The Complexities of Middle Level Teacher Credentialing: Status Report and Future Directions

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Abstract

Specialized preparation and credentialing for teachers of young adolescents continue to be the focus of advocacy efforts within the field of middle level education. To better understand the status of middle level teacher credentialing throughout the United States, this descriptive, pragmatic, qualitative study explored how specialized middle level teacher credentials are addressed in the United States and...
what options are available. Researchers reviewed publicly available documents from each state and the District of Columbia. The findings revealed wide variations in the (a) credentialing authority, (b) credential name, (c) credential grade bands, (d) extent of overlapping credentials, (e) testing requirements, and (f) field experience requirements. Findings draw attention to the complexity of educator credentialing in the United States and document the extreme variations of middle level teacher credentialing across the country. Implications for policymakers and institutions of higher education are discussed.

**Keywords:** credentialing, licensure, middle grades, middle level teacher certification, middle level teacher preparation

The landscape of teacher education and credentialing has changed significantly over the past 20 years (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015a; Hagans & Powers, 2015; Mehta, 2013). Two competing forces are shaping policy and practices for how teachers are prepared, credentialed, and inducted into the profession (Camera, 2016). Beginning in the mid-1990s, high-stakes accountability measures have and continue to transform education policy and practice. This transformation is manifested in multiple forms within K–12 schools, institutions of higher education (IHE), and state level education credentialing agencies (Mehta, 2013). At the same time, the United States faces a shortage of teachers that severely threatens large urban and rural school districts (Aragon, 2016). With the accountability measures for teachers, students, and states looming over the profession, negative media attention surrounding teachers and schools, and workforce stress, fewer and fewer people are choosing teaching as a career. Individuals entering the teaching workforce dropped 35% in the last five years (Camera, 2016). Added to the downturn of teachers entering the workforce is the large number of teachers leaving classroom teaching or retiring from the profession all together. The expected reduction in the workforce, coupled with the higher demand for qualified and effective teachers, creates great challenges for both IHEs and state education agencies. These two entities will be expected to provide flexibility in how teachers are prepared and credentialed to both increase the number of teachers available and ensure the teaching workforce is qualified and effective.

While all of the aforementioned complications in teacher education and credentialing reveal the contradictory issue affecting the field of teacher education, one thing is constant—the classroom teacher plays an important role in a student’s success (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2014; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). P–12 students in US schools today are expected to meet rigorous college- and career-ready standards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2012), and their chance of success in meeting these standards is better if they have consistently effective teachers at all levels of their education (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2010).

Balfanz (2009) suggested the critical role of the teacher is even more profound in the middle grades. His research team followed more than 12,000 sixth-grade students from 1996 to 2004. While the context of the first study was limited to Philadelphia, the replication of that study in ten US cities concluded similarly that students’ grades, attendance, and behavior in grades 6–8 have significant impact on their school experiences (Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2014; Balfanz & Fox, 2011; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen, & Shane, 2016).

In an effort to improve the educational experiences for young adolescent students, preparation for middle level teachers has been and remains a priority for middle level advocates (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2012; Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, & Thompson, 2016; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Proponents of specialized preparation for teachers of young adolescents acknowledge the developmental period between the ages of 10 and 15 as a time of significant physical, social, emotional, moral, and intellectual growth and change. They emphasize many of these changes can have a profound impact on the educational experiences of middle grades students. In its position paper, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), the Association for Middle Level Education advocated for middle level teachers who both value young adolescents and are specifically prepared to teach them. AMLE (2012) also outlined specific standards for middle level teacher preparation programs that address young adolescent development, middle level curriculum, middle level philosophy and school organization, middle level instruction and assessment, and middle level professional roles.

McEwin et al. (2003) noted the growth and progress that have occurred in middle level credentialing during the past 50 years. The number of states requiring middle level licensure grew from “2 in 1969 (Pumerantz, 1969), 8 in 1978 (Gillan, 1978), 26 in 1985 (McEwin & Allen, 1985), 33 in 1992 (Valentine & Mogar, 1992), and 44 in 2000
While the increasing number of states requiring middle level licensure represents progress, the need for clarity regarding the specific requirements of middle level credentialing persists. For example, after finding that “[the] vast majority of the teachers, 93%, in neighborhood middle schools in Philadelphia [were] elementary certified,” Useem, Barends, and Lindermayer (1999) engaged in research to better understand the certification regulations in the state of Pennsylvania (p.10). In an effort to develop a contextual analysis for comparison, they gathered information on middle level teacher certification in the 50 US states and the District of Columbia from various sources including websites, telephone interviews, email communications, and hard copy materials. While their data showed that certification for the middle level grade bands (e.g., 5–8, 5–9, 4–8, 6–8) was part of 44 states’ teacher credential requirements, their analysis did not reveal how or if overlapping licenses existed within the states at that time or other nuanced certification rules that would allow teachers prepared in elementary or secondary preparation programs to teach at the middle level.

More recently, Howell and associates (2016) documented a significant disparity between the state requirements for middle level credentials and the number of IHEs with specialized middle level teacher preparation programs. After reviewing 1,324 IHEs’ teacher preparation programs, Howell et al. (2016) found only one-third of IHEs with programs leading to an initial teaching credential had specialized middle level teacher preparation programs. Most surprisingly, they found one-third of the IHE programs reviewed had no coursework related to, or focused on, young adolescents or middle level schools, yet many of these IHEs were in states that offered some form of middle level teaching credential. This discrepancy points to questions about how the policies related to teacher licensure are translated into practice within the IHEs.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the status of middle level teacher credentialing throughout the United States by documenting policies at the individual state level and examining the different options available for teachers to obtain a credential for teaching in the middle level grade bands (e.g., 5–8, 5–9, 4–8, 6–8). The following questions guided the study:

1. How is specialized middle level teacher licensure addressed by the 50 US states and the District of Columbia?

2. What are the different middle level teacher licensure options available in the 50 US states and the District of Columbia? How are these options similar/different?

**Framework**

The authors are conceptually grounded in the middle school philosophy (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2010) and pertinent research on effective middle level teaching and teacher education (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2013; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013). In addition to our conceptual orientation, we draw on Cochran-Smith and Villegas’ (2015a) notion of research as a social practice and Bourdieu’s (2009) Bourdieusian perspective on research in educational policy. Together, these theoretical frameworks call us to consider how “the larger social, political and economic forces and resulting ideologies that have shaped education” influence the demands of the policies and actions of IHE and state education agencies (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015a, p. 8). Consistent with Bourdieu’s (2009) Bourdieusian perspective, we view ourselves as agents within middle level teacher education research and acknowledge our specific interest in this social and professional space. While we are guided by the conceptual underpinnings of middle level philosophy, our commitment to the education of young adolescents through teachers prepared to teach them remains a driving force of the research we conduct.

Heilbron (2009) and Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015a) suggested that Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” conceptualizes the tension between and among individuals within a social space who have different intentions, assets, and abilities. By virtue of our professional roles as researchers and teacher educators, we work within the same societal and professional spaces as those who make policies about teacher education and certification. Research as social practice brings us together as competing agents with different ideas and reveals the complexity of “relationships between research practices and social, economic and institutional power” (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015a, p. 381).
Bourdieu’s view of research as a social practice encourages us to move beyond the critical view of word choices to the consideration of the structural influence that might have impacted the word choices describing curricular requirements IHEs listed for public view. Additionally, this framework requires that we acknowledge our role in the social practice of research because of the work we do, questions we ask, and solutions we present. Given this perspective, we reviewed the statutes, mandates, and descriptions of requirements for middle level credentialing in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. We attempted to document how states describe middle level credentialing in the context of the state’s educational climate and national mandates for accreditation in an effort to provide transparency of policy enactment.

**Methodology**

A descriptive, pragmatic, qualitative research design frames this study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). We used existing data document analysis to understand the nature of teacher credentialing policy in the United States. These documents and policies inform the implementation of practice in IHEs that prepare teachers in each state and, therefore, provide a lens to examine these practices.

**Data Sources and Collection**

We identified and accessed the websites for the credentialing agency for each of the 50 United States and the District of Columbia as part of a larger overall study examining both the state licensure documents and the nature of middle level teacher preparation program degree requirements within each state. We limited our analysis to documents available on credentialing agency websites between October 2016 and January 2017. In addition, when possible, the state codes of regulation were also reviewed online. Only traditional route, initial licensure data were reviewed. The following information was recorded in a spreadsheet: URLs for state credentialing agency documents, grade bands for licensure (e.g., 5–9, 4–8, 6–8), name of credential (if middle level specific), whether a middle level credential was required, testing requirements for credentialing, and any additional details of the credential that were available (e.g., overlapping grade bands, field experiences, specific coursework). To examine the testing requirements, we referenced the Educational Testing Service and the National Evaluation Series websites.

When it was necessary to provide clarity, we reviewed websites from universities within the given state confirm or disconfirm the information collected from the state credentialing agency. Screenshots or PDFs of online documents were collected in order to continue the examination of the data, support member checking, and enhance accuracy, knowing that these online documents and the licensure itself were subject to change.

**Data Analysis**

The terms license, certificate, and endorsement are often used interchangeably to refer to a professional credential allowing an individual to teach in that state, yet each term can have slightly different meanings. In some states, an individual who completes a teacher preparation program and associated examinations is granted a license to teach, while other states grant certification. In other instances, individuals are granted an endorsement that is added to an existing license or certificate. Though there are various nuances associated with each term, in this study we use the general term credential to mean a professional license, certificate, or endorsement issued by a state credentialing authority. When referring to a credential offered in a specific state, we use the appropriate term for the credential (i.e., license, certificate, endorsement).

Data analysis occurred in four phases to ensure consistency and intercoder reliability. First, an initial set of data for five states was reviewed and coded by all researchers as a group. Agreement in coding was established for each of the five states. Next, the remaining states were divided among the researchers for coding. After this round of coding, a member of the research team reviewed 20% of the data and associated codes to ensure accuracy. Finally, one of the researchers reviewed all the data to confirm findings. Any inconsistencies were discussed by the research team until agreement was achieved.

We categorized each state in a closed coding system. Codes included (a) having a stand-alone credential (even in scenarios where it was not required or had significantly overlapping grade bands), (b) an endorsement (of any type—by exam, coursework, other), or (c) no state identified specialized credential. In addition, we examined features of both stand-alone licensure and endorsements. Specifically, we examined if the stand-alone license was required or if overlapping grade band licensure allowed teachers to teach in the middle grades. When coding a state as having licensure versus an endorsement, we erred on the side of classifying the credential as more
specialized than less. We also acknowledge that even in the context of no specialized preparation, or in a state with an endorsement, individual institutions may provide various degrees of specialized preparation for middle level educators. See Table 1 for complete results.

Findings

This exploratory study was designed to document middle level teacher licensure in the 50 US states and the District of Columbia and describe differences that exist between states. We acknowledge credentialing data are not static and can change quickly within the social and political environments of state agencies; therefore, these findings are based on the researchers’ interpretation of the documents publicly available at the time of data collection. Our theoretical framework guided the research as we continually acknowledged the context of the educational climate and national mandates for accreditation during our analysis. The findings reveal the variations in the (a) credentialing authority, (b) credential name, (c) credential grade bands, (d) extent of overlapping credentials, (e) testing requirements, and (f) field experience requirements. These descriptions draw attention to the complexity of educator credentialing in the United States and document the extreme variations in middle level teacher licensure across the country.

Credentialing Authority

The structure by which a state issues and regulates teacher credentialing varied from state to state. While many states located credentialing authority within a department of education, it was sometimes administered through a separate standards board or a state board of education. The most common structure for credentialing we found was a state department of education. In 37 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, the authority over teacher credentialing rested with a state department of education, frequently a division within the department. In a few cases (n = 6) the name was slightly different (e.g., the Office of Public Instruction or the Education Agency). There were 10 states with a separate standards board that regulated teacher licensure. Of those, California had a Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and Iowa had a Board of Educational Examiners. There were three states in which credentialing was overseen by a department of education, but the regulations and rules were determined by a separate standards board.

Credential Name

One challenge associated with the preparation of teachers of young adolescents stems from the variations of terminology used within the field. Middle school, middle grades, or middle level are the most commonly used terms. For example, the National Middle School Association’s Board of Trustees voted in 2011 to change the name of the organization to the Association for Middle Level Education in an effort to be more inclusive of schools that included middle grades but were not called “middle schools” (Waidelich, 2011).

We found that 35 states and the District of Columbia had a range of names for their credential including middle school (n = 14), middle level (n = 11), and middle grades (n = 11). One state (Maine) used both middle grades and middle level to describe its credential area. Adding to the complexity of the credential name, the grade bands and subject matter areas associated with the credential varied as well. With regard to the remaining 14 states, their acknowledgment of a credential for teachers of young adolescents ranged from middle childhood (n = 2) to subject and grade band specific areas (n = 4) to not acknowledging the middle grades at all (n = 1). Kansas offered certification for “late childhood through early adolescence (grades 5–8)” and the remaining six states offered either elementary or secondary credentials that encompassed the middle grades via K–6 or K–8 and 5–12 or 7–12 options.

Overlapping Credentials

The issue of overlapping grade bands creates a problematic structure for middle level teacher credentialing. Generally, the elementary credential spans kindergarten through grade 6, and the secondary teaching license spans grades 6–12. The typical middle grades credential we found addressed grades 5–9.

We examined the teaching licensure overlap that exists in the United States and found few states with a stand-alone middle grades credential. While 42 states and District of Columbia recognized the middle level through an endorsement or specific teaching license, 35 (68.6%) had a licensure structure in which middle grades was completely embedded within a current elementary or secondary license (see Table 1). In fact, only eight states (Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and West Virginia) had a licensure structure in which some of the middle grades stand alone, and, in each of those cases, grade overlap was still present. For
Table 1
Teacher Credential Grade Bands in the 50 US States and the District of Columbia:

Middle grades with limited overlap (elementary, middle, secondary)

| State          | Grades         |
|----------------|----------------|
| Kentucky       | P–5; 5–9; 8–12 |
| Missouri       | 1–6; 5–9; 9–12 |
| Ohio           | PK–3; 4–9; 7–12|
| South Carolina | PK–3; 2–6; 5–8; 9–12|
| Massachusetts  | K–6; 5–8; 8–12 |
| North Carolina | K–6; 6–9; 9–12 |
| Pennsylvania   | PK–4; 4–8; 7–12|
| West Virginia  | K–6; 5–9; 9–adult|

Middle grades with complete overlap (elementary, middle, secondary)

| State          | Grades         |
|----------------|----------------|
| Alabama        | K–6; 4–8; 6–12 |
| Connecticut    | 1–6; 7–12; MG certificate with no defined grade bands |
| Florida        | K–6; 6–9; 6–12 |
| Hawaii         | K–6; 6–8; 6–12 |
| Illinois       | 1–6; 5–8; 5–12 (effective 1/2018) |
| Iowa           | K–6; 5–8; 5–12 |
| Maine          | K–8; 5–8; 7–12 |
| Michigan       | K–6; 6–8; 6–12 |
| Montana        | K–8; 4–8; 5–12 |
| Nevada         | K–8; 7–9; 7–12 |
| New Jersey     | K–6; 5–8; P–12 |
| New York       | 1–6; 5–9; 7–12 |
| Oregon         | 3–8; 5–9; 9–12 |
| Tennessee      | K–6; 6–8; 6–12 |
| Utah           | K–6; 7–8; 6–12 |
| Virginia       | K–6; 6–8; 6–12 |
| Wisconsin      | K–6; 5–8; 5–12 |
| District of Columbia | 1–6; 6–8; 7–12 |

No middle grades (elementary, secondary)

| State          | Grades         |
|----------------|----------------|
| Alaska         | K–8; 7–12      |
| Colorado       | K–6; 7–12      |
| Mississippi    | K–6; 7–12      |
| South Dakota   | K–8; 7–12      |
| Arizona        | 1–8; 6–12      |
| Idaho          | K–8; 6–12      |
| Oklahoma       | 1–8; 6–12      |

Undefined Grade Band

| State          |
|----------------|
| California     |

*aThese findings are based on the researchers’ interpretation of the documents publicly available at the time of data collection.*
example, the state of Kentucky had a P–5 license for elementary, 5–9 license for middle grades, and an 8–12 license for secondary. Only grades 6 and 7 were unique to the middle grades license.

**Credential Grade Bands**

We found that the availability of a teaching credential focused on the middle grades had increased the manner in which a credential could be earned varied widely. Analysis of the current status of middle level licensure (see Table 1) revealed 43 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia (84.3%) had an option available for the middle grade band. These grade band options included grades 5–8 (n = 12), 4–8 (n = 7), 5–9 (n = 10), 6–8 (n = 6), 4–9 (n = 3), 7–9 (n = 1), 6–9 (n = 2), 7–8 endorsement (n = 1), and undefined grade band (n = 1). Existence of a credential did not mean it was the only option available because of overlapping licensure options and, in some cases, the credential available was only obtained through an endorsement added to an elementary or secondary credential. We found several states still did not recognize the middle grades as a unique grade band in its credentialing structure. Other options included K–12, K–6/7–12, K–8/5–8/7–12, 1–9/10–12, K–6/1–8/5–12, or no middle grades license option available.

**Testing Requirements**

Testing requirements for credentials varied extensively by state (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Wilson & Youngs, 2005), and the requirements were influenced by each state’s credentialing structure. Thus, if a middle grades credential was not offered, assessments related to middle grades education were not required but might be used for endorsements.

The nature of the test requirements varied as well. As Wilson and Youngs (2005) stated, “Teacher tests range from tests of basic skills to tests of liberal arts or general knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge” (p. 600). While all states required some sort of basic skills test and one or more content area knowledge exams, not all states required exams to assess knowledge of pedagogy or pedagogical content knowledge.

We found that middle level content knowledge, or even more broadly based secondary content knowledge, was often all that states assessed for middle level credentialing. Testing varied even with the eight states that required specialized licensure for at least one of the middle grades. Five of the states (i.e., Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) used the Praxis series of exams; whereas the other three (i.e., Massachusetts, Missouri, and Ohio) had state-specific exams. All eight states required a middle level content knowledge examination; however, only five of the eight (i.e., Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and West Virginia) required an exam that addresses middle level-specific pedagogy.

**Field Experiences**

Field experiences were the least defined aspect of teacher credentialing we examined. Field experiences, clinical experiences, student teaching, and internships are some of the terms states used to refer to the hours working or observing in schools, and we included all of these terms while examining “field experiences.” The most common term we found in documents was “student teaching.”

Length of time in these experiences varied drastically, and in many cases states did not specify a grade level or content area. For example, Wyoming, Vermont, and Michigan defined their student teaching experience requirements in terms of weeks with a minimum of 8 weeks (WY) to a maximum of 13 weeks (VT). Kentucky defined the length of student teaching as 70 days, and Massachusetts and Virginia defined their student teaching requirements in terms of hours (MA, 300; VA, 300). A number of states listed vague time definitions such as “semester hours,” “clock hours,” or “hours” but did not provide an indication of what type of experience was required.

There were vast and clear discrepancies in basic field experience requirements from state to state written into policy for teachers seeking credentials in the United States and virtually no specification for middle level field experience requirements. However, we recognize the enacted policy at each teacher preparation program may include specified field experiences at the middle level.

**Limitations**

We acknowledge that the policy documents we analyzed are not static and can change quickly within the social and political environments of state agencies. We also acknowledge an analysis of these documents alone will present only a partial view of middle level teacher education and licensure as it exists today and is influenced by our interpretation of the information presented for public view.
Discussion and Implications

The findings from this exploratory study are significant to the field of middle grades education for three reasons. First, it highlights the great variability in paths leading to a middle level credential from state to state. The preparation and credentialing of teachers are responsibilities of the states, and each state must work within its existing laws and regulations to ensure classroom teachers are properly credentialed. Preparation and credentialing for elementary and secondary teachers have a relatively long, established history, and for many years, the credentialing structure in most states overlapped in the middle grades (e.g., K–8, 7–12). States chose to address the credentialing of middle level teachers in a variety of ways as demonstrated in this study. Some have kept the previous overlapping credentialing structure, while others have embraced specialized preparation and licensure for middle level teachers by establishing credentials with limited overlapping grade bands. Furthermore, other market forces have led to additional alternate and extension routes to a credential.

The differing education contexts across the nation, including issues of rurality and teacher shortages, contribute to the challenges of obtaining licensure to teach at the middle level. For example, Tennessee offered a grades 4–8 generalist teaching certificate for individuals wanting to teach middle school until September 2015. The broad nature of the certification and complexities associated with preparing a teacher to teach all four major content areas forced the Tennessee Department of Education to revise its offerings (Personal Communication, Nicole Thompson, February 23, 2015). Since September 2015, individuals desiring to teach middle grades may obtain a grades 6–8 subject-specific teaching certificate or may earn certification for grades 6–12. The options available will be largely determined by the universities within the state and what preparation model they decide to offer. Thus, Tennessee does offer stand-alone middle level certification, but the opportunity to earn such certification may be limited by what programs are offered by universities within Tennessee. In contrast, Utah does not offer middle level certification, though a variety of other initial teaching certifications are available that encompass the middle grades (i.e., K–6, 6–12, and 1–8). Subject-specific endorsements to teach seventh and eighth grades can be added to the grade 1–8 certificate. Consequently, if an individual holds grade 6–12 certification, he/she must major in the content area.

The variability exposed in this study highlights the importance for policymakers to acknowledge the middle level as a distinct educational level, and it also encourages further examination of middle level credentials by policymakers to ensure teachers in the middle grades are both credentialed and prepared in a manner that takes into account the developmental needs of middle level students. With more than 13,000 middle level schools in the country, it is critical to have teachers who understand the essential organizational structures that support the learning and developmental needs of young adolescents.

This study is also significant for middle level teacher preparation programs. While the researchers acknowledge the fact that preparation programs must work within the regulations of their states regarding preparation and credentialing, we also recognize state regulations often allow for a certain level of institutional autonomy to design programs that meet regulatory requirements while addressing institutional and community needs. With such variability, it is important that institutions ensure all programs leading to a middle level credential are truly “specialized” as recommended by the Association for Middle Level Education (2012) standards. The burden rests with the teacher preparation program to ensure that each program addresses the unique developmental needs of the young adolescent, particularly if the program leads to a credential that includes the middle grades (e.g., K–8 or 7–12).

As middle grades teacher educators, many times our work is driven by what policymakers are doing, what state credentialing agencies require, and what trends in supply and demand dictate. Given our research, we would suggest teacher educators think flexibly and embrace opportunities to create programs to prepare effective middle level teachers even when state policy or credentialing structures are not supportive. If an IHE recommends candidates for a credential that includes the middle grades, teacher educators at that institution have a professional responsibility to include components in the preparation program focused on the specific needs of this age group. When we examined IHEs, it was evident that there was freedom to choose to create a program for middle grades educators (Howell et al., 2016), but the consistency with which it happened varied greatly. For example, one state with no middle grade credential had four institutions with stand-alone middle level teacher preparation programs, demonstrating a commitment to preparing teacher candidates to address the needs of adolescents. On the other hand, another state had a 4–8 middle
grades license but not a single IHE within the state had a middle level teacher education program or coursework related to middle level education specifically. These examples highlight the variability that exists among institutions and states regarding the preparation and credentialing of middle level teachers. No longer can we use the excuse of not having a middle grades credential. The responsibility falls on teacher educators to enact the changes and develop the curriculum that is appropriate 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. However, this does not relieve policymakers from their responsibility to enact policy that recognizes the middle level as unique and distinct.

Finally, this study is significant to the field of middle level education research because it extends the understanding middle level researchers have regarding the current state of the field. Because of its relative youth, the field of middle level education has experienced its own sort of growing pains. At times, the needs of young adolescent students, the preparation of teachers, corresponding policy, and advocacy efforts have progressed at different rates. As the body of knowledge expands, middle level researchers can further inform all constituents regarding the needs of middle level students and the preparation of teachers to serve them. As we consider future research for middle level teacher education, we draw on Cochran-Smith and Villegas’ (2015a) comprehensive review of research on teacher education from the past 100 years (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015b). They identified the three most prominent questions research on teacher education seeks to answer: “the curriculum questions,” “the effectiveness question,” and the “the knowledge question” (p.381). With regards to these questions, future research must place greater emphasis on examining the impact of specialized middle level credentialing. For example, are teachers with a specialized middle level credential able to more effectively implement components of the middle school concept into their classrooms? Is there a difference in the manner in which they build relationships and address the developmental needs of young adolescents? Do they possess the content and pedagogical knowledge to create relevant, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences? As middle level education researchers, we will seek answers to these questions, so young adolescents have teachers who are prepared to educate and support them.

Conclusion

Some may ask, “So, why is this important? Even with overlapping licensure, the middle grades are still ‘covered.’” We argue the issue is much deeper than offering a credential that includes the middle grades; it is about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions one demonstrates to obtain that credential. We believe a deep understanding of adolescent development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, moral), middle level curriculum and pedagogy, and middle school organizational structures is essential to effectively teach young adolescents. We would not expect an elementary school teacher to effectively teach choral music or high school chemistry, nor would we believe a high school chemistry teacher would be adequately prepared to diagnose the reading challenges of a 6-year-old. Likewise, a teacher for the middle grades should be specially prepared to effectively teach the young adolescent.

In 1905, G. Stanley Hall and scholars in the field of psychology began to recognize the uniqueness of adolescence, and the junior high schools emerged to address this uniqueness (Hall, 1905). The junior high school failed to fully realize what it set out to accomplish largely because it was treated as a miniature high school with teachers who were not specially prepared for the students they would teach (Alexander, 1987). As Vars (1969) stated, “After 60 years of existence, the junior high school is still largely a ‘school without teachers’—that is without teachers prepared specifically to work at this level” (p. 172). Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury (1967) summarized the staffing situation of the junior high school when they stated, “Perhaps the most serious obstacle to the educational development of the junior high school has been the lack of teachers specifically prepared for work at this level” (p. 49). Unfortunately, as this study finds, the middle school is poised to repeat the same mistakes, not because of a lack of desire to do what is best for young adolescents, but because current credentialing structures and education policy make it easy to ignore the middle grades.

As advocates for specialized middle level teacher preparation, we find ourselves in the center of competing agendas in which the teacher workforce is regulated by policies that are enacted based on market values of supply and demand, while measures of accountability are also driving reforms to ensure the teacher workforce is effective and qualified. The contradictory climate of teacher preparation and credentialing exacerbates the lack of clarity in middle
level teacher education at the national level. This research evolved from the question of why there were not more teachers prepared for middle grades classrooms. With 13,000 middle level schools in the country, but only one-third of initial teacher preparation programs having a middle grades program (Howell et al., 2016), the question becomes more urgent. After a comprehensive review of regulations and policies, we found collections of loosely coupled grade bands that overlapped, ignored, or highlighted the middle grades. When we compare our findings to Useem and associates (1999), we are forced to recognize that the progress for middle level credentialing has not continued on the positive trajectory it once experienced. We found credentialing for middle level teachers has become even more diluted within overlapping grade bands or completely eliminated. Fewer states require a stand-alone middle level credential now than 20 years ago. The current political and policy climate, impending teacher shortage, and efforts to deregulate entry to the teaching profession are significantly impacting teacher preparation broadly and middle level teacher preparation specifically.

As teacher educators, we are at a crossroad. The landscape of middle level teacher licensure is complex and ill-defined, and it appears specialized middle level teacher preparation and licensure are in jeopardy. We can allow competing forces and the lack of clearly defined middle level credentialing policy to deter us, or we can forge new opportunities to create programs that emphasize developmentally appropriate practices regardless of whether a middle level credential exists within our states. At the same time, we must increase our efforts to influence policymakers to enact regulation that recognizes the middle level grade band as unique and distinct requiring teachers who are specially prepared and credentialed. In doing so, we achieve our ultimate goal—a developmentally responsive educational experience for all middle level students.

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