

## Ready, Set, Go: It's Middle School!

*Desha Williams, Ph.D.*

*Kimberly Gray, Ph.D.*

*Susan Stockdale, Ph.D.*

*Kennesaw State University*

*Middle school teachers teach energetic, curious adolescents rigorous content at a time in their lives when many changes are occurring. Those entering the teaching profession as middle school teachers must be prepared for this unique environment. This study examines 16 pre-service middle school teachers' developments as they participate in a yearlong internship. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected and the study was guided by the principals of situated learning theory. Data revealed the development of cultural responsive dispositions, increased self-efficacy in classroom management, and perceptions of better preparedness for their own classroom. Based on the results on the study, we recommend increased preparation programs transition to a yearlong internship model for field experiences.*

Middle school is full of energetic students who are making new discoveries about themselves and their environment, while at the same time exploring limits. Physiological and psychological changes occurring with middle school learners may create stressful situations for novice middle school teachers. Teaching rigorous content, managing classrooms, and nurturing transitioning middle school learners may prove challenging, especially when there are few programs specializing in preparing teachers specifically to teach middle grades learners (NMSA, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to document the impact of a yearlong internship program designed particularly to prepare prospective middle school teachers for the realities of teaching middle school, while providing guidance as they develop their professional identity.

In many traditional teacher preparation programs, students participate in an "observation" semester, followed by a semester of student teaching in a different school with a different cooperating teacher. In these settings, prospective teachers may complete a preparation program and clinical experiences without having the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful middle grades classroom teachers, particularly in diverse school settings (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). The teacher candidate has limited time to convert course theories into classroom practices. Additionally, most student teaching experiences occur in the spring, when most schools are overwhelmed with standardized testing. As a result, many host teachers are not comfortable releasing their classroom to a person who is first assigned to them only a few months previously. A one-semester teaching placement does not allow for the learning of students' names, learning styles, or idiosyncrasies, let alone the time to develop trust of the cooperating teacher that the novice can effectively prepare students for the upcoming standardized tests.

Further, teacher candidates are also asked to begin teaching students they have just met on a fulltime basis in an environment where they still need to learn the operating rules and procedures. Research on the development of a teacher suggests beginning concerns are centered around classroom discipline and other managerial issues, followed by lesson design

and delivery, and it's only in the final stages of teacher candidate development that a beginning teacher focuses attention on student learning (Fuller, 1969, Gormley et al., 1993). Clearly, a one semester student teaching experience does not provide the pre-service teacher time to work through any of these beginning stages of concern, thus leaving them ill prepared to become a first year teacher.

### **The program and its philosophy**

This program embeds content and pedagogy with the middle grade philosophies embraced in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2005). The students begin their journey taking content courses from faculty within the specified content discipline, along with general education courses. The journey continues with an introduction to education course, a course on the socio-cultural impact of diversity on teaching and learning, and an educational psychology course, as well as, early field experiences. These courses lay the foundation for courses in being an advocate for middle grades learners, reading in the middle grades, content courses that specifically examine the connection of collegial content and middle grades standards, and a course whose objectives include lesson planning, state and national curriculum, and assessment. All of this university's middle grades students follow this program of study. It is in the senior year where students make the choice to continue the traditional program or participate in the yearlong program.

During the students' senior year, students learned the pedagogy that is appropriate for middle grades learners, classroom management techniques, and began their yearlong internship. Here, we introduced the philosophy of "internship" to the students and their assigned mentor teacher. Interns, no longer referred to as students, are introduced to the faculty, parents, and students as interns. The term student tends to have an inferior connotation. Using the term intern coincides with other professional positions, for example, medical intern, cooperate intern, or judicial intern. The simple change in terminology began the efficacy building process in these budding middle grades teachers.

The interns and the mentor teacher also are introduced to the tenets of co-teaching, while defining roles and developing communication techniques. Developing roles and relationships between the intern and mentor teacher are imperative to establishing effective and efficient environments (Smith, 2007). Along with the co-teaching components, defining roles and communication, the first meeting also involved techniques for negotiating conflict, goal setting, and relationship building. These areas were further built upon at the end of the semester. Accomplishments were acknowledged and goals were re-examined at this time. With all of these elements in place, the interns and the mentor teacher began the second semester as a cohesive pair.

### **Theoretical Framework: Situated Learning**

As interns enter the teaching profession, they are learning how to be effective middle grades teachers, how to make decisions about lessons, how to manage of the classroom and other various aspects of teaching. Situated learning lends theoretical support.

Situated learning endorses learning in context. The theory proposes that the process of learning cannot be separated from the context of learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within situated learning, one learns how to function effectively in a given situation through participation in an authentic learning experience. Thus, participation in a year-long internship allows for pre-service teachers to have authentic interactions with situations that they may encounter once they are in their own classrooms.

Herrington and Oliver (2000, pp. 30-31) constructed nine components to describe the principles of situated learning. The components

- provide authentic content that reflects the way knowledge will be used in real life—non-linear design, no attempt to simplify,
- provide authentic activities—activities that have real world relevance,
- provide access to expert performances and the modeling of process—access to social periphery, access to expert thinking,
- provide multiple roles and perspectives—the opportunity to express different points of view,
- support collaborative construction of knowledge—classroom organization into small groups,
- promote reflection—opportunity for learners to compare with experts,
- promote articulation—publicly present argument to enable defense of learning,
- provide coaching and scaffolding—complex open ended learning environments,
- provide authentic assessment—multiple indicators of learning.

All of these elements of situated learning are incorporated into pre-service teachers' experience during a yearlong internship. Pre-service teachers are placed in schools where they observe practicing teachers model their craft. In this setting, discourse occurs regarding the pre-service teachers' performances in the classroom, providing many authentic opportunities for reflection and coaching.

Learning within a situated environment allows for interactions with the characteristics which align with the norms, values, and practices of an effective middle school teacher (Altalib, 2002).

### **Methodology and Data Analysis**

Two diverse, high-needs, Title 1 middle schools in a large urban city in the Southern U.S. agreed to participate and host yearlong interns. Sixteen interns volunteered to participate in the yearlong internship with the understanding that they are encouraged to volunteer additional field hours with their mentor teacher; honor this placement for an entire academic year; attend various workshops, and will volunteer to experience an entire academic year...from preplanning to the closing of the school year.

Data was collected through seven reflective journals prepared by the interns. The assigned topics for those reflections were best practices, management, routines, does content matter, what to "steal" (from their mentor teacher), and two open choice reflections. At the end of the second semester, interns wrote a holistic reflection journal on the yearlong experience. Qualitative data was also collected through exit interviews with the interns. A content analysis (Covert 1977) was completed by two university faculty members who separately coded themes that were evident in the data set. They then shared the themes and made generalizations accordingly. To assist in establishing the trustworthiness of the data, the authors were not supervisors of the interns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This helps to provide a space for honest dialogue because power issues are reduced. The authors analyzed the data separately to increase inter-rater reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Additionally, given that "some of the most powerful influences on the development of teacher efficacy are mastery experiences during student teaching and the induction year" (Hoy, 2000, p. 2), the yearlong interns were given the (Ohio State) Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale - long form (TSES; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). The authors note the strong relationships between teachers' persistence, commitment, enthusiasm, instruction behaviors and their teacher efficacy beliefs. In an effort to glean very preliminary evidence, their scale results were compared with randomly selected student teachers completing their field experience in the traditional format, meaning that they began their that experience in mid-January, at the beginning of the university's spring semester. The Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) was administered to students enrolled in the yearlong internship (n = 16). Another 15 teacher candidates enrolled in the traditional final year of classroom and field experience work were also asked to complete this scale. The scale was administered three times: 1) at the beginning (August) of students' final year; 2) in the middle (January) of the year; 3) and at the end (May) of the year. Three students did not complete the scales at various points. Reliability analysis (coefficient alpha) was used to measure the internal consistency of the items making up the scale total score and factor scores. Tschannen-Mora and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) report a coefficient alpha for the long form calculated at .94. Factor sub-score alphas ranged from .87 to .91. These are consistent with the coefficient alphas calculated for these data. The scale authors note three moderately correlated subscales: Efficacy in Student Engagement, Efficacy in Instructional Practices, and Efficacy in Classroom Management. The construct validity of

the Teachers' Sense of Teacher Efficacy Scale, is discussed in Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001).

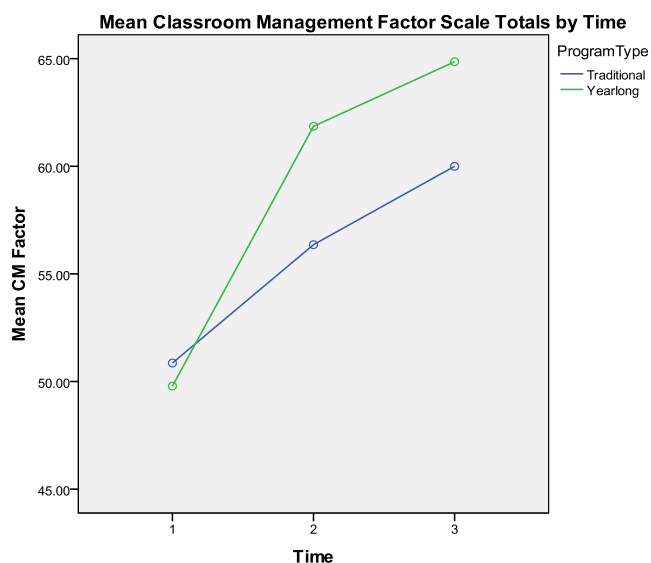
### Findings

Results gathered from the mixed method methodology suggest that the interns have increased efficacy in classroom management, increased efficacy in preparedness for the classroom and, displayed more developed dispositions of cultural responsiveness.

### Classroom Management

Classroom management is an area where many student teachers and first year teachers struggle. Independent t-tests were conducted to determine if one group's mean score (yearlong or traditional) representing confidence in their classroom management skills was significantly larger than the other mean score based on different time periods. Initial (August) differences in Classroom Management Factor Score means were not significant; but there was a significant difference between the January ( $t = -2.34$ ;  $df = 28$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) and May ( $t = -2.01$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p < .056$ ) mean totals. Figure 1 portrays this graphically.

**Figure 1: Mean Classroom Management**



The following qualitative responses also provided evidence of the interns' sense of mastery of classroom management strategies:

I really believe that I am more prepared from student teaching in a school like this because now that I have managed classrooms with these circumstances I have the ability to manage any classroom. I am comfortable in front of a classroom where the students try to talk back and act up on a day to day basis.

Importance of clearly establishing the classroom procedure and enforcing them from day one.

I want to make sure that I do utilize my parent-contact sheet and keep a record of when I call parents to then later be able to use it when there is an administrator involved.

I really like assigning a section at a time and while they are working on it walk around and check over their work. I think that by doing this I will be able to see where they are having issues and be able to elaborate on something that might not be understood.

You see what works and what doesn't work at all. You see and get to experience everything a teacher does. Learn management and procedures and you really get to know the students.

### Preparedness for First Year

*"I believe that during the yearlong internship we were treated more like a faculty member instead of a guest in a school. We were there from start to finish, everyone knew us in the office and the students respected us as an adult."*

To feel like a faculty member, is definitely a goal of the yearlong internship. Interns are at the school for preplanning meetings, parent nights, faculty meetings, and parent-teacher conferences and are introduced as a co-teacher. Being able to immerse themselves in the school culture allows them to more fully understand the school environment and what it really means to be a classroom teacher. The situated nature of the yearlong internship allows for "hands-on" experiences that assist in the interns' self-efficacy in preparedness for any school culture.

I am glad that I was able to learn about Title I schools and dealing with students from different backgrounds than me. Even though this school has its fair share of problems, I feel like I am ready to take on any school after this. I would hate to have student taught in a higher-SES school then end up with a job somewhere like [this school]. I think I would be extremely unprepared.

Intern comments through reflections when compared to the reflections of non-interns also reveal that interns evolve from self-concerns and task concerns during the fall semester to impact concerns throughout student teaching which is a trait uncommon to student teachers (Fuller, 1969). One intern writes "I was able to learn how the students worked and learned before I even started my student teaching which was so useful because I was able to make my lesson plans according to my students." Non-interns, on the other hand, go to a new classroom in January with the goal of learning the routines, the students' names, and the curriculum so they can begin planning lessons and taking over teaching responsibilities by early February. There simply isn't time for them to move beyond self-concerns.

Another trait of preparedness that emerged was the focus on student learning. Two different interns stated, "I know which students will need additional time on assignments. I know each student's academic strengths and weaknesses and therefore can tailor my assignments and lessons to suit their needs" and "I feel like I have had the opportunity to watch and assist students as they have developed and changed over an extended period of time".

Other statements of preparedness include the following:

- It has allowed me to acquire skills like a first year teacher, and I knew my students better.
- I think it gave me a better understanding of what the entire school year is like. It also helped me to see how what you do at the beginning of the year (such as routines and procedures) sets the tone for the entire year.
- I understand what it takes to run a classroom long term and have the time to try different strategies. I can also see the growth and development of students over a long period of time.
- I got to have a full year experience and not relearn any procedures or new students. I know what to expect out of school.
- In all ways...seeing the beginning to the end of the year, seeing the students' change. Was very comfortable most of the year with planning, discipline, and all classroom.
- It forced me to work through difficult situations in a professional manner rather than count the days until a change.
- I think being in the same classroom allows you more time to establish yourself within the school. There are many benefits to interns being able to experience the school year from beginning.
- The main reason I feel being in the same classroom has helped me is by allowing me to build relationships with each student, my mentor teacher, and other faculty members.

### Dispositions of Cultural Responsiveness

Diverse student populations benefit from culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2002) because it recognizes the connection between community and home without comprising academic rigor. Cultural responsive demonstrates mutual respect and the multidimensional nature of students and learning, in both process and content. This process began with relationship building that led to interns being in a position to impact the lives of their students, personally and academically. Tenets of cultural responsiveness also align with the essential attributes of successful schooling of middle school learners (NMSA, 2003). Quotes below provide overwhelming evidence of developing dispositions of cultural responsiveness because of the engagement in a yearlong internship as well as attention to developmentally responsiveness, equity, and valuing adolescents. Each statement is from a different intern,

I was able to plan lessons designed for students and their different abilities. I knew the students well enough to effectively use a variety of grouping methods for group and partner activities. I also knew their various learning styles, and was able to incorporate them into my lesson plans.

Every assessment I give throughout my classroom is for the sole purpose of getting to know my students, discovering what they understand, and what they need help on, however, I mostly want to make sure they are engaging in a positive learning environment.

One of the things that I am most grateful for in relation to the yearlong internship is the relationships I formed with my students.

I think that the teacher has to respect the students.

I want the students talking more in class working out problems and relating to what they are learning.

I want to make sure that I present the content in several different ways, because not all of my students learn the same way.

I believe that to better assess your students you first must find out what the students already know when they come to your classroom.

I know how they learn best.

I was able to plan lessons designed for students and their different abilities. I knew the students well enough to effectively use a variety of grouping methods for group and partner activities. I also knew their various learning styles, and was able to incorporate them into my lesson plans.

I also feel like I was able to make more of an impact on them in general. Over time students trusted me....I was able to see how my students improved and grew over the course of the entire school year.

### Discussion

Teachers of middle school learners need to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the needs of students experiencing many psychological and physiological changes. Preparation programs must be specialized to prepare pre-service teachers for the middle school environment (NMSA, 2005). Yearlong internships offer the authentic context (Herrington and Oliver, 2000) that will give pre-service teachers the opportunity to move theory into practice. Additionally, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Blue Ribbon Panel Report on clinical preparation and partnership, as well as, other researchers have called for extended time in the classroom for teacher candidates (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; NCATE, 2010).

A quantitative study by Spooner, Flowers, Lambert, and Algozzine (2008) provided preliminary results that reported teacher-candidates who participated in year-long internships reported "better relationship with their supervising teacher, greater knowledge of school policies and procedures, and higher scores for the perceived adequacy of time spent in school than did the students in the semester internship (p.263)." Additionally, eight years prior to Spooner, et al's study, a study at the Central Washington University (Schmitz, Veilbig, Fitch, & Alawiye, 2000) reported students who participated in yearlong internships have most experiences of a first year teacher, implying that many of those first year chal-



allenges have been addressed and candidates are more effective in attending to those challenges as they begin their “true” first year in the profession. This mixed-methods study provided complementary evidence that yearlong internships give future middle school teachers not only an opportunity to observe day-to-day events, but fully participate in an entire academic year, while receiving guidance and support from a seasoned teacher. It gives interns time to process course information into classroom practice. They are able to move past a focus solely on classroom management to giving attention to their students’ individual learning needs. Many quotes were provided as evidence to support the recommendation that more teacher preparation programs consider a change to incorporating yearlong internships into their programs. Teachers are better prepared for the energy, challenges, and changes that middle school learners bring to the classroom.

### References

- Abdal-Haqq, I. 1998. *Professional development schools: Weighing the evidence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Altalib, H. (2002). *Situated cognition: Describing the theory*. Fairfax, VA: George Mason University.
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, S. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 18(1), 32 - 42.
- Covert, R.W (1977). Content analysis: Analysis of work samples and other written documents. *Evaluation Research Center, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia*.
- Darling-Hammond, L., and P. Youngs. 2002. Defining “highly qualified teachers”: What does “scientifically-based research” actually tell us? *Educational Researcher*, 31 (9),13–25.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Baratz-Snowden, J. (Eds, 2007). A good teacher in every classroom: Preparing the highly qualified teachers our children deserve. *The entity from which ERIC acquires the content, including journal, organization, and conference names, or by means of online submission from the author: Educational Horizons*, 85(2), 111-132.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Fuller, F.F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualization. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6, 207-226.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106 - 116.
- Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation design. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), pp. 255-74.
- Gormley, K., Hammer, J., McDermott, P., & Rothenberg, J. (1993, October 15 - 17). *An investigation into the influence of classroom practica experiences on student teachers' thoughts about teaching*. Paper presented at the Northeastern Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Ellenville, NY.
- Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. (2000). An instructional design framework for authentic learning environments. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 48(3), 23 - 48.
- Hoy, A. (2000). *Changes in teacher efficacy during the early years of teaching*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010). *Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers*. Washington, DC: NCATE.
- National Middle School Association (2005). *This we believe in action: Implementing successful middle level schools*. Westerville, OH: NMSA.
- Schmitz, S., Veilbig, C., Fitch, L. & Alawiye, O.(2000). *Assessment! The foundation to this performance/ field-based teacher preparation program*. Central Washington University, 1 – 15.
- Spooner, M., Flowers, C., Lambert, R., & Algozzine, B. (2008). Is more really better? Examining perceived benefits of an extended student teaching experience. *The Clearing House*, 81(6), 263 – 269.
- Smith, E. R. (2007). Negotiating power and pedagogy in student teaching: expanding and shifting roles in expert-novice discourse. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 15(1), 87 - 106.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing and elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 783-805.