

EXAMINING PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE GRADES LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Principals serve a critical role in ensuring that all adults working with 10-14 year old learners understand the nature and needs of adolescents, connect with them, and value the learning structures best suited to address those needs (Clark & Clark, 2008). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine Vermont middle grades principals' perceptions of effective leadership for grades 5-8. Applying a case study approach (Patton, 2002) I collected data through individual interviews, focus groups, and document review.

Additionally, shadowing 5 of the 24 principal participants resulted in an in-depth *day in the life* perspective of administrators of K-6, K-8, 5-8, 6-8 and 7-8 schools. The theoretical framework consisted of theory on the developmentally responsive middle level principal (Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, & Gross, 2006); five basics of personal efficacy (Stevenson, 2002) and three levels of leadership accountability in the middle grades (Clark & Clark, 2008).

Key findings fell into two categories, each of which was divided by three major themes. The first category entitled, What Principals Believe, included these emerging concepts: principals' ways of knowing; prior knowledge and experience; and a sense of urgency. In this first theme principals expressed a special affinity for, and understanding of, the developmental nature and needs of the young adolescent as critical to their leadership fit.

The second theme offered insight into principals' leadership experience and areas of expertise specific to middle grades theory such as: philosophy, organizational structures, nature and needs of the young adolescent, integrated curriculum, instruction and assessment. The third theme identified a combination of six major leadership styles and nine skills viewed as strengths that are essential to leading schools effectively. The second category entitled, *Translating Beliefs into Action*, described three additional themes. The first was why middle grades are structured differently to fit the needs of developing young adolescent. The second was why hiring well-informed adults requires "bringing the best people on the bus" and why curriculum, instruction and assessment are considered as pivotal aspects to teaching and learning.