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Please cite this paper as:

Hudson, S. & Kean, B. (2013). *Final year preservice teachers' confidence for teaching in the middle years of schooling*. Refereed paper presented at 'Knowledge makers and notice takers: Teacher education research impacting policy and practice', the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Brisbane, 30 June–3 July.

Published by: Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA)

Available via stable URL: https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013_hudson_and_kean.pdf

Review status: Refereed—abstract and full paper blind peer-reviewed

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Final year preservice teachers' confidence for teaching in the middle years of schooling

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Abstract

For some years now in Australia concerns have arisen about early adolescents and their disengagement from the schooling system, their "at risk" behaviour and their need for social, emotional and academic support. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) advocates for an education system that supports the development and well-being of young people. As a result, there is a need for continued university courses designed to graduate teachers who possess the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge for engaging early adolescent learners. This mixed-method study analysed the responses of final-year preservice teachers from three universities across Australia completing middle years' teacher preparation. Data were gathered from preservice teachers ($n=142$) using a survey, extended response questionnaire and one-to-one interviews ($n=10$). Quantitative results indicated that the majority of preservice teachers claimed confidence in creating a positive classroom environment (range: 70-97%), developing positive relationships for teaching (71-98%), pedagogical knowledge for teaching (72-95%), and implementation of teaching (70-91%). Qualitative findings suggested that the experiences that assisted them to be confident for teaching were practicum and associated field studies coursework, a positive mentor teacher, specifically designed middle years subjects, the pedagogical approaches of university staff, and other real-world experiences such as volunteering in schools and participating in professional development alongside their mentors. This study demonstrated that universities presenting middle years' teacher preparation need to consider: the quality of the practicum experience; the suitability of mentor teachers; the significance and practicalities of middle years subjects; university lecturers' modelling of pedagogical practices; and the inclusion of real-world learning experiences. Although the findings of this study provided evidence as to how preservice teachers' confidence for teaching has been influenced by their middle schooling teacher preparation, further research is required to investigate how confidence translates into practice within their first years of teaching.

Introduction

For more than a decade in Australia there have been concerns about early adolescents and their disengagement from the schooling system. Although developmental, early adolescence is often identified as the ages between 10 – 15 years (Pendergast, 2010). Early adolescence is a period where young people are experiencing significant growth physically, emotionally and socially. It is often reported as a time when young people are “at risk” (Carrington, 2006) as they experiment as a way to seek independence and develop their identity. As a result of this sometimes tumultuous stage of development, early adolescents can become disengaged from family, teachers and their schooling (Cumming & Cormack, 1996; Hill & Russell, 1999; Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003).

Engaging middle years students in Australian schools has been the subject of a number of reports (Carrington, 2006; Pendergast, 2005; Zevenbergen & Zevenbergen, 2007). Reports such as Queensland’s *“Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan”* (Education Queensland, 2004), New South Wales’s *“Our Middle Years Learners – Engaged, Resilient, Successful”* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006), and Victoria’s *“Strategy for Reforming the Middle Years in Victorian State Schools”* (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2003) have influenced the development of middle years practices across Australia. These reports have highlighted the need for reforms and specific strategies to engage middle years learners. An emerging theme from these reports is universities’ role in graduating teachers confident and competent for teaching early adolescent learners.

Universities have responded by designing teacher education programs to prepare teachers who are developmentally responsive to the social, emotional and academic needs of early adolescents. Designed from the research and literature related to middle years learners and, the relevant state and national standards for teachers, the courses support the development of teachers with the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge for effective middle years teaching practices. Teacher education institutions developed varying types of middle years programs such as one-year Graduate Diploma courses to four-year degree programs while some course structures have embedded middle years subjects into existing degrees. Given the two tiered structure of the Australian schooling education system (i.e. primary and secondary), debate about the longevity of such teacher education programs has been ongoing (Dinham & Rowe,

2007). Nevertheless, many universities have persisted with the goal to support early adolescents at the forefront of their course designs.

Pendergast (2010) purports that, to be effective, middle schooling teachers require high levels of confidence so they can assist early adolescent learners to meet the required outcomes. If middle years graduates in Australia are to begin their careers with perceived confidence for teaching, teacher education institutions need to carefully consider the attributes of middle schooling teachers and the way they embed the pedagogical, theoretical and content knowledge in their course structure, the quality of the experiences provided and the inclusion of opportunities to master the skills and knowledge required for perceived confidence development (Mitchell, Kapitzke, Mayer, Carrington, Stevens, Bahr & Hunter, 2003).

Bandura (1977, 1997) advocates that people with strong levels of confidence will experience accomplishment, personal well-being and higher achievement in the attainment of specific goals. Confidence can influence the way in which a task is initiated and the determination applied in overcoming difficulties that may arise (Bandura, 1977). There is also some evidence to suggest that, in some key learning areas, a teacher's perception of confidence to teach can be directly related to their teaching ability in the classroom (Jamieson-Proctor, Burnett, Finger, & Watson, 2006; Jamieson-Proctor & Finger, 2006), and can be linked to student success and achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Henson, 2001).

There is no one formula for developing confidence in preservice teachers to teach successfully in the classroom but the ability to undertake a task is influenced by a person's motivation, their experiences, and their perceived skill and ability to successfully complete the task (Benabou & Tirole, 2002). There is little literature about preservice teachers' perceptions of their own ability to teach in the middle schooling context and their views about their teacher preparation programs. The key purposes of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of initial teacher education preparation for teaching in the middle school, to influence future university course designs and contribute to this field of research. Furthermore, it is hoped this research encourages continued discourse around middle schooling and the need to sustain education degrees and course content that support the development of teachers to be pedagogically and developmentally responsive to early adolescents.

Research design

This research investigated the self-reported confidence of final-year preservice teachers from three universities across two states in Australia. As an interpretive study, this research focused on the perspectives of the preservice teachers. The two aims of the study were to: (1) investigate final-year preservice teachers' perceptions of their confidence to teach in the middle years of schooling and; (2) analyse the experiences included in their teacher preparation course that made them feel confident.

This mixed method study used a survey, extended response questionnaire and one-to-one interviews. Similar to the study by Woolfolk Hoy (2000) that investigated beginning teacher and preservice teacher confidence, the survey was specifically designed for this study. The survey constructed was underpinned by middle schooling literature and the Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006) and addressed the first aim of the research gathering information about preservice teacher confidence. Preservice teachers self-reported their confidence against statements on a five point Likert scale (that is, strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, uncertain=3, agree=4, and strongly agree=5). An extended response questionnaire and semi structured interview questions were developed to collect information about the participants' university experiences that made them feel confident. These qualitative data were combined to address the second aim of the research.

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Raw data from the five-point Likert scale were entered into SPSS16. These statistics allowed for analysis of completed responses from the 142 final-year preservice teachers. Agree and strongly agree percentages (i.e., from raw data responses 4 and 5) were added together. In this way, it could be determined the percentage of preservice teachers who generally agreed with a survey item in relation to their confidence to teach in the middle school. The questionnaires ($n=142$) and interview data ($n=10$) were hand-coded and combined to provide more in-depth viewpoints. The questionnaire was in written form and delivered in a limited time frame, hence, a more general response was elicited (Creswell, 2009). The 20 minute one-to-one interviews were semi-structured allowing for more in-depth responses to be explored and expanded (Neuman, 2010).

Results and discussion

Confidence for teaching

These preservice teachers were in their final weeks of completing their teacher education program. Survey data indicated (Table 1.1) that 70% felt well prepared from their tertiary education to teach in the middle school. However, of the 30% who did not fall into this category, 18% felt uncertain about their confidence to teach. There were 73% who claimed they had theoretical knowledge, 78% with pedagogical knowledge, but only 67% who believed they had curriculum knowledge for teaching in the middle school.

Table 1.1

Overall Preparation for Teaching in the Middle School (n=142)

Item	%*	M	SD
35. Theoretical knowledge for middle school teaching	73	3.83	0.80
36. Pedagogical knowledge for middle school teaching	78	3.85	0.76
37. Curriculum knowledge for middle school teaching	67	3.70	0.90
38. Successfully prepared for middle school teaching	70	3.74	0.86

*%=Percentage of students who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each item.

These preservice teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they could create a positive classroom environment (Table 1.2). Indeed, 97% believed they could create a safe learning environment with 96% believing they would have enthusiasm for teaching. Theriot (2005) claims that enthusiasm is positive teacher behaviour and is considered an influence on students' intrinsic motivation.

Eighty-five percent or more of the preservice teachers indicated they could create a learning environment that fosters independence (86%), caters for diversity (87%), and that they could develop programs to cater for students' interests (89%) and needs (85%, Table 1.2). However, there were fewer preservice teachers who were confident in implementing effective behaviour management (70%), and in providing clear and reasonable consequences for behaviour (76%). Behaviour management is recognised as one of the challenging aspects of teaching (Weinstein & Mignano, 2003; Wolfgang, 2001) with Caldwell and Sutton (2010) identifying this as an area that needs to be focussed on in teacher preparation. Indeed, this research indicates it is the same for preservice teachers undertaking middle schooling courses.

Table 1.2

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions for Creating a Positive Classroom Environment (n=142)

Item	%*	M	SD
2. Create a safe learning environment	97	4.46	0.57
3. Create a learning environment that fosters independence	86	4.12	0.62
4. Create a learning environment that caters for diversity	87	4.18	0.70
5. Respond to the individual learning needs of the students	85	4.11	0.70
7. Negotiate a classroom management plan with students	81	4.04	0.69
8. Implement effective behaviour management strategies	70	3.88	0.82
9. Provide clear and reasonable consequences for behaviour	76	3.98	0.76
10. Demonstrate enthusiasm for teaching	96	4.79	0.54
13. Develop learning programs that cater to students' interests	89	4.13	0.67

*%=Percentage of students who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each item.

Developing and fostering positive relationships is essential in teaching early adolescent students. These participants' perceptions of being able to develop positive teacher-student relationships was nearly unanimous (98%) and working in teams also presented a positive response (90%, Table 1.3). However, fostering community and parent relationships presented lower percentage scores (80%, 79% respectively), as did supporting students to transition between grades (71%).

Table 1.3

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Developing Positive Relationships for Teaching (n=142)

Item	%*	M	SD
6. Develop positive teacher-student relationships	98	4.56	0.54
30. Support students in their transition between year levels and from primary to secondary	71	3.81	0.74
31. Work in teaching teams	90	4.15	0.64
33. Foster positive relationships with the community	80	4.02	0.77
34. Foster positive relationships with parents	79	4.04	0.74

*%=Percentage of students who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each item.

The majority of these preservice teachers believed they had the pedagogical knowledge to work within middle schools (Table 1.4). About 90% indicated they could plan appropriate learning experiences and engage students in intellectually challenging work, with 95% believing they could engage students in group work. Importantly for their continued development, 93% agreed or strongly agreed that they could reflect and refine teaching practices with 92% claiming they would engage in further professional development (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of their Pedagogical Knowledge (n=142)

Item	%*	M	SD
1. Share my personal philosophy of teaching	85	4.03	0.63
11. Plan appropriate learning experiences for student	87	4.11	0.74
18. Engage students in group work	95	4.29	0.55
21. Use a variety of teaching strategies	85	4.06	0.67
23. Reflect and refine my teaching practices	93	4.27	0.64
24. Engage in further professional development	92	4.39	0.68
25. Engage students in intellectually challenging experiences	89	4.12	0.58
26. Align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment	72	3.87	0.73

* %=Percentage of students who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each item.

About a quarter of these preservice teachers could not agree or strongly agree to six of the nine items in regards to the Implementation of Teaching (Table 1.5). Implementing literacy and numeracy programs is pivotal within middle schools, yet only 74% believed they could incorporate literacy and numeracy strategies into planning and teaching. Literacy and numeracy are cross curricular perspectives within the new Australian curriculum and this result indicates a need for greater emphasis in these two area. Considering Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills have been incorporated throughout their coursework and embedded within various subjects also showing interdisciplinary practices, it is significant that 23% were either uncertain or disagreed that they could implement ICT in the middle school (Table 1.5).

Table 1.5

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions for Implementation of Teaching (n=142)

Item	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
12. Implement student-centred learning experiences	85	4.09	0.67
14. Implement interdisciplinary learning programs	77	3.96	0.71
15. Implement learning programs with real-world links	91	4.18	0.60
16. Implement learning programs with global connections	76	3.92	0.72
17. Implement learning programs that incorporate ICTs	77	4.03	0.81
19. Incorporate literacy strategies in planning and teaching	74	3.90	0.71
20. Incorporate numeracy strategies in planning and teaching	74	3.85	0.68
22. Implement a constructivist approach	76	3.95	0.66
29. Demonstrate content knowledge of subject matter	80	3.96	0.74
27. Create a variety of assessment tasks	73	3.92	0.76
28. Report upon student learning	70	3.85	0.80
32. Provide regular feedback to parents	76	3.94	0.73

* %=Percentage of students who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each item.

Current theoretical underpinnings for teaching middle years students include constructivism where the learner engages in first-hand experiences to construct knowledge (Carrington, 2002; 2006; Vygotsky, 1986). Although 76% of participants claimed they could implement constructivist approaches in the middle school, nearly a quarter of the preservice teachers were either not sure or disagreed they could teach in this way (Table 1.5). Furthermore, despite 80% claiming they had the content knowledge, others may be unsure or disagree until they know the lesson they will be teaching.

Assessment and reporting are fundamental to the teaching and learning cycle (e.g., Queensland Government, Department of Education and Training, 2008). Yet more than a quarter of the participants claimed they were uncertain or disagreed that they could create a variety of assessment tasks, with 76% indicating they could provide regular feedback to parents (Table 1.5). Many coursework subjects embed the construction of student assessment tasks. So, it was surprising that more than a quarter of these preservice teachers recorded they were not confident they could create such tasks.

University experiences that influenced confidence development

The qualitative data were analysed and the preservice teacher responses were coded into four themes. The university experiences that increased their confidence for teaching were:

1. Practicum experiences in middle years classrooms
2. Specifically designed middle years subjects
3. Pedagogical approaches of university staff
4. Other experiences

1. Practicum experience in middle years classrooms

It seems the preservice teachers indicated that “hands on” nature of the practicum and the opportunities to “practice and reflect on lessons” combined with “observing and participating in middle years classrooms”, were viewed by the majority of the preservice teachers to develop confidence. As summed up by one preservice teacher’s written response, “practical work, there is nothing like teaching in the classroom for increasing your confidence to teach”. Varied practicum experiences in a number of different middle years classrooms, were also viewed as valuable for increasing preservice teacher confidence.

Preservice teachers highlighted the interactions with teachers in their roles as mentors influenced confidence development. Preservice teachers appreciated the personal attributes of their mentor teachers, noting that they made them feel “welcome in the school and classroom by their warmth and generosity” and “their enthusiasm for having a preservice teacher”. Positive mentoring provided by the teacher during practicum was raised by the majority of the participants as developing confidence for teaching.

2. Specifically designed middle years subjects

Over a quarter of the preservice teachers ($n=52$) agreed that their confidence increased as a result of the subjects that specifically addressed middle years topics. Preservice teachers commented that these subjects provided “content knowledge for teaching” and directed them to “using syllabus documents to understand the goals for teaching middle years learners”, as well as “providing them with resources they could obtain to increase their own content knowledge”.

Specific middle years subjects, as well as providing the content knowledge, were also appreciated as providing pedagogical knowledge. Preservice teachers commented that the subjects “assisted them to understand middle years philosophy” and “learn about effective teaching strategies for intellectually challenging middle years learners”. The development of theoretical knowledge that was embedded in the middle years subjects was valued by those completing the questionnaire. Particular curriculum subjects were named such as, “Science and Tech, SOSE and Arts ” as well as subjects where they gained information about early adolescent development such as “Behavioural Studies as it gave me the psychological and social aspects of students in the middle years of schooling”.

3. Pedagogical approaches of university staff

The pedagogical approaches of the university staff was the third theme that emerged as developing preservice teacher confidence. The data revealed that the modelling of teaching suitable to middle years students increased preservice teachers’ confidence as they could see the “practices and strategies in action”. According to the preservice teachers, “university staff that modelled strategies for teaching in the middle years of schooling” increased confidence as they “provided them with practices required for their own teaching”. Modelling by university staff as a vehicle for developing preservice teacher confidence was supported by over one-third of the cohort who completed the questionnaires. As well as the modelling of teaching strategies, preservice teachers noted that modelling “integrated curriculum”, “constructivist approaches to teaching”, “questioning techniques using Bloom’s taxonomy”, and “planning units of work using backward mapping” provided them with “hands-on experiences that they could use in the classroom and as part of their own teaching”.

4. Other experiences

The final theme that emerged from the preservice teachers’ responses was they had “other experiences” that had impacted on their confidence for teaching. For many of the preservice teachers, as part of their teacher preparation, they had opportunities to be involved in “professional development and volunteer activities” that were seen by the participants involved to “increase participation and real world opportunities”. The professional development made available by lecturers to some preservice teachers was seen as “valuable for confidence development as it provided opportunities to interact with teachers from diverse

schools". It meant the "sharing of ideas not only from university lecturers but a greater range of professionals".

Conclusions

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) advocates for an education system that supports the development and emotional wellbeing of young people. To achieve this goal teacher education courses need to graduate confident teachers who possess skills to effectively engage early adolescents. This study highlighted the areas of self-reported confidence of final year preservice teachers for teaching in middle years classrooms and the experiences that supported confidence development. As there is some evidence to suggest a correlation between confident teachers and student outcomes, it may be useful for universities to consider the confidence of their graduates when reviewing teacher preparation course designs. To further substantiate and build upon the knowledge of this study, opportunities to track graduate confidence during their first year of teaching would provide further information to support and enhance teacher preparation.

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