The Middle School Concept Implementation Gap: A Leadership Lens

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Abstract

Middle school scholars periodically lament the lack of holistic implementation of the middle school concept (Alverson et al., 2021; Dickinson & Butler, 2001; Lounsbury, 2013; Schaefer et al., 2016). The results of a case study conducted in Alberta, Canada (Rheaume, 2018) are compared to a recent examination of the current status of middle schools in America (Alverson et al.) to illustrate common implementation gaps and challenges. Consideration of the role of middle level leadership in supporting the implementation of the middle school concept is followed by a proposed expansion of the Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership (DRMLL) model (Brown et al., 2002).

Introduction

The middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) is a framework that describes the attributes and characteristics of successful middle schools that are "responsive to the nature, needs, and identities of young adolescents" (p. 5). Building on Alexander and Williams' (1965) call for more learner-centered schools for this distinct age group, the middle school concept was articulated in two significant publications, *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association (NMSA), 1982) and *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Throughout its evolution, as expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1982, 1992, 1995, 2003, 2010), the middle school concept has consistently called for holistic implementation of practices that support the development of students aged 10 to 15. In the most recent iteration, Bishop and Harrison explain that "successful schools for young adolescents implement the full range of structures, supports, and practices known to be most effective with this age group" (p. 6).

However, middle school advocates and researchers have consistently recognized that full implementation of the middle school concept is relatively rare. Dickinson and Butler (2001) identified subject-based teaching as a contributing factor to the "arrested development" (p. 9) of middle schools. Although researchers in the early 2000s indicated that schools that fully implemented the middle school concept were more successful than those that did not, the decade ended with "a sense that the middle school promise was yet unfulfilled" (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 14) as many schools had only achieved fragmented implementation. Lounsbury (2013) also lamented "the limited progress in implementing a more comprehensive conception of middle level education" (p. 43). Most recently, based on their survey of American middle schools that included over 1600 participants, Alverson et al. (2021) claimed that "unfortunately the results seem to highlight the stagnant progress in implementing middle grades practices" (p. 16).

This study examines the role middle school leadership plays in the implementation of the middle school concept. Although statements related to leadership and organization make up a third of the characteristics of successful middle schools (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), the leadership category seems to receive less attention in the literature than other aspects of the middle school concept. The Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership (DRMLL) model (Brown et al., 2002) serves as basis of comparison for the implementation and perceived importance of the middle school concept in studies conducted in the United States (Alverson et al., 2021) and Canada (Rheaume, 2018). Finally, an expansion of the DRMLL is offered as a potential means to bridge the middle school concept implementation gap.

Middle School Leadership, Middle School Concept - Leadership and Organization

School leaders have an essential role in establishing successful schools (Leithwood, 2007). As Howell et al. (2013) identified, "The principal is the leader of the school, and it is up to him/her to initiate the steps that are critical for establishing and maintaining the staff and structures that will create a middle school

consistent with the key tenets of the middle school concept" (p. 3). The current middle school concept identifies six characteristics that pertain to leadership and organization (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Leaders are called upon to "demonstrate courage and collaboration" and be "committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research" (pp. 47-49). Middle school leaders ensure that "a shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision" (Bishop & Harrison, p. 45) and "policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented" (pp. 46-47). The middle school concept also calls for relevant professional learning and organizational structures (such as teaming, common planning time, and flexible grouping) that "foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships" (Bishop & Harrison, pp. 50-53). According to Williamson and Johnston (2013), "Middle grades leaders must maintain a clear and persistent vision of the role and purpose of the middle grades school" (p. 145).

Responsive Middle Level Leadership

Using the unique nature of young adolescents as the basis for decisions in middle schools has long been referred to as being developmentally responsive (NMSA, 2010), a core tenet of the middle school concept and a key disposition for middle school leaders (Gale & Bishop, 2014). In 2002, Brown et al. proposed a DRMLL model that encouraged middle school leaders to be responsive to the needs of students, the faculty, and the middle school itself. The Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire (MLLQ) developed by Anfara et al. (2006) contributed to a deeper understanding of developmentally responsive leadership. Bickmore (2011) found that the DRMLL was "appropriate for framing middle grades principal leadership and informing principal practice in middle grades" (p. 7). A new, broader definition of being responsive is: "Using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about the school are made" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 8). Building on these foundations, our conception of responsive middle level leadership involves the following three dimensions:

1. Responsiveness to the development of young adolescent students by understanding their unique characteristics and by establishing engaging, equitable learning environments that empower them to thrive;

2. responsiveness to the development of faculty by establishing a shared vision and collaborative culture focused on continuous improvement; and

3. responsiveness to the development of the middle school itself by implementing the organizational structures of the middle school concept that promote meaningful relationships and learner success.

We have previously provided qualitative illustrations of developmentally responsive leadership in each of these dimensions (Rheaume et al., 2021). Alverson and colleagues' (2021) recent examination of American middle schools prompted this consideration of similar findings from a case study of middle schools in central Alberta, Canada (Rheaume, 2018), especially those related to developmentally responsive practices, leadership, and organizational structures. The research questions that guided this study were:

> RQ1: How do the results of two recent studies on the implementation of the middle school concept compare?
>
> RQ2: What role does leadership play in the implementation of the middle school concept?

Methodology

Whereas the Alverson et al. (2021) study used a stratified random sample to survey 1650 middle school principals and teachers from all 50 states, Rheaume (2018) used case study methodology to obtain the perspectives of 43 middle school administrators (principals and vice-principals) in the central Alberta region of the province of Alberta, Canada in the 2017/18 school year. Although the methodologies and scope of these two studies were quite different, their findings related to the implementation of the middle school concept were often similar and prompted this comparative study. The data from the initial case study (Rheaume) are compared to Alverson et al.'s recent examination of American middle schools, specifically the findings related to developmental responsiveness to students, to staff through responsive leadership, and to the

school community through organizational structures. For each area of comparison, the findings of the Rheaume study are first presented and then compared with the Alverson et al. findings. Then, the percentage of participants who considered these features of the middle schools to be important are compared between the two studies. Features that differed less than 10% were considered of equal importance. A brief description of the context and methods used in the Rheaume study is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (%)

Contextual data - survey (n= 27)		Contextual data - focus groups (n= 17)	
School Grade Configuration		Middle School Enrollment (n= 10)	
Middle (4 - 9)	55	300 - 400	3
Pre-K to 9	11	400 - 500	3
K - 12	33	500 - 600	3
		Over 700	1
Participants by School District		Participants by School District	
A	37	A	29
B	44	B	23.5
C	18.5	C	47
Survey Participant Backgrounds			
Teaching Experience (years)		Familiarity with middle School Concept (TWB, NMSA, 2010)	
6 - 10	11	Very	42
11- 15	18.5	Quite	19
16 - 20	33.3	Familiar	23
21 - 25	11	Slightly	8
26 - 30	18.5	Not	8
more than 30	7.4		
Administrative Experience (years)		Recency of Middle Level Professional Development	
1- 5	48.5	within last 12 months	42
6 -10	33.3	2 years	23
11 - 15	11.1	4 years	4
16 - 20	0	5 years or more	23
more than 20	7.4	never	8
Current school administrator (years)			
1 - 3	81.5		
4 - 6	7.4		
7 - 9	7.4		
10 or more	3.7		

Context and Participants

Middle schools are not common across Canada. Most Canadian school systems, including in the province of Alberta, typically have elementary schools (K to 6), junior high schools (7 to 9) and high schools (10 to 12). However, Albertan school districts may use different grade configurations in schools, based on community needs. This results in a wide variety of grade groupings in schools including K to 9 and K to 12 schools, especially in rural settings.

Central Alberta has a higher proportion of middle schools than elsewhere in the province, at 11% to 2.5% respectively. The 10 middle

schools in the region ranged in size from 308 to 705 students, with an average enrolment of 475. The five smaller rural schools were led by two administrators whereas there were three in the other five middle schools located within the city of Red Deer, which has a population of just over 100,000. The middle schools had a variety of grade configurations including one 4 to 9 school, three with grades 5 to 8, three with grades 6 to 8, two 6 to 9 schools and one school with only grades 7 and 8.

Participant demographic data is provided in Table 1. Over half of the survey participants led middle schools that included grades 4 to 9. Their teaching experience ranged from six to more than 30 years. Over 80% of the participants had 10 or fewer years of school leadership experience. The participants had relatively little middle grades leadership experience as almost half had less than five years of experience as a school leader and 82% were in their current building three years or less. The survey participants (62%) were generally familiar with middle school practices and concepts and (65%) had participated in professional development in the past two years specific to the young adolescent learners and/or middle level practices. However, almost a third (31%) had gone five years without or never had such professional development. These results are similar to Yee's (2016) finding that many middle school administrators have "little to no background" in education at the middle level.

Data Sources and Analysis

Middle school leaders (principals and vice-principals) from three school districts participated in the case study that used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A 59-item survey adapted from Howell et al. (2013) in phase one was followed by focus group interviews with 17 middle school leaders in the second phase. Emergent themes from phase one informed the development of phase two's focus group interviews that enabled the primary researcher to corroborate and explain the phase one survey data and further explore views and practices related to the middle school concept and middle level leadership.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected as part of the phase one survey that was completed by 26 of the 72 (36%) principals and vice-principals (referred to as administrators) from any school that taught learners in grades 4 to 9, such as K to 9 or K to 12 schools. Those in strictly elementary or high schools were not invited to participate in the survey. Responses to the 5-point Likert scale items on the survey were analyzed using percentage frequency distributions and measures of central tendency. The importance of each item, the relative importance within a category, and the mean score for the item helped to identify trends in attitude and practices of the middle school administrators. Themes quickly became apparent in the brief responses to the open-ended survey items, by using color-coding and grouping similar responses within an Excel spreadsheet. This qualitative data, along with the quantitative data from the rest of the survey, provided initial insights and emergent themes to be further explored during the focus group interviews.

The same interview protocol was used with the 17 middle school administrators who participated in one of six focus groups that lasted an average of 50 minutes and produced 74 single-spaced pages of verbatim transcribed data. Krueger and Casey's (2000) Long-Table Analysis Approach and Saldana's (2009) coding techniques were used to identify both common and unique themes across the interviews. The convergence of evidence through integrated analysis of data from both phases (Yin, 2014) provided a robust interpretation of the administrator perspectives on the middle school concept and their leadership practices.

Results

The three dimensions of the DRMLL model were previously used to illustrate how leaders in the central Alberta region were responsive to students, to their staff, and to their school community (Rheaume et al., 2021). This study uses the same three dimensions of responsiveness to compare the results from the initial case study (Rheaume, 2018) to Alverson et al.'s (2021) results related to developmental responsiveness to students, to staff through responsive leadership, and to the school community through organizational structures. Results related to relationships are also presented.

Responsive to Young Adolescent Development

Administrators in the Rheaume (2018) expressed strong beliefs about the importance of responsiveness to the developmental characteristics of young adolescents in both the quantitative and qualitative data sets. In the focus groups, many administrators spoke about young adolescence as an important and challenging developmental phase. Principal Claire and other administrators highlighted the importance of supporting all areas of young adolescent development (cognitive, psychological, social-emotional, and physical) as students transition from childhood toward adulthood (see Rheaume et al., 2021 for details). As shown in Table 2, being developmentally responsive was highly valued by survey participants, with 89% to 100% rating all four statements as very important (5) or quite important (4).

Table 2

Developmentally Responsive

Statement	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1	Most[a]	Mean
Understanding of young adolescent development (physical, social, emotional, and intellectual)	**17** **66%**	6 23%	3 12%	0	0	6 23%	4.54
Making instructional decisions based on students' developmental characteristics	**19** **73%**	5 19%	2 8%	0	0	**12** **46%**	**4.65**
Providing opportunities for students to express individual interests, strengths, and opinions	**16** **62%**	8 31%	2 8%	0	0	4 15%	4.54
Considering student variables (demographics, prior knowledge, cultural background, etc.) when determining how best to meet their needs	**16** **64%**	9 36%	0	0	0	4 15%	4.64[b]

Note. N= 26. Likert Scale: VI - Very important; QI - Quite important; I - important; SI - slightly important; NI - Not important. [a] In question B of each competency category, participants were asked to select the most important of the four statements. [b] This question (14Ad) was left blank by one respondent, therefore n=25 for this item.

These results were similar to the findings related to the importance and implementation of middle school components in the Alverson et al. (2021) study. They reported that 95% of their over 1600 participants rated "educators who value working with young adolescents" as very important. That "all students are well known" was very important to 79% of participants in their study, compared to 100% of the case study participants who thought "considering student variables" was important. Somewhat surprising was the finding that only 49% of the American participants thought "student voice in decision making" was very important, whereas 93% in the case study indicated that it was very or quite important to provide "opportunities for students to express individual interests, strengths, and opinions." In practice, student voice was only rated as implemented regularly by 20% of participants in the Alverson et al. study, which was considerably lower than the implementation of other middle school components.

Their consideration of instructional components showed that 94% of participants rated active learning as very important, and another 89% valued multiple approaches to teaching and learning. Similarly, the statement that was rated as very important by 73% of Canadian participants and ranked as the most important (mean of 4.65) was "making instructional decisions based on students' developmental characteristics." Results pertaining to assessment were also comparable. "Using assessment to inform instruction and teacher practice" was rated as very important by 81% of

the case study participants and quality assessment was very important to 76% of American middle school participants.

In both studies, middle level educators seem to value and recognize the importance of practices that are developmentally responsive to young adolescents. The Alverson et al. study (2021) identified that there were often gaps between the beliefs and the actions of middle level educators, as shown for example by the lack of student voice.

Responsive to Staff (Leadership)

Responsive middle school leaders support the development of their staff and play an essential role in how a school operates and supports student learning (Howell et al., 2013; Leithwood, 2007). Whereas the focus of the phase one survey was on the broader topic of middle level education, the focus group interviews provided rich insights into how middle school leaders perceive their role. As principal Claire stated:

> So how important is the role of the leader? I mean, all of us, we might not want to say it, the truth is, it's critical. Right, if we don't get it, and if we don't have a vision and facilitate…the processes in our school to get people where we want them to be, you're not going to get where you want to be.

Shared vision was the only element related to leadership that was common between the two studies examined here. It was interesting to note that leadership is not mentioned in the Alverson et al. (2021) study.

The importance of having a shared vision was discussed in each focus group interview and five of 17 (29%) participants described their work with their staff to "know what the plan is" (Max) and get everyone "climbing a mountain together, all moving in the same direction" (Jack). Vice-principal Stephanie indicated that "working on having that common vision and common language for our staff" was key to effective teaching teams. In the Alverson et al. (2021) study, 81% of participants identified "a shared vision of mission and goals" as being very important, although only regularly implemented 52% of the time.

Focus group participants also shared evidence of responsive leadership practices through their descriptions of collaboration with their staff, personnel decisions, and building relationships. Many participants viewed school leadership as a collaborative effort. As Scott stated, "Distributed, shared leadership is crucial in a middle school." Similarly, Vice-Principal Jerry spoke about middle schools having a "collective responsibility approach." Claire also highlighted the teamwork aspect of middle school leadership and described her work as "pulling people together" in collaborative efforts to engage students. Shared leadership and building a collaborative culture were seen as fundamental features of middle school leadership.

Personnel decisions, including getting the right people on the team through hiring and getting the right people working together through teaming, were identified as key to the middle school leadership role. Mark, a principal, noted the importance of creating productive, effective teams by "putting the right pieces in the right places." Another principal, Kerry, pointed to strategic hiring as a means to get the right people working together. Two other principals, Bruce and Jack, considered cultural fit with their school and existing teams. As Max indicated, "It's about knowing people's strengths and placing them so that they can be successful."

The middle school leaders also discussed the importance of relationships and specific ways they were responsive to the development of their staff. Some common themes that surfaced during the focus group interviews were empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking and influencing their staff members. Relationships are explored in more depth in a later section.

Responsive to the School Community (Organizational Structures)

Both the quantitative results and participant descriptions provided insights into the views of middle school leaders on the organizational structures that "foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 50). Four key responsive middle school practices are displayed in Table 3: (a) teaming, (b) advisory, (c) curriculum integration, and (d) flexible schedules and groupings.

Table 3

Importance of Middle School Practices

Middle School Practice	5 - VI	4 - QI	3 – I	2- SI	1 - NI	M
a. Teaming	**24** (92%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.88
b. Interdisciplinary instruction	6 (23%)	**14** (54%)	4 (15%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	3.92
c. Adult advocate for each student	**17** (65%)	8 (31%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	4.58
d. Flexible schedules and groupings	6 (23%)	**14** (54%)	5 (19%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	3.92

Note. n = 26. M = mean score. Likert Scale: VI - Very important; QI - Quite important; I - important; SI - slightly important; NI - Not important. The middle school practices were described as follows: (a) Teaming (planning and working collaboratively with grade or subject-area partners; shared groups of students); (b) Interdisciplinary instruction (project-based learning, curriculum integration, cross-curricular learning); (c) Adult advocate for each student (through advisory programs, homeroom, etc.); (d) Flexible schedules and groupings (larger blocks of time to bring together different groups of students).

Teaming, the practice of planning and working collaboratively with grade or subject-area partners who share groups of students, was deemed very important by 92% of survey participants. The leaders identified that because of teaming, teachers were able to be more responsive to student needs through regrouping, interventions, and collaborative planning, as illustrated by a survey participant who described the work of the team as "creating common assessments and collaboratively regrouping to help students meet the outcomes." During the focus group interviews, the leaders also discussed the merits and challenges of middle school practices related to teaming such as flexible groupings, block schedules, and common planning time. In the Alverson et al. (2021) survey, interdisciplinary team organization was valued equally at 92%, when the very important (54%) and somewhat important (38%) ratings are combined. However, flexible scheduling and groupings were rated much higher with 44% of participants stating this was very important, compared to only 23% of the Canadian study.

Having an adult advocate through advisory programs or homeroom was also highly rated by participants in both studies. Although the activities described during the focus groups as part of advisory ranged from character education to culture initiatives, there was consensus that the main purpose of advisory was relationship-building. A survey participant wrote: "We focus on relationships with each other and creating significant time for students to bond with significant adults in our building." Advisory was viewed as an opportunity to foster a sense of belonging in the school and was rated as very important by 65% of our participants. This is somewhat higher than the 46% of participants in the Alverson et al. (2021) study who rated advisory programs as very important and regularly implemented.

The case study participants were less enthused about interdisciplinary instruction with only 23% rating practices such as project-based learning, curriculum integration, cross-curricular learning as very important. In fact, curriculum integration was the lowest rated item on the phase one survey. In the Alverson et al. (2021) study, 91% of participants rated "curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory" as very important, although 54% indicated that this was regularly implemented. Their data on specific instructional approaches was also noteworthy: project-based learning was rated as very important by 40% of participants and cross-disciplinary units of instruction was at 31%. In the focus group interviews, leaders identified a

range of curriculum integration practices including some middle schools where curriculum integration occurred on a regular basis, whereas it happened occasionally in others. A few, such as principal Scott, seemed to signal it was a thing of the past: "I don't think it is as prevalent as it used to be." Principal Binard indicated that he preferred that teachers focus on their subject area, which is similar to the "strong focus on basic subjects (language arts, social studies, mathematics, science" that was rated as very important by 77% of participants in the Alverson et al. study.

Although the participants in both studies seemed to recognize the value of typical middle school organizational structures that promote student success, teaming and its related practices such as common planning time and flexible scheduling were rated higher and seemed to be more prevalent than advisory and curriculum integration.

Considering Relationships

Relationships were a pervasive theme in both the survey and focus group interviews. When asked about effective teachers in the open-ended survey item, almost half (42%) of administrators mentioned relationships with comments such as "relationships of trust and mutual respect; builds connections with students; relates to students; student focused (relationships)." As shown in Table 4, all survey items about relationships were rated as very important by the majority of respondents. The statement "establishing respectful and productive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues" received the highest mean score (4.88) on the survey.

Table 4

Relationships

Statement	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1 NI	Most	Mean
Communicating and interacting effectively with students, parents and colleagues	**23 88%**	2 8%	1 4%	0	0	5 19%	4.85
Establishing respectful and productive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues	**24 92%**	1 4%	1 4%	0	0	20 **77%**	4.88
Honoring cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understandings	**13 50%**	10 38%	3 12%	0	0	0%	4.38
Involving parents and/or community members in support of student learning	**12 46%**	9 35%	5 19%	0	0	1 4%	4.27

Note. n = 26. M = mean score. Most: Participants chose the most important of the four statements in this category. Likert Scale : VI - Very important; QI - Quite important; I - important; SI - slightly important; NI - Not important.

Although the other two statements about relationships with community members and diverse cultures were not selected as the most important items, they were still ranked as (5) very important. Similarly, 93% participants in the Alverson et al. (2021) survey identified "trusting and respective relationships among administrators, teachers, students, and parents" as very important.

Relationships were a pervasive theme in the focus group interviews. As identified by Max: "I think that middle school's basic building block is all about relationships." Although their primary focus was on relating to students, a few administrators also described how they built relationships with their staff, and the school community, including parents.

Student Relationships

Several participants commented on the challenge of building relationships with young adolescents who, by nature, are starting to seek

autonomy and independence (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). As Binard explained, "You really have to work at building relationships" with middle school students. The administrators indicated that it was important to connect with students by building rapport and trust. Max, for example stated: "We need to form significant, appropriate adult bonds with kids where they feel like they can trust us." Bruce was one of the leaders who discussed the challenges inherent in trying to build relationships with middle school students, understanding that teens tend to push back against authority, but still need to feel cared for and supported as they journey toward adulthood. Michelle emphasized that leaders provide consistent, unwavering support and "let them know that we're there for them every single day." Similarly, Kerry described how she couldn't "fly off the handle" and needed to be predictable in how she related to students. Foster insightfully explained that the relationships with middle school students are different from those with elementary students who "love their teachers" and high school students who "see the light at the end of the tunnel and know where they want to go." As Bill stated, "It's about knowing the kids."

Staff Relationships

The participants described how they related to their staff and strived to empower, support, encourage risk taking, and influence them. Three school principals (Bruce, Scott, and Kerry) discussed the importance of empowering teachers by having them take the lead. Bruce explained how the grade teams in his school were solution-oriented and found that "if you empower them, they'll do really good things" and his role was to remove barriers and to "not micromanage them." Both Michelle and Jack discussed supporting teacher self-efficacy as key to their relationships with teachers. As Jack stated: "I always feel that it is support, support, motivate, bring up, bring up. You know, trying to install back that confidence that they can do it." Binard was among several leaders who encouraged his teachers to take risks, adopt a growth mindset, and innovate in the classroom, thus creating a safe and supportive learning environment, based on trusting relationships. Finally, the focus group participants recognized that they often needed to influence others to make things happen in their school. Bill explained how he thought of the teachers as "just a different class" that he is teaching and he needed to negotiate with them, as part of a give-and-take relationship. It was important to Kerry to model positive relationship behaviors in her interactions with staff as part of establishing a safe and caring environment. In sum, the middle school leaders valued their relationships with their faculty and staff and adopted a variety of means to work collaboratively with them.

Middle School Community Relationships

In addition to building relationships with students and staff, a few leaders indicated that they were working to enhance relationships with parents and community members. Scott acknowledged the role that staff, students, and parents play in "creating a positive, nurturing, safe, inclusive place for kids." Jack focused on "making sure that I have a relationship with everybody in that building, and their parents." Max emphasized the importance of trust in his school community: "You have to build an environment where trust is just implicit; it's part of the fabric of your building. Our staff trust us, our kids trust us, our community of parents trust us, caregivers, to make sure that we are doing our absolute level best for their charges." Binard identified that "meaningful involvement from parents and our community really can strengthen our education program." Michelle described the difficulty in engaging middle school parents as follows:

> We're finding that we are on every social media, anything that's possible out there, and we're still getting complaints from parents that they don't know what's going on in the school…We're trying to create independent youth who are responsible for their learning, who are responsible for what they need to be responsible for, and their parents are still wanting us to make sure we're sending everything home in triplicate.

Whether it was to engage parents through parent council (Scott), connect with them through social media (Michelle), or invite them as guest presenters (Binard), building relationships with parents and striving for their meaningful engagement in the education of their children was an important aspect of middle school leadership.

Relationships Facilitated Through Organizational Structures

Participants recognized that relationships are key to effective middle schools and that organizational structures help those relationships to flourish. Teacher-teacher, teacher-student and student-student relationships are supported through teaming and advisory, in particular.

Kerry, Max, and Mark discussed getting the right teachers on the team to foster positive collaboration and the necessity of effective teacher to teacher relationships with a grade team. They also identified that a key purpose of middle school teams is to promote more productive relationships with students. As noted by a survey participant, middle schools needed "dyad teaching partners to maximize student-teacher relationships." Teams work to not only promote academic development, but also build in the "collective responsibility" (Jerry) for all aspects of student success in middle school. Similarly, advisory programs and adult advocates were viewed as important means to promote teacher-student and also student-student relationships in middle school. Creating a sense of belonging and providing opportunities to develop appropriate social bonds were highlighted by Bruce, Claire, and Michelle

The middle school leaders frequently noted relationships as central to how they were responsive to the development of students, staff, and the school itself. *Relational* leadership practices often seemed to work in tandem with *responsive* middle leadership practices.

Comparison Summary

The comparison of findings of the Rheaume (2018) case study conducted in the central Alberta region of Canada and the Alverson et al. (2021) study of American middle schools showed several similarities and a few notable differences (see Table 5). To increase comparability, aspects with less than 10% difference were considered equivalent.

Table 5

Middle School Study Comparison of Perceived Importance

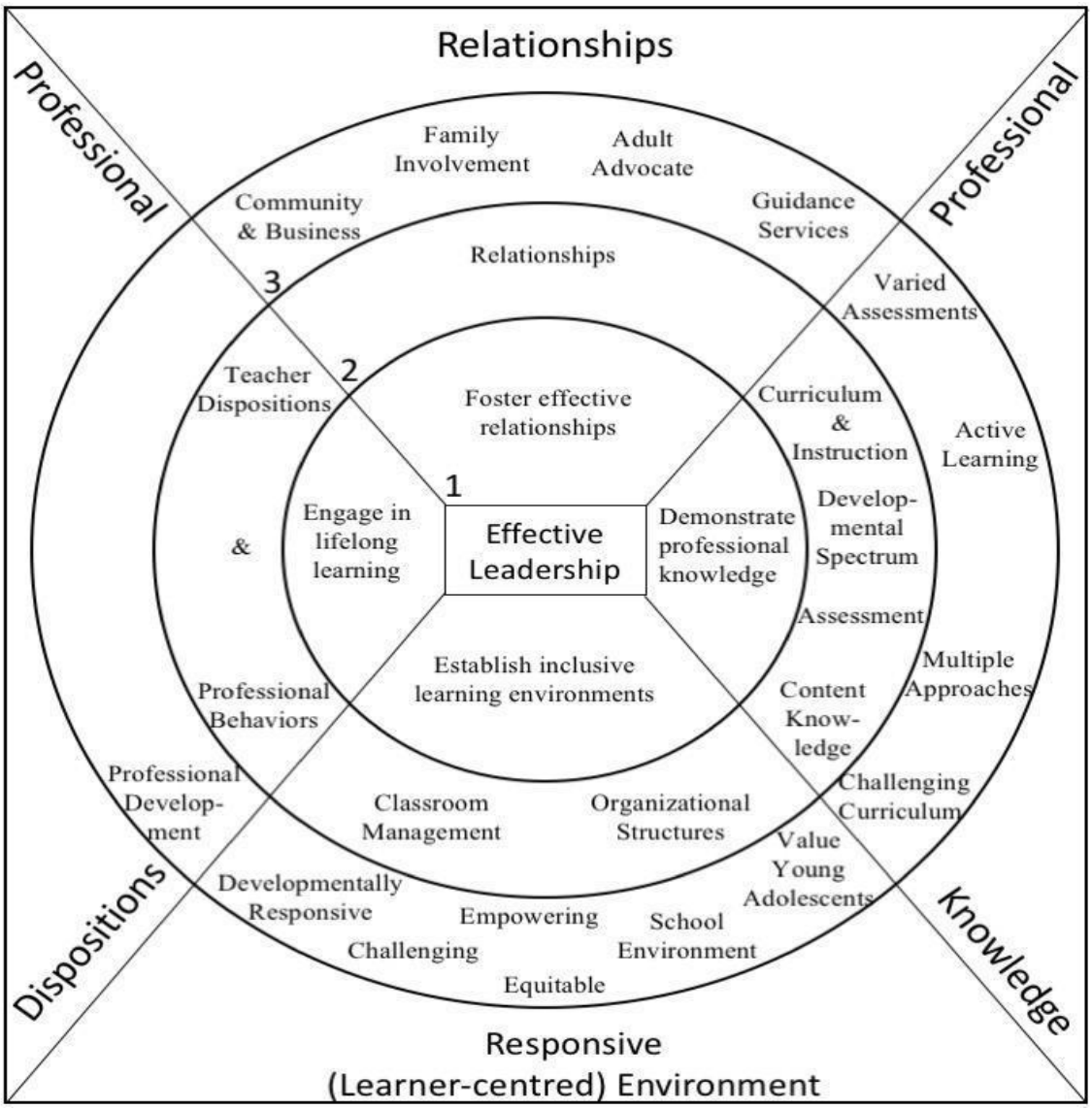
Middle School Concept	**Rheaume** (2018) (%)	*compares to*	**Alverson et al.** (2021) (%)
Developmentally Responsive			
- Value young adolescents	89 - 100	=	95
- Knowing student	100	>	79
- Student voice	93	>	49
- Varied instruction	73	<	89 - 94
- Quality assessment	81	=	76
Leadership			
- Shared vision	29	>	81
Organizational structures			
- Teaming	92	=	92
- Flexible groupings and schedules	23	<	44
- Advisory	65	>	46
- Interdisciplinary instruction	23	<	91
Relationships			
- Students, parents, colleagues	92	=	93

The participants in both studies held relatively similar views on the high importance of developmentally responsive practices. The exception was student voice which was notably lower in the American context. In the leadership category, shared vision seems to be much higher in the US, however it was only explored in the focus group aspect of the case study, making the

results more difficult to compare. There were significant differences in the perceived value of the organizational structures in these studies. Whereas teaming was highly valued in both contexts, flexible grouping and scheduling as well as interdisciplinary instruction were viewed much more favorably in American middle schools. Conversely, advisory was perceived as of greater importance to the middle school leaders in the case study. Participants almost unanimously viewed relationships as very important.

Figure 1

Framework for Effective Middle Level Education (Rheaume, 2018)



The sources for this framework were: 1. *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020); 2. Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices (Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013); 3. *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010).

Discussion

Apparent in both studies is a lack of full implementation of the middle school concept. The comparison of practices in two contexts signals that indeed, certain elements of the middle school concept are more prevalent than others in today's middle schools. Alverson et al.

(2021) pose provocative questions about the relevance of certain organizational structures, instructional approaches, and the middle school concept as a whole. While it is not the purview of this article to explore such questions, possible answers may be provided through greater attention to middle school leadership.

Leadership as Central to the Middle School Concept

The Rheaume (2018) case study findings led to the development of a framework that identified effective leadership as central to middle level education (Figure 1). The top and bottom sections of this framework include descriptors of educators that value relationships and responsive (learner-centered) environments. The left and right sides of the framework point to the professional dispositions and knowledge that educators need to ensure student success. The findings suggest that middle school leaders require all four elements of the framework and are the key to the successful implementation of all aspects. As a former middle school teacher, I was witness to the crumbling and eventual disappearance of typical middle school practices such as teaming, interdisciplinary instruction, and advisory when a new principal joined our staff.

This framework suggests two important ideas. The first is the centrality of leadership to successful middle schools. The second is that a broader approach to middle level education, with emphasis on four areas – relationships, responsive (learner-centered) environments, professional dispositions, and knowledge – may help educators and researchers view the middle school concept as more attainable than ticking the boxes of 18 characteristics and five attributes that are identified in the current version of *This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Relational Leadership

The importance of relationships, as identified by the participants in both studies, could not be dismissed. Alverson et al. (2021) noted that their participants "value the relational aspects of middle schools, even though they are not being implemented at similar rates" (p. 14). During the focus group interviews, the school leaders consistently referred to their reliance on relationships with students, staff, and the community to fulfill their leadership role. This finding supports Clark and Clark's (2004) claim that principals develop relationships through "supporting and nurturing students and adults" and by "collaborating and sharing leadership" (p. 53). The middle school leaders discussed developing trust, being predictable, and having to work at building relationships with young adolescents.

In their interactions and relationships with others, middle level leaders engaged in a variety of leadership actions to develop their staff, including establishing a shared vision and building a collaborative culture through empowering, supporting, encouraging risk-taking, and influencing. As identified by Robinson (2011), relational trust is essential to risk taking and innovation: "In schools with higher levels of trust, teachers experience a stronger sense of professional community and are more willing to innovate and take risks" (p. 34). It is interesting to note that relationship skills are required for all five dimensions of Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model. Many of the descriptions of how these leaders related to others can be summed up by Leithwood's (2007) definition of leadership:

> Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is all about establishing widely agreed upon and worthwhile directions for the organization and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions. My generic definition of leadership—not just effective leadership—is very simple, then; it is all about direction and influence. (p. 44)

By their actions, these leaders were building on the relationships with their staff to influence organizational improvement.

A few middle school leaders described their efforts to build relationships with parents, families, and the community. Their experience was similar to the principals in the Gale and Bishop (2014) study who "described building relationships with families as not always easy but essential" (p. 11) and attributed the challenges to larger middle school context, increasing content difficulty, and young adolescents' desire for increased autonomy.

Relationships underpin much of the work of middle school leaders. In addition to being developmentally responsive, middle school leaders would benefit from seeing relationships

as another major lens through which to view their work. This echoes Gale and Bishop's (2014) finding that responsiveness and relationship were essential dispositions of middle school leaders.

Limitations

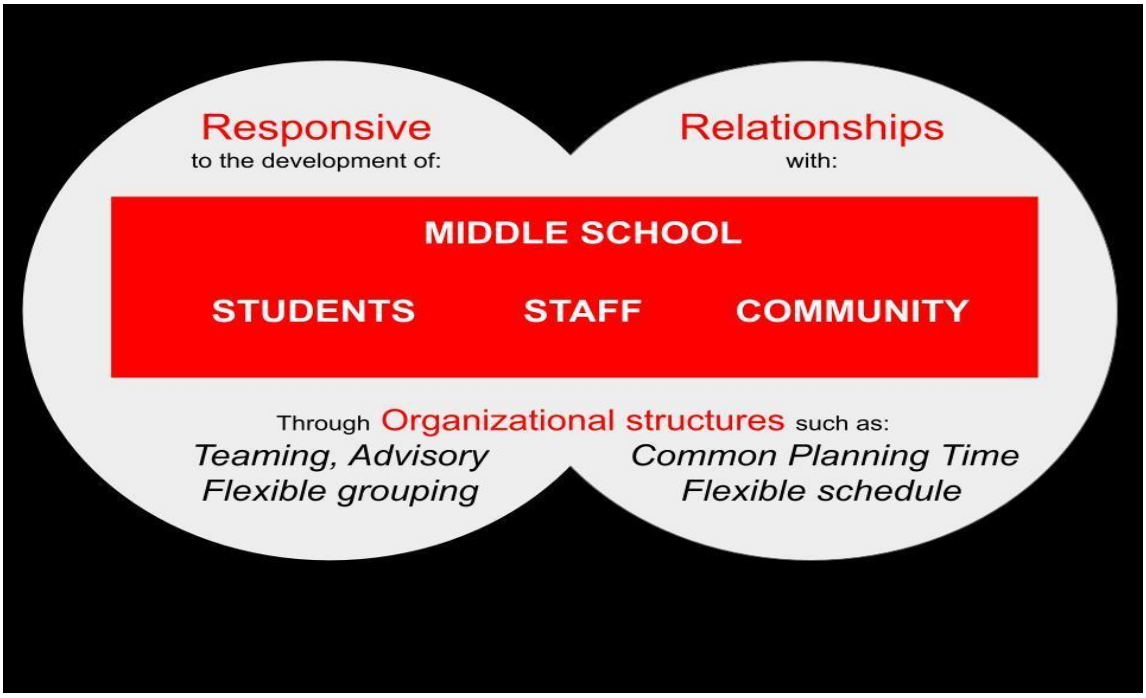
The relatively small scope of the case study (43 participants) compared to over 1600 in the Alverson et al. (2021) national study is a limitation to being able to validly compare the results between contexts. The Likert rating scales were also different (5-point vs. 3-point). This was accounted for when making comparisons. However, it is important to note that the case study survey was adapted from the Howell et al. (2013) study and that Cook and Faulkner were listed as co-authors on the Alverson et al. (2021) study. As such, a number of commonalities between studies were noted, making the results more readily comparable. Another limitation is that the survey instruments in neither the case study (Rheaume, 2018) nor the Alverson et al. (2021) study specifically addressed middle school leadership, making comparison across contexts difficult.

Recommendations

Our findings, combined with the value placed on relationships by participants in the Alverson et al. (2021) study, suggest the DRMLL model could be expanded to include relationships with students, staff, and the middle school community. Although there are many other facets to the work of a middle school administrator, Figure 2 suggests that middle school leaders would benefit from viewing their role through bi-focal lenses of responsiveness and relationships.

Figure 2

Bifocal Lens of Middle School Leaders



Organizational structures are identified as key to supporting both responsive and relational leadership lenses, as shown in Figure 2. "Organizational structures foster purposeful and meaningful relationships" are an important characteristic of successful middle schools (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). By supporting teaming, common planning time, flexible schedules and flexible groupings, school leaders "intentionally organize people, time, and space to maximize young adolescents' growth and development" (Bishop & Harrison, p. 50) and

promote deeper relationships between members of the middle school community.

We further suggest that the emphasis on developmental be removed from the DRMLL model, in keeping with the recent shift to a broader scope of responsiveness in *This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Although the middle school concept is grounded in a desire to provide a schooling experience that is developmentally appropriate for young adolescents, educators are becoming increasingly aware of additional ways responsiveness is required. A responsive orientation creates an opening for school leaders to attend to the cultural, linguistic, sexual orientation, and other needs of the young adolescents in their care. Therefore, *responsive to the development of* middle school students, staff, and school itself, is a more humanistic view of leadership, helping others reach their potential through concern with their growth and development, and aligns with Maslow's view of self-actualization (Compton, 2018).

Responsive and relational middle level leaders recognize and respond to the diverse and unique characteristics of young adolescents. They work with their staff to establish a shared vision and collaborative culture, and they implement evidence-informed organizational structures of the middle school concept to promote meaningful relationships and learner success. With such middle level leaders, young adolescents are sure to thrive.

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