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**The Long View –
Perspective of a Middle Level Teacher Educator**

By

Laurie A. Ramirez, Ph.D.
Appalachian State University

In March 2013, I was honored to hear Paul George deliver the John Van Hoose Memorial Lecture in Greensboro, North Carolina. As a relatively new university professor, it was inspiring to hear the history and legacy of middle level education in our state. Dr. George (2014) noted that North Carolina middle level educators “actually discovered, developed, and pioneered much of ‘what really works’” (p. 2) with young adolescents. Additionally, he commended teachers for laboring faithfully and holding true to the concepts that define middle level education: interdisciplinary teaming, advisory and advocacy, exploratory and cooperative learning. The speech was meant to commemorate the life and work of its namesake, yet it accomplished so much more than that. For teacher educators, it was both affirming and urgent, both a confirmation of our good work and a call to action.

One of the most heartening moments occurred when Dr. George (2014) claimed that, based on over forty years of observation and in spite of the current media criticism, scapegoating, and lack of support: “Teachers and school leaders, in your buildings especially, are better-trained and more professional than in any other period. I’ll bet that the curriculum in your school is far more rigorous than it used to be, and expectations have never been higher” (p. 2).

He went on to suggest that academic achievement is at an all-time high and that parents give high marks to the schools their children attend. While this may be true and we may have come far since the inception of the middle school movement, there is still much work to do. The long view for teacher education will require us to persevere what Dr. George calls the “attack on

public schools” (2014, p. 3) continues. In the short term, we might take a moment to appreciate that the middle school concept and the importance of preparation specific to young adolescent learners have finally been acknowledged and our work has yielded gains.

A study comparing randomly selected and highly successful middle schools (McEwin & Greene, 2010) found that there are higher percentages of teachers in the highly successful middle schools who hold specific, separate middle level certifications. Forty-nine percent of highly successful middle schools reported that the majority of their core teachers (over 50%) held distinctive middle level certification, as compared to 29% in the randomly selected schools. Specialized middle grades teacher preparation is much more widespread and prominent than ever before (McEwin & Smith, 2013), yet there are still many teachers in middle schools who have not come from preparation programs that address the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to successfully educate young adolescents. The increase in specialized preparation for teachers who work with young adolescents is a success that we can be proud of. The McEwin and Greene study indicates principals are beginning to understand the importance of middle level teacher preparation as well as continued professional development for all principals, teachers, and staff to stay true to the middle level vision and mission. Their findings suggest the work we do as teacher educators, to prepare prospective teachers to meet the needs of all young adolescents, is valued and essential to the success of the middle school movement. These short-view achievements are heartening and we should acknowledge the changes that have come about because of the hard work of those who advocate for middle level education. But, as Dr. George (2014) reminds us,

We cannot expect that the values we cherish and the programs we prize will win out simply because they have won the struggle for our hearts, just because they are an expression of the human spirit at its best. If those of us who hold to a progressive worldview fail to keep this vision alive, our society and its schools may endure a long dark period until another group gathers the courage to pick up the banner and carry it forward. (p. 8)

In the long view, we need to act. We need to continue to carry the banner, especially as teacher educators. We need to hold true to what we believe is best for young adolescents, which, for us, means continuing to advocate for specialized middle level teacher preparation programs. We must continue to educate not only prospective teachers and principals, but also the general public, many of whom believe there is nothing unique about young adolescents or do not understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to teach at the middle level. Dr. George (2014) stressed in his speech, we need to “feed the wolves” fighting within our hearts that strive for an educational reality that is “loving, compassionate, generous, truthful, and trusting” (p. 4).

As Dr. George (2014) spoke, he lamented the current state of middle level education in North Carolina and elsewhere. The focus on standardized testing, sweeping budget cuts, teacher merit pay, and others have badly damaged the centerpieces of the middle school concept: teaming, advisory/advocacy programs, cooperative learning, integrated curriculum, etc. As a teacher educator, it is concerning that the middle level tenets we espouse and believe are not often present in our schools. The educational vista we paint with our students is stained when they experience the reality of the accountability movement. For me, and likely a majority of my

teacher education peers, this disconnect is difficult to accept. We recognize that the middle school movement is pedagogically sound, best practice, and supported by decades of research. John Lounsbury (2013) claims, “To anyone with a basic knowledge of human development and the commonly accepted principles of learning, and with a belief in the democratic way of life, the middle school concept is really just common sense” (p. 43). Perhaps, teacher education needs to refuse to accept the disconnect we find between what we believe about teaching young adolescents and what is happening in public schools today. We need to heed the words of Paul George and his peers and feed the wolf that fights for progressive education.

At Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, the disconnect we see between our middle level teacher preparation program and the public schools is often profound. The schools in our area are K-8 and rarely have the characteristics of a “true” middle school: advisory, interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, etc. Our students often come to us expressing frustration, confusion, and even anger that the middle school professionals they encounter are not using developmentally responsive practices or (alas!) have not even heard of the names (e.g., Paul George) and texts (e.g., *This We Believe*, the 2010 publication of the National Middle School Association) we take for granted. In the short view, it might be easier for us to prepare our teacher candidates for what they WILL encounter in our areas’ public schools. This would “fix” the disconnect problem our students face. Dr. George (2014) quoting Benjamin Mays, prompts us to persevere: “It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture” (p. 8).

Keeping the long view in mind, we have developed and continually work to improve a program that includes all the essential components identified by middle level researchers and advocates (see McEwin & Smith, 2013):

- The history and philosophy of middle school education
 - Young adolescent development
 - Middle grades organization
 - Middle grades curriculum
 - Subject matter knowledge
- Middle school planning, teaching and assessment
 - Advocacy for young adolescents and their schools
 - Middle school field experiences
 - Middle grades faculty
 - Social justice.

In addition to those components, we emphasize leadership and continue to encourage our teacher candidates to reject the status quo. Rather than “hope” their schools will be ideal middle schools, we expect and empower them to lead the charge for change. The long view requires them to be advocates for what they know is best practice for young adolescents and to be courageous leaders willing to make their voices heard. We help them develop as leaders through a rigorous program and extensive supplemental professional development. We involve them in our professional organizations and encourage attendance at state, regional, and national conferences. We also model leadership and change agency in the consulting work we do with local schools struggling to reclaim the middle school philosophy and organization. Through a combination of efforts, we strive to foster in our students a long view of middle level education and see the

importance of their role. While we can carry the banner at the teacher education level, they must also pick up the banner and carry it forward into the public schools. There, they must have the courage to wave it proudly, voice their knowledge, and put their skills to use to create the middle schools all young adolescents deserve.

The middle grades movement and teacher preparation that supports it are, as Paul George (2014) attests, recent examples of a progressive view of life and are some of the most influential things to happen to education in the past 100 years. Progressive education grew out of a time when social tumult and discord were high; change was on the horizon and people were willing to take risks and fight for it. The middle grades *movement* was part of a plethora of other *movements* – all attempting to move away from the status quo and move toward something greater, something more just. Middle level proponents wanted education that was integrated and thematic, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and democratic. They envisioned schools where lifelong learning, critical thinking, cooperation/collaboration, and personalization were emphasized. Middle schools needed to better meet the unique needs of the young adolescent, including social, moral, physical, emotional, cultural, and academic needs. This movement, then and now, is what Dr. George calls a *moral movement*, one that centers on students and works toward a more positive view of human development, particularly adolescent development. He believes that “a new consciousness” and a “new conviction” are emerging and developing, and each paces ideals of progressivism at the core.

Teacher preparation in North Carolina and across the nation must also strive for a new consciousness and a new conviction in a time when budget cuts, program consolidation, and accountability place our work in danger. *Consciousness* is defined as “a sense of one’s personal or collective identity, including the attitudes, beliefs, and sensitivities held by or considered characteristic of an individual or group” (www.thefreedictionary.com). It is synonymous with awareness, alertness, and concern about a particular issue or situation. For teacher educators taking the long view, our new consciousness must align with the progressive worldview that middle level leaders espoused early on and it must remain true to the core of what we believe about middle level education. We need a shared consciousness, a collective identity and worldview centered on what we believe is essential for educating young adolescents: democracy, content knowledge for the real world, challenging and exploratory curriculum, interdisciplinary teaming, advisory/advocacy, and educating the whole child, among others. Our new consciousness should push us to fight and lobby for middle level specialization for all middle level educators. We can no longer wait and hope. As McEwin and Smith (2013) argue: “It is time to move beyond debate and dialogue about middle grades teacher preparation and licensure. High quality, specialized middle grades teacher preparation programs should be universally available and required for all middle grades teachers” (p. 692). Further, they assert that “courageous, concerted actions on the part of all those responsible for the education and welfare of young adolescents will be required to achieve the goal of having competent, well prepared teachers in all middle grades classrooms” (p. 692). This concerted action and shared vision is, I believe, exactly what Paul George meant when he called for a new consciousness.

Dr. George (2014) also spoke of a new conviction. Our conviction, as teacher educators, should be no different than that of the candidates we prepare. As McEwin and Smith (2013) claim, we are *all* responsible for the education and welfare of all young adolescents. We cannot separate

ourselves from the work of teachers, principals, and school staff. A collective identity and a concerted effort are necessary to push the middle school movement even forward and maintain the moral momentum to which Dr. George referred. Many of the middle school leaders highlighted in *The Legacy of Middle School Leaders* (Smith & McEwin, 2011) speak of the middle school movement in battle terms. Tom Gatewood (2005, as cited in Smith & McEwin, 2011), for example, addresses the continued need to convince all stakeholders, especially politicians, that the middle school movement is what's best for young adolescents. "There are a lot of folks who see no legitimate reason at all for the middle school concept and it troubles me that we are still battling that... The ones who fight for it are those of us who are still in the Movement. We're the ones who still continue to try to hold on and to provide some line of defense... I think we are at a point in our movement where we need another breakthrough," (Smith & McEwin, 2011, p. 223). Gatewood argues that the early years of the middle school movement was so focused on forming a national organization and creating publications that it forgot to concentrate on teacher education. Perhaps teacher educators can be that breakthrough that the middle school movement needs. We are in a (relative) position of power and have the capacity to have our collective voice heard. Our national organizations—Association for Middle Level Education (formerly National Middle School Association), National Professors of Middle Level Education, American Association of Secondary School Principals, etc.—need to collaborate and coordinate our efforts to move the middle school concept forward and demand what we know is best for young adolescents. John Arnold (Smith & McEwin, 2011) attests "we've got to have renewed focus on kids and deeper understanding of what that entails" (p. 107). We need to shift the focus away from standards and accountability and back toward kids' intellectual, social, and moral growth. John Arnold believes this is how we empower kids and make a difference in their lives. The new conviction of teacher educators goes far beyond the teacher candidates we prepare. It must include the young adolescents they will impact and the schools in which they will teach, learn, and lead.

Dr. George (2014) ended his speech with a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt; "the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams" (p. 9). As teacher educators, we need to dream big. We need to acknowledge the power we possess, individually and collectively. We need to wield that power for the good of the movement that was begun with individuals like Paul George. Our work must honor their legacy of thought and action and keep the momentum of the movement. We must take up their fight when they can no longer engage in the battle and be the breakthrough the middle school movement needs. I relate strongly to a statement made by Nancy Doda (Smith & McEwin, 2011); like Dr. George's (2014) speech, it spoke loudly to me and reminds me why I care so deeply about this movement: "I would like to be remembered in my life and profession as having been a part of something great and not have on my grave that I raised test scores, but that I actually raised the dignity of life, the quality of life for young people and the schools in which they found themselves" (p. 194).

I, for one, feel honored to count myself among those who understand, care for, and believe in young adolescents. Dr. George's (2014) speech was ultimately a call to action for all middle level educators; it is one I will not take lightly. I invite all teacher educators to heed his words and feed the wolf that fights for our collective cause.

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Laurie A. Ramirez is Assistant Professor and Undergraduate Program Coordinator, Middle Grades Teacher Education at Appalachian State University. Email: ramirezla@appstate.edu