

An Overview of Middle Level Education Research, 1991-2002

Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe 2003



NMSA Research Committee

Between 1991 and 2002, 3,717 studies related to middle schools were published. That is an average of 309 per year over a 12-year period of time, almost one published study per day. This accounts only for the research that Hough and his research team (2003) identified.

While dissertations account for a large portion of this research (just under one-half), documents and journal articles indexed in ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) account for two-thirds of all the studies disseminated. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) is the leading organization disseminating middle level education research, followed by National Middle School Association. Research on middle level topics peaked in 1998 when almost 12 percent of the total number of studies were disseminated, and by 2002 the volume of research had receded to roughly six percent or half that of 1998 (Hough, 2003).

Surprisingly, many topics identified in *The 21st Century Research Agenda: Issues, Topics & Questions Guiding Inquiry into Middle Level Theory & Practice* (NMSA, 1997) and the corresponding programmatic characteristics and structures found in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995) have not been adequately addressed in the research, including flexible scheduling, adult advocates for students, school climate, and health and wellness issues (Hough, 2003).

About two-thirds of all studies on middle level education are qualitative in nature and have become increasingly so over the past 12 years, while quantitative studies that once represented almost 30 percent of the total now represent about 15 percent. The data collection techniques of choice among researchers conducting middle level education research include unobtrusive methods, case studies, and mixed approaches. Less common are observation, surveys, and interviews. Meta-analyses and focus groups are few and far between. Few experimental designs have been conducted, under four percent of the total of 3,717 studies. Action research accounts for approximately 20 percent of the studies and has grown exponentially as a method of choice (Hough, 2003).

Universities support almost 90 percent of all middle level research conducted. The leading institutions providing this support are, in order: The University of Georgia, Columbia University's Teachers College, University of South Carolina, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and (tied for fifth) Ohio State University, Temple University, and the University of Alabama (Hough, 2003).

Hough (2003) found that over 90 percent of the research has been conducted by individuals not identified as prominent middle school advocates. One finding we stumbled upon serendipitously was that virtually no middle level education studies were replications of prior efforts. That is, no one has used the same research design and methods to collect, analyze, and report findings that another researcher had employed. Replicating studies is a must if the research base is to be validated. Medical research, for example, is filled with replications to validate previous findings.



THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

The landscape of middle level research is painted using many different brushes and diverse styles, so the resulting product is somewhat confusing. But, as mentioned earlier, there is an urgency regarding research in this area. Acknowledging this urgency, Felner and associates (1997) wrote, "Although a more well-developed research base does not, by itself, ensure more successful reform efforts, without such a foundation the progress and fruits of reform efforts will continue to be disappointing" (p. 41).

The inconclusive nature of the findings related to the effects of middle school practices on student achievement has been documented (see *NMSA Research Summary #12: Academic Achievement*, 2001; Brown, Roney, & Anfara, 2003; Van Zandt & Totten, 1995). But this is not unusual in the realm of educational research. Reviewing the literature on many different educational topics reveals research that supports, negates, or shows no difference in the relationship among the variables being studied. However, the inconclusive nature of middle school research should not be adopted as a rationale for inaction or refusal to move forward in improving middle level schools. There is, indeed, a promising and expanding body of research that demonstrates positive results when schools fully implement the recommended tenets of the middle school philosophy.

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