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An International Study of Programs That Prepare Teachers of Young Adolescents

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Abstract

This article highlights an upcoming multi-phase, international comparative research study on higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of young adolescents. The purpose of this investigation is multifaceted. The investigators aim to (a) document the programmatic and pedagogical features of higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of young adolescents in diverse national, regional, cultural, and institutional contexts; (b) identify and describe relationships between higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of young adolescents and the socio-cultural, historical, and institutional contexts in which they are embedded; (c) identify and describe patterns of philosophy, programming, and practice evident across higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of young adolescents; (d) assess the extent to which higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of young adolescents operating in diverse contexts are aligned with the AMLE's Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards; and (e) investigate relationships among higher education institution-based programs' design elements, contexts, implementation processes, and outcomes that prepare teachers of young adolescents.

Young adolescents (YAs, ages 10-15) undergo physical, social-emotional, cognitive, psychological, and moral developmental changes (Caskey & Anfara, 2014) that occur when they attend middle school, junior secondary school, or its equivalent. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), an international organization that advocates for YA education, calls for schools to be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable, the four essential attributes of successful schools (NMSA, 2010). AMLE defines developmentally responsive as, "using the nature of young adolescents as the foundation on which all decisions are made" (NMSA, 2010, p. 13). Further, one of the 16 characteristics for educating YAs is "educators who value YAs and are prepared to teach them" (NMSA, 2010, p. 13).

Understanding the uniqueness of this age group, middle level education researchers have long advocated for specialized preparation of teachers of YAs who are specifically trained to teach and reach this age group (Hill & Russell, 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin & Smith, 2013; NMSA, 2010). Knowing and making use of developmentally appropriate teaching practices is critical to effective teaching and learning (Horowitz, Darling-Hammond, &

Bransford, 2005), especially during early adolescence (AMLE, 2012; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; NMSA, 2010).

The ways teachers of YAs are prepared for the teaching profession varies from country to country and, in countries where education policy is devolved to regional or local levels, there can be tremendous variation within a country. For example, in the United States (US), each state establishes policies and regulations for teacher credentialing and training. Multiple variations in state credentialing cover early adolescence, including but not limited to K-6, K-8, 6-12, 7-12, 8-12, 4-8, 4-9, 5-9, and 6-8 (Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, & Thompson, 2016). The variation in credentialing frameworks has resulted in similar variation in the types of teacher preparation programs responsible for preparing teachers of YAs nationwide. For example, states with credentials that parallel the age range of YAs (e.g., 4-8, 4-9, 5-9, 6-8) tend to have stand-alone, specialized middle level/middle childhood teacher preparation programs with coursework and fieldwork that acutely focuses on preparing to teach YAs. States with broader credentials (e.g., K-6, K-8, 6-12, 7-12, 8-12) tend to have teacher preparation programs where middle level education is combined with elementary or secondary education teacher preparation programs.

To date, limited large comprehensive studies exist on higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs that include multiple institutions from multiple countries around the world. In the US, few national studies of higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs have been conducted. One notable large-scale study of US middle level teacher preparation programs conducted by Howell et al. (2016) found that while most US states have mandates for middle level credentials, close to 50% of participating institutions do not have a stand-alone program that provide specialized middle level teacher preparation (Howell et al., 2016). Further, over the last 10 years, in the US multiple organizations have urged education institutions to rethink and retool how they prepare teachers (NCATE, 2010; National Research Council, 2010), calling for teacher preparation programs to include purposeful clinical experiences with “sufficient depth, breath, diversity, coherence, and duration” (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2019) and a focus on “...intentional pedagogical experiences in authentic educational settings...” (AACTE, 2018, p. 18).

In other countries, such as Australia, questions around whether teacher preparation programs that specifically prepare teachers to teach YAs could be justified are being asked (de Jong & Chadbourne, 2005). Historically, Australia, has had a two-tiered system of schooling with no requirement in any States or Territories for teachers to have specialized training or credentials to be able to teach YAs. Several key reports highlight the need to focus on the unique developmental needs of YAs, yet little, if any, progress has been made to align teacher preparation programs to prepare teachers to teach YAs. Despite calls in the 1990s for education systems in Australia to respond to the unique educational needs of YAs (see, for example, Barratt, 1998; Cormack & Cumming, 1996; Hill & Russell, 1999), it wasn't until the *Melbourne Declaration* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) that there was national recognition of the need to focus on this age group. However, to date, other than a scoping task to identify the number of higher education institutions that offer “some form” of specific teacher preparation for YAs, no detailed studies have been undertaken (Pendergast, 2006).

In the US, there exists a set of middle level teacher preparation standards developed by the AMLE and approved by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (AMLE, 2012). Currently under revision, these standards consist of the following five standards: young adolescent development, middle level curriculum, middle level philosophy and school

organization, middle level instruction and assessment, and middle level professional roles. We will utilize AMLE's forthcoming middle level teacher preparation standards as the framework guiding this investigation. These standards will serve as a basis for gathering data on teacher preparation programs and alignment with the standards will be part of the analysis process.

Purpose of the Proposed Study

The purpose of this multi-phase, international comparative study is to: (a) document the programmatic and pedagogical features of higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs in diverse national, regional, cultural, and institutional contexts; (b) identify and describe relationships between higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs and the socio-cultural, historical, and institutional contexts in which they are embedded; (c) identify and describe patterns of philosophy, programming, and practice evident across higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs; (d) assess the extent to which higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs operating in diverse contexts are aligned with the AMLE's Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards, and (e) investigate relationships among higher education institution-based programs' design elements, contexts, implementation processes, and outcomes that prepare teachers of YAs. This study defines higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs as any teacher preparation program that prepares teachers to teach students 10-15 years of age (e.g., stand-alone, specialized middle level teacher preparation program; secondary/junior secondary programs that includes middle grades/middle school years; elementary program that includes middle grades/middle school years; others).

The main research questions guiding this study are:

1. What universal programmatic and pedagogical elements do higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs share that transcend differences in cultural, historical, societal, or institutional contexts? (RQ1)
2. How do socio-cultural, historical, and institutional contexts shape the ways higher education institution-based programs prepare teachers of YAs? (RQ2)
3. To what extent are higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs operating in diverse contexts align with the AMLE's Teacher Preparation Standards? (RQ3)
4. How are higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs implemented and operationalized in diverse national, socio-cultural, and institutional contexts? (RQ4)
5. What relationships exist among program design elements, contexts, implementation processes, and outcomes? (RQ5)

Design of the Proposed Study

This multi-phase research project will begin with an initial pilot study that will be followed by a two-phase full study. The first three research questions (RQ1–RQ3) will guide the initial pilot study and the first phase of the full study. The last two research questions will frame the second phase of the full study, which will involve follow-up investigations to probe trends, issues, themes, relationships, and gaps evident in the data from phase one as well as program implementation processes and outcomes.

The pilot study and first phase of the full study will employ a comparative case study (CCS) design (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Goodrick, 2014). CCS is an appropriate design because

we seek to understand “how processes unfold, often influenced by actors and events over time in different locations and at different scales ... [with] attention to the vertical, horizontal, and especially the transversal elements” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7). We will collect data for the pilot and phase one studies with an online survey that will consist of a series of closed and open-ended questions. The survey will be divided into sections such as context, basic organization of program, and connections to AMLE’s teacher preparation standards. The context section will include questions to gather institutional information (e.g., university/college, program, program faculty), student demographics, and policies and practices that guide programmatic decisions (e.g., national, state, territory, institutional). The basic organization of the program section will include questions pertaining to planned program/program of study (e.g., sequence of coursework, credit hours/points, key program assessments) and clinical practice (e.g., organization of field experiences, implementation of field experiences, supervision). The AMLE teacher preparation standards section will include questions related to each of the newly developed standards. Important to note, this project will not be limited to systems that recognize or use AMLE standards; rather, these standards are being used as a framework to think about teacher preparation programs that prepare middle grades teachers to teach YAs in a more holistic manner. A second round of data collection will involve audio/video-recorded interviews with survey respondents to elaborate on and validate their responses. During phase two of the research project, investigators may employ a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research methodologies, and data sources as they seek to answer questions that arise from the phase one study.

Calls for Participation

Calls for participation in the phase one study will be made in 2021, once the revised AMLE teacher preparation standards are released and the survey finalized based on these standards. Data will be collected via an online survey tool and can be completed by a faculty or staff member highly knowledgeable about the innerworkings of the program and policies influencing program implementation. One survey is to be completed per program. If a higher education institution has multiple programs that prepare teachers of YAs, one survey per program will need to be submitted. While states/territories and countries where the program resides will be reported, the institution will be deidentified and given a pseudonym to provide institutional confidentiality. The survey will be designed to ensure a timely completion while simultaneously allowing for rich data to be captured. Participation in the survey will allow the survey completer an opportunity to ponder programmatic strengths, opportunities for growth, and alignment with AMLE’s revised teacher preparation standards.

Implications

Through this project, we have an opportunity to expand our international network of higher education scholars who work in institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs and provide opportunities for enriching literature on the preparation of teachers of YAs to help advance our field, improve the preparation of teachers of YAs and, ultimately, support the success of YAs all around the world. From an international perspective, this project will provide a detailed understanding of the design and operationalization of higher education institution-based programs that prepare teachers of YAs internationally. On a programmatic level, participation in the study has the potential to help inform program refinement and enrichment and aid the alignment with the updated AMLE teacher preparation standards, among other

things. Last, this study has great potential for the enhancement of policy and practice at various levels (e.g., national, international).

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