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

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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.

I. INTRODUCTION

ANYONE who has recently stepped into a middle-years classroom will resonate with Wormelli's [1] observations that early adolescents are truly a unique group of learners, like none other a teacher might experience - a group that at one moment will test a teacher's mettle and the very next bring so much inspiration and reward that a teacher might question how one could ever think of working with another age group of students. It is the magic of the learning relationship between teacher and student and the willingness to enter into a space where they become co-creators of learning that empowers individuals and unites communities. "This is not a group of slightly more complex primary students. Nor is it a group of immature high schoolers. These [middle-years learners] are unique. Intellectually, the tools they need for figuring out academics and life are not all in the toolbox yet. This makes decision making, impulsivity control, moral/abstract reasoning, "reading" the situation, planning, understanding consequences of words and actions, and other executive functions intermittent at best. They are fiercely independent, yet paradoxically, they crave social connection. They move from concrete to abstract thinking, sounding like adults when talking about some topics, and young children when discussing others. They crave competence, self-definition, creativity, vividness in learning, emotionally safe

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environments, control/power over their lives, physical activity, positive social interactions with adults and peers, structure and clear limits, and meaningful participation in school/ community. Most of all, they want to belong." [1, para. 9-14].

In a world that is becoming increasingly complex, it would be unreasonable to believe that the field of middle-level education could remain unaffected by ever-changing societal expectations, demands and pressures related to the role education and educators play in preparing the world's children for life, work and beyond. What remains unchanged, however, is the need for early adolescent learners to have an education that prepares them for this unpredictable world which lies outside the four walls of our schools - an education that will allow them to survive and thrive, an education that will unleash their natural curiosities and empower them to contribute to our world in a manner in which only they can. Understanding the unique developmental needs of early adolescent learners remains a key to ensuring their success in learning, yet decisions about middle-level learning environments and programming for these learners are often based on budgets, capital plans and politics, as opposed to what will best support these learners through a very tumultuous developmental time.

Examine the research that has come from any Canadian province or territory in the past few years and you will see that on the top of the list of priorities or initiatives is high school completion. Provincial and territorial governments have invested large amounts of time, money and human resources to this end. Much of the same research also points to the middle years as being an important determiner of high school completion; yet, far fewer resources have been devoted to understanding how to transform middle-level learning environments in order to lay the proper foundation for success in high school and beyond. Other Canadian studies have shown early adolescent students as becoming increasingly disengaged and disconnected from their learning. According to the *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being* study [2], early adolescents' behaviours and self-perceptions are closely related to their quality of life in school.

From the international educational context, Finland is considered by many to have one of the world's top-performing education systems [3], [4]. Education reforms in Finland have been described by some as emphasising teacher and student personal responsibility, where teachers are given the freedom to design the curriculum and students have increased choice in what they study [3], [4]. The Finnish context provided a thought-provoking narrative of how this much-admired system supports the unique and ever-changing developmental needs of early adolescents in what is viewed as a highly student-centered system of education.

Germany is currently undergoing significant reform in their systems of education and teacher preparation as they work to challenge long-held beliefs about hierarchies and levelled systems of schooling. Once believed to be a symbol of national strength, the sifting and sorting of children into one of three tiers of school at the age of 10 is now believed by many to be a limiting factor in potential for student growth and

opportunities [5]. In response to what was described as "PISA shock," Germany has, since the year 2000, seen a steady increase in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in literacy, mathematics and science. Known for having a more decentralised system of education, the 16 German Länder (regions) have primary responsibility for what happens in schools and in teacher education. Reforms in teacher preparation programs are now underway in some of the German Länder, as educational leaders in the university system work to ensure teacher training programs reflect the changes primarily being seen in Germany's secondary schools. The German context provided a fascinating perspective on how the needs of early adolescent learners are being attended to, regardless of where the school falls in the current tiered system.

The education system in Canada varies considerably among the ten provinces and three territories. When Canadian results are profiled in international measures such as PISA or the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), the nation as a whole continues to score near the top. These results, when further examined by province, reveal there is a large discrepancy in how individual provinces fare on the tests. A small number of provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec) score, in all PISA tests, at the Canadian average and have in some cases surpassed the average Canadian results. The remaining six provinces score below the Canadian average and, in some instances, well below other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Some of the most significant work related to leading, teaching and learning in the middle years has come from the Canadian province of Manitoba. The province of Ontario, driven by research emerging from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), has also recently been more intentional in the way it has supported and resourced their middle-level learning environments. The Canadian context provided an intriguing examination into what impact the middle-years movement has had on selected Canadian school contexts, almost 50 years after it originated in the neighbouring United States.

II. THE STUDY

A. The Core Research Questions

Using a semi-structured interview format with instructional leaders and lead teachers and using a small focus group format with students, we sought to discover common themes related to the lived experiences and beliefs of these three groups in the context of middle-level learning environments. In developing initial questions and subsequent follow-up questions for study participants, the following overarching questions were used as guides:

- *Overarching theme of questions.* What factors contribute to the establishment of developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments for early adolescents?
- *Instructional leader overarching question.* Using the research articulated by Viviane Robinson [6] in her book

Student-Centred Leadership as a lens, "What leadership dimensions contribute to the creation of a developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging learning environment for early adolescents?"

- *Lead teacher overarching question.* Using Sharon Friesen's [7] *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* as a lens, "What instructional practices do teachers draw upon that contribute to the creation of a developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging learning environment for early adolescents?"

- *Student overarching question.* Using Carol Dweck's [8] *Mindset* as a lens, "How do early adolescents articulate their needs in ways that contribute to the creation of a developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging learning environment?"

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Paradigm and Design

We utilised a case study design, informed by constructivist grounded theory for treatment of data. This research design allowed for the sharing of lived experiences through the richness and depth provided through the use of a collective case study format; using constructivist grounded theory to inform the analysis of data resulting from semi-structured interviews and focus groups allowed for the generation of a conceptual, visual framework. By combining these two methodologies, the study was designed fill a gap which we perceived to exist in the research regarding middle-level learning environments.

This study was situated within a constructivist paradigm, with an emphasis on social constructivism. In social constructivism, emphasis is placed on the important role culture and context play in understanding various societal experiences, whereby knowledge is constructed not in isolation, but in a collective manner using the lived experiences of those involved [9]. There was no intent to use this research to discover "rights or wrongs," or label practice as "worthy or not worthy." In keeping with the nature of constructivist grounded theory methodology, there was no theory or hypothesis that had been put forward to be proven or disproven through the data.

A narrative, collective case study research methodology was utilised. Bruner describes "narrative knowing," where knowledge is "created and constructed through stories of lived experiences, and the meanings created [help to] make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives" [10, p. 12]. From this narrative knowing, researchers gain a unique insight that allows for bringing together multiple layers of understanding of often-complex phenomena. The use of multiple case studies enables researchers to depict the depth and richness of a phenomenon across contexts [11], [12]. The concept of an analytic case study was important to this research as it allowed for the development of a framework highlighting specific aspects of the phenomenon being studied - in this instance, middle-level learning environments.

The strength of constructivist grounded theory emerged as a compliment to case study design, in that it provided well-established methods for analysis of data, leading to the generation of a practical framework. Constructivist grounded theory methodology for data analysis is more a process of discovery, rather than confirmation. Charmaz indicates that constructivist grounded theory accepts the "relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards an interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" [13, p. 250].

Similarly, Alvesson and Sköldberg consider data analysis to be an iterative process requiring the researcher to engage in reflection and interpretation on multiple levels; they term this process "reflexive interpretation" [14, p. 248]. Therefore, the judgment, intuition and ability of the researcher to highlight key issues all play a significant role in the process of data analysis. Charmaz [15] identifies "points of departure" that serve to frame interview questions and form preliminary categories in the coding process. "Grounded theory coding is inductive, comparative, interactive, and iterative - and later - deductive" [16, p. 4]. Data from each individual country-based case was analysed using the strategies of coding, memo writing, visual mapping and the development of core categories. Another aspect that distinguishes constructivist grounded theory coding from other qualitative coding methods is the analytic perspective from which the researcher begins to immediately approach the data and continues to do so throughout the analysis process [16].

TABLE I
NUMBER OF RECURRING CODES AND CORE CATEGORIES EMERGING FROM ANALYSIS OF DATA

Case	Recurring Codes	Core Categories
Germany	43	9
Finland	55	10
Canada	38	7

The quality and trustworthiness of this study was considered using the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln [17] and Robson [18] of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity. As well, methodological rigour (determining whether the research was conducted with good methodological practice) and interpretive rigour (reviewing the data analysis process and questioning the interpretations as sound and reflective of the data) were assessed [19].

B. School Site and Participant Selection

We used Patton's strategies of intensity sampling, "selecting information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely" [20, p. 182] and maximum variation sampling, "selecting cases that are considerably different on the dimensions of interest" [20, p. 182] for both site and participant selection. Education faculty at universities in Germany, Finland and Canada assisted in recommending site locations that would align with the criteria of these two sampling strategies; essentially, any school site that had early adolescent learners and whose principal was

supportive of opening his/her school to this research. This same openness applied to the selection of individual study participants as well. In discussions with the school principal, we asked for a wide range of teachers and students. The only criteria were that they be willing to openly and honestly share their beliefs, opinions and lived experiences; they did not have to be the "award winning teacher" or the "top of the class student," while these factors would not have excluded anyone either.

C. Data Collection

We created interview guides for each participant group, specific to the context of the group and to issues or points of departure identified [15], [21]. This format and structure ensured the research remained focused on lines of inquiry essential to the central research question, while also allowing for participants' unique perspectives and experiences to be reflected in the data.

Both direct and participant observations were used as a method for data collection in this study. A flexible observation guide was created to maintain consistency among site locations and also ensure key areas of investigation were attended to. Along with the semi-structured interviews and document review, these observations formed a primary source of data, which informed the development of the conceptual, visual framework. Both print and electronic documents relevant to each school site were analysed. These site-specific documents were often referred to during data analysis in order to obtain specific information and wording, as well as clarify interpretation of specific contextual issues.

TABLE II
SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTED FROM INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH SITES

	Germany	Finland	Canada
Days on site	8 days	8 days	8 days
Number of participants	33	40	33
Number of interviews	13	12	12
Total time on site	16 hours	16 hours	20 hours
Documents reviewed	18	20	18

IV. COUNTRY-BASED CASE STUDY NARRATIVES

Three case study narratives articulated images of leading, teaching and learning "in the middle" in Finland, Germany and Canada, beginning with a general overview of the education system in that country which highlighted key factors that contributed to the ways in which the country views and approaches early adolescent education. An overview of key lessons learned from each of the education systems is included below.

A. Finnish Education System-Lessons Learned

- Public trust in and value of the education system.
- Flexibility in programming for early adolescent learners.
- Very little formal assessment/evaluation of student learning until upper secondary school and the impact on student motivation for learning.
- Cultural value of independent children, translating into independent, self-sufficient learners.

- Quality and consistency of teacher training programs.
- Nation-wide system for communicating student learning - Wilma.

B. German Education System-Lessons Learned

- Gemeinschaftschule and Gesamtschule - new models of learning to meet the changing need of learners.
- Cooperation between Länder and Federal government with respect to education and when possible alignment of the systems of education in the Länder.
- Use of available data to make informed decisions related to education reform.
- Vocational education and training as legitimate and valued forms of education and future careers.
- Openness to learning from and collaboration with other countries.

C. Canadian Education System-Lessons Learned

- Lack of national regulations related to education creating significant and sometimes alarming differences among the education system of the provinces.
- PISA results perhaps a bit misleading.
- Specific and targeted pre-service teacher training focusing on early adolescent development and early adolescent learning.
- Provincial commitment to and focus on early adolescent learning and middle-level learning environments was key.
- Use of technology when appropriate to enhance learning and ensure students develop into wise consumers of technology and the information available to them through new technologies.

In each of the case study narratives, we then returned to the foundational research perspectives underpinning the investigation into early adolescent learning and middle-level learning environments: instructional leadership as envisioned by Robinson [6]; instructional practices as outlined by Friesen [7]; and student agency as a necessary component of Dweck's [8] growth mindset. Whenever possible, the words of study participants drew the reader into the unique and challenging world of leading, teaching and learning in middle-level learning environments.

The images of the lived experiences, beliefs, hopes and challenges facing instructional leaders, lead teachers and students were articulated by participant group, under the headings of:

- Images of instructional leadership in [country name] middle-level learning environments; for example,

    "Do teachers know how our adolescent students' brains work and how they work now is completely different than they did in Year Five or Year Six? Do we take this into consideration as a primary thing that is very relevant and is something that defines the relationship between the teacher and [their class]? Then perhaps not so much would be left to chance in the classroom, hoping a lesson is right for the learners in front of me." (German principal interview, December 2014)

- Images of instructional practices in [country name] middle-level learning environments; for example,

"Teaching teenagers is about being an adult all the time. You can't just give them orders; you have to be the adult, an adult who is present all of the time. If I put [the student and I] into a situation where I say it is "this" or "that," then I have lost. If "this" doesn't happen, then I have to make "that" happen and then my relationship with this student is on thin ice. This is the issue I have to avoid as long as I can. Also I have to be awake when the students do something good. That is very important. That is the main issue. Tell them they are doing well, that you are proud of them. You need to be interested in them. Notice them. Not pretending, but genuine. And at the beginning I thought, "Can I be interested in them all?" I noticed if I am truly interested in them and want to meet them as persons, it didn't take energy away from me, it gave me energy." (Finnish teacher interview, November 2014)

• And, images of the student experience in [country name] middle-level learning environments; for example,

"I'm not as comfortable taking risks as I would like to be. I don't usually raise my hand in class unless I am positive I have the right answer and I usually pick the same way of presenting my learning to my teachers, either a poster or a PowerPoint. I guess I am worried that I may mess up if I try something new and I will look silly in front of my classmates. Even worse I could fail and get bad grades." (Canadian student interview, December 2014).

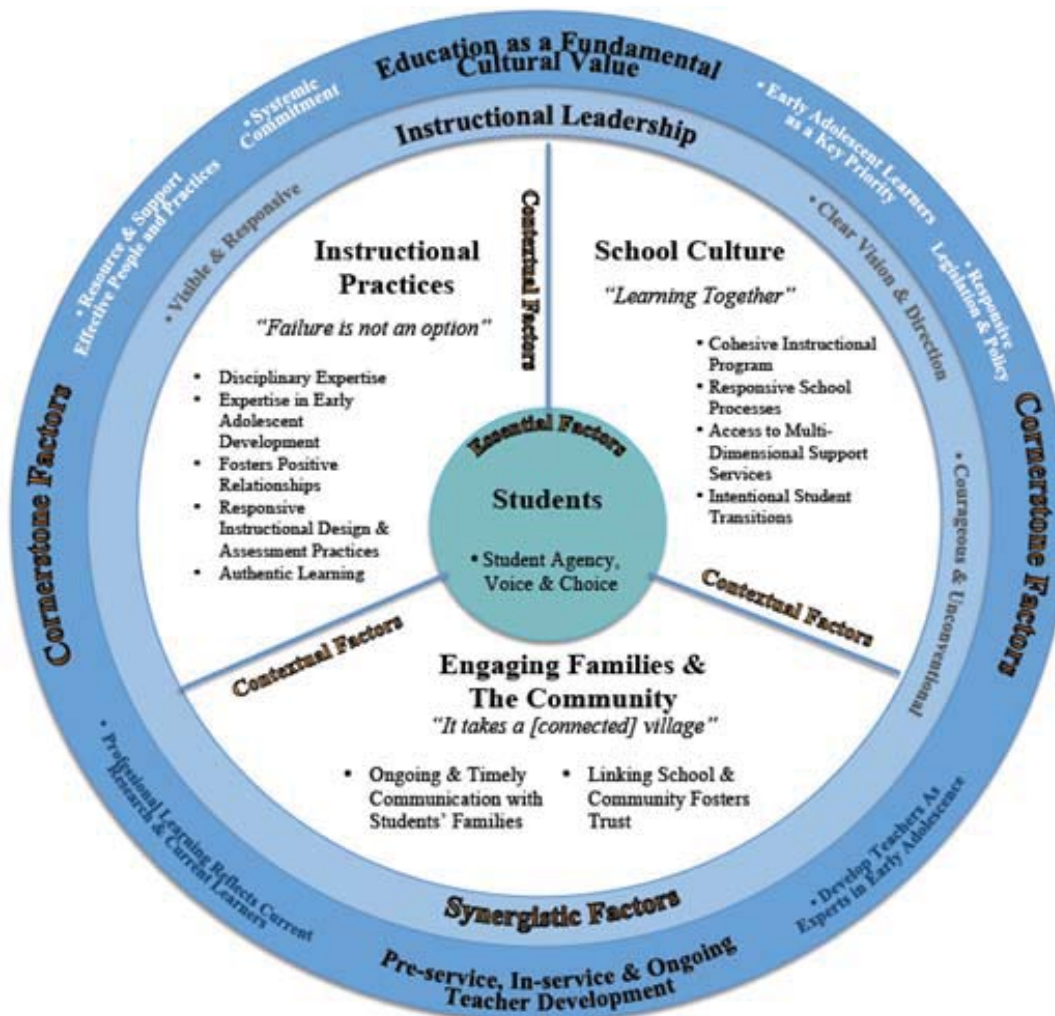## V. DISCUSSION: A CONCEPTUAL VISUAL FRAMEWORK

Fig. 1 A Conceptual Visual Framework representing the factors that contribute to developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments

These four clusters (Cornerstone Factors, Synergistic Factors, Contextual Factors and Essential Factors) bring together groups of factors into layers that provide the foundation for subsequent layers to build and expand upon. Key connecting factors within each cluster, such as "education as a fundamental cultural value" (one of the Cornerstone

Factors) or "instructional practices" (one of the Contextual Factors), illustrate what research data identified to be essential elements that support the transformation of middle-level learning environments.

The Cornerstone Factors of "education as a fundamental cultural value" and "pre-service, in-service and ongoing teacher development" are viewed as foundational and fundamental. This does not suggest however, that in the absence of these Cornerstone Factors, none of the subsequent layers of factors would be possible or attainable; simply, the data has shown the Cornerstone Factors set the stage for the other factors to unfold in a more intentional, supported and sustained manner.

The Synergistic Factor of "instructional leadership" and the accompanying sub-factors describe features of instructional leadership that both support, as well as advance, transformation in middle-level learning environments. The type of instructional leadership (and associated characteristics) described in the proposed framework has been shown through this research study to create the conditions for the Contextual Factors to exist and evolve.

Contextual Factors of "instructional practices," "school culture" and "engaging families and the community" reflect the unique context of each school. These factors need to be purposefully nurtured by all those supporting early adolescent learners within each school.

The Essential Factors, with explicit focus on the students, are found at the centre of the framework. The practices of instructional design and assessment, essential elements in the daily work of teachers, are often seen as tasks of the teacher alone and things that are "done to students." What was very clear from the interviews with students is their desire to be more involved in all facets of their education. In so many aspects of schooling, student agency and voice has been completely left out of any real decision making with regards to how their schooling experience unfolds, and, if student voice is celebrated primarily as being the choice between a poster or a PowerPoint presentation as a means of sharing their research, then educators' notions of voice, choice and agency are perhaps misguided. The creation of a learning environment that supports the unique developmental and learning needs of early adolescent learners needs to be co-created with the very individuals that will be most impacted - the students. Transformation of middle-level learning environments involves a complex interplay of many factors, perhaps none more important than the students.

Taken as a whole, the Factors and Sub-factors presented in the framework represent what the data from this study indicate as contributing to the establishment of developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments.

VI. Conclusion – "Nothing But the Essentials"

A synthesis, which has been languaged for practitioners, of the seven Connecting Factors found in the research data and represented through the conceptual visual framework (Fig. 1) provides the essentials for learning environments to support the unique developmental and learning needs of early adolescent learners.

1. The students – Please never lose sight of the fact that the early adolescent learners you have in your school are the most important resource you have at your disposal to easily gauge if you (as the instructional leader) and your teachers (as facilitators of learning) are on the right track. Talk to your students. Ask them about their experiences in your school. Provide your students with authentic opportunities to develop agency in their learning by demonstrating to them through your actions you consider them and their voices as important factors when creating a learning environment in which they will flourish. Shadow some of your students throughout the course of their day at school if you truly want to understand what it means to be an early adolescent learner in the middle-level learning environment you have been entrusted to care for and lead. Base any decisions you make on what you learn from your students and about your students. Do not attempt to find a "quick fix" in the latest innovation or packaged program. Find the answers you need to create a developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging learning environment, in those very students who are the reason you are here today, wanting to know how to make their experience in your school exactly what it needs to be, so they, too, may see the world of possibilities that exist for them.

2. The instructional leaders – You will be tasked with countless "things" as an instructional leader (meetings, paperwork, measures of accountability, etc.); however, please always remember that protecting the learning environment in your school and those within that environment (your students and your teachers) are your most important responsibilities. You will need to support your teachers in understanding the myriad of "things" in the life of a teacher that may detract from the real work of teaching and learning in their classrooms. [I find the following statement is a good way to help teachers understand what is truly important: "If at the end of the day you cannot say that what you have done has positively impacted your students, then you need to alter your course so you do not lose your way."] You will need to "protect when you must [and] permit when you can" [22, para. 1] your early adolescent learners as they navigate this developmental period. And on some days [and, hopefully there are not many], you will need to be the one who holds on to hope and believes in your teachers, your students and their families, until they can do this for themselves once again. As the instructional leader, you are the synergist who brings together the necessary elements and creates the conditions [and yes, sometimes this happens by "clearing through the mess"] for your teachers to teach and your students to learn. Savour your role and what your instructional leadership has the potential to create every day, both for each student and each teacher in your care.

3. The teachers – After your students, your teachers are the most significant resource you have in your school. Just as you know how important it is for your teachers to come to know and understand each of their students as learners and as individuals in order to better support student learning, you must do the same with your teachers. Do not mistake this for friendship. Trust in your teachers (unless you have clear evidence to the contrary), trust that they want to do whatever is necessary to be the best they can be for their students. The only way you will know how to support the growth of your teachers and their pedagogical practices is by engaging in continuous and ongoing professional conversations and professional learning with them. Be present in their classrooms (not in an evaluative way with a clipboard and checklist) in a manner that allows you to truly understand their work and the ways in which they approach teaching and learning. By doing this, you will continue to grow and develop as an instructional leader, alongside your teachers; for your teachers to see you as a learner as well is a very powerful act of instructional leadership. Provide your teachers with professional learning that will develop their understanding of the early adolescent learners in their classrooms. Remember the times as a classroom teacher, when you and your students were in what can only be described by Csikszentmihalyi's [23] "flow." It was like a "perfect storm"; the classroom environment, the task, the conditions, the students, you - it all came together in just the right combination to create an amazing moment of learning. Every teacher should have those moments to remember and savour. Help your teachers to develop their pedagogical practice in ways that will allow them to create the kinds of authentic learning opportunities their students will talk about for years to come.

4. The school culture – You can tell a lot about a school from the feeling you get when you walk through the front door. Take the steps necessary to ensure your school is a welcoming place for your students and their families, as well as a place where your teachers want to come to work every day. The things that may seem frivolous or extraneous to the work of teaching and learning in the classroom are in fact known to have a significant positive impact on your teachers and students and the learning culture within your school. School clubs, sport teams, intramurals, the school band or drama production, all provide amazing opportunities for your teachers and students (and even you) to learn together in non-traditional ways. For some of your students these opportunities will be the reason they come to school. They may always struggle in math class, but they shine on the basketball court; every student deserves to find that place within their school where they shine. There is something very powerful that happens to the culture of a school when teachers, students and their families unite in support of a common purpose. As silly as it may sound, your students take great pride in identifying with the school name and mascot that has been chosen. [Being recognised as a "Titan" (the school mascot name) and wearing that bright orange (the school colour) "hoodie" with the school logo is significant in the life of an early adolescent.] Create a school culture that you would want your own children to be part of. That is a very good litmus test.

5. The school philosophy – There is something to be said about a strong sense of consistency, cohesiveness, coherence and dependability in the "school life" of early adolescents, when many other aspects of their growth and development seem not within their immediate control. Please examine the processes at your school, many which probably existed long before you arrived, to ensure they are serving your current school population well; and, then do not hesitate to do away with those structures and philosophies that may be doing more harm than good. If there was one word I would use to describe the kind of middle-level learning environment (and subsequent school processes) that best support this environment and the learners within it, it would be "flexible." Do not confuse this with "anything goes" or "laissez faire." Flexibility very much reflects the needs of early adolescent learners. Your school timetable needs to accommodate large blocks of learning that can be negotiated among the teachers to allow students to delve deeply and linger with topics and issues important to them. The start and end to learning must not be dictated by the sounding of a bell or by the passing of a week or month. Be careful that you not ask your teachers to create unit plans and year plans that determine the pace of learning. This pace, of course, can only be dictated by the actual learning students demonstrate. Ensure the right people are in place in your school to support the unique learning and developmental needs of your early adolescents. This includes your teachers, support staff and any others your budget will permits, such as psychologists, social workers, etc. Please be open to all possibilities that exist with regards to how you might schedule your school, deploy your teachers, group your students, and secure learning resources and tools. Some of the most unconventional approaches can yield amazing results.

6. The school community – The community in which your school is situated can act as a powerful force for your school; and, whether this takes on a positive or negative tone, in many ways rests in your hands. The positive relationship between your school and its community is one that you want to nurture. You want to shape this relationship so your early adolescent learners are not only supported while in your school, but also the moment they step outside; the community can do this, but you will also need to create the conditions in which this can occur. Early adolescents are not always seen in the most positive light by older generations. Therefore, your students need opportunities where they can demonstrate to the community they are growing up in how they can contribute to it in positive ways. Be creative; open up

your building to those in the community; ask them to share in your students' learning. Take every opportunity to showcase your students' unique talents and abilities to the community. Help the community see your early adolescent learners as the kind, caring and capable individuals you know them to be. Then you will have created a school community; and, this is exactly what your early adolescent learners need to support their healthy growth and development as learners and as individuals.

7. The greater vision – What is it that you hope for when you close your eyes and see the perfect place of learning for your early adolescent learners? This is your greater vision and even though it may not be your current reality, it is what you continue to strive for. Never lose sight of it - this is important! Please know that to achieve your greater vision, there are some things that are out of your control; and, this will be very frustrating. You cannot control the government or their policies impacting education, nor is it likely that you will be able to alter the opinions of those who do not hold education, early adolescents and the work of teachers in the same high regard as you do. The prospect is better that you (both by example and through the philosophy you live at your school) influence practices towards early adolescent learners and middle-level learning environments at a district level. Yet, the exceptional work and substantiated beliefs and practices happening in schools on a daily basis may be lost on "senior management," many of whom have not truly engaged in the real work of a school in years. Direct your energy towards resourcing and supporting the good work already taking place in your own school, work towards changing those school-based practices and philosophies that do not serve your students well and always approach with scepticism those who serve to derail your progress towards that essential place of learning. Be a tireless advocate for leading, teaching and learning in the middle years; this is how you will realise your greater vision, one student, one teacher and one school at a time, beginning with your own.

VII. RESEARCH TO PRAXIS

For the past three years, principals, assistant principals and learning leaders from a large urban Canadian school district have been engaged in professional learning with a focus on student-centred instructional leadership as envisioned by Robinson [6]; instructional practices as outlined in the Teaching Effectiveness Framework of Friesen [7]; and student agency as a necessary component of Dweck's [8] growth mindset. One of the quadrant-based areas of this school district has implemented a school cohort model to bring more developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments to scale. The work in this area, which has a very culturally diverse and lower socioeconomic family profile, has been informed by key research documents mentioned previously and framed by the five key actions from Manitoba Education's guiding document "Engaging Middle

Years Students in Learning – Transforming Middle Years Education in Manitoba" [24]:

1. develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents;
2. provide more responsive teaching and intellectually engaging learning experiences;
3. nurture stronger learning relationships increase student voice and choice; and,
4. strengthen community involvement.

As indicated in the Manitoba document, developmentally responsive middle-level learning is not based on a specific grade configuration. It is about ensuring each early adolescent student learns as he or she learns best. But, some structures or configurations make creating responsive middle-level learning environments more difficult; for example, spending only three years in one school and the challenges that frequent school transitions create when students are in a period of considerable developmental transition; or rigid timetables with small blocks of instructional time; or multiple teachers who do not know the student holistically as a learner; or lack of appropriate counselling/learning services supports in schools.

Although not a typical grade configuration in this large, urban school district, the grade six to nine middle-level configuration was one suggested in the Manitoba document. After considerable deliberation, it was decided that all four grade seven to nine junior high schools in one section of the area move at the same time to grade six to nine middle schools. Collaborative networks of principals, assistant principals and learning leaders were created and began, a year ahead of time, to make necessary adjustments for the new grade configurations and to plan the changes required to create more developmentally responsive middle-level learning environments. The Area gave financial support to provide onsite university facilitator assistance in each school to implement the following research-based middle-level learning environment changes:

- Revised and aligned schedules in all schools with longer blocks of instructional time.
- Assigned fewer teachers for students in their core academic courses (1 Humanities teacher and 1 Math/Science teacher for two classroom groups of students).
- Provided rich exploratory Fine and Performing Arts (FPA) and Career and Technology Foundations (CTF) course implementation in multi-grade groups. (For example, Grades six and seven and Grades eight and nine together for instruction.)
- Moved all schools to a new outcomes-based report card format.
- Used non-instructional or professional development days for cross-school collaborative, discipline-based task design and assessment work. (For example, all the Math teachers from the four schools designing authentic tasks and formative assessment together…)
- Redesigned student transition processes from typical, singular spring meetings for special education students to ongoing, elaborated communication between schools, teachers and parents for all students.

At the end of the second year of working in this manner, the feedback from changes in the four schools has been very positive. There has been significant improvement in institutional and intellectual engagement measures of "Tell Them From Me" survey data and significant improvement in the education ministry Accountability Pillar survey measures of a safe and caring environment, program of studies, work preparation, citizenship, parent involvement and school improvement. The numbers of suspensions and office visits in the schools have decreased significantly. This initial feedback requires further monitoring and adjustment of actions and processes to ensure continuous improvement; but, it provides support to further develop a cohort model to create more developmentally responsive, intellectually engaging middle-level learning environments in additional groups of schools with early adolescent learners.

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