

## The Masters Degree in Secondary Education with a Middle Level Emphasis: Transforming Middle Level Education in Hawai'i

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### Early Adolescent Education

Think back to when you were in the seventh grade. What did you look like? How did you feel about your appearance? What occupied your thoughts? What were your pastimes? Who were your friends? What did you and your friends do together? What did you do with your family? What were you like in school? In what ways did you change over the course of that year?

Chances are, many of these memories are less than fond ones. Indeed, many people cringe when seventh grade is mentioned. Adults picture hordes of bizarrely-attired, noisy hellions swarming through the shopping malls. Teachers scan transfer lists. Parents seek divine intervention or therapy.

However, seventh graders, for the most part, cannot help themselves. They are in the throes of early adolescence—a stage of life, lasting from age ten to fifteen, characterized by the most dramatic changes of the entire human life span, outside of the first two years of life. These changes occur across all domains—physical, intellectual, emotional, social and moral. In addition, the changes occur at widely varying rates, with girls usually preceding boys by about two years. Among the changes of early adolescence are the onset of puberty, increasingly abstract thinking, searching for one's identity, the feeling of being constantly "on stage," the dominance of the peer group, concern with "big issues" like justice and equality, and intense, often fleeting curiosity about nearly everything.

Along with these changes come great challenges to all who come in contact with early adolescents, although the greatest challenges are presented to the youngsters themselves. Extensive research on the age group indicates that those who successfully navigate these turbulent waters—and most do—are blessed with one or more caring adults outside of their family with whom they can establish a close bond, and with schools which are designed to address their unique developmental needs (Deering, 1982).

Fortunately there are teachers who want to be that caring adult and who want to create those schools for early adolescents. Thirty-four of these teachers are enrolled in the first teacher education program in the state of Hawai'i to focus on the education of early adolescents—the Master of Secondary Education with a Middle Level Emphasis (MLMED). The program began in June, 1996 and will

conclude in summer, 1998. The MLMED is designed to build a local teacher leadership cadre to promote statewide educational reform in the middle grades.

### Creation of the MLMED

The MLMED was three years in the planning, emerging from the Hawai'i School University Partnership Implementation (HSUP) Task Force on Middle Level Teacher Education (hereafter referred to as "The Task Force"). HSUP, a partnership of the Hawai'i State Department of Education, the University of Hawai'i College of Education and Kamehameha Schools Bishop Estate, was created in 1986 to provide for a unified approach to solving the educational problems in Hawai'i's schools. The Task Force involved personnel from Arts and Sciences, all of the College of Education's departments, and teachers, administrators and central office personnel from the Department of Education, the Kamehameha Schools and the Hawai'i State Teachers Association.

The Task Force examined numerous reports in which it was concurred that early adolescents undergo such profound developmental changes across cognitive, physical and social-emotional domains that they need schools tailored to their unique developmental needs, and teachers who are expert at working with the age group (Deering, 1982). A growing body of research suggests that middle level educational approaches such as teacher teaming, heterogeneous grouping of students, teacher advisory programs, flexible schedules, interdisciplinary curriculum, and varied, active learning contribute to positive academic, social and physical processes and outcomes for early adolescents (Connors & Irvin, 1989). These approaches help teachers deal with early adolescents' social, emotional and physical needs so that they will be ready to function successfully in the intellectual realm.

Hawai'i's early adolescents have been increasingly encountering the problems associated with their age group, such as gang involvement, violence, drug abuse, academic failure, truancy and dropout (Chesney-Lind, 1995). Fortunately, public and private schools throughout the state have begun implementing middle level approaches, some since 1989. In addition, the Hawai'i Department of Education recently endorsed middle level education (Deering, 1995). However, the state's teacher certification

structure of K-6th grade generalists, and 7-12th grade subject specialists, combined with a school structure of K-6th grade elementary, 7-8th intermediate and 9-12th high schools, splits the middle grades of 5-9th.

This separation of the holistic elementary generalists from the content-oriented intermediate teachers has contributed to many intermediate schools being "junior" high schools, with rigid departmental organization and little attention to early adolescents' critical social and emotional development. In such schools, disorganized and insecure early adolescents are left to find their way through seven-period days, seven teachers, seven different sets of rules, seven unrelated subjects and seven different groups of classmates, all of which adds up to a recipe for disaster.

The Task Force determined that the greatest support for middle grades educational reform could be provided by focusing on in-service teachers who were already working with and committed to the age group, rather than on pre-service teachers in the elementary or secondary certification programs who might or might not end up working in the middle grades. This meant that the program would have to be at the graduate level. Very limited resources further suggested that the program would have to maximize its impact by developing leaders for the middle level movement, not just better teachers. In addition, budgetary constraints led to structuring the MLMED as a quasi-program within the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies (TECS) existing MED in Secondary Education, rather than as a new, separate program.

### MLMED Participants

The MLMED is designed to model effective middle level educational practice, the better to teach about and critique these approaches. An interdisciplinary team of core faculty, much like the interdisciplinary teacher teams in middle level schools, provides guidance to the program. The core faculty members are: Dana Davidson, Department of Family Resources; Barbara DeBaryshe, Center on the Family; Paul Deering, Coordinator, TECS; Beth Pateman, TECS and Tom Stone, Curriculum Research and Development Group. The faculty offer a diverse array of talents, including content area teaching knowledge, research expertise, knowledge of human and family development, considerable middle grades teaching experience, and at least several members who are still "early adolescents" themselves.

The MLMED has also been fortunate to have accomplished adjunct faculty in the College who have agreed to teach in the program: Rhonda Black of the Department of Special Education, Michael D' Andrea of the Department of School Counseling, and C W Stevens of the Hawai'i Association of Middle Schools. In addition, several College faculty members are teaching courses during

summer, 1997, that are specifically oriented to the middle grades.

The MLMED students are as diverse as the program's faculty. They are teachers in thirteen public and private middle grades schools on O'ahu (Table 1) who were encouraged to apply to the program with colleagues from their schools so they would have a support group as well as a nucleus for school change. Kailua, Moanalua, Nanakuli and Waipahu Intermediate Schools and Kamehameha Middle School are fortunate to have cadres of three or more teachers in the program, with Central Intermediate having seven.

Table 1  
MLMED Student and School Participants

| School                   | Number of Students |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Central Intermediate     | 7                  |
| Dole Intermediate        | 2                  |
| Hale Kula Elementary     | 1                  |
| Kailua Intermediate      | 3                  |
| Kamehameha Middle        | 4                  |
| Kawananakoa Intermediate | 2                  |
| Moanalua Intermediate    | *4                 |
| Nanakuli Intermediate    | 3                  |
| Wahiawa Intermediate     | 1                  |
| Waianae Intermediate     | 1                  |
| Waimanalo Intermediate   | 1                  |
| Waipahu Intermediate     | 4                  |
| Wheeler Intermediate     | 1                  |
| TOTAL                    | 34                 |

\* Partner School

The diversity of the students is further reflected in their ethnicity, with 29% from groups which are under-represented in the state's teaching force (Asians other than Japanese, Chinese, Korean; Hawaiians; Filipinos; other Pacific Islanders; African Americans; Latinos; Native Americans). Thirty-five percent of the students are from outlying schools, which have less access to professional development opportunities. Sixty-two percent of the students are from low-income schools, giving the program a total of 68% of its students from high-need schools (distant and/or low-income). Finally, the MLMED participants are experienced teachers, with a mean of ten years' experience and an average age of thirty-eight. Many of these veteran teachers have noted that they would never have enrolled in a masters program if not for this one, as it is focused on their true interests and is designed to be teacher-friendly.

MLMED courses are taught at Moanalua Intermediate School, the program's Partner School. This accomplishes

several things. It grounds the program "in the real world," rather than the rarefied atmosphere of the university. Also, it makes classes more accessible for students living in outlying areas and parking easier for everyone. Perhaps most importantly, it facilitates renewal at the Partner School through research and staff development presentations by university faculty and ongoing conversations between them and school faculty.

### MLMED Curriculum

Three Program Strands are woven throughout the MLMED: effective practice; reflection and collaborative assessment and leadership within the professional community. Effective middle level educational practice is applied by having participants move through the majority of their courses as a cohort, much like a middle level team. In addition, participants are organized into "home base groups" by geographical region, each with its own faculty advisor, much like middle level advisory groups. The feeling of community which is so essential to early adolescent (and adult) learners, is further enhanced by ongoing team-building activities, and community rituals such as celebrating birthdays and other passages. Community and student empowerment are further facilitated by a one-credit issues seminar which meets once per month and includes all program faculty and students. Half of each session focuses on community—student advising, celebrating achievements and addressing programmatic issues and student concerns. The other half is devoted to a topic related to multicultural education.

Reflection and collaborative assessment are facilitated by reflective faculty and student class logs, which are often read and discussed at the beginning of the subsequent class session. In addition, reflection and collaboration are promoted through student input into all aspects of the program, particularly assessment (explained below). Leadership is promoted by focusing on students' mastery of genres of professional writing which can offer them access to decision-making and fund-raising roles and support for their development as leaders of professional development activities. All Strands were facilitated in the program's opening retreat (cover photo), in which students and faculty got acquainted, built teamwork and trust through a series of group-challenge activities, and examined and critiqued the program's goals, curriculum and assessment.

While the Strands are the threads which hold the MLMED together, the "heart" of the program is the Professional Standards for Teachers of Early Adolescents, a set of five characteristics shared by effective teachers (Task Force, 1995).

The first Standard requires knowledge of early adolescent development and the general ways in which middle level

approaches attempt to address it. The second emphasizes knowledge of one's content area(s). The third Standard requires the ability to apply developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction and to work with diverse populations. The fourth stresses skills of teacher-as-counselor and the fifth emphasizes leadership skills.

The Standards guide all curriculum and assessment in the program. They allow faculty and students to plan and evaluate courses, curricular materials and other experiences using common criteria. The Program of Studies is based on the Standards with thematic questions guiding each semester's work (see Table 2). Students will complete thirty or more hours of course work in their programs and will compile Portfolios as their MEd Plan B Projects.

Table 2 Schedule of Courses

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| Term     | Summer 1996   |
| Theme    | Who are early adolescents? What is middle level education?  |
| Courses  | FAMR 491 Focus on Early Adolescence (3)<br>EDCI 640M Seminar in Interdisciplinary Education (3)   |
| Term     | June 29-30, 1996  |
| Theme    | Team-Building, Program Planning   |
| Activity | Retreat at Camp Erdman  |
| Term     | Fall 1996   |
| Theme    | What's happening with early adolescents around our school? How can we find out?   |
| Courses  | EDCI 632 Qualitative Research Methods (3)<br>EDCI 642 Seminar in Middle Level Education (1)   |
| Term     | Spring 1997   |
| Theme    | How can we meet the needs of early adolescents in our school?   |
| Courses  | EDCI 622D School Curriculum-Middle Level (3)<br>EDCI 642 Seminar in Middle Level Education (1)  |
| Term     | Summer 1997   |
| Theme    | Individual student choice   |
| Courses  | Vary according to individual's interests  |
| Term     | Fall 1997   |
| Theme    | How do we work effectively with academically diverse populations?   |
| Courses  | SPED 620 Educating Exceptional Students in Regular Classrooms (3)<br>EDCI 642 Seminar in Middle Level Education (1)                               |
| Term     | Spring 1998   |
| Theme    | How do we build and maintain positive learning environments? How do we communicate effectively? How and when do we intervene in student problems? |
| Courses  | EDCG tba Guidance & Classroom Management (3)<br>EDCI 642 SIMMLE (1)   |
| Term     | Summer 1998   |
| Theme    | What are current trends in education? How can we exercise leadership in the profession?   |
| Courses  | EDCI 667 Seminar in Curriculum (3)  |

The program consists of 25 credits plus 5 credits from a Cognate Area.

In conjunction with the Standards is the Portfolio Assessment process which empowers students to monitor and demonstrate their accomplishments. This gives them greater freedom to select courses and experiences since they have clear, specific needs and goals in mind. Extensive student input into the Portfolios, at the retreat and thereafter, has helped to ensure that this process is not overly cumbersome and truly facilitative of their professional development. However, as with much of the MLMED, portfolios are new to both faculty and students so everyone is learning together.

### First Year Insights

The MLMED has already begun to produce important insights after less than a year in existence. Based on extensive anonymous and non-anonymous feedback and examination of student projects, it appears that the program and its participants are off to an excellent start at reforming middle grades education in the state.

Much of the feedback from MLMED students verifies that community is vital to the program's and their success. The retreat at Camp Erdman last June, funded by the Hawai'i School University Partnership, laid an invaluable foundation for community. Both faculty and students worked together intensely in the diabolical team-building activities: "Alligator Alley" and "The Wall." This served to break down barriers between university and school personnel and between teachers from different schools.

A student wrote, "Those of us who had the pleasure of being there for the entire time really bonded. I feel much better about asking for help and support from those who are not in my home base."

Also, the retreat shifted ownership of the program from the university faculty to all participants who were engaged in critiquing and refining the goals (Standards), curriculum and assessment plans.

Another participant was pleasantly surprised at the whole process and wrote, "Before we discussed these standards I didn't think we had much to talk about. After the discussion I felt a part of the decision making with regards to the standards and I felt we all had some input for standards we felt were very important."

Students have cited the program's tight, supportive community as a crucial element supporting their learning: "Home base groups are helpful in that we can help each other on assignments....Most important things I learned were from other classmates."

Others noted that their classmates kept them going as they tried to balance full-time teaching, graduate studies and family. One student was even considering enrolling in next fall's core course despite having already completed

comparable courses, "Just to be with everybody. Seeing them once a month (in the seminar) isn't enough!"

Another gratifying insight emerging about the MLMED is that participants are engaging in very rigorous study of their school practices and finding this process to be tremendously useful.

Students' research projects from fall, 1996, contained their perceptions of effective teachers and of their parents' expectations; stakeholders' outlooks on school schedules and teacher advisory programs; ways to reach struggling students and ways to communicate with non-English-speaking parents. Many of the projects were collaborative, involving more than one teacher from a given school, or in one case, teachers from Kamehameha, Kawanakoa and Waipahu Middle/Intermediate Schools. A collaborative study of students' outlook on school bell-schedule options conducted by Nanakuli Intermediate School teachers, Laura Harada, Joan Lewis, Claire Okazaki and Stacy Nishina-Won used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and concluded:

That our school tutorial period needs further examination....[it is] currently optional for students.... The first quarter grades indicate that many of the students failed one or more of their classes. Of those, none attended tutorial on a regular basis. We believe there is a correlation between the failures and the lack of tutorial attendance....the number of "F's" received between last year's seventh graders and this year's... almost tripled...[and for eighth graders] the number of "F's" for first quarter grades rose from 79 to 270. While we cannot conclude positively that this increase is a direct result of not seeing the students on a daily basis, we believe that this is an area that definitely could use further study.

It is extremely demanding for full-time teachers to conduct studies of this complexity. However, considerable student feedback suggests that they are finding the process to be well worth the effort. For example, anonymous feedback from two students confirms that they are highly committed to the program, in spite of the stresses. Said one student: "The knowledge I gained from this class will certainly help me to improve what I do in my classroom and possibly what the school does. I now know a more 'scientific' or methodological approach to investigating a situation I am concerned or curious about. Once you sort of know what to do, it's not really that scary—like most things." Another commented: "It [MLMED] forces me to create, innovate, reflect and reassess. I really feel I'm becoming a better teacher through all that we are made to consider."

To ease the burden on participants, the MLMED faculty have been flexible about deadlines for projects. In addition,

they have tried to encourage school administrators to utilize and support their MLMED teachers' growing efficacy as educators and leaders. In response to a meeting and follow-up letter, school principals provided substitute teachers for a day so that seven MLMED could pursue research/school improvement projects during fall, 1996. We are hoping that subsequent meetings with principals will help even more of them to see the benefits of supporting their MLMED teachers' efforts with professional development time.

It has also become apparent that the MLMED's Portfolio Assessment process is a powerful tool. It has empowered students to assess their own learning needs and plan for meeting them. The first year review of the portfolios has made students and their advisors aware of the individual's strengths and needs and knowing this has facilitated planning for the second year. Having clear program exit criteria affords greater flexibility in choices of courses and other learning experiences for students. They can make a case for their mastery of a particular Standard independent of course work, for example through job experience, thus, allowing them to skip a non-required core course in favor of a more relevant option.

Perhaps best of all, there is considerable evidence that MLMED participants are already stepping forward as leaders in the state's middle level educational reform movement, both within and beyond their own schools. A number have served as mentor teachers for the College's pre-service teachers, sharing their expertise with the next generation of middle grades teachers. In addition, program participants have conducted staff development meetings and shared their research in their schools, supporting their colleagues' learning and innovation. Others have led school and district committees in developing writing assessment rubrics, revising school schedules, developing teacher advisory programs and planning new middle schools. Others have helped to write and produce informational video tapes and skits about middle grades education. Still others have conducted presentations at middle level education conferences on O'ahu, the Neighbor Islands and the Mainland.

Quite simply, the MLMED is off to a great start. The faculty and students have forged themselves into a supportive, energetic community of learners and leaders in the middle level educational reform movement. It is already apparent that middle level education in Hawai'i will never be the same again due to the efforts of these thirty-four pioneers. Instead of dreading teaching seventh grade, these teachers and those with whom they work will increasingly enjoy, motivate and inspire these rambunctious pre-teens.

As one MLMED participant noted, "Understanding and accepting early adolescents is what middle level teaching is all about. I definitely believe my teaching has improved by enhancing my awareness of the changes the students are

going through. Having an understanding of what the various needs are for these kids and also knowing what their stresses are helps me to plan lessons and activities that are appropriate. Basically, understanding early adolescents was the main thing."

The MLMED will start its second cohort in summer, 1998, just as the first group is finishing. We can't wait!

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