An Analysis of Responsive Middle Level School Leadership Practices: Revisiting the Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership Model

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Abstract

This paper presents the qualitative findings from a recent doctoral study that examined the leadership practices of 17 middle school administrators from three school districts in the Canadian province of Alberta (Rheaume, 2018). The data gathered through six focus group interviews are framed within the three dimensions of Brown et al.’s (2002) Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership (DRMLL) model, illustrating ways that middle school leaders are responsive to the development of: (a) young adolescent students by understanding their developmental characteristics and establishing engaging, equitable learning environments that empower them to thrive; (b) faculty by establishing a shared vision and a collaborative culture focused on continuous improvement; and (c) the middle school itself by implementing the organizational structures of the middle school concept that promote meaningful relationships and learner success.

Although the findings of this study aligned with the DRMLL model, they also led to suggestions for expanding it to better reflect current leadership practices and the newly revised middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Even so, DRMLL has stood the test of time for nearly two decades and continues to serve as an excellent foundation for middle level leadership.

Keywords: developmentally responsive, middle school, middle level leadership

The publication of The Successful Middle School: This We Believe (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) marks an opportune time to reexamine responsive middle level school leadership practices. Bishop and Harrison described five essential attributes of the middle school concept—responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging—and 18 characteristics of successful middle level schools divided into three categories: culture and community; curriculum,
instruction and assessment; and leadership and organization. The leadership and organization category and the essential attribute of responsiveness are foundational to a conceptualization of responsive middle level school leadership. Building-level administrators are key implementers of the middle school concept in successful schools serving young adolescents (Howell et al., 2013), yet the literature base on middle level school leadership practices is thin.

The three-dimensional Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leader (DRMLL) model developed by Brown et al. (2002) and enhanced by the work of Anfara et al. (2006) provides a useful framework for examining and understanding middle level school leadership. Much of the existing literature on middle level school leadership has tended to provide general, conceptual guidance rather than specific, practical examples (Bickmore, 2011; Brown et al., 2002; D. C. Clark & Clark, 2000; S. N. Clark & Clark, 2003, 2004; DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019). The few studies that used the DRMLL model in the past decade (Bickmore, 2011; Bickmore & Dowell, 2015; Gale & Bishop, 2014) emphasized theoretical conceptualizations or provided broad statements related to middle level leadership. Clear illustrations of the actual practices of developmentally responsive middle level school leaders are sorely lacking. Furthermore, since the DRMLL model was developed, This We Believe has undergone two revisions (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Thus, a fresh look at the model is warranted.

The purpose of this research, which was drawn from a larger case study on middle level education in the central region of the province of Alberta (Rheaume, 2018), was to examine the practices of middle school leaders in relation to the three dimensions of the DRMLL model (Anfara et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2002) and relevant elements of the middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

The following question drove the study: In what ways do the practices of middle level school leaders align with the three dimensions of the DRMLL framework? We first review literature related to the concept of responsive middle level leadership and then present findings from our analysis of focus group interviews with 17 middle level school leaders from Alberta. Finally, we explore the merit of the DRMLL model (Anfara et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2002) in light of the findings and discuss implications for middle level school leaders and researchers.

ConceptualizingResponsive Leadership

The recent edition of the middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) includes a number of noticeable and significant changes. Middle schools, regardless of grade configuration, are intended to provide a responsive, supportive environment for young adolescents as they experience the physical, cognitive, psychological, social-emotional, and moral changes that typically occur between the ages of 10 to 15 (Alexander & Williams, 1965; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; George, 2011; NMSA, 2010). This was previously referred to as being developmentally responsive. However, during this unique phase of growth and development, young adolescents also become increasingly aware of their social identities that are shaped by race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and exceptionality (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). In this recent edition of This We Believe, the essential attribute of “developmentally responsive” was replaced with “responsive” and was described as “using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 8). This statement marks a shift away from developmentalism toward a more holistic and individualized approach to responsively educating young adolescents. As the key decision makers, principals and school leaders must also be responsive as they have an essential role in bringing the middle school concept to fruition (Gale & Bishop, 2014; Howell et al., 2013). An overview of middle school leadership is followed by a discussion of developmentally responsive leadership and its pertinence in light of this change to the middle school concept.

Middle School Leadership and Organization

While the body of literature about middle level education has grown substantially during the last 60 years (Lounsbury, 2013; Schaefer et al., 2016; Yoon et al., 2015), relatively little has been written about middle level school leadership (Bickmore, 2011; Gale & Bishop, 2014). Middle level education researchers and advocates assert that, in addition to the roles and responsibilities generally fulfilled by school leaders, middle level schools call for specific leadership practices that are responsive to the nature and needs of young adolescents (Bickmore, 2011; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Brown et al., 2002; D. C. Clark & Clark, 2000; S. N. Clark & Clark, 2003, 2004; DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019; Gale & Bishop, 2014). Indeed, “leadership has very significant effects on the
quality of the school organization and on student learning” (Leithwood, 2007, p. 46), and school principals and other leaders play an essential role in creating the conditions for a successful middle level school.

The leadership and organizational characteristics of successful middle schools include a shared vision; student-centered policies and practices; informed and committed leaders who are courageous and collaborative; professional learning for all; and organizational structures that promote both learning and relationships (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The principal has a pivotal role in realizing these characteristics in each school. As Howell et al. (2013) argued, “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).

In particular, middle level school leaders must support the “organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships” by organizing “people, time, and space to maximize young adolescents’ growth and development” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 50). The organizational structures associated with successful middle level schools include interdisciplinary teams, common planning time, flexible schedules, and purposeful groupings of students. The interdisciplinary team of two or more teachers working with a common group of students has become a well-established practice in middle level schools (Lounsbury, 2013). Common planning time provides necessary opportunities for teachers to collaborate, plan, and support student learning. Flexibile block schedules enable teams to provide more in-depth, engaging, cross-curricular learning activities that are not interrupted by frequent bells (D. C. Clark & Clark, 2000; Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), 2003a, 2003b; Howell et al., 2013; NMSA, 2010; Yoon et al., 2015). Successful middle level schools also have structures in place that bring different groups of students together for different purposes, such as advisory, grade team activities, or activities based on students’ interests, skills, and choices (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Middle level school leaders recognize the value of these organizational structures and commit to their effective implementation, enabling responsive pedagogy and meaningful relationships within a supportive school culture to flourish (NMSA, 2010).

### Responsive Leadership in Middle Level Schools

The concept of responsive leadership has periodically surfaced in the literature during the past two decades. Brown et al. (2002) initially proposed a three-dimensional model of the Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leader (DRMLL) who is responsive to the needs of the students, the faculty, and the school itself (p. 465). Anfara et al. (2006) developed the Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire (MLLQ) and expanded the DRMLL model, as indicated by the italicized statements in Table 1. Later, Bickmore (2011) conducted a quantitative study that validated both the MLLQ and the DRMLL and found that the DRMLL was “appropriate for framing middle grades principal leadership and informing principal practice in middle grades” (p. 7). Gale and Bishop (2014) described the developmentally responsive leader as having “tripartite focus on the needs of the young adolescent, the faculty, and the school” (p. 3) and identified developmental responsiveness as a key disposition for middle level school leaders. Finally, Bickmore and Dowell (2015) used descriptors from the DRMLL to analyze leadership practices in a charter school. These studies supported the DRMLL as a framework for middle level leadership.

The shift toward a broader conception of responsiveness provides an opportunity to reexamine the limitations and relevance of the DRMLL, starting with concept developmentally responsive. Developmentally responsive, student-centered pedagogy has been at the core of the middle school concept since its inception (Alexander & Williams, 1965; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; George, 2011; NMSA, 2010). Thornton (2013) explained how “the middle school movement is grounded in the notion of the developmentally responsive practitioner” and that a “commitment to developmental responsiveness affects all decisions related to organization, policy, curriculum, instruction and assessment” (p. 2).

However, the limitations of a focus on developmental characteristics, such as a deficit-orientation toward young adolescents and generalization of developmental traits, are becoming more apparent as awareness increases about issues of privilege, marginalization, and equity. More recent depictions of responsive practice take into consideration a broader range of factors including culture, race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and home circumstances (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Vagle, 2015; Yoon et al., 2015). This more holistic and inclusive conceptualization of responsiveness
Table 1
Alignment of Leadership Models with This We Believe

| Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership | Core Leadership Practices | Successful Middle Schools: This We Believe |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Brown et al. (2002)                                | Leithwood (2011)           | Bishop and Harrison (2021)                |
| Anfara et al. (2006) (italicized statements)       |                           |                                          |
| **Responsive to the Needs of the School Itself**   |                           | Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. |
| • Is knowledgeable of and can implement the components of the middle school concept. |                           |                                          |
| • Acts as a responsible catalyst for change and understands that change requires flexible time, training, trust, and tangible support. |                           |                                          |
| • Is flexible and able to deal with ambiguity and chaos. |                           |                                          |
| • Advocates for middle level education and what is best for young adolescents |                           |                                          |
| **Responsive to the Needs of Faculty**             |                           | A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. Policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented. Professional learning for all staff is relevant, long term, and job embedded. |
| • Understands the necessity of reconnecting educational administration and the processes of teaching and learning. |                           |                                          |
| • Is emotionally invested in the job.               |                           |                                          |
| • Shares a vision for continuous organizational improvement and growth. |                           |                                          |
| • Creates opportunities for faculty professional development that addresses strategies for meeting the needs of young adolescents. |                           |                                          |
| • Encourages teachers to employ a wide variety of instructional and assessment approaches and material. |                           |                                          |
| • Provides teachers with the resources necessary to effectively perform their teaching responsibilities. |                           |                                          |
| **Responsive to the Needs of Students**            |                           | Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research. |
| • Understands the intellectual, physical, psychological, social, and moral/ethical characteristics of young adolescents. |                           |                                          |
| • Establishes a learning environment that reflects the needs of young adolescents. |                           |                                          |
| • Purposely designs programs, policies, curriculum, and procedures that reflect the characteristics of young adolescents. |                           |                                          |
| • Believes that all students can succeed.          |                           |                                          |
| • Views parents and the community as partners; not adversaries. |                           |                                          |
| • Provides students with opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics to develop their identity and demonstrate their competence. |                           |                                          |
| **Developing People**                              |                           |                                          |
| • Providing individualized support and consideration |                           |                                          |
| • Offering intellectual stimulation                 |                           |                                          |
| • Modeling appropriate values and practices         |                           |                                          |
encourages educators to go beyond the limitations of a developmental approach when determining how to meet the needs of each young adolescent.

Vagle (2015) suggested that educators focus on individual young adolescents as unique people in a particular context rather than emphasizing differences by focusing on developmental characteristics of a particular age group. Educators can continue to use their understanding that young adolescents experience “rapid, and many times tumultuous emotional, physical, social and intellectual development … in a very random and unpredictable manner” (Howell, 2012, p. 53) to inform their interactions with individual students. Developmental awareness is complemented by an orientation toward responsiveness that seeks to understand, support, and appreciate each young adolescent, within the context of their unique growth, development, and social identities. Thus, developmental responsiveness continues to be desirable, and is couched under the broader responsive umbrella. A responsive leader considers each learner as an individual and ensures that the middle level school provides an environment in which every learner can thrive.

When examining middle level leadership, it is necessary to also consider if the middle level school context requires a different approach than leading in elementary or high schools. Some may suggest that the DRMLL is too narrowly focused, omitting key aspects of a school leader’s role such as providing instructional leadership or looking after the managerial tasks of school operations. For example, the instructional leadership practices described by Hallinger (2005) remain suitable across school contexts. The practices include creating a shared purpose, monitoring student learning, and focusing on continuous improvement. A broader conception of school leadership, such as Leithwood’s (2011) four core leadership practices (i.e., setting directions, improving the instructional program, developing people, and aligning the organization) is also likely applicable regardless of context. However, as Bickmore (2011) explained, the DRMLL model incorporated instructional, transformational and shared/participatory leadership models to “provide the contextual nuances of middle grades principals leadership not found in any one general leadership model.” (p. 4). Hallinger (2005) also acknowledged that school context is a “source of constraints, resources, and opportunities” (p. 234) influenced by factors including student demographics, school size and organization, financial and human resources, and community. Table 1 shows how DRMLL, a contextualized model of middle level school leadership, correlates well with both Leithwood’s (2011) core leadership practices and the statements pertaining to leadership and organization in the middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Although the statements may be framed or organized differently, these leadership models provide similar insights when considered as an ensemble.

If the purpose of a middle level school is to provide a responsive and equitable environment in which young adolescents can thrive (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), this context certainly calls for responsive leadership practices. A unique feature of DRMLL as a school leadership model is that it uses the middle school concept as a unifying vision for the school and it is rooted in being responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents, the faculty, and the school itself. While it is therefore not comprehensive, perhaps it can be considered as supplemental to existing educational leadership knowledge and applicable specifically in settings where young adolescents are taught.

Based on the premise that middle level schools are a unique context that continue to require responsive leadership practices, we propose that the DRMLL model (Brown et al., 2002) remains a suitable middle level school leadership framework, with the caveat that there are nuances of the leader role worth exploring further. Our conception of responsive middle level leadership is built upon the three dimensions of the foundational studies (Anfara et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2002), is complemented by the recent iteration of the middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), and is described broadly as:

1. responsiveness to the development of young adolescent students by understanding their developmental 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 a 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.
Method

Research Design
The researchers employed a qualitative, exploratory case study design (Yin, 2014). The choice of design was consistent with a constructivist worldview, which holds that reality is socially constructed, and allowed for the interpretation of phenomena through the multiple perspectives of participants (Denzin, 2011). The researchers gained understanding through the collection and inductive analysis of data from 17 middle level administrators, which led to rich, thick description of their perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

Setting and Sample
A purposive sample of 17 middle grades administrators (i.e., principals and vice-principals) was drawn from three school districts in and around Red Deer in central Alberta. Two of the school districts were in the city of Red Deer, which had a population of slightly more than 100,000 at the time of the study. The other four middle level schools were located within an hour’s drive from Red Deer in smaller towns with populations ranging from 5,000 to 15,000. The three school districts were selected to participate in the case study due to their close relationship with the teacher education program in which the primary researcher worked. As depicted in Table 2, participants came from all three districts—Chinook’s Edge (n = 8), Red Deer Catholic (n = 5) and Red Deer Public (n = 4)—with at least one participant from each of the ten middle schools in the region. The sample included nine male and eight female participants whose pseudonyms were Bill, Binard, Bruce, Chloé, Claire, Daisy, Foster, Jack, Jerry, Kerry, Maggie, Mark, Max, Michelle, Scott, Stephanie, and Terry. The participants had a range of less than one year to more than twenty years of experience as administrators in elementary, middle level, and high school settings, and during the focus group interviews some compared their middle level leadership experiences with their experiences in elementary and high school settings.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures
The perspectives of 17 middle grades administrators were gathered through six focus group interviews. This was an efficient method for gaining collective insights about middle level administrators’ perspectives because focus groups “yield insights that

Table 2
Middle Schools in the Central Alberta Region

| School District (# part.) | 2017–18 Student Population (approx.) | Grade Configuration | # of admin |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Chinook’s Edge (8)        |                                      |                     |            |
| Fox Run                   | 379                                  | 7–8                 | 2          |
| Innisfail                 | 380                                  | 5–8                 | 2          |
| Deer Meadow               | 440                                  | 5–8                 | 2          |
| Westglen                  | 308                                  | 5–8                 | 2          |
| Red Deer Catholic (5)     |                                      |                     |            |
| Mother Teresa             | 450                                  | 4–9                 | 2          |
| St. Francis               | 705                                  | 6–9                 | 3          |
| St. Thomas                | 552                                  | 6–9                 | 3          |
| Red Deer Public (4)       |                                      |                     |            |
| Central                   | 520                                  | 6–8                 | 3          |
| Westpark                  | 431                                  | 6–8                 | 3          |
| Eastview                  | 600                                  | 6–8                 | 3          |

Note. Data extracted from school district websites: www.chinookedge.ab.ca, www.rdcrs.ca, and www.rdpasd.ab.ca.
might not otherwise have been available” in individual interviews as a result of the interactions among participants as they discuss a specific issue (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 436). Each focus group interview used the same instrument with 11 questions that focused on middle school leadership, the middle school concept, effective teaching, and recommendations for teacher education. The interviews ranged in duration from 28 minutes to 72 minutes and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the primary researcher.

Using the Long-Table Analysis Approach (Krueger & Casey, 2000), each focus group question was placed on a separate tab in an Excel spreadsheet and participant pseudonyms were listed down the first column. Then, text segments from each interview transcript were analyzed and categorized using structural coding based on the question topics (Saldana, 2009). The text segments were placed next to the participant’s pseudonym, thus splitting the data from all interview transcripts into different spreadsheet tabs. For example, mention of developmental responsiveness resulted in that text segment being placed next to the participant’s pseudonym, thus splitting the data from all interview transcripts into different spreadsheet tabs. For example, mention of developmental responsiveness resulted in that text segment being placed next to the participants name in the spreadsheet tab related to that topic. This segmented data was an efficient means to retrieve participant quotes as it organized all interview data by topic and grouped related ideas. Using deductive coding, this categorized raw data was mined for specific examples of concepts related to responsive leadership. The participant insights into leadership practices reported here are illustrative examples of the three dimensions of developmentally responsive middle level leadership (DRMLL).

**Trustworthiness**

Threats to trustworthiness were considered at the design stage of the case study (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and minimized by using techniques such as purposeful sampling, appropriate instrumentation, descriptive data as evidence, and representative inductive analysis. For example, the same instrument was used for the six focus group interviews which provided rich descriptions of the leader’s experiences, allowing triangulation of the data and enhancing credibility of the findings.

**Findings**

The study’s findings are grouped by the three dimensions of the DRMLL to illustrate how the middle level school leaders in this study were responsive to the: (a) development of young adolescents, (b) development of faculty, and (c) development of the middle school itself. Within each dimension, several sub-themes emerged and are discussed.

**Dimension 1: Responsive to the Development of Young Adolescents**

By understanding the characteristics and variability of the different areas of young adolescent development (i.e., cognitive, psychological, social-emotional, physical, moral), teachers and school leaders are better able to respond to the needs of the middle level school learner (CCE, 2003a). As principal Claire stated, “by nature, middle schools are a structure that honors the developmental appropriateness of grouping those ages of kids together.” Examples of how the leaders in this study were responsive to the development of young adolescents are provided as illustrations of the first dimension of DRMLL.

One of the focus group interview questions asked administrators to explain how their school responds to the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. They were also prompted to consider how race, culture, sexual orientation, and/or language ability factor into developmental responsiveness. First and foremost, the administrators viewed young adolescence as an important and challenging developmental phase of life. As indicated by Claire, “It’s a unique time in their development. A petri dish of hormones, social-emotional needs, and building their independence.” The leaders also emphasized how, by recognizing and fostering all areas of development, they were helping students to transition from childhood toward adulthood during their time in the middle grades.

**Cognitive Development.** In terms of cognitive development or intellectual changes, the leaders recognized that young adolescents experience increased curiosity, increased responsibility for their learning and their grades, and increased difficulty of content during middle school. Principal Kerry described how young adolescents need to know why in order to “get more of a buy-in with that age level.” For example, in response to students who were posting inappropriate pictures on social media, she brought in police officers, a psychologist, and a social worker so that the students could ask their questions and better understand why they shouldn’t do that. Four administrators discussed how project-based or cross-curricular learning provides opportunities for engaging, authentic learning that is more meaningful
to young adolescents. Binard described how his teachers strive to “make sure the experiences kids are having are authentic, meaningful, hands-on . . . where it’s not textbook, drill and kill type of instruction.” Principal Scott explained how the rigor and academic expectations increase as students progress toward high school. To help with this transition, teachers gradually release responsibility so that students become increasingly accountable for their learning each year in the middle grades, as explained by Kerry. Another principal, Bill, explained how access to their grades enables middle level students to “see how their practices are influencing their grade positively or negatively.” In Binard’s school, students seek enrichment or assistance as needed through DEAL (Drop Everything and Learn) sessions they sign up for twice weekly. Flexible learning time during the school day provided students with the “responsibility to be responsive to their own learning” (Binard) and the ability to “be an advocate for yourself and what you need for learning” (Foster), empowering students for increased independence.

Psychological Development. The participating administrators also discussed the psychological changes experienced by young adolescents such as increased independence and identity formation. As principal Binard explained: “you’re trying to promote independence, you’re trying to foster that voice, you’re trying to get them to advocate for themselves. All the while, they’re trying to find out who they are, within this young adolescent stage.” Bruce described how “students in their natural growth are looking to strive for more independence” as they progress through the middle grades. Regarding identity development, vice-principal Stephanie highlighted the importance of providing students “with a variety of experiences, so they can figure out what I like, and what are my interests.” Choice of exploratory courses, option classes, and extracurricular sports, clubs, and programs in each of the schools provided ways for students to discover individual interests. Participants also discussed leadership programs that can help foster both moral and psychological development in young adolescents such as gay-straight alliances that support sexual identity development and cultural initiatives that increase awareness and sense of belonging. These initiatives are also examples of equity as they provide students with opportunities to thrive as individuals. Through their approach to working with young adolescents and their support of activities that promote identity formation and independence, the administrators in this study were responsive to these important psychological transitions that occur during the middle grades.

Social-Emotional Development. Pertaining to the social-emotional development of young adolescents, certain administrators focused on helping students understand themselves in relation to others. As Max stated, “it is dealing with themselves personally, dealing with others appropriately, finding their own place, their own self-worth, finding their self-confidence.” Binard described a number of initiatives in his school such as friendship groups, suicide awareness, and anti-bullying programs to support students through some of the social difficulties they may experience, which he described as follows:

They come to school and then now they are expected to regulate themselves for six and a half hours a day, and forget about the things that are happening at home, or the peer conflicts that they’re having and they don’t know how to deal with, and forget the social media things that happened last night. So, of course, we have kids that can’t learn because they have all of this other baggage that’s taking place.

Two vice principals focused on making sure “social relationships are positive” in the middle grades (Stephanie) and ensuring that students learn social skills such as resilience and coping when friendship difficulties arise (Daisy). Principal Max was also concerned about how his students related to others:

I really care that they show good character. I really care that they are going to have humility and that they are going to have compassion for their fellow students. And I think that’s different. I think sometimes, that’s our job to teach them what that looks like.

Bruce explained that as a middle level school leader, “you have to be more creative in how you connect with kids.” He discussed working with students in his school to develop a positive school culture that provides students with something to “feel a part of and connect to.” The participants in this study viewed their leadership roles as helping middle grades students learn to navigate socially and interact with others by providing a supportive environment that recognizes young adolescent social-emotional developmental needs.
Physical and Moral Development. Physical and moral transitions were not as frequently mentioned during the focus group interviews. Physically, the participants referred to the hormonal changes, the variance in physical appearance, or the need for activity. Scott remarked: “with the development of their brains and everything that is happening physically too, it is three years of change and chaos for them.” He described how his school promotes physical activity by providing elliptical, stationary bikes, and a stand-up boxing pillow to “give those movement breaks to kids that need it.” He and Foster both described how they provided flexible seating in their school to meet student physical needs.

Regarding moral transitions, only one administrator (Terry) discussed how young adolescents are a “powerful group” and indicated that the middle grades is an important time to engage them in making a difference and “change the world.” Being aware of the physical and moral changes experienced by young adolescents can help administrators be responsive, student-centered leaders.

The leaders in this study described myriad ways that they recognized and were responsive to the developmental needs of the young adolescents in their schools. They described a variety of programs and initiatives that fostered engaging learning environments, empowering young adolescents to thrive.

Dimension 2: Responsive to the Development of Faculty
Two key leadership practices that the administrators used to support the development of their faculty were promoting a shared vision and building a collaborative culture focused on continuous improvement. Five specific leadership practices that build a collaborative culture are described in this section.

The fact that school leaders play an essential role in how a school operates and supports student learning is well documented in the research literature (Howell et al., 2013; Leithwood, 2007). During a focus group interview, Claire pinpointed the necessity of leadership in schools:

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 … you’re not going to get where you want to be.

Although the DRMLL model refers to faculty, most leaders in this study referred to their staff, implying both teachers and support staff. The terms staff and faculty are used interchangeably.

Promoting a Shared Vision. Using common language to articulate a shared vision was an identified means to influence the direction of the school. Principal Max stated that his main role was “helping all staff to know what the plan is” and that it was important for staff to believe in the school’s shared vision and feel like they “own it.” Jack focused on working toward a common goal: “Climbing a mountain together, all moving in the same direction. Got to have the group walking with you.” In their work to foster effective teacher teams, Stephanie highlighted the importance of “working on having that common vision and common language for our staff.” For Claire, developing a shared vision started with “getting the voice of our staff” and then talking “to our staff about where are we going to start and what are we going to do.” She provided a detailed description of her work to create a shared vision in her school:

We had this whole branch of cultural work that came out of my staff, that then I had to help them vision through that, and create structures, and things that we put in place in the last couple of years … So we had to look at everything within the building from structure, to how we spent budget, to how we had our team leader structure set up with our staff, to behavior expectations, consequences, to get to where we were at.

In each focus group interview, the participating administrators discussed working with their staff to collaboratively make decisions related to the direction of the school. For these administrators, shared vision was an important means to build a collaborative culture.

Building a Collaborative Culture. Although the participants held a formal leadership role, they often discussed how school leadership is a collaborative effort. As Scott stated, “distributed, shared leadership is crucial in a middle school.” He pointed to the teamwork needed in middle level schools: “Being part of a team. It takes a village. There’s nowhere that it takes more people in the village than in a middle school. It’s the support people, the caretakers, the librarian. It takes everyone to do that.” Vice-principal Jerry referred to middle level schools having a “collective responsibility approach.” Making
reference to being the captain of the ship but needing her crew, Kerry discussed how shared leadership increases staff buy-in. The leaders in this study discussed five specific leadership practices they used to foster a collaborative culture and be responsive to the needs of their staff: establishing effective teams, empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking, and influencing.

Establishing Effective Teams. Creating productive, effective teams and strategic hiring were identified as key leadership practices. Participants were primarily concerned with “putting the right pieces in the right places” (Mark). Kerry talked about teaming and getting the right people working together and explained “it is all strategic in how you do it.” Bruce highlighted the importance of cultural fit when he hires: “So, when we hire, when we add people to our team, part of that is, do they fit into the culture of the school.” With high staff turnover, Jack referred to strategic hiring as his opportunity to create a cultural shift in his school.

Teaming drove many personnel decisions for these leaders. Both Jack and Bill saw dyad teams as a way to foster deeper relationships between teachers and students. Jack found that teacher dyads “sets up that relationship piece.” Bill explained that teacher teams were able to get to know the students better, develop rapport and give students “the best opportunity to succeed.” Both Mark and Max referred to having difficult conversations to shifting existing teachers to different teams or grade levels to better their school. Getting the right people on the team through hiring and getting the right people working together through teaming were viewed as key leadership actions for these administrators.

Empowering without Micromanaging. Three administrators detailed the importance of their leadership efforts to empower their staff without micromanaging. Kerry explained how teachers in her school had a say in problem solving and finding solutions. Bruce described it being “frustrating or a little bit scary as a leader” but important to have his staff take the lead.

For Scott, empowering his teachers was essential:

One of the things that I’ve done in my short time here is really identify those people who are the leaders and empower them . . . Whatever it might be, you find those leaders and you empower them, and you trust them, and you support them, and you follow up with them, and you do those things, all focused on the key principles of our school. Without those people, I couldn’t do my job. I can’t imagine what it would be like without them.

Empowering people in their work was an important aspect of the leadership role for Bruce, Scott and Kerry, who evidently value collaborative leadership.

Supporting. Playing a supportive role was another key leadership action identified. Principal Max explained how he supported the “teaching staff, the EA (educational assistant) staff, the secretarial staff, the custodial staff” to embrace an inclusive school environment by removing roadblocks and providing professional development. Scott discussed needing to protect his staff from too many initiatives and described his role as being a filter or a buffer by “sifting through and being responsive but being protective at the same time.” Vice-principal Michelle focused on the importance of supporting teachers through both coaching and professional development (PD):

I think that the very first thing before we can get to any of this, is that our teachers have to believe that they can reach all of the children in their classroom. If they don’t believe in their own self-efficacy, they’re not going to be able to work with the diverse students that we have in our classrooms. So, that’s where the PD comes in from, that’s where the relationships, that’s where the support comes in.

Both Kerry and Bruce discussed their role in ensuring that the school was safe and caring as well as supporting teachers who were willing to take risks, as explored next.

Encouraging Risk Taking. Bruce said: “I think it’s one where you need to let your staff know that they can take risks, they’re supported in that.” For Kerry, promoting a growth mind-set and encouraging risk taking was an important aspect of her leadership role. Binard referred to giving teachers permission to try new strategies and not limit themselves out of fear of lowering results on standardized assessments:

There’s more to education than being able to write a multiple choice test. And so, giving teachers permission to go beyond that and say: I’m okay if your results aren’t where they normally are, if you’re doing this. Take some risks. Change things up.
By encouraging risk taking, these administrators are providing a safe place to learn and make mistakes for both students and teachers.

**Influencing.** Influencing others through negotiating, modeling, facilitating, and/or manipulating were leadership practices that the leaders in this study took to accomplish their work and fulfill their roles. These leaders 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 in a bit of a give and take relationship. Kerry explained how she modeled the types of positive relationships she sought in her school. Claire identified that school leaders often need to facilitate or manipulate processes to make things happen in the school. These leaders were focused on building a collaborative culture focused on continuous improvement, described by Maggie as “constant dissatisfaction with the status quo.”

In sum, the focus group participants discussed how they were responsive to the needs of their staff. They promoted a shared vision and built a collaborative culture through their leadership practices of teaming, empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking, and influencing others.

**Dimension 3: Responsive to the Development of the School Itself**

Here we discuss findings related to the administrators’ perspectives on teaming, flexible grouping, advisory, and curriculum integration. The participants provided insights into leadership efforts that support these four practices and organizational structures that align with the middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

**Teaming.** Focus group interview participants indicated that teaming was very important in their school. Teaming, or a team of teachers working with a common group of students, is at the core of many middle level school organizational structures (Schaefer et al., 2016). Five administrators identified the dyad as an effective teaming structure in their schools. Dyads provide a collective responsibility approach to supporting students comared to a typical subject-based junior high in which students are taught by six or more different teachers each day. As one principal, Scott, explained: “Every single teacher teaches two subjects and they share two classes.

I really feel it’s been one of the most positive things we’ve done here at the school.” Increased flexibility, stronger relationships, collaboration, and efficiency were among the benefits of teaming highlighted by middle level school administrators. Bill commented as teachers shifted toward collaborative teams, “not only did they enrich one another’s teaching, but they also streamlined their workload.” Overall, teaming was a highly valued middle level school practice in the central Alberta region, and by supporting teaming, these leaders were responsive to the needs of the school.

**Flexible Grouping.** The middle level school administrators also discussed how students may be grouped for different purposes. Participants identified the benefits of cross-graded groupings to improve school culture, provide student leadership opportunities, and foster positive relationships within the school. One administrator explained that their advisory program was comprised of cross-graded teams. Three other administrators mentioned how teachers in grade teams work together to identify and address student needs by using data to inform their interventions. Thus, flexible groupings can provide opportunities to both meet student needs and build relationships in a middle level school setting.

**Advisory.** Advisory programs are described as a middle level school structure that ensures “every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate” (NMSA, 2010). However, focus group interview participants were generally not favorable toward advisory programs, indicating in many cases that they were non-existent in their schools. Instead, two administrators described homeroom periods that were used to eat lunch and for sending information home. In other schools, advisory meant specific activities such as curriculum enhancement, character education, literacy, or cultural exploration. These administrators did not view advisory as an important feature of the middle school concept nor as an organizational structure that was necessary to be responsive to the needs of the school.

**Curriculum Integration.** Curriculum integration occurs when “units are organized around a theme or integrated by a melding of teachers’ goals and students’ questions rather than through separate subjects” (NMSA, 2010, p. 17). This practice is sometimes conflated with interdisciplinary teaching, cross-curricular instruction, and even inquiry-based or project-based learning (PBL). Results from the focus group interviews indicated that administrators
were lukewarm to the concept of curriculum integration and that a range of curriculum integration practices were occurring in central Alberta middle level classrooms.

Although participants identified benefits of curriculum integration such as authentic learning, cross-curricular connections, deeper understanding for students, and a common focus for teachers, the most significant challenge mentioned by more than half of the participants was time for teachers to collaborate, plan, and implement curriculum integration. The administrators in one school district indicated that curriculum integration occurred on a regular basis, especially in schools where PBL was popular. Other administrators thought it happened occasionally, and participants from one school district seemed to signal that it was a thing of the past.

The leaders in this study most valued teaming as an organizational structure that supports the development of the school itself. Their understanding and implementation of other structures such as advisory, flexible groupings, and curriculum integration varied across the three school districts.

**Discussion and Implications**

The responsive leadership practices identified in this study provide insight into the tangible ways middle level school administrators support the development of students, staff, and the school itself. The participants’ current expressions of responsive middle level school leadership practices are compared to DRMLL to identify both alignment and differences, leading to implications for middle level leaders and researchers.

**Responsive to the Development of Young Adolescents**

Middle level schools can provide a supportive learning environment for students to experience the physical, psychological, social-emotional, cognitive and moral changes that typically occur between the ages of 10 to 15. The participating administrators recognized their role as helping students transition through this developmental stage and often made comparisons between elementary and high school students when highlighting the unique features of supporting young adolescents (Foster, Bruce, Max). The administrators described the ways they were responsive to young adolescent psychological development by promoting increased independence (Kerry, Bruce, Foster) and identity development (Binard, Stephanie, Daisy). They also saw the middle grades as an important time for cognitive (Scott, Maggie) and social-emotional development (Michelle, Stephanie, Max).

Some researchers have recently called for a broader conception of developmental responsiveness that includes recognition of culture, context, and other social factors that influence adolescent development (e.g., Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Vagle, 2015; Yoon et al., 2015). However, the study participants described being responsive to the needs of individual students—not based on their developmental characteristics or diverse backgrounds but based on the needs that the student presented in a particular moment. Max described this as “figuring out what’s more important for this kid right now.” For Bruce, being developmentally responsive meant considering students “individually with what that kid needs.” This is perhaps in line with Vagle’s (2015) plea to “move from characterizing young adolescent(CE) to particularizing young adolescent(TS)” (p. 25, emphasis in original). These leaders seemed to reject the dichotomous notion that leaders either emphasize differences by focusing on developmental characteristics or emphasize individual needs. Rather, they used their understanding of young adolescent development to support decisions related to individual young adolescents.

The participants in this study also provided insights into how they established learning environments that empower young adolescents to thrive. Their descriptions of leadership practices that are responsive to young adolescent development provide qualitative evidence in support of the DRMLL as conceived by Brown et al. (2002) and Anfara et al. (2006). Current conceptions of responsiveness (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) were also evident in these administrators’ perceptions of how their leadership practices promoted individual young adolescent development, and the model could easily be expanded to reflect a broader notion of responsiveness.

**Responsive to the Development of Faculty**

Only two ways the middle level school administrators in this study were responsive to the development of their faculty align with the descriptors in DRMLL: sharing a vision for continuous improvement and providing professional development (see Table 1). Most participants recognized the importance of having a shared vision. Claire, for example, provided an insightful account of how she worked with her
staff to develop a shared vision for her school. The school leaders also discussed providing professional development to support teacher learning, especially related to instructional strategies (Max, Bruce, Michelle, Foster).

The findings of this study diverged from DRMLL on the leadership practices that participants used to build a collaborative culture focused on continuous improvement. The leaders repeatedly emphasized the value of working together to support middle grades students. As Scott stated: “It takes a village.” The significant leadership practices identified in this study that leaders used to develop their faculty included: (a) establishing effective teams, (b) empowering, (c) supporting, (d) encouraging risk taking, and (e) influencing staff.

a. Teaming is not stated as part of DRMLL, even though Brown et al. (2002) identified it as a “community-building structure” (p. 464). Several administrators (Mark, Kerry, Bruce, Jack) discussed their role in establishing effective teams through hiring and “having fierce conversations” (Max).

b. Both Scott and Bruce discussed how they empowered their staff to support students. They discussed leadership in their school as a shared role.

c. Michelle described how she supported her teachers by promoting their self-efficacy while Max supported teachers by removing roadblocks.

d. In terms of encouraging risk taking, Binard wanted his teachers to try new instructional strategies and both Kerry and Stephanie promoted a growth mind-set in their schools.

e. Finally, in alignment with Leithwood’s (2007) definition of leadership being “all about direction and influence,” the middle level school administrators discussed how they influenced their staff. Kerry and Bill described how influenced their staff by modeling caring behaviors and other administrators (Claire and Mark) explained that they sometimes needed to manipulate staff to achieve their vision for the school.

These five leadership practices were ways the administrators in this study built a collaborative culture focused on continuous improvement. The emphasis on collaboration in the middle grades would be a beneficial addition to DRMLL and is reflective of the statements pertaining to leadership in the current iteration of the AMLE position statement (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Further research into these leadership practices may be warranted.

**Responsive to the Development of the School Itself**

Knowledge of the middle school concept and related practices were viewed as an important way to promote success for all middle school students. This is in alignment with the DRMLL statement that leaders are “knowledgeable of and can implement the components of the middle school concept” (Brown et al., 2002, p. 465). However, the leaders in this study did not view all components as equally important. Although the middle school concept is intended to be a comprehensive approach to middle level education with its components fully implemented (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), it seems that this ideal is rarely achieved (Loulsbury, 2013; Schaefer et al., 2016). The prevalence of teeming compared to limited use of curriculum integration and advisory programs seems to parallel the literature on these middle level practices. The participants tended to view teeming as perhaps “the most critical component” (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 12) of the middle school concept that leaders need to understand and implement. The related practices of flexible grouping and common planning time were also identified as key organizational structures in middle level schools.

In contrast, curriculum integration was not a ubiquitous middle level school practice. Although the middle school concept calls for curriculum that is “challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 27), the participants in this study and the literature both suggest that curriculum integration is “a promise yet unfulfilled” (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 13). Even though there has been a recent resurgence of interest in project-based learning in the central Alberta region, curriculum integration is worth middle level leaders being familiar with but it was not deemed essential.

Similarly, advisory programs were rare in central Alberta middle level schools. In the middle school concept, advisory is intended to ensure that each student has one adult advocate in that school “who assumes special responsibility for supporting that student’s academic and personal development” (NMSA, 2010, p. 35). Most administrators described programs that fulfilled managerial functions such as providing a way to group students for lunch, assemblies, or report cards. As Maggie explained, “we have formal advisory but, I would say, it is not
true to the concept of advisory as much as it is a homeroom period.” Responsive leaders would be wise to consider the possibilities related to the middle school concept of advocacy.

To be responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents, leaders ought to attend to the typical organizational structures that promote student success and meaningful relationships, especially teaming and its related practices such as common planning time and flexible student groupings. The use of curriculum integration and advisory programs can also benefit young adolescents but were not viewed as essential by the participants in this study.

**Limitations**

As with all case study research, the findings are limited to the context in which the study was conducted. The results are limited to the perspectives and demographics of the participants in the study, who may be further limited by their own understanding and experience with features of the middle school concept and leadership. The limitations inherent to the research design included the effectiveness of the interview instrument to provide quality data as well as the primary researcher’s ability to reflexively facilitate the focus group interviews to limit bias and to minimize influence during the interviews.

**Conclusion**

What distinguishes the role of the middle level school leader is the consideration of all aspects of the school through a responsive lens. Responsive middle level school leaders recognize young adolescence as a unique developmental stage and strive to provide engaging, equitable learning environments that help each young adolescent thrive. Supporting the development of faculty by establishing a shared vision and building a collaborative focus on continuous improvement provides a responsive learning environment for all. By implementing the organizational structures of the middle school concept, a middle level school leader promotes meaningful relationships and learner success. The leader’s role is to be responsive in myriad ways that prompt the development of the students, faculty, and the school itself.

We found the DRMLL model (Anfara et al. 2006; Bickmore, 2011; Brown et al., 2002) to be an effective framework for providing examples of developmentally responsive middle level school leadership practices. Although the results were limited to the perspectives of 17 middle level school leaders in the central Alberta region, their leadership practices aligned well with the three dimensions of the DRMLL model.

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, we suggest that the DRMLL model ought to be expanded to include current thinking about the middle school concept (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), especially in the areas of responsiveness and building a collaborative culture. We also believe our findings related to the salience of relationships could inform the DRMLL model, though this aspect of our work was outside the scope of this article. Researchers have found building and sustaining relationships to be an essential aspect of middle level school leadership (Clark & Clark, 2004; Gale & Bishop, 2014), however the importance of promoting relationships tends to be implied in DRMLL descriptors rather than explicitly stated. We believe a more intentional, explicit approach to building and sustaining relationships may be warranted in the model.

While we have suggested ways the DRMLL can be enhanced, we find it is a meritorious model that should be more widely adopted in schools, as it serves as an excellent foundation upon which middle level school leaders can build.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Author Note**

The primary author, Julia G. Rheaume, first gathered the data used in this article as part of her doctoral research that was completed through the University of Calgary. Dr. Jim Brandon was her supervisor and Dr. Donlevy and Dr. Gereluk were members of her dissertation committee. Jim provided substantial guidance throughout the development of this article and he sadly passed away in August 2021. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to julia.rheaume@gmail.com.

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