



Monitoring the Middle School Movement: Are Teachers In Step?

John A. Huss
Northern Kentucky University

A descriptive study examined the degree to which middle level teachers in grades 6-8 in three states accept the tenets of the middle school philosophy. The guiding questions were: (1) Does a cross difference in variables exist among teachers from different organizational settings or grade configurations in respect to the teacher's acceptance of the tenets of the middle school philosophy? (2) Does a cross difference in variables exist among teachers who hold different types of certification or licensure in respect to the teacher's acceptance of the tenets of the middle school philosophy? Based on the overall data, the middle school movement appears to be making steady progress. Data in this study suggest substantial teacher acceptance of the middle school philosophy across the various organizational settings. Pearson chi square values denoting significant differences across building configurations were revealed for eight of the 20 survey questions. A greater sense of uniformity existed across certification or licensure types with significant differences uncovered for four of the 20 questions.

Many could argue the middle school movement is walking in molasses as an increasing number of districts show renewed interest in K-8 alignments or otherwise abandon key elements of the middle school concept. Determining the relative success of the 40-year middle school movement and its well crafted ethos would be much easier to do if "middle school" were a single entity that meant the same thing to all people. Let's face it; teachers interact with middle level students in a variety of settings. In addition to so-named middle schools, the list includes junior high schools, K-8 schools, and elementary schools. These same teachers also possess a variety of certification or licensure types, ranging from elementary to middle grades to secondary. Amidst such a cacophony of confusion, do some teachers view "middle school" as a *culture* with its successful operation dependent upon teachers' attitudes and approaches, while others view it as a mere *configuration* dictated primarily by programmatic characteristics? Simply put, do all teachers of middle level students exhibit the same philosophical commitment to the middle school model?

Sustaining the growth of the middle school movement becomes a daunting task indeed if the very practitioners who lead the classrooms do not identify or align themselves with the middle school philosophy, or fail to understand the tenets underlying this philosophy. According to *This We Believe*, a seminal document generated from the National Middle School Association (1982, 1995, 2003), the middle school "philosophy" provides a clear set of guiding characteristics for successful, developmentally responsive middle schools to embody. Among these are: a shared vision; educators committed to young adolescents; a positive school climate; an adult advocate for every child; family and community partnerships; and high expectations for all students, buttressed by an integrative, exploratory curriculum.

Yet if teachers consider only certain building configurations to be bonafide "middle schools" or are professionally prepared in areas other than a middle level specialization, the result could be a wide gap in middle level education wherein the middle school concept is not practiced, or is attempted with indifference simply because

of the name chiseled on the building marquee or the grade denotations printed on a state certification. According to Mizell (2000a), so long as these divisions of belief and practice exist among middle level educators, it is not likely there will be the consensus of conviction and action necessary to have a major impact on student learning. Revisiting this gray area involving teacher attitudes toward the middle school philosophy may provide valuable information to help gauge whether the middle school movement is making an impact where it ultimately matters most, in the hearts and minds of the middle level teachers.

While uniqueness may be fascinating for snowflakes and thumbprints, it brings only dissonance and fluster to an educational movement dependent upon adherence to an unequivocal set of underlying beliefs. If teachers universally accept the aforementioned middle school philosophy and believe that "middle school" is an *idea* that should be discernible wherever transcendent students are being taught, the tenets can serve as a common denominator or shared vision for middle level teachers, thus effectively negating any differences that may arise from variables such as organizational setting or certification/licensure type. Conversely, differing perceptions across building configurations or certification lines as to what constitutes a "middle school teacher" could signal an inconsistency in how early adolescent students experience "middle school" in the classroom.

The Carnegie report (1989, 2000) recommends that middle schools be staffed with teachers who are expert at teaching early adolescents and who have the education and training necessary for the assignment. It is reasonable to postulate that the degree to which a particular school setting is consciously or unconsciously aligned with the middle school philosophy, or the extent to which a building configuration actually resembles a "complete" middle school, *may* have a bearing on the extent to which the teachers in that setting feel a sense of urgency to likewise adopt the philosophy, are encouraged to adopt the philosophy, or are provided with adequate professional development to adopt the philosophy. Schools, after all, are both socially conditioned and subject to political influences (Woods and Bagley, 1996).

The professional preparation of middle level teachers might be the X factor in determining the ultimate acceptance of middle school tenets in a given school or district. The importance of specialized middle grades preparation can certainly not be overstated. Stahler (1996) compared a group of middle level student teachers that were prepared in a middle school teacher education program with a group of middle level student teachers that were prepared in an elementary or a secondary teacher education program. These student teachers (n=34) completed a questionnaire about their attitudes toward middle level learners and middle level teaching. Results of analyses showed the student teachers with special middle school preparation knew more about early adolescents,

were familiar with the literature, prepared lesson plans that included more practices appropriate for middle level learners, taught more highly rated lessons, and had a better attitude toward middle level teaching than those who had been prepared in a more general program.

Several studies, however, have suggested that fewer than one in four middle grades teachers have received specialized preparation before they begin their careers (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Scales, 1992; Scales & McEwin, 1994). This practice of staffing middle level schools with teachers and other professional personnel who lack special preparation for working with young adolescents appears to be a perennial roadblock to excellence in middle level education. In short, preservice teacher programs, state departments of education, and the profession itself have struggled to divest themselves from the elementary-secondary mindset and, thus, have largely failed to recognize the essentiality of introducing specific preparation programs for middle level teachers.

As a result, many unwitting middle grades teachers fail to put serious effort into becoming adept middle level instructors because they are waiting to be elevated to the high school or assigned to elementary classrooms to teach primary children. With a prevailing attitude of "no special know-how required," many middle level teachers forgo opportunities to improve their skills and dispositions focused directly on the middle level environment. In many states, for example, the only requirement for obtaining a middle school license is to have an elementary or secondary credential and teach one year at the middle grades level (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Likewise, the patterns of "grade overlaps" (K-8, 6-9, 7-12) found in many teaching licenses negate the alleged significance of a separate middle school license and send a message that the middle grades option is relatively unimportant inasmuch as both elementary and high school teachers are also licensed for the middle grades classroom (McEwin & Dickinson, 1996). As an example, one state's current plan includes the following options: grades pre k-3, 1-8, 4-8, 7-9 and 7-12. Presented with these choices when considering future employment possibilities, many prospective teachers select programs leading to licensure in grades 1-8 or 7-12 because these grade spans make them more "marketable" (McEwin and Dickinson, 1995).

A study was conducted to examine the degree to which middle level teachers in grades 6-8 in three states accept those basic principles, ideas, and ideals which grow out of a belief that "middle school" is an educational response to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during transcendence. Two questions guided the study: (1) Does a cross difference in variables exist among teachers from different organizational settings or grade configurations in respect to the teacher's acceptance of the tenets of the middle school philosophy? (2) Does a cross difference in variables exist among teachers who hold different types of certification or licensure in respect to the teacher's acceptance of the tenets of the middle school

philosophy? Knowing the extent to which middle level teachers endorse and are committed to the middle school philosophy could provide a yardstick for teacher educators, school administrators, and middle school researchers who are often answerable for difficulties encountered with innovations in education.

A Review of Related Literature

In the 1970's, Wiles and Thomason (1975) commented on the state of germinal research efforts in middle level education and described it as being of "remarkably low quality" (p. 421). Hopefully, we are now coming of age in middle level research by identifying an agenda for research that can inform and extend our agenda for action. We are also raising common questions and beginning to identify the types of studies we need to address those questions (Strahan, 1992).

The inaugural literature on middle level education is concerned almost exclusively with the emanation of the junior high model and the subsequent inability of the junior high school to effectively fulfill its mission and meet the academic and social needs of pre-adolescent students. The pioneering works of Koos (1927) and Gruhn and Doulgass (1956) are particularly noteworthy. The perceived failure of the junior high school is quite significant and represents the beginning of an unfortunate pattern of instability throughout middle level education that continues to the present day.

Within the body of literature focusing on middle level education, variables such as grade organization and building configuration are found in abundance. Jenkins and McEwin (1992) point out that grade organization has remained a controversial topic in American education for over 80 years. Indeed, beginning in 1918 with a survey by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools to determine the most common grade configuration in America's junior high schools, and continuing into the new millennium, the quest to expose the "best" physical arrangement for the middle grades has left us with data to literally support any combination one would care to advocate. A gradual transition from the junior high to the middle school arrangement has, however, clearly emerged with each passing decade. For instance, several studies documented the growth in the percentage of schools organized in the 6-7-8 pattern from 15% (Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, and Keefe, 1981) to 40% (Alexander and McEwin, 1989) to 50% (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, and Melton, 1993) to 55% (McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins, 1995). In a 1993 national study, 65% of the principals reported that their schools had moved to a 5-8 or 6-8 grade level configuration, as compared to 25% in 1981 reporting such a change (Valentine, et al, 1993).

Nonetheless, the recent work of Paglin and Fager (1997) now hints at a revivification of the K-8 format (often referred to as the "elemiddle school"). In the same vein, Offenberg (2001) compared the effects of attending public Philadelphia K-8 schools or public middle schools on

eighth- and ninth-grade achievement and discovered students attending K-8 schools had higher reading, mathematics, and science achievement than students attending middle schools serving similar communities. Similarly, a study of Baltimore City Public Schools reveals that students in K-8 schools produced significantly higher reading, language arts, and mathematics scores than did students in 6-8 schools (Connolly, Yakimowski-Srebnick & Russo, 2002). Such vacillation on the "configuration of choice" may have a role in the ongoing challenge of the middle school philosophy to engender a strong sense of identification among classroom teachers who are employed within such a diversified collection of "middle school" arrangements.

Despite the perpetuity of this debate, the overall literature suggests that when considering the "proper" arrangement of grades for the middle years of schooling, the grade level configuration alone appears to bear little consequence on student learning, school adjustment, and personal growth. According to Norton and Lewis (2000), it is the execution of appropriate programs delivered in the best institutions that will provide the most responsive education for the young adolescent. Hough (1999) insists a bona fide middle school is not an organizational structure consisting of a specific grade level configuration and a name that includes the word *middle*, rather it is a set of characteristics that meet the needs of the emerging adolescent. Roeser, et al (2000) suggest that it is the integration of specific instructional and interpersonal dimensions that create effective middle schools.

Nevertheless, some research has inferred that "complete" middle schools may foster higher teacher efficacy, which leads to positive student attitudes (Warren and Payne, 1997). Further, teachers in "complete" middle schools tend to perform better and have a more positive, humanistic attitude toward teaching and student control than do their counterparts in the junior high school and other middle level settings.

Studies of teacher thinking have revealed that if teachers' implicit theories about learners or their mental images of effective teaching are contrary to that embodied in a new curriculum or teaching method, they may be unlikely to bring the innovation alive with great enthusiasm, thoroughness, and persistence. As represented in the literature, teacher thinking can be described as a set of moderating contextual factors that influence substantially the outcomes of teacher effectiveness and curriculum effectiveness (Clark and Peterson, 1986; Cochran-Smith (1990); Richardson, 1996). A study by Vulliamy (1997) agrees that teachers' beliefs, values, and practices are powerful mediators of their interpretations and responses to imposed changes. To many teachers, middle schools are not compelling, and the purpose of middle schools is fuzzy and clouded by jargon that, to them, has little relevance to the day-to-day challenges of teaching and learning (Mizell, 2000b).

Recent middle grades research has specifically isolated a need for teacher attitudes that embrace the concepts of the middle school model. Dickinson and Butler (2001) uncover six elements of the transition to middle schools that ultimately hinder full implementation of the middle school concept in many schools: use of an incremental stage implementation model, lack of teacher education programs, lack of curriculum development, inadequate leadership, a paucity of research, and misunderstanding of the middle school concept. Similarly, Pitton (2001) discusses the need for changing teacher perceptions of middle school students in order to create a welcoming school and classroom environment that fulfills the goals of the middle school concept. Teachers and school districts are encouraged to focus on students' changing needs by making connections to the middle school model.

Indeed, trends beginning in the early 1990's indicated an increasing number of middle level schools were implementing programs recommended to align more closely with the developmental needs of early adolescents (Epstein and MacIver, 1990; Valentine et al., 1993). Is this enough? Despite sporadic studies on the classroom implementation of middle school principles, a deficiency exists in solid research on how middle level teachers actually encircle and accept the tenets of the middle school concept, either in a general sense or as the tenets apply to their own unique educational environments. The mere reported implementation of a classroom practice could be misleading. As the research on teachers' thought processes alludes, if teachers do not embrace or give credence to a specific practice, the desired outcomes may still fail to be realized, even though, on paper, the program component appears to have been "implemented." The components are, in fact, implemented without integrity.

What is lacking then in the literature is a study or series of studies to examine organizational setting and its relationship to teacher acceptance of the middle school philosophy. Similarly there is a lack of studies that examine teacher certification/licensure and its relationship to teacher acceptance of the middle school philosophy. Without the proper expectations and support by classroom teachers, the status of the middle school movement is precarious at best and the vision of middle level settings that are scholastically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable will remain as little more than fodder for academia.

Statement of Hypothesis

The null hypotheses (H_0) for this study were twofold:

1. There will be no significant difference in how middle level teachers from four distinct building configurations (teachers from schools referred to as "middle schools," organized with some combination of grades 6-8; teachers from schools referred to as "junior high schools;" teachers who teach middle level grades in K-8 or 1-8 schools; and teachers who teach 6th grade

in an elementary K-6 or 1-6 building) accept the tenets of the middle school philosophy.

2. There will be no significant difference in how middle level teachers possessing various types of teaching certification or licensure (elementary, middle, secondary) accept the tenets of the middle school philosophy.

Method

The sample for this study consisted of 200 randomly selected middle level teachers in three states from the four dominant organizational settings in which one typically finds grades 6-8, or some combination thereof: (A) 50 teachers from schools specifically referred to as "middle schools," organized with some combination of grades 6-8; (B) 50 teachers from schools designated as "junior high schools;" (C) 50 teachers who teach middle level grades in K-8 or 1-8 buildings in which the elementary and middle level grades share a common structure; (D) 50 teachers who teach 6th grade in an elementary K-6 or 1-6 building.

The states of Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio were selected for the study because these states provide "heartland" moderation with a desirable balance of urban/rural districts. Some studies, for example, have suggested that *very* rural or *very* urban school systems are often incompatible with the middle school, for explanations ranging from a perceived loss of "community identity" to a prevailing lack of socioeconomic "fit" (Becker, 1987; DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald, 1995).

A total of 280 questionnaires were mailed (70 in each category of building configuration; 112 to Indiana, 91 to Kentucky, 77 to Ohio) with 204 being returned (53 elementary, 50 junior high, 51 middle school, 50 K-8), an overall 73% return rate. Forty-two percent of the questionnaires were returned from Indiana teachers, 31 percent were from Kentucky, and 27 percent were from Ohio. To provide homogeneity and simplify comparisons, only the first 200 returned questionnaires (50 in each category of building configuration) were used for analysis. The average years of classroom experience for the teachers who responded were: Junior High (13), Middle School (15), Elementary (15), and K/8 (13), for a combined average of 14 years.

The measuring instrument for this study was a researcher-generated questionnaire that made use of a 1-to-5 Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree). Respondents were also asked to denote the type of building in which they teach as well as the type of professional certification/licensure held. Survey questions were compiled from desirable middle level attributes as articulated by such landmark sources as Wiles and Bondi (1981), Carnegie Council's *Turning Points* (1989; 2000) and the National Middle School Association's *This We Believe* (1982, 1995, 2003). Survey questions (and the category of the middle school philosophy apposite to each question were as follows):

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1.	The entire school program should offer many opportunities for physical movement	Meeting the Needs of Emerging Adolescents
2.	The school schedule should be flexible and permit time for recreation breaks or special activities	Meeting the Needs of Emerging Adolescents
3.	Parents should have a role in governing the school (e.g. through school site councils, decision-making teams, etc.)	Parental Cooperation
4.	Each learner should be able to identify one teacher to whom he/she may turn for support and guidance	Meeting the Needs of Emerging Adolescents
5.	Each learner should have the chance to explore a wide range of interests through exploratory courses, mini-courses, activities, etc.	Meeting the Needs of Emerging Adolescents
6.	Students should be given directed practice in the use of materials and the "ways of knowing" appropriate to the subject (e.g., studying history as a historian would)	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
7.	The use of interdisciplinary teams does not improve the quality of learning among students in grades 6-8	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
8.	The use of multiage groups improves student learning	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
9.	Team planning time should be scheduled during the day	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
10.	Learning tasks should be individualized	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
11.	I believe students should be grouped by ability	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
12.	Students should be housed in smaller areas, which enable them to identify with a smaller group	Meeting the Needs of Emerging Adolescents
13.	Teachers should have special training for middle school	A Staff of Middle School teaching provided by the school system Specialists
14.	Administrators and teachers should understand and be committed to the middle school concept	A Staff of Middle School Specialists
15.	Each curriculum area should have a prepared statement of goals and a continuum of objectives	Planning for Continuous Progress
16.	Evaluation of learner progress should be keyed to the goals and objectives	Planning for Continuous Progress
17.	Instruction should match the adopted goals and objectives	Planning for Continuous Progress
18.	Textbooks should be used seldom or never	Instruction for Middle Level Learners
19.	Reports to parents concerning learner progress should be multi-dimensional, relying more on narrative accounts and less on letter or numerical "grades"	Planning for Continuous Progress
20.	I consider myself to be a middle school teacher	Self Identification

Data analysis was accomplished through the use of the two-dimensional chi square in the form of 4 x 3 and 3x 3 contingency tables with each middle level setting being compared with each of the other middle level settings, and each certification type compared with each of the other certification types. The chi-square is a nonparametric test of significance appropriate when the data are in the form of frequency counts. It can also be used to determine whether two variables are independent by comparing their observed joint occurrence with their expected joint occurrence, assuming independence. To both acknowledge minimum frequency thresholds of certain cells and to streamline the reporting of data, survey categories were “lumped” or “collapsed” to achieve this efficiency: “Strongly Disagree (SD)” and “Disagree (D)” were logically combined as “Disagreement” while “Strongly Agree (SA)” and “Agree (A)” were merged into “Agreement.” Certification categories were likewise synthesized to reflect “Elementary,” “Middle,” (which includes teachers with precise middle school certification and teachers with a so-stated middle school endorsement, acquired through an approved program of studies), and “Secondary.” Such aggregation preserved the integrity of the data as originally collected.

Cross Difference in Variables Among Organizational Setting and Middle Level Teacher Acceptance of the Middle School Philosophy: A Summary of Findings

Data in this study suggest substantial teacher acceptance of the middle school philosophy across the various organizational settings. There were, for example, no significant differences revealed on the following items: the school schedule should be flexible and permit time for recreation breaks or special activities; each curriculum area should have a prepared statement of goals and a continuum of objectives; evaluation should be keyed to the goals and objectives; instruction should match the goals and objectives; students should be given directed practice in the use of materials and the “ways of knowing” appropriate to the subject; and the value of interdisciplinary teams. Such findings are consistent with earlier published research summaries from the National Middle School Association that concluded effective programs and practices, not grade configuration, determine quality schools (Lucas and Valentine, 2001).

Pearson chi square values denoting significant differences among building configurations were, however, revealed for eight of the 20 questions on the survey (see Table 1). This lack of symmetry on 40 percent of the items would suggest *some* association between school setting and how teachers accept the tenets of the middle school philosophy. The items with significant differences may serve to isolate those tenets that have, perhaps, made less headway in gaining universal acceptance by middle level teachers in all settings.

Cross Difference in Variables Among Certification or Licensure Type and Middle Level Teacher Acceptance of the Middle School Philosophy: A Summary of Findings

A greater sense of uniformity existed across certification or licensure types than building configurations. Efforts by teacher education programs and district-sponsored professional development to emphasize experiential, student-centered, cognitive approaches to learning may slowly be blurring the lines between elementary, middle, and secondary certification. Pearson chi square values indicating significance among certification types were uncovered for four of the 20 survey questions (See Table 2).

Additional Findings: Middle Level Teachers as a Group

With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the 200 middle level teachers who participated in this survey (with a combined average of 14 years classroom experience) were in agreement as an aggregate with 15 of the 17 questions for which an affirmative response would be viewed as consistent with the beliefs of the middle school philosophy. Similarly the teachers disputed two of two statements for which a negative response was consistent with the beliefs of the middle school philosophy. Nonetheless, the items where teacher responses were *incompatible* with middle school beliefs can certainly not be disregarded or discounted. In fact, these responses are very telling, especially when placed in juxtaposition with the idea that 61 percent of the participants considered themselves to be “middle school” teachers. The teachers, for example, rejected the notion that reports to parents concerning learner progress should be multi-dimensional, relying more on narrative accounts and less on letter or numerical grades (62% disagreed or were unsure). Teachers disagreed textbooks should be used seldom or never (75% disagreed), demonstrating a reluctance to subjugate the textbook even within a classroom philosophy based around learning that really matters, higher-order thinking skills, authentic contexts, and demonstrations that engage students in role performances. In addition, the teachers were collectively unsure about the use of multiage groups to improve student learning (58% unsure). The argument can be made the aforementioned tenets are more than incidental components of the middle school concept. In many ways these tenets represent much of the kernel of the middle school movement.

Discussion

Based on the overall data, the middle school movement appears to be making steady progress. The first phase of the movement was obviously the creation and development of middle schools themselves. The second phase, currently in progress, emphasizes increased knowledge and skills for principals and teachers, the strengthening of curriculum and the significant reform of education for young adolescents. The level of agreement by teachers with the tenets of the middle school philosophy

Table 1. Organizational Setting and Teacher Acceptance of Middle School Philosophy

Question from Instrument	X ² / probability	Significant Difference
3) Parents should have a role in governing the school	13.8 0.002	Elem (46% A, 26% U), JH (60% A, 10% U), Mid (56% A, 24% U), K-8 (54% A, 36% U) JH vs. K-8
5) Each learner should have the chance to explore a wide range of interests through exploratory courses, minicourses.	8.62 0.044	Elem (54% A, 32% U), JH (80% A, 10% U), Mid (80% A, 10% U), K-8 (72% A, 18% U) Elem vs. JH, Elem vs. Mid
10) Learning tasks should be individualized.	8.22 0.016	Elem (66% A), JH (36% A), Mid (56% A), K-8 (56%) Elem vs. JH, Mid vs. JH, JH vs. K-8,
11) I believe students should be grouped by ability.	13.1 0.041	Elem (22% A, 30% U), JH (34% A, 24% U), Mid (46% A, 18% U), K-8 (22% A, 42% U) Elem vs. Mid, Mid vs. K-8
12) Students should be housed in smaller areas, which enable them to identify with a smaller group.	14.5 0.025	Elem (70% A, 18% U), JH (78% A, 12% U), Mid (62% A, 18% U), K-8 (50% A, 38% U) JH vs. K-8
13) Teachers in grades 6-8 should have special training for middle school teaching provided by the school system.	15.0 0.020	Elem (54% A, 36% U), JH (68% A, 14% U), Mid (80% A, 10% U), K-8 (58% A, 24% U) Elem vs. Mid, Elem vs. JH
14) Administrators and teachers should understand and be committed to the middle school concept	15.2 0.002	Elem (68% A, 22% U), JH (72% A, 16% U), Mid (80% A, 10% U), K-8 (50% A, 40% U) JH vs. K-8, K-8 vs. Mid
20) I consider myself to be a middle school teacher.	16.4 0.000	Elem (36% A), JH (72% A), Mid (80% A), K-8 (60% A) Elem vs. Mid, Elem vs. JH, Elem vs. K-8

Note. Elem is abbreviation for Elementary, Mid is abbreviation for Middle School, JH is abbreviation for Junior High, A is abbreviation for Agreement, U is abbreviation for Undecided. Terms in bold print indicate pairings of significant differences.

*p < .05

df=6

Table 2. Certification / Licensure Type and Teacher Acceptance of Middle School Philosophy

Question from Instrument	X ² / probability	Significant Difference
1) The entire school program should offer many opportunities for physical movement.	11.7 0.020	Elem (76% A, 9% U), Mid (75% A, 10% U), Sec (53% A, 31% U) Elem vs. Sec , Mid vs. Sec
4) Each learner should be able to identify one teacher to whom he/she may turn for support and guidance.	9.68 0.046	Elem (72% A, 13% U) Mid (87% A, 8% U); Sec (66% A, 19% U) Elem vs. Mid , Mid vs. Sec
9) Team planning time should be scheduled during the day	15.6 0.004	Elem (79% A, 11% U), Mid (86% A, 7% U), Sec (53% A, 25% U) Elem vs. Sec , Mid vs. Sec
9) Team planning time should be scheduled during the day.	14.3 0.006	Elem (39% A), Mid (71% A), Sec (56% A) Elem vs. Mid

Note. Elem is abbreviation for Elementary, Mid is abbreviation for Middle School, Sec is abbreviation for Secondary, A is for Agreement, U is for Undecided. Terms in bold print indicate pairings of significant differences.

*p < .05
df=4

(building configuration and certification type notwithstanding) shows recognition that the disparate needs of young adolescents were not being adequately met within the context of previous administrative units. Teachers are expressing widespread agreement with those program components that align with key recommendations from the literature on middle school education.

Perhaps most encouraging was the lack of significant differences between the attitudes of teachers in buildings called “middle schools” and the attitudes of teachers in buildings called “junior high schools.” The junior high school, with its reputation for a sterile fixed curriculum and didactic approach to instruction, has been perceived for decades as an antithesis to the organizational flexibility, individualization, and humanistic sensitivity of the middle school. Both organizational settings appear to be moving closer together in the attitudes they exhibit toward meeting the developmental and social needs of young adolescent students.

Interestingly the questionnaire items which produced significant differences for certain pockets of middle level teachers were those items concentrated in clusters of tenets most explicitly representative of a middle school structure (e.g. Meeting Needs of Emerging Adolescent, Instruction for Middle Level Learners, Parental Cooperation, Staffing in Middle School). Despite the

absence of a clear trend regarding those groupings that revealed significant differences, the data suggest that some strong and traditional schooling cultures might still exist. Teachers who teach sixth grade in an elementary building, teachers who are elementary-certified, teachers who teach middle level grades in a K-8 building, and teachers who are secondary-certified appear to be the most vulnerable to a departure from the tenets of the middle school philosophy. Targeting the improvement of teachers’ learning through consistent and high quality middle school-specific staff development holds promise as an effective intervention.

Teachers who teach sixth grade in the elementary school, for instance, must be made aware of the value of student exploration and the wisdom of special training for middle school teaching provided by the district. Most importantly, these teachers need to identify themselves as middle school, not elementary, teachers. Likewise, it is important for teachers who are elementary-certified to align themselves with the middle school philosophy if they are teaching middle level students. Otherwise, the teachers may defer to an “elementary” predisposition and fail to adequately acknowledge the needs of “tween-agers.”

K-8 teachers were irresolute about the value in housing middle level students in smaller areas. Such buildings may benefit from a variation of the “school within a school” or “small school” concept to personalize teaching

and learning. To avoid sacrificing middle level educational needs to elementary or high school program priorities, educators should provide separate bell schedules, faculty, and budget categories for the middle level program as well as staff development based on the separate needs of the middle level staff. Teachers should be involved in the planning and reorganization of the middle level school curriculum and programs. Ninety percent of K-8 teachers were either opposed to or undecided about the tenet that administrators and teachers should understand and be committed to the middle school concept. Such a scenario is quite unsettling and should be a cause of great concern to those who are in leadership roles within the middle school movement. Teachers in K-8 schools also need to understand the value of parental involvement in the governance of the school (K-8 teachers led all building configurations with more than 1/3 of respondents “undecided”); this sharing of authority with parents clearly helps to establish a coordinated home-school effort.

Teachers with secondary certification should come to recognize the importance of physical movement, team planning, and, like elementary-certified teachers, the ability of students to identify one teacher to whom they can go for guidance and support. Junior high teachers in the sample were unconvinced about the need to individualize instruction, thus effectively disregarding the premise that students are always unique, even in classes of supposedly homogeneously grouped students. Strikingly, middle school teachers led all organizational settings in their agreement with ability grouping, and, therefore, must work to create a culture of detracking in which the right and ability of students from every background to learn from the best kind of curriculum is respected. The common practice of pacing instruction to the “average” student must be reevaluated.

While the affirmation that middle level schools should be about the business of developing a true identity has not been fully realized to date, there is certainly room for optimism. True, some middle level settings and professional certification types display evidence of “blended outcomes” as they reconcile traditional structures with the components of the middle school philosophy, yet the teachers as a whole appear to be moving toward greater implementation of middle school programming. Such findings should inspire middle school advocates who frequently face a significant communications challenge as they attempt to inform educators as to the reasons why middle schools exist and why the experiences they should provide for young adolescents are different from those at the elementary and secondary levels. This study serves to isolate areas of concern, while simultaneously articulating the tenets where little disagreement by teachers exists. In this way, precious professional development time can be utilized in strengthening those areas where attitudes of middle level teachers may conflict with the middle school philosophy rather than continually revisiting those components where concurrence is already in evidence.

Limitations of the Study

The attributes represented within the questions on this survey describe effective middle schools. They do not *necessarily* present a recipe for making any given school more effective. Quite simply, they are “artifacts of effectiveness” or things produced by effective schools. Thus, the questionnaire can provide only arbitrary, albeit research-based, indicators of what exemplary middle school programs might (and, perhaps, should) look like. The questionnaire cannot regard the level of consistency within, passion for, or integrity to an educational model that may or may not be present at the various and sundry schools where the responding teachers practice their crafts. The results of this study, then, represent only one aspect of a middle school profile. It is the whole of the interactions in any given school environment that ultimately determines the effectiveness of that school.

As noted earlier, computation of the chi square values in this study required the collapsing of Likert categories in order to meet the assumption of adequate cell sizes, although recent scholarship in this area (e.g. Howell, 1998) is suggesting that previous assumptions of this nature may be overly conservative and perhaps unnecessary. Nevertheless, the lumping of categories removed the original distinctions between “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” and “Strongly Agree” and “Agree.” The same is true for certification types (“Elementary + Middle” and “Secondary + Middle” were included under the larger umbrella of “Middle and Middle Endorsed”). For purposes of analysis, merging these graduated distinctions affected the data very little (if at all), with acuteness of description more than statistical contribution being sacrificed.

The selection process was limited to those middle level schools for which a roster of teachers could be attained with reasonable effort after a particular school was randomly selected. While a randomly selected school was disqualified in less than one percent of the cases, consumers of this study should be aware of the inherent sampling bias. The data, of course, are limited to those teachers who received a questionnaire and returned it. While the sample size for this study was adequate, generalizability of the results should not be overstated. Being a cross-sectional study, the results sought to represent all relevant subgroups in the population, but, like Heraclitus who could not step into the same river twice (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), data collected in this study represent, at best, a snapshot of teachers in three states at a particular time and their attitudes toward various tenets of the middle school philosophy. As with any questionnaire, respondents can be unduly influenced by the scope of their general understanding and private interpretations of question content, any anticipatory mindset that may be present (“What am I *supposed* to say?”), and the amount of time devoted to thoughtfully completing the instrument.

Future Research Needed

The endeavor initiated with this study calls for further expansion. As noted earlier, it is generally accepted that the middle school philosophy is followed more aggressively in certain regions and geographic districts and less so in others. The question begs if the tendencies exposed in this study are a territorial peculiarity or a national trend. Enlargement of the study into other sections of the country, along with increased sample sizes, would serve to capture the attitudes of more and more teachers, thereby helping to determine if independent investigators, in fact, detect similar relationships. Studies using Likert-type survey instruments and chi square analysis, however, do not effectively answer the question of “why” middle level teachers feel the way they do about the various tenets of the middle school philosophy.

A demographic of particular interest might be the subjects taught by the middle level teachers who respond to a future questionnaire. This additional information might serve to reveal whether teachers in certain content areas are more prone to agreement or disagreement with the middle school philosophy.

A future qualitative study in the form of an interview study might focus on the in-depth perceptions of teachers in the various building configurations. Two interviewing approaches would be germane for this research question: one-on-one and/or focus group. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), interviews have a unique purpose, namely, to acquire data not obtainable in any other way. There are certain things, which simply cannot be observed or quantified, including (but not limited to) past events, events, which occur outside of the researcher’s sphere of observation, and mental processes.

Also, according to Kvale (1996), there is a move away from obtaining knowledge only through external observation and experimental manipulation of human subjects, toward an understanding by means of conversations with the humans to be understood. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) assert, “You cannot, except through interviewing, get the actor’s explanations. The opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry” (p.65).

A focus group interview of middle level teachers in which participants are given latitude to expand on the middle school philosophy may provide excellent insights into teacher attitudes and how these ideas are manifested in the classroom. According to McMillan (1989), interviewing more than one person at a time sometimes proves very useful. Some people need company to be emboldened to talk; and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people who know one another.

Summary

With no significant differences among teachers on 12 of the 20 questionnaire items when compared by building configuration, and no significant differences

among teachers on 16 of the 20 questionnaire items when compared by certification or licensure, data in this study suggest the middle school movement is advancing satisfactorily throughout middle level education. No clear patterns were established for those items where significant differences were revealed, although teachers who teach sixth-graders in an elementary building, teachers who are elementary-certified, teachers who teach middle level grades in a K-8 building, and teachers who are secondary-certified appear to demonstrate the greatest divergence between middle school ideology and teacher attitude. Teachers and administrators can no longer say there are no models, no best practices, no techniques, no assistance, or no high performing schools to see or from which to learn. Identifying sites with high implementation of middle level programming concepts for the purpose of having practitioners visit those sites should be encouraged (Russell, 1994). High-quality, comprehensive staff development is paramount.

This study recognizes that self-report descriptive research of this nature cannot establish cause-and-effect, or answer “why” middle level teachers feel the way they do about the various tenets of the middle school philosophy. Resolution of such issues would require conducting additional studies using other research designs.

Final Conclusion

By accepting key characteristics of the middle school philosophy as a part of everyday schooling, teachers who teach middle level grades are attempting to address the needs of young adolescents, irrespective of the grade span organization in which they teach or the type of certification/license they hold. Teachers are expressing widespread agreement with those program components that align with key recommendations from the literature on middle school education and are shedding those residual practices that are inconsistent with the spirit of the middle school philosophy. By recognizing the need for developmentally appropriate teaching strategies and strategies which enhance teacher efficacy, the notion that middle school is an “idea” and middle school students are “unique” may finally be on the cusp of realization.

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Author Notes

Dr. John A. Huss is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Northern Kentucky University. His background is in curriculum and instruction and middle grades education. Dr. Huss has also taught fifth and seventh grades language arts. He can be reached by email at hussj@nku.edu or at (859) 727-2809 by phone.

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