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Rethinking Teacher Preparation for the Inclusive Middle Grades Classroom

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Introduction

Preparing and retaining effective teachers is a current issue of concern, especially in urban school districts. For certain content areas, such as special education, math, and science, this issue is further magnified, especially in the middle grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Given the direct impact the quality of a teacher has on student achievement, these shortages must be addressed (Aslam & Kingdon, 2011; Berry, 2004). To further complicate the matter, even teachers who are certified to teach in these areas often indicate they do not feel prepared to work in urban settings and even more specifically with students who have special needs (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In order to ensure a quality education for every child, educator preparation providers must ensure that preservice teachers are adequately prepared to meet the unique and diverse needs of their students.

The Impact of Teacher Preparation

Current federal legislation such as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (2002) and the Reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)* (2004) mandate that all students are taught by highly qualified teachers. The preponderance of the evidence demonstrates that teacher quality has a direct and significant influence on student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, LaFors, & Snyder, 2001; United States Department of Education, 2004). Sanders and Rivers (1996) determined that students assigned to highly effective teachers for three years in a row outperformed their counterparts, who were assigned to an ineffective teacher for three years in a row, by 50 percentile points on a standardized achievement test. They determined the effect of the teacher to be so great that it outweighed race, poverty, and parent education. Given the magnitude of the influence a teacher has on a child's academic progress, it is imperative that all children have access to and are taught by highly qualified, effective teachers.

A Unique Approach to Preparing Middle School Teachers

Studies show that quality educator preparation providers produce more qualified teachers, lead to better student outcomes, and result in lower attrition rates (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Research reinforces the claim that teachers who are fully prepared in their programs are more effective with students than those who are less prepared (Blanton et al., 2003). Strong subject content knowledge, strong pedagogy skills, and knowledge of student learning are all reoccurring themes in the discussion of teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2004; NCTAF, 2003). Ultimately, research in the area of teacher quality supports the theory that high quality teacher preparation programs are most effective at producing high quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; NCTAF, 2003).

While the research indicates the value of quality teacher preparation programs, these programs must constantly evolve and evaluate their curriculum to ensure they are indeed providing future teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to be effective (Dean, Lauer, & Urquhart, 2005). Research also indicates that when teachers have adequate preparation that is tailored specifically to the areas in which they plan to teach, they are more likely to stay in the teaching profession (Burstein et al., 2009).

This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010), outlines 16 characteristics of effective middle schools. One of the key characteristics is that "educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them" (AMLE, 2010, para. 7). In order to develop teachers with this mindset, they must be prepared in a way that will ensure they understand the complexities of adolescent learners and how to be responsive to their developmental

needs and interests. Young adolescent learners are diverse, not only in their intellectual abilities, but in their experiences, their social and emotional development, their physical growth, and more. Teachers who teach middle school need to be prepared to utilize their knowledge and understanding of young adolescents to develop challenging and equitable learning opportunities.

With these facts in mind, faculty at an urban institution on the east coast set out to develop an undergraduate program in middle grades education vastly different from other educator preparation programs. The full intent of this Middle Grades Special Education (MGSE) program is to prepare teachers who have the content knowledge as well as the pedagogical skills and experiences necessary to work with each and every child. Graduates from this program will be aware of and equipped to handle the challenges associated with teaching in urban, high-poverty school districts. Even more importantly, they will be prepared to meet the individual learning needs of adolescents, including students with disabilities who are included in their classrooms. This undergraduate preparation program adheres to the notion that middle school is a unique niche and requires additional specialized knowledge and skills in addition to the required content and pedagogical skills found in quality preparation programs. The most current research in middle school, special education, diversity, adolescent psychology, and reading was used as the foundation for developing this program, providing teachers exiting this program a comprehensive understanding and skill set that prepares them for the students they will teach.

Dual Certification

The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2017) stresses the need for teachers to “demonstrate skills and commitment that afford all P-12 students access to rigorous college- and career-ready standards” (Standard 1.4). However, many general education teachers feel unprepared to meet this challenge (Burstein et al., 2009; Kirk, 1998). Given that students with disabilities are best served by spending the majority of their time in the general education classroom (Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Wagner & Blackorby, 2004), it is imperative that general education teachers know how to meet the needs of every student.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, stated, “We know that when students with disabilities are held to high expectations and have access to the general curriculum in the regular classroom, they excel” (Layton, 2014, para. 7). To ensure all students with disabilities have this opportunity to excel, the U.S. Department of Education has applied more stringent criteria for states’ special education systems. These new requirements move beyond compliance to looking at progress and outcomes, including how students with disabilities perform on both national and state assessments. On the 2013 eighth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Math Assessment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013), 65% of students with disabilities scored “Below Basic” compared to 21% of students without disabilities, a difference of 44%. This statistically significant difference in scores further demonstrates the achievement gap experienced by students with disabilities across the nation. It also supports the need for teachers to be prepared to work with both typically and atypically developing learners.

Graduates of the MGSE program will receive training in two academic content areas (math, science, English, or social studies) within middle school education, grades 4-8, and also special education. Accordingly, graduates of the MGSE program will be prepared to take three certification exams: one in each of the two content areas (i.e., math, science, English, or social studies) and then, in order to be certified in special education, an additional exam in special education. Some states offer one P-12 exam for special education while others delineate age/grade bands. The program curriculum is designed to ensure graduates are well-prepared to be successful in both examination scenarios.

This “dual certification” along with strong content preparation serves many purposes and is one of the major strengths of the program. First and foremost, it prepares teachers who are confident and able to meet the needs of diverse learners including students with disabilities in their classrooms. Universal design for learning (UDL), response-to-intervention (RTI), positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), culturally responsive pedagogy, standards-based instruction, and technology integration are instructional concepts that are interwoven throughout the 128 hour curriculum. In addition, all courses within the program are aligned to and meet the appropriate content standards as well as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Standards (2015). Preservice teachers are taught how to design instruction upfront that will meet the needs of the widest range of learners in the classroom and how to further adapt their instruction for students who may have more significant needs (Darragh, 2007). In addition, preservice teachers take specific coursework focused on program planning for students with special needs, writing and implementing individualized education plans aligned to the common core curriculum, teaching students who are English language learners, and working with families and communities to meet the unique needs of their students.

Intensive Field Experiences

The current literature supports the need for intensive field-based experiences in teacher preparation (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007; Yost, 2006). A critical study by Connelly and Graham (2009) suggests that intensive student teaching experiences play a key role in the preparation and retention of special education teachers. In their study, teachers who had less than ten weeks of student teaching experience were much more likely to leave the field than their counterparts who had more than ten weeks of student teaching experience. In addition, school based stakeholders who were involved in the planning process for the program also echoed the importance of frequent, sustained, and varied experiences in the classroom.

Therefore, the MGSE program requires preservice teachers to be in the field for a minimum of 900 hours during their studies. To ensure these placements are not a burden on the local school districts, the MGSE program faculty meet with district and school personnel to provide an overview of the field experiences for each semester in the program as well as the activities and requirements related to each experience. Additionally, placements occur throughout the students’ time in the program. Students are placed in the schools an average of 16 hours each week during their first two semesters, allowing them to apply the theories and concepts being taught in college courses. The clinical practice (student teaching) experience in this program is split into two separate experiences. The first experience, the general education experience, is a ten-week experience that begins with local school districts when the school year begins. This schedule allows teacher candidates to see the beginning of the school year and how teachers set up classroom structures, rules, and procedures and initially implement those with students. Once this timeframe is over, teacher candidates continue to work in the schools one day a week, but return to the university campus for additional coursework and training.

During their second student teaching experience, candidates go into special education settings as co-teaching pairs. This allows them to develop and practice their collaboration and co-teaching skills in a classroom setting. Candidates engage in planning instruction, implementing student IEPs, attending IEP meetings, and the response to intervention process at their schools. Once this experience is completed, student teachers once again return to campus for follow-up coursework. While the MGSE program is preparing candidates for dual certification, many mentor teachers in the partner schools are not dually certified. For this reason, the decision was made to split the internship experiences so that student teachers would be mentored by a teacher highly qualified in the content area of the placement.

The intent of these varied and intensive field experiences is to provide candidates with multiple opportunities to experience working with diverse learners, to apply what they are learning in the college classroom, and to learn from their mentor teachers, colleagues, and middle school students. Students are afforded a wide variety of experiences, further strengthening their skills as well as their confidence levels (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007; Yost 2006).

Adolescent Psychology

In 2005 and 2006 the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) collaboratively planned and held two roundtable meetings to discuss the importance of teachers' understanding of child and adolescent development. One outcome from investigating "the problem" was that only 61% of middle school programs require their preservice teachers to complete a childhood and adolescent development course, even while, 50% of NCATE accredited institutions reported that they believed their preservice teachers needed more training in development (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2007). *Child and Adolescent Development Research and Teacher Education: Evidence-based Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice (NA)*). Furthermore, in reflecting on these roundtables James Comer noted that although educator preparation programs provide some training on basic child development, "we teach them the theory, but not enough about how to apply it" (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2007). *Child and Adolescent Development Research and Teacher Education: Evidence-based Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice (NA)*, p. iv).

Further bolstering these findings, a follow up report from NCATE, *How the Developmental Sciences Can Prepare Educators to Improve Student Achievement: Policy Recommendations* (2010), states that "the lack of exposure to developmental sciences knowledge in educator preparation programs has a negative impact on children and youth" (p. 3). For this reason, understanding the development, both typical and atypical, of children was incorporated into the MGSE program. Adolescents are going through a particularly unique period of development which needs to be nurtured in order for students to be successful (Alexander & George, 1981; Gutheinz-Pierce & Whoolery, 1995). This need is further magnified for students with disabilities. The reality is that most textbooks and human development courses emphasize the early development of children and merely "footnote" children as they develop from 12-18 years of age, increasing the likelihood that the psychological development of adolescents will be ignored, something which has been repeatedly shown to directly impact the academic success of students (Norton, 2000).

The goal of MGSE program is to directly prepare educators to meet the unique needs of young adolescents by understanding the diverse development of these young teens and embracing it to provide developmentally appropriate instruction. Also, while enrolled in their adolescent psychology course, preservice teachers are in the field and thus, can be instructed in the developmental concept, and then go and actually experience it in their field experiences. Through providing training and constant concrete reinforcement of the information through congruent field experiences, the goal is to solidify for the candidate the psychological needs and means of generating developmentally appropriate content for adolescents.

Furthermore, the goal of their course in adolescent psychology is to not only provide theoretical underpinnings, but to provide preservice teachers with a solid basis in the real-world application of the knowledge gained. The class topics include brain development, cognition, language, identity, peer and family relations, puberty, emerging sexuality, emotional development, and autonomy. Individual and group differences in development are discussed with an emphasis on the adolescent

with special needs. As a culminating course product preservice teachers are asked to complete a detailed case study of one of their middle school students.

Reading Instruction

Recent NAEP (2013) data shows that 60% of eighth-grade students with disabilities scored below the Basic Level of proficiency in reading (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). In addition to those with identified disabilities, many more students in middle schools also struggle in basic literacy skills. Rudimentary reading abilities do not guarantee that students will have the skillsets needed to demonstrate efficient literacy practices in all content areas or in multiple literacies (Conley, 2012). Students who possess proficient or advanced reading skills are better prepared to be “college and career ready” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3). However, in 2013, 76% of eighth graders in the state of North Carolina were reading at or above a basic level, while only 4% were reading at an advanced level (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Students with strong reading adroitness have a much greater understanding of information presented, and are able to effectively demonstrate their knowledge through writing, speaking, and other diverse and multiple literacies (Conley, 2012).

The debate of literacy instruction in the middle grades has been ongoing for decades. In 1997, Vacca stated that literacy instruction for young adolescents is not valued by policy makers, political leaders, and, perhaps most disturbing, school administrators. Educational reforms dictate the need for students to be proficient readers while still in the elementary grades, but as any educator can attest, what is *supposed* to happen is not always a representation of what *actually* happens.

When children realize that reading is a difficult and challenging task, they often try to hide their deficiencies and try to find ways to avoid reading altogether. For such students, it can be less embarrassing to be punished for acting out than it is to let others in on the shameful secret that they cannot read very well (Pressley, 2006). As years pass, these students lack cognitive competencies such as reading comprehension, word recognition, an understanding of text complexity, and reading fluency; this can cause children to become more and more disengaged and repeatedly have low motivation for reading (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

In order for students to effectively progress in language and literacy, reading skills must continually be taught and reinforced in all grade levels. However, the concept of being a teacher of reading does not always fully resonate with educators in the middle and high school levels. Often, this is due to the fact that little or no formal reading instruction is received in educator preparation. Besides not being well prepared to teach reading skills to students, middle school teachers also often feel there is not enough time to teach anything but the subject matter of their specific content area. Most middle school teachers consider themselves teachers of content instead of teachers of reading and literacy skills, since the overall perception is that reading is taught in the elementary grades (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

It is imperative that educators have a strong awareness of reading instruction in order to be most effective in their teaching. Middle grades teachers must be cognizant of early literacy skills in order to determine fundamental reading skills in which a student may be deficient. Every teacher should have a general understanding of the processes involved in learning to read since the task is so invaluable (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Educators need to recognize that students must “feel there is value in reading and writing” (Morrow, 2014, p. 22). Unfortunately, many middle school teachers are not trained in literacy skills and are unsure of how to help middle school students become more engaged in the reading process.

At the inception of designing the MGSE program, three reading courses were developed with the understanding that all preservice teachers, no matter their content focus, would be required to take these classes. The purpose of this design was to help the preservice teachers going through the program to understand their role as a teacher of reading. A recent study by Shanahan, Shanahan, and Misichia (2011) determined that mathematicians, historians, and chemists read texts differently. With the Common Core Standards focused on content area literacy, middle school teachers must know how to effectively teach reading within the specific content area as well. If teachers are unclear of what to do, many simply do nothing. The MGSE reading courses were designed with this in mind; these courses, which focus on strategies for reading and writing in the middle grades, literacy in the content areas, and assessing reading difficulties, allow preservice teachers the opportunity to learn literacy skills and strategies that can be used to engage and motivate students to become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

While the general focus of the information is on strategies for the improvement of fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary skills, preservice teachers also gain background knowledge of early literacy skills. This allows them to have a much stronger understanding of the complexity of reading, and will allow them to better acknowledge pivotal literacy skills that may not have been strongly developed. The goal is to graduate competent middle school educators who have a strong knowledge base and a strong appreciation for the importance of reading. Within the content domains in middle school, literacy is at the core, and by allowing teacher candidates the opportunity to learn about literacy skills and strategies, these novice teachers will be prepared to motivate and encourage all students, including struggling readers, unmotivated readers, and those with disabilities.

Conclusion

An additional unique feature of this MGSE program is that it was created in collaboration with local school administrators and teachers, state agency representatives, faculty from the liberal arts and sciences, parents, and members of the community. The process began by asking “What do we want and need our middle school teachers to be able to do?” With this end in mind, the group worked diligently together to use the existing research and develop coursework and experiences that will prepare teachers for a diverse middle school classroom and support the inclusion of students with special needs. Teachers exiting this program will have the content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and experiences necessary to promote student achievement for all learners. The expectation is that this program can be a model for teacher preparation programs as they revise their own curriculum to better prepare middle school educators to meet the needs of all learners. By enhancing the structure of education preparation providers, pre-service teachers will have a much greater foundation; this is a critical component in the recruitment and retention of educators.

Based on the research and the strategic design of this preparation program, it is anticipated that graduates from this program will be better equipped and prepared to meet the diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms. Also, given the factors that contribute to teacher retention, these graduates will have the experiences necessary to support them as they navigate their first years of teaching, reducing the chance for attrition. Through quality and focused teacher preparation, the MGSE program intends to meet the need for highly effective and qualified teachers in middle school and special education who are able to work with each and every child in a variety of settings.

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