

Elementary Teacher Candidates' Attitudes toward Middle Level Teaching

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Abstract

Middle level teachers often enter the profession without specific preparation to teach middle level students. Because young adolescents need teachers who are trained to meet their unique needs, it is essential to identify and develop teachers who have the skills and desire to work with middle level students. This study used a within-stage mixed method design to examine 145 elementary teacher candidates' attitudes toward middle level students and teaching at the middle level, and the impact of a weeklong middle level field experience. This study found exposure to an authentic middle level teaching experience prompted elementary teacher candidates to alter their desire to pursue middle level teaching as a career.

Introduction

Often regarded as “the forgotten middle,” middle-level teacher preparation is often an overlooked component of teacher education programs. Advocates of middle level teacher preparation posit that young adolescents need teachers who are trained to meet the specific academic, behavioral, and social needs of middle level students (Conklin, 2008; Ference & McDowell, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003), yet research suggests that middle level teachers are the least trained and least qualified among all grade levels (Gaskill, 2002; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003; Stepp, 2000). Typically, middle level teachers come from either generalist elementary teacher education programs or subject-specific secondary teacher education programs, not from specialized middle level programs (Conklin, 2008).

Elementary teacher candidates at Northern Michigan University (NMU), the site of this study, like most teachers nationwide, acquire their certifications to teach at the middle level without specific middle level preparation. Rather, the candidates add to their K-6 certificates a middle level endorsement in the content areas of their chosen academic majors and minors. Although supporters of specialized middle-level teacher preparation are ardent about the unique and detailed standards they believe should be required of middle-level teachers, most states do not require middle-level teachers to receive specialized training (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). In the past, it was possible, and at times common, that elementary teacher education candidates at NMU would have completed their entire teacher education program with dozens of hours of classroom field experiences and 16 weeks of student teaching, none of which were at the middle level; yet, most would graduate with a middle school endorsement.

Attracting and retaining quality teachers is vital to improving education (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Students at each grade level deserve teachers who want to teach at that level. The preponderance of teacher education programs without specific middle level teacher preparation programs are likely, at a minimum, to graduate teachers with little exposure to middle level students and practices, and at a maximum, to graduate potentially excellent middle level teachers who have no desire to work with middle level students. The National Middle School Association (2007) included in its standards the need for middle level teachers who are “positive and enthusiastic about all young adolescents” (p. 4).

This study examined elementary teacher candidates’ attitudes toward middle level students and teaching at the middle level, and the impact of a weeklong middle level field experience, where elementary teacher candidates planned, prepared, taught, and assessed integrated thematic units. Though it could be assumed that the candidates’ competencies at teaching middle level students increased also as a result of the field experience, this study was concerned only with candidates’ views on teaching young adolescents prior to and following the field experience. This study sought to determine if exposure to an authentic middle level teaching experience prompted elementary teacher candidates at NMU to alter their desire to pursue middle level teaching as a career.

Theoretical Framework

People choose teaching as a career for a variety of altruistic, intrinsic, and extrinsic reasons with altruistic and intrinsic motivations dominant (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Fox, 1961; Watt & Richardson, 2007). Altruistic reasons include helping children specifically and society generally; intrinsic reasons include the satisfaction that comes from working with children and sharing one’s content knowledge; and, extrinsic reasons include pay, work schedule, and job

stability. Although the most common reasons for entering the profession have remained consistent of the past several decades, elementary teacher candidates tend to be more student-centered in their motivation; whereas, secondary teacher candidates tend to be more subject-centered (Book & Freeman, 1986; Johnston, McKeown, & McEwen, 1999).

Social-cognitive career theory suggests that people make career choices not solely based on whether they want to pursue a given occupation but also whether they think they can be effective in the position (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996). Much research has been conducted linking Maslow's needs theory with teacher satisfaction. High teacher satisfaction is directly related to high self-esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization (eg: Sweeney, 1981; Trusty & Sergiovanni, 1966). Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory suggests teachers' beliefs in their own abilities influence their choice, performance, and persistence. The greater college students' beliefs are about their likelihood of being effective teachers, the more likely they are to choose teaching as a career (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Harms & Knobloch, 2005).

Watt and Richardson (2007) posited that the expectancy-value motivational model is most effective for studying teacher career choice because it takes into account both the candidates' expectancies of success and the value they put on the task. According to Wigfield and Eccles (1992), values consist of three subcomponents including intrinsic value (how enjoyable teaching is), utility value (how important teaching is), and attainment value (how important it is to teach well). Teachers choose their careers because they think teaching is enjoyable, important, and that will be good at it (Wigfield & Eccles).

Despite the abundance of research on choosing teaching as a career, including several studies on candidates choosing to teach primary grades and several on candidates choosing to teach math and science at the secondary level, I was unable to locate any studies on teacher

candidates choosing middle level. Because so few states mandate it, the vast majority of teacher education programs do not offer specific middle level education programs. Therefore, most teacher candidates choose between elementary and secondary programs, which overlap to include middle level certification.

If we accept the assertions from the research including social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory, and the expectancy-value motivational model on career choices among professions, one can assume similar principles apply to choices within professions. When deciding which grade level they want to teach, candidates are influenced by the grade levels they might find enjoyable as well as the grade levels at which they might be effective. Logically, teacher candidates should have meaningful, authentic experiences at each of the grade levels they will be certified to teach if they are to make informed decisions about which positions to pursue.

Central to the formation of effective teachers is the role of field experiences. Research on the effectiveness of field experiences is extensive (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hayes, 2002). Field experiences allow teacher candidates to bridge the theory-based instruction from their university coursework and the practical application in the classroom (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). Although most teacher education programs strive to provide their candidates with field experiences, McEwin, et al. (2003) recommended that all teacher candidates who will be certified to teach at the middle level have ample opportunities to work specifically with young adolescents, and in particular, to put into practice the pedagogical, social, and cultural suppositions about young adolescents learned in their coursework. Middle level teachers reported the field experiences during their teacher preparation to be the most beneficial training for teaching middle level (Caskey, 2003; McCotter, Muth, Hart, & Lim, 2001). This study aims to answer the following questions: What are elementary teacher

candidates' attitudes toward middle level students and middle level teaching? To what extent does a weeklong middle level field experience for elementary teacher candidates impacts whether they want to teach at the middle level?

Methods

Participants and Context

Participants in this study included 145 teacher education candidates majoring in elementary education at Northern Michigan University, an average of 29 teacher candidate participants per semester from five semesters from 2006 to 2008. One hundred twenty-six (87%) participants were female and 19 (13%) were male. Known for its frequent and rich field experiences, NMU's teacher education program has symbiotic partnerships with a number of local public and charter schools. Participants in this study were teacher education candidates enrolled in their second block of methods courses during their final semester prior to student teaching.

Data Collection

I combined qualitative and quantitative techniques using a within-stage mixed-model design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from the same instrument (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Prior to the semester of elementary teacher candidates' second methods block, I administered questionnaires that inquired about their experiences with and attitudes toward middle level students. The questionnaires included a mix of Likert-type, short answer, and extended response questions.

During the methods block, each team of three or four candidates spent weeks researching, planning, and preparing a weeklong integrated thematic unit based on Grade Level Content Expectations designated by the 7th-grade teachers in whose classes the candidates would be

teaching. Toward the end of the semester, each team taught and assessed their unit in a local public middle school classroom. Each teacher candidate was responsible for teaching at least one mathematics, science, and social studies lesson throughout the week; language arts was integrated.

Following their middle level teaching field experience, I administered the same questionnaire to the candidates. Furthermore, following the weeklong field experience, candidates completed a comprehensive (seven to 10-page) reflection, which included general prompts as well as prompts specific to each subject area.

Data Analysis

For all of the Likert-type questions on both the pre and post questionnaires, I used SPSS to produce descriptive statistics. For my qualitative analyses of the candidates' written data, I divided their pre-field experience questionnaire responses from both their post-field experience questionnaire responses and their final comprehensive reflections. I used a general coding process, searching for recurring regularities or emergent themes (Guba, 1978). After titling the themes, a colleague and I tested the emergent themes recursively, repeatedly challenging and analyzing the centrality and usefulness of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Results

Elementary education candidates at NMU have substantial opportunities to work in local classrooms, yet relatively little of their experiences occur at the middle school level (see Table 1). Candidates are required to observe in classrooms of their choice for each of two courses during the pre-methods phase of the program. Additionally, two courses in Block 1 of the program meet at local elementary schools. In those courses, candidates observe and teach

lessons. Both programmatic and candidate choices yield asymmetrical time spent at the middle level.

It is important to note that I have chosen the median rather than the mean to represent the central tendency of these data. It is not uncommon for candidates at NMU to substitute teach while they are still in their teacher education programs. (Michigan requires only 90 credit hours to obtain a substitute teaching permit.) I did not seek to determine how many of the 145 participants worked as substitute teachers; however, obvious outliers and a high standard deviation necessitate the use of median to represent their hours spent observing and teaching prior to the middle level field experience. Nonetheless, descriptive statistics made it clear that candidates' experience at middle level is lagging.

Table 1. Time Spent Observing and Teaching in Classrooms Prior to Block 2

	Median Hours
Hours spent observing K-2 nd grade classrooms.	30
Hours spent observing 3 rd -5 th grade classrooms.	31
Hours spent observing 6 th -8 th grade classrooms:	0
Hours teaching lessons in K-2 nd grade classrooms:	7
Hours teaching lessons in 3 rd -5 th grade classrooms:	11
Hours teaching lessons in 6 th -8 th grade classrooms:	0

Pre-Experience Perceptions

One purpose of this study was to better understand elementary teacher candidates' perceptions of middle school students and teaching prior to the intensive field experience.

Candidates were asked to rank their grade level teaching preference prior to and after the experience. Complete results are included in Table 2. The middle level grades (6th, 7th, & 8th), along with kindergarten, were their least popular choices, with 2nd and 3rd grades as their highest ranked choices for the grade level at which they would like to teach.

Table 2. Ranked Choice of Grade Level Preference

(1 = the grade level you would most like to teach; 9 = the grade level least like to teach)

Preference	Pre		Post	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Kindergarten:	5.6	2.88	6.0	3.00
1 st Grade:	4.6	2.76	5.0	2.78
2 nd Grade:	3.9	2.30	4.2	2.26
3 rd Grade:	3.7	2.00	3.8	1.94
4 th Grade:	4.0	2.03	4.1	2.09
5 th Grade:	4.7	2.19	4.8	2.23
6 th Grade:	5.3	2.27	5.4	2.33
7 th Grade:	6.0	2.51	5.1	2.58
8 th Grade:	6.9	2.60	6.7	2.53

When asked on the pre-experience questionnaire whether or not they would like to teach at the middle level when they graduate and then to explain why or why not, 75 candidates (51.7%) answered yes, and 70 candidates (48.3%) answered no. Analyses of the candidates'

explanations for their responses to the explicit question revealed a number of reasons the candidates did or did not want to teach at the middle level.

There were a number of themes from the responses of the candidates who noted at the start of the semester, prior to coursework and field experiences focused on the middle level, that they wanted to teach at the middle level.

A number of candidates stated that they felt they could have a positive impact on middle level students. One candidate wrote:

This is where students are lost, or are hooked for life! When children enter middle school the changes they undergo personally and a student are so critical. For that reason—I believe that I could have a great impact on middle school students. During my own schooling, the teachers who played the most influential role in developing the person that I am today are my middle school teachers. I would like to accept the challenge, no matter how intimidating it might be, to work with students making lifelong decisions about who they want to become.

Another candidate recognized the impressionability of middle level students:

They are at a difficult age, but I like this age group because it is often a time where they are asking themselves the question “Who Am I?” I would love to be able to help them figure this question out in a positive way and through positive and uplifting experiences.

Many of the responses, however, were less altruistic with many candidates supposing that teaching at the middle level would be enjoyable. For example, one candidate noted:

I would love to teach middle school students because it is so much fun! I love being able to work with these students because they have so many great ideas, and can bring so

much to the table. I love being a creative teacher—using intriguing methods in order to help students understand the material!

Others expressed their desire to specialize in one or two content areas. One candidate wrote:

It's more than just the students, but I like the idea of specializing in one subject area and focusing on that one area to teach all the students. Even though it's only one subject there is so much preparation because as a teacher you want to reach all the students. I really like math, and my dream would to eventually become a middle school math teacher.

A number of candidates expressed an interest in teaching middle level students less in terms of their attraction to adolescents, but more as a repulsion to teaching younger students. For example, one candidate wrote:

They are not as dependent on the teacher for things like going to the bathroom and tying their shoes. It drives me crazy to see little kids cry over not getting a worksheet when they are passed out or because they cannot zip their coat!

Though approximately half of the teacher candidates stated prior to the semester that they wanted to teach at the middle level, a nearly equal number expressed that they did not. Several stated that they did not think they could handle middle school students. One candidate wrote, “I work much better with younger students. I feel like older students walk all over me and I do not have as much classroom control.” Another stated, “I would rather not have to teach middle school students because I feel that I would get walked all over. I feel like they wouldn't have much respect for me either.” Similarly, several candidates noted that they simply prefer younger students. For example, one candidate wrote:

I feel that I relate better with younger students. I also enjoy teaching them how to read and write. I think teaching younger elementary would be a better experience for me and I think I would have more control in my classroom.

An additional theme centered on candidates' perceptions that middle schools are not willing to learn. One candidate wrote:

I do not know if starting out as a new teacher I could handle their immaturity. I have found that the older the students are the less they want to learn. I also feel that the younger students listen better and aren't as smug as the older students.

Another candidate generalized, "At the younger level, students have a desire to learn and enjoy being in school. In middle school, they hate it (in general). Having students not show any interest in my lesson would be very discouraging to me."

Several candidates were forthright about their own negative experiences as middle school students. One wrote, "I hated middle school. It was awful. Mean girls, emphasis on having the right clothes and hanging around with the right kids. Why would I want to go back to that?"

Another stated:

I would rather not teach middle school because I remember how I was at that age. I remember that there were a lot of discipline problems and students not doing their homework. I was a mess in middle school and just wanted to work with kids when they are going through so much.

For others, their aversion toward teaching middle level students stemmed from their lack of confidence with content. One candidate wrote:

Just the thought of it is quite intimidating because they know more than elementary students and might ask questions I don't have answers to. I know this is going to happen no matter what, but I'm worried about it happening all the time. What if you have a student that is always one step ahead of you?

Finally, several candidates expressed uncertainty because of their lack of experience at working with middle level students. One candidate wrote, "At the moment I would not like to teach middle school. I think this may have something to do with the fact that I have no experience working with middle school students." Similarly, another candidate stated:

I'm not sure if I would like to teach middle school students. I've never taught them before and I'm basing my response off of what I have taught. Hopefully this semester will help me to make a decision on if I enjoy older students or not.

Post-Experience Perceptions

The second purpose of this study was to determine if elementary teacher candidates' perceptions changed after their middle level field experience. Both before and after the semester, the candidates were asked to respond to four prompts regarding their perceptions of middle school students. At the start of the semester, as noted in Table 3, the candidates tended to be neutral about middle level students. Following the preparation for, and the teaching and assessment of their middle school units, there were significant changes in the candidates' perceptions regarding candidates being fun to teach, $t(144) = -9.91, p < .001$, intimidating, $t(144) = 9.85, p < .001$, and cooperative, $t(144) = -7.52, p < .001$.

Table 3. Perceptions of Middle Level Students

(Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5)

Prompt	Pre		Post	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Middle school students are fun to teach.	3.6	.89	4.3	.82
Middle school students are hyper and rambunctious.	3.4	.91	3.3	.94
Middle school students are intimidating.	3.0	1.20	2.0	.86
MS students are cooperative and willing to learn.	3.5	.76	4.0	.74

Similarly, after the 7th grade field experience there was a significant change in the candidates' ranking of 7th grade, $t(144) = 5.45$, $p < .001$; however, there was not a significant difference in their ranking of the other two grade levels (6th and 8th) associated with middle school (See Table 2). Though the candidates seemed to grow more comfortable with 7th grade students, they did not transfer that self-efficacy to teaching the other middle level grades.

On both the pre and post questionnaires, I asked the candidates explicitly if they would like to teach middle level students and to explain why. Of the 75 candidates who prior to the experience noted that they wanted to teach at the middle level, seven (4.8%) recanted. Of the 70 candidates who previously stated that they did not want to teach middle school students, 34 (23.4%) changed their minds (see Table 4).

Table 4. Would you like to teach middle school students?

Student response	Students:	Percentage
“Yes” pre-field experience and “Yes” post-field experience:	68	46.9%
“Yes” pre-field experience and “No” post-field experience:	7	4.8%

“No” pre-field experience and “No” post-field experience:	36	24.8%
“No” pre-field experience and “Yes” post-field experience:	34	23.4%

After the middle level field experience, the candidates completed questionnaires and wrote assigned reflections from several prompts related to general teaching topics and specific course objectives. Their writings revealed a number of themes related to their changed perceptions of middle level students and teaching.

Many candidates noted their surprise at how much they enjoyed working with middle level students. One candidate noted, “I was shocked at the willingness of students to participate in discussions because they truly care about the issues. Now I believe that middle school students are fun to work with and are willing to learn and participate in discussions.” Another candidate commented:

They were a lot of fun to work with. They were a little less concerned with being “cool” than I thought they would be. It was amazing to see how much they knew and how much they wanted to learn. I think that middle school students are at the age where they are still interested in learning but old enough to do fun activities with.

Coming from a program dominated by elementary school experiences, candidates were surprised by the middle level students’ abilities to understand and express complex ideas. For example, one candidate commented, “They have the base knowledge needed to do higher level thinking activities and often have their set learning style, whereas, with the younger grades the students don’t know what best suits their needs. I hadn’t realized this until now.” Another candidate stated:

Middle school students are able to link personal connections, make valuable arguments, and are able to express their opinions. I enjoyed the discussions, how each student demonstrates how they are able to understand the subjects being taught to them, and I value their opinions.

Paramount to most candidates' foray into the profession is their anxiety about classroom management. As evidenced by their pre-experience questionnaires, these candidates were nervous about managing middle level students. Following the experience, however, a number of students expressed positive revelations about student behavior. Several candidates found the middle level students to be respectful. For example, one candidate noted, "They were very helpful and willing to work and listen to us as their teachers." Another commented:

I feel that there was a mutual respect and the students were wonderful to work with. They paid attention and knew what was expected of them. Though some of the students were challenging, I feel very rewarded and like I accomplished something after working with the kids last week.

Emerging from the writing of several candidates was evidence that they had been very nervous about working with the students but had grown to become less intimidated. One candidate wrote, "Now that I have spent an entire week in a middle school, I believe I have a better impression of middle school students. Before, I thought that middle school students were intimidating and only cared about themselves." This candidate's revelation was obvious: "I was surprised how my opinion has changed. I had always thought I would be intimidated by this age group but I was pleasantly surprised." Another candidate stated succinctly, "After teaching middle school students, I no longer fear them."

A number of candidates expressed intrigue by the challenge of working with middle level students. One candidate wrote:

Now, I would love to teach in a middle school classroom. Of course, it will be a challenge, but what grade is not a challenge to teach? I see them as a challenge to help each individual grow as a student and a person and help them to become more aware of who they are as a person and a student.

Some candidates seemed to welcome the challenge:

I would like to teach middle school students because they are fun, challenging, and intriguing. The [Anytown School] experience has really opened my eyes to what the middle school teachers deal with on a daily basis and gave me a look into the huge range of abilities that are present in the middle school classroom. The challenge that middle school students provide on a daily basis is one that will keep me on my toes and still be very rewarding.

Another candidate wrote, “I think I would like to teach them since they are at such a fun age, although challenging. I like challenges though, so teaching middle school would always make teaching interesting and changing.”

Despite the noteworthy changes in many candidates’ attitudes toward middle level students, some candidates noted they would not like to teach middle level students. Thirty-six candidates (24.8%) suggested both before and after the field experience they would not like to teach middle school students. Those candidates who remained opposed throughout provided some similar reasons before and after the practicum for not wanting to teach middle level students; however, the vast majority of their responses fell under the theme: “*Just Prefer Younger Students.*” Candidates frequently noted they became less intimidated by middle level

students and grew more comfortable teaching them, but they still like younger students more. For example, one candidate wrote, “I was surprised at how much easier they were. I’m not sure why I was so worried about it. But, in the end, I still really want to teach young kids. It’s where I am most comfortable.” Another student stated, “I had never worked with middle schoolers before, and after teaching them for a week, I am much more comfortable, but I still wouldn’t want to teach them all the time.”

In contrast to the 34 candidates (23.4%) who changed to an aspiration to teach middle level students following the field experience, there were seven students (4.8%) prior to the field experience who expressed a desire to teach middle level students but then changed their perspectives following the field experience. Their reasons were varied, but two themes emerged. A few students noted how they were unprepared for the content they were expected to teach. For example, one student stated:

I am only certified to teach two subjects at the middle level, yet we had to teach all four. I shouldn’t have had to teach math to 7th graders when I don’t have a degree in math. Even teaching the subjects in my major was hard. I can’t believe they expect middle school students to know about global economic interdependence. I don’t even get it.

Another candidate commented, “It was horrible! They were asking questions that I had no clue how to answer. Some of those kids were smarter than I am. I definitely would never want to teach middle schoolers.”

Two students expressly noted their difficulty with classroom management during the field experience impacted their desire to teach middle level students. For example one student wrote, “Basically, they ate me alive. They didn’t listen to anything I said. I cried every night after I taught. I would never want to teach kids at that age!”

Limitations

There were several of the limitations of this study, some of which are noted here. I did not analyze each participant's quantitative data in conjunction with her extended responses and reflection, which would have created a richer understanding of the phenomenon. Rather, I examined all the data from each question collectively. Because the field experience took place in 7th grade classrooms, it isn't clear if the candidates would have had similar responses had they taught in 6th or 8th grade. Incidentally, only the candidates' ranking of 7th grade showed significant change. Additionally, this study was limited by the context of the school in the field placement. The site school is rural with moderate economic diversity but little racial or cultural diversity. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which these findings would be replicated in an urban school setting.

Discussion

This study aimed to answer the following questions: What are elementary teacher candidates' attitudes toward middle level students and middle level teaching? To what extent does a weeklong middle level field experience for elementary teacher candidates impacts whether they want to teach at the middle level? The findings provide some insights into our understanding of the questions.

Prior to the field experience, the candidates at Northern Michigan University University had relatively little experience working with middle level students. As such, many did not perceive their competence at teaching middle level students to be sufficient. Self-efficacy, or people's beliefs in their ability to perform a task successfully, greatly influences the extent to

which they seek opportunities to perform that task (Bandura, 1997). Stated simply, people tend to avoid things they are not sure they can do effectively. Candidates in this study tended not to desire middle level teaching positions to the extent they did 1st-5th grade positions, presumably because they hadn't had opportunities to work with middle level students in general or to teach middle level students specifically. Harms and Knobloch (2005) suggested, "if a pre-service teacher had a self-actualizing experience during student teaching or in early field experiences, that individual may be more likely to pursue a career in the formal education field" (p. 103). Similarly, I posit that if a pre-service teacher had a self-actualizing experience at a specific grade level during student teaching or in early field experiences, that individual may be more likely to pursue a teaching position at that grade level.

I dare not suggest that building our nation's supply of eager-to-teach middle level educators is as simple as giving elementary teacher candidates a weeklong field experience at the middle level; however, it is widely accepted, "the stronger students' efficacy beliefs, the more interest they express in a give occupation" (Harms & Knobloch, 2005, p. 103). It is hardly inconsequential, however, that nearly half of the candidates in this who did not want to teach at the middle level prior to the field experience changed to state that they would be willing to accept a teaching position at the middle level.

Conclusion

Popular perception is that middle level students are rebellious, confrontational, and difficult to teach (Stevenson, 2002). Those who work with middle level students, however, will attest that middle school students can be passionate, inquisitive, respectful, impressionable, and a joy to teach. There is little question that middle level students are at an important stage of life and deserve teachers who have adequate preparation and desire to teach them.

Michigan, like most states, does not require specific coursework for middle-level certification. Rather, middle-level certification is granted to both elementary and secondary education majors, overlapping grades 6 through 8. Cooney and Bottoms (2002) suggested that teacher education programs in states that grant overlapping certificates seldom provide adequate middle-grades preparation. McEwin, et al. (2003) noted that most teacher preparation programs that grant middle level certification focus on either elementary or high school levels and assume that “graduates of either group are, in some magical way, also well prepared to teach young adolescents” (p. 9).

The movement toward middle level certification has been progressive. The number of states with middle level teacher certification has risen steadily from two in 1968 to 15 in 1978 (Valentine & Mogar, 1992) and 44 in 2002 (Gaskill, 2002). Although 44 states offer middle level licenses/endorsements, only 21 states require a middle level credential for employment and only 12 states require a specific middle level certification (Gaskill, 2002). Clearly, there is a shortage of teachers with the proper training to teach middle level students (FERENCE & McDowell, 2005).

As progress toward universal middle level preparation inches along, teacher education programs would be wise to emphasize frequent and authentic field placements at the middle level for all candidates who will be certified to teach at that level. Once teachers gain experience with middle level students they tend to find the experience fulfilling and desire to remain at that level (McEwin, et al., 2003; Scales & McEwin, 1994); however, teachers placed at the middle level without adequate training are more likely to leave after their first year (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). Middle schools need teachers that are prepared to and want to teach young adolescents.

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