

**THIS WE BELIEVE IN ACTION:
TEACHING MIDDLE GRADES TEACHER PREPARATION CLASSES ON SITE**

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Accountability is the current buzz word in education. All levels of educational institutions are charged with improving student achievement and impacting student learning. Pre-service preparation programs are also included in this charge. Accreditation organizations, such as NCATE and NMSA, are looking for programs at higher education institutions that prepare pre-service teachers to assist in the achievement of students in grades sixth through eighth. Turning Points 2000 (Jackson and Davis, 2000) reports a growing consensus to support specialized teacher preparation at the middle grades level and states that new middle grades teachers should be prepared to become part of the Turning Points design system. With this charge came the mandate to review teacher preparation programs currently developed in higher education.

The National Middle School Association (2001) defined performance standards and programmatic standards for higher education institutions that are training middle level candidates. Performance standards defined by NMSA include knowledge of young adolescent development, philosophy and school organization, curriculum assessment, understanding teaching fields, developmentally appropriate instruction and assessment, family and community involvement, and professional roles of educators. Program standards include implementation of courses and field experiences that specifically address middle level

education, and faculty members preparing educators to have middle level experience and expertise. In their position statement (2006), NMSA strongly supports the requirement that middle level teachers receive the specialized knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to teach young adolescents effectively. Anne Marie Harnett (1992) reported that principals want their teachers to understand early adolescence and believe to achieve that goal, pre-service teacher education programs must provide experiences in middle school settings and courses that develop an understanding of the early adolescent's unique needs. Using these standards and reports, the middle level faculty at the University of South Carolina Upstate reviewed their current middle level program and clarified standards that needed improvement.

One area that the USC Upstate faculty felt needed to be strengthened came under the Programmatic Standard: Middle Level Courses and Experiences. The structure used in the middle level program included courses taught at the university site or at a middle school site and a 20-hour or 40-hour clinical experience that was completed in blocks of time, usually two weeks toward the end of the semester, and designated by the course instructor. The university middle level faculty felt that changing the structure of the program to include courses taught at a middle school site and the clinical component that consisted of 2 to 4 hours per week at the middle school site would complement

the mission of NMSA and establish an environment for pre-services teachers to become an active part of the middle school. As part of this process two faculty members pursued a partnership arrangement with an area middle school.

Woodmont Middle School is located in Piedmont, South Carolina and is part of the Greenville County School District. The school has approximately 871 students in grades six through eight. It is an authorized International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP) school. MYP is a program of international education designed to help students aged 11 to 16 develop the knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills necessary to participate actively and responsibly in a changing and increasingly interrelated world. There is an emphasis placed on learning how to learn and how to evaluate information critically.

Woodmont Middle is divided into academic teams. The number of teachers assigned to each team varies based on grade level and content area but typically ranges from two to four members. The faculty's goal is to gradually increase the number of teachers on each team as the student progresses through the grades. Each grade level has two planning periods a day in which one period is reserved for grade level curriculum and MYP meetings and the second a personal planning period.

The mission of the school is to "Prepare students academically and socially to become responsible, productive citizens of a global society" (WMS webpage, 2006). To support this mission students participate every other

week in a Global Connections program which is comparable to an advisory program. Their Global Connections program offers opportunities for the students to discuss and find ways to be successful in school and in their community and gives them a small group of students with whom they can belong and interact.

Two introductory professional courses taken by middle grades pre-service teachers were taught at the middle school and the clinical hours assigned to each course were completed onsite. Six pre-service teachers were involved in this pilot semester and were immersed in the middle grades environment two days a week for approximately seven hours during the spring semester of 2006. During this time period the pre-service teachers were not only attending their university classes but were also involved in class discussions, large group and small group instruction, curriculum planning meetings and team planning meetings that were taking place at the school site.

The university classes held at the school were Middle School Curriculum and Middle School Teaching Methodology. These classes are usually taught on the University campus. Pre-service teachers taking classes on campus are given two weeks during the semester to complete course requirements and clinical hours. The focus of these classes is on curriculum needs for middle grades, the transitional function of the middle school, organization and management of the middle school and an overview of the major concerns, principles, theories and research related to effective instruction and assessment to meet the varying

abilities and learning styles of middle school students. University students enrolled in these courses are usually in their second semester of their professional program.

Course requirements completed at the middle school site included the development of curriculum maps, unit plans, lesson plans and an introduction to the components of a teacher work sample. The pre-service teachers were assigned to a teacher within their chosen content area and also completed observations and interviews. They were asked to use the information obtained in the courses and the observations to plan and implement appropriate instructional strategies in their assigned classrooms. Each pre-service teacher was asked to plan and teach one lesson in each of their content areas. During the lessons the cooperating teachers provided feedback to the pre-service teachers using a University evaluation form.

Being at the middle school provided many opportunities for the pre-service teachers to establish a true meaning of what a middle level educator is. Experiences were given to the pre-service teachers to work with grade levels in planning curriculum. Faculty, administrators and pre-service teachers often met to discuss methods and integration of subjects and ideas. Each Tuesday the pre-service teachers were invited to attend planning meetings and hear faculty and administrators make decisions that ensured success for all middle level students. Being there throughout the semester allowed the pre-service teachers to take part in the development of events such as Invention Convention, Science Fair and Cultural Night. Knowing that these events were

taking place allowed the pre-service teachers to plan and implement instruction that was integrated with the themes or topics. One pre-service teacher assisted a sixth grade team with the creation of rain sticks for Cultural Night. Another pre-service teacher taught a symmetry lesson with sixth graders involving the flags of the different nations studied in the social studies curriculum and the middle level students presented the flags at Cultural Night. Faculty at Woodmont Middle School were invited to talk with the pre-service teachers during their university class times and often provided relevant experiences and knowledge about discipline, management, diversity and instruction.

This partnership aided Woodmont in obtaining one of their goals which was to increase the number of volunteers coming into the school. The pre-service teachers were able to assist the faculty and staff with the many events scheduled, such as Math/Science Nights and Cultural Night. Through interactions with the pre-service teachers, the faculty was able to assist in the training and preparation of the next generation of middle level educators. This was one of the goals stated by the principal and the lead teacher of the middle school as the initial impetus for the partnership since Greenville County School District will have 69 middle level teachers eligible for retirement in 2005, 22 eligible in 2006, 25 eligible in 2007, 20 eligible in 2008 and 25 eligible in 2009 for a total of 161 middle level teachers (POMLE, 2006). This involvement also created the potential for professional development opportunities offered by the university through the graduate programs.

This concept of teaching university courses at a school site is not unique. Many classes are taught by faculty at USC Upstate at area schools. What made this experience different was that the pre-service teachers were actually involved in the everyday happenings of the school. When the university course syllabus planned for discussion of middle level physical changes, the pre-service teachers were able to observe students during class changes and come back and discuss their data and observations. They were also able to meet with the administration team at the school to discuss dress code, discipline procedures and expectations of a middle level educator.

There were other benefits that came from this partnership. One of the university students was asked to teach the lesson that he developed to all the classes within his team so that every student was able to benefit from the new writing strategy that was introduced. In fact, the teacher was so impressed that she shared the technique with a team mate and showed her how to use it in her content area. At the end of the semester this student said,

The Woodmont Middle School experience was the closest opportunity I had to becoming a teacher figure. When I say “teacher figure”, I am referring to the ability I had to interact with students all through my practicum hours in the classroom. Many other practicum experiences I had, teachers had difficulty getting me involved in the class. At other schools I would observe without interacting much with the students until it was my

time to teach. When this happens you almost feel like an outsider when it’s your time to teach and sometimes the students can feel that you are not part of the system.

Also at the end of the semester the middle school faculty that worked one on one with the pre-service teachers was asked to provide feedback. Many of them commented on the practicum experience as being positive, a great experience and they had learned from the students. Each of the teachers and the administrators were willing to take part in these experiences again. The pre-service teachers overall felt that the experiences they were involved in were beneficial in making their decision to teach at the middle level. There were some pre-service teachers that traveled over forty miles to attend the classes and were concerned about the distance because of the rising cost of gas. These pre-service teachers commented at the end of the semester that the experience was worth the cost and effort each week. They demonstrated a very strong knowledge of the middle level conceptual framework and all of them are continuing to pursue the middle level certification. They are very eager to work with this exciting and energetic age group.

This We Believe (2003) emphasizes the importance of a commitment made by middle level educators “to value working with young adolescents and also to make a conscious choice to teach them” (p.11). This experience allowed the pre-service teachers time to be involved in a middle level environment to gather information needed so that such a commitment could be made. This We Believe (2003) also

emphasizes the importance of a specialized middle level teacher preparation program. At our university we believe that placing pre-service teachers in area middle schools and allowing them opportunities to interact

with both young adolescents and those that teach them is a step taken to ensure that our students are “well equipped with specialized knowledge, skills and dispositions”(p.17).

References

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