

NCMLE Middle Grades Musings

The Low-Down on Teaming

No single educational idea has come to characterize the middle school concept as certainly as has interdisciplinary teaming.

(J. Lounsbury)

Think about the quote above.

So, why is it that the team may be the most recognized structure in a middle school? Is this still true to middle schools today?

[Note: John Lounsbury is one of the founding fathers of middle school philosophies and came along when the middle school was newly implemented, ~mid-1960's.]

Let's ponder this another way first. What is a team? Like, truly....when asked if a school has teams, I've gotten all kinds of responses.

The pure, "Yes," followed by silence and then the qualifier, "the whole <insert grade level> is a team."

The pure, "Yes," followed immediately by, "but we had to use 8 teachers to form it."

Or, the pure, "Yes," and then when asked, "so what team processes do you have?"

The admission of "well, we don't really do that," or even, "well, last year we were the Ravens, but we don't have a name yet this year" (stated in October).

You see, in my travels, the middle school team concept is certainly limping along, much as the middle school philosophy seems to be in many of our state's middle schools.

What is a Middle School Team?

A middle school team is not a Professional Learning Team (PLT) or Professional Learning Community (PLC). Well, let me take that back---of course it is--but the PLT/PLC concept, over the years, seems to have nudged out the middle school interdisciplinary team concept. There is room in a middle school for both structures. The PLT/PLC, is usually comprised of like-disciplinary cohorts, and the interdisciplinary team, is comprised of **interdisciplinary teachers who share a common group of students**.

But the middle school team is more than a grouping of 2, 3, or 4 teachers with a team identity. This interdisciplinary team works to create a nurturing, student-teacher environment as well as a cohesive, student-student environment while sharing the same group of students. The adults on the team should have a shared philosophy---what is the role of the teacher, and what is the role of the student? Oh, and

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when the student doesn't fulfill the team expectation, what is the response? Punitive or developmental? Rigid or Flexible? *[Note: the desired answer is the latter.]*

If you are still reading this, you know the young adolescent is all over the proverbial map. Middle school teachers have enlisted to work in a place that should be transitional and developmental, and the team should work together to establish the processes to assist with these ideals within the context of a fun, flexible, and loving space.

Why Teams?

So, why a team and not just every teacher setting up this sort of environment within their own four walls?

Developmental Responsiveness. <That's the short answer.> The longer answer is that young adolescents crave "belonging". They want to feel that they belong to "the group". Now, we can't recreate a total in-group, but we can create a sense of belonging to the team and to the teachers that lead that team. This goes back to teacher-student and student-student relationships. Within a team, teachers can build those relationships and also implement opportunities for developing "belongingness" through doing for others, whether this is through development of student projects or service learning, or something more. Teams also assist in the cognitive domain, allowing opportunities to connect learning experiences between and among content areas. Teaching to the Big Idea of "Credibility is Important" will leave more learning tracks in the young adolescent brain than learning isolated topics in four vastly different content areas.

Teaming is important. It is an important middle level structure, and it has a specific purpose and function in the development of the young adolescent. The academic year is still young. Take the quick self-assessment provided in the call-out box and set some goals to go into 2017 with an invigorated, improved version of team and teaming practices!

Yes or No

A quick self-assessment to teaming

- ✓ Our team has a team identity.
- ✓ Our team has a shared philosophy.
- ✓ Our team does things to help student build relationships with one another.
- ✓ Our team does things to build relationships with one another (on the adult level).
- ✓ Our team has a set of common policies and procedures.
- ✓ Our team functions with a common calendar of assignments, special projects, and the like.
- ✓ Our team meets together four to five times a week.
- ✓ Our team meetings focus on students' successes and needs.
- ✓ Our team has celebrations when students succeed.
- ✓ Our team flexes our daily schedule as needed.
- ✓ Our team implements at least one interdisciplinary unit per quarter.

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