our Middle Level Teacher Education Program and our practices in coursework and clinical practice. To help readers understand the California context of middle level teacher education, we discuss the complexity in credentialing of California middle grade teachers and other realities and challenges. We then turn to a description of our program and highlight three tools we use to navigate the nexus of realities and challenges and continue to produce quality middle grade teachers. The theoretical framework is integrated in all aspects of our program.

OUR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The principles upon which our program was founded 20 years ago are still operational today. At CSUSM, the middle level and teacher education reform movements in the context of our local schools informed the development of our middle level teacher education program. These reform movements, along with multicultural education and research on teacher education provide the theoretical framework that has withstood the winds of change, while also allowing us the flexibility to evolve as necessary.

Middle level reform has been guided by scholarly research and the principles outlined in a number of private and government sponsored documents. The late 1980s publication of *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform*

for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools (Middle Grade Task Force, 1987) and *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) set the agenda for middle level reform. *Turning Points* provided the most succinct statement of principles in its eight recommendations for middle level education. The elaboration and implementation of these ideologies was a major purpose of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), established in 1973. In *This We Believe* (1982), NMSA outlined the essential characteristics of a “true” middle school.

Simultaneous with the issuance of these middle level documents, the preparation of the nation's teachers was also receiving attention from reformers. Reports of the Holmes Group (1986), the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986), and the Center for Educational Renewal (Goodlad, 1990) urged a reconception of teaching and teacher education. Reinventing teacher education programs became a concern not only of colleges of education but of university administrations (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1992; The Renaissance Group, 1989).

The confluence of the reform movements in middle schooling and teacher education is also reflected in reform reports (Alexander & McEwin, 1988), research (Scales, 1992) and professional standards documents (NMSA, 1991; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1992). Scales' (1992) research for the Center for Early Adolescence, *Windows of Opportunity* summarized middle level teachers' recommendations to improve teacher education programs for middle level teaching.

Recent research on teacher education also informs our theoretical framework. First of all, research on the changing demographics in American schools has revealed a need for teachers who ensure all students, especially students who struggle to learn, achieve academic success. Teachers are expected to teach rigorous subject matter to diverse students who

learn in different ways (Howard & Aleman, 2008). In addition, many teacher educators (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Greene, 1988) urge teachers to prepare to be more than technicians who will then be able to go beyond school boundaries, challenge the taken-for-granted, and act on their beliefs and commitments.

Although it is a challenge for teacher education programs to prepare high-quality teachers, researchers and teacher educators have identified a few guidelines. For example, Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (2006) studied characteristics of seven “exemplary” teacher education programs. While programs had distinctive approaches to preparing qualified teachers, they shared many common features:

- A common, clear vision of good teaching permeates all coursework and clinical experiences.
- Well-defined standards of practices and performance are used to guide and evaluate coursework and clinical work.
- Curriculum is grounded in knowledge of child and adolescent development, learning, social contexts, and subject matter pedagogy, taught in the context of practice.
- Extended clinical experiences are carefully developed to support the ideas and practices presented in simultaneous, closely interwoven coursework.
- Explicit strategies help students (1) confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning and students and (2) learn about the experiences of people different from themselves.
- Strong relationships, common knowledge, and shared beliefs link school- and university-based faculty.
- Case study methods, teacher research, performance assessments, and portfolio evaluation apply learning to real problems of practice (p. 41).

Even with these features in place to support teacher candidates’ growth, it takes time for them to develop the art and craft of teaching, in particular, collectively with teacher peers.

Therefore, it is important to help preservice teachers see the credential program as one stage of a long-term process of becoming an expert teacher.

Finally, universities cannot and should not operate in vacuums. A critical informant of the effective preparation of classroom teachers is the local school context. We know that we learn from the situations in which we live and work, from the “wisdom of practice.” In southern California, we live and work in a multilingual, multicultural community that provides us with unparalleled opportunities as we prepare teachers for the cultural and linguistic diversity they will encounter in middle level schools. This also resonated with our own value of social justice. So that even within a more homogenous setting, we might also promote a multicultural/ multilingual education for teachers because central to any educational philosophy is social justice and that is ultimately what we are aiming for—whatever our situation. One other facet of the local context that influenced our program was the mission statement of our College of Education to “collaboratively transform public education by preparing thoughtful educators and advancing professional practices ... through our commitment to diversity, educational equity, and social justice.” It was our local context that ultimately inspired the College of Education¹ to make multicultural education a central focus of all our programs and determine that all credential candidates would graduate with the CLAD (Cross-cultural Language and Academic Development) competencies, now updated to CTEL (California Teachers of English Learners).

Therefore the theoretical framework that has informed our program can best be summarized by the principles presented in Table 1.

Obviously circumstances have changed in 20 years. When we developed the program, the state of California had adopted licensure for middle level educators, and that licensure no longer exists. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards;

TABLE 1
Theoretical Framework

Middle level reform	1. Create small communities for learning; 2. Teach a core academic program; 3. Ensure success for all students through flexibility in arranging instructional time, adequate resources for teachers, and the elimination of tracking by achievement level; 4. Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions; 5. Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents; 6. Improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents; 7. Re-engage families in the education of young adolescents; and 8. Connect schools with communities.
Teacher education reform	1. Form partnerships and encourage collaboration between schools and universities; 2. Set high standards for entry into teaching, including academic preparation; 3. Model exemplary practice in teacher education programs; 4. Provide career long professional development opportunities for teachers; 5. Establish and promote professional standards for teachers; 6. Provide differentiated roles for teachers; 7. Empower teachers to be proactive and make change in their environments; and 8. View teaching as a moral endeavor.
Middle level teacher education reform	1. Offer earlier, lengthier and more varied (by setting, building configuration and ethnicity) field experiences and student teaching with mentors selected for their expertise not their availability; 2. Cover a greater variety of teaching and assessment techniques; 3. Include more curriculum on young adolescents' social, physical, cognitive and emotional development; 4. Provide more in-depth coverage of classroom management strategies that respond to young adolescents developmental characteristics and needs; and 5. Emphasize academic subject content more deeply.
Multicultural education	1. Promote intergroup harmony; 2. Target social justice; 3. Empower students and their caretakers; 4. Develop a multicultural perspective: viewing issues from multiple perspectives; and 5. Explicitly prepare teachers for cultural and linguistic diversity.

California credentialing standards; as well as changing educational trends such as service learning, various forms of assessment, and the use of technology in the classroom all have had an impact on the development of our program. Because it was founded on a solid theoretical foundation with a sound research base, we have been able to adapt our practices based on our principles. Therefore we have been able to maintain several distinguishing features:

1. collaborative planning and teaching by an interdisciplinary team of teacher educators (a cohort of faculty). The instructional team consists of five tenure track professors and one teacher-in-residence at the college;

2. thematic instruction, integrated curriculum, and joint assignments around the overall theme of social justice and democratic education;
3. joint assessments of some student work, (in the beginning this included a portfolio);
4. service learning coursework to provide the knowledge, skills, and commitment our candidates need to engage young adolescents in meaningful curriculum-based service;
5. all coursework conducted on site at a middle school;
6. selection of a small number of field experience sites through an application process along with a commitment that all

- credential candidates will experience multilingual and multicultural classrooms;
7. shared supervision and evaluation of student teachers by a team member and a designated school site teacher (“on-site liaison”);
 8. student participation in numerous professional development activities in professional organizations and conferences; and
 9. concerted efforts to foster team support and advocacy for the students.

The combination of all these features and our commitment to enacting them in an authentic, purposeful manner have resulted in a program that we find consistent with a vision of restructured middle level teacher education.

In the following, we will provide a detailed description of our program in relation to the above theoretical framework. We will also discuss three navigational tools that we employ to address the implications of the California credentialing policies and other realities of middle level teacher education, as we search for the middle level teacher. These tools help us navigate through rough times (e.g., budget cuts) and confront challenges (e.g., NCLB and state mandates). But first, a description of the California context of middle level teacher education is in order.

REALITIES AND CHALLENGES OF MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHER EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA

Middle level teacher education programs have a professional obligation to prepare quality teachers. Since 2002, the definition of what counts as quality has been determined by the requirements specified in the federal No Child Left Behind act. Individual states then added to the definition by imposing additional requirements. In California, for example, an NCLB-compliant teacher is one who has earned a full teaching credential, which means completing coursework and clinical practice, passing tests

demonstrating subject-matter knowledge (the California Subject Examination for Teachers) or a college major, and passing a series of Teaching Performance Assessments or TPAs (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2004). The state does not offer a specific middle school credential, so aspiring teachers of the middle grades (typically Grades 6, 7, 8) either earn a multiple subject credential allowing them to teach elementary grades or a single subject credential in a curriculum area taught in the secondary grades.

The appropriate credentialing of California middle grades teachers is extremely confusing. California’s Ryan Act of 1970 introduced the terms “multiple subject” and “single subject” but made no mention of a middle grades credential (Jones, 2010). The intervening years have not addressed that omission. Because neither the multiple subject nor single subject credential specifies grade level authorizations, it often falls to the employing school district to decide what credentials and authorizations will qualify a middle grades teacher to be considered NCLB-compliant. According to guidance from the California State Board of Education and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, teachers who teach departmentalized classes (typically seventh and eighth grade) must hold an appropriate single subject credential or a subject matter authorization (college major or 32 units in the subject). A teacher who teaches a middle school core class (two or more subjects, two or more periods, same students, in the same day) can hold either a multiple subject or two or more single subject credentials. The issue is further complicated by the fact that California consists of school districts that include K-5, K-6, K-8, 6-12, 7-12, 8-12, and K-12 grade configurations. Young adolescents may attend schools in two different districts during their middle grades years, with the break between the districts coming at the entrance to Grades 6, 7, 8, or 9. Where middle schools are part of a district that primarily serves younger students (K-6 or K-8), the most desirable (versatile) teachers hold multiple

subject credentials. Where middle schools are in a secondary-oriented district (6-12 or 7-12), the most desirable teachers hold Single Subject credentials. In a K-12 district, there is typically a mixture of these two credentials in schools serving young adolescents.

Teachers holding such broadly and ill-defined licenses as California's Multiple Subject and Single Subject Credentials may lack the preparation required to meet the specific needs of middle school students. Young adolescents have cognitive, physical, moral, psychological and socioemotional needs that are distinct from those of older and younger students and that have a significant impact on their academic success (National Middle School Association, 2010b; Powell, 2005). Middle school teachers therefore need targeted preparation that focuses on how to promote the understanding of subject-matter knowledge for young adolescents in a way that differs from either elementary or high school pedagogy. As well, they need preparation to be effective participants in practices that characterize exemplary middle schools such as interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, and advisory (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002).

Currently, a variety of challenges face middle schools which broadly credentialed (Multiple Subject or Single Subject) teachers may not be prepared to confront. They include:

- a lack of curricular focus on core academic courses and analytical skills that leads students to shift their focus away from school and even become alienated from it;
- inadequate preparation of middle school students for either high school or meaningful employment;
- teachers with insufficient and/or in appropriate training to meet the specific needs of young adolescents and to teach challenging discipline-specific material and high-level skills simultaneously; and
- the restriction of at-risk students' access to challenging curricula due to the dramatic

increase in *ability grouping* (often called *tracking*) as children enter middle school that contributes to their subsequent low achievement (Ames, 1998; NMSA, 2010a, 2010b; Argetsinger, 1999; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996).

Research suggests that teachers with full credentials have a more positive influence on student achievement than other teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007), so the lack of a specific middle school credential in California (and several other states) is alarming, especially in light of the above-mentioned challenges.

Another challenge that exists in the world of teacher preparation is recruiting in a competitive market. Teacher education programs that pride themselves on preparing high-quality middle school teachers typically look beyond simply meeting minimal credentialing requirements and focus their teacher preparation coursework and student teaching experiences toward the capacity for meeting the unique needs of middle school students while simultaneously delivering excellent methods instruction. The major challenge for programs that prioritize quality is competing in an environment where the goals of all teacher credential programs are not uniform (Jones, 2010). While teacher candidates graduating from programs that promise excellence in both content area pedagogy and young adolescent development may be more competitive in the job market, the programs themselves may lose students to programs that limit their definition of quality to merely meeting credentialing standards. Sometimes, students are satisfied with credential in hand, with little regard for the quality of their preparation.

Having explained the credential requirements and practices of middle level teacher education in California and the challenges we face, we now turn to a description of our program and the tools we use to navigate through these realities and challenges.

THE MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM AT CSUSM

The Middle Level Teacher Education Program in the College of Education at CSUSM is based upon the standards established by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (now called the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP]), the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and the National Middle School Association (now the Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE]), as well as our respective professional organizations (NCTE, NMTA, NCSS, NSTA, NABE, NAME). Although our program fulfills the credential requirements of the state of California, the fact that California does not have a required or optional middle level credential led us to rely on the CAEP/AMLE standards when devising our program elements (while attending to the requirements of California Commission on Teacher Credentialing so that all our students receive a California credential).

The program is postbaccalaureate, and teacher candidates spend 1 year taking credential courses and completing clinical practice within this time frame. In the first 8 weeks of the fall semester, teacher candidates take four courses at a middle school site. In the second 8 weeks, they go on to clinical practice. The same pattern repeats in the spring semester, where teacher candidates take another four courses in the first 8 weeks and continue their clinical practice experience during the second 8 weeks.

The theoretical framework discussed at the beginning of the article provides guidelines for our coursework and clinical practice. In particular, a powerful influence on our work was the College of Education's mission statement. We are a mission-driven college and that mission guides all our decisions and informs the essence of our work. That statement is as follows: *The mission of the College of Education Community is to collaboratively transform public education by preparing thoughtful educators and advancing professional practices.*

We are committed to diversity, educational equity, and social justice, exemplified through reflective teaching, life-long learning, innovative research, and ongoing service. Our practices demonstrate a commitment to student-centered education, diversity, collaboration, professionalism, and shared governance.

Our collaborative experience began with a group of area middle level teachers and administrators meeting with university faculty to create the Middle Level Program. We incorporated elements of collaboration that exemplify best middle level practice such as team teaching, team planning, and shared supervision. That ethic of collaboration has continued with our public school partners as we together face new challenges that arise in order to maintain the integrity of our program. We assign groups of students to a relatively small number of area middle schools for their clinical practice (student teaching), which creates small cohorts within the larger group. Because of our focus on *collaboratively transforming public education*, we share supervision of our students between university faculty and an on-site liaison at the middle school. The on-site liaison meets regularly with the teacher candidates and observes and evaluates them when they teach. The liaisons and university supervisors collaborate frequently about teacher candidates' strengths and needs in order to make sure that the middle school students experience the best possible learning environment and the teacher candidates develop into effective, compassionate middle school teachers. An additional benefit is that the on-site liaisons' and cooperating teachers' practice is often positively influenced by discussions with the university supervisors and observations of teacher candidates.

Young adolescents are always fascinating, sometimes frustrating, and often exciting. Teaching those students is particularly challenging but incredibly rewarding. The teacher candidates in our Middle Level Education Program learn about their social, physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Because our mission reminds us that our goal is to pre-

pare thoughtful educators and advance professional practices, we work with our teacher candidates to help them understand how to address young adolescents' unique needs, while also helping them reach mastery of the California state content standards. Needless to say, this balance is rarely easy to attain, but we model collaboration, team teaching, and reflective planning as practices that move us toward our mission-based goal of teaching the whole student.

The explicit enactment of the mission statement is a means for us to address the realities and challenges discussed above. The College of Education faculty and staff have invested significant time crafting a mission that would inspire all our programs and inform our decisions. These beliefs allow us to stay focused on our goal of attracting high-quality candidates and producing effective middle school teachers. In addition to fully engaging the mission, we use three particular tools to navigate the policies, realities, and challenges in middle level teacher education.

TOOLS FOR NAVIGATING REALITIES AND CHALLENGES IN MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHER EDUCATION

We use three particular tools to navigate the nexus of changing mandates, realities, and our Mission. Figure 1 indicates the association among the three navigational tools and our theoretical framework.

The first navigational tool deals with the concepts of teamwork and modeling of effective middle level practices. Preservice teachers practice working with their peers to ground their instructional decisions in adolescent development research and thereby gain a valuable tool for navigating through current high-stake testing and deficit-based educational mandates.

The collaborative nature of the first navigational tool additionally prepares teacher candidates for their future roles as community

partners between their school district and the university. As they work with on-site liaisons and university supervisors, middle level candidates become better adept at collaborating beyond their school walls. These partnerships set the foundation for the emergence of the third navigational tool of inquiry and lifelong learning as preservice teachers begin to notice the explicit link between their coursework and teaching practices at their school site and individual classrooms. Once preservice teachers experience the powerful nature of university-to-school district collaboration, they will be better prepared to face the many challenges presented to them throughout their careers in the field of education. Finally, each of our three navigational tools connects to the components of middle level reform, teacher education reform, middle level teacher education reform, and multicultural education as previously illustrated in our theoretical framework.

Navigational Tool 1: Teamwork and Modeling Middle Level Practice

As indicated in our theoretical framework, collaborative planning, thematic instruction, joint assessments, and shared supervision are distinguishing features of our Middle Level Program. Additionally, we model exemplary middle level practice throughout our program, and because team teaching and collaboration are such strong tenets of middle level practice, we will discuss these together.

Team Teaching. To model good middle level practice and to provide a coherent teacher education program, we instructors plan and teach the Middle Level Program as an interdisciplinary team. As team members, we are responsible for the bulk of coursework and serve as faculty advisors during clinical practice, although additional instructors are needed for some content area courses. Prior to each semester, we meet to plan the curriculum, assignments, assessment, and schedule. Having our own classroom at a middle school site allows us to schedule ourselves freely. Our students have two classes with us daily with ses-

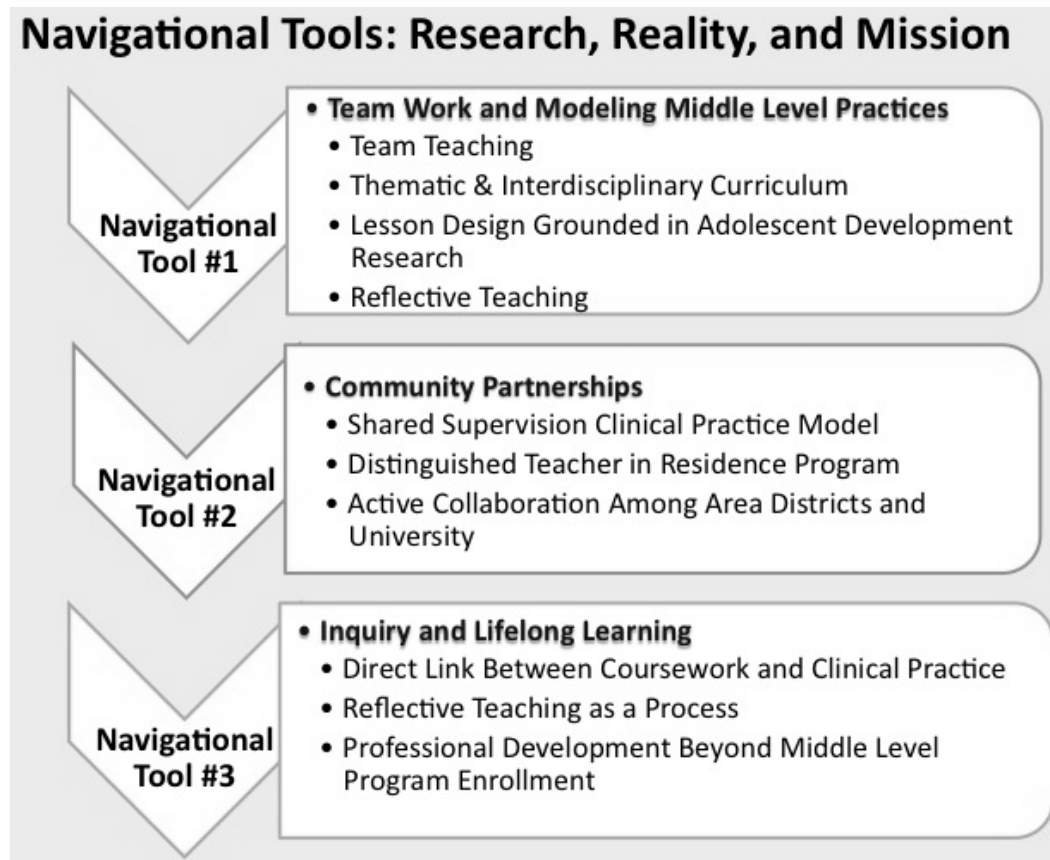


FIGURE 1
Navigational Tools and Their Components

sions of 150 minutes each, but we team members have no set schedule. Instead, we plan the sequence of curriculum and instruction and then agree on who will teach on which days. For example, when we teach about the California content standards, the Teaching and Learning professor sees the students first and explains what standards are and discusses the reason for their creation. Then, each content professor (mathematics, literacy, etc.) has one or more class sessions in which he/she teaches about the standards for that particular discipline.

Individual course topics are embedded within five themes (discussed below) and connections between course topics are made

whenever possible so we can eliminate repetition and capitalize on natural links. Sometimes we teach a course topic together so students can benefit from the same content through two different lenses. Knowing the overall goals and the content of each course, each instructor is able to explicitly connect his/her content to the theme, other content, the College's mission statement, and our larger vision of middle level education and educators.

Dividing our curriculum and instruction in this way blurs the lines that traditionally separate teacher education courses. Our students occasionally have difficulty determining which "course" is being taught on a given day—for example, when two of us team teach

cooperative learning strategies because they are appropriate in multicultural education contexts and good middle level teaching. As a team, we construct a “super-syllabus” that provides our students with an overview of our themes, calendar, assignments, and expectations. We hope that this not only keeps the students organized, but also encourages them to think of alternative ways to conceive of the traditional divisions in the school curriculum and schedule.

During the second semester, we also teach the students how to write an interdisciplinary unit plan that involves the teaching and learning, science, and social studies methods courses. All three professors explain the assignment in their classes and offer support as the students work toward understanding how to create interdisciplinary instruction. The faculty members grade the unit plan separately by looking at the elements that pertain directly to their content areas. Although the students struggle initially with integrating content and instruction, they tell us that they appreciate the modeling of a team approach to both curriculum development and instructional delivery.

Reflective Planning. One of our primary tenets is to question whether the fact that something gets taught necessarily means that was actually learned. We teach our candidates how to check for understanding and reteach when necessary or appropriate. Along those lines, the middle level teaching team meets regularly throughout each academic year and at least once every summer. Our discussions during those times focus on what we want and need our cohort to learn as directed by the state of California, our college’s mission statement, and our own understandings of effective middle level pedagogy. We also discuss how we know that the teacher candidates really are learning what we teach and brainstorm ways to help those who are struggling. We have found that this type of reflective planning allows us to regularly discuss what is happening in the cohort classroom, reflect on our successes and challenges with each group of teacher candi-

dates, and strategize ways to help everyone achieve success.

Closely allied with our mission and the CAEP/AMLE standards are themes that we created, enacted, and refined as the organizing structure of our curriculum and instruction. We see these themes much in the same way that middle level teachers view interdisciplinary thematic units. No matter what teacher education course each of us teaches, we all relate our curriculum to these themes. We sequence our course topics, assignments, and assessments according to the themes to facilitate our teacher candidates making connections across courses. We informally call these “themes with teeth” to highlight their importance in our curriculum. We also think of them as “themes with feet,” indicating that we want our graduates to take these into their own middle level practice as ingrained parts of their teaching philosophies. These themes provide substance for our overarching goal of “Fostering Change for Democratic Education in Middle Schools” (McDaniel, Stowell, Ríos, & Christopher, 1994; Stowell, McDaniel, & Ríos, 1995).

Our five themes are:

- Learning happens in caring communities.
- Students are the center of our work.
- Teaching is the negotiation among theory, practice, and students.
- Empowerment of students is essential to students’ meaningful participation in a democratic society.
- Education requires political action to achieve a just society.

In summary, the CSUSM Middle Level Teacher Education Program was founded upon the belief that young adolescents have a unique set of cognitive, physical, moral, psychological, and socioemotional needs. Our program is guided by the theoretical framework and an active College of Education mission statement, and our teaching is directed by five themes that reflect our deepest beliefs and understandings about what middle school students need in

order to be academically and socially successful. This single-minded focus on delivering exceptional, mission-driven teacher credential education has allowed us to remain constant in the face of changing state and federal requirements.

Navigational Tool 2: Community Partnerships

Collaboration and partnerships between school districts and universities are certainly not new ideas to the field of public education (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Varrati, Lavine, & Turner, 2009). Currently, local districts in San Diego County focus much of their time and resources on finding ways to enhance the professional collaboration between their teachers, administrators, and counselors. We remain committed to developing such collaboration as a tool that program graduates can use to navigate the various ideologies and practices they are certain to encounter in the K-12 setting.

The collaborative nature between the Middle Level Program at CSUSM and local schools strengthens our ability to conduct coursework on site at a middle school, allow our teacher candidates to participate in site-based professional development, and continue the use of a team approach to advocate for the needs of both our teacher candidates and middle school students. As indicated in our theoretical framework, such elements lead to the consistency in our Middle Level Program and commitment to working with local school districts. Perhaps one of the most evident examples of the partnership between the Middle Level Program and area school districts is the use of a shared-supervision model during clinical practice. This supervision model builds on the triad model and begins with the initial triad of the teacher candidate, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor to include an on-site liaison (Bullough & Draper, 2004). The on-site liaison serves as a vital link between the university and the school site to enhance the professional growth and overall clinical practice experience for the teacher candidate. Addition-

ally, the on-site liaison, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor share the responsibility for conducting formal observations and providing the teacher candidate with feedback as well as modeling the process of critically reflecting about individual teaching practices and making the necessary adjustments and refinements in these practices. The shared supervision model for clinical practice is unique in that it provides an avenue for university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and on-site liaisons to work collaboratively to foster the professional growth of preservice teachers while also offering them opportunities to dialogue and share best practices with each other. Finally, this process provides teacher candidates with the first real opportunity to practice their navigational skills as they negotiate among the ideas and reflections given to them from the university supervisor, on-site liaison, and cooperating teacher. Such a process is therefore essential into developing educators who will actively work to transform the world of public education when they are in their own classroom and school site.

Another program that enhances the ability to form professional relationships between the university and local school districts is the Distinguished Teacher in Residence (DTIR) program. This program was formed in 1993 for the express purpose of promoting professional collaboration at the university and district levels. DTIRs are selected from a consortium consisting of San Diego County school districts to serve for terms of 2 years as faculty in the College of Education at CSUSM. While DTIRs do not work solely within the Middle Level Program, each year we always have at least a DTIR. These educators work to develop a closer relationship between individual schools and districts and the College of Education. During their term with the College of Education, DTIRs further enhance the link between the methods and theory offered to teacher candidates during their methods courses by providing a valuable connection to current classroom experiences and school-site dynamics. Such connections between theory and

practice not only benefit the teacher candidates, but their future students as well. Furthermore, DTIRs provide their students with current examples of how to navigate through the many agendas present in a public school setting while staying true to individual ideals related to social justice and equity and transformational teaching practices and ideology. Due to the fact that DTIRs are selected according to their teaching strengths and overall match with the College of Education's mission, they have the potential to become a powerful voice calling for collaboration as a method of transforming public education in a way that not only makes sense to credential students, but is feasible as well. This connection can further stimulate critical dialogue within individual methods courses that students are then able to carry into their clinical practice and future teaching experiences, thus providing them with yet another tool for the navigation of their professional careers as educators.

Despite the fact that both the College of Education and the Middle Level Program offer unique opportunities for the creation of a strong partnership between higher education and K-12 education, there exist several challenges that can potentially undermine the overall impact this partnership has on the local educational environment. For example, the current focus on high-stakes testing and the need that many educators feel to cover as much material as possible, often through worksheets and individual textbook learning created by NCLB and Race to The Top mandates, can leave little room for creativity, flexibility, and projects-based learning in the modern middle school classroom (Apple, 2009; Mullen & Farinas, 2003; Sleeter & Stillman, 2009). Due to the pressure exerted on educators to "teach to the test," by their administrators and district, cooperating teachers may be especially hesitant to give their teacher candidates freedom to implement lessons designed to be more engaging, hands-on and in-depth for their students. Furthermore, cooperating teachers may also be unreceptive to new or more current teaching

styles and lessons if they feel that what they currently do for their students produces "proficient" scores on the California Standards Test. This duality can be very frustrating for teacher candidates who may be taught one set of educational philosophies and practices during their methods coursework and witness the opposite enacted during their clinical practices (Apple, 2009; Polat, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2009). For this reason, assets such as the DTIR program should be enhanced to seek out educators who can serve as future cooperating teachers for the Middle Level Program with the explicit purpose of putting the ideas and strategies addressed during methods coursework into actual practice.

Through the use of critical collaboration and partnerships between the Middle Level Program and San Diego school districts, it may be possible to take steps towards changing the existing constraints placed on teachers and their students by NCLB and Race to The Top. Using the shared-supervision model for clinical practice and the DTIR Program as navigational tools for increased collaboration and dialogue between the university and its associated schools and districts, the transformation of public education via collaboration and partnerships moves one step closer to becoming the reality of the educational climate in San Diego County.

Navigational Tool 3: Inquiry and Lifelong Learning

The credential program should be a place for a shift in preservice teachers' beliefs, from a belief that teacher education is a one-time event to a commitment to continuing inquiry and lifelong learning. To this end, we first prompt preservice teachers to "connect the dots." As earlier discussed in our theoretical framework, our program builds on collaboration and integrated instruction to help teacher candidates make connections between their coursework and experiences in the field. We supervise our own student teachers and maintain communications with on-site liaisons and cooperating

teachers. The junction of coursework and field experience provides a context in which preservice teachers start to learn from and in practice. Our students begin to learn the art of teaching in collaboration with cooperating teachers at their clinical practice sites. They reflect on lessons, compile portfolios, and engage in thoughtful conversations about ways to better teach young adolescents. The capacity to inquire about student learning and to learn from teaching is crucial for continuing professional growth. Indeed, we encourage preservice teachers to take responsibility for their lifelong learning and seek opportunities for themselves and others to become effective teachers.

For this purpose, we engage our teacher candidates in a variety of activities. For example, at the very beginning of the school year, teacher candidates investigate a middle school's organization and teachers' instructional practices. Inquiry about the school culture helps teacher candidates situate their learning to teach in a middle school context. They typically find agreement and contradiction to their existing beliefs about middle schools, which sets the stage of further inquiries in the credential courses, clinical practice, and beyond. In addition, we require student teachers to attend the annual conference of the California League of Middle Schools where they learn about the latest theories, policies, standards, and practices. They also experience how such an event can benefit their professional growth.

Another way to foster teachers' lifelong professional growth is engage them in inquiries about teaching and learning. We encourage preservice teachers to research a wide range of issues. Some examples are: (a) identifying which students have a high status in a small group setting and whose opinions are seldom accepted (Cohen, 1994); (b) investigating how a lesson unfolds during implementation and how students put forth their cognitive efforts (Stein, Smith, Henningsen, & Silver, 2009); (c) studying students' conceptual understanding and misunderstanding, particularly in mathematics and science classrooms;

(d) shadowing a middle school student – following the student through a day to understand and reflect on their lived experiences; (e) conducting case studies of challenging students and using pedagogy and motivation theories to interpret the cases as well as providing strategies for working with them. These examples range from a particular problem in teaching to a research study. All are intended for teachers to develop an inquiry mindset with which they continue to learn productively by guiding one's own problem solving (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

It would be naïve to assume that teacher inquiry about teaching would necessarily lead to better student learning. A critical question should be posed: In teachers' inquiries, what do they focus their attention on? Novice teachers tend to focus on teacher action – how the material is presented and how the lesson goes as planned. Such attention to surface features of classroom activities is by no means sufficient for developing an effective framework for lifelong learning. Therefore, we expose preservice teachers the art of noticing. In particular, we believe that students are at the center of our work. We encourage preservice teachers to carefully observe students' learning and dispositions. This is not to say that teachers observe behaviors such as students following instructions and performing the required tasks. Rather, we encourage preservice teachers to focus on students' conceptions, reasoning, and conversations with peers. We urge them to collect student work as evidence of learning or not learning. We also hold a mock Student Study Team meeting so that teacher candidates can understand exactly how schools support struggling students, thus increasing their sensitivity to students' learning needs.

As a concluding remark on the lifelong learning principle, we shall highlight a few learning outcomes of our graduates. First of all, it is common for us to meet our graduates, both as speakers and participants, at local professional conferences such as those held by California Leagues of Middle Schools and California Mathematics Council. Second,

many of our graduates become on-site liaisons who coordinate clinical practice at middle school sites and provide support to teacher candidates. The on-site liaisons have become leaders at their school sites. Third, a few of our graduates come back to our College of Education and serve as Distinguished Teachers in Residence described previously. These examples are evidence of how our graduates continue to learn and grow as professional educators.

***CONCLUSION: NEITHER RAIN,
NOR SNOW, NOR HEAT,
NOR GLOOM OF THE NIGHT***

Teacher education programs across the country are situated in a nexus of political, social, economic, educational, and institutional forces. These forces interact with one another and delineate what and how future teachers are prepared. In particular, middle level teacher education programs are subject to accountability measures and are under increasing political pressure to prepare teachers to ensure students' academic performance. The focus on demonstrating students' academic achievements through standardized testing can be detrimental to the middle level philosophy that instead emphasizes young adolescents' developmental needs and the socially equitable experience of the whole student in pursuit of academic excellence.

In this article we discussed credentialing policies and realities that significantly influence our practices in the only middle level credential program in the state of California. We also described the three tools we use to navigate these realities and challenges. These navigational tools are instrumental in our effort to prepare high quality middle school teachers. The navigational tools also have helped us sustain the program, address various mandates, and maintain our focus during difficult times. For example, as stated previously, we believe in collaboration and actively work to maintain communication and collaboration with our dis-

trict partners. These relationships are one tool that has allowed us to navigate ever-changing state mandates and still meet the needs of our teacher candidates and their students. Regardless of what No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, or any other law requires of teachers and teacher education programs, we continually return to the principles upon which we were founded. We make sure our teacher candidates are prepared for new mandates, new tests, and new structures, but there are beliefs from which we will not waver. If we dismantle the skeleton on which we were built, then our work means nothing.

While we remain flexible in order to address the changing landscape of teacher education, we hold on to the principles of best practices in middle level teacher education described above. These principles are not negotiable; we will not compromise these best practices for the sake of political and educational agendas set by others. Any compromise will dismantle the essential framework of our work and the integrity of the program. Indeed, we will continue to collaboratively transform public education by preparing thoughtful educators and achieving a more equitable education for middle school students.

NOTE

1. For 20 years, Education at CSUSM resided in the College of Education. As of 2011, however, all education programs exist within the School of Education in the College of Education, Health, and Human Services.

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