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Academic Challenges in Southeastern Middle Schools: Voices of Teachers and Principals

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Abstract

This study seeks to share teachers' and principals' voices from middle schools in the Southeastern United States who are attempting to help their students achieve academic success. Obtaining a snapshot of middle schools in the Southeastern United States provides opportunities to recognize trends and identify challenges about the current implementation of middle level programs and practices related to academics. The last large-scale survey was completed over ten years ago (McEwin & Greene, 2010, 2011) and was focused on principal voices only. When attempting to assess the level of implementation of various school improvement efforts or to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced daily in the classroom, the voices of teachers and principals are powerful voices that must be heard. Among other results, educators called for more meaningful collaboration among elementary and middle schools to address gaps in content and skills, and a better focus on educating the whole child in their schools. Implications and future directions are discussed.

Middle schools should be places that support adolescent learners and help them to navigate “the middle” years. Middle schools that are successful typically embody several important aspects of middle level education by being developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. Obtaining a snapshot of middle schools in the Southeastern United States (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) provides opportunities to recognize trends and identify challenges about the current implementation of middle level programs and practices related to academics.

The last large-scale survey that included the Southeast was completed over ten years ago (McEwin & Greene, 2010, 2011) and was focused on principal voices only. To gain a more recent picture of middle schools today, a survey asking about the status of middle grades today was distributed to middle school principals and teachers in the Southeastern United States in the Fall of 2018 and Spring of 2019. The survey consisted of 32 Likert-type items and one open-response item. A previous study examined the quantitative portion of the survey (Alverson

et al., 2019). The current study focuses on the qualitative responses of the open-response item, which asked participants to discuss challenges facing middle schools and middle school educators today. The voices of teachers and principals can provide insight and context regarding academic challenges and the status of Southeastern middle schools. Therefore, the central question that we examine in this paper is, what are the academic challenges in middle schools today?

Literature Review

Effective Middle Schools

Effective middle schools support young adolescents academically in various ways. Research on successful middle schools focuses on several different areas including academics and the curriculum, organizational structures, and the developmental needs of adolescents.

Academics and the Curriculum

Curricula should be appropriately challenging, integrative, exploratory, and diverse (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Appropriately challenging curriculum is based on rigorous standards from state and national levels as well as from academic disciplines. There should be an emphasis on young adolescents having a deep understanding of key concepts and skills rather than covering large amounts of material. Additionally, effective middle schools should allow students time to digest, explore, and hone their content and skills. Curricular rigor and clarity have been viewed as essential components of effective school practices (Davis et al., 2019; Lifvendahl, 2007) and are as important as developmentally appropriate teaching practices (Anfara & Waks, 2000). Integrative curriculum, which allows for connections between and through content areas, provides authentic learning experiences helping to connect disciplines with real-world learning. Integrated curriculum has been shown to be successful in enhancing student learning (Caskey, 2002; Cassidy & Puttick, 2022; Hurd et al., 2020; Pate, 2001). Exploratory curriculum provides young adolescents opportunities to explore interests within and outside of the core curriculum. It exposes students to new concepts, fields of study, and possible interests. Young adolescents have become less interested in traditional academic fields and are more interested in authentic learning and exploring real life concerns and interests (Brighton, 2007; Kellough & Kellough, 2008). This includes the need to explore throughout their schooling (Manning & Bucher, 2012).

Organizational Structures

The unique developmental and academic needs of young adolescents have led to the utilization of organizational structures in middle schools such as interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, advisory periods, and common planning time. Interdisciplinary teaming is a practice intended to promote communities of learning in the classroom (Moolenaar et al., 2012). By definition, it is a practice “in which teachers share students, space, and schedule” and is “an essential component in meeting the needs of young adolescents,” (Arhar, 1997, p.49). Interdisciplinary teaming, together with common planning time, provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate on integrative curriculum as well as have a number of adult advocates who build relationships with their students (George & Lounsbury, 2000) and create a sense of belonging. Teaming also helps to create closer relationships with parents and families and increases student achievement (Cucciuffo, 2018; Flowers et al., 1999). Flexible scheduling allows

for varying schedules, supporting interdisciplinary teaming and allowing for teachers to make intentional and strategic modifications to the schedule to better support students (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Ellerbrock et al., 2018; George & Lounsbury, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006). It allows exploration opportunities, inquiry projects, service-learning projects, and many other opportunities usually restricted by the rigidity of traditional scheduling. Advisory programs aim to further build relationships with students as well as provide a space for social-emotional learning and development, provide opportunities for individual academic assistance, and promote positive relationships between students, teachers, and administration (Foster, 2017; Galassi et al., 1998; Gayl, 2018;). Effective advisory programs have been shown to reduce drop-out rates, increase positive school climate, and improve students' self-concept (Connors, 1991; Mac Iver, 1990). Perceptions of the school environment influence adolescents' behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school, which can potentially positively affect their achievement (Daily et al., 2019; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Developmental Needs of Adolescents

Within the middle school model, academic success and achievement are seen as part of educating the whole child. Social-emotional, moral, and psychological development impacts and influences how young adolescents learn (Scales, 2010) and the lack of these supports can create academic challenges for young adolescents. Social experience and interactions, along with the growing and reorganizing neural networks occurring during adolescent brain development, facilitate learning for young adolescents (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018). Research also supports the notion that safe environments can further help to promote learning and positive mental health in students (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018). Additionally, social and emotional learning may buffer the negative effect that mental health issues have on the learning experiences of adolescents (Panayiotou et al., 2019).

Challenges in the Middle

The implementation of middle school practices and structures can be challenging for a variety of reasons including state testing and school accountability, lack of professional development, legislation, new initiatives, and a lack of time (Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Harris, 2015). In a recent survey, middle school teachers and principals noted that they found student behavior and testing requirements as the biggest challenges to academic achievement (Alverson et al., 2019). Additionally, professional development, testing requirements, and a lack of knowledge or support were barriers to curriculum rigor and clarity (Alverson et al., 2019). National surveys have shown a decrease in organizational structures. For example, results from the 2009 survey by McEwin and Greene showed a decrease in interdisciplinary teaming from 77% to 72% from the previous 2001 survey, and results from a more recent survey showed that teaming only occurred in 60% of the survey participants' schools (Alverson et al., 2021).

Principals serving at nationally recognized, highly successful middle schools offer guidance in avoiding "pitfalls" in implementing the middle school model (McEwin & Greene, 2010). Among these pitfalls to avoid are partial implementation of effective middle level programs and practices, acceptance of traditional popular practices that are not effective at the middle level, giving in to the pressures associated with standardized tests to the extent that other essential programs and practices suffer, and a lack of a shared vision among stakeholders promoted by leaders (McEwin & Greene, 2010; Sanzo et al., 2011). Aligned with the idea of having a shared vision among stakeholders is the idea of teacher empowerment through their

leadership practices. Effective and authentic school leaders can empower their employees, i.e., teachers, by supporting their expression of ideas within their schools to promote change, thereby elevating their voice and feelings of competence (Zhang et al., 2021).

Considering the literature on successful middle grades practices, the challenges facing educators who are working to implement the middle school model, and the last survey in the Southeast completed a decade ago (McEwin & Greene, 2010), researchers distributed a survey in 2019 examining the status of middle grades in the Southeast today. While the quantitative results have been published (Alverson et al., 2019), the voices of teachers and principals from the comments in the open-response item were not included. In the current study, we examine the responses to part of this item. Researchers were interested in the following research question: what are the academic challenges facing middle school educators today? In this paper, researchers hope to provide some insight and context to the academic challenges of these middle school educators.

Methodology

To address the research question, we examined the comments from an open-response item of a survey administered to middle school educators across the Southeastern United States in the Fall of 2018 and Spring of 2019. Participant selection, survey instrument, and an explanation of the data and analysis are described in the following sections.

Participants

Participants were principals and teachers from schools in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, which are the states identified as the Southeast Sunbelt Region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). A list was compiled of all public and state-recognized charter middle schools in each of the states by using search features on publicly accessible, governmental websites. We generated a stratified random sample across the eight states by randomly selecting 25% from the total number of schools in each state. This resulted in a total of 561 different schools to which the survey was sent. To increase the likelihood of gathering responses from each school, three principals and five teachers per school were chosen at random to receive the survey, for a total of 4,488 surveys sent. Responses were anonymous with participants only indicating whether they are a principal or teacher and the state in which they teach. While it is not possible to know how many separate schools were represented in the sample, we do know that we had teachers and principals from each of the Southeastern states that responded to the survey (see Table 1).

We emailed the survey over the course of several weeks beginning in the fall of 2018 and followed up with a reminder email a couple months later in the spring semester of 2019. We did not give a time frame for responses, but most responses were completed by the end of spring 2019. A total of 373 principals and teachers responded to the survey for a response rate of 8.3%. Of the 373 participants, 127 (34%) included responses to the open-response questions with 93 responses from teachers and 34 from principals.

Table 1*Number of Teacher and Principal Responses by State*

State	Responses by State	Teacher Responses	Principal Responses
Alabama	12	8	4
Florida	18	11	7
Georgia	16	12	4
Kentucky	21	16	5
Mississippi	4	3	1
North Carolina	30	22	8
South Carolina	5	5	0
Tennessee	13	10	3
Total	119	87	32

Note: One hundred twenty-seven participants responded to the open-ended item on the survey. Several participants did not list their state, which accounts for the difference in numbers indicated in the table. There were 93 teachers and 34 principals who responded.

Survey Instrument

Participants answered an open-response item as part of a survey sent out to all eight states in the Southeast. The survey was adapted from a previous survey by McEwin and Greene that was administered in 2009 to determine the status of middle schools in the United States. Our survey consisted of 32 Likert-type items and one open-response item. We used many of the items from the previous survey but deleted several items to shorten the survey. Participants were asked to respond to items concerning basic information about their schools, including enrollment data and course offerings. Other items focused on their perceptions of the importance of teaching strategies and middle school components as well as the degree to which the strategies and components were implemented at their schools. The entire survey took an average of 16 minutes to complete. The open-response item was comprised of three questions and was included at the end of the survey. Specifically, the item included the questions:

1. Do you have suggestions about what needs to be accomplished to make middle schools more successful?
2. Are there special challenges that are faced at your middle school on a regular basis?
3. Do you have advice for other educators about how to make their middle schools highly successful?

Participants were given one text box in which to provide an answer for all three questions. There were no limitations on the length of the responses.

Data Analysis

Data consisted of 127 responses to the open-response prompt. Data analysis utilized descriptive open coding (Saldaña, 2012) and was completed in iterations (Anfara et al., 2002). Responses were first read holistically to gain a familiarity with the data. A second reading was done for initial content analysis. Initial content analysis originally used focused coding based on the three questions in the prompt, but researchers found participants often either did not answer all parts of the prompt or did not answer any of the prompts. Further, researchers found comments regarding suggestions, challenges, and advice often overlapped, but were focused on a particular topic. Thus, researchers completed a third iteration of analysis using open coding. A codebook was created with initial coding resulting in 49 codes. During the fourth iteration, codes were combined and refined, resulting in 32 codes. Codes were then sorted into categories. Finally, themes were identified across categories. The theme of academic challenges included 19 codes in five categories. The categories were, “preparation for middle school,” “holistic education,” “curriculum implementation,” “organizational structures,” and “testing.” Example codes include, “social emotional learning,” “remediation,” “coursework too rigorous,” “teaming,” and “lack of articulation” (see Table 2). Codes in the academic challenges theme were present in 109 of the responses (see Table 3).

Table 2
Academic Challenges Categories and Codes

Category	Codes
Preparation for Middle School	Not “school ready” Reading/writing performance Lack of articulation Remediation
Holistic Education	Social emotional learning Exploratory Extracurricular Relationships
Curriculum Implementation	Too Rigorous Too Shallow Too Fast
Middle Grades Organizational Structures	Lost Middle Grades Philosophy Teaming Staff and schedule Advisory
Testing	Common Planning Time Influence on curriculum Student motivation Accountability

Table 3
Number of Responses for Academic Challenges

Theme	Principal	Teacher	Total
Preparation for Middle School	2	14	16
Holistic Education	6	32	38
Curriculum Implementation	6	15	21
Middle Grades Organizational Structures	6	11	17
Testing	7	10	17
Total	27	82	109

Findings

Preparation for Middle School

Sixteen respondents (14 teachers and 2 principals) commented that many young adolescents were not academically prepared for middle school. Teachers felt they were playing “catch up” with students because as one teacher commented, “... students are coming to us less and less prepared for success in schools. The fundamental skills and behaviors that make students ‘school ready’ are not present in many of our students...” Specifically, students are struggling with math and reading and these, “...two areas in middle school require so much prior knowledge that when students arrive in 6th grade performing ‘below’ grade level it is difficult to get them caught up in middle school.” This burden was seen to lie with middle school teachers; the “lack of instruction in writing/vocabulary at the elementary level places an extra burden on the teachers in middle school to catch up and pick up the slack that has been let down.” The solution offered was better collaboration with elementary schools. A principal suggested:

Middle schools need to work closely with their feeder elementary schools and look at instruction, discipline, and individual students to help with their transitions. We are all playing catch-up. Kids come to middle school not ready for middle school academically. Schools need to feed into each other, have to work together and not work in isolation or feel threatened by working together.

Working together was seen as a solution to reduce remediation and help the transition to middle school.

Holistic Education

Current curricular offerings for middle school were not diverse enough, especially as they related to extracurricular and exploratory studies. With 38 responses (32 teacher and 6 principal) this was the most commented on topic. Teachers and principals noted social and emotional learning (SEL) as one way to help young adolescents succeed in school. A teacher wrote:

Social and emotional learning is important in middle schools, especially in a school like ours where students are raising themselves, have absentee parents, have grandparents

raising them, or are homeless. Students are lacking simple social and emotional skills to cope with everyday life.

Additionally, respondents saw the need for the curriculum to allow for more than just academics. A teacher wrote:

Students need more than just classes in their major academic areas (reading, math, science, social studies). They need time to be creative and imaginative. ... They need time to enjoy being kids and utilize their imagination they have when they are young.

Another teacher wrote, "Students also have no physical outlet that isn't tied to academics.... I think that students need structure, but also a way to let off steam." Participants want school to also be a place for students to have creative and physical outlets. One teacher felt this was due to funding. They wrote, "due to lack of funding, the students in our schools are missing out on electives, hands-on inquiry-based learning, outdoor physical education equipment, service/community activities, etc."

While not tied to courses, principals and teachers felt above all building relationships was key to teaching young adolescents. A teacher commented, "Middle school, as well as teaching in general, is about relationships; building, fostering, and developing relationships." Another teacher agreed writing, "Forming relationships with students first must happen before we can reach them academically." A principal also concurred writing, "build meaningful relationships with students and they would want to perform because they will not want to let you down." Middle school educators in this survey felt school needed to be more to young adolescents than just the core subject areas.

Curriculum Implementation

In addition to having more options in the curriculum, 21 principals and teachers commented on how curricula were being implemented in their schools. Educators believed that curriculum implementation was too rigorous, too fast, or too shallow. Too many high school classes are being pushed on young adolescents with one principal writing, "Students need middle school years to grow and develop their brains and their bodies. Too many academic stressors and pressures from parents and the district for students to engage in rigorous course work at a young age." This added rigor was seen as not developmentally appropriate. As a teacher explained, "...all we've done is create a bunch of frustrated kids who feel like they can't meet expectations because they're dumb or not trying hard enough. This is rough on a kid." Another teacher echoed this sentiment:

I have seen too many students shut down completely because they couldn't understand the work being asked of them. I would like to see middle schools offer a curriculum that is more aligned with adolescent brain development.

While young adolescents need a challenging curriculum it also must be developmentally appropriate.

In addition to rigor, the curriculum was seen as moving too quickly for young adolescents. One teacher commented, "Our curriculum is too broad and too shallow. We fly through things, asking that kids remember them for the test so they can safely remember the most trivial bits of info crammed into the curriculum." Moving quickly presents a number of issues, including less time for remediation. As one teacher illustrated, "There are too many math

standards to teach in a year. We are teaching one standard a week. There is no time for remediation with this structure.” Principals and teachers want to have curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for young adolescents and allows students time to meet the rigorous standards.

Middle Grades Organizational Structures

Respondents (11 teachers and 6 principals) believe schools are losing essential middle grades organizational structures. A principal discussed what they saw as a lack of understanding of what makes a middle school, commenting:

I fear that middle schools are being lumped in as “secondary” and not seen as the unique learning opportunities for young adolescents in a different light as of the high school level student experience. I also see the loss of understanding in what makes a true middle school, with teaming, interdisciplinary approach and advisory programs.

Participants lamented the loss of teaming. One teacher wrote, “...teaming is greatly missed and seems to be falling away in some schools. Most teachers value teaming...” There were a number of comments from teachers regarding its importance, including that teaming “...is very important for the success of 6-8th graders,” “middle school students need to be teamed,” and middle schools need to “go back to teaming which allows middle schools to meet the needs of young adolescents.” Despite the support for teaming, many middle school educators found it difficult to implement in their schools.

Staffing and the variety of course offerings were cited as major barriers to teaming. One principal wrote, “I think the biggest barrier [to teaming] we have is that we are short staffed in our building to be able to team.” Another principal commented:

...cuts in the number of teaching units at our school that makes it a challenge for us to maintain three interdisciplinary teams at each grade level. We really need at least one more teacher at each grade level in order to best meet the needs of our students.

Further, funding cuts, “...affected the quality of our teaming practices at our school and has caused several other middle schools in our district to do away with interdisciplinary teaming.” Even with adequate staffing and funding, teaming can be difficult to implement because of the large number of academic course offerings, including advanced and high school level courses. A principal explained, “Our school ‘teamed’ for years. It is a practice that we believe in but the vast number of course offerings at various levels makes it virtually impossible to do with fidelity.” Despite these challenges, it was clear participants desired teaming in their schools.

While teaming was mentioned most often, advisory programs and common planning time were also valued. Finding time for common planning time was a challenge as one teacher wrote, “If we need to meet, we have to stay after school. In our grade level we have a coach, yearbook sponsor, teacher who chaperones ball teams, and parents with small children making it difficult to schedule meetings.” However, some saw it as worth the struggle to meet with one teacher suggesting, “Make team planning happen, even if not built into the day... I have seen it greatly benefit school climate and culture as well as move struggling students toward success.” Even though participants stated several challenges with common planning time, they viewed it as a crucial component of middle schools.

Respondents felt advisory programs were needed to meet the social and emotional needs of young adolescents. A teacher saw their advisory program was too often being used as a remediation class and not, "... for creating community at our school. We should be teaching our students how to be good citizens. Our students need the time to practice correct socialization, communication, and personal problem-solving skills." Advisory was also seen as a way to impact school-wide challenges. A principal wrote, "we still need an advisory program to tackle bullying and behavioral issues." For respondents, there is a desire to have organizational structures at their schools, but there are a number of challenges keeping them from being implemented.

Testing

Within the current educational climate, it is perhaps not surprising testing was commented on 17 times (10 teachers and 7 principals). In particular, respondents discussed issues with the amount of testing, testing's influence on the curriculum and student learning, and how test scores are utilized. A principal felt testing narrowed the curriculum, writing, "We are constrained by testing and it is difficult to expand our offering to allow for student interest." The amount of time reserved for testing takes away from instructional time. One teacher noted, "We are currently set to waste one full month to taking six tests." The amount of testing was also seen to hold back student learning. Another principal worried that, "Students do not internalize their learning meaning they learn it for the test." Student motivation was also an issue with a teacher commenting, "Too much standardized testing seems to make students apathetic towards school work and tests in general." Another teacher wrote, "Testing for data collection and practice tests, coupled with baseline, mid-year, and end of year assessments interrupt student growth, learning, and diminish motivation." The number of tests and the amount of time taking tests were viewed as an unwise use of instructional time by the respondents.

Teachers and principals were also concerned about how the results of testing were being utilized and the transparency of results. A teacher wrote, "The state testing is not used in any way to assess students. The school gets in trouble, teachers get in trouble, but the students are promoted regardless of their performance in class or in tests." This can lead to a lack of motivation. One teacher explained, "Pressure to perform well on state testing is taken more seriously by the faculty than the students. There is a lack of intrinsic motivation on the students' part to reach proficiency, especially since they are not truly held accountable." Others were concerned with how tests show student growth as one teacher explained, "...there is a faulty logic utilized with comparing results of a class from one year to another; students should show growth in their own performance when comparing their individual results from one year to the next." Others have concerns with how the scores are presented to stakeholders with one teacher writing:

Our pay is tied to those tests. We are not allowed to see the tests. Kids know the test is scaled (a curve based on predicted classroom grades) which often results in 60% scores counting as B on the report card. We are not allowed to share raw scores with parents.

In short, one teacher wrote, "Ties to standardized testing overrules everything." Overall, testing was viewed as having a detrimental impact on the curriculum and instruction.

Discussion

In this paper, we examined the open-ended responses of a survey distributed to Southeastern middle school educators regarding academic challenges. Findings suggest academic challenges for these middle school principals and teachers include students who are not academically prepared for middle school, poor implementation of curricula, the lack of the implementation of organizational structures, and the negative influence of standardized testing on schools, curricula, and instruction.

Respondents called for more meaningful collaboration between elementary and middle schools to address the content and skills gap as advocated by research (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016). Principals and teachers believed students coming to middle school are not academically prepared, particularly regarding reading and writing skills. Respondents felt they were playing “catch-up” academically, resulting in remediation, which delays teaching of grade-level content and narrows exploratory options for students. Feeder elementary schools were seen as not preparing students with the academic and “school skills” needed to be successful in middle school. There may be many reasons for this disconnect including the strong focus on standardized testing as the primary measure for student progress, a mismatch in curricula, or a mismatch of the vision or focus of elementary and middle schools. Regardless of the reason, it is clear these middle school principals and teachers in the Southeast want greater collaboration with elementary schools is needed to help address these issues. Effective transition programs that include a close collaboration between elementary and middle schools can help students become familiar with the new school, develop relationships with peers and adults, provide skills and knowledge to be academically successful, and help improve academics, attendance, and retention rates (Bellmore, 2011; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Kingery et al., 2011).

While a variety of academic offerings were noted, participants felt their schools did not offer enough exploratory and non-academic options for students. Respondents valued the development of non-academic skills and knowledge, embracing the concept of educating the whole child as advocated by middle grades philosophy (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Responses suggest the curriculum may not be developmentally responsive to young adolescents and lack exploratory options. This may be the result of adding more advanced level and remediation classes. A heavy focus on academics at the expense of exploratory options is a hallmark of the junior high model and goes against the recommendations of implementing a challenging, integrative, and exploratory curriculum described by *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Exploratory options are key because they allow adolescents to explore their interests and focus on topics that are aligned with their unique abilities (Manning & Bucher, 2012). Unfortunately, there has been a decline of exploratory curriculum options in many middle schools, largely due to the constraints put on schools by high-stakes testing (Manning & Bucher, 2012; Scarpa, 2005).

Some respondents expressed concern over whether advanced courses were appropriate for middle school students. Repeated failure of high-level academic courses, anxiety, and stress were cited for these concerns. Respondents also expressed concern about the fast pace of curriculum which allows little room for remediation and does not allow for teachers to go in-depth with the content. *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (2021) advocates for a challenging curriculum that is, “...appropriately geared to each student’s level of understanding

and readiness” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 28). A challenging curriculum allows time for students to engage in and master advanced skills and knowledge (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Participants saw teaming as a way to meet the academic and social needs of young adolescents and stated many benefits to these practices. However, many noted teaming was no longer used in their schools primarily due to inadequate staffing resulting from a lack of funding. Respondents also noted numerous academic course offerings, including advanced and remediation courses, that made it difficult, if not impossible, to implement teaming. While not specifically mentioned, similar challenges to teaming, such as the lack of staffing and academic course offerings, seem to be present with common planning time as well. Respondents discussed the struggles of trying to meet with their team after school. Advisory programs and common planning time were also considered beneficial organizational structures by respondents. Advisory programs were seen as a way to help students gain social and emotional knowledge and skills and address important non-academic aspects of adolescent development. However, there were concerns about how advisory periods were being used in practice. Respondents noted advisory classes were used primarily as time for reported advisory programs were used for academic purposes (e.g., RTI, academic goal setting, academic remediation). These responses suggested a move away from organizational structures typically recommended for effective middle schools and largely follow the decline of these structures noted in national surveys (Alverson et al., 2021; McEwin & Greene, 2011). McEwin and Greene (2011) reported on the pitfalls of partial implementation of effective middle grades practices. The challenges noted in participant responses help provide context and understanding for why this is happening.

Finally, participants noted issues regarding standardized testing’s influence on schools, curriculum, and instruction. Respondents saw the heavy focus on testing was taking away valuable instructional time and making students apathetic to school and motivating them more difficult. For all the testing, respondents saw little value of testing, stating scores were not used for student accountability and were not communicated to parents and teachers. Many saw testing as a flawed system focused only on accountability for teachers and schools.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation for this study is with only 34% of participants providing comments, our findings are not representative of our sample and thus to all middle grades educators in the Southeast. While this is the case, these results still provide some context and insight into the academic challenges Southeastern middle grades educators are facing and raised questions for future research. For example, while research has noted a decrease in some organizational structures nationally, such as teaming (Alverson et al., 2021; McEwin & Greene, 2010), findings here provide some insight as to the possible reasons why. Funding may be an understandable issue regarding structures or practices that involve additional time in the school day. Concerning teaming, the influx of advanced and remedial classes as the barrier to the implementation of teaming has yet to be thoroughly explored and studied. Further, these advanced and remedial courses restrict key exploratory and SEL classes. Southeastern educators in this survey also raise questions about the developmental appropriateness of advanced curricular content and implementation for young adolescents.

Our findings highlight many academic challenges for principals and teachers in the Southeast. While further research needs to be done to explore these challenges, we offer a few recommendations for future directions. First, it seems clear that middle school educators would

like to see more communication and articulation with elementary schools. Future directions for educators could include new ways to collaborate with elementary educators to create clear articulation for academics and behavior that is more comprehensive than a simple transition program. Second, challenges and concerns about middle grades academics today seem to focus on larger issues not easily addressed in a single classroom or even a single school. Funding issues can create staffing issues, which can affect the use of middle grades organizational structures such as teaming or adding exploratory classes. Future directions for educators to address these issues could be educating leadership and policy makers about the unique developmental needs of young adolescents and the importance of educating the whole child to help make more informed decisions.

Researchers also recognize this study was carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic and these challenges may be very different for educators today. With emerging research on the effects of the pandemic on administrators, teachers, and students, future research could compare and explore these challenges to those presented here and elsewhere. How do we equip educators to deal with the issues presented in this study, and what do teachers and principals need to do to address these challenges? Future directions for research should explore the ways the pandemic has further affected the middle school model, which is largely absent in many middle schools today. Among the different topics to which researchers should focus is the elementary-to-middle-school transition, course offerings, implementation of advanced and remedial courses, the implementation of organizational structures, and testing's influence on instruction. Researchers hope these results provide an opportunity to identify academic challenges, understand these challenges, and begin looking to the future to form solutions.

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