

Middle Grades Leadership Academy: Collaboration for Improvement

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Since the advent of the partnership movement in the 1980s, teacher preparation programs have been attempting to establish relationships with colleagues in the arts and sciences (Holmes Group, 1986; Goodlad & Sirotnik, 1988). Such partnerships are especially crucial for middle level teacher preparation programs where we struggle to prepare teachers who are both strong in their content areas and who possess teaching strategies that are conducive to learning for the early adolescent. This paper describes the experiences of one university, using federal grant and state matching funds, to establish such partnerships, and presents the feedback we received from our colleagues in the arts and sciences.

In 2000, three agencies in Illinois, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), received \$4.3 million in funding from a Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant (TQE). The primary goal of this grant was to improve middle level education in Illinois. This was to be achieved by changing the certification structure to include a middle-grade teaching certificate, improving the knowledge and skills of new and existing middle level teachers, and implementing recruitment activities throughout the state to increase the supply of effective middle grade teachers (ISBE, et al, 2000).

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) was one of four institutions of higher education that was sub-contracted to implement the objectives of the TQE grant. One of these objectives was the establishment of a Middle Grades Leadership Academy "to provide hands-on, on-site clinical and other professional development for higher education faculty, in collaboration with middle-grade educators" (IBHE, et al, 2000, p. 13).

Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA)

The TQE grant called for the establishment of a project team from each of the four institutions, consisting of university faculty from arts and sciences and education, area community colleges, and middle grades educators. In addition to the SIUE faculty and staff from the School of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences, our project team consisted of faculty from Southwestern Illinois Community College (SWIC), Lewis & Clark Community College (LCCC), and Clark Middle School from the East St. Louis school district. The SIUE project team planned and implemented SIUE's first MGLA during the week of May 20-24, 2002.

An invitation was issued to all arts and science faculty at SIUE, SWIC, and LCCC offering a \$1,000 stipend to attend the four-day Academy. Attendees were also offered the opportunity to attend a technology workshop provided by the grant. Those who took advantage of this technology workshop were provided with their own laptop computer. Fifteen faculty members accepted the invitation, eight from SIUE, two from LCCC, and five from SWIC.

On the first day of the MGLA, we began by having the participants reflect on their own middle school experiences. From this context we shared information about developmental changes occurring during early adolescence and the effect of those developmental changes on the educational experiences of middle schoolers. We then gave attention to the history and philosophy of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) and the resulting changes in education for middle grades. Lastly, we modeled

teaching strategies designed to enhance learning by early adolescents.

During the Tuesday session, using the Schools to Watch: National Forum for the Acceleration of Middle Grades Reform training (available at: <http://www.mgforum.org>), we explored how an "ideal" middle school might function. We used a case study provided by the National Forum to evaluate middle schools using the Schools to Watch criteria, ending the day with a mock interview of a middle school principal.

Wednesday we divided into two groups and each visited an area middle school, after which we had an interesting debriefing session. For example, two MGLA attendees, observing in the same classroom, came away with completely opposite opinions about the environment in that classroom. One attendee thought it was total chaos and the other a creative learning situation.

The MGLA concluded with discussions of participants' roles in the middle level teacher preparation process. We reviewed the work that the project team was doing on the development of a middle level major and the standards for such programs established by NMSA.

At the end of the session we distributed an evaluation form and asked the following:

1. List 2-3 new ideas or concepts concerning middle level education that were introduced during this academy.
2. List 2-3 new ideas or concepts concerning your role in the preparation of middle level teachers that were introduced during this academy.
3. What types of activities might you introduce in your classes as a result of your participation in this academy?
4. What do you feel are the strengths of this academy?
5. Suggestions for improvement for next year's academy.

Using a focus group format, we brought the MGLA attendees back together the following October and asked them the following questions:

1. What did you learn from last year's MGLA?
2. What are you doing/thinking differently now, because of the MGLA?
3. Examine the list of things you said you learned in May. How have these things affected your thinking/teaching since then?
4. Identify three items that had the most impact on your teaching/learning.
5. Identify three items that had the least impact on your teaching/learning.
6. What specific recommendations do you have for next year's MGLA (with a new group of faculty)?
7. What else do the planners of next year's MGLA need to know?

Attendees' Feedback

After examining the feedback from these two evaluations, the responses seemed to fall into two categories; 1) what the attendees felt they learned and 2) what changes they were considering for their own teaching. Imbedded in those categories were suggestions for improvement of the MGLA.

Participants seemed to have learned the most about the early adolescent developmental issues. This topic received the most discussion in the evaluation responses. The idea that a child's developmental growth, beyond early childhood, would impact the educational process was either new information or more in depth information than they previously possessed.

I knew nothing about this topic, so everything was new, such as the characteristics of adolescents... The thing that I thought about the most was the idea that content teaching will be successful only if the middle schooler's (sic) needs (social, emotional, and cognitive) are met. Traditionally only cognitive needs have been considered.

The segment concerning the students and the physical, cognitive, and psychological changes they are going through was very enlightening.

- a. linkage between emotional & cognitive abilities*
- b. education at this age needs to encompass emotional aspects of adolescent development*
- c. critical time to develop learning capabilities*

The participants also commented numerous times about the visits to the middle schools in light of the new information they had on developmental issues and the structure of middle schools. When delineating areas for improvement for the MGLA, longer school visits as a whole group, more interaction with teachers, and more debriefing time were mentioned most often.

Participants also learned that their own teaching served as models for the teaching of content.

This workshop first reminded me that I'm not only a teacher of mathematics but also a role model for future teachers of mathematics.

Arts and Science faculty are crucial to the development of future middle school teachers.

I never realized the direct influence I may have on future middle school teachers by the role I play in my own classroom.

Honestly (and I hate to admit this), although I have always tried to be a "good" teacher at SIUE, I never-NEVER thought about the fact that I do, indeed, have future middle school teachers sitting in my classes... I stayed awake all last night thinking

about how I could redesign my class to better use best practices.

The second category of responses centered around how faculty had changed their teaching as a result of the MGLA. The following responses from three of the participants were recorded during, and transcribed from the October follow-up focus group session:

I have this semester tried to do some more demonstration type things in one of my calculus classes. They do technology one day a week off in a lab, and I have brought it into the classroom. We have actually done some in the classroom for them to see. So, that is you know a small thing.

You know we talked about discovery and inquiry based learning and using technology and those specific strategies, which you can use to kind of get these sorts of ideas across to a wide variety of students.

Oh yeah, in terms of my structuring my classes and that sort of activities and assignments that I give. Especially in my adolescence development class where I have a lot of students who are going into education. When I see things about curriculum changes in terms of state requirements, certification changes, and legislative changes I make out copies. Then I give them out to everybody and say, these are the places that you need to go for information. Because you are going into the system you better know how it works.

We also discovered, like all good teachers, when introduced to new strategies, there was a level of frustration:

I tried group activities in my summer class again being inspired by group activities and have the usual problems. So, I think I would like more specifics. How can we really make these kinds of things work? Instead of saying well I am just going to try them again. I tried them in the past, and I am going to try them again. You know you pick up little things on how to make them better, but I tend to just run into some of the same problems that I have run into in the past with it. Really knowing if something is wrong with how can I fix this? Needless to say I am not doing group things in the same way in this semester now.

Year Two

The following year, we again offered the MGLA during the week of May 19-22, 2003. We made significant changes in the program based on data collected from the previous year. From the university, we focused on recruiting arts and sciences faculty teaching methods courses for the K-12 and 6-12 certificates and also involved with student teacher supervision. We began the week by helping the participants understand the purpose and goals of the MGLA. In 2002, some participants were unclear about the purpose of the MGLA and the rationale for their involvement, so as part of the second year this information was included in the introduction given to the participants and elaborated on when they had questions throughout the first morning. We condensed the overview of adolescent development and history and organization of middle schools into the first day as well. In doing so, participants came away with a better understanding of the main ideas, but were not overly burdened with tiny details. The comments on the first day's evaluation forms let us know the participants saw the logic behind the organization of middle schools, based on what they had learned about adolescent development.

In 2002, we demonstrated good middle level teaching strategies as a separate concept. The data from that first year indicated that the participants found the idea that they were models for good teaching very powerful. We felt, therefore, we should model good strategies throughout the academy rather than separately. Thus, in 2003, we used learning centers in order to teach the participants about the middle school concepts of teaming, exploratory, and advisory. After completing the centers we first reviewed the knowledge from the activity and then debriefed the process and ways it could be modified to work in various classrooms.

In 2003, we dedicated two days of the academy instead of just one to visiting middle schools and provided more time for participants to visit with teachers and to debrief each visit. Both school visits provided MGLA participants with large group discussion, question and answer time with administrators and faculty, and a chance to break up into smaller groups to observe classes and talk to teachers. At the end of each visit we debriefed back at the university.

The debriefing session after the first school visit included many positive comments about seeing the middle school components (exploratory, teaming, and advisory) in action and now realizing their purpose. Following the second school visit, discussion was much richer than the previous day because the participants were comparing the two visits. The participants were surprised that the principals from both schools seemed unconcerned about state mandated testing, but were instead concerned about students' learning throughout the entire year (it should be noted that both schools have test scores above the state averages). It was very beneficial for the participants to visit two different middle schools (one an award winning school for several years and one just beginning to embrace the middle school concepts) and make comparisons between them. By visiting the middle school the classrooms, some participants even envisioned ways they could modify their own college classrooms to make them more hands-on and student centered.

At the end of each day the MGLA participants completed an evaluation form. These were used to modify the upcoming day's activities and to inform us of any questions participants still had at the end of the daily discussions. During the last day, again while modeling good middle level teaching strategies, we spent time discussing how participants could implement what they had learned into their own classrooms. Many were excited to have the summer to revamp portions of their fall classes to incorporate the techniques learned during the MGLA. All participants were strongly encouraged to modify one lesson and implement it during the fall. Because the 2002 participants were also excited to try new things after they left, but were unsure of how to implement it, this year participants were invited to a "reunion" during the upcoming fall semester in which they could share their experiences with their modified lesson and get additional assistance on various teaching strategies from those directing the MGLA as well as others from the School of Education. We are hoping to also bring back participants from the 2002 MGLA as well and to keep in contact with both groups to offer our assistance when needed.

Conclusions

Our experiences with the MGLA have been very positive and we view the workshops as a resounding success. Not only did we satisfy the requirements of the grant to provide professional development, we also established relationships with and among arts and sciences faculty at all three participating institutions. We were encouraged by the favorable comments we received regarding the MGLA and are confident that attendees have a better understanding of middle-level education. Some of our colleagues in arts and sciences now recognize the significance of developmental issues in early adolescence and acknowledge the need to prepare teachers who are responsive to those unique issues. As a result of the MGLA, these arts and sciences faculty are aware of their role in the teacher preparation process and can examine ways in which to enhance their own teaching in order to model best practices.

A major obstacle in the planning of the MGLA was determining an incentive to entice arts and sciences faculty to participate in the workshop. The TQE grant allowed us to offer a stipend to participants that generated their initial interest. However, the objectives of MGLA could be realized using alternative methods or incentives. For example, we're considering continuing MGLA in 2004 by offering community college participants continuing education credit in lieu of a stipend. Many community colleges recognize and reward continuing education when considering tenure and/or promotion decisions. Another option would be to emphasize the workshop as an opportunity for professional development. Some colleges and universities may recognize this type of workshop as an example of an individual's ongoing effort toward improving his/her classroom teaching. Regardless of how it is accomplished, we would encourage others in middle level teacher preparation to establish connections with content area colleagues on both the university and community college campus.

References

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