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## **Educators' Perceptions of Middle Level Education in a State without a Middle Level Teacher Credential**

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# **The CCTE Fall 2021 Research Monograph**

Published by  
the California Council on Teacher Education

Containing 13 Research Articles  
Based on Presentations  
at the CCTE Fall 2021 Conference



# **CCTE Fall 2021 Research Monograph**

**Published by the California Council on Teacher Education**

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## **Educators' Perceptions of Middle Level Education in a State Without a Middle Level Teacher Credential**

**By Rong-Ji Chen, Erika Daniels, Roxanne Greitz Miller,  
Moses Ochanji, Ben Seipel, & Acacia M. Warren**

### **Abstract**

Over forty U.S. states offer teacher licensing specifically in preparation for teaching middle grades students. California is not included in this number, nor do California teacher licenses (i.e., multiple subjects, single subject, and special education) require teacher preparation coursework specific to meeting the needs of early adolescents. This descriptive study presents results of an exploratory survey of California educators with middle grades experience ( $n=48$ ) regarding their ability to identify essential attributes and characteristics of successful middle schools in

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California, their perceptions of young adolescents' needs and responsive teaching practices, and their current opinions of middle level education in California. Findings indicate that survey respondents (1) moderately agree that middle schools in California represent the essential attributes and key characteristics of successful middle schools, (2) agree that middle level teachers' practice is responsive to early adolescents' developmental needs but does not emphasize student choice and community interaction, and (3) overwhelmingly agree that the overall state of middle level education in California is inadequate. These findings have implications for policymakers and teacher educators to think flexibly about middle level education and whether the needs of early adolescents are best served by the current conditions of teacher preparation in California.

*Keywords:* middle grades, middle schools, teacher preparation

### **Introduction**

California is a national leader in educator preparation, producing many highly qualified teachers who demonstrate both subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skill on the pathway to earning a California teaching license ("credential"). However, the status of California's middle grades teacher preparation is lacking in comparison to other U.S. states. California is one of only eight states without specific licensing or required coursework for middle grades teacher preparation (Howell et al., 2018) despite national efforts to promote specialized preparation for teachers who work with early adolescents (Association for Middle Level Education, 2021; McEwin & Smith, 2013). Teacher preparation programs in California offer three preliminary credentials: Multiple Subjects, held by most elementary school educators; Single Subject, held by most secondary school educators; and Education Specialist, which provides two levels of credentialing for those serving students with special education needs. Teacher candidates wanting to teach middle grades students choose among the three types of credential programs, which generally means their training focuses on teaching in self-contained elementary school classrooms, departmentalized high school classrooms, or in a range of special education environments. Without specific preparation for the middle grades, teachers and administrators who find themselves in middle level educational settings in California may not be prepared to serve young adolescents' unique developmental, socio-emotional, and academic needs.

### **Literature Review**

The basis for implementing specific experiences into middle level education to support the development of early adolescents has been documented in the literature for more than 80 years (see McEwin & Smith, 2013, for a comprehensive reference list). The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) presents a framework of middle level education and defines five essential attributes and 18 characteristics of successful middle schools (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The essential attributes

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specify that education for young adolescents must be responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. The 18 characteristics are categorized in three areas: (a) culture and community, (b) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and (c) leadership and organization. Young adolescents' unique cognitive, physical, moral, socio-emotional, and identity development is at the center of this middle level framework, and the interdependent essential attributes and characteristics form a coherent system to facilitate young adolescents' development.

Middle school teachers are expected to understand this framework and adopt best practices to meet young adolescents' various developmental needs. To this end, middle level educators urge teacher education programs across the country to provide specialized preparation for middle level teachers (Howell et al., 2016). Although much research is needed to answer the question of whether specialized middle level teacher preparation truly matters, several empirical studies have yielded a promising finding that middle school teachers with specialized preparation performed better in many key areas than their counterparts who have only elementary or secondary licensure (e.g., Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2005; Ochanji et al., 2016).

Teacher education programs operate under the state policy on teacher credentialing and coursework and fieldwork requirements. Howell and colleagues (2016) reviewed the licensure documents and middle level teaching degree requirements of the 50 U.S. states and Washington, D.C. They found that, while 45 U.S. states offer licenses specific to middle grades, one-third of universities with teacher preparation programs have no required coursework focused on preparation for teaching in middle level settings, and they urged teacher educators to think flexibly to prepare effective middle level teachers even when state credentialing structures are not supportive.

#### **Aims**

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the current state of middle level education in California. We analyzed survey data from California education stakeholders regarding their credentialing paths and teacher preparation program content, perceptions about middle grades characteristics, teaching practices, and beliefs about young adolescents. The findings shed light on educator perceptions of the condition of middle level education and teacher preparation in a state without specific professional licensing or requirements for middle grades teachers, with implications for policymakers and teacher educators.

#### **Methods**

Situated in the California context and based on the above review of the AMLE framework and related research, we posed the following research questions:

To what degree do survey respondents recognize AMLE's five essential attributes and 18 characteristics for successful middle schools in their district?

What are survey respondents' perceptions about young adolescents and the differences between middle school and junior high school? To what degree do their teaching practices address young adolescents' needs?

What do survey respondents think of the current state of middle level education, in general?

We designed an online survey to address these questions. All levels of California educators were invited (via email listservs, contact lists, and social media postings) during spring and summer 2021 to participate in the survey. We had usable data from 48 respondents, with an average of 11.1 years of service in education (range 1-29 years; SD=9.63 years). Survey respondents worked in middle grades settings for an average of 7.4 years (range 0-29 years; SD=7.80 years).

The survey had five broad sections: personal experiences and training regarding middle level education, reflections on the AMLE's essential attributes and characteristics of a successful middle school as defined by Bishop & Harrison (2021), administrative positions and training, personal teaching practices as related to middle level education, and personal beliefs regarding the current state of middle level education in California. Items in the personal experience and training section were a mix of open response, checkboxes, and yes/no questions. All 23 items in the AMLE attributes section (e.g., curriculum, community, engagement), 24 items in the personal teaching practice section (e.g., content, pedagogy, assessment), and 13 items in the current state of middle level education (e.g., purpose, structure, student needs) were Likert-based (3 points: agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree). The 14 administrative/school structure prompts were yes/no items. Responses were tallied by percentage and means calculated for all questions regarding respondent agreement (agree = 1, neither agree nor disagree = 0, disagree = -1). Respondents could offer additional comments at the end of each section. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

### **Findings**

For this monograph, we center our discussion on quantitative findings from the survey. Due to space limitations, we encourage readers to view all tables and figures referenced below online at <https://bit.ly/mid-gr-graphics>.

#### ***Specialized Preparation in Middle Level Education***

We asked three questions about respondents' initial preparation as a teacher. Figure 1 online summarizes the responses. There was no distinction between the operational concepts of "middle schools" and "junior high schools" in 67% of respondents' preparation. Only 31% of respondents took specialized middle level teacher preparation coursework. This finding complements the study by Howell et al. (2016) who found that one-third of the 1,324 teacher preparation programs in the study did not offer coursework on young adolescents or middle level schools,



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despite these programs being located in states that provided middle level licensure. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of respondents reported middle grades experiences in fieldwork settings (e.g., observations and/or student teaching placement), which indicates by placing teacher candidates in middle schools to learn from the field, many teacher preparation programs may be attempting to address the candidates' preparation for the unique settings of middle grades and young adolescents' developmental needs in the absence of specific required coursework.

#### **AMLE's Essential Attributes and Characteristics of a Successful Middle School**

We asked the respondents whether they believed the middle grade schools in their districts or communities are responsive/challenging/empowering/equitable/engaging (i.e., whether their schools demonstrate the AMLE essential attributes). Overall, respondents indicated they generally agree that the middle grade schools in their district/community exhibited each of the five essential attributes. The "responsive" and "engaging" attributes were identified (agreed with by 79% and 75% of respondents, respectively) more than others, with "equitable" receiving the least recognition (55%). Table 1 and Figure 2 online summarize the results.

Similarly, we asked the respondents to identify AMLE's 18 characteristics of successful middle schools present within the middle grade schools in their district (see Table 2 and Figure 3 online). The top three identified characteristics were educators' respect and value of young adolescents (88%); a school environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all (77%); and school safety addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully (72%). The least recognized characteristics regarded educators being specifically prepared to teach young adolescents (44%), students' academic and personal development being guided by an adult advocate (44%), and school collaboration with community and business partners (47%). The authors' observation is that the most frequently cited characteristics are common to schools at *all* levels. Yet, the least recognized characteristics tend to be specific to middle grades settings.

#### **Teaching Practice**

We asked the respondents whether they agreed with 24 statements about teaching and students. Figures 4 through 8 online summarize the percentages of the responses in five areas. General observations of trends and responses include:

Respondents reported adopting many teaching practices aligned with AMLE's recommendations, such as interdisciplinary lessons, student-centered teaching, planning with colleagues, and meeting students' social-emotional needs.

The state-adopted standards and school-based guidelines largely determined curriculum content; only 46% of the respondents said they decided "what to teach."

Respondents perceived a very high degree of autonomy concerning instruction

(95% of respondents independently determined how to teach) and assessment (85% of respondents independently determined how to assess) of their students.

The lowest percentages reported by respondents related to implementing community-based projects (35%), allowing students' choice in assessment (27%), and students' involvement in the larger community (16%).

These findings correspond to White et al. (2013), who found various gaps between middle level educators' practices and the AMLE Standards.

### ***The State of Middle Level Education***

We asked the respondents to assess middle level education in general. Table 4 and Figure 9 show the results. For the statement, "the current state of middle-grade education is adequate," only 27% of the respondents agreed, 31% disagreed, and 42% neither agreed nor disagreed. The mean agreement was -0.04, much lower than other statements. Additionally, 40% thought that the terms "middle school" and "junior high school" are synonymous, despite the extensive literature base establishing middle schools as distinctly different in theory and practice.

Moreover, for the statement, "teachers, in general, are well-prepared to meet the needs of middle grade students," 33% of the respondents agreed, 16% disagreed, and 51% neither agreed nor disagreed. Overall, we conclude the survey respondents disapproved of the current state of middle grades teacher preparation in California. However, in contrast, over 90% of the respondents recognized young adolescents' needs are unique from those of elementary and high school students. 78% of respondents did not think middle school students are just "little high school students," and 53% believed middle grade students need a homeroom teacher or advisor.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study has acknowledged limitations. The sample of 48 respondents is not representative of educators across the state. Also, as an exploratory study, the questionnaire was not designed to be comprehensive, nor was it intended to reach the statistical power necessary to authoritatively comment on the opinions of educators across the state of California. Future studies will address these limitations as we expand our efforts and process further revisions.

Despite the limitations, the findings are essential to middle level education for two main reasons. First, the results show that although the state policy shapes the operations of teacher preparation programs and school districts, these preservice and in-service entities can - and we propose should - provide opportunities for preservice and in-service teachers to learn how to address young adolescents' developmental needs. We agree with Howell and colleagues that teacher educators must develop the appropriate curriculum for individuals seeking a credential that includes the middle grades, regardless of whether the candidate is prepared through an elementary, middle, or secondary preparation program (Howell et al., 2018).

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School districts can share this responsibility by providing placements in quality middle schools to their credentialing providers.

This study is also significant for considering how individual practitioners navigate the political and educational system. By and large, the respondents did not think that the current state of middle grades education or teacher workforce preparation is adequate. Indeed, education leaders and policymakers in California do not appear to value young adolescents' unique developmental and educational needs, evidenced by the absence of a specific middle grades credential. Yet, most of the respondents recognized the need to specifically educate young adolescents, who are different from other age groups. As we move forward from this monograph in our future work, we will gauge how educators operationalize their commitment to young adolescents and middle grades education in spaces where structural support is lacking, as well as in what ways and to what extent middle school principals demonstrate their commitment to and enact the key characteristics of quality middle grades education in their schools.

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