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Promoting *This We Believe* and the AMLE Standards with Teacher Candidates

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In an introductory middle grades course, teacher candidates synthesize and apply the concepts from key middle level documents through their coursework. Along with a popular middle grades text (Brown & Knowles, 2014), teacher candidates read *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010) as well as the Association for Middle Level Education Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards (AMLE Standards; AMLE, 2012). As I have taught this course over several semesters, I have modified, updated, and otherwise adapted several aspects of the course in order to integrate these documents into the program more directly. These modifications and adaptations stem from my vision for teaching (cf. Duffy, 1998) as well as works including the Middle Level Educational Research Agenda (Mertens, Caskey, Bishop, Flowers, Strahan, Andrews, & Daniel, 2016) and a recent handbook on clinical partnerships at the middle level (Howell, Carpenter, & Jones, 2016).

Here, I share how I have incorporated *This We Believe* and the AMLE Standards into this course to enhance teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching at the middle level. First, I will describe the course and key concepts from the two documents that are integrated into the course. Next, I share examples of several course activities and assignments that incorporate the documents. Finally, I reflect on the overall integration of key middle level documents in the course.

The Course and Key Concepts from *This We Believe* and the AMLE Standards

Teacher candidates integrate many forms of knowledge, skills, and dispositions over a relatively short amount of time in the teacher preparation program. *This We Believe* and the AMLE Standards have been situated as anchor points for several course concepts and related assignments. The introductory middle grades course is required for undergraduate majors in middle grades education. For several semesters, the course has met on-site in a partner school (Wall & Draper, 2017) for several weeks and on-campus for the latter part of the semester. Teacher candidates in the course have a practicum requiring classroom hours in both a middle school classroom and an upper elementary classroom; there are two field placements since middle level certification in our state is grades 4-8. Course topics include young adolescent development as well as middle level philosophy and structures. Teacher candidates also engage in designing a unit matrix and lesson plan to support their increasing knowledge of planning. Each teacher candidate also completes two shadow study assignments and several structured observations in their assigned classrooms.

This We Believe states four essential attributes of middle level education, that it be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. The document is organized into sixteen characteristics under the themes of: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and school culture. One of the key characteristics in *This We Believe* is that middle level curriculum should be: challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. Another is that middle level educators “value young adolescents and are prepared

to teach theme.” Along with other components of the document, these guiding ideas are embedded in several course assignments.

The AMLE Standards are organized into five domains: young adolescent development, middle level curriculum, middle level philosophy and school organization, middle level instruction and assessment, and middle level professional roles (AMLE, 2012). Each Standard includes different elements, and the explanation under each Standard includes a rubric to gauge whether middle level teacher candidates’ actions reflect Unsatisfactory, Acceptable, or Target status for given criteria. These rubrics can be used to support teacher candidates’ critical reflections and goal-setting for their progress throughout the middle level program. As course and program objectives are aligned to the AMLE Standards, it is beneficial for teacher candidates to read and explore the Standards directly.

Course Activities and Assignments

Through several assignments in the course, teacher candidates analyze and synthesize concepts in *This We Believe* and the AMLE Standards. These documents inform their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching. Here, I describe sample assignments that draw on one or both of these documents: some assignments are brief in scope while others constitute major course assignments.

Classroom Observations. As stated, teacher candidates enjoy placements in middle grades classrooms. During the field experience, they perform five structured observations. One of these focuses on middle level curriculum. Teacher candidates are prompted to connect aspects of the curriculum they observe to four keywords from *This We Believe*. The prompt asks them to identify elements of the classroom that are, respectively, challenging, exploratory, relevant, and integrative. These keywords also relate to two other prompts, for teacher candidates to explain how the curriculum in their class connects to other content areas (exploratory; integrative) and to students’ interests and identities (relevant).

Letter to Families. Another assignment calls on teacher candidates to be able to synthesize and explain middle level curriculum and philosophy to an imagined audience of the parents of their future students. This assignment is linked to AMLE Standards 2 (Middle Level Curriculum) and 3 (Middle Level Philosophy and Structures). Teacher candidates need to be able to state concepts using relevant terminology (e.g. differentiation; integrated curriculum) while also clarifying these concepts with language and examples for an audience of non-educators of different backgrounds. Teacher candidates in our program sometimes state that they would like to have more experience interacting with parents and guardians. While this assignment does not put them into direct contact with parents and guardians, it provides a framework within which they can practice how they would communicate with their students’ families. This, in a sense, also speaks to AMLE Standard 5 (Middle Level Professional Roles).

Effective Middle School Project. Teacher candidates synthesize their knowledge of middle level philosophy and structures by writing a handbook of sorts for an imagined middle school. This paper is organized around program characteristics such as committed educators, adult advocates, and positive learning environment—many of which align directly with characteristics of *This We Believe*. Teacher candidates draw on AMLE standards while describing example guiding ideas, practices, and programs at their imagined school. This paper is a way for teacher candidates to consolidate knowledge and to gain a school-wide perspective of how a middle school is structured and organized.

Presentations. Teacher candidates collaborate on presentations highlighting either one of the AMLE Standards or a section of *This We Believe*, depending on the semester. The presentation should explain the major ideas in their part of the respective document, connections to research, and ideas for practice. The class each semester develops the rubric for the presentation.

Vision Statement. Each teacher candidate writes a vision statement for teaching. This vision statement (Duffy, 1998; cf. Lounsbury, 1991) is a way for teacher candidates to articulate their goals for themselves as educators, and goals for their students. Teacher candidates need to link their vision statement to middle level students, to their selected content area concentrations, and to either *This We Believe* or the AMLE Standards.

Concluding Thoughts

Through these activities and assignments, teacher candidates are able to engage more meaningfully with key middle level documents and the concepts in them. These assignments, in addition to their other course assignments, reflect objectives for the course and program as we continue to prepare teachers who are prepared for middle level classrooms. Reading and incorporating *This We Believe* and the AMLE Standards in the course allows teacher candidates to see how concepts fundamental to middle level education connect to their field experiences and their coursework.

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