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Abstract

Collaborations between the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE) and European League for Middle Level Education (ELMLE) can be mutually beneficial. This article reflects on NAPOMLE's past experiences with our global affiliate ELMLE and promotes future partnerships expanding our commitment to supporting the development of middle schools and middle level leaders. We advocate a global approach to preparing and empowering the next generation of middle school leaders.

Connections: The Power of Collaboration

Just as we teach our students to think broadly and consider multiple perspectives, so should we engage in meaningful conversations with our colleagues about best practices in middle level education across our state, nation, and world.

This We Believe shares that exemplary middle schools have leaders who “demonstrate courage and collaboration” (AMLE, 2020, p. 36). As defined by the National Middle School Association (now the Association for Middle Level Education or AMLE), “courageous, collaborative leadership implies understanding, action, and advocacy. Courageous, collaborative leaders are those who understand the theory behind and the best practices for middle grades education” (Anfara, et al., 2008, n.p.). When professors of middle level education come together, we share best practices, strategies, data, and research. Collaboration allows us to network and advocate with and for one another. There is great value in the time spent listening, watching, and reflecting with one another that strengthens collaboration.

In literature and practice, collaboration has been shown to increase productivity, positive morale, inspiration, and a sense of empowerment (Tallman, 2019). We see it in the business world, in interdisciplinary teams, and in school improvement teams (Lamburg, 2018). We know

that when faculty collaborate, middle school students transition to high school better (Beavers, 2015; Hutchins, 2013; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2015); parents benefit (Hutchins, 2018); and academic achievement and morale among collaborators increase (Tallman, 2019). We see it among middle level departments in colleges and universities; we see it between education faculty with arts and sciences faculty; and we see it as an amazing tool to engage with our partner stakeholders (Previts & Bauer, 2017).

In the United States, two groups regularly present and hold meetings at the annual AMLE conference. The American Educational Research Association Middle Level Special Interest Group (AERA MLER SIG) has put together a middle school Research Agenda (2016). Professors and graduate students use this agenda to produce, support, and promote middle level education research. Publications include *Research in Middle Level Education* online and the *Middle School Journal*. A second collaborator group is the National Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE). NAPOMLE seeks to bring middle level professors together and publishes *Current Issues in Middle Level Education*.

In 2006, NAPOMLE professors from Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia established a SouthEast Professors of Middle Level Education (SEPOMLE) symposium. At that first symposium we brought in John Lounsbury and Ken McEwin, as well as representatives from our state departments of education. Over the past fourteen years, we have held six symposia with a focus on advocacy and leadership. During the symposium we have time set aside for work with Affinity Groups designed to allow participants to ponder, reflect on, and consider ways to promote leadership. The value of this collaboration has extended beyond the sharing of what we do individually. Over the years, groups of us have presented together, shared research, and published articles together.

An area that is growing in our country is the notion of international collaboration. While collaboration impacts university colleagues, partner stakeholders, colleagues within our own state, and across state lines, what we have not examined is the power and impact collaboration has had among and with our international affiliates. In the past few years we have begun participating in the European League of Middle Level Education (ELMLE) annual conference. Having the opportunity to meet middle level teachers and leaders has given us a broader view of best practices, which we have subsequently shared with our preservice teachers.

Collaboration inspires and connects us with a common purpose, to promote the middle school agenda of supporting young adolescents; but the collaboration is more than that. In every event, every school, every session, we find leaders sharing ways they engage students and one another in personalized learning, mindfulness, and leadership. For the past two years representatives from ELMLE have joined our AMLE national conference. Now we join them as part of a collaborative advocacy group. "Our hope is to continue to highlight the importance and value of collaboration in the southeast, in the United States, and with our international partners. This collaborative experience with ELMLE and NAPOMLE reminds us that together we are stronger," said Dr. Nancy Ruppert, AMLE Past-President.

Sarah Ellyson, ELMLE President, agrees. "The long-standing relationship which has developed between NAPOMLE and ELMLE has become one of great, quality collaborations. When previewing presenter proposals annually, our steering committee has a great trust in the application of research based, best practice which the team of NAPOMLE professionals will bring to the conference," she said. "The partnership follows the spirit of AMLE's mission of

dedication to helping middle school educators reach every student, grow professionally, and create great schools, and takes it a step further to create a better world by bringing current practice from the United States to the international arena of ELMLE member schools, where the impact reaches the learners who will be world leaders of tomorrow.”

From the perspective of a leader in the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education, Dr. Gary Senn, current NAPOMLE President, appreciated the opportunity to engage with dynamic international practitioners in middle level education. In spending time with ELMLE members, he found himself considering how NAPOMLE might support the group by participating in conference activities or by contributing to their journal. “It would also be great for NAPOMLE members to bring awareness of ELMLE to teacher candidates as an option for future participation through the professional society, or as an excellent career opportunity,” he said.

The following is an overview of The European League of Middle Level Education followed by ways we may want to collaborate with this affiliate.

Collaborating with the European League of Middle Level Education

The European League for Middle Level Education (ELMLE) presents a unique opportunity to network with other middle level education professionals from a global perspective. ELMLE is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the development of middle schools and middle level leaders. Founded in 1986, ELMLE is an international affiliate of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). ELMLE’s global membership comprises schools and individuals in Europe, the United States, South Africa, India, and China. The European League for Middle Level Education “is dedicated to inspiring administrators and teachers of young adolescents to improve their knowledge and professional practices which promote positive student learning” (ELMLE, 2020). A ten-member steering committee, elected by its diverse membership, hosts a fall leadership retreat and organizes its annual European middle level education conference.

Leadership Retreat

ELMLE’s annual leadership retreat brings together leaders and aspiring leaders of the European and global community who are dedicated to improving middle level education. Principals, directors, heads of school, program coordinators, curriculum directors and other leadership roles from Upper Schools, K-8 schools, middle schools and other configurations of international schools are welcome. According to their website, “We are a community of learning leaders who value the interactions, shared knowledge, and expertise of our diverse and dedicated members. If you are passionate about serving young adolescents through exceptional leadership, you are one of us!” (ELMLE, 2020).

Annual Conference

The European League for Middle Level Education hosts an annual conference in a different city each year to provide variety and access. The conference includes one pre-conference day offering walking tours of the host city, special topics sessions, a reception, and time for reflection and planning. The main conference includes two full days including plenary sessions, workshops, full-length sessions, TED-style sessions, social events, and more. All pre-conference and main conference days include lunch. Previous conference locations include Valencia, Amsterdam, Vienna, Berlin, Prague, and Rome.

A small group from NAPOMLE attended the European League of Middle Level Education conference in Budapest in January 2020. The approach of keynote speakers during the annual meeting was unique. Rather than a traditional approach of a lone keynote speaker lecturing to a group, the presentations were panel discussions with a moderator asking questions of the different panelists. The approach was effective and thought-provoking. The conversations continued in concurrent sessions from more amazing middle level educators sharing experiences and research.

The 35th annual 2021 ELMLE conference will have a unique format as it will be held virtually throughout 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. This virtual experience will be accessible wherever you are. According to ELMLE's website, "We're looking forward to welcoming you to our 35th annual conference to continue our conversations from Budapest, hear stories of impact, and explore The Space Between!" (ELMLE News, 2020). The theme of this year's conference "refers to middle school as a space between elementary and high school; a time when our young adolescents are between being a young child and growing up. It's also about creating safe spaces to explore, find their own spaces, and exist in more than one space," said Ellyson.

ELMLE looks forward to continuing the conversation and connections in the coming school year. All ELMLE member schools and individuals will benefit from free year-long access to ELMLE's ongoing professional learning community. Highlighted speakers, forums, Job and Theme Alike events will be offered and accessible to ELMLE members throughout the year, including the February 6, 2021, full day annual (virtual) conference event.

The 36th annual ELMLE conference will be held January 27-29, 2022 in sunny Malta. You are invited to "join us at the gorgeous Hilton Malta for a rejuvenating weekend of inspiration, networking, and collaboration with other passionate Middle School educators like you!" (ELMLE News, email communication, 2020).

Publications

In addition to leadership retreats and the annual conference, ELMLE offers several publications including the ELMLE newsletter and the ELMLE journal entitled *Bridge in the Middle*.

ELMLE News is a bi-monthly publication with the latest news from middle schools and middle level education research. They welcome suggestions, ideas, and submissions from ELMLE members in a teacher-friendly, concise 400- to 600-word format. ELMLE recognizes the contribution of published *ELMLE News* authors with a €50 discount for the next ELMLE conference.

Bridge in the Middle is ELMLE's annual publication, published in November-December of each year. They welcome suggestions, ideas, and submissions from ELMLE members. The journal has a more formal extensive format. Current and archived editions of the journal, as well as submission guidelines, can be viewed online (ELMLE Publications, 2020). ELMLE recognizes the contribution of published *Bridge in the Middle* authors with a €100 discount for the next ELMLE conference.

Making the ELMLE Conference Affordable

You may be wondering how expensive it is to attend the ELMLE conference. Yes, it is expensive, but there are a number of ways to reduce the cost of your registration. First, the

European League for Middle Level Education is an affiliate organization of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), the largest professional organization of middle level educators in the world. A cost-saving dual AMLE/ELMLE membership is available for individuals or schools. Once you've joined ELMLE, the member rate to register for the conference represents a significant discount.

Second, individuals who present at the conference receive a discount on their registration. In 2019 the lead presenter for a full-length submission received a €50 discount, and the lead presenter for a TED-style, 15-minute session received a €25 discount. A third way to cut costs is to submit an article for publication. If your article is accepted, ELMLE offers the lead author a €50 discount for *ELMLE News* or a €100 discount for a more extensive article in their *Bridge in the Middle* journal. Finally, if you register and pay for the conference early, your registration will be entered in an "Early Bird" drawing for a €50 credit.

If you are interested in expanding your involvement in middle level education from a global perspective, we encourage you to consider joining us in collaborating with the European League for Middle Level Education. AMLE provides a listing of all of the affiliates (2020) from Australia to Canada, throughout the United States and to Europe. Sometimes all we have to do is reach out.

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Appendix

Publishing Opportunities

AMLE Magazine <http://www.amle.org/Publications/AMLEMagazine/tabid/176/Default.aspx>

AMLE Middle School Journal

<http://www.amle.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/tabid/175/Default.aspx>

AMLE Research in Middle Level Education Online

<http://www.amle.org/Publications/ResearchinMiddleLevelEducationOnline/tabid/173/Default.aspx>

CIMLE Current Issues in Middle Level Education <https://www.NAPOMLE.com/cimle>

ELMLE Bridge in the Middle <https://sites.google.com/elmle.org/home/publications/bridge-in-the-middle-journal>

ELMLE News <https://sites.google.com/elmle.org/home/publications/elmle-news>