

**Slaying the Dragon: Junior Model United Nations Curriculum Designing for Middle School Teacher Candidates**

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**Abstract:**

The process of teaching curriculum design to pre-service teachers is a complex process. To address this issue, teacher candidates were asked to integrate an inquiry-based approach while considering their own curriculum chapter for a Junior Model United Nations (JMUN) program. The findings of this study suggest that teacher candidates can benefit from inquiry-based methods in planning and teaching JMUN curriculum. In the process, teacher candidates become aware of their own biases and pedagogical needs while teaching their future students. This is accomplished through cause and effect teaching since the teacher candidates are simultaneously building and teaching. The further removed teacher candidates are from curriculum development, the less likely they are to understand the significance of curriculum development and its applications.

**Key words:** global mindedness, inquiry learning process, engagement, simulation, application of knowledge.

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**Introduction**

Piaget's (1954) theory of development and Vygotsky's (1978) constructivism theory combine prior experience and active learning that leads the child to develop new capacities. Within this framework, simulations provide a context for real-world interaction (de Freitas, 2007; Dorn, 1989). By providing middle school students with a simulation experience, the students can work toward how knowledge is structured and what biases or misconceptions should be addressed.

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In 2011, our university established a Model United Nations (MUN) within the Department of Political Science. The program flourished quickly. After several years, the director of the Model United Nations program noticed significant results related to student success, specifically regarding social and academic integration. Consequently, the Primary Investigator (PI) wanted to see if the same effects were measurable for middle school students. Thus, the PI (also the MUN director) started a Junior Model United Nations (JMUN) for middle school students. After running a successful pilot program of about 50 middle school students from five schools in 2014, the PI asked for direct feedback from teachers and students who participated. The primary suggestion from middle school teachers made it clear that a full curriculum on how to prepare students for the conference was needed. At this point, the PI asked the College of Education to get involved, and several professors agreed. The JMUN now evolved into a collaborative effort between the Political Science and Teacher Education departments. The Political Science department focused on the details, facts, process, procedures, and details of the JMUN, while the Teacher Education department focused on designing an education curriculum appropriate for the middle grades.

Specifically, the curriculum was designed as a capstone assignment through a graduate level class within the Teacher Education department. Students were asked to select one topic provided to them by the director of the Model United Nations (from Political Science), and they designed teacher resources, sample lesson plans, and topic/lesson descriptions that would be useful for teachers implementing a JMUN program at their middle schools. Most chapters had more than one student working on the initiative. Thus, the best out of all teacher candidates' submitted work was chosen to be officially included in the JMUN curriculum. The final version was proofed, edited, and added to by the director of the Model United Nations program, the instructor of record of the graduate level course in teacher education, as well as several other professors from the College of Education.

### **Becoming Global Citizens**

Many educational organizations have begun referencing the creation of global citizens, or global citizenship, as an intended learning outcome of their work. For example, in a publication by the International Baccalaureate Organization (2013) that explains the program, the concept of preparing school-aged children to think and act "globally" is heavily emphasized. One description of what it means to act as a global citizen is: "Globally engaged people critically consider power and privilege, and recognize that they hold the earth and its resources in trust for future generations" (IBO, 2013, p. 7). In the context of the Model UN, it is appropriate to reference the inclusion of global citizenship in the United Nations' education efforts. In September 2012, the

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United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, announced plans for the “Global Education First Initiative,” a project designed to help make the U.N.’s goal of education for all a reality. The third of three priorities for the project is “fostering global citizenship,” which is important and is explained on the Global Education First Initiative's website:

The world faces global challenges, which require global solutions...it is not enough for education to produce individuals who can read, write, and count... education must be transformative and bring shared values to life... it must give people the understanding, skills and values they need to cooperate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Global Education First Initiative Priority #3, n.d., para. 1)

A classroom should be a place supported by the “This We Believe” framework where students can have a call to action. This is also supported by establishing a culturally responsive classroom environment (NMSA, 2010). Within student-centered curriculum design, a focus on students’ emotional wellbeing and knowledge is always intertwined.

### **A Case for a JMUN Curriculum**

Our framework is grounded in global theories of teaching and learning. Ayers (1998) captured the potential and necessity of teaching for social justice as he identified the value to students of enriching their learning and their lives as global citizens. Cochran-Smith (2001), Sleeter (2008), Villegas & Lucas (2002), and Zeichner (2006) speak to the importance of a democratic education and social justice that encourages teachers and students to question systems of oppression. Many university education programs have global studies themes scattered throughout courses, but often teacher candidates are not sure how to apply the ideas they have learned in their classroom practice (Walker, 2012). Further, some teachers fear that teaching students to critique and question those in power will position them as activists challenging the status quo. Some teachers fear repercussions from parents and administration (Bender-Slack & Raupach, 2008). For the investigators’ academic program, a Junior Model United Nations (JMUN) curriculum guide for teachers and students was designed with the concept of meeting the demands of globalized citizens.

When planning lessons, activities, and assessments, the needs of middle school students should always be at the forefront of teachers’ thinking. Substantial research exists reifying the characteristics and needs of children ages 10-14. For example, young adolescents are constantly asking why, how, and what can be done (Nesin & Brazee, 2013). According to Edwards (2014), “the adolescent brain is developing in areas of reasoning/problem solving, decision

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making/hypothetical situations, processing information/efficiency, expertise/use of experience, and moral reasoning/social cognition” (p. 5). These are the very skills and areas that are supported in a JMUN program. The JMUN discussions, experiences, and research allow students to understand what being socially responsible means on a deep level. Multiple domains of development that are unique to young adolescents (Brighton, 2007), such as intellectual, social, moral and character development, are appropriately addressed simultaneously through the JMUN.

According to the National Middle School Association (2010), several characteristics of effective middle schools are met through both JMUN design and implementation. Teacher candidates are simultaneously experiencing best practices for middle school students while creating future exemplary lessons. Becoming an expert on a UN Member State is active learning for middle schoolers because the knowledge is necessary for role-play at the JMUN conference. Designing the curriculum is purposeful for teacher candidates because it meets a vital need for curriculum requested by in-service teachers. Additionally, the JMUN curriculum is relevant to students because it is centered around real issues and current events. It is integrative because it incorporates the social sciences with the four strands of language arts (speaking, writing, reading, and listening), and depending on the topic, it can include mathematics and/or science. Middle school students are challenged to make formal speeches in front of their peers and are guided through the mystery of how the JMUN conference might progress. Finally, educators who implement JMUN curriculum embody the use of multiple learning and teaching approaches endorsed by NSMA. Specifically, major learning activities should culminate with a knowledge performance that can include presentations, debate, or simulations, three skills integral to JMUN (AMLE, 2012).

### **JMUN Curriculum Implementation**

Implementing a new and unfamiliar curriculum can be nerve-wracking for teachers. Therefore, the goals of this section are to illustrate how teachers have implemented the curriculum for our JMUN conference. It should be noted that some middle schools used the curriculum for their specific social studies or elective class.

First, teachers usually provided an overview of the history, purpose, and organizational structure of the United Nations. Afterwards, teachers usually had students research their individual Member States using different interactive techniques to familiarize the students with their selected countries. Some teachers provided similar types of information on the United States to

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use as a point of reference for students to compare and contrast political and social views. Next, students typically gave short presentations to the class/club about their Member States based on the information learned from the activities. Several of the teachers encouraged their students to regularly research current events in their Member States and share the news in class. Students are encouraged to keep a portfolio or daily diary of their Member States.

After this, teachers typically get more specific for their particular JMUN. This starts with teachers having students read through the first topic of discussion background guide. For every topic discussed, a complete topic “brief,” or background guide, is prepared by the conference administration and is included as part of the registration packet. Later, there is a question and answer period about the topic between teacher and students; for instance, one of our conversation topics from last year dealt with child soldiers. Next, the same process was followed for the provided resolutions and supporting documents of those resolutions, which were also given to teachers by the conference organizers. The class/clubs usually discussed each Member State’s probable stance on the resolution (based on their independent research) and prepared policy speeches regarding child soldiers. Speeches were then practiced in front of the class with lessons on how to give good speeches.

Although this was the pro forma pattern, several teachers devised their own approach for the JMUN. For instance, many invited the Director of the specific JMUN conference into their classroom, either physically or via Google Hangout, to discuss conference proceedings, watch and listen to class activities to provide constructive feedback, and to generally give advice. In some instances, teachers had their students provide the overview of the United Nations through the use of “Powtoons.” Additionally, some teachers had dedicated days to “impromptu” speeches on “silly” topics such as favorite foods to prepare them for impromptu speeches required at the JMUN.

Despite the numerous successes of the first JMUN conference, middle school teachers asked about implementing a formal curriculum. The Political Science department reached out to Teacher Education about how to best pursue a JMUN curriculum. During the fall of 2014, a plan was devised. The goals for the curriculum design process would mainly rest with the teacher candidates.

### **Slaying the Dragon**

The investigators’ teacher preparation program now strives to be innovative in designing curriculum. With extensive training in curriculum design, its teacher candidates are asked to act

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as designers for a social studies curriculum. The spring of 2015 was the pilot for the process. The Teacher Education Department and the Department of Political Science worked collaboratively to mentor middle school teacher candidates during the curriculum development process. The teacher candidates were told that they would each be responsible for writing a chapter about the JMUN process. They were also told that only the best submissions would be accepted for the online curriculum guide for middle school teachers and students.

A few teacher candidates initially complained about being asked to develop social studies curricula as teacher candidates. The future teachers mentioned a lack of experience in development and formal training in writing a textbook chapter. One teacher candidate stated, "You are asking us to slay the dragon." This statement implied that the request to build an online JMUN curriculum guide was a monumental undertaking for the future teachers. As a starting point, the teacher candidates were provided an overview of the project and resources for the project that were also available to in-service teachers. During the curriculum development process, faculty from the Department of Political Science acted as content experts, answering questions about the JMUN process. The Teacher Education Department faculty provided support in methodology development as well as advanced writing strategies for new writers. These different supports will be described in the following sections.

### ***College of Education Support Strategies***

In addition to the social studies methods course in which the JMUN curriculum is written, multiple opportunities to make connections to the JMUN model exist throughout middle school teacher candidates' coursework. As stated at the beginning, at least three "This We Believe" characteristics are addressed through JMUN. Teacher candidates explore the 16 characteristics in a course titled *Theory Into Practice in Middle Grades Education*. During course discussions, JMUN serves as an example of students and teachers being engaged in active, purposeful learning; a curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and relevant; as well as an example of educators using multiple learning and teaching approaches (NMSA, 2010). Additionally, the various subject contents addressed through JMUN make the model an exemplar of interdisciplinary instruction.

The course objectives for *Nature and Needs of the Middle Grades Learner* also align with the tenets of JMUN. According to Jackson and Davis (2000), the main purpose of middle grades education is to "enable every student to think creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, and to communicate and work with others." As the various domains (e.g., physical,

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social, intellectual, moral) of adolescent development are investigated in this course, the instructor can integrate JMUN aspects of active learning, cooperative learning, and social justice. Teacher candidates have even made their own connections by bringing up JMUN as an example in class discussions. During a *Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum* class discussion, a student shared that JMUN is a meaningful way to integrate writing into middle school social studies classes. Finally, due to the global nature of JMUN, the model provides an authentic example of multicultural education in action, linking it to another course offered in the department.

### ***Political Science Support Strategies***

Awareness of teacher candidate concerns is integral to guiding them through the process of JMUN curriculum building. The main concern when building a Model UN experience is that for most individuals, the “MUNiverse” is an unknown entity. Most questions from teacher candidates involve not knowing precisely what a MUN conference looks like. Therefore, it is important to provide this information to the best of one’s ability. Before doing this, however, it is important to detail the main organs and functions of the United Nations itself. A good rule to follow in the classroom is to teach the actual body before teaching how to simulate that body. After receiving a general explanation of the United Nations, most teacher candidates started to understand how it fits into a social studies curriculum. Consequently, it was much easier to focus on how to target a curriculum geared toward middle school students.

The emphasis at this point should be on the outcome of a Junior Model United Nations conference. This is always the central question of teacher candidates: What is the purpose of a Model UN, especially for middle school students? Generally, Model UN conferences are based around writing and voting upon resolutions on precise topics provided by the organization administering the conference. Once this is understood, most teacher candidates know to base their classroom design around the central theme of resolution building. It is necessary then to teach the process of resolution building in addition to the structure of an international resolution. This serves both to teach the workings of an international organization and to teach the necessary skill of technical writing. We are dedicated to the growth mindset concept and recognize that all learners can grow from novices to experts with proper support and time commitment from the learner and the facilitator. The facilitator needs to stay patient and focus on the main tools of a JMUN experience, which are international negotiation at a Model UN: formal caucusing (speeches) and informal caucusing (peer to peer negotiation).

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Next, questions revolve around what exactly speeches and negotiations should focus upon. The answer depends on how a student's assigned Member State might approach a specific topic. Here, a teacher's job is to instruct students to retain the character of the country they represent, to research policies a country has issued domestically on the topic at hand, and how, if at all, the representative country has handled the topic via foreign policy. Once a student understands a Member State's stance, it is their job to create speeches and develop negotiation strategies to convince other delegates representing different UN Member States to side with them and their policy recommendation in a resolution. After this is explained, most questions by teacher candidates are answered, and the candidates understand how to provide their middle school students with the necessary tools to research a Member State's policy and to direct that policy toward creating representative resolutions.

### **A Broader Audience: Implementing a JMUN Curriculum**

During a JMUN preparatory middle school class, a teacher candidate in the program was faced with a middle school student who questioned the design of her curriculum. In addition to designing the curriculum, the teacher candidate's response came from material she had created for the curriculum project. While learning about current events related to global issues, a student asked about the value of current events in a history class: "If we are learning about history, why are current events covered?" The investigator was excited to see how the teacher candidate responded based on beliefs on the effectiveness of the JMUN curriculum program and middle school theory. The teacher candidate replied, "Good question. I have an assignment that I developed that can really help us explore your question." The teacher candidate brought up modern child rights in the Congo. She asked the students to refer to a passage they read earlier about *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair and asked the students about similarities. A few students discussed how the politicians acted during these events and how the victims were portrayed in the book, and many of the students started to answer the question organically. One student said, "We know what cruelty looks like. Just because we are looking back it does not mean that we have overcome cruelty." The teacher candidate asked the student to expand on her thoughts, and the middle school student said, "We now understand what unfair treatment for children looks like. Sometimes we use news programs or newspaper articles to examine mistreatment." The teacher candidate responded:

You talked about how media outlets supported slavery and were against women's suffrage. It is up to us to decide what it means when children are working in factories or

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being forced to work in factories overseas. If child labor is wrong, why do we have companies who employ international children in unsafe work conditions?

The teacher candidate asked the students to think-pair-share their thoughts on the topic of discussion and returned to the original student question about current events. According to Beineke (2011), "If the book is picked up by a middle school student who enjoys history, then what it contains will do no harm and probably a great deal of good. And actually, teachers will need to make similar decisions about the content they chose to include in their courses" (p. 177). Within this case, the teacher candidate made decisions to explain her stance on global issues instead of selecting a textbook definition for the experience.

### **The Designer Experience**

The teacher candidates who had their chapters selected for the curriculum guide were asked to share their thoughts on the program. An undergraduate teacher candidate shared this information about her experience:

In response to the curriculum aspect, I tried to compress the information into bite-size chunks that would be easily understood by the students. The sheer volume of information on the background of the United Nations was very extensive and a little daunting. Therefore, I wanted my chapter to highlight key, important information in a way that a general understanding could be accomplished easily without compromising the completeness of the necessary information.

One of the main tenets for our course is that curriculum design should be focused. We insist that their first questions are: Who is your audience? Who are you writing for? What are their needs? One of the challenges was to write curriculum that both teachers and students could understand. Each audience has different needs. The teachers need a framework to complement their knowledge base, and the students need content knowledge and foundational support. This can range from simple definitions to activities that better help the learner understand the role of the United Nations. To illustrate this, one teacher candidate discussed what her daughter gained from the JMUN experience:

As a parent watching my child go through the JMUN process, I found it very interesting and exciting. I am always on the lookout for experiences that will enhance my child's knowledge base and her awareness as a global citizen and the international issues that we are facing today. Through her experience in Model UN, I think that not only was she

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exposed to information that she was heretofore unaware of, but I think it also helped her to become a more engaged participant in the world around her. She had to challenge herself, as a representative of South Africa, to participate in the activity as someone from South Africa, instead of from the mindset of an American. She had to be open-minded and creative. Furthermore, she had to employ diplomatic skills in dealing with the other participants when passing resolutions or trying to establish “allies.” Additionally, the development of speeches and resolutions, and the exercise of delivering those speeches publicly, was practice in a very useful and necessary life skills for her.

Giving pre-adolescents a voice in global matters gives middle school students a better understanding of the challenges they will face in the future. It prepares them to examine and to participate in the world around them. And it can give them a new perspective on their everyday lives. The teacher candidate tied her experience and her daughter’s experience together thusly:

Through her experience and then subsequently through my own (in your class) I really began to gain a better understanding and appreciation for what JMUN is. The writing of the curriculum also helped me to understand the process that she went through better and likewise her experience affected the process of my curriculum designing. I knew the students she had participated with and the teachers who had helped her, so when designing I looked at it as if they were the ones using and reading it. I like to think this enhanced rather than hurt the end product.

To address “This We Believe” characteristics, the curriculum includes multiple types of learning and teaching approaches and challenges the students to think critically about the problems that a specific country faces. It integrates history, political science, communications, ethics, and diplomacy, as well as the sciences to address environmental challenges and resource allotment. In order to become actively aware of the larger world, JMUN asks students to understand global issues from different perspectives. The middle school students have to ask significant and relevant questions about the world, ranging from questions about the usage of modern warfare to the ethical consideration of using child soldiers. They are also asked to answer questions that do not have one right response, ethical questions that adults cannot always answer. Finally, they are asked to respect people as global citizens. Teachers will not be able to prepare middle school students successfully for a JMUN conference without active learning and knowledge of our modern world.

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The teacher candidate who had expressed concerns about curriculum design process (and coined the phrase “slaying the dragon”) had a chapter submission accepted. The following year, he asked to have his class participate in the JMUN program. The JMUN program is currently at full capacity. This speaks to how often we misunderstand curriculum design and how important it is to help our teacher candidates understand the discipline. According to Beineke’s (2011) stance, “What is called subject matter is often defined, some may think narrowly, as synonymous with curriculum. It is commonly understood, though, that curriculum cannot be divorced from instruction. And that curriculum is more than the subject matter being taught” (p. 174). From our perspective, this translates to acting as designers. We are really impressed that many of our teacher candidates refused to use a textbook and are developing their own curriculum to meet the needs of their students. Good teachers do not just retell content—they develop best practices for learning.

### **Future Projects**

The success of the JMUN online curriculum has opened the door for the JMUN projects to be considered as possible course requirements by community members. In fact, faculty and teachers have volunteered to either submit their own chapters or serve as editors for future social studies curriculum projects. One faculty member asked if the present authors could build a peace curriculum. We have also included other schools from other states for the JMUN project. We are working to develop curriculum guides for elementary and high school versions based on the Middle School JMUN curriculum. All this is to serve our belief that teacher candidates should not be passive in the learning process. Instead, they must think as designers who can elicit purposeful learning from their students.

### **Conclusion**

In the interest of promoting learning in middle schools, there is a need to re-imagine teacher candidates as curriculum makers in order to inspire future teachers to become agents of change. To have positive effects, teachers need to think of curriculum not as fixed but as dynamic in a way that is fundamental to student learning. In this JMUN framework, it is important for teacher candidates to consider their life experiences both outside and inside classrooms as “texts” containing knowledge and understanding of themselves, their situation, their students, and their subject areas and pedagogy—all of which are constantly modified to accommodate new experiences across time and space. Thus, global issues become a valuable resource to draw upon to make authentic decisions about classroom curriculum. In support of “This We Believe”

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characteristics, “Our schools mirror our society. By honoring and celebrating the diversity in our classrooms, we are offering our nation’s young people the best opportunity to become contributing members of their communities, the nation, and the world” (NMSA, 2012, p. 59). In this practitioner piece, teacher candidates brought together their personal and professional experiences, providing insights into how to devise and revise a JMUN curriculum in a way that is thought-provoking for middle school students. In this iteration, curriculum is focused on what is “worth experiencing, doing and being” (Schubert, 1996, p. 169). However, that which is worth knowing is always changing and evolving for both teachers and learners. To encapsulate the dynamic nature of knowing, curriculum must also be fluid. Therefore, the process of curriculum-making should be situated “autobiographically” (Schubert, 1996, p.169). In a sense, curriculum-making is about who the teacher candidate is, whom the future teacher chooses to grow and become, and what the self-actualized teacher does. It is the entire range of experiences, both direct and indirect, that affects thinking, approach, and decision-making. Thus, curriculum, experience, learning, and teaching are seamlessly intertwined in a JMUN program for teacher candidates. And the dragon? Slayed for all the world to see.

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