

Leading, Teaching and Learning “in the Middle”: Experiences, Beliefs, and Values of Instructional Leaders, Teachers, and Students in Finland, Germany, and Canada

Authors : Brandy Yee, Dianne Yee

Abstract : Through the exploration of the lived experiences, beliefs and values of instructional leaders, teachers and students in Finland, Germany and Canada, we investigated the factors which contribute to developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments for early adolescents. Student-centred leadership dimensions, effective instructional practices and student agency were examined through the lens of current policy and research on middle-level learning environments emerging from the Canadian province of Manitoba. Consideration of these three research perspectives in the context of early adolescent learning, placed against an international backdrop, provided a previously undocumented perspective on leading, teaching and learning in the middle years. Aligning with a social constructivist, qualitative research paradigm, the study incorporated collective case study methodology, along with constructivist grounded theory methods of data analysis. Data were collected through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews and document review, as well as direct and participant observation. Three case study narratives were developed to share the rich stories of study participants, who had been selected using maximum variation and intensity sampling techniques. Interview transcript data were coded using processes from constructivist grounded theory. A cross-case analysis yielded a conceptual framework highlighting key factors that were found to be significant in the establishment of developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments. Seven core categories emerged from the cross-case analysis as common to all three countries. Within the visual conceptual framework (which depicts the interconnected nature of leading, teaching and learning in middle-level learning environments), these seven core categories were grouped into Essential Factors (student agency, voice and choice), Contextual Factors (instructional practices; school culture; engaging families and the community), Synergistic Factors (instructional leadership) and Cornerstone Factors (education as a fundamental cultural value; preservice, in-service and ongoing teacher development). In addition, sub-factors emerged from recurring codes in the data and identified specific characteristics and actions found in developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments. Although this study focused on 12 schools in Finland, Germany and Canada, it informs the practice of educators working with early adolescent learners in middle-level learning environments internationally. The authentic voices of early adolescent learners are the most important resource educators have to gauge if they are creating effective learning environments for their students. Ongoing professional dialogue and learning is essential to ensure teachers are supported in their work and develop the pedagogical practices needed to meet the needs of early adolescent learners. It is critical to balance consistency, coherence and dependability in the school environment with the necessary flexibility in order to support the unique learning needs of early adolescents. Educators must intentionally create a school culture that unites teachers, students and their families in support of a common purpose, as well as nurture positive relationships between the school and its community. A large, urban school district in Canada has implemented a school cohort-based model to begin to bring developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments to scale.

Keywords : developmentally responsive learning environments, early adolescents, middle level learning, middle years, instructional leadership, instructional practices, intellectually engaging learning environments, leadership dimensions, student agency

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