

Reform-Oriented Collaborative Inquiry as a Framework for Student Teaching in Middle School

Significance to Middle Level Education

Specialized middle level teacher education programs are an oft-purported lever for middle level education reform (AMLE, 2006). Preparing teachers to enact reform-oriented visions of teaching in the context of uneven, if not stalled, middle level education reform (McEwin & Greene, 2010) presents a formidable challenge. Yet, despite a growing body of literature on specialized middle level teacher education (Deering, Zuercher, & Apisa, 2010; Ference & McDowell, 2005; Kleine & McBryar, 2009), the critical student teaching year remains under-researched. This dissertation thus investigated a proposed framework, Reform-Oriented Collaborative Inquiry (ROCI; Figure 1), as a means to support reform-oriented student teaching in middle school. The challenges, benefits, and insights described in the findings bear implications for middle level teacher education programs that aim to prepare teachers to enact the middle level vision, even when this vision is not the status quo at their middle schools.

Research Questions

To investigate ROCI in practice and its associated outcomes, a nested research design was used to conduct two separate yet connected studies. Study 1 investigated ROCI in practice using the following research questions: **RQ#1**) *How did we as a group innovate to put AMLE characteristics (AMLE, 2012) into practice in a way that is responsive to the needs and strengths of our middle school community?*, and **RQ#2**) *What does middle school student feedback indicate about their experience with our innovation?* Study 2 investigated the group's experiences using the following research questions: **RQ#3**) *What challenges, if any, did our group face throughout ROCI?*, **RQ#4**) *What benefits, if any, did our group experience through participation in ROCI?*, and **RQ#5**) *What, if anything, did student teachers learn about what it takes to participate in middle level education reform?*

Research Design

Reform-Oriented Collaborative Inquiry

The ROCI framework consists of three phases, each of which is associated with a set of inquiry activities (See Figure 1). While the three phases are intended to be implemented chronologically (as indicated by the arrows), the inquiry activities at each phase are purposefully represented within larger circles to signify that they may be employed in any order. They are often used simultaneously depending on what the inquiry group determines is best suited to their needs at the time.

Participants and Context

As the teacher educator and researcher in this study, I was a participant along with four middle level student teachers (Bobbi, Danni, Charlie, and Ray¹) who were selected for their evident enthusiasm for the reform-oriented middle school vision. The student teachers were all concurrently enrolled in an undergraduate Middle School Math and Science (grades 4-9) program at a large Mid-Atlantic university where they were completing their student teaching at the same field placement school, hereafter referred to by the pseudonym Lakeview Middle School (LMS). Twenty-one middle school students also participated in the study by providing feedback on their experience with the group's work.

¹ All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms

Data Sources & Data Analysis

The data sources for this study included (a) inquiry group audiotapes and memos, (b) group-created teaching materials, (c) middle school student final reflections, (d) student teacher observation memos, (e) researcher memos, (f) student teacher interview data, and (g) student teacher reflections. For RQ#1, analysis consisted of organizing and reviewing the data sources sequentially, then using this data timeline to write a rich description of our actions at each phase of ROCI. Since the nature of this research was largely descriptive, the writing of the final description of our work was an integral part of the analytic method. For RQ#2-6, data analysis was guided by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014)'s proposition that qualitative analysis consists of "three concurrent flows of activity: 1) data condensation, 2) data display, and 3) conclusion drawing/verification" (p. 12). Data condensation consisted primarily of deductively coding the relevant data sources using categories defined by the research questions (e.g., benefits, challenges), after which coded units of data across data sources were arranged in a data display to facilitate conclusion drawing concerning themes. After these stages of analysis, I returned to the original data sources (e.g., audiotapes, transcript segments) to verify whether emergent conclusions held up at the "ground level" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Findings

Illustrative Example of ROCI (RQ#1)

A descriptive case of the inquiry group's work through each phase of ROCI is provided in the dissertation. To summarize, through ROCI, the student teachers developed and implemented a student-driven social action project in their homeroom classes (referred to here as I/E classes). Driven by the essential question "How can we promote a positive school culture at LMS?," this project used the Investigate, Plan, Act, Reflect, Demonstrate/Celebrate (IPARDC) framework (National Youth Leadership Council, 2013) to explore and take action regarding this student identified topic of interest. The resulting project was designed to experiment with the following AMLE characteristics: "active, purposeful learning" and "relevant curriculum," and the "school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all." Using "hands-joined learning" (AMLE, 2012, p. 16), the student teachers co-developed a project that was driven by student input and provided multiple opportunities for student choice and voice, ultimately resulting in a school-wide Spirit Week, Teacher Appreciation Week, and the proposal of a student leadership club called S.O.U.L. (Society of United Leaders).

Middle School Student Final Reflections (RQ#2)

Given the AMLE characteristics emphasized in the project, the inquiry group was especially interested in learning to what extent the middle school students felt the project 1) gave them a voice in their school, 2) was important or relevant to them, and 3) made a difference in their school. Analysis of the middle school student final reflections indicated the following results: 1) student voice: 18 yes, 3 no; 2) important or "relevant" work: 18 yes, 2 no, 1 blank; and 3) making a difference: 19 yes, 1 no, 1 blank. Students also reported learning many valuable lessons in hard work and determination, teamwork and leadership skills, and empowerment.

Challenges and Benefits for ROCI Group Members (RQ#3 & #4)

As the student teachers engaged in ROCI, they experienced challenges in navigating the disconnect between College of Education (CoE) and LMS visions of teaching, as well as those inherent in being "just an intern." The student teachers also struggled to cultivate student engagement in "new" teaching approaches. Additionally, we faced multiple challenges associated with time and collaboration. The most encouraging benefit was that ROCI supported the group in persisting in reform-oriented student teaching despite these multiple challenges.

ROCI also led to increased understanding and confidence in reform-oriented teaching practices and shifts in student teacher-student relationships. Finally, as the teacher educator, I developed several new insights concerning how to negotiate working in the theory/practice space with student teachers.

What It Takes to Participate in Middle Level Education Reform (RQ#5)

The student teachers identified three key aspects for successful participation in middle level education reform. First, they emphasized the importance of effective collaboration with three key stakeholders in education reform: 1) other teachers, 2) administration, and 3) students. Second, the student teachers underscored the importance of strategic communication, especially as it concerns the frequency, framing, and method of communication used with key stakeholders. And lastly, they stressed the importance of flexibility and patience in this work.

Conclusions & Implications

The findings point to several implications for middle level teacher education. These include 1) the development of practice-based teacher education curricula that prepare preservice teachers for reform-oriented student teaching, 2) the need to explicitly prepare student teachers for the struggles associated with defying the status quo, and 3) the potential for ROCI to serve as a framework for building capacity in reform-oriented teaching in partnership schools. The considerable challenges faced by the group also underscore the need to address the multiple political, structural, and financial obstacles that make investing in school-university partnership work difficult.

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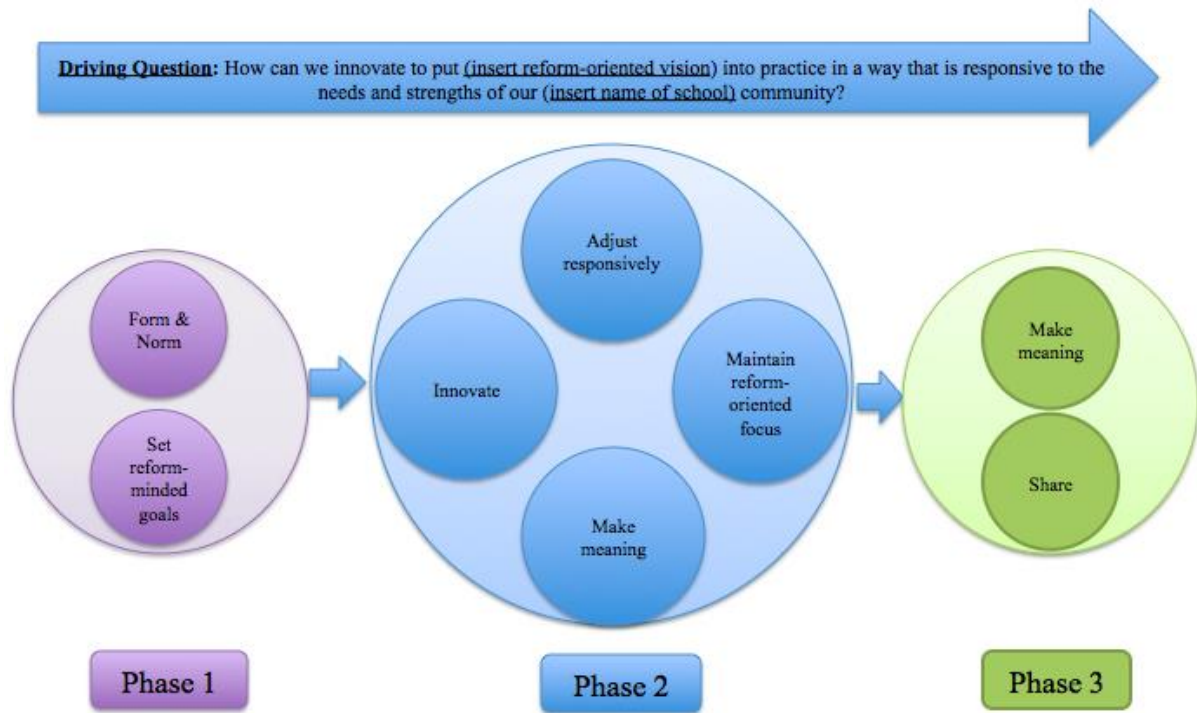


Figure 1. The Reform-Oriented Collaborative Inquiry (ROCI) framework, developed by the author, Dr. Jessica DeMink-Carthew