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Middle School Administrators' Perspectives on
Effective Middle Level Education in Central Alberta

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This instrumental case study (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995) examined the perspectives of 43 middle school administrators on effective middle level education in central Alberta, Canada. Their views on the middle school concept, effective middle level leadership, and effective teaching were obtained through an online questionnaire and six focus group interviews, using an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The analysis of school administrator perspectives generated five integrated findings pertaining to middle level education: (a) teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential to middle level education; curriculum integration and advisory are less important and prevalent; (b) effective beginning middle school teachers should develop professional knowledge and skills, including an ability to create learner-centred, inclusive environments; (c) effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships; (d) middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school; and (e) middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships. The synthesis of the findings led to three conclusions related to teaching competencies, leadership competencies, and effective middle level education: (a) middle level teachers should be caring, developmentally responsive team players who can use instructional strategies, classroom management, and differentiation skills to meet students' needs in inclusive, learner-centred classrooms; (b) school leaders should understand young adolescence as a unique developmental stage in order to support the transition of 10 to 15-year-olds through the middle grades; and (c) responsiveness and relationships were found to be essential to effective middle level education. This study has implications for middle level

leadership and middle level teacher preparation and provides 22 recommendations for local, provincial, national, and international middle level education stakeholders.

Keywords: middle level education, effective leadership, effective teaching, case study

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DEDICATION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Represents:</u>
AMLE	Association for Middle Level Education
BEd	Bachelor of Education
CCAD	Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development
CCE	Center for Collaborative Education
LQS	Leadership Quality Standard
NMSA	National Middle School Association
RDC	Red Deer College
RTI	Response to Intervention
TQS	Teaching Quality Standard

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Middle schools are somewhat uncommon in Alberta, Canada. In fact, less than 3% of all schools in the province of Alberta are called middle schools (Alberta Education, 2016a). However, middle schools constitute 11% of schools in three central Alberta school divisions in and around the city of Red Deer. These middle schools frequently accept student teachers and hire graduates from a Bachelor of Education (BEd) program offered at Red Deer College (RDC) that focuses on middle level education and prepares teachers to work with young adolescents, ages 10 to 15. As central Alberta is home to a relatively high number of middle schools and the only middle level teacher preparation program in the province, it provides a unique context to study middle level education.

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to examine the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators on effective middle level education. A questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to gather the perspectives of 43 participants from three school divisions on the middle school concept, effective teaching, and middle level leadership. Their insights were needed to determine the extent of possible discrepancies between the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC and the current realities of central Alberta's middle schools.

This chapter provides contextual information related to this study, and follows with: an explanation of the research problem, purpose, and questions that framed this inquiry; an explanation of why I chose case study research design; a discussion of the rationale and significance of the research; an account of my perspectives and assumptions in relation to this study; and lastly, the definitions of terms used throughout this study.

Background and Context

This case study is bounded (Merriam, 2009) by the middle schools in three school divisions in the central Alberta region. Red Deer Public is an urban school division. Red Deer Catholic is a regional school division that has schools throughout the central Alberta region. Chinook's Edge is comprised mainly of rural schools located in towns and villages in the Red Deer region and south. Although middle schools are typically grades 6 to 8, the middle schools in these three school divisions have a variety of grade configurations.

To gain insights into the current realities of middle schools in the region, it was necessary to explore three constructs related to effective middle level education: the middle school concept, effective middle level leadership, and effective teaching. This section provides an overview of these constructs as they relate to this case study. In Chapter Two, I elaborate on the constructs and how they relate to each other in the conceptual framework.

Middle School Concept

The middle school concept is a comprehensive, student-centred approach to the schooling of young adolescents. As described in *This We Believe*, a position paper published by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in 2010, the middle school concept is based on the idea that “the curriculum, pedagogy, and programs of middle grades schools must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents” (p. 5). A one-page summary of *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) is provided as Appendix A.

A number of researchers have recently chronicled the plethora of research in the field of middle level education (Lounsbury, 2013; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016; Yoon, Schaefer, Brinegar, Malu, & Reyes, 2015). The historical development of this educational movement provides insight into the significance of the key components of the middle school concept. A

core tenet of the middle school concept, as it has evolved over the past 50 years, is that middle schools should be dedicated to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents as a distinct group of learners (George, 2011). According to George (2011), the middle school concept is “the current manifestation of progressive education” (p. 48), based on a philosophical “set of fundamental beliefs in essential human goodness and the possibility of progress” that involves “affirming the value of every student, collaborative leadership, teacher teamwork, flexibility, student-centred curriculum, and active instruction” (p. 50). Lounsbury (2013) claimed that “to anyone with a basic knowledge of human development and the commonly accepted principles of learning, and with a belief in the democratic way of life, the middle school concept is really just common sense” (p. 43).

To accomplish this, middle schools typically have organizational structures such as an interdisciplinary teaching team that uses a flexible block schedule and their common planning time to collaborate and design responsive learning experiences for the students they share (NMSA, 2010). Advisory programs are another example of a typical middle school practice, designed to ensure that students have an adult advocate to guide their academic and personal development. The middle school concept, and its related elements, is central to a study on effective middle level education.

Effective Middle Level Leadership

Effective middle schools require leaders who are visionary, committed, courageous and collaborative, and who have “an unwavering devotion to the growth and development of young adolescents” (NMSA, 2010, p. 29). These leaders understand their essential role in creating learning environments that support student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2011). Yee (2016) called for “instructional leaders and teachers who have the expertise, experience and passion to

work with middle years students, along with the courage to commit to creating the best possible learning environments for these particular learners” (p. 8). Robinson (2006) explained that educational leaders require a specific set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions to create the “conditions that teachers need to promote their students’ learning” (p. 73). Yee (2016) agreed that “creating the conditions for teaching and learning to unfold is the central task of the student-centred leader” (p. 9).

Such leaders recognize that optimal conditions for young adolescent learning require organizational structures, such as flexible block scheduling, teaming, and common planning time, that enable developmentally responsive pedagogy and meaningful relationships within a supportive culture and community to flourish (NMSA, 2010). The new Alberta Education (2018a) *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS) states that “a leader nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning” and is able to communicate “a philosophy of education that is student-centred and based on sound principles of effective teaching and leadership” (p. 5). It was therefore important to explore the perspectives of middle school administrators on the middle school concept and on their role in fostering a student-centred learning environment.

Effective Teaching

Teaching is deemed effective when students learn. Darling-Hammond (2000) identified well-prepared, high quality teachers as the most important factor influencing student achievement. Wiliam (2016) proposed that “teachers vary considerably in their effectiveness in promoting growth in student achievement” (p. 62). Friesen’s (2009) *Teaching Effectiveness Framework*, Danielson’s (2016) *Framework for Teaching*, and Hattie’s (2012) *Visible Learning* all provide insight into what constitutes effective teaching. In Alberta, the new *Teaching Quality*

Standard (TQS) “provides a framework for the preparation, professional growth, supervision, and evaluation of all teachers” (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 2). The six competencies identified therein (Alberta Education, 2018b) are closely aligned with Howell, Cook, and Faulkner’s (2013) *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices*. Combined, these two frameworks provided the basis for the exploration of effective middle level teaching in this study.

Teacher preparation. Although the mandate of teacher preparation programs is to graduate effective teachers, several recent Alberta Education publications indicate there may be some concerns. In the Alberta Education (2015a) annual report, 36% of Albertan principals indicated that graduates of teacher education programs were inadequately prepared to become teachers. Furthermore, 25% of beginning teachers in Alberta leave the profession within five years (Alberta Education, 2013a). As noted in an Alberta Teachers’ Association (2013) study on beginning teachers, “the quality of preservice preparation has an impact on attrition” (p. 7). The *Task Force for Teaching Excellence* (Alberta Education, 2014), which had a mandate to improve teaching quality and ensure “for every child, in every class, there is an excellent teacher” (p. 1), identified three areas of concern pertaining to teacher preparation: admission into programs, practicum opportunities for student teachers, and the alignment of teacher preparation programs with provincial vision and goals.

Davis (2015) highlighted the challenges faced by teacher preparation programs in the United States, indicating that the path to successfully preparing effective teachers “has never been less clear” as “what makes a great teacher and what is meant by high quality” is ill-defined (p. 107). Similarly, in the 2015 *Handbook of Canadian Research in Initial Teacher Education*, Falkenberg decried the discrepancies student teachers often experience between their post-secondary classroom learning and their field-based practicum experiences in schools. In the same

publication, Russell and Dillon (2015) questioned the prevalent teacher preparation program design where coursework is followed by a practicum, and proposed a more integrated model. The mandate of teacher preparation programs is to graduate effective teachers. This study provides insights into the competencies needed for effective teaching in middle school and thus, middle level teacher preparation.

The middle level teacher preparation program at RDC draws upon foundational middle school concept documents such as *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) that promote a student-centred, progressive approach to schooling. The program has a mandate to prepare grades 4 to 9 generalist (all core subjects) teachers who use active, integrated curriculum to engage young adolescents in authentic, developmentally responsive ways. A list of courses is provided as Appendix B. Typical middle school practices such as teaming, service learning, and active learning are modeled throughout the two years. The cohorts of pre-service teachers become increasingly adept at integrating curriculum from different subject areas as they design meaningful, engaging learning opportunities that take into consideration the physical, social, emotional, moral, and cognitive development of middle school students. Student teachers are generally placed in local middle schools for their practicum experiences. Their anecdotal reports of discrepancies between the realities of local classrooms and their learning in the middle level teacher preparation program led to this investigation.

Research Problem

Students in the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC learn about typical middle level practices such as teaming, common planning time, curriculum integration, flexible block scheduling, and advisory programs. However, these practices are not necessarily occurring in central Alberta middle schools, and are perhaps not fully understood by administrators and

teachers in the region. For example, pre-service teachers noted during their practicum that many central Alberta middle school teachers do not have common planning time. This regularly scheduled meeting time during the school day enables interdisciplinary teams of teachers to work together to plan learning activities and assessments, organize team events, and discuss student concerns (Cook & Faulkner, 2010). A lack of common planning time limits teachers' ability to collaborate to support student learning.

Indeed, both pre-service teachers and graduates of the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC have reported to me, as a teacher educator in that program, about discrepancies between what they have learned as a pre-service teacher and the realities of middle schools in the region. A recent RDC graduate recognized the discrepancy upon attending a conference in the United States: "We have learned so much and solidified some things we believed to be true for our training, but don't always see in our schools" (personal communication, March, 2017).

The discrepancies between what is taught in Canadian teacher preparation programs and the current practices in today's schools are lamented by Canadian researchers such as Falkenberg, (2015) who claims: "the university-based course work and the school-based field experiences need to be much more integrated than they currently are" (p. 12). In several articles in the *Handbook of Canadian Research on Initial Teacher Education*, edited by Falkenberg (2015), this discrepancy is referred to as a theory-practice gap. A recent study on beginning teachers found that "the theory-to-practice gap has not yet been bridged in Alberta" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2013, p. 30); participants indicated that their university studies and experiences in schools did not adequately prepare them for the realities of being a teacher.

Meanwhile, middle school administrators are hiring graduates of the middle level teacher preparation program, evaluating them, and deciding whether or not to recommend them for

permanent certification and continued employment. If the practices taught in the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC do not align with current middle school practices or the administrators' views of effective teaching, the beginning teacher may find it difficult to be successful. For example, an RDC graduate may focus on integrating curriculum from different subject areas around a certain theme and the administrator may prefer that each subject be taught separately. This illustrates the importance of seeking the insights of middle school administrators on current middle school practices and the competencies that are needed to be an effective middle school teacher. Their perspectives can inform the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC and provide insights into means to better prepare pre-service teachers for their role in local middle schools.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to examine the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators on effective middle level education. Their perspectives on the middle school concept, middle level leadership, and effective teaching provided insight into the extent of perceived discrepancies between the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC and the current realities of central Alberta's middle schools.

This study was guided by the central research question: *What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?* The research sub-questions (Creswell, 2012) are based on the three main constructs (the middle school concept, effective teaching, and effective middle level leadership) that framed this study:

1. Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?

2. According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher?
3. How do middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education?

Research Design

Case study is defined as an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded, real-world context (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). An *instrumental* case study (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995) research design was used to provide insight into the phenomenon of middle level education, based on the perspectives of middle school administrators in the current central Alberta context. This case study is *instrumental* as it focused on the phenomenon of middle level education in the central Alberta region, rather than being an *intrinsic* case study that focused on the case itself (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995). Case study research invites the use of multiple sources of evidence to provide a holistic account of a real-world problem of practice (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Varied perspectives were obtained using a two-phase *explanatory sequential* mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In the first phase, qualitative and quantitative data was collected using an online questionnaire. The initial results provided the basis for the second phase, which involved six focus group interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Using multiple sources of evidence provided a bifocal lens (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005), or in other words, both macro- and micro-insights into the administrators' perspectives on effective middle level education. Using multiple sources also facilitated the corroboration of findings through the triangulation of data (Yin, 2014). The research design is described more fully in Chapter Three.

Rationale and Significance

It was necessary to explore the perspectives of middle school administrators on effective middle level education to gain insight into the current practices in central Alberta's middle schools. The rationale for this study was to determine the extent of perceived discrepancies between current middle school realities and the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC. The results of this research may lead to changes that better prepare pre-service teachers for their role in local middle schools and begin to address the theory-practice gap discussed above.

It is essential to provide a local Canadian context in the literature on teacher preparation (Falkenberg, 2015, p. 3). Although Howell et al. (2013) suggested that their Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices could serve as a tool to analyze the current status of teacher preparation programs, it was necessary to first obtain a better understanding of the current practices in middle schools in the region. They also recommended further research related to the perspectives of principals on effective middle level practices. This study builds on the recommendations of Howell et al. and Falkenberg (2015). It is also an opportunity to determine whether or not American models of effective middle level education, such as the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010) and the Howell et al. (2013) framework, are suitable in a Canadian context. This study seeks to address these gaps in the literature and to identify the theory-practice discrepancies described above.

This study may be of interest to those in middle level teacher preparation, the Bachelor of Education program at RDC, and other teacher preparation programs in the province. This study may also be of interest to local school divisions as it may enhance both the administrators' awareness of, and therefore interest in, the middle school concept and effective middle level education practices. Professional associations such as the Alberta Teachers' Association and its

subsidiary, the Middle Years Council, may also be interested in this study due to its focus on a particular type of schooling and the related necessary leadership and teaching competencies. Finally, given that the middle years comprises a significant division (Grades 5 to 10) of the Alberta Education (2016b) *Guiding Framework for the Design and Development of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Provincial Curriculum (Programs of Study)*, this study may have a significant impact on teacher preparation in Alberta.

Researcher Perspectives

This case study is bounded by the unique context in which it was conducted: three school divisions in central Alberta that have a high percentage of middle schools compared to the rest of the province. My own experiences, observations, concerns, and assumptions as they pertain to middle schools in the central Alberta region, provide insight into how I situate myself as a researcher in this project.

My experiences as a classroom teacher, school administrator, teacher educator, and post-secondary administrator in the central Alberta region provide me with important insights into the research problem and context of this study. Having been born, raised, educated, and thereafter employed in the region for the past 20 years, I have inside knowledge about how changes in the implementation of the middle school concept in local schools have unfolded. As a classroom teacher in various middle schools in the region, I experienced typical middle school practices such as teaming, integrated curriculum, and advisory programs. At one middle school, I helped develop a school-wide advisory program, enjoyed being a member of a teaching team, and explored curriculum integration with my grade sixes. I was disheartened when a new principal started the school year by removing the advisory program and discontinuing common planning time.

As the practicum placement coordinator for the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC for four of the past eight years, I frequently contacted the middle school administrators in all three school divisions and visited their schools. The three central Alberta school divisions were chosen for this study because of the close relationship between the middle level teacher preparation program and the middle schools in those school divisions that accept student teachers on an annual basis. Through my conversations with mentor teachers, student teachers and school administrators, I have gained insights into the unique aspects of each middle school.

As a teacher educator, I became very familiar with the middle school concept and used it as the foundation of the middle level teacher preparation program. It was through my work in the middle level teacher preparation program that I began to perceive the discrepancies between its curriculum and what was occurring in middle schools in the region. That perceived discrepancy is what led to this study.

In my current leadership role as Associate Dean of the School of Education at RDC, I am deeply interested in how middle school administrators view effective middle level education and how closely their perspectives align with the middle level teacher preparation program curriculum.

These experiences have prepared me to engage in this study as I am equipped with both etic and emic views (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006) of the research context. I have emic (insider) knowledge of middle school practices due to my experiences as a middle school teacher. As an etic (outsider) researcher who is no longer part of the middle school context, my background and experiences in the central Alberta region helped me relate to the participants and interpret the findings from this study.

Researcher Assumptions

Based on my experiences as a middle school teacher, administrator, and teacher educator in the central Alberta region, I held three assumptions at the outset of this study. My first assumption was that the middle school administrators would be willing to participate in this study. I was aware that they frequently accepted student teachers and hired graduates from the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC. I was therefore quite confident that they would be willing to participate and provide feedback that might enhance the middle level teacher preparation program.

My second assumption related to effective middle level practices. I assumed the Howell et al. (2013) framework would provide a suitable basis for this study on effective middle level education because it uses the middle school concept as a foundation. From my work as a teacher educator at RDC, I observed that aspects of this framework have been implemented to varying degrees in different schools and school divisions. I anticipated that the participants would understand and be able to identify effective middle level practices, and how those practices may compare to other levels of schooling, based on their knowledge of effective teaching and their experiences as a middle school administrator. I could not, however, assume that the administrators would be familiar with the middle school concept and how it relates to effective middle level education.

My third assumption was that a discrepancy existed between the middle level teacher preparation program curriculum and the current realities of middle schools in the region. My experiences with local middle schools, as outlined above, have helped me recognize the “limited progress in implementing a more comprehensive conception of middle level education” (Lounsbury, 2013, p. 43) in the central Alberta region. My experiences in both middle schools

and post-secondary education in the region led me to believe there were discrepancies between how the middle school concept was presented in post-secondary and how it was experienced in local middle schools. However, this case study was necessary to determine if that assumption was indeed correct and if so, the extent of the discrepancies.

Being familiar with the people and contexts of this study could lead to researcher bias. I was especially concerned about a halo effect (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) and sought to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the perspectives of the participants. Using an anonymous questionnaire enabled me to focus on the data, rather than individual participants. I chose to use a research-based framework on middle level practices (Howell et al., 2013) to develop the questionnaire items rather than basing them on my own experience. Focus group interviews allowed for collective insights and therefore some immediate member checking. These attempts to limit researcher bias were bolstered through the use of multiple sources of evidence to corroborate the findings (Yin, 2014).

Definitions

The following are definitions of key concepts as they are used in this study:

Explanatory sequential mixed methods design

Data is collected and analyzed in two phases. The qualitative results in the second phase are used to explain the initial quantitative results.

(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 71)

Instrumental case study

A case study is an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded, real-world context (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). This case study is instrumental (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995) in

that it provides insight into the phenomenon of middle level education in central Alberta.

<i>Interdisciplinary</i>	Combining two or more subject-areas to enhance student understanding of concepts. Types of interdisciplinary approaches include: project-based learning (PBL), curriculum integration, and cross-curricular learning.
<i>Middle level</i>	Pertaining to young adolescents (aged 10 to 15) in the middle grades.
<i>Middle level teacher preparation program</i>	Years 3 and 4 of a Bachelor of Education degree/teacher preparation program offered at Red Deer College that uses the middle school concept as a foundation for preparing teachers to teach grades 4 to 9.
<i>Middle school</i>	An educational institution between elementary and high school of varying grade configurations, most commonly grades 6 to 8, that strives to foster the academic and personal development of all learners.
<i>Middle school concept, movement or philosophy</i>	These terms are used interchangeably to refer to an approach to schooling that is student-centred, progressive, and grounded in practices designed to be developmentally appropriate for young adolescents, aged 10 to 15. The most comprehensive current expression of the middle school concept is captured in <i>This We Believe</i> (NMSA, 2010, see Appendix A).

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter has outlined an instrumental case study on effective middle level education based on the perspectives of middle school administrators in central Alberta. A brief description of the research contexts provided background to the research problem, purpose and questions that propelled this study. A discussion of the rationale and significance of this study was followed by an overview of the researcher's perspectives and assumptions. Lastly, key definitions were provided.

The next chapter provides a critical review of the literature pertaining to the three constructs that comprise the conceptual framework for this study. The focus of Chapter Three is methodology which provides the details on the two-phase sequential research design that was used to obtain the perspectives of middle school administrators through an online questionnaire and focus group interviews.

In Chapter Four, I present the findings generated from my interpretation of the data collected through an online questionnaire and focus group interviews. Chapter Five contains an interpretation and synthesis of the findings. Finally, Chapter Six provides conclusions and recommendations for middle level teacher preparation and future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This instrumental case study focused on the phenomenon of middle level education in central Alberta. The perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators were needed to determine potential discrepancies between the middle level teacher preparation program and the current practices of central Alberta's middle schools.

A critical review of literature pertaining to effective middle level education was necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the many aspects of this field of study, including the middle school concept, effective teaching and middle level leadership. Literature related to these topics guided my inquiry into the central research question: *What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?*

The following sub-questions focused on specific aspects of middle level education and therefore helped to address the central research question:

1. Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?
2. According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher?
3. How do middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education?

Review of relevant literature continued throughout the data collection, analysis, and synthesis phases of this study. My review of the literature consisted of examining information from a variety of sources including books, dissertations, professional journals, periodicals, handbooks, government publications, and internet resources. These sources were mainly accessed through library searches using databases such as ProQuest Dissertations and Theses and

Education Research Complete, as well as using Google Scholar and Google search. Research topics and search terms related to middle level education included: middle school, middle years, middle school philosophy, leadership, principals, administrators, teacher education, teacher preparation, effective teaching, and teaching competencies, in various combinations.

A critical review of the literature related to each research topic involved analysis and interpretation in order to explore multiple perspectives, identify similar and contrasting ideas, detect gaps in the literature, and establish the basis for this study. My examination of the literature helped to develop the conceptual framework that shaped and guided this study.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework “organizes and informs research” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 193). It serves to guide all aspects of the research process and helps situate the research problem within the existing body of knowledge and research context. A conceptual framework also explains the constructs to be studied and how they are interrelated (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Building upon a critical review of the literature and my insights gained from experience in this particular context, the conceptual framework for this study on effective middle level education, as perceived by middle school administrators, was initially comprised of three constructs, as shown in Figure 1: middle school concept, effective middle level leadership, and effective teaching.

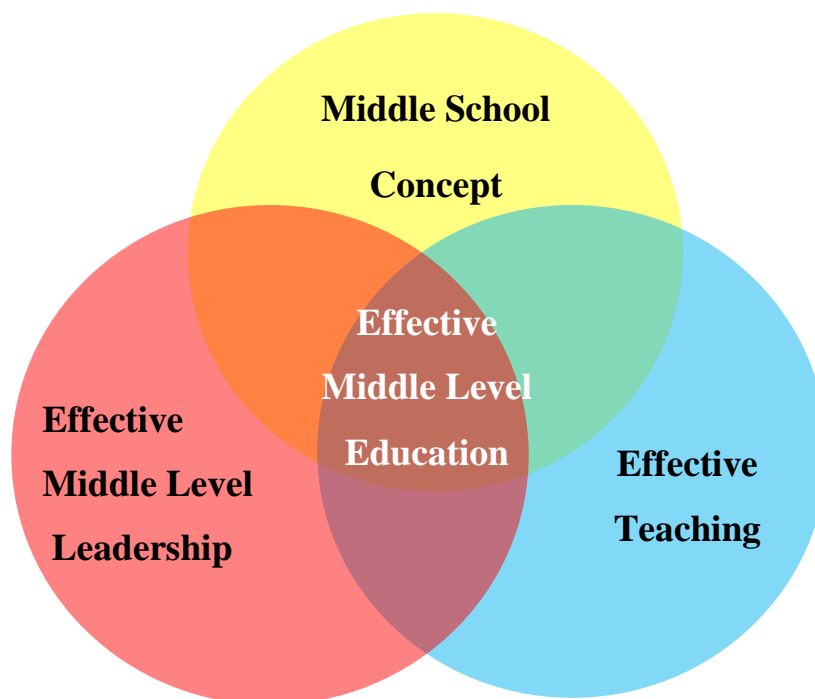


Figure 1. Effective Middle Level Education conceptual framework

In this conceptual framework, I am suggesting that effective middle level education requires not only what the literature identifies as effective teaching (e.g. Alberta Education, 2018b; Danielson, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Friesen, 2009; Hattie, 2012) and effective middle school leadership (e.g. Alberta Education, 2018a; NMSA, 2010; Robinson, 2006; Yee, 2016). I also believe middle level education requires implementation of the middle school concept as a comprehensive, student-centred, progressive, and developmentally responsive approach to the schooling of young adolescents (Lounsbury, 2013; NMSA, 2010). This study investigated how these three constructs were perceived and experienced by middle school administrators in central Alberta, and how the constructs weave together to provide effective middle level education for young adolescents in the region. It is also important to note the overlap between the constructs in Figure 1, illustrating both the shared elements and those that exist on their own. For example, elements of the construct effective teaching would apply to

teaching at any grade level. However, the conceptual framework suggests that when effective teaching intersects with the middle school concept, there are perhaps some unique elements related to effective teaching at the middle level. A critical review of the literature pertaining to each of the three constructs is provided in the next section.

The first section of the literature review provides contextual information related to effective middle level education. A brief historical overview of the middle school movement in the United States is followed by its trajectory in Canada and relevance to education in Alberta. The essential elements of the middle school concept, as it is currently expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), are then explained. The next section explores the essential role of the middle level leader as they promote the various elements of the middle school concept. The final section of the literature review addresses effective teaching, more generally. Combined, the middle school concept, effective middle level leadership, and effective teaching comprise the framework for this study on effective middle level education. A synthesis of corresponding themes from the literature related to each construct is provided at the end of this chapter.

Middle School Concept

A substantive body of knowledge pertaining to the field of middle level education, or the schooling of young adolescents, has accumulated over the past fifty years (Lounsbury, 2013; Schaefer et al., 2016; Yoon et al., 2015). Middle level education refers to a student-centred, progressive approach to schooling that is grounded in practices designed to be developmentally appropriate for young adolescents, aged 10 to 15.

This comprehensive approach to schooling is comprised of several interrelated concepts that are often combined and referred to as the middle school philosophy, middle school concept, middle school movement and more recently, middle level education. This shift was perhaps

reified when the National Middle School Association (NMSA), a leader in American middle level education, changed its name to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) in 2011 (Lounsbury, 2013; Waidelich, 2011). The name change allows for a broader concept of education at the middle level and recognizes that middle level students attend school in a variety of grade configurations including K-8, 6-8, 5-9, 7-9 and many others.

The middle school concept is a comprehensive vision for the schooling of students aged 10 to 15, that strives to meet their unique learning needs through developmentally appropriate practices. It is foundational to how effective middle schools operate as organizations and how members of the school community interact and conduct their daily work. Middle level leaders and teachers enhance their ability to provide effective middle level education when they use the middle school concept as their guide (NMSA, 2010).

Historical Background

It is important to trace the middle school concept to its historical roots in order to determine which aspects have endured the test of time, those that have floundered, and those that have flourished over the past half century. This brief analysis also informs the aspects of the middle school concept that are deemed most important and should be included in the current study. Although some aspects of the middle school concept are introduced here, they are explained more fully in the next section.

Schaefer et al. (2016) attributed the birth of the American middle school movement to William Alexander's 1963 renaming of *junior high schools* to *middle schools*. Alexander called for middle schools that "openly address both the academic and personal development of every young adolescent" (NMSA, 2010). He proposed that middle schools should "be planned to serve a truly transitional function from childhood to adolescence. Its organizational arrangements

should foster growth from childhood dependence toward a high degree of self-sufficiency” (Alexander & Williams, 1965, p. 219). He also claimed that young adolescents were ready for more than the self-contained elementary classrooms and yet should “be free of the rigidity of total departmentalization, the pressures of inter-school competitions, and the tensions of older adolescent social functions that loom so large in typical junior high schools” (p. 219). His proposal for middle schools laid the groundwork for the middle school concept and began the middle school movement.

According to George (2011), the middle school concept is the “current manifestation of progressive education” based on “trust, meaningful relationships, freedom, empowerment, equity, optimism, diversity, complexity, tolerance, child-centredness” (p. 48). Dickinson and Butler (2001) pointed to the potential of the middle school concept to foster intelligent, democratic citizens and proposes it as the “best hope for realizing a Deweyian progressive education philosophy” (p. 11). The middle school movement began in the 1960s in the United States, at a time of significant social changes such as the civil rights, women's rights, and peace movements (George, 2011). Middle level education is similarly built on a progressive foundation of “affirming the value of every student, collaborative leadership, teacher teamwork, flexibility, student-centred curriculum, and active instruction” (George, 2011, p. 50).

Much like middle level learners, the history of middle level education is somewhat capricious, experiencing highs and lows as well as periods of popularity and disdain. Schaefer et al. (2016) conducted an extensive review of over 2000 articles relating to middle level education from 1963 - 2015 and described trends in each decade. Due to space constraints, only the main ideas of the middle school concept that were identified for each decade are briefly mentioned here.

Whereas the 1970s were characterized by attempts to ascertain how middle schools might differ from junior high schools, the middle school movement gained momentum in the 1980s and became the main schooling model in the United States. As an emergent model for schooling, the emphasis was on meeting the diverse needs of students through interdisciplinary, exploratory curriculum and team teaching. Two significant publications, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1982) and *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) helped clarify goals of middle level education, spur change, and foster prolific implementation of the middle school concept across the United States during the 1980s (Manning & Bucher, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2016).

Organizational structures that aligned with the middle school concept were in the literature limelight in the 1990s. These included common planning time, block scheduling, and interdisciplinary teaching teams as well as responsive middle level practices such as advisory programs and cooperative learning. However, concerns about middle school curriculum started to strain the movement as scholars and practitioners struggled to differentiate integrated (no subject-area restrictions) or multidisciplinary (study of a topic through the subject area) approaches to curriculum (Schaefer et al., 2016). The degree of implementation and success of middle schools also started to come into question, leading to calls for middle school reform. Middle school curriculum continued to be contentious in the new millennium as teaching teams struggled to create “integrated, responsive, relevant and engaging” curriculum (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 13). Standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing were seen as enemies of a student-centred, developmentally responsive approach to teaching and learning (Thornton, 2013). As such, advisory programs and curriculum integration seemed to lose favour while “teaming was a research-based practice of the middle school movement that emerged as its most critical

component” (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 12) as it enabled a team of teachers to better collaborate, be more responsive, and promote student success.

Research in the 2000s indicated that schools that fully implemented the middle school concept were more successful than those that didn’t and 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. For example, a school may have implemented an advisory program, but not teaming, or vice versa. In the first part of the 2010s, the American middle school movement continued to bump up against standardized curriculum and a culture of accountability through testing. As a result, “middle grades leaders noted that the movement was slowing, stagnant, and without energy” (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 14). Even though he indicated some of the accomplishments of the middle school movement, Lounsbury (2013) was discouraged by “the limited progress in implementing a more comprehensive conception of middle level education” (p. 43). Although Schaefer et al. (2016) suggested that middle school practices remain essential to meeting the needs of young adolescents, they concluded that “these are trying times for the middle school movement” (p. 18). In their review of the literature, Schaefer et al. (2016) found that developmental responsiveness, or taking into consideration both the unique nature and diverse needs of young adolescents, has remained unshakably at the core of the middle school concept throughout the decades. Similarly, flexible block scheduling, common planning time and teaming seem firmly embedded. The current era seems to emphasize standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing whereas advisory programs and exploratory, integrative curriculum seem less important.

This section has demonstrated that certain elements of the middle school concept have endured, while others have had less prominence in the literature and in practice over the past 50

years. Given that much of the literature on the middle school concept is American, the next section explores its manifestation in Canada.

Canadian Context

Unlike many American trends, the middle school movement has not seen widespread adoption in Canada. While a vast number of studies have been conducted on middle schooling in the United States, there has been scant Canadian research on middle schools. Fasano (1989) remarked that, “our proximity to U.S. centres often prompts us to seek a middle-school guru to the south” (p. 9). Topics related to adolescent health, bullying and literacy are discussed in the Canadian literature; however, studies on middle schools or middle school philosophy in Canada are relatively non-existent.

Riding on the excitement of the NMSA conference held in Toronto in 1989, Fasano (1989) wrote of the growing Canadian interest and implementation of middle schools across the country. At the time, there were 78 middle schools in Canada, mostly in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario, with only one in Alberta (Fasano, 1989). Twenty years later, the middle school concept seemed to fall out of favour when both Johnson (2012) and Dhuey (2013) found that attending a middle school negatively affected academic achievement on provincial tests in Ontario and British Columbia. Meanwhile, in their efforts to transform middle years education, Manitoba Education (2010) identified the following five strategies: “Nurture stronger learning relationships; strengthen community involvement; develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents; provide more responsive teaching and learning experiences; increase student voice and choice” (p. 2). These strategies involve both developmentally responsive, student-centred pedagogy and organizational structures as explored above. The middle school concept seems to have been well integrated into the provincial education system in certain parts of Canada.

Unlike neighbouring prairie provinces Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where middle schools are included in the provincial educational structure and policies, middle schools are not part of the educational framework in Alberta. Most provincial curriculum is currently organized by elementary (K-6), junior high (7-9) or senior high (10-12). Prospective teachers often choose either an elementary (generalist) or secondary (specialist) route to obtain a Bachelor of Education degree. Although there has been a Middle Years specialist council available through the Alberta Teachers' Association since 1993 (Alberta Teachers' Association, n.d.), it is affiliated with the American Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) and is founded upon the middle school concept, as expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). Middle schools seem relatively absent from the Albertan education picture.

Similar to the national adoption, the middle school movement has been implemented sporadically in Alberta, more popular in some school divisions than others. Based on the government published list of 1920 public and separate schools in Alberta, there are merely 22 (or approximately 1%) that are middle schools in name (Alberta Education, 2016a). A closer look at schools in the city of Calgary indicates that another 19/241 schools are middle level grade configurations (often 5 to 8) increasing the overall number of middle schools in Alberta to approximately 2.5%. In the central Alberta region, a middle school grade configuration (including combinations of grades 4 to 9) exists in three of the four school divisions nearest Red Deer. Ele-middle schools, described by Manning and Bucher (2012) as having grades K-8 or K-9, are also a popular choice for middle level education in these school divisions. Table 2.1 illustrates the types of school configurations in the three school divisions in the Red Deer area that have middle schools, based on information gleaned from each school division website. All ten middle schools listed in Table 2.1 are well-established in the region and constitute an average

Table 2.1

Number of Schools per Grade Configuration in Red Deer Area

School Division	Elementary Schools (K-5 or K-6)	Middle Schools (4 - 9)	Ele-middle schools (K-8 or K-9)	High Schools (9-12 or 10-12)	K-12 schools
Chinook's Edge School Division	11	4	6	12	6
Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools	7	3	7	3	0
Red Deer Public Schools	13	3	3	2	1

Note. Source was school division websites: www.chinooksedge.ab.ca; rdcrs.ca; www.rdpsd.ab.ca

of 11% of schools between the three school divisions, which is much higher than the provincial average of 2.5%. Students from the middle level teacher preparation program at Red Deer College are frequently placed in these schools for practicum. In the past decade, there have been some shifts in these school divisions both toward and away from middle schools. In one of these school divisions, a middle school and two elementary schools were changed to K-8 configurations in an effort to improve student achievement. This decision caused many educators in the region to question the value of the middle schools and the commitment to the middle school concept. Meanwhile, in another school division, schools changed their names from junior highs to middle schools and grade six students were no longer in elementary schools. The middle schools vary not only in size or number of students, but also in their implementation of the middle school concept.

Across Canada and across Alberta, the middle school concept has been implemented to varying degrees. Given the local shifts in grade configurations and changes in provincial

education over the past twenty years, it was important to consider the relevance of the middle school concept in the current Albertan educational context.

Relevance of the Middle School Concept

The middle school concept could be considered in the context of broader debates about the purpose of schooling. Hull (2013) identified four orientations: the dominant curriculum as technology (efficiency) orientation “defined knowledge and learning in the form of quantifiable and measurable outcomes” (p. 19); the competing child-centred orientation “emphasized developmentally appropriate and personalized approaches to learning” (p. 19), the liberal arts orientation resulted in discipline knowledge packaged into discrete curriculum areas taught in blocked periods of time; and the social reform orientation that promoted education as a means to improve society.

Those that hold the prevailing efficiency view call for increased rigor and academic excellence, often supporting a focus on achievement on standardized, high-stakes tests, school accountability, and international test scores such that students can become productive, contributing members of society that can compete in a global economy. In this light, critics of the middle school movement claim that it is not rigorous enough, is too child-centred, does not promote academic achievement and fails to adequately prepare students for high school or post-secondary studies (Beane, 2013; Dhuey, 2013; Manning & Bucher, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2016). However, as Friesen (2009) claimed, the efficiency view is “fundamentally flawed” (p. 3) as application of knowledge to different contexts and a learner’s ability to adapt, reflect, and think in a variety of ways are more important than the acquisition of disparate facts that are memorized for an exam and quickly forgotten. Therefore, a shift toward more relevant, engaging student-centred practices is needed.

As a movement with progressive roots concerned with humanistic and democratic values (Beane, 2013; George, 2011), the middle school concept relates to other child-centred approaches such as personalized learning “that would result in more self-actualized, engaged and competent young persons” (Center for Collaborative Education [CCE], 2017, p. 18) and holistic approaches such as aboriginal worldviews that “address the whole person, encompassing their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual capabilities in relation to all living things” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 14). Similarly, the following statements from the Albertan Ministerial Order on Student Learning (Alberta Education, 2013b) align with progressive educational views:

- Whereas the fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing the competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society.
- Whereas education in Alberta is based on the values of opportunity, fairness, citizenship, choice, diversity, and excellence.
- Whereas the educational best interest of the child is the paramount consideration in making decisions about a child’s education.

Further, students are at the core of the curriculum redesign currently underway in Alberta:

“Understanding the nature of learning and the learner is the starting point for building a learner-focused, knowledge-centred and meaningful provincial curriculum for students in Alberta”

(Alberta Education, 2016b, p. 4). As such, the middle school concept continues to be relevant to education today and, when fully implemented, would support current Albertan educational initiatives.

In sum, while advocates of the middle school concept promote it as a relevant, holistic, student-centred approach to teaching and learning that is designed to meet individual learning needs and promote success for all learners, research has yet to determine if this progressive model of education can withstand the enduring pressures of the efficiency orientation toward education. Given this historical and contextual overview of the middle school concept, the next section elaborates on the essential elements that comprise it.

Essential Elements

Since their inception, middle schools were intended to ensure both the “academic and personal development of every young adolescent” (NMSA, 2010, p. 4) through the implementation of the middle school concept. The most widely accepted vision of the current middle school concept, *This We Believe*, (NMSA, 2010) identifies developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable education as four essential attributes of successful middle schools. It also identifies 16 characteristics in the following three categories: (i) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (ii) leadership and organization; and (iii) culture and community, as shown in Table 2.2. Together, these 20 distinct and intertwined elements combine to form the middle school concept, or what is needed for effective schooling at the middle level.

Thoughtful consideration of the essential elements of the middle school concept, as expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), may lead one to question how these ideas are unique to middle school. Taken individually, they are not. For example, many of the foundational principles of *Moving Forward with High School Redesign* in Alberta (2017) are also present in the middle school concept, including: “rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalization, meaningful relationships, home and community involvement, assessment, welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment” (Alberta Education, 2017).

Table 2.2

Elements of the Current Middle School Concept

Four essential attributes:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmentally Responsive: using the nature of young adolescents as the foundation on which all decisions are made. • Challenging: recognizing that every student can learn and is held to high expectations • Empowering: providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take control of their lives. • Equitable: advocating for every student's right to learn and providing challenging and relevant learning opportunities. 		
Three categories of characteristics of successful middle schools:		
Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Leadership and Organization	Culture and Community
<p>Value Young Adolescents: Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.</p> <p>Active Learning: Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.</p> <p>Challenging Curriculum: Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.</p> <p>Multiple Learning Approaches: Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.</p> <p>Varied Assessments: Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.</p>	<p>Shared Vision: A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.</p> <p>Courageous & Collaborative Leaders: Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.</p> <p>Committed Leaders: Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.</p> <p>Professional Development: Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.</p> <p>Organizational Structures: Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.</p>	<p>School Environment: The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.</p> <p>Adult Advocate: Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.</p> <p>Guidance Services: Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.</p> <p>Health and Wellness: Supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.</p> <p>Family Involvement: School actively involves families in child's education.</p> <p>Community and Business: School includes community and business partners.</p>

Note. Adapted from: *This We Believe*, NMSA, 2010, p. 14

Further, the argument could be made that many of the essential elements apply to all levels of schooling. While this is true, what distinguishes the middle school concept is its developmentally responsive core that suggests that the effective middle school is geared toward meeting the unique needs of young adolescents.

The statements of *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) are “interdependent and need to be implemented in concert” (p. 13) and therefore comprise a holistic approach specific to the education of young adolescents. Emphasizing the connections between all of these elements, Dickinson and Butler (2001) refer to the middle school concept as a “total ecology of schooling” (p. 10) that needs to be implemented as a “totally integrated organizational-curricular-instructional-relational-developmental concept” (p. 11). To be more succinct, the middle school concept involves promoting success for all students through developmentally responsive, student-centred practices, unique organizational structures, and a community approach to teaching and learning.

The following section provides a more detailed look at the four essential attributes and the three categories of the middle school concept as expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), highlighting the role of the middle level leader.

Effective Middle Level Leadership

Emphasizing the essential role of the school leader, Leithwood (2007) indicated that “leadership has very significant effects on the quality of the school organization and on student learning” (p. 46). Howell et al. (2013) stated that “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). Key literature on school leadership served to inform the practices needed for

effective middle level leadership. A comparison of four leadership models is provided in Table 2.3 to illustrate common and distinct features of each model. The *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) provides a current description for school leaders in Alberta. It was used as the basis for comparison with the other three models.

Table 2.3

Comparison of Leadership Models

Alberta Education (2018a) <i>Leadership Quality Standard</i>	NMSA (2010) <i>This We Believe</i> (excerpt)	Leithwood (2011) <i>Core Practices</i>	Robinson (2011) <i>Leadership Dimensions</i>
Fostering Effective Relationships	Organizational Structures		
Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning	Professional Development; Committed Leaders		
Embodying Visionary Leadership	Shared Vision	Setting Directions	Establishing Goals and Expectations
Leading a Learning Community	School Environment	Aligning Organization	Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment
Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit			
Providing Instructional Leadership		Improving Instructional Program	Ensuring Quality Teaching
Developing Leadership Capacity	Courageous and Collaborative Leaders	Developing People	Leading Teacher Learning and Development
Managing School Operations and Resources			Resourcing Strategically
Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context	Family Involvement; Community and Business		

Similarities are apparent across the four leadership models. Shared vision was articulated, although using different terms, in each of the four leadership models. Collaborative leadership was also common to each model. In *This We Believe*, a collaborative leader “cultivates leadership skills in others, and empowers them to make decisions and enact changes” (NMSA, 2010, p. 29). As such, the collaborative leaders characteristic from the middle school concept is similar to the other three leadership models that refer to developing people and leadership capacity. Relationships were only featured in two of the leadership models: *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) and *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). The organizational structures characteristic of the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010) was considered as a means to foster relationships as is noted in its description: “Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships” (p. 31). This is largely accomplished through teaming in middle schools. The personnel management aspect seems conspicuously absent, or is not explicitly stated, in these leadership models.

These four leadership models and other literature will be used to explore the importance of leadership in middle level education and the influence leaders have on all aspects of middle schooling. The review is organized by the three categories of characteristics in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010): (1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) organizational structures; and (3) culture and community. First, however, leaders should be guided by the four essential attributes of effective middle schools, especially developmental responsiveness.

Essential Attributes

As identified in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), effective education at the middle level is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (see Table 2.2). Combined, these four essential attributes provide a foundation for how education at the middle level is

provided to young adolescents, creating a philosophical approach committed to the success of every student. These attributes can therefore provide a set of values for the middle level leader on which to build a “shared vision for student success,” as identified in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a). Further, “as the prime determiner of the school culture and its direction, the principal influences student achievement and teacher effectiveness by using his or her knowledge to nurture, sustain, and advocate for comprehensive, student-centred education program” (NMSA, 2010, p. 28-29).

While all four attributes are deemed important and promote progressive education values, developmental responsiveness seems to dominate the middle school literature. Developmentally responsive, student-centred pedagogy recognizes the diverse needs and characteristics of young adolescents and takes into consideration their physical, social, emotional, moral, and cognitive development (CCE, 2003a & 2003b; NMSA, 2010; Thornton, 2013). 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). A developmentally responsive leader would therefore recognize 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) and strive to make decisions and create conditions in their school that lead to success for all learners. For example, providing young adolescents with a wide range of opportunities to explore diverse interests can support their psychological development and can lead to “healthy recreational and leisure time pursuits that enrich life and help develop well-rounded, self-sufficient adults” (NMSA, 2010, p. 20). A middle school leader would thus value opportunities for exploration provided through extra-

curricular, fine arts, athletics, field trips, and in-class experiences. Responding to the developmental needs of young adolescents is therefore foundational to middle school leadership.

Robinson (2006) explained that educational leaders require a specific set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions to create the “conditions that teachers need to promote their students’ learning” (p. 73). The competencies required of Alberta school leaders are identified in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a). If success for all students is the ultimate goal of middle level education (CCE, 2003a, p. 3), the middle level leader needs to be knowledgeable about young adolescent development and promote developmentally responsive pedagogy. Such a leader would recognize a developmentally responsive teacher who provides students opportunities to move around and interact while learning, for example, to meet both their physical (sitting too long can be painful to changing bodies) and social needs (increased importance of peers). As indicated in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), school leaders are expected to apply principles of child development to their decisions (p. 7).

Of significance, Vagle (2015) identified that by focusing on the developmental stage, young adolescents are often viewed in “deficit-oriented ways” (p. 3) and suggests that educators should instead consider the “complicated, contextual, and socially constructed” (p. 4) unique lives of individuals to be truly responsive. Drawing from the field of early learning research, he further suggested that this would require young adolescent educators to increase awareness of cultural, race, gender, class, sexuality and language differences. Yoon et al. (2015) concurred that more research is needed to provide “new insights into significant developmental factors such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, family/home life, value systems, and the ways these impact schooling” (p. 11). Middle level educators therefore should perhaps consider a broader

conception of responsive practices to meet today's young adolescent needs. For instance, instructional leaders could encourage teachers to become more responsive by planning, teaching and assessing students based on individual needs and interests. A responsive educator can better empower young adolescents and provide more equitable learning opportunities by supporting individual interests, needs, and growth. It would be difficult for middle level leaders to encourage developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering and equitable learning environments if they do not adequately understand responsive teaching practices that are based on student needs and interests. Middle school leaders should have an educational background, experience, and ongoing professional learning related on middle level education (Yee, 2016).

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Whereas the four essential attributes explored above (developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable) describe the broad orientations that are essential to effective middle level educators and leaders, the middle school concept also serves as a set of guiding principles when it comes to student-centred planning, instruction and assessment practices. The first characteristic in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment category is that “educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them” (NMSA, 2010, p. 14). Effective middle level educators “understand the developmental uniqueness of this age group, the appropriate curriculum, and effective learning and assessment strategies” (NMSA, 2010, p. 15). Howell et al. (2013) explained that while the content knowledge, assessment, classroom management, and curriculum and instruction are common to effective teaching at any grade level, they should be considered at the middle level “through a lens that considers young adolescent development” (p. 17).

The rest of this category of characteristics of effective middle level education as it pertains to curriculum, instruction and assessment, is more fully developed in a later section on effective teaching. It should be noted, however, that providing instructional leadership in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment are identified in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a). The next category of the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010) that is explored pertains to leadership and organization.

Leadership and Organization

The degree to which the middle school concept is implemented in a particular school depends largely upon the primary school leader, the principal. There are five statements related to leadership and organization that characterize effective middle schools (NMSA, 2010). Leaders are called upon to “demonstrate courage and collaboration” and be “committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices” (NMSA, 2010, p. 28-29). Perhaps most important for a middle school leader, “a shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision” (NMSA, 2010, p. 27). 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). The middle level leader needs to have a deep understanding of the middle school concept and practices to be able to support the school’s vision of effective middle level education.

Prior experience at the middle level was also important. Yee (2016) questioned the Canadian practice of appointing middle school administrators who have “little to no background in working with teachers, students and their families in middle level learning environments” (p. 8). She called for increased leader awareness “of how the adolescent developmental period impacts all aspects of leading, teaching and learning” (Yee, 2016, p. 8). Williamson and

Johnston (2013) proposed that a principal's understanding of developmental differences can lead to their support of best middle levels practices related to curriculum and instruction (p. 143). One can imagine that without an understanding of the middle school concept and the essential role of the leader, it would be difficult for a middle school leader to implement a vision for effective middle level education.

Middle level education is also characterized by unique organizational structures. Typical organizational structures that set middle schools apart can include: common planning time where interdisciplinary teams of teachers collaborate; advisory programs designed to be developmentally responsive and meet the unique needs of young adolescents; and flexible block schedules that enable teams to provide more in-depth, engaging, cross-curricular learning activities that aren't interrupted by frequent bells (Center for Collaborative Education, 2003a & 2003b; Howell et al., 2013; NMSA, 2010; Yoon et al., 2015).

Lounsbury (2013) explained that teaming, two or more teachers working with a common group of students, has become a well-established practice in middle schools. The team is a core organizational structure, creating a smaller learning community of 50 to 100 students and a few main teachers, that ideally leads to "improved student achievement, increased parental contacts, an enhanced school climate, and positive student attitudes" (NMSA, 2010, p. 31). The team of teachers ideally meets during common planning time to discuss matters related to curriculum, instruction, assessment and individual student needs (NMSA, 2010, p. 32).

A flexible block schedule, for example having the same group of students all morning, provides longer stretches of time to work on projects, participate in field trips or other activities that are not possible within a typical class period. In the absence of these organizational structures, middle level education can be limited, or not as effective (Dickinson & Butler, 2001;

Howell et al., 2013). For example, if a teacher does not have common planning time with a team of colleagues who teach different subjects to the same students, it becomes more challenging to provide interdisciplinary learning experiences and focused supports for struggling students. The organizational structures unique to middle schools are therefore important aspects of effective middle level education that should be supported and implemented by leaders.

Culture and Community

Middle level leaders have an important role to play in establishing a school's culture and community. As Leithwood (2007) identified, "organizational culture and structure are two sides of the same coin" (p. 56). He added that it is generally the principal that needs to put in place the structures to enable collaborative cultures and lead the way to "building productive relationships with family and communities" (p. 56). Similarly, in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) the "fostering effective relationships" competency is described as "a leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community" (p. 4). Middle school leaders work with teachers, parents and community members in unique ways (Williamson & Johnston, 2013). A key characteristic of effective middle schools is being able to actively involve families, community and business partners (NMSA, 2010). In terms of family involvement, school leaders can create a family-friendly environment through efforts such as parent education and volunteer programs, positive home-school communication and student-led conferences (NMSA, 2010, p. 40-41). It is also likely up to the school principal to establish community and business partnerships so that students can benefit from authentic learning opportunities such as service learning projects, guest experts and field trips (NMSA, 2010, p. 41). Building community is therefore an important role for middle level leaders.

In terms of the school culture, the middle level leader needs to ensure that the “school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive and supportive of all” (NMSA, 2010, p. 33). This is accomplished through a culture where relationships are built upon respect, positive interactions and collaboration (NMSA, 2010). Howell et al. (2013) put relationships at the core of effective middle level education as they impact all aspects of teaching and learning and “go hand in hand with developmentally responsive pedagogy” (p. 5). Westerberg (2016) claimed: “The importance of the principal’s role in promoting productive relationships between adults and students on campus is second to none” (p. 60). A positive learning environment requires positive relationships and a leader to foster them. “Like the young adolescents themselves, the climate of a developmentally responsive middle school requires constant nurturing” (NMSA, 2010, p. 34).

Still in the culture and community category, the other three characteristics of effective middle schools are closely linked to the supportive environment explored above. A student-centred school environment is enhanced by access to guidance services, focus on health and wellness, and support for “every student’s academic and personal development guided by an adult advocate” (NMSA, 2010, p. 35). Again, the school administrators play a key role in providing the organizational supports for these three characteristics to be implemented. Many effective middle schools have advisory programs that provide daily contact with a trusted, caring adult who can guide, support, advocate and intervene on behalf of individual students. While many middle schools have advisory programs (Lounsbury, 2013, p. 41), “advocacy is not a singular event or a period in the schedule, it is an attitude of caring that translates into actions, big and small, when adults respond to the needs of each young adolescent in their charge” (NMSA, 2010, p. 35). The advisor is intended to support the efforts of the guidance or school counselling program. Finally, school administrators are also responsible for providing

developmentally appropriate health and wellness programs in the school and overseeing everything from school nutrition, anti-bullying efforts, intramural and other sports activities, to the general well-being of all school members. (NMSA, 2010, p. 38-39). In sum, the middle level administrator plays a central role in promoting culture and community in effective middle schools.

This section has explored the role of the middle level leader as it pertains to the implementation of the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010). In addition to promoting the four essential attributes as core middle school values, the middle level leader also needs to promote the elements of effective middle schools that fall into the three categories: culture and community; leadership and organization; and curriculum, instruction and assessment. The next section elaborates on the curriculum, instruction and assessment category as it relates to current literature on effective teaching.

Effective Teaching

An important body of literature to consider when exploring effective middle level education is the broader topic of effective teaching. Darling-Hammond (2000) stated that teaching quality is the most important determinant of K-12 student achievement. However, because teaching is a craft that is mastered in myriad ways, effective, high quality teaching is not universally identifiable. In his lamentation of current teacher evaluation practices based on a teacher content knowledge and ability to impact student achievement, Davis (2015) indicated “there are not clear expectations of what a competent, high quality teacher looks like and what skills and dispositions they possess” (p. 104). Nevertheless, researchers have developed different models of effective teaching that have received significant attention. This section explores some

of the recent research-based effective teaching frameworks that informed this study on effective middle level teaching.

Effective Teaching and Effective Teachers

A primary distinction is commonly made between effective teaching and effective teachers. Darling-Hammond (2010) described teacher quality as: “the bundle of personal traits, skills, and understandings an individual brings to teaching, including dispositions to behave in certain ways” (p. 2). She described teaching quality as “instruction meets the demands of the discipline, the goals of instruction, and the needs of students in a particular context” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 3). She further explained that teaching quality is a subset of what constitutes a quality teacher and that teaching conditions also impact teacher effectiveness. This view is in keeping with the Alberta Education (2018b) *Teaching Quality Standard* which states: “quality teaching occurs when the teacher’s ongoing analysis of context, and the teacher’s decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply, result in optimum learning for all students” (p. 3). Wiliam (2016) cautioned that it is “difficult and perhaps impossible to entirely disentangle teacher quality from teaching quality” (p. 30), and focused on teacher effectiveness as the means to improve student achievement. When considering effective teaching, it is therefore necessary to keep the teaching context, in this case middle school, in mind when determining what knowledge, skills and attributes are needed or what middle level teachers are expected to know, do and be. The Drake, Reid, and Kolohon (2014) “Know, Do, Be” framework serves as a useful guide when considering what current research says about effective teaching and teachers.

In an effort to determine what Albertan teachers need to know, do and be, Alberta Education commissioned the *Task Force for Teaching Excellence report* (Alberta Education, 2014), which describes the divergent viewpoints of eight education stakeholder groups and over

3000 Albertans regarding teaching excellence. These views illustrate that definitions of teaching quality are influenced by two main paradigms as described by Hull (2013): an efficiency view and a relationship-oriented view. These paradigms are illustrated below by various stakeholder views on quality teaching.

In their submission to the Task Force, the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta stated, “teaching excellence will not be achieved without consequence for non-compliance to standards” (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 148). This is representative of what Hull (2013) described as the persistent efficiency model, characterized by “heavy-handed emphasis on efficiency, standardization, and measurement of learning” (p. 20), or the technical knowledge and skills (know and do) side of teaching.

On the contrary, the Alberta School Boards’ Association stated, “excellent teachers are engaged and build genuine rapport with students to help each student realize his/her full potential. Facilitating student learning, in a collaborative, empathetic and nurturing learning environment is critical to ensuring greater opportunities for student success” (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 168). This view of teaching excellence is characteristic of a more student-centred approach to education, a way of ‘being’ a teacher. In this relationship-oriented approach, Hull (2013) explained that excellent teachers “foster meaningful relationships in their classrooms. They must be people of vision and deeply understand how to teach and encourage their students’ learning” (p. 27). As shown in Table 2.4, both the efficiency and relationship-oriented views of teaching excellence seem to be promoted in the Alberta Education (2018b) *Teaching Quality Standard* (TQS).

Table 2.4

Teaching Quality Standard Competencies, by Paradigm

Efficiency view	Relationship-oriented view
<p>Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge (3) A teacher applies a current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction, and assessment practices to meet the learning needs of every student.</p>	<p>Fostering Effective Relationships (1) A teacher builds positive and productive relationships with students, parents/guardians, peers and others in the school and local community to support student learning.</p>
<p>Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit (5) A teacher develops and applies foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students</p>	<p>Engaging in Career-Long Learning (2) A teacher engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to improve teaching and learning.</p>
<p>Adhering to Legal Frameworks and Policies (6) A teacher demonstrates an understanding of and adherence to the legal frameworks and policies that provide the foundations for the Alberta education system.</p>	<p>Establishing Inclusive Learning Environments (4) A teacher establishes, promotes and sustains inclusive learning environments where diversity is embraced and every student is welcomed, cared for, respected, and safe.</p>

Note. Each numbered category of competencies from the Alberta Education (2018b) *Teaching Quality Standard* was sorted according to paradigms described by Hull (2013).

The *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) is used in Table 2.5 as a basis for comparison with other recent (since 2009) research-based frameworks of effective teaching. Only the first four competencies of the TQS are compared as the other competencies (#5 and #6 above) are specific to an Alberta context and both could be incorporated into other categories. For example, applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit (#5) could be considered as part of a teacher's professional body of knowledge (#3) and ability to establish an inclusive learning environment (#4). Similarly, knowledge of legal frameworks and policies (#6) can be subsumed by competencies #2 and #3. Table 2.5 is a synthesis of currently renowned researchers' frameworks of effective teaching as they compare to four of the competencies in the Alberta Education (2018b) *Teaching Quality Standard*.

Table 2.5

Comparison of Alberta's Teaching Quality Standard to Research on Effective Teaching

Alberta Education (2018b) Teaching Quality Standard competencies	Friesen (2009) Teaching Effectiveness Framework	Darling-Hammond (2010)	Hattie (2012) Visible Learning for Teachers	Howell, Cook & Faulkner (2013) Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices	Danielson (2016) The Framework for Teaching: Six Clusters Supporting High Level Learning
1. Fostering effective relationships (students, parents, peers, community)	4. Teachers foster a variety of interdependent relationships		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exert positive influences on student outcomes (not only academic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships 	
2. Engaging in career-long learning	5. Teachers improve their practice in the company of their peers			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher dispositions and professional behaviors 	6. Professionalism
3. Demonstrating a professional body of knowledge planning, instruction, assessment	1. Teachers are designers of learning; 2. Worthwhile work; 3. Effective assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong general intelligence and verbal ability; • Content knowledge and pedagogy; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize and use content knowledge; • Monitor learning and provide feedback; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum and instruction; Assessment; • Content knowledge; • Developmental spectrum 	1. Clarity of instructional purpose and accuracy of content; 4. Student intellectual engagement; 5. Successful learning by all students
4. Establishing inclusive learning environments		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of learners and needs; • Adaptive expertise; (assess, scaffold, support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimal classroom climate for learning; • Passionate teachers that care, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer, and consolidate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom management; • Organizational structures 	2. Safe, respectful, supportive, and challenging learning environment; 3. Classroom management

As shown in Table 2.5, the Howell et al. (2013) framework aligns most closely with the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) and provides a comprehensive set of guidelines for effective teaching. While similar ideas are represented in the other well-researched frameworks of effective teaching shown in Table 2.5, the Howell et al. (2013) framework

includes all of the components of effective teaching described in the Alberta Education (2018b) *Teaching Quality Standard*. This points to the connection between middle school concept, as captured by the Howell et al. framework, and the Alberta Education (2018b) definition of effective teaching, as captured in the *Teaching Quality Standard*. Arguably then, effective implementation of the middle school concept is effective teaching. Further, because of its alignment with the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) as shown in Table 2.5, and its inclusion of developmental responsiveness and organizational structures that are particular to middle level education, the Howell et al. (2013) framework was used as a basis for this study on effective middle level education.

Darling-Hammond's (2010) description of effective teachers was mainly based on the efficiency model (know and do) whereas the other frameworks seemed to balance both efficiency and relationship-oriented (be) aspects of teaching. Whereas all frameworks highlighted the efficiency aspects of teaching such as content knowledge, instructional planning and pedagogy, Darling-Hammond (2010) and Danielson (2016) did not include either assessment or relationships. All but two of the frameworks identified professional behaviours such as reflection and commitment to lifelong learning. Finally, of the research considered here, only Hattie (2012) identified teachers who care as being important to effective teaching, as stated in Competency 4 of the TQS. This leads to an investigation of teacher dispositions related to effective teaching.

Effective Teaching Dispositions

While the previous section considered what a teacher needs to *know* and *do* to be effective, dispositions are concerned with a teacher's way of *being* or nature. Thornton (2013) claimed that "foundational dispositions undergird all pedagogical decisions a teacher makes" (p.

1). A teacher's disposition influences their interactions with others and their view of their students, their role and themselves (Howell et al., 2013). When it comes to disposition, middle level educators inherently should be passionate about and enjoy working with young adolescents (NMSA, 2010).

Positive middle level teacher dispositions include having a positive attitude, respecting individual differences, believing that all students can succeed, and building relationships (Howell et al., 2013). Thornton (2013) explained that effective middle level teachers need responsive dispositions to guide their instructional, assessment and management decisions. Whereas a teacher with a technical disposition would "encourage students to seek correct answers in an efficient, straightforward manner," one with a responsive disposition is more likely to "emphasize student learning that is focused on deep understanding; students are encouraged to ask questions, examine assumptions, and construct new meanings" (Thornton, 2013, p. 3).

Howell (2012) indicated that to be responsive, middle level teachers must understand the developmental needs of students so they can design instruction that addresses student physical, social, and cognitive needs. For example, a U-shaped debate invites students to engage in cognitively challenging activity, while moving and interacting with peers (Manning & Bucher, 2012). A responsive teacher is therefore in tune with the developmental needs of students which then influences how the teacher interacts with students, designs instruction and conducts assessment (Thornton, 2013).

In addition to being responsive, Howell et al. (2013) indicated that "good teaching starts with a caring, student-centred individual who can then develop a rigorous educational experience where children achieve success" (p. 13). This statement seems to be supported by the Anfara and Schmid (2007) review of the research on characteristics of effective middle grades teachers that

included: “have positive self-concept, display optimism, show enthusiasm, exhibit a good sense of humour, demonstrate flexibility, respect and accept others, are good listeners and communicators, cooperate with others” (p. 58). Even though the Howell et al. (2013) study used the Anfara and Schmid (2007) professional characteristics to develop their initial framework, they did not include the personal qualities. However, they added two categories (relationships, teacher dispositions and professional behaviours) to their initial *Effective Middle Level Teaching* framework because of the distinction that “effective teaching focused on curriculum and instruction while responses on an effective teacher highlighted relationships and development” (Howell et al., 2013, p. 13). Dispositions are therefore key to being an effective teacher.

It is important to explore how principals view both effective teaching and teachers at the middle level. Howell et al. (2013) stated “it matters who the principal chooses to place in classrooms of our middle schools” (p. 3). Mason and Schroeder (2010) also emphasized the importance of hiring effective teachers and found that during the hiring process, principals initially looked at professional attributes such as grades, experience and references but the personal attributes such as enthusiasm, appearance, confidence and communication skills, as demonstrated in an interview, were given higher significance. While principals in the study conducted by Ingle, Rutledge, and Bishop (2011) also looked for enthusiasm, work ethic, and motivation, they most valued caring teachers with strong teaching skills and subject knowledge who were willing to contribute to school activities. In their study, principals were asked to rank order the following teaching characteristics: “organized, intelligent, communication skills, works well with others, creative, knows subject, strong teaching skills, motivated, thoughtful/reflective, caring, enthusiastic, and cooperative” (Ingle et al., 2011, p. 585-587). Ingle et al. (2011) also

highlighted how middle school principals were cognizant of how well a potential teacher would fit with the school and a particular teaching team.

Similar to the difficulty in finding consensus on effective teaching, the literature is no more conclusive when it comes to effective teachers. However, based on the common attributes of the studies included in this section, effective middle level teachers should be responsive and enthusiastic, possess good communication skills and be able to establish caring, respectful relationships. These attributes were perhaps best summed up in the OECD (2011) *Teachers matter* report:

Teacher characteristics that are harder to measure, but which can be vital to student learning include the ability to: convey ideas in clear and convincing ways, create effective learning environments for different types of students, foster productive teacher-student relationships, be enthusiastic and creative, work effectively with colleagues and parents (p. 6).

There is a connection between effective teaching that impacts student learning and effective teachers who possess certain characteristics or dispositions. Thus, administrators should look for both professional and personal qualities when hiring a prospective teacher.

Dispositions continue to affect a teacher's ability to be effective in a school context and it is generally up to the principal to oversee teacher performance both in and outside the classroom. Nixon, Dam and Packard (2010) explained that "school principals are uniquely positioned to monitor, assess, and influence teacher dispositions and performance" (p. 210). These authors pointed to the responsibility of the principal to ensure quality teaching and how dispositions, or trends in teacher behaviour, can be a strong indicator of teacher effectiveness (Nixon et al., 2010). Teacher dispositions, their professional background, and potential fit within a particular

context all contribute to a principal's hiring decisions, including the subsequent retaining of a teacher. Middle level administrators, then, play an important role in hiring effective teachers, with the right combination of personal and professional attributes, for their middle school context.

Thus, effective middle level teachers should possess both professional characteristics, such as curriculum, instruction and assessment knowledge and skills (know and do), and personal characteristics (be), including a responsive, reflective disposition that enables them to foster positive relationships and establish inclusive learning environments. As Hull (2013) claimed: "Good teaching is as much about being as it is about doing" (p. 24). Effective middle level teaching requires effective teachers with just the right "know, do, be" attributes that are well-suited to working with young adolescents.

This section explained the distinctions and connections between effective teaching and effective teachers. The *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) along with the Howell et al. (2013) framework were identified as comprehensive descriptions of effective teaching that included both professional and personal characteristics. While effective teachers possess myriad personal attributes, a responsive, caring disposition that leads to productive relationships was determined essential for middle level educators. Finally, the role of the principal was explored, when hiring teachers who possess both the personal and professional characteristics to be effective at the middle level.

Synthesis of the Literature

A critical review of the literature related to (a) the middle school concept, (b) effective middle level leadership, and (c) effective teaching, led to a comparison and synthesis of key

concepts from the literature, as shown in Figure 2. There is a high level of correlation between the literature selected to represent each construct.

Effective Middle Level Education: Selected Literature					
Construct:	Effective Teaching	↔	Middle School Concept	↔	Middle Level Leadership
Primary Source:	Alberta Education (2018b) <i>Teaching Quality Standard</i> Competencies		NMSA (2010) <i>This We Believe</i>		Alberta Education (2018a) <i>Leadership Quality Standard</i> Competencies
Theme					
Relationships	Fostering effective relationships (1)		Adult Advocate; Collaborative Leaders; Family Involvement; Community and Business;		Fostering effective relationships (1)
Professional learning	Engaging in career-long learning (2)		Professional development; Committed Leaders		Modeling commitment to professional learning (2); Leading a learning community (4)
Knowledge and Skills	Demonstrating a professional body of knowledge (planning, instruction, assessment) (3)		Active learning; Challenging curriculum; Multiple learning approaches; Varied Assessments		Providing instructional leadership (6)
Learner-Centred Environment	Establishing inclusive learning environments (4)		Shared Vision; Organizational structures; Developmentally responsive; Challenging; Empowering; Equitable		Embodying visionary leadership (3)

Figure 2. Primary source statements related to the constructs of the conceptual framework. Parenthetical numbering refers to specific competencies as identified in the documents.

The themes indicated on the left side of Figure 2 capture the essence of the statements in each row. Relationships seem central to each of the three constructs. The need for both leaders and teachers to strive for continued professional learning regarding the education young adolescents is another common theme in the literature. Leaders should be able to recognize and promote effective teaching, especially as it pertains to curriculum, instruction, and assessment in

the middle level classroom. Finally, middle level leaders and teachers should be able to establish learning environments that are conducive to the learning needs of young adolescents. These broad themes were used to guide the development of the research instruments described in Chapter Three and then the analysis and interpretation of findings in Chapters Four and Five. The conceptual framework, comprised of the multiple components of each construct as described in this chapter, continued to evolve as the study transpired.

Chapter Summary

The middle school movement has had a profound impact on the education of young adolescents. Far more than grade configurations, the middle school concept permeates how all members of a school community relate to one another, how teaching and learning occurs, and the manner in which successful middle schools operate.

Consideration was given to the administrator's role in implementing the middle school concept through establishing the appropriate culture, community and organizational structures, and ensuring effective teaching through appropriate curriculum, instruction and assessment by hiring effective teachers. Middle school administrators tend to consider both the professional and personal attributes, and the context for teachers to be effective at the middle level. The three constructs of this review of the literature have been the middle school concept, effective middle level leadership and effective teaching. Combined, these form the conceptual framework for this study on effective middle level education.

In the next chapter, I explain the methodology and case study research design used to explore the perspectives of central Alberta middle level administrators regarding effective middle level education.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to examine the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators on effective middle level education. Their perspectives were needed to determine the extent of perceived discrepancies between the middle level teacher preparation program at Red Deer College and the current realities of central Alberta's middle schools.

Case study is the ideal methodology for using multiple data sources to investigate both the “generality and particularity” (Greene, 2008, p. 7) of the practical and complex nature of educational contexts (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). A questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to gather the perspectives of 43 participants from three school divisions on the middle school concept, effective teaching, and middle level leadership. Through this inquiry, I sought to address the central research question: *What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle level administrators on effective middle level education?* In addition to informing the central research question, the use of both qualitative and quantitative data provided more comprehensive insights into the perspectives of the participants regarding the research sub-questions:

1. Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?
2. According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher?
3. How do middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education?

This chapter begins with a description of the research rationale for the pragmatic worldview that underpins this case study that used both qualitative and quantitative data, or

mixed methods. The research context and participants are then described, followed by an overview of the research design including: data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness and limitations. A brief summary concludes this chapter.

Research Rationale

In this case study, I used mixed methods to obtain multiple sources of evidence and provide more comprehensive insights into the complex, real-world problem of practice (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014) related to effective middle level education in central Alberta. In this section, I describe the pragmatic worldview that supported the use of multiple sources of evidence for this case study inquiry.

Pragmatic Worldview

Qualitative research is often conducted through a constructivist worldview which holds that reality is socially constructed and seeks to interpret phenomena through the multiple perspectives of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As an educator who values collaboration and interaction, my views frequently align with social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1930). However, I also have strong pragmatic roots and sought to conduct research using practical means to address a real-world problem.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) explain that a pragmatic worldview “enables researchers to adopt a pluralistic stance to gather all types of data to best answer the research questions” (p. 46). Researchers using mixed methods can hold a variety of worldviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). While some contend that combining worldviews and collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study is incommensurable (Denzin, 2011), others indicate that worldviews can change during a study and

should reflect the type of research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Pragmatism was the worldview adopted for this study.

With roots in the works of 19th century American philosophers Charles Peirce, William James, George Mead, and John Dewey, pragmatism promotes a “what works” or practical, common sense approach to inquiry that uses the methods most suited to a problem (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Maxcy, 2003). Considering the perceived discrepancies in the implementation of the middle school concept in the central Alberta region, Greene (2008) identified that “the dynamic interplay between theory and practice or between thinking/knowing and acting/doing is actually a hallmark of Deweyian pragmatism” (p. 8). Cohen et al. (2011) explained that a pragmatic worldview:

argues that there may be both singular and multiple versions of the truth and reality, sometimes subjective, sometimes objective, sometimes scientific and sometimes humanistic...Rather than engaging in a self-absorbed debate over qualitative or quantitative affiliations, it gets straight down to the business of judging research by whether or not it has enabled the researcher to find out what he or she wants to know... (p. 23).

Based on Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2011) description of worldviews, pragmatism was a suitable lens for this study in that it was real-world, practice oriented, and based on a research question that required a pluralistic and practical approach to discover both the singular, convergent perspectives arising from the literature and multiple, pluralistic perspectives on effective middle level education held by local administrators. Driven by a problem of practice, the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods enables a researcher to answer both *what* and *how* aspects of the research questions. To illustrate, the questionnaire used in this study

provided quantitative data about *what* constitutes effective middle level education, and when it was combined with the qualitative *how* data from the focus group interviews, it provided a more comprehensive understanding of administrators' perspectives.

According to Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2005), "pragmatic researchers are in a better position to use qualitative research to inform the quantitative portion of research studies, and vice versa" and can use a "bifocal lens" (p. 383) to obtain both macro and micro views of a research problem. As case study lends itself well to the use of both qualitative and quantitative evidence, it was the methodology of choice for this study.

Mixed Methods: Multiple Sources of Evidence

Mixed methods research provides both breadth and depth to the understanding of a research problem by including qualitative and quantitative evidence in the same study (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2008; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Yin, 2014). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) explain that with mixed methods: "the limitations of one method can be offset by the strengths of the other method, and the combination of quantitative and qualitative data provide more complete understanding of the research problem than either approach by itself" (p. 8). Yin (2014) explained that the use of mixed methods enables the researcher to "address more complicated research questions and collect a richer and stronger array of evidence" (p. 66). Ultimately, "we have to face the fact that numbers and words are both needed if we are to understand the world" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 42). Hence, the present study is well-suited to mixed methods research. Both quantitative and qualitative data are needed to provide the numbers and words, the breadth and depth, or the convergence and divergence of perspectives in a complex educational research context.

Case Study Research

Case study research is described and conducted in many ways. As a research methodology, “case study inquiry relies on multiple sources of evidence, with the data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2014, p. 17). According to Merriam (2009), “qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as primary instrument for data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 39). The bounded case, or unit of analysis, as a phenomenon that exists in a unique context, is what distinguishes case study research from other qualitative methods that focus on the topic of investigation (Merriam, 2009).

Case study is defined as an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded, real-world context (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). This case study was *instrumental* (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995) in providing insight into the phenomenon of middle level education, based on the perspectives of middle school administrators in the current central Alberta context. This case was bound geographically by the central Alberta region, contextually through the definition of middle school, and temporally in the 2017/18 school year.

Yin (2009) supported the use of multiple sources of evidence or methods within a case study in order to provide a rich, holistic account of a phenomenon. He further explained that this approach enables a researcher to triangulate data and corroborate findings. This strength of case study research can however also be considered a challenge of this methodology in that researchers can become overwhelmed by the volume of data and have difficulty summarizing findings (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Flyvbjerg (2011) refuted four other perceived limitations of case study by stating that:

- context-dependent knowledge is more valuable than general (theoretical) knowledge;
- single cases can be transferable, if not generalizable;
- case study is capable of more than simply generating hypotheses
- by confirming and disconfirming preconceived notions, researchers are not more biased toward verification.

To these points, a case study provides multi-faceted views that lead to an in-depth understanding of real-life phenomenon that unfolds in a particular context. As such, it serves a different purpose than other types of research focused on developing theoretical knowledge, generalizations, and/or predictions. Further criticisms of case study include a lack of rigor (Yin, 2009) and issues of reliability and validity, all of which can be addressed “through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented” (Merriam, 2009, p. 210). The next sections provide details on these aspects of the research design.

Research Context and Participants

This case study was limited to the middle school administrators in three school divisions in central Alberta. In those school divisions, there are a total of ten middle schools (most often grades 6-8, 5-8, or 6-9), led by approximately 25 administrators. I used a purposive sample that can be described as homogeneous sampling inasmuch as the middle school administrators are professionally similar (Cohen et al., 2011; Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003). Considered as a group, the middle school administrators comprise the case for this study and their perspectives inform the effective middle level education phenomenon.

As a teacher educator in the region who previously worked with many of the middle school administrators to place student teachers in their schools, I am familiar with the unique

characteristics of the ten schools in this study. Taken individually, each school would provide vastly different insights into middle level education, as would each administrator. Consideration of a single school or only a few administrators would provide only a partial glimpse into the research problem as, based on my observations, schools implement different elements of the middle school concept to varying degrees. To illustrate, one of the middle schools has “academies” that promote an exploratory curriculum and enable students to pursue their passions in fine arts, sports, leadership, and many more. Another school implements interdisciplinary curriculum through project-based learning, providing engaging and relevant learning opportunities for students. In some of the larger urban middle schools, teacher teams collaborate in order to foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. Based on the diversity of the school contexts and the lived experiences of the middle school administrators, broad-based data collection methods were needed to capture the similarities and differences that can lead to significant insights into what constitutes effective middle level education in the central Alberta region.

Data Collection and Analysis

The use of multiple sources of evidence is a key feature of case study research (Yin, 2014). By accessing a variety of data sources, inferences are based on more comprehensive evidence and opportunity for diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). To obtain a holistic understanding of effective middle level education in Central Alberta, the perspectives of middle school administrators were obtained through the use of a questionnaire and focus groups, two methods considered by both Merriam (2009) and Yin (2014) to be types of interviews.

Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) meant data collection occurred in two phases. The results of the questionnaire in the first phase were explored during the focus group interviews in the second phase. By collecting the data sequentially, the second phase built upon the results from the first phase, providing opportunities for explanation of the results from the initial phase and increasing the trustworthiness of the claims. The two phases of data collection and analysis are explained separately.

The First Method: Questionnaire

Yin (2009) supported the use of both surveys and quantitative evidence within case study. The goal of survey research is to extend the data beyond the individual in order to determine the extent of the phenomenon being studied (Andres, 2012). According to Creswell (2012), surveys enable the researcher to: “assess trends or characteristics of a population; learn about individual attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and practices; evaluate the success or effectiveness of a program; or identify the needs of a community” (p. 403). As all of these purposes align with the intent of the current study, an online questionnaire was a suitable data collection instrument to investigate the perceptions of central Alberta administrators on effective middle level education.

Identified strengths of questionnaires include their ability to relatively quickly and inexpensively collect data from groups of respondents. Compared to a survey conducted verbally (i.e. - telephone), an online questionnaire can have a more sophisticated design and the data is collected automatically and thus, more accurately (than paraphrasing, for example). In addition, respondents tend to provide more thoughtful responses because they can complete the questionnaire at their convenience, which can also lead to better quality data (Andres, 2012).

However, because the survey is self-administered, it is essential to attend to concerns such as the quality, length and validity of the questionnaire, as well as response rate and response

bias (Creswell, 2012; Johnson & Turner, 2003). To counteract the inability of participants to explain their answers in a closed-ended questionnaire, Johnson and Turner (2003) supported using both quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (words) items in a questionnaire design. As Creswell (2012) explained:

Predetermined closed-ended responses can net useful information to support theories and concepts in literature. The open-ended responses, however, permit you to explore reasons for the closed-ended responses and identify any comments people might have that are beyond the responses to the closed-ended questions (p. 220).

Similarly, Andres (2012) highlighted the opportunities that survey research provides to collect, analyze, and combine qualitative and quantitative data to bolster findings.

The instrument. The questionnaire used in this study is provided in Appendix E. The design of the questionnaire was mainly drawn from the literature that informed the conceptual framework: *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b); Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices (Howell et al., 2013); and *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). The correlation of the questionnaire items to the research questions is provided in Appendix H. Similar to the Howell et al. (2013) study on effective middle level teaching, the questionnaire involved asking school principals both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The Howell et al. (2013) study was chosen, as explained in the literature review, for its comprehensive research-based framework that closely aligns with the elements of both effective teaching and the middle school concept in the present study. However, the specific categories and questionnaire items were created using language from the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) to reflect an Albertan context.

An online version of the questionnaire, built with a Canadian cloud-based survey software program called SimpleSurvey (OutSideSoft Solutions, 2017), was divided into four sections: introduction and informed consent, participant information (questions 1- 6), middle level practices (questions 7 - 13) and middle school concepts (questions 14 - 20). Some of the 20 questions had multiple parts. The questionnaire was comprised of three open-ended items, fifteen selection-type items and 41 Likert scale items for a total of 59 response items. With the exception of the questions intended to gather participant information, all closed-ended items used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the level of importance (5 = very important, 1 = not important) of key concepts related to middle level education. The open-ended items provided insights to specific questionnaire items and were also used more broadly to inform the research questions. The online questionnaire was pilot-tested by colleagues and interested stakeholders (all non-eligible participants) between September 16 and 22, 2017 and slight adjustments were made based on the feedback.

The data collection. Upon receipt of all the necessary ethics approvals (University of Calgary and Red Deer College Research Ethics Boards) and approval from each school division (see Appendix C), on October 4, 2017, the purposive sample (Miles et al., 2014) of 72 middle school administrators in the three local school divisions were sent a personalized email message, through SimpleSurvey (OutSideSoft Solutions, 2017), inviting them to participate in the study on effective middle level education. In the email, they were provided with a unique code (ex: SF1) to use in the questionnaire. Although the use of the code was optional, the code enabled only the researcher to determine which administrators participated and facilitated follow-up to improve

response rates. The email contained a link to the online questionnaire, which participants were asked to complete by October 20th.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, there was a brief introduction to the study, details of the required elements of informed consent, the purpose of the study, the benefits of participating, a statement of participants' right to withdraw at any time, and a guarantee of participant anonymity (see Appendix D). Participants were asked to indicate their consent by selecting "yes" or "no" before accessing the questionnaire. Reminders to complete the questionnaire were sent on October 12 and 18, 2017 and the questionnaire was closed on October 20, 2017.

The participants. The questionnaire was sent to 72 administrators in schools where young adolescents are taught in three school divisions in Central Alberta. Middle school administrators and administrators that had middle grades in their schools including K-12 schools and ele-middle schools (Manning & Bucher, 2012), typically grades (pre-) K - 8 or K- 9, were invited to participate. Those working in strictly elementary or high schools were not included. The questionnaire was available for a total of 16 days in October, 2017. Of the 34 people who accessed the questionnaire a total of 52 times, four people did not consent to participate, four people agreed to participate but did not complete it, and 26 completed the questionnaire. The highest participation was observed on the first day with nine people completing. Spikes in completion rates were also observed after a reminder was sent each week. The questionnaire participation rate is therefore 36% with 26 of 72 completions. It took an average of 14:56 minutes to complete the questionnaire with a range of 5:07 to 38:14 minutes.

The analysis. As both quantitative and qualitative data were collected as part of the questionnaire, different types of data analysis were necessary. For each of the quantitative items,

simple percentages were calculated to show general tendencies presented in the data (Creswell, 2012). Further, the percentage of responses to each Likert scale item demonstrated trends in attitudes, beliefs and practices of the middle school administrators. Themes quickly became apparent in the brief responses to the open-ended questionnaire 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 questionnaire, provided initial insights and emergent themes to be further explored during the focus group interviews. While some interpretation from this phase was used to determine the questions for the second phase, the bulk of the interpretation of the quantitative data occurred after phase two of data collection and analysis.

Second Method: Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted in the second phase of this case study as a means to “better understand and interpret information and findings” from phase one (Johnson & Turner, 2003, p. 309). Focus groups are useful for collecting shared understanding from a group of similar, likely cooperative participants (Creswell, 2012). As the middle school administrators were from the same school division, they were familiar with one another and could benefit from an opportunity to discuss effective middle level education with their colleagues. Cohen et al. (2011) stated that due to the interaction between participants as they discuss a specific issue, focus groups can “yield insights that might not otherwise have been available” in individual interviews (p. 436). Focus groups were therefore an efficient method for gaining collective insights into the results of phase one as well as important recommendations, based on both the results of phase one research and the administrators’ collective professional experience. Cohen et al. cautioned, however, that focus groups require a skilled moderator to keep the discussion focused, to ensure that all participants have relatively equal voice, and to address disagreements

should they arise. The moderation skills I have gained as an administrator, who frequently facilitates professional dialogue, were well-suited to conducting the focus-group interviews.

The instrument. The purpose of the focus group interviews was three-fold: to corroborate and/or explain the data from phase one, explore views and practices related to middle level leadership, and make recommendations regarding effective middle level education. Although I had developed a focus group protocol prior to ethics approval, in anticipation of what I thought would be the important questions, the protocol went through a number of iterations prior to being used with participants. Based on the questionnaire data from phase one, I was able to identify specific topics and results that merited further exploration during the focus group interviews.

In the design of the protocol, I ensured that the focus group questions related directly to the research questions and conceptual framework (see Appendix H). Krueger and Casey (2000) provided helpful guidelines for the development of focus group questions and protocol. I pilot-tested the protocol with two colleagues to obtain feedback on question clarity and order. I also tested the audio-recording equipment and intended transcription procedures at that time. As a result, the final focus group protocol questions focused on four areas: (i) middle school leadership, (ii) the middle school concept questionnaire results, (iii) effective teaching questionnaire results, and (iv) recommendations for teacher education. The focus group interview protocol is provided as Appendix G.

The data collection. This second phase of data collection occurred in November and December, 2017. By contacting key individuals in each school division, the same people I worked with to obtain permission to conduct research, I was able to set up dates and times for the focus group interviews. The middle school administrators were sent a personalized email that

included information about the study and an invitation to attend a focus group for their school division. The focus group interview consent form is provided as Appendix F.

This approach had varying degrees of success. In two school divisions, the meeting was arranged to be in the school division office during a district administrator meeting day. In one division, this resulted in a high level of participation; however, the time was limited. In the other division, most administrators ended up needing to attend another meeting and only two were able to participate in the focus group as a result. In the third division, after consulting with a principal who offered to host the focus group, we agreed upon a date. Unfortunately, only three administrators from two schools were able to attend that day.

As a result, after conducting and transcribing these three focus groups, I decided to personally visit three schools in an attempt to be as inclusive and thorough as possible with the focus group data collection. In two schools, I met individually with the principal, and in the other school, I met with both the principal and a vice-principal. The same focus group protocol was used for all interviews. During each interview, I recorded key points next to each question on the protocol as a memory aid.

Each focus group interview was audio-recorded using a TASCAM DR-05 digital recorder, saved as an.mp3 audio file and meticulously transcribed by the researcher. Concerned that I may not be able to distinguish between speakers, I also video-recorded the 8-person focus group using an iPad. However, this proved to be unnecessary as the voices alone were sufficient to identify the speaker. I also attempted to use voice to text software (Read Write Google); however, I found it more efficient to simply type what the speaker said, phrase by phrase. The focus group interviews lasted between 28:37 minutes and 1 hour 12 minutes with an average of

51:22 minutes for the six focus group interviews that produced a total of 74 single-spaced pages of verbatim transcribed data. The data was reviewed by my supervisor during analysis.

The participants. Based on the number of administrators indicated on school websites, I was anticipating a possible total of 25 middle school administrators from the three school divisions would be eligible to participate in the focus group sessions, as shown in Table 3.1. At least one representative from each of the ten middle schools in the Central Alberta region participated in a focus group interview. The schools range in size from 308 to 705 students, have many different grade configurations, and are led by two or three administrators. In the literature, middle schools are typically grades 6 to 8. However, middle schools in central Alberta have a

Table 3.1

Middle Schools in the Central Alberta Region

School Division School Name	2017-18 Student Population (approx.)	Grade Configuration	# of admin
Chinook's Edge			
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			
Mother Teresa	450	4 - 9	2
St. Francis	705	6 - 9	3
St. Thomas	552	6 - 9	3
Red Deer Public			
Central	520	6 - 8	3
Westpark	431	6 - 8	3
Eastview	600	6 - 8	3

Note. Source was school division websites: www.chinooksedge.ab.ca; rdcrs.ca; www.rdpsd.ab.ca

variety of grade configurations including grades 4 to 9, 5 to 8, 6 to 8, 7 to 8, and 6 to 9. The grade configurations are likely determined by the local context and school division preference.

As I worked with individuals from the school divisions who invited participants on my behalf, three unexpected participants (not strictly middle school administrators) joined the focus group sessions. Table 3.2 shows the number of focus group interview participants from each school division, for a total of 17.

Table 3.2

Focus Group Participants by School Division

School Division	Number of Focus Group Participants
Red Deer Catholic	5
Red Deer Public	4
Chinook's Edge	8

The analysis. Creswell's (2012) six steps of qualitative data analysis informed how the focus group interviews were prepared, explored and coded, analyzed, represented, interpreted and validated. In the data preparation stage, Creswell (2012) described choosing to code by hand or by computer. I chose to follow the hand-coding procedures using a computer, but not coding software.

After the interviews were transcribed, an electronic version of the Long-Table Analysis Approach described by Krueger and Casey (2000) was used to group the data using an Excel Spreadsheet. I created a separate spreadsheet for each focus group question. Along the left side of the spreadsheet, I listed the pseudonyms of each participant. Then, I went through each transcript and placed text segments relating to the focus group question next to each participants' name. If a participant had lengthy or multiple text segments related to a question, the information

was entered in the next column. In this way, the entire transcript was broken into segments based on how it related to the question topic. According to Saldana (2009), this could be considered “splitting” the data using a Structural Coding technique.

At the end of the transcript, I read horizontally for each participant to get a sense of all the text segments related to that question and recorded a few short words or codes that captured the essence of that administrator’s perspectives into a summary matrix. These codes may be considered Holistic (Saldana, 2009). By using a computer to digitally cut and paste the text segments, I adapted the Long-Table Analysis Approach (Krueger & Casey, 2000) to efficiently group related ideas.

This method enabled me to identify themes across participants and easily retrieve quotations related to the question topic. The matrix was especially useful as I was next able to use Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2009) to assist in the development of themes by reading vertically, across the participants, to find common as well as unique ideas. Conducting six separate focus groups provided opportunity for data triangulation. This textual analysis led to the basis for the presentation of the findings, and interpretations as described in Chapters 4 and 5.

Integrated Analysis

While data from each phase was collected and analyzed separately based on the research questions and conceptual framework, results from both phases were integrated to provide a robust interpretation, based on both numbers and words, of the administrator perspectives on effective middle level education. Miles et al. (2014) claimed that when quantitative data is “combined with the up-close, deep, credible understanding of complex real-world contexts that characterize good qualitative studies, we have a very powerful mix” (p. 43). Further, the use of qualitative data can serve to clarify, illustrate, corroborate, modify and/or enhance the

quantitative findings. Yin (2014) referred to this as convergence of evidence and he explained that “multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (p. 121). As such, an integrated analysis demonstrates connections between the phases with the qualitative data in phase two being used to explain and corroborate the results from phase one.

A summary of the research procedures, including data collection and analysis for both phases of this case study, along with timelines, is provided in the Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Research Timeline

Phase	Description of Action	Dates
Pre-research preparation		
	Candidacy Exam	May 2017
	CFREB Ethics Application and Approval	June – Aug. 2017
	Other Approval (School divisions, Employer)	Sept. 2017
Phase One: Questionnaire		
Data Collection	Questionnaire sent to school-based administrators	Oct 2017
Analysis	Phase One data; create focus group protocol	Oct. – Nov. 2017
Phase Two: Focus Groups		
Data Collection	Focus group interviews	Nov. – Dec. 2017
Analysis	Prepare data (transcribe and organize)	Nov. – Dec. 2017
	Analyze data	Jan. 2018
Integrated Analysis		
	Combine results from phases one and two. Write up report in Chapters 4 and 5.	Jan. – Mar. 2018

Ethical Considerations

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) noted that “a social science researcher is responsible for both informing and protecting respondents” (p. 124). This study was conducted following the principles of ethical research such as informed consent, right to withdraw, and anonymity to ensure the protection of the participants. This section addresses ethical considerations and processes used for this study.

Approval and Access

Approval to conduct this research project was sought from five different institutions: the university offering the doctoral program, the college offering the teacher preparation program and where the researcher is employed, and the three school divisions in the local area.

Application for approval was sought through the university institutional review board following the successful completion of the candidacy exam. This approval was necessary before seeking approval from the other four institutions. Approval from the research ethics board at RDC was requested so that the institution was aware of, could monitor, and report on the research being conducted by an employee.

The researcher contacted the designated superintendent in each school division to explain the benefits of participation in this research project, including increasing understanding of effective middle level education and providing feedback to enhance the teaching quality of the graduates of the teacher preparation program at Red Deer College (see Appendix C). I provided a copy of the university ethics approval, informed consent forms which outlined the participants’ commitment and ethical considerations, as well as drafts of the focus group protocol and the questionnaire.

Permission to conduct research was granted in each school division within a week. Approval for both phases of this study was sought at the outset of the research project as it involved the same population. I worked with the same individuals to seek advice as to recommended times and locations for the focus groups sessions.

Informed Consent

Along with the invitation to participate in both phases of data collection, the administrators were provided explanations of informed consent, and the rights and benefits from participating in the study, as outlined in the University of Calgary consent forms (see Appendix D and F). Throughout the study, utmost care was taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants such that the information provided cannot be traced to an individual. Further, participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice. By completing the questionnaire in phase one, the administrators are providing their informed consent. In phase two, participants were asked to provide their informed consent and sign statements to protect the confidentiality of other focus group participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data in phase one was collected using an online questionnaire and then downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet. All participant identifiers were removed before analysis. In this way, the responses were truly anonymous.

In phase two, the focus group interviews were transcribed and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The raw data from either phase was not reported by school division or school, thereby maintaining the anonymity of participants. Pseudonyms were also used to promote participant anonymity.

Dissemination

Confidentiality of participants was ensured by the use of pseudonyms and careful attention to detail in the reporting of data in all aspects of the study. All participant quotes used to illustrate results remained anonymous and untraceable to the source. The results of phase one of this study were shared with the focus groups participants in phase two as a means of member checking, validation of the findings, and an opportunity to collectively explore their meaning. In addition to the doctoral dissertation, the final results may be submitted to peer-reviewed journals for publication and/or presented at conferences. Finally, all three participating school divisions will be given a summary of the results of this study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative studies generally refers to credibility, dependability and transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). As explained by Andres (2012), trustworthy research: “produces information that answers the research questions posed by the researcher, accurately describes the sample or population at hand, and, if appropriate, can be extended to individuals beyond the participants of the study” (p. 115). Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2011) suggestions for minimizing threats to trustworthiness or validity during data collection, data analysis and interpretation, supplemented by recommendations from Cohen et al. (2011), were applied at the design stage, as indicated in the Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Steps to Minimize Threats to Trustworthiness Throughout the Research Process

Threat to trustworthiness	Steps taken to minimize threat
<i>Data collection</i>	
Instrumentation	Questionnaire adapted from validated instrument (Howell et al., 2013); Instrument was pilot-tested and revised as necessary.
Sample	A subset of the same participants were involved in both phases.
Content	Questions used on both instruments (questionnaire and focus group protocol) correlated to the conceptual framework and research questions.
<i>Data analysis</i>	
Credibility	Data from phase one was checked by members in focus groups during phase two. In phase two, using six separate focus groups allowed for triangulation of the data. Further, the quantitative and qualitative data from phase one, as well as qualitative data in phase two led to “methodological triangulation” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 196).
Subjectivity	Questionnaire results were anonymous.
Correlation	Participant quotes (qualitative) were used to support statistical (quantitative) results.
Transformation	The audit trail for transforming qualitative data into quantitative data was described for the open-ended items on the questionnaire.
Display	Qualitative and quantitative data was displayed by categories or themes to show correlation to the conceptual framework and research questions.
<i>Data interpretation</i>	
Integration	Data was integrated and considered holistically to address research questions, especially using qualitative findings to support quantitative results.
Representation	Data was fairly represented and all claims were supported by the data.

Delimitations

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explained that “delimitations are conditions or parameters that the researcher intentionally imposes in order to limit the scope of a study” (p. 8). This case study is delimited to middle level administrators, both principals and vice-principals, in three school divisions in Central Alberta. Although elementary or high schools in the region may have been using middle school concepts, the administrators in those schools were not included in this study. Further, while there may be other effective middle schools in regions outside of central Alberta, the three school divisions were selected due to their close relationship with the teacher preparation program at Red Deer College. The selected school divisions and middle schools frequently host student teachers for practicum experiences.

Limitations

In research, limitations are “external conditions that restrict or constrain the study’s scope or may affect its outcome” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 8). While there are limitations inherent to the research design chosen for this study, human limitations of this research project relate to both the participants and the researcher.

A case study research design was chosen in order to use multiple data sources to inform the research phenomenon. By using a questionnaire and focus group interviews, the findings could be corroborated through triangulation. However, this design was limited by the number of administrators who chose to participate. With a 36% (26/72) participation rate in the questionnaire and a 68% (17/25) participation rate for the focus group interviews, the data sets can be considered sufficient to effectively address the research questions. The results are however limited to the perspectives of the participants in both phases of this study.

This study was limited by participant knowledge of the middle school concept and participant perspectives on middle level education. The participants needed to be willing to share their honest opinions while completing the questionnaire and during focus group interviews.

As the researcher, I needed to be objective in my analysis and interpretation of the results and endeavoured to limit by bias due to familiarity with the research contexts. This was especially important during the focus groups where I was both etic and emic in the discussions (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). The quality of data resulting from the focus group interviews was limited by the focus group protocol and my ability to facilitate the focus group. Similarly, the quality of the data from the questionnaire was limited by the design and effectiveness of the instrument.

The results of this study may be limited to teacher preparation programs with a focus on middle level education.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the case study methodology chosen for this research project on effective middle level education. Through a pragmatic lens, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to more fully address the research questions. A questionnaire was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from middle school administrators from three school divisions in central Alberta in phase one. In phase two, focus groups provided explanations of the phase one results and provided recommendations for middle level teacher preparation.

In addition to the data collection and analysis intentions, this section has also addressed ethical considerations, threats to validity, as well as limitations and delimitations.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators on effective middle level education. A questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to gather the perspectives of 43 participants from three school divisions on the middle school concept, effective teaching, and middle level leadership. Their insights were needed to determine the extent of perceived discrepancies between the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC and the current realities of central Alberta's middle schools.

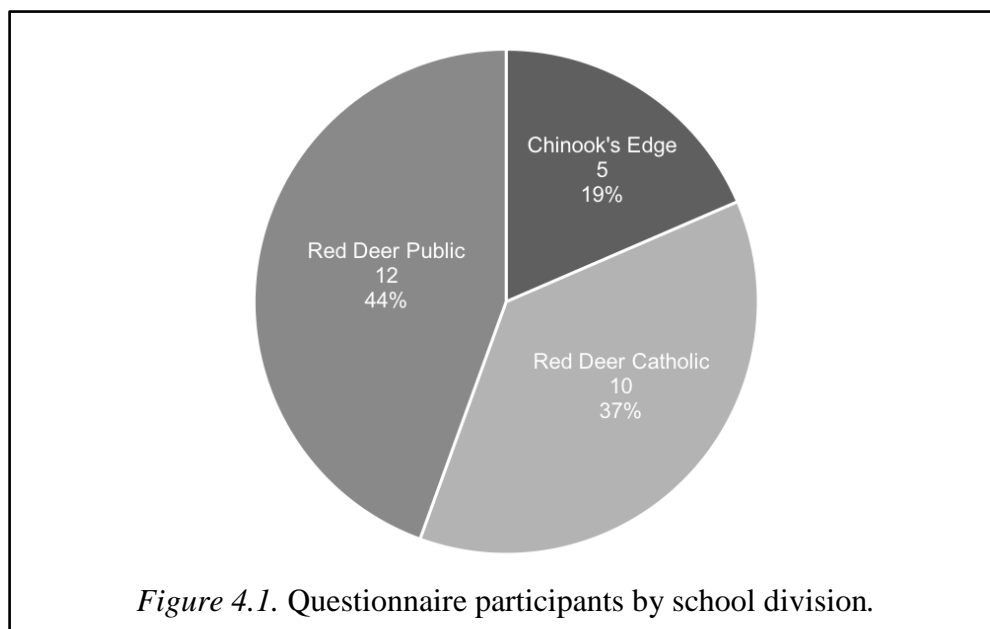
This chapter begins with a description of the case, including details about the school contexts and the backgrounds of the middle school administrators. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the findings as they pertain to the conceptual framework and research questions that guided this study. The five major findings are organized by the three constructs of the conceptual framework and are supported by evidence gathered from both the questionnaire and the focus group interviews. A summary of the findings is provided at the end of the chapter.

Case Context and Participant Demographics

The focus of this case study was effective middle level education as perceived by a group of middle school administrators from three school divisions in the central Alberta region. This section provides details on the administrators who participated in this case study on effective middle level education. In the first section of the questionnaire, participants provided information about their school division, their school grade configuration and their experience as administrators. This data provides insights into the research context and the backgrounds of the participants, as derived from both the questionnaire and the focus group interviews.

School Divisions

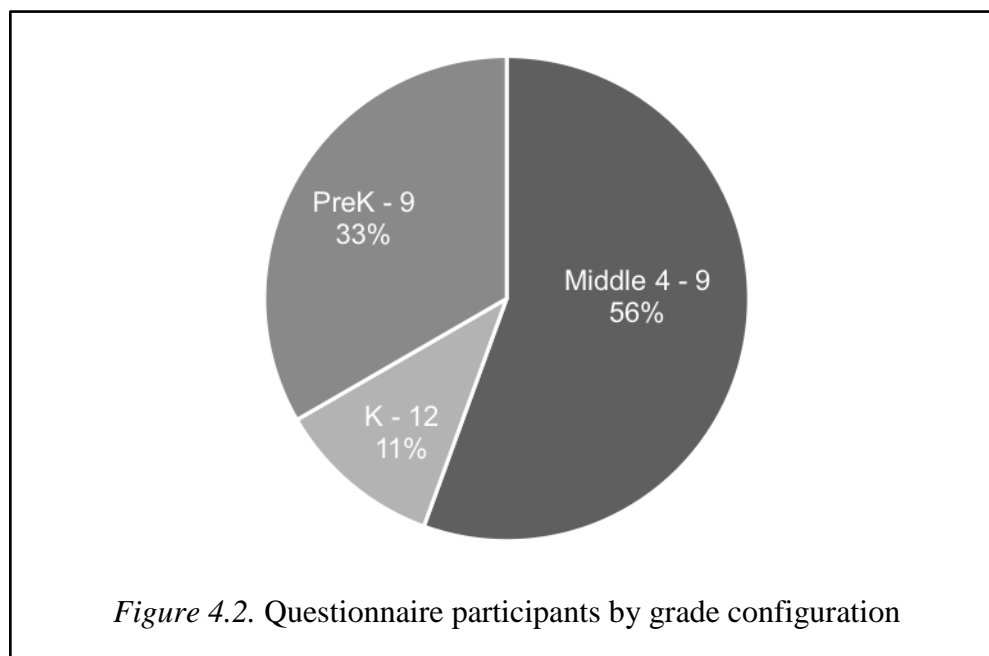
The questionnaire was sent to 72 administrators from 31 schools in Chinook's Edge, Red Deer Public, and Red Deer Catholic school divisions. This section was completed by 27 respondents as one person stopped after question 6. As shown in Figure 4.1, the majority (81%) of respondents were from the Red Deer-based school divisions



Schools

In their questionnaire and focus group responses, the administrators highlighted unique features of their schools including everything from contextual elements such as school size or rural setting to specialized programs or targeted initiatives. The majority of questionnaire participants (44%) indicated they were administrators in Middle Schools (any of grades 5 to 8). Three (11%) were administrators in K-12 schools and another five (19%) indicated grades K-9. Seven participants (26%) chose 'other' grade configurations with four indicating grades Pre-K to 8, two indicating grades 6-9 and one from a grades 4 to 9 school. By combining similar grade

configurations, K to 9 with Pre-K to 8 and expanding Middle Grades which was grades 5 to 8 on the questionnaire to include both 6 to 9 and 4 to 9, therefore ranging from grades 4 to 9, a total 56% of respondents could be described as middle level administrators, as shown in Figure 4.2.

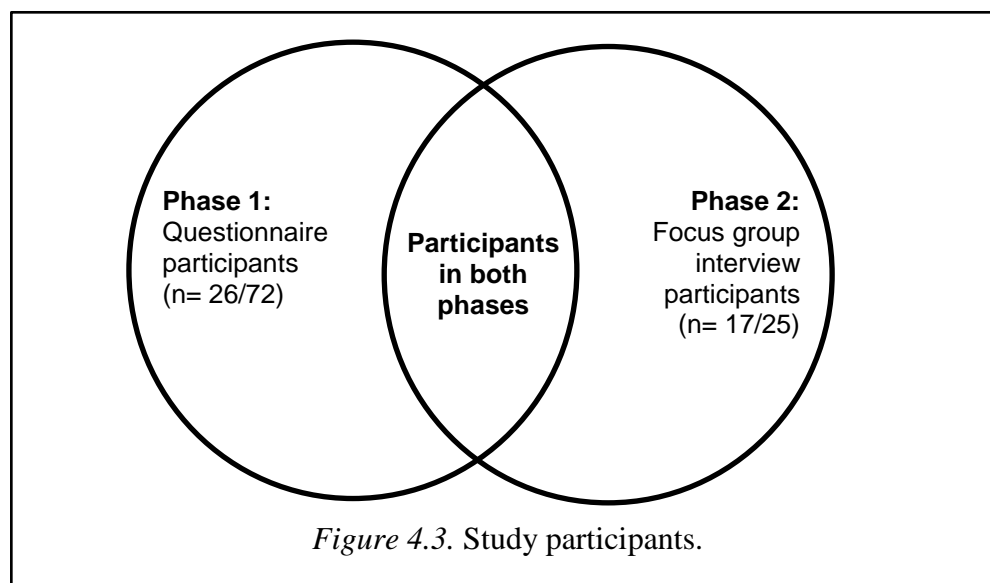


Administrators

Although the 26 questionnaire participants included administrators from a wider range of grade configurations, including (pre) K to 8, 9, or 12, the focus group interviews included participants from all ten of the schools listed in Table 3.1 and two other administrators who were not currently in middle schools but were interested in participating.

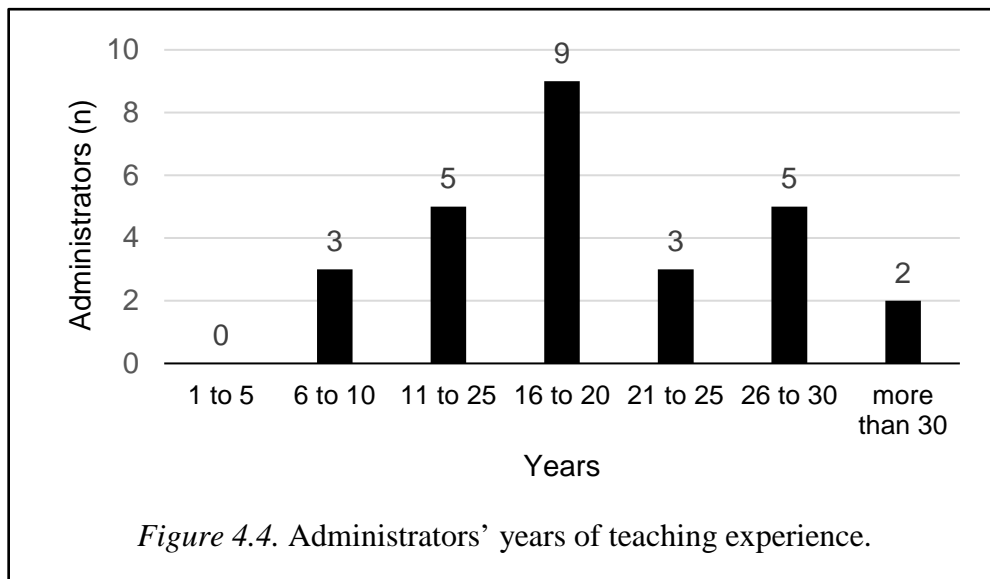
A total of 17 middle school administrators from the three school divisions participated in the focus group interviews. The participant pseudonyms were: Bill, Binard, Bruce, Chloe, Claire, Daisy, Foster, Jack, Jerry, Kerry, Maggie, Mark, Max, Michelle, Scott, Stephanie, and Terry. They may not have completed the questionnaire so are not necessarily a subset of the larger group of questionnaire participants. There may be some overlap between the two participant

groups; however, due to the anonymity of questionnaire respondents, it is impossible to determine the extent of the overlap. Figure 4.3 below illustrates the participants in both phases of this study.

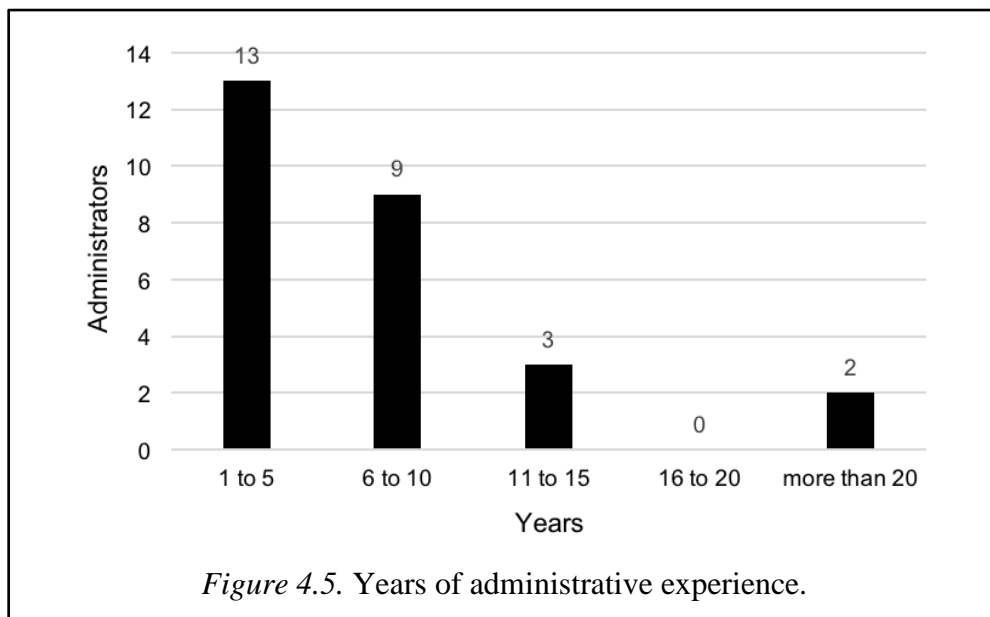


As focus group participants may have previously completed the anonymous questionnaire, they were not asked for administrative background information. The remainder of this section describing the case, the group of middle level administrators in central Alberta, was derived from the questionnaire.

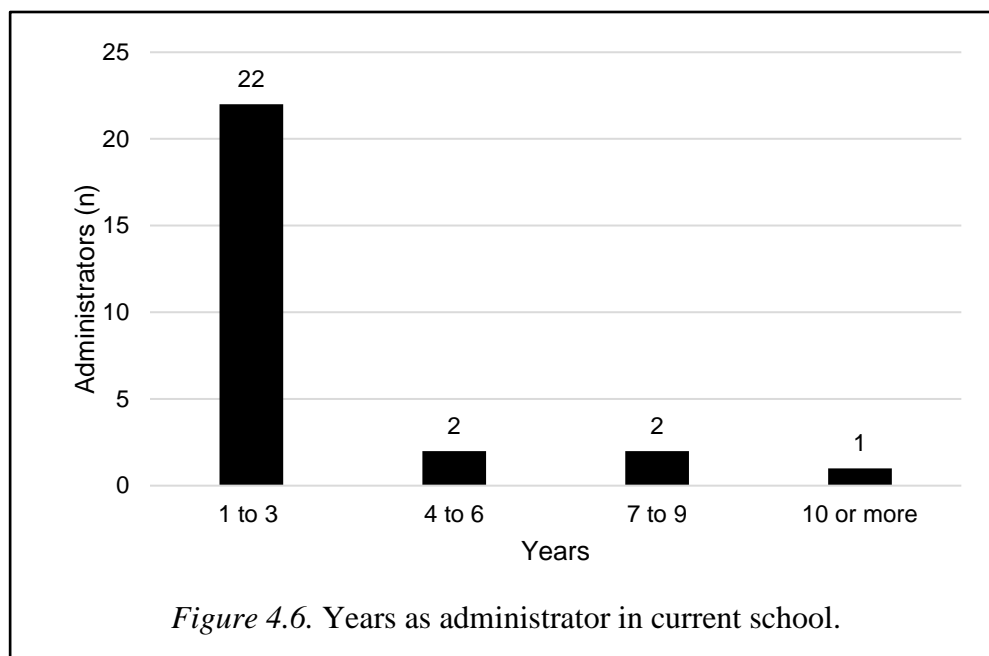
Professional experience. For the administrators who participated in the questionnaire, their number of years of experience as a teacher was fairly evenly distributed, as shown in Figure 4.4. One-third of administrators (nine) had been teaching for 16 to 20 years, another third (ten) had been teaching for more than 20 years and the other eight had between six and fifteen years of teaching experience.



However, almost half of the participants (48%) had been an administrator for five years or less and 21 (81%) had been an administrator for 10 years or less. As illustrated in Figure 4.5, only two had more than 20 years of administrative experience while the other 12 (44%) had between six and fifteen years.



Participants were also asked to indicate the number of years that they had been an administrator in their current building. The vast majority (81%) had been in their school for only three years or less, including the current school year, as shown in Figure 4.6 below.



Familiarity with middle school. Administrators were also asked about their familiarity with the teacher preparation program at Red Deer College, the middle school concept, middle school practices, and related professional development. Almost half (42%) of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they were quite or very familiar with the middle level teacher preparation program at Red Deer College while a quarter (23%) were slightly or not familiar. As such, the level of familiarity varied amongst participants. The majority of participants (62%) indicated they were quite (4) or very familiar (5) with the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010). If the neutral familiar (3) selection is included, the total rose to 85%. The majority of participants (65%) had participated in professional development in the past two years specific to the young

adolescent learner and/or middle level practices. However, almost a third (31%) had gone five years or more without such professional development.

The questionnaire provided important baseline information about the administrators from the region as a group. Over half (56%) of the questionnaire participants worked in middle schools with students in grades 4 to 9. The administrators ranged from six to more than 30 years of teaching experience and over 80% of them had ten or fewer years of administrative experience. The majority of participants had been in their current school for three years or less. The questionnaire participants were generally familiar with middle school practices and concepts while somewhat less familiar with the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC.

This section provided contextual information related to this case study on effective middle level education. A closer look at the administrators as a group, including the schools they work in and their backgrounds, provides details that can help frame their responses to the questionnaire and focus group interviews, ultimately providing insight into the research questions.

Five Integrated Findings

The five major findings were drawn from integrated analysis of data from all sources to provide more comprehensive, holistic insights into the research questions. For each finding, the general trends noted in the quantitative evidence from the questionnaire were integrated with the qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire items and focus group interviews. Exact quotations from participants, indicated by pseudonyms, provide particular and illustrative insights to the current realities in central Alberta middle schools. As shown in Table 4.1, the five integrated findings were organized by the three constructs of the conceptual framework: middle school concept, effective teaching, and effective middle level leadership.

Table 4.1

Middle Level Education Study Findings

Research Question	Finding
1. Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by middle school administrators?	<p><i>Construct: Middle School Concept</i></p> <p>1. Teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential to middle level education; curriculum integration and advisory are less important and less prevalent.</p>
2. According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher?	<p><i>Construct: Effective Teaching</i></p> <p>2. Effective beginning middle level teachers should develop professional knowledge and skills, including an ability to create learner-centred, inclusive environments.</p> <p>3. Effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships.</p>
3. How do middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education?	<p><i>Construct: Effective Middle Level Leadership</i></p> <p>4. Middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school.</p> <p>5. Middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships.</p>

As the primary research question “what are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?” served as a central or overarching question (Creswell, 2012) that guided this study, it is addressed in Chapter Five as the initial analysis and interpretation of the other three research sub-questions were necessary before considering the results more holistically.

Finding Related to Middle School Concept

One of the research questions that guided this study was: Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school

administrators? Although *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) outlines the middle school concept philosophically, this study sought to determine how typical middle school practices are currently being experienced and implemented in middle schools in the central Alberta region. This section presents the integrated findings pertaining to four middle school practices: teaming, advisory, curriculum integration and developmentally responsive.

Finding 1: Teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential to middle level education; curriculum integration and advisory programs are less important and less prevalent. An overview of the questionnaire results is followed by a discussion of each of these typical middle school practices.

The questionnaire results are presented in Table 4.2 as an introduction to the middle level administrators perspectives on specific middle school practices: teaming, interdisciplinary instruction, adult advocate, and flexible schedules and groupings. An explanation of each practice is provided below Table 4.2. Participants indicated the level of importance of each practice in their current school.

Of these typical middle school practices, teaming was deemed to be of greatest importance with 92% of administrators indicating it was very important (5), with a mean score of 4.88. Teaming was described as planning and working collaboratively with grade or subject-area partners, often with shared groups of students. Having an adult advocate through advisory programs or homeroom was also deemed important with 96% choosing very important (5) or important (4) and a mean score of 4.58. Only six participants (23%) indicated that interdisciplinary instruction and flexible schedules and groupings were very important as these items were more likely to be rated as a 4, important. Combining the 4 and 5 ratings provided a 77% favourable opinion of these two typical middle level practices, with same mean of 3.92.

Table 4.2

Importance of Middle School Practices

Middle School Practice	5 - VI	4 - QI	3 - I	2- SI	1 - NI	M
Teaming	24 (92%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.88
Interdisciplinary instruction	6 (23%)	14 (54%)	4 (15%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	3.92
Adult advocate for each student	17 (65%)	8 (31%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	4.58
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: Teaming (planning and working collaboratively with grade or subject-area partners; shared groups of students); Interdisciplinary instruction (project-based learning, curriculum integration, cross-curricular learning); Adult advocate for each student (through advisory programs, homeroom, etc.); Flexible schedules and groupings (larger blocks of time to bring together different groups of students).

Based on the questionnaire results, teaming and adult advocates seem to be more important practices in the schools in the region than interdisciplinary instruction and flexible schedules and groupings.

Later in the questionnaire, administrators were asked to rate the importance of a beginning teacher's understanding of organizational structures such as advisory programs, teaming, flexible groupings and curriculum integration as part of their professional repertoire. While these statements were still identified as important with a mean range of 4.19 to 4.69, this set of competencies was generally less important than other areas of professional knowledge and skills. The ability to plan cross-curricular learning opportunities was in fact the lowest-rated competency of the questionnaire. As shown in Table 4.3, the ability to work as an effective team member was most important for the majority (58%) of administrators.

Table 4.3

Organizational Structures/Middle School Concept

Statement	5 - VI	4 - QI	3 - I	2 - SI	1 - NI	Most	M
Serving as a role model, advocating for, and guiding young adolescents	16 62%	7 27%	3 12%	0 0%	0 0%	8 31%	4.50
Working collaboratively with colleagues, as an effective team member	20 77%	4 15%	2 8%	0 0%	0 0%	15 58%	4.69
Planning cross-curricular, exploratory and/or authentic learning opportunities	10 39%	12 46%	3 12%	1 4%	0 0%	2 8%	4.19
Using varied groupings of students to promote collaboration and interaction	12 46%	10 39%	3 12%	1 4%	0 0%	1 4%	4.27

Note. n = 26. Percentages are rounded. Most: Participants chose which of the four statements was most important to differentiate between items. M = mean score.

Likert Scale: VI - Very important; QI - Quite important; I - important; SI - slightly important; NI - Not important.

Many aspects of the middle school concept were not mentioned by administrators on the open-ended questionnaire item. However, collaboration and groups of students working together were mentioned by eight administrators (30%). One administrator indicated they would expect to see “flexible seating and flexible groupings” while another regarded “teacher working with individual or small groups” as effective teaching. Teaming, a few teachers working with a larger group of students, is related to flexible groupings and working collaboratively. The questionnaire results seem to indicate that the concept of teaming was highly important to these administrators. The focus group interviews were an opportunity to obtain more nuanced understandings of these initial results.

Teaming. Teaming, or a team of teachers working with a common group of students, is at the core of many middle school organizational structures (Schaefer et al., 2016). It can drive the

school timetable, determine how students are grouped and which teachers they have, and provide opportunities for teacher collaboration. Teaming relates to common planning time and flexible block scheduling as the composition of the teacher team and each person's teaching schedule determines whether or not they have their preparation blocks at the same time for common planning. Working as a teaching team can provide the flexibility to work with a group for longer periods of time, such as a double block of science or a half-day team-based activity.

Teaming shifts teaching from a solo activity to an opportunity to work collaboratively with teacher colleagues for the benefit of students. Middle school teams are typically dyads, grade-based or cross-graded. Dyads are usually two teachers working with the same groups of students for two subjects each, often a math/science teacher and a humanities teacher. Grade-based teams are more common in larger schools where four subject-specific teachers work with the same groups of students. Cross-graded teams can be subject-specific (all science teachers or health teachers, for example) and tend to have a more school-wide focus. Cook and Faulkner (2010) described the work of an interdisciplinary team as follows:

Interdisciplinary teaming with common planning time provides an opportunity for teachers to collaborate and learn from one another's experiences. By sharing ideas, knowledge, and personal challenges and successes in the classroom, offering specific feedback on instruction, and working to understand the needs and experiences of students, teachers can maximize their talents and establish an individualized and appropriate learning environment in which young adolescents are challenged academically and can achieve success. (p. 2)

Teaming is central to how middle schools are organized and run. It provides a more collective responsibility approach to supporting students than in a typical subject-based junior high where

students are taught by six or more different teachers each day. Administrators provided important insights into how teams are currently operating in central Alberta middle schools.

Teaming is school-dependent. Focus group interview participants corroborated the questionnaire results that teaming was very important in their school. As Foster stated, “our big focus is always that team.” However, the type of team structure was school-dependent and often related to number of students in a grade. All three types of teams (dyad, grade-based and cross-graded) were described by the focus group participants. Larger schools seemed to have a more established teaming structure such as dyads or grade teams in place whereas administrators in smaller, often rural schools referred more often to cross-graded teams. As Bill stated: “our middle school is at a size where there's very low opportunity to collaborate,” as the number of classes per grade impacts teaming possibilities.

Five administrators identified the dyad as an effective teaming structure in their school. As 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.” Grade teams were also identified, sometimes in addition to the dyads, as explained by Bruce: “So, our grade 6 team as an example, there are six of them and that is all they teach is grade 6 and they're going to either teach math/science or humanities.” In one school, cross-graded teams provided an opportunity for “team-building activities, we do character lessons, soft skills instruction” as explained by Claire. Schools with a larger range of grades also talked about cross-graded activities such as advisory programs and reading or assembly buddies. The administrators also identified some of the benefits and challenges of teaming in their school.

Benefits of teaming. Increased flexibility, stronger relationships, collaboration and efficiency were among the benefits of teaming highlighted by middle school administrators. A

questionnaire participant identified a unique feature of their school as: “Dyad teaching partners to maximize student-teacher relationships.” Scott referred to relationships and flexibility as benefits of teaming:

The teachers would say, the positive things that are happening, is number one, they’re able to build the relationships with their kids at a much higher level and depth and much quicker. And, they also have some flexibility in their teaching. If they want to do a double math class one day, they can do a double math class.

Collegiality and relationships between teachers were also highlighted. As Kerry stated, “anytime you put a couple of brains together, magic is going to happen.” She added that when teachers do their planning and assessing together, it has a positive effect on both teachers and students. A questionnaire respondent indicated: “In a rural setting where only (sic) where teachers may feel isolated, the co-teaching model is vital to create team and meet the diverse needs which are the reality of teaching middle school in an inclusive setting.” Bill commented that as teachers shifted toward collaborative teams, “it was amazing to watch that process because not only did they enrich one another’s teaching, but they also streamlined their workload.” He also indicated that teaming can provide for more equity within a grade team: “you created less of the haves and the have-nots in your grade. Because, yeah, I’m a really good social studies teacher but not that great of a language arts teacher, whereas I’m paired with somebody else on that team that is a great language arts teacher.”

Three other administrators mentioned how teachers in grade teams work together to identify and address student needs by using data to inform their interventions. Using a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach is a tiered system of academic and social-emotional supports

provided by schools to promote student success (Alberta Education, 2015b). Maggie explained how RTI is a focus of the grade teams in her school as follows:

And then they are meeting once a week to plan their RTI (Response to Intervention) cycle. And so, to look at the data, who is doing well, who is not. They divide the kids up and meet those needs. Our struggle right now is tracking the efficacy of our interventions over the course of the year, and over the course of time.

A questionnaire participant pointed to the work of the team as “creating common assessments and collaboratively regrouping to help students meet the outcomes.” The benefits of teaming in middle schools have potential to positively impact student learning, as identified by these middle school administrators.

Challenges of teaming. While teaming was highly supported, administrators also mentioned some of the challenges related to teaming. As discussed earlier, the ability of some administrators to create teacher teams was limited by school size. Teaming with few or an odd number of classes per grade creates administrative and timetabling challenges. As Max explained, “It is very difficult to create dyads with five.” Two administrators commented on how the new memorandum of agreement, that puts parameters on instructional and assignable time, had an impact on the amount of time they could provide for teacher collaboration. It was interesting to note that teacher collaboration time ranged from five preps a week (Bill) to weekly (Mark) to once a month (Jack) during professional development days. Another challenge related to individual teacher capacity and fit to a team. Mark commented that “there is a lot of thought put into teams in the middle level...because you need to put the right pieces in the right places.” This was supported by Max who explained that “it is about knowing people’s strengths and placing them so that they can be successful. Sometimes it is having fierce conversations.” Bruce

focused on teacher expertise: “I have got some teachers who, they are a math expert, they like teaching math, their passion is math, but they also have to teach half-time science.” Teaming challenges were largely related to staffing and logistics.

Teaming is changing. Three different administrators spoke of how their concept of teaming had recently changed. Scott explained the significant positive impact a shift from grade-based teams to dyads had in his school: “when I was here (as a teacher), I taught four science classes and I was really good at teaching that. Now, I’m on the other side of this desk and I see the importance of teaching kids and building relationships, and even more, I’m seeing that in my teachers.” Bruce talked about needing to shift the teaming model in his school “so the teaming will be more core-class focused as opposed to options focused.” Mark provided an in-depth explanation of how the work of teams has changed in recent years:

For us, teachers function within their grade teams. So, they meet once a week, during the school day. The idea there is that transformation from where it used to be day-to-day, week-to-week, how do we manage as a team to they meet once a week to discuss some of the struggles that their students are having, both academic and socioemotional.

Mark elaborated on how his teams in his school are becoming more data-driven while remaining student-centred. As Terry stated, the concept of teaming is “evolving.” In these three schools, administrators identified how teams needed to be adjusted based on the context and school needs.

Middle school administrators value teaming. The types of teams varied based on school population and other contextual factors. The benefits of teaming such as teacher collaboration, flexibility and stronger student-teacher relationships were highlighted alongside the administrative challenges such as logistics and staffing. In some schools, established teaming

structures were shifting to adapt to identified school needs. Thus, it would seem that teaming is a highly valued middle school practice in the central Alberta region.

Advisory. Advisory programs are described as a middle school structure that ensures “every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate” (NMSA, 2010). Although 96% of questionnaire respondents identified having an adult advocate as an important middle school practice ($M = 4.58$), the focus group interview participants were less enthused. Administrators described a wide range of activities when asked about advisory programs in their school. In some cases, advisory programs did not exist. In other cases, administrators described homeroom periods which were used to send information home or eat lunch. In still other schools, elaborate programs and specific activities were attributed to advisory-type activities. Depending on the purpose, adult advisors meet with their student advisory group daily, weekly, or periodically (for example when something needed to be sent home, or for an assembly). The purpose and unique features of advisory programs in central Alberta schools, as described by the middle school administrators, are outlined below.

Purpose of advisory programs. Advisory programs can be a smaller structure within a grade that promotes peer and student-teacher relationships. Michelle described how her advisory group went from “kids sitting just all by themselves” to “now, we’ve got six and eight sitting together, we’ve got the girls and boys mixing up, we’ve got some that are quite content to just sit on the floor, socialize, have a picnic and visit.” Foster talked about how advisory groups helped with transition between grade levels: “Teacher advisory groups is something that we have here and we push it at the start because they come from so many different feeder schools. And even within our school, we have six different classes and then next year, they’re with entirely new

kids.” Advisory programs can therefore create a smaller community for students within a large school, increase cross-graded opportunities, and improve school culture.

On the questionnaire, one administrator highlighted the importance having adult advocates as a unique school feature: “We have implemented multi-graded advisories for social groupings, for academic groupings, for community groupings and will be implementing houses within our advisory groupings. We focus on relationships with each other and creating significant time for students to bond with significant adults in our building.” Another participant described the positive impact that the recent implementation of houses had on the school:

House structure: Implemented and designed to create a culture of belonging in our school, to build soft skills in our students, and to foster and encourage school spirit and positive behaviours. We have seen a significant and positive shift in our school culture since the implementation of this 'structure' (which was purposefully and thoughtfully designed by our whole staff) in May 2016.

Claire described the purpose of her school’s program was “for kids to be able to be connected to, and actually it’s for staff to be connected to, staff.” Bill noted how cross-graded advisory groups provided leadership opportunities for older students. It would seem that the main purpose of advisory is to foster positive relationships within the school.

Features of advisory programs. The administrators that had advisory programs in their schools highlighted their unique features. In one school, advisory was used for character education as well as an opportunity to focus on literacy, numeracy and incorporate Indigenous culture, and was credited with a decrease in discipline referrals to the office. In another school, the students sign up for their school’s RTI program during their weekly advisory period. Two other administrators talked about using a Heroes (character education) program in their school,

delivered by community members. However, they claimed to not have a formal advisory program.

From character education to culture and curriculum, advisory programs in central Alberta schools are unique to each school. However, administrators seemed to indicate that the main purpose of advisory is relationship-building.

Curriculum integration. Although curriculum integration can be referred to as interdisciplinary, cross-curricular instruction or perhaps even synonymous with inquiry-based or project-based learning (PBL), it 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). Results from both the questionnaire and focus group interviews indicate that administrators were lukewarm to the concept of curriculum integration. Only six questionnaire participants (23%) indicated that interdisciplinary instruction was very important and was more likely to be rated as important. Combining the 4 and 5 ratings provided a 77% favourable opinion of this typical middle level practice. Although mean scores of 3.92 and 4.19 on a 5-point Likert scale on questionnaire items pertaining to curriculum integration seem favourable, they were the lowest-rated items across the questionnaire. While most focus group participants seemed to conceptually support the idea of curriculum integration, such as Max who referred to it as “nirvana,” it seems to have generally fallen out of favour, as declared by Scott: “I don’t think it’s as prevalent as it used to be.” The administrators’ descriptions of the range of curriculum integration practices currently occurring in middle schools in the region is followed by the benefits and challenges they also identified.

Current curriculum integration practices. When asked their thoughts on curriculum integration, middle level administrators’ responses ranged from “no more cross-curricular

projects” as Jack said, to “where those connections happen naturally” as described by Scott to “yes, every grade, every team has to create a mini-PBL” as explained by Binard. Evidence of this range of curriculum integration practices is provided in the next few paragraphs.

Along with others who were not in favour of curriculum integration, Maggie couched her statement, “I’m not going to say it’s not important” with an explanation that teachers are more focused on students and therefore have other priorities. From a similar standpoint, Jack questioned whether literacy and numeracy were considered cross-curricular as that was the focus in his school. He seemed firmly against curriculum integration:

I know the big word in the last few years has been PBLs. We don’t have one PBL going on in our school, at all. I know that some other schools do. But we get these teachers that come to these interviews, want to talk to you about project-based learning and it’s not the reality. They’re still fairly effective at the right age level, in terms of elementary. But they’re not happening in our middle schools. (Jack)

Scott claimed “I don’t think there is purposeful planning for integration like there used to be.” He elaborated by saying: “But for two teachers to get together to do this project that integrates these four subjects, you just don’t see that anymore.”

Other administrators indicated curriculum integration was somewhat happening in their school such as Mark who said that his teachers were “planning project-based learning that quite often does cross at least two curricula. I think at this point, they each have projects that they’ve developed or morphed over the last few years.” Claire stated that “it would depend on the team. It’s not that it’s not important, but it wouldn’t be something that A, I would mandate or require or B, that we devote any time to in terms of staff learning or necessarily specifically work on that.” Although she was enthusiastic about project-based learning, Kerry claimed that it occurred

“not as often as you would love to see it happen” in her school. She added that curriculum integration seemed to happen more readily when done by an individual teacher rather than requiring a team effort.

In the schools where administrators claimed curriculum integration was frequently occurring, they referred to smaller scale projects that lasted two to three weeks instead of six. As Bruce explained: “One of our best projects that we had done last year was two weeks. It builds in accountability. It builds in those elements of authentic learning.” Binard described how his teachers moved away from trying to “hit as many different strands and as many different outcomes as you can in all these curriculums” toward integrating two subjects over three weeks where “we’re going to hit our project, we’re going to hit our outcomes, and then we’re moving on.” He elaborated on his school’s language shift from project-based learning to authentic learning:

I think the shift is, where the catchword was PBL (project-based learning), and now we’re really seeing that PBL is just a strategy in authentic learning. So, the word that we’re using more this year in our school with a new admin team is authentic learning. Make sure the experiences that kids are having authentic, meaningful, hands-on. If you need PBL to deliver that, that’s fine, but you don’t need to use PBL to deliver that.

(Binard)

Binard described curriculum integration as a “double-edged sword” as, while he was supportive of this practice, he preferred that teachers focus primarily on their subject area.

As illustrated above, curriculum integration practices in central Alberta middle level classrooms range from frequent to few to forgotten: Some administrators indicated that

curriculum integration occurred on a regular basis, whereas others thought it happened occasionally, and a few seemed to signal it was a thing of the past.

Perceived benefits of curriculum integration. The majority of administrators identified benefits of curriculum integration such as student engagement and information retention, teacher collaboration and opportunities for authentic learning.

A few administrators made the connection between student-centred instruction, curriculum integration and authentic learning. As Kerry described it, “the beauty of PBL, is that you create a driving question that links a few curriculum strands and you let it kind of play out with where the kids are going to take it.” She also stated: “I think it’s a great way for students to learn and it’s extremely engaging, and it’s voice and choice.” She added that middle school students are often asking “why” and therefore an inquiry-based approach to address questions such as “why would this matter to me? Why is this important?” is well-suited to this age level. Max described how students gain deeper understanding when he stated: “The connections become deeper and longer-lasting for them to recall.” Bill also referred to the connections students are able to make between curriculum areas and real life through curriculum integration which helps them realize “okay then, there is a purpose for this.” Bruce focused on how “PBL is one strategy to do authentic learning” but that the goal should be to provide authentic learning opportunities whether or not the students are doing a project so that the rest of the time isn’t considered by students to be “traditional, really boring stuff.”

Teacher collaboration was another identified benefit. Bill appreciated how teachers “end up streamlining the curriculum around essential outcomes.” Max explained that when “everyone is on the same page and everyone is talking about similar big rocks, the kids can understand what they are supposed to learn.” Bruce identified that curriculum integration and working together on

a PBL, for example, gave the teachers in his school a common focus: “Our teams are always rehashing, re-assessing, revisiting and then revising their projects.” Both Max and Bruce pointed to the opportunities for differentiation when curriculum is integrated.

Although curriculum integration can provide benefits such as authentic learning, cross-curricular connections and deeper understanding for students, and a common focus for teachers, administrators also identified challenges related to curriculum integration in their schools.

Perceived challenges of curriculum integration. Time for teachers to collaborate, plan, and implement curriculum integration was mentioned by over half of the administrators as one of the greatest challenges. As Max stated, “the real trouble with it is, you have to create the opportunity and the time to build cross-curricular planning.” Jack emphatically claimed “there’s just no more time in the day for them to do that. It just, there isn’t.” Bruce referred to the pressure teachers have to teach the Alberta curriculum and how they need to “make really sure that the time you’re putting into it balances how important those key outcomes are.” One administrator described how difficult planning for curriculum integration can be:

I think it’s really time-consuming and it's really, (pauses) you have to think. You have to sit and think ‘cause the driving question will make or break that link between the curriculums... For me this year it's the collaboration time. Losing that has made a difference in being able to do that and talk about it and dig deeper on it...It isn’t just a quick thing. You have to really sit and think and work through it and co-plan...” (Kerry)

Bill described how it was necessary to build a culture that allowed teachers to be vulnerable as working so closely with colleagues required a “comfort level of putting yourself out there.”

Referring to other priorities, Max explained “that teachers have an awful lot of their plates to

deal with, and it's probably seen as one more thing to add." Lastly, Bruce indicated that it is not for all students:

Well, we find that students get PBL fatigue. They get tired of it. It's not a learning, same as everything, it's one learning style. So it's not for every kid all the time. You can do a lot of differentiation within PBL. But, it's one where kids will tell you, some kids love it, some kids hate it.

Curriculum integration, also known as project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, cross-curricular, or interdisciplinary instruction, seems to be supported by most administrators, implemented in some schools, and not a priority in most cases.

Developmentally responsive. Although developmental responsiveness is foundational to the middle school concept, it was perhaps the least tangible middle school practice. Developmentally responsive means "using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all about decisions about school organization, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made" (NMSA, 2010, p. 13). By understanding the characteristics and variability of the different areas of young adolescent development (intellectual, social, physical, emotional, moral), teachers and schools are better able to respond to the needs of the middle school learner (CCE, 2003a). As Claire stated, "by nature, middle schools are a structure that honours the developmental appropriateness of grouping those ages of kids together." Developmental responsiveness was supported both in theory and in practice by the middle level administrators who participated in this study.

When asked as part of the questionnaire to rate and rank the developmentally responsive competencies required of beginning teachers, all four statements were deemed by most administrators as very important (5). As shown in Table 4.4, the statement that was chosen as the

most important was “making instructional decisions based on students’ developmental characteristics.” Being developmentally responsive is therefore an important practice.

Table 4.4

Developmentally Responsive

Statement	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1 NI	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. ^bThis question (14Ad) was left blank by one respondent, therefore n=25 for this item.

During the focus group interviews, administrators were asked to describe how their school or teachers respond to the developmental needs (physical, social, emotional, and intellectual) of students. They were also prompted to consider how race, culture, sexual orientation and/or language ability factor into developmental responsiveness. Administrators shared their insights about developmental responsiveness and provided examples of how their school responds to the developmental needs of the young adolescents in their building.

Different administrators focused on different aspects of what it meant to be developmentally responsive. First and foremost, a number of administrators acknowledged the difficulty some students have with this period of transition. Kerry stated “it is a hard time for them in the middle years.” Binard noted “we have more and more students who are struggling developmentally,” and Bill explained that this “age group of students is going through similar

challenges”. These statements illustrate how these administrators recognized young adolescence as a unique and challenging developmental phase of life.

For Binard, being developmentally responsive was synonymous with effective teaching when he stated “that’s just what a teacher has to do nowadays.” He added that if a teacher is not responding to developmental needs and the unique characteristics of young adolescents “you’re sinking rather quickly within your classroom” as “learning won’t take place for those kids.” For Bruce, it meant considering young adolescents “individually with what that kid needs.” Mark had perhaps the most articulate, holistic view about what it meant to be a developmentally responsive leader:

I think as middle school leaders, we’re constantly looking through that lens of what’s developmentally appropriate for them. Or, how do we give them those skills to make it developmentally appropriate. I think in the middle level, you’re constantly looking through that lens at everything you do, academics, social, extracurricular.

Although the concept of developmental responsiveness is broad and comprehensive, with many different aspects subsumed into it, the administrators tended to focus on distinct parts rather than the whole. Each developmental need is discussed separately.

Physical needs. A few administrators discussed the physical and hormonal changes typical to this developmental stage. Kerry referred to how young adolescents were “going through a lot right now, their whole hormonal bodies.” Scott explained how his school addressed students’ physical needs by providing lots of opportunities for movement because “there’s lots of kids who really need that stuff.” He pointed to the availability of ellipticals, stationary bikes, a stand-up boxing pillow and flexible seating to help meet student physical needs through activity and movement.

Social and emotional needs. Some administrators focused on the social and emotional aspects of young adolescent development. Bruce zeroed in on the need for students to have a sense of belonging “because they need to connect and they’re struggling where to connect, as we talked about earlier on, so you need to provide something for them to feel a part of and connect to.” For Daisy who stated, “we teach kids, not subjects,” relationships and connection were also important. She continued, “If you don’t have their heart, you don’t have their hand.” Helping students feel safe and establish positive relationships within the middle school community was important. As Kerry stated, “when we’re feeling safe and comfortable and all of those wonderful things, we’re more open to learn. And sometimes it’s not necessarily the book learning that day that is impacting them. It’s the social learning. It’s how people treat each other.” Bill discussed how students can experience difficulties with peer relationships and be “friends this week, frenemies the next week, and absolute enemies the following week.” Binard referred to the difficulty middle school students can have coping:

I’m going to take the social-emotional aspect of things, in their lives and outside, and then they come to school and then now they’re 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.

Each of these administrators acknowledged that young adolescents experience challenges related to their emotional and social development. They also provided examples of how their schools responded to these students’ needs.

Binard described a number of initiatives to support the social and emotional development of students in his school including peer mentorship, anti-bullying, suicide awareness, health champions, and friendship groups. Bruce talked about building an inclusive culture and the importance of developing community and school spirit by “giving students something to connect with and be a part of.” Mental health supports were a focus in another school. As Binard indicated, “if you don’t have programs in your school to help address those (social-emotional needs), then you’ve lost that kid before they even walked in the door.” The structures in middle schools such as teaming and advisory also enable teachers and staff to build stronger relationships with students and support their socio-emotional development.

Intellectual needs. Young adolescent cognitive development and meeting the intellectual needs of their students was the focus for other administrators. Binard indicated how his school provided “students the responsibility to be responsive for their own learning” by choosing the opportunities of assistance or enrichment that would best support their learning needs. Similarly, four administrators referred to Response to Intervention, a tiered system of academic supports, as a feature that made their school unique on the questionnaire. As one administrator explained: “A 40 min block once a week is set for all Middle School students to receive a targeted intervention based on our collected data.”

Kerry described this stage as “being filled with the whys” and explained that when young adolescents understand the rationale and can get their questions answered, they are more inclined to buy-in. She changed her school’s digital citizenship program so that it was more developmentally responsive as well as brought guests into her school to promote learning about posting pictures through social media. As she explained:

So we brought in the RCMP, we brought in a psychologist, and a social worker, and we let them ask their whys because that's what they need at that age. They need to ask their whys. There was no matter how out there it can be. If that is what is dominating their thoughts, we need to answer it so that they can move on and we can move on.

This is one example of meeting the intellectual needs of students. Exploratory or option programs in schools were another means to allow students to pursue areas of interest and foster cognitive development, as noted by Stephanie.

However, cognitive or intellectual development was not top of mind for most focus group participants. As Maggie noticed, “Did you guys notice we haven’t mentioned academics, once?” This provoked a discussion about how schools strive to meet both the social and intellectual needs of students. Mark explained that “there are definitely times in middle school where it feels like academics takes a second seat to trying to make sure that the culture is positive and respectful. But, we still have to push both things. We still have to move forward with both.” The need for differentiation to meet learner needs was discussed during each interview. However, it was not mentioned in reference to developmentally responsive practice.

Other needs. In addition to being developmentally responsive to the physical, social, emotional, intellectual changes that students experience in young adolescence, schools are also challenged to consider many other factors such as cultural influences, sexual orientation, family contexts, and ability in different areas (e.g. language, physical, learning, and reading) to meet individual student needs (NMSA, 2010). In terms of psychological needs, Bill identified the importance of providing students with leadership opportunities to gain more independence and “grow into responsibility.” Becoming more independent was also noted by Binard and Bruce. Focusing on the moral aspect, Terry identified that young adolescents are “a powerful group”

that “want to make a difference.” She indicated that they “want to please and make sure that they are doing their best and change the world.” Leadership programs in schools, for example, can help foster both moral and psychological development in young adolescents. Regarding sexual identity development, Claire explained that middle school students “start to think about that and experiment with that and all the rest of it.” Scott explained how the gay-straight alliance club in his school was “open to any student who wants to go.” Programs, clubs, sports teams, and extra-curricular activities contribute to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents.

Four administrators identified Indigenous cultural awareness and programming as another means of responding to the developmental needs of students in their school. Scott explained that his school offered an Aboriginal studies class and provided opportunities for all students to learn about aboriginal cultures through elders and activities such as a pow-wow demo, drumming circles, moccasin making, and family potlucks. Max highlighted the importance of cultural competence and that his school was ill-prepared to work with refugee students who had perhaps never attended school, suffered from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and did not speak English. In most schools, cultural and linguistic diversity was relatively non-existent. As pondered by Maggie: “how do you teach cultural sensitivity when you have one kid that doesn’t look like everyone else?” However, a few administrators indicated how their school was working to meet diverse student needs.

Middle school administrators identified developmental responsiveness as key to their approach with young adolescent learners. Through their perspectives on what it means to be developmentally responsive and how this is accomplished in their school, it seems that the middle school concept provides the fabric for many practices designed to meet a wide range of student needs.

This section has presented the study's integrated findings pertaining to four middle school concepts: teaming, advisory, curriculum integration and developmentally responsive. Through the focus group interviews and the questionnaire, administrators in the central Alberta region have indicated that teaming and developmentally responsive practices are middle school concepts that are core to how their schools operate. However, practices related to curriculum integration and advisory are viewed to be less important and are not as widely implemented. The next section considers findings related to effective teaching.

Findings Related to Effective Teaching

A second research question asked: According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher? The focus group interviews were an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the initial questionnaire results. Middle school administrator perspectives from all sources are combined throughout to present a more holistic response to the research question. Two findings emerged from the analysis of the data. Finding 2 explores how effective teaching requires professional knowledge and skills, as well as competencies related to creating learner-centred environments. Finding 3 was that effective middle school teachers require certain dispositions or ways of being to promote positive, productive relationships. Also in this section are the middle school administrators' recommendations for effective teaching as they apply to teacher preparation.

Finding 2: Effective beginning middle level teachers should develop professional knowledge and skills, including an ability to create learner-centred, inclusive environments. A combination of pedagogical knowledge and skill, understanding of student needs, and ability to adapt to a context are key to effective teaching (Alberta Education, 2018b; Darling-Hammond,

2010). This section provides a closer look at the middle school administrators' perspectives on the competencies necessary for beginning middle level teachers in the areas of professional knowledge and skills and creating learner-centred environments. The administrators also made recommendations related to teacher preparation so that beginning teachers acquire the necessary competencies.

Professional knowledge and skills. Subject-area knowledge, understanding of curriculum, and a repertoire of instructional and assessment strategies are all needed to facilitate student learning. The questionnaire provided some initial insights into the professional knowledge and skills that middle school administrators deemed important for beginning middle level teachers. As an open-ended questionnaire item, administrators were asked to use three short words or phrases to describe effective teaching. The Likert scale items addressed professional knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as middle school concepts. The questionnaire results are presented first to provide general insight into the research question. These findings are then supported by the statements made by administrators during the focus group interviews pertaining to instructional strategies, subject-area knowledge, and assessment.

Engaging instructional strategies. Student engagement seemed top of mind for this group of middle level administrators when questioned about effective teaching. Table 4.5 shows the administrators' perceptions of the importance of different types of professional knowledge. In addition to rating the importance of each statement, they were asked to indicate which of the four statements was the most important competency for a beginning middle level teacher. With mean scores ranging from 4.46 to 4.85, most respondents indicated that all of the competencies were very important (5). However, the ability to design relevant, challenging and engaging learning activities was chosen as most important by 65% of administrators.

Table 4.5

Professional Knowledge

Statement	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1 NI	Most	Mean
Designing learning activities that make curriculum relevant, challenging and engaging	22 85%	4 15%	0	0	0	17 65%	4.85
Setting clear criteria and high expectations for student learning	22 85%	4 15%	0	0	0	4 15%	4.85
Subject-area knowledge and competency	15 58%	8 31%	3 12	0	0	2 8%	4.46
Using a variety of instructional strategies and resources, including technology, to promote learning	16 62%	9 35%	1 4%	0	0	3 12%	4.58

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.

Student engagement was the most prevalent response to the open-ended item on the questionnaire with 17 administrators (65%) referring to it in their description of effective teaching. This administrator's submission perhaps captures the essence of student engagement: "A balance of music, movement and magic combined with high expectations and rigor." In a similar vein, authentic or relevant learning was indicated seven times (27%) and hands-on learning identified three times. Surprisingly, learning outcomes were referred to by only two administrators. For one administrator, effective teaching meant "By design - every moment is designed purposefully by the teacher - focused on learning outcomes."

During the focus group interviews, administrators also identified teacher knowledge of instructional strategies as essential to engaging middle school students. Max pointed to needing a variety of instructional strategies to meet student needs: "We learn differently, all of us, and the more learning strategies that we teach the kid to be able to pick that information up across the curriculums, the better off we are." Bruce indicated that his staff "is constantly looking for ways

to engage students in the curriculum and teach in a more innovative way” and often use project-based learning (PBL) and technology. He did caution, however, that “PBL is one strategy to do authentic learning” as he is challenging his staff to find other ways to make classroom learning authentic. Binard described authentic engagement as follows: “We’re not here to keep them entertained. We’re not here to make things fun. But we’re here to make things real, and tangible, and applicable to what they can see outside of a school.” Foster added that it was about providing challenging learning opportunities that are “going to a high level, applying that knowledge to different situations. Things that, ideally, things that you can’t Google an answer for, kids are trying to solve.” Promoting authentic, engaging instruction was a definite aspect of effective teaching for these administrators. Beginning middle level teachers therefore need to acquire knowledge of a wide variety of instructional strategies to engage young adolescents in relevant, authentic learning.

In addition to instructional strategies, administrators zeroed in on other ways effective teachers are engaging students in their schools. Scott referred to increased technology in his school as an important means to “helping kids be engaged learners.” Daisy talked about how the academies in her school increase student engagement: “They’re able to explore painting, music, hockey, bowling, and swimming, and different avenues with that. I think that hits the middle school, you know, active, engaging learning.” Binard also explained that exploratory curriculums provide opportunities for students to discover areas of interest that relate to career and life skills such as photography.

A few administrators also mentioned providing professional development to promote engaging instruction. Max discussed the need for teachers to acquire the instructional strategies to meet student needs, especially in literacy and numeracy, and also pointed to the importance of

school-based professional development in this area. Stephanie referred to her role as an administrator to set up “engaged and active, purposeful learning” for students by working with her teaching staff. Binard indicated that helping teachers acquire multiple teaching and learning approaches through professional development is a persistent focus in his school.

Student engagement was important to the participants in this study. Although this could be a reflection of provincial educational trends, it could also be that the middle school administrators recognized the challenges related to engaging young adolescent learners and therefore emphasized engaging instructional strategies as a key component of effective middle level teaching.

Subject-area knowledge. On this topic, the focus group participants were split. While some indicated that they tend to hire generalists who have a good understanding of teaching a broad range of subjects, a few administrators felt that middle level teachers, especially in grades 8 and 9 needed a stronger foundation in the subject areas they taught and therefore tended to prefer subject specialists. When asked about their preference for generalists or specialists when hiring for their school, some administrators indicated generalists without hesitation. For example, Mark indicated: “I don’t think I’d be looking for a specialist, unless it was a specialist-type position like phys.ed. or music.” Focusing on generally effective teaching, Scott stated: “I believe that a good teacher can teach any subject so I don’t look for a subject specialist. Certainly at this level, it’s not.” Similarly, Maggie said she was “way more interested” in a generalist as she explained: “I think if you’re a good teacher, you can learn to teach almost anything.” Although he did see a need for someone with strong pedagogy in literacy and numeracy, Jack stated: “Certainly we want generalists because we’re never hiring a social studies teacher. We’re never hiring any specific thing, as you said, they’ve got to teach more than one thing and that’s

going to change throughout their career.” As middle school teachers often teach a variety of subjects, these administrators indicated their preference for generalist-prepared teachers.

Some administrators were somewhat reluctant to choose and indicated that instructional strategies and good pedagogy were the key to effective teaching. As Kerry indicated: “I see it in two ways but I’m of the mindset that instructional strategies is number one because if you can, if you have strong instructional practices you can learn the curriculum before the students and be ahead of them, right.” Concerned about meeting the diverse needs of learners, Max raised the importance of knowing “how to teach when kids don’t get it...So, I think that the focus needs to be moved away from the subject-area specialist in middle school and focus more on how to teach.” Bill talked about teaching as being a “sell-job” and that if teachers are “passionate about what they’re doing, and they make those relationships, kids will buy it.” He added that the “uber-excitement comes from knowing your topic really well, and being able to see the interconnections of it.” For these administrators, the importance of being a generalist or a specialist was trumped by having good pedagogy and being excited about the subject content.

It seemed that the administrators that were interested in a subject specialist were primarily concerned about the higher grade levels of math. Bruce indicated that a generalist was fine for grade 6 or 7, but he tended to look for more of a subject specialist in grade 8 and 9. Binard concurred as he was finding that “the teachers that we’re having come to us are not specialized enough to handle some of the curriculum. He added that lack of curriculum knowledge made it difficult for teachers to differentiate the curriculum which resulted in teaching “down the middle.” He provided this rationale for preferring a specialist teacher:

So they have a good understanding of, let’s say, middle school, and you know what an effective middle school teacher looks like and building relationships and those side of

things. But then you look at, for example, we have a grade 9 math/science position that I've advertised for a month now and we don't have any applicants. So, getting people that are specialized enough to really do that curriculum justice, so that they're not focusing so much of their time just learning that rich curriculum.

Foster suggested that providing more than one curriculum-specific course to generalist pre-service teachers, would enhance their subject-area knowledge.

Based on these findings, the jury is still out on whether a generalist or a specialist prepared teacher would be a more effective middle school teacher. As some administrators indicated, it may depend on the grade level and subject area, with concern related to math, in particular.

Assessment. In terms of professional knowledge related to assessment, using assessment to inform instruction and teacher practice was the highest rated item in this portion of the questionnaire. The mean range on these items was 4.42 to 4.81. As illustrated in Table 4.6, using multiple and varied assessments and feedback were all important assessment skills. Of the 26 questionnaire respondents, assessment was mentioned five times on the open-ended item. Two administrators valued the opportunity for differentiated assessment and providing students “choice and voice in assessment” while another identified “formative assessment practices” as key to effective teaching.

While assessment was not identified as a major theme in the focus group interviews, it was mentioned in relation to curriculum integration, creating common assessments and as a challenging area for instructional leadership. A few administrators pointed to the importance of teacher teams collaborating to create common assessments and using them to pinpoint student needs. Maggie referred to “taking a look at how are we going to work together to develop

Table 4.6

Assessment

Statement	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1 NI	Most	Mean
Using varied assessments to generate evidence of student learning related to learner outcomes	18 69%	5 19%	3 12%	0	0	6 23%	4.58
Providing accurate, constructive and prompt feedback to students concerning their performance	16 62%	10 38%	0	0	0	5 19%	4.62
Providing different ways for students to demonstrate their learning	16 62%	6 23%	3 12%	1 4%	0	3 12%	4.42
Using assessment to inform instruction and teacher practice	21 81%	5 19%	0	0	0	12 46%	4.81

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.

those common assessments” while Stephanie focused on building “really effective teams so that they can work together collaboratively, and then plan common assessments, activities for students.” Mark talked about using vocabulary pre and post-tests to gauge the impact of instruction. Teacher collaboration, especially across different subject areas, was identified by Max as an opportunity for varied assessments and deeper learning:

If everyone is on the same page and everyone is talking about similar big rocks, the kids can understand what it is that they’re supposed to learn, and then showing you what they’re learning. That allows the kids to, it allows you to assess them, multiple different ways, whether or not they actually understand that concept. And when they can understand that concept, multi-subject wise, it’s not going away.

Assessment was identified as a challenge by Jack who explained the gaps in this area of professional knowledge:

A challenge for us would be that varied and ongoing assessment at a middle level. As an administrator, that’s a big concern that I have with teachers, is that varied piece, and that

ongoing piece...And I think that forever that I'll be doing this job, that's going to be a challenge, working with teachers. Because some get it, and some need an awful lot of work.

While not a major theme, assessment was nevertheless identified as important professional knowledge for teachers.

The professional knowledge and skills that the middle school administrators identified as important to effective teaching pertained to engaging instructional strategies, effective assessment, and subject-area knowledge.

Creating learner-centred environments. Building on the professional knowledge and skills of the previous section, effective middle level teaching could perhaps best be described as learner-centred. Administrators repeatedly referred to effective teaching as being able to meet diverse learner needs in inclusive classrooms. As explained by one questionnaire respondent, effective teaching means “meet the diverse needs which are the reality of teaching middle school in an inclusive setting.” Creating learner-centred classrooms refers then to practices such as differentiation and personalization of learning, providing students with voice and choice, and being responsive to their needs. It is also essential that the teacher manage their classroom such that it fosters a positive learning environment. As remarked by Max: “this gig is not for the faint of heart.”

On the open-ended item on the questionnaire, effective teaching was synonymous with differentiation for almost half (46%) of respondents. Respondents referred to differentiated instruction, personalization, inclusion, or scaffolding as a means to make sure “all levels of learner supported” and “gain an understanding of each student learner and their learning styles.” As demonstrated in Table 4.7, all of the rating scale questions in the inclusive learning

environments category were rated as very important (5). The mean range was 4.62 to 4.88 and the statement “creating and maintaining a welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning environment” was one of the highest rated items on the questionnaire. It was also identified as the most important of the four statements.

Table 4.7

Inclusive Learning Environment

Statement	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1 NI	Most	Mean
Creating and maintaining a welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning environment	24 92%	1 4%	1 4%	0	0	14 54%	4.88
Planning for individual differences and responding to diverse student needs	17 65%	8 31%	1 4%	0	0	3 12%	4.62
Supporting learning for each student; believing that all students can learn and be successful	21 81%	4 15%	1 4%	0	0	6 23%	4.77
Employing strategies that promote a positive, engaging, student-centred learning environment	21 81%	4 15%	1 4%	0	0	3 12%	4.77

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.

The focus group interviews provided many indications that this area of competency was of primary importance for teachers to be effective at the middle level as differentiation and inclusion were mentioned during all six interviews. As one administrator indicated, effective teaching means paying attention to both differentiation and creating a conducive learning environment:

Understanding how to differentiate in a classroom too, for all learners. How can you make your classroom and your teaching for all learners and meet the needs of a variety of different kids, not just teach one thing. And so you talked about that wit and skill to be able to handle middle school kids, who joke, or have a rude comment, or who...and you can be able to take them aside and talk to them about that or deal with that. (Stephanie)

This administrator identified a need for a range of instructional strategies to differentiate and meet the diverse student needs in inclusive classrooms:

I think just that differentiation at the middle school level where you've got quite a big range in your classes. In your grade 8 class, it's not streamed but there are kids that are, like in a math class, working quite a few grade levels below, and kids that are at grade level. The ability of teachers to present information or create learning experiences in different ways is really important. Sometimes there's a place for doing an activity and then taking notes. And other times it's something like let's do an inquiry activity around gas mileage when they're learning about math, or something like that. Just the variety of different learning experiences is really important in middle school. (Jerry)

The importance of the ability to differentiate instruction magnifies at the middle level due to the increase in disparity of student abilities as they continue through school. The next sections look more closely at inclusive classrooms, student-centred and managing the learning environment as means to foster a learner-centred environment.

Inclusive classrooms. A few administrators provided detailed descriptions of inclusive classrooms in their schools.

The classroom has changed and it has gone from a fairly narrow band of students to this absolutely massive scope of kids that you have in your classrooms, varying degrees of educational abilities or inabilities, varying different cultures and it has changed dramatically. (Max)

Max provided an even closer look as he explained that "in an inclusive classroom, we have differently-abled students in classrooms that are non-communicative, that are barely bi-pedlar.

That's the change in the classroom. So we have to support that teacher and the rest of the students to learn to live in that environment." Scott also highlighted the shift to inclusive classrooms:

The most important thing, and something that my staff is really lacking, is inclusion.

Inclusion is, when I was here, we had segregated programs. We don't have that anymore.

You're seeing more and more kids with higher and higher needs in our classrooms. And our teachers who've been here for 15 years, are struggling to program for them.

Terry indicated that inclusion also meant programming for students with complex needs, not just those with learning disabilities or English language learners. Effective teaching therefore includes being able to meet diverse learner needs in inclusive classrooms.

Learner-centred. Some administrators focused on how their school strives to meet student needs. In some schools, learner-centred meant attending to individual interests and needs as learners.

I think we really try and individualize our approach to students, as much as we can, here...If you were to talk to any one of my teachers and you were to ask them, ok, that student there, tell me, they could probably tell you their reading level, they could tell you strengths, weaknesses, and personal interests. (Bruce)

On the open-ended item of the questionnaire, some administrators highlighted the importance of targeted interventions, such as this statement: "Strong focus on literacy and providing targeted and specialized intervention to students in their area of challenge." A few administrators identified instructional strategies and the importance of "teachers working collaboratively to address lacking skills and targeting these students with support." Another school's Response to

Intervention program provides students with opportunities to meet their own learning needs, as described by Binard:

I need help in this area and I need to go here to get it. Or, I want more enrichment in this area and I need to go here and get it. Maybe I just need time to work through some things on my own. That's provided for them as well. So, really giving kids the ability to respond to their own needs without us telling them.

Other administrators described programs to support the social and emotional development of learners as well as exploratory programs to explore their individual interests and passions. Such programs are highlighted in the developmentally responsive section, however, are illustrative of how schools can establish structures to create student-centred learning environments.

Managing the learning environment. A few administrators also zeroed in on a teacher's ability to creating a safe, positive learning environment in the classroom. Although some administrators referred to the importance of classroom management skills, which has nuances of control and discipline, they were primarily concerned with "creating a positive, nurturing, safe, inclusive place for kids," as stated by Scott, so that all learners can flourish. This reflects a shift from keeping students on task to being attentive to the complexity of managing the learning environment so that both the learning and socio-emotional needs of students are met. The importance of a safe learning environment was also emphasized by Bill, "If you don't have their hearts, like when we talk about that school environment is safe, if they don't feel like they're cared for, you'll never have their head." Kerry indicated that it was important to not only make sure students "feel safe, included and supported," she also felt that "if there is not structure in a classroom, there's no learning taking place."

You can be caring, reflective and adaptable, that's beautiful. But you also need to be structured. You need to have a routine. We talked about that. That box still needs to be there. They need that. They need it more than ever at this age and the more airy-fairy we are, the more they push. The more they step out of that box and it's hard to get that back, because once they've lost respect for you...(Kerry)

She further explained that managing the learning environment is one of most challenging aspects of being a beginning teacher which can lead to someone “thinking of quitting within the first two months because they can't get the class under control.” Bruce also highlighted a need for a “foundation in classroom management” and the importance of a beginning teacher being able to provide evidence of some of their management tools during an interview that could set them up for success in the middle school classroom:

But I know that September 1st, when the kids show up, they can handle the first couple of weeks and they'll be okay. And they're not going to start off with some really bad habits that all of the sudden in October are really going to be hard to change. And, now they need three times as much support.

For these two administrators, creating student-centred learning environments meant being able to effectively manage the learning environment to be an effective teacher. An understanding of inclusive classrooms and an ability to differentiate to meet student needs were also viewed as essential elements of effective teaching.

Teacher preparation. Given the competencies the administrators viewed as important, teacher preparation programs should focus more on developing beginning middle level teachers' ability to meet diverse student needs in inclusive classrooms, with an emphasis on instructional strategies, differentiation, and managing the learning environment with less focus on curriculum

integration. When asked during the focus group interviews to provide feedback on the courses that are currently offered in the middle level teacher preparation program at Red Deer College (RDC), administrators provided recommendations for what beginning middle school teachers should know, do and be in order to be successful at the middle level and they commented on the need for teacher preparation programs to reflect the classroom realities.

Program Recommendations. During the focus group interviews, administrators were given a list of the courses taught over 2 years in the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC and asked to provide feedback, based on their needs and observations of recent hires and of student teachers (see Appendix B). The middle school administrators had some insightful recommendations to continue, increase or decrease emphasis on certain program areas.

The feedback was generally positive and I did receive a few endorsements such as this one from Mark: “We find the RDC students, not that this is an advertisement, but we find them way more prepared. Four of our last six hires have been from the (middle level teacher preparation) program at RDC.” This administrator also highlighted features of recent graduates:

We have multiple graduates from your program and they, whether it was in their journey at the time of life that they took the program, I don't know, but they are outstanding.

Doing an incredible job. I think that's because they are flexible with, oh, ok, I didn't learn this in school, and they don't panic about that kind of stuff. They're like, teach me, how do I become a better teacher, how do I do this better. They're committed. (Max)

Daisy indicated that the collaborative nature of the program was also an important feature as it helps pre-service teachers learn to work with others and be a team player.

There were numerous suggestions for decreasing the emphasis on curriculum integration. When I explained that the concept of curriculum integration is taught in three courses, Scott

suggested that teachers need three courses on inclusion and only one in curriculum integration. Jack also suggested that preservice teachers “spend a lot less time doing cross-curriculum stuff.” He added: “We get these teachers that come to these interviews, want to talk to you about project-based learning and it’s not the reality...that’s not happening in our middle schools...We talk about the big rocks, the essential outcomes, and avoid the fluff. Unfortunately, PBL is falling in the fluff.” In a school where project-based learning (PBL) is prevalent, the administrator indicated that beginning teachers did not require a deep understanding of PBL:

Honestly, not very deep. Our whole professional development focus is on it, here. If I’m interviewing someone and they say, yeah, I’ve got a background in PBL, that’s great. But then, it would also worry me if they’ve developed some bad habits. (Bruce)

Bill suggested that the separate curriculum courses could be integrated, requiring collaboration between the instructors, instead of offering a course on integrated curriculum. I explained that we often see such collaboration between instructors who teach in the same semester in the teacher preparation program at RDC.

In our discussion of beginning teacher competencies, this administrator explained the need for teachers to have deep subject-area knowledge:

Certainly what I’ve found in the few years, in my hiring process, you’ll get teachers coming out and really focus on “*relationship, relationship, relationship*” which is kinda what I’ve always “yeah, that’s what I want,” people who can build a relationship with kids. But what I’ve found now, my next piece is, do they have the background to teach Math 9, if they’re going to be teaching Math 9. And that’s been a struggle. People who want to come to middle school tend to be the ones who are really good at engaging kids, having fun with kids, build a relationship with kids. But that content knowledge, and the

ability to take a program of studies and make it engaging and still have academic rigor, that's a tall order. (Bruce)

Teacher subject-area knowledge was especially important to the middle school administrators who had Grade 9 students in their building. A challenge for teacher preparation is to enhance the subject-area knowledge for generalist teachers. This administrator provided a suggestion of how we might package courses differently to increase emphasis on inclusion and bolster subject-area knowledge:

If I was doing the schedule, you know what I would do? I would get rid of your integrated curriculum and I'd get rid of your inclusion, and I'd make sure that inclusion is part of every one of these curricular ones, incorporate it into there. I would have students choosing a second math or science and a second LA or social. You're getting a little more subject connection, going a little bit deeper. You're almost building a better-equipped generalist. (Foster)

Foster's suggestion illustrates the importance of inclusion and subject-area knowledge and reiterates that curriculum integration is perhaps expendable. Similar to Foster's recommendation, preparation for the inclusive classroom was frequently mentioned.

I think you heard very clearly that the inclusion thing is something that our teachers need to be prepared for. I listen to some student teachers that have been through here in the last year and a half, they had no idea they'd have some of these challenges in the classrooms. It's easy to sit in the class of 24 kids who sit there and do what you want them to do. But with the cognitive delays, the behaviour difficulties, the home life, all of those things that are so much more prevalent in all of our schools now, that's crucial to me. (Scott)

Jack also noted that recent beginning teachers “really didn’t have a handle on the difference between modifying and adapting the learning of kids.” He further recommended that students learn how to benchmark and gain a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. Finally, increased practicum was also noted as essential to preparing beginning teachers. As Foster stated “my advice, what is needed, is more time in front of kids.”

So what would the ideal beginning middle level teacher look like? Administrators made some clear descriptions of the collection of competencies they would be looking for when hiring. Kerry focused on instructional strategies, risk taking, and classroom management. Maggie’s comment was somewhat similar: “I want somebody in there that’s got classroom management skills, that can communicate clearly, that is open to trying new things.” For others, curriculum, inclusion, and the ability to build relationships were the priority.

What do we want? We want it all, right? We want relationships, and we want curriculum, strong. And then I also want them to have some sort of special skills. I want them to have innovation on the side. Because, we have exploratory courses. We have PBLs. (Foster)

I want a teacher who is a masterful connector with kids. Who builds relationships with kids. Who can modify things for different kids, is flexible in doing so, is very much a team-oriented person, works well with a partner and with parents and with kids. Those are the things that I would look for if I’m going to hire someone as a teacher. It doesn’t have to be the smartest person. It doesn’t have to be the person who knows the most about math. It’s helpful, but...I became a science teacher but I wasn’t a science teacher, that’s just what I became. (Scott)

They need that foundation in classroom management. They need that foundation in strong planning. They need a variety of instructional techniques and I would say at middle school, DI [Differentiated Instruction] techniques would be more than, you know, how do I take, adapt and modify a program of studies when I've got a kid who's reading at a grade 3 level and a kid who's reading at a grade 7 level, all in a grade 8 class. Those are things where I think beginning teachers come out and they're really frustrated with...I think the big thing for me is that ability to build relationship and care about kids. That's got to come through, first and foremost. The last couple years, I think knowledge of the program of studies has become more important to me. (Bruce)

Each of the above administrators had slightly different descriptions of the ideal beginning teacher. Collectively, these administrators prioritized a middle level teacher's ability to build relationships, establish a conducive learning environment, and differentiate instruction.

The evidence presented in this section also suggests that a well-prepared beginning middle level teacher would have acquired the curriculum knowledge and instructional strategies to be able to meet the learning needs of diverse students in an inclusive classroom.

Recommendations for teacher preparation programs to achieve such a beginning teacher included increasing emphasis on inclusion, managing the learning environment, and subject-area knowledge, while decreasing emphasis on curriculum integration.

Classroom realities. A few administrators noted the challenges pre-service and beginning teachers sometimes face when leaving the post-secondary realm and confronting the realities of today's classrooms. Two administrators highlighted the importance of connecting the theoretical knowledge acquired in the post-secondary institution to the practical knowledge of the field.

I think that's what I'd like the program to be able to do, is say what are our realities right now in middle school? And I think they need to adapt to it quicker, in terms of what is being taught. I don't think that is instructor-driven as much as conversations like this. And then go out and make it happen. Because then these kids are coming out with some preparation for the reality of now. Because too often, they're sitting in there, in the pretend world of the ideology, or of what it was, or what it should be. There's no concept of any reality of what it should be. (Jack)

You know, this is what it really looks like in a classroom. This is what we're talking about in the classroom. Pedagogy's wonderful; teaching pedagogy is a wonderful thing. But at the end of the day, what are you going to do when ten of your kids really don't get it, and how are you going to know if they don't get that. How can you figure out in your internship, where the kids are at? Ultimately, that's your job. Right, understanding the curriculum, and that's wonderful. But the real meat and potatoes is part two. (Max)

These administrators noted the challenges of adequately preparing preservice teachers for current classroom realities. Their comments allude to the theory-practice gap often experienced by beginning teachers. Increased access to K-12 classrooms was offered as a possible remedy.

The importance of teacher preparation program instructor relevancy was also discussed. Given the close relationship between the middle schools and the post-secondary institution, some administrators noted that certain areas of the curriculum seemed relatively stronger or weaker based on the teacher preparation program instructors:

Recently they've been going to schools to learn how to do Level A assessments, learning about the different learning styles of students, learning about students who have LDs

[Learning Disabilities] and that are low cog [cognitively], and what are the differences. It's been a real addition to your program. I don't know who you had before, but I think that really helps them have an understanding of different learning that's out here.

(Stephanie)

I have noticed that content knowledge piece, in the last couple years it seems, some of them have struggled. (Bruce)

These comments illustrate the importance of teacher preparation program instructors being able to convey the necessary pedagogical, curricular, and theoretical knowledge that is needed for current classroom realities.

Other administrators commented on how beginning teachers seem ill-prepared for the workload that comes with teaching.

I just don't think that, and I've heard it from some of the people in our building, and I have some friends as well that are in the program, people are not aware of how much work goes into teaching, until they actually start experiencing teaching. So you have your third year teachers, education students coming in, saying "Holy, I wasn't prepared for how much work actually has to be put into lesson planning and the day-to-day actions that happen within the school." I don't have an answer about how you could prepare students a little bit more for that. But, I think that's a big eye opener for them to see, holy, this impacts a lot more than just my seven hour day. (Binard)

This administrator was also concerned about a general lack of preparedness of beginning teachers and questioned the admission practices:

We did some hiring last spring and there were frighteningly too many Pinterest teachers applying. Everything was pretty and cute and they have lovely little resumes. And there was no depth. It was really quite frightening. The amount of time that they're willing to...knowing a number of beginning teachers, the emphasis is on the pretty classroom and fluff. At the expense of depth and I don't think...It doesn't come as a surprise to me the high numbers of beginning teachers who leave the profession. They are not ready for the workload. But I also think Universities are expecting students...they're taking students with the highest GPAs, the highest marks, that have done nothing but focus on getting high marks, and then they come into a classroom setting where they're also asked to supervise, and to coach, and to communicate with parents, and to be part of a lot of other things that aren't academic. And they can't cope. They don't have it because they have focused so hard on being the perfect student. They also can't relate to the kids who struggle. And I think we need to take a look more at the whole students when they're being admitted into Faculties. (Maggie)

Maggie's comments illustrate yet another challenge of teacher preparation programs to ensure that preservice teachers acquire not only an understanding of the realities of a teacher's workload and level of commitment that is needed, but are also capable of making sound pedagogical decisions to deliver high quality, engaging, developmentally appropriate, and targeted instruction of the curriculum outcomes.

This study's participants suggested that instruction in teacher preparation programs should be reflective of classroom realities to help student teachers bridge the gap between their courses and their future classrooms. Increased communication and opportunities for collaboration between the teacher preparation program and the local schools were recommended

by Max, Jack, and Foster as means to address the disconnection. The administrators also highlighted the shock that student teachers and beginning teachers often experience when they start doing the work of a teacher. Although perhaps this is something that can only be learned from experience, teacher preparation programs might consider how to more adequately prepare student teachers for the realities that lie ahead.

According to the middle level administrators who participated in this study, teacher preparation programs should focus on developing the competencies related to effective teaching, specifically: professional knowledge and skills, including key understandings related to engaging instructional strategies, assessment, and subject-area knowledge; and an ability to create student-centred learning environments, which involved being able to meet diverse student needs in inclusive classrooms while maintaining a positive, respectful classroom environment.

Finding 3: Effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships. Middle school administrators had some similar and divergent ideas about the dispositions (i.e. personal qualities or attributes) they look for in beginning middle level teachers.

Teacher dispositions. Middle school administrators commented on the dispositions they felt were most important as both an open-ended item and closed-ended Likert scale item on the questionnaire and during the focus group interviews. On the open-ended questionnaire item, administrators were asked to identify three personal attributes or characteristics of effective middle school teachers. The 26 administrators most often described effective teachers as passionate (12), flexible (9), and able to foster relationships with students (11). Attributes that were mentioned four or five times included caring, creative, communicator, team player and reflective. At least two administrators also identified curriculum knowledge, patience, fair, and

hard-working as desirable attributes for middle level teachers. The dispositions that were identified in the open-ended questionnaire item are listed in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

Identified dispositions

Disposition	Frequency (n= 26)	Similar words used to convey dispositions
passionate	12	enthusiastic, energetic, engaging
relationship	11	relates, relational, personable
flexible	9	
caring	5	empathy
reflective	5	lifelong learner; perceptive; growth mindset
communicator	5	
creative	5	innovative
team player	4	
understands curriculum	3	knowledgeable
patient	2	
hard-working	2	
fair	2	

These results were slightly different from the dispositions identified in the closed-ended questionnaire item when they were asked to pick the three dispositions that would be most important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate. Based on this question, the most important dispositions were caring (62%), reflective (50%), adaptable (42%) and learner (38%), as shown in Table 4.9. These dispositions had a mean range of 4.73 to 4.96 with learner having the second highest mean at 4.81.

Whereas reflective and caring were identified by five administrators on the open-ended item, they rose to the top of the list in the closed-ended item. Being flexible and adaptable rated

Table 4.9

Desirable Middle School Teacher Dispositions

Disposition	5 VI	4 QI	3 I	2 SI	1 NI	Most	Mean
Adaptable	19 73%	7 27%	0	0	0	11 42%	4.73
Caring	25 96%	1 4%	0	0	0	16 62%	4.96
Creative	6 23%	15 58%	5 19%	0	0	1 4%	4.04
Dedicated	19 73%	6 23%	1 4%	0	0	5 19%	4.69
Enthusiastic	15 58%	8 31%	3 12%	0	0	4 15%	4.46
Fair	17 65%	8 31%	0	0	1 4%	2 8%	4.54
Intelligent	6 23%	12 46%	7 27%	1 4%	0	1 4%	3.88
Leader	1 4%	16 62%	6 23%	3 12%	0	0%	3.58
Learner	21 81%	5 19%	0	0	0	10 38%	4.81
Professional	18 72%	5 20%	2 8%	0	0	4 15%	4.46
Positive	19 73%	6 23%	1 4%	0	0	7 27%	4.69
Respectful	19 73%	6 23%	1 4%	0	0	4 15%	4.69
Reflective	19 73%	6 23%	1 4%	0	0	13 50%	4.69

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. For this question, the administrators were asked to first rate the importance of each disposition.

high in both parts of the questionnaire. Although dispositions related to being passionate or enthusiastic were mentioned by almost half of the administrators (46%) on the open-ended item, enthusiasm was among the lower-ranked dispositions on the closed-ended item.

During the focus group interviews, the administrators were given the ranked list of dispositions from the questionnaire and asked to comment on the initial findings (see Appendix I). They were generally satisfied with the top four on the list: caring (62%), reflective (50%), adaptable (42%) and learner (39%). As explained by Bruce, caring is necessary: “No, caring makes sense that it’s the top one. Caring, you want that to be up there. If they don’t care about kids, they’re not going to like this job very much.” One administrator elaborated that caring also means getting involved in the school, and is related to dedication:

Just being connected though to the students, too. You can be caring but what does that look like. A little bit deeper than “I care about kids,” because hopefully they’re all in teaching because they care about kids. But a little bit more connection. Connection to your school, not just your class. How are you going to impact the whole school? (Terry)

Chloe provided an explanation for why being flexible and adaptable is so important in middle school:

Being able to adapt, and being coachable, and all those pieces are really important. Some of the pieces you can fill in, but if they can’t...(pauses) In middle school, you need to be able to change on the fly. There’s no set, one path. You’ve got to be able to diversify and awfully quickly.

This illustrates how middle school teachers need to be especially observant of, and responsive to, the often fluctuating emotional states of young adolescents. Binard provided a similar perspective and highlighted the importance of being adaptable and reflective:

I'm looking at the top four, and for me the top four are my top four. Adaptable for sure, and reflective. I think in that reflective portion is where you really get teachers identifying, ok I can do this, I did this well, or I didn't do that well, or, I'm overwhelmed and I need support. So, I like the top four for sure. At middle school, adaptable is a huge portion because you never know what you're going to be teaching every year.

Some administrators had other reactions. Max chuckled at "how far down, creative, intelligent and leader" were on the list. Two administrators were surprised by how low enthusiasm was rated.

I'm surprised enthusiasm is so low. And you're right, like I know it's important to be caring but I think you can show you're caring in different ways that are on here, like, by being enthusiastic, by being a leader. You know it's just like: I want the best for you guys. That's caring, and then put in a bunch of these other things, like the positive part.
(Bill)

I thought enthusiastic would be a little higher. Leader at zero! Wow - that's (pauses), you're a leader. I'm not surprised by caring. I think that's so important. I talked about adaptable and I see that being up there. I would think that enthusiastic would be a little higher and, leader is zero! I guess we were asked to pick the top three, so I understand why. (Scott)

Although Foster indicated "I like the positivity myself," Jack wasn't concerned about it: "I don't really care if someone's that positive, to tell you the truth." He indicated that creativity and dedication needed to be higher up the list: "Dedicated, well you're not going to survive unless you're dedicated. But this creative piece, including a math class, you need to be pretty creative at

a middle school.” On this point, Foster agreed that “innovation is what starts to separate your average teachers from your exceptional teachers. Is it necessary, no. It really makes that difference; you start to teach to the edges.” These administrators seemed to generally agree with the top dispositions, while indicating their personal preferences for other dispositions such as creativity, positivity, and enthusiasm.

Jack indicated that beginning teachers don’t always come across as professional, especially by preferring to sub in their first years of teaching: “Graduates don’t seem to be aware of the expectations, are not interested in being hired, don’t know what it means to be a professional.” Bruce also commented on professionalism:

You know, interesting we had our talk about millennials, that professional piece is one that I’m surprised is that low. However, I will say, most of the teachers we hire are fairly, very rarely do I need to have a conversation about professional. I think the practicums take care of that. I think practicum teachers, mentor teachers, are very good at outlining what that looks like for student teachers.

The fact that leadership was the lowest-ranked disposition for beginning middle school teachers was frequently brought up during the focus group interviews. However, most arrived at the same conclusion as this administrator:

See, I’m not surprised about leadership if we’re only picking our top three. I’m not surprised that leadership is down there. I’m thinking about some of our most solid teachers in our building. They’re leaders in their own way, but they have no interest in leaving the classroom. They are so good at what they do. They want to stay there. That’s where their impact is. (Maggie)

Looking at the list of dispositions as a whole, this administrator perhaps said it best:

All of these are very important. So you're going to get a bent somewhere in the data that tell you that these are the three that mathematically come out on top, but those are all very important characteristics for teachers to have. (Max)

Considering all of the data, it would seem that being caring, adaptable, and reflective are essential traits for an effective middle school teacher. After these top three dispositions, administrators seemed to have their personal preferences such as positivity, creativity, and professionalism. A few of these dispositions are also essential to being able to develop positive, professional relationships, as explored in the next section.

Relationships. Although relationships are mentioned in other sections of findings, this section is focused on how the administrators described effective teachers in terms of their ability to develop productive relationships, especially with students. When asked about effective teachers in the open-ended item (see Table 4.8), 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).” It is interesting to note in Table 4.10 that on the closed-ended questionnaire items, both statements related to relationships with students, parents and colleagues were also highly rated.

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 very important (5). Although their primary focus was on student-teacher relationships, a few administrators focused on building relationships with community members and parents during the focus group interviews. These two types of relationships are explored in greater depth.

Table 4.10

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
Honouring 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.

Student-teacher relationships. Administrators repeatedly identified a middle school teacher's ability to build relationships with their students as essential to the success of both parties. As Foster said, "I can't teach somebody to form relationships with kids. It's almost something you just have, or you don't. I've seen the struggle where you have very strong curricular people but they're just fire and ice with kids. So, you're at a loss because they're not teachable anymore." Scott referred to an ability to connect with kids: "I want a teacher who is a masterful connector with kids." Bruce explained how the connection is different at middle school:

I think, like with any teaching, you need to figure out ways to connect with those kids.

The kid many not think the relationships are important, but it doesn't mean it is any less important in how you're relating to them, how you're interacting with them. It just might mean your approach has to be really differentiated for different kids. So you've got a kid who's really trying to be independent, making some poor choices, you've got to figure

out how am I going to connect with this kid. And sometimes that's a challenge. High school I always found the challenge is, "what do you want to do after you're done here, how many credits do you need, how can we get you through." But it was a common goal that you automatically shared. Elementary kids, they want to have fun, there's all kinds of ways to go. Middle school, it's how am I going to connect in a different way with that piece. I think you have to be more creative in how you connect with kids.

Binard also discussed how building relationships is different at the middle school level:

A big shift in focus at middle school is really being able to build relationships with kids. At the elementary level, kids just inherently love you. They want to be close to you, and they want hugs, all that kind of stuff, and they inherently want to please. And at the middle school level, you really have to work at building relationships with the kids, connecting with them.

For Bill, the relationships are certainly what distinguish the middle level:

You know what, I think it's about relationships. In our elementary schools the kids really want to form that relationship with you, I think, and in Middle School, probably the difference is that you're forming a relationship with them. They want to have a relationship with you, but it's your responsibility, to take that first step. So, in my school...it's about knowing the kids. And then once you've established that relationship, then rapport is so much easier.

A middle school teacher's ability to form positive relationships with students was very important to these administrators. They indicated that relationship-building with middle school students was different than at other levels of schooling, and often more challenging. A middle school teacher then should inherently know how to relate to young adolescents.

Community relationships. In addition to positive, productive relationships with students, a few administrators identified the importance of being a team player and able to collaborate with colleagues and parents. Scott described an effective middle school teacher as someone who “is very much a team-oriented person, works well with a partner and with parents and with kids.” An ability to foster effective relationships with their colleagues was especially important where middle school teams were working collaboratively, as explained by these administrators:

Teaming is really important and that ability for them to collaborate and talk about the students that they have in a positive, constructive way...They have to come together to have a constructive meaning for why they are having those conversations. Ok, I want to get better with this student. Or, have you noticed this about...And they're typically negative things, but how do we spin that negative, so that student is successful. (Bill)

Because we really had to create that. What is an effective team? What are our expectations during collaboration? What makes a team effective? And then, learning about each staff member as well. Like, what are your skills and interests and what can you bring to the table? And it's taken three years to really build those effective teams so that you can put something out on the table. Well, why are you doing that? And how come? And explaining it to me without taking it personal. So that has been a lot of work as an administrator to build those. (Stephanie)

Collaboration is an expectation for these middle school administrators. As Daisy stated, “collaboration is a skill. Not everybody can just go in and work well with other people.” Middle school teachers should be able to establish productive relationships with colleagues, be a team player and “play nice” as Daisy suggested. Given the importance of teaching teams in middle

school, teachers should be able to work well with others and collaborate in a team-based, collective responsibility approach to working with students. Daisy also noted that the teacher preparation program at RDC helped students to develop collaborative skills and become good team members.

In addition to being caring, adaptable, reflective and a learner, it was important to middle school administrators that middle school teachers be able to build relationships with students, colleagues and parents.

Findings Related to Effective Middle Level Leadership

The final research question focused on leadership: How do middle school administrators foster effective middle level education in their schools and view their role as leaders? I thought it was important to first explore the administrators' perceptions of effective middle level education by discussing the purpose of middle school during the focus group interviews. Then, by comparing middle school administration to other grade levels, administrators described their role in fostering effective middle level education.

Two major findings emerged and are presented separately. First, middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school. Second, middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through relationships, shared vision, collaboration and placing people in the right positions.

Finding 4: Middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school. Through our discussions about the purpose of middle school and how it was distinct from other grade levels, middle school administrators identified many different aspects of transition that young adolescents experience during their time in

middle school. Comments about general transition are followed by various types of transition related to being developmentally responsive.

Transition from child to young adult. Helping students transition from childhood to adulthood was identified as a key purpose of middle school by almost every focus group participant including Michelle who claimed “we’re the middle child, but we’re the icing in the Oreo.” This sentiment was echoed by Max: “I like the idea of us being in the middle. We’re very aptly named being the middle of childhood and adulthood.” A number of administrators compared features of elementary and high school students to highlight the changes that occur in middle school. Scott explained “I think we’re trying to take these little kids, we’ll just call them little kids when they come into grade 6, and help them become young, functioning adults.” Maggie also marveled at the range of maturity she first noticed at the middle school level:

I remember when I came from primary, so grade one to middle school, and chaperoning the first dance in the fall. And they’re all out in their best dance gear and then running up to buy Kinder Surprises at the store and build the little cars and race them. Like, oh geez, this is so weird.

A unique feature of middle school described by Kerry was “the impact that you have to really watch them grow as young adults.” Mark explained that due to the variance in young adolescents, middle school provided a bridge to help students make the transition between elementary and high school.

The middle school administrators who participated in this study seemed generally more focused on the personal growth and development of their students than on academics. As he referred to meeting the needs of students and promoting personal growth, Jack explained: “I think we just play that middle role of moving those kids across the continuum, and sometimes

academics are the most important things, and sometimes academics aren't the most important thing." Max was also focused on meeting student needs and "helping the students as best as we can" and reflected that "we have to get better at figuring out what's more important for this kid right now." Expressing a concern about perhaps focusing too much on relationships and pointing out that "we're here to teach academics as well," Maggie commented: "I think we walk a tightrope that making sure middle school doesn't just become a fun place to be, it's a fun place to get a lot of stuff done. There's a difference." Indeed, Max recognized that middle schools tend to be much more student-centred than curriculum-centred high schools. However, a number of student transition factors related to academics were also identified.

Cognitive transitions. Mark highlighted the essential role of the teacher teams to "make sure that not just the needs of those kids are being met, but moving forward with curriculum and academics." Scott explained how the rigor and academic expectations increase as students progress toward high school. He described how students who did well in elementary sometimes find middle school increasingly difficult. Bill remarked that in middle school, a student's grades are a shared responsibility between the student, the teacher and the parent. He explained that middle school students start to access to their grades so they can "see how their practices are influencing their grade positively or negatively." He also noted that students transition from usually one teacher in elementary to teachers in dyads in middle school to subject specialists in high school. Kerry referred to the curiosity of young adolescents when she stated "they need to ask their whys." Binard's description of "providing students the responsibility to be responsive to their own learning" by seeking enrichment or assistance as needed could be considered another means to help them transition to high school.

Interestingly, both Binard and Maggie indicated that middle school was not about preparing students for high school, it was about “teaching the kid in front of you” (Maggie) and if you teach grade 7, “worry about grade 7 and the stage that that child’s in at grade 7 and the curriculum that they’re learning at grade 7” (Binard). In terms of their intellectual development or cognitive transitions then, these middle school administrators recognized that young adolescents experience increased curiosity, increased responsibility for their learning and their grades, and increased difficulty of content during middle school.

Psychological transitions. Middle school administrators also referred to psychological changes experienced by young adolescents such as increased independence and identity formation. A number of administrators identified building student independence as an important transition that needs to occur during middle school. Kerry described it as follows:

It’s building their independence and through that model, that they learn to journey those different moments where you have to be on top of things. You still have support in 6/7 but then in 8/9 you have less, right. There’s more accountability on them. It’s a gradual release of responsibility, for sure.

Foster also talked about the transition toward more independence:

We’re helping kids through transition. They’re coming from elementary where they’ve got their one teacher, their one class and, like you’d said, they see the teacher, they love their teacher, it doesn’t matter, they come in and they just love ‘em, right. And now they’re starting to become their own independent people. Sometimes they’re confronting authority, starting to develop their own opinions, strong opinions and that, so that can be a big difference for me with middle school.

As middle school students take on more responsibility and gain independence, they begin to articulate their own opinions and make their own decisions. In their quest for self-determination, they may also push boundaries and reject authoritarian decisions. As Bruce stated, “students in their natural growth are looking to strive for more independence. So, they still want those relationships with teachers, but as they transition through, and my middle school experience is grade six to nine, as they transition through that, they try and strike out for some more independence.” Binard described it as “giving kids voice in middle school.” He added, “you’re trying to promote independence, you’re trying to foster that voice, you’re trying to get them to advocate for themselves.” Administrators identified helping students develop their independence as an important aspect of their transition during middle school.

Another psychological transition the administrators noted was identity development. As indicated by Binard, “they’re trying to find out who they are, within this young adolescent stage.” Stephanie highlighted the importance of providing students “with a variety of experiences, so they can figure out what do I like, and what are my interests.” Exploratories, option classes, and extracurricular programs provide means to discover individual interests. Bruce attributed peer conflict to their identity development as middle school students “figure out who they are and how they interact.” Development of young adolescent identity and independence were significant psychological transitions in this study.

Social-emotional transitions. Another area of transition that occurs during middle school pertains to the social-emotional development of young adolescent. While Mark joked that the purpose of middle school was “conformity,” administrators such as Bruce referred to teaching students “how to interact with each other and the world.” He elaborated that “kids need to learn how to be nice to each other, how to contribute to society, how to interact when they

disagree with someone. They don't know those skills and that's what they're working through in their time with us here." 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.

These administrators emphasized the importance of helping middle school students develop socially in order to become good people and citizens.

Interpersonal relationships were an important social aspect of middle school student's transition. Michelle described it as follows: "they are exploring different friendships. They are exploring different relationships. They're learning how to navigate the social world, whether it's social media, whether it's face to face, whether it's parents, whether it's like you said relationships, dating." Stephanie referred to making sure middle school "social relationships are positive" while Daisy added that students need to learn social skills such as resilience and coping when friendship difficulties arise.

Max also highlighted resilience while he explained the social development experienced by middle school students: "It is dealing with themselves personally, dealing with others appropriately, finding their own place, their own self-worth, finding their self-confidence, to do those things. In large part, it's focused on being resilient. We deal with a lot of kids that are not resilient." Relating to peers and others is an important aspect of the social-emotional development of young adolescents.

As friends become more important, a few administrators identified the decreasing importance of parents to middle schoolers, which also impacts them socially. Bruce explained that middle school students are "trying to figure out" how to make the shift from being

elementary students where their teacher and parents are the “main thing in their lives” to high school when peer interactions are of utmost importance. Scott commented on how students become more aware of their family circumstances as they reach middle school: “In my perspective, kids are much more sheltered in the elementary level and they don’t really see all that’s going on. And they get to middle school and they’re starting to get their own opinions, they’re starting to become young adults. And those things just magnify.” Similarly, Binard described social-emotional challenges experienced by young adolescents who struggle to deal with issues at home, with their peers, at school, and on social media. One administrator mentioned the need for a mental health therapist in the school to help address young adolescents’ social-emotional needs. According to these administrators, a purpose of middle school is therefore to help students learn to navigate socially, interact with others and develop their social-emotional regulation skills.

Physical and moral transitions. Although not as frequently mentioned, a few administrators also mentioned physical and moral development. Physically, administrators referred to the hormonal changes, the variance in physical appearance, or the need for activity. Perhaps as this transition is biological in nature and therefore largely outside of their realm of influence, it was less of a focus for the administrators. Only one administrator referred to the moral development of young adolescents:

I think, middle school, they’re a powerful group, like that age. Like they can be so affected by what’s happening with them...They can make a huge difference and they’re ready for beyond, right. They’re still keen. Most of them, they want to make a difference...They do want to please and make sure that they’re doing their best and

change the world. So, I mean if you can get them at that age, it makes high school that much easier, right. (Terry)

Being aware of the physical and moral shifts experienced by young adolescents can help administrators be responsive, student-centred leaders.

As illustrated by the focus group participants, middle school is a time to help students transition through cognitive, psychological, social-emotional, physical, and moral developmental changes. As indicated by Claire, “It’s a unique time in their development. A petri dish of hormones, social-emotional needs, and building their independence.” Effective middle level education therefore would help students successfully transition through the middle grades by recognizing and fostering the various aspects of young adolescent development. The next section explores how middle school administrators accomplish this feat.

Finding 5: Middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships. School leaders play an essential role in how a school operates and supports student learning (Leithwood, 2007; Howell et al., 2013). A focus group participant 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, or manipulate the processes, honestly, the processes in our school to get people where we wanted them to be, you’re not going to get where you want to be. (Claire)

This section explores how middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education, paying attention to the analogies they made in reference to their leadership role and the significant actions they took as the school leader. Some aspects of our discussions likely apply to school leadership at any level. The four ways they fostered their

vision for the purpose of middle school (shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships) are each explored separately.

Shared vision. Using common language to articulate a shared vision was an identified means to influence the direction of the school. Max stated that his main role was “helping all staff to know what the plan is.” He described wanting to create ownership, explaining that it was different from buy-in. He indicated it was important for staff to believe in the school’s shared vision and feel like they “own it.” He explained that “the vision is the fabric, what the fabric of the school is.” 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.” Bill talked about school-wide decision making related to a special event day while another referred to collaboratively building a cohesive school culture. 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 behaviour expectations, consequences, to get to where we were at.

In each case, 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.

Collaboration. A few administrators indicated that while they may be the leader, school leadership was a collaborative effort. As Scott stated, “distributed, shared leadership is crucial in a middle school.” He pointed to the teamwork needed in middle 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.” Jerry referred to middle schools having a “collective responsibility approach.” Making reference to being the captain of the ship but needing her crew, Kerry stated: “I’m at the helm, but they’re part of that piece, that’s so important. And it makes you feel like you’re important in the picture, when you have that shared leadership. You get that different buy-in and the desire to want to come up with a solution.” Claire also highlighted the teamwork aspect of middle school leadership:

I don’t know if I see it necessary as the principal and vice-principal putting stuff in place. More as pulling people together to create or facilitate structures and support networks...But, I think at the middle level, it’s more of a collaborative. In order to truly engage the kids, and the staff sometimes, it has to be very collaborative.

Shared leadership and building a collaborative team were identified as means to foster effective middle level education.

Personnel. Another important leadership aspect pertained to getting the right people in the right positions. Creating productive, effective teams and strategic hiring were identified as two key administrative roles.

The middle school administrators were primarily concerned with “putting the right pieces in the right places” (Mark). Kerry also pointed to strategic hiring as a primary means to foster school vision: “You’re looking at people who bring certain amounts of energy and passion and

those are the things that you're looking at as you hire. What that middle school group anywhere needs, that excitement and that. So strategic hiring for sure.” She also talked about teaming and getting the right people working together and explained “it is all strategic in how you do it.” She added:

Like even where I will put a class is strategic. And it's not, it's in order to meet the needs of students, but also of the teachers because that's, they're my class...So I think there's so many pieces of the puzzle that get thrown in together and it's all, in my mind, is all strategic. Rarely will something just haphazardly happen.

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 was another important aspect. Both Jack and Bill saw dyad teams in middle school as a means to foster deeper relationships between teachers and students. Jack found that setting up 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 shifting existing teachers to different teams or grade levels to better their school. Mark talked about the “behind the scenes” leadership that was needed although “that teacher may not be prepared to make that move to that team.” Max indicated that “it’s about knowing people’s strengths and placing them so that they can be successful. Sometimes it’s having fierce conversations.”

Personnel management within the organization, including getting the right people on the team through hiring and getting the right people working together through teaming, was viewed as another essential role of the middle school administrator.

Relationships. Relationships were frequently identified as being foundational to the purpose of middle school and what made being a middle school administrator unique. As identified by Max: “I think that middle school’s basic building block is all about relationships.” Jack focused on “making sure that I have a relationship with everybody in that building, and their parents.” Relationships with students, staff, and community members are explored separately.

Relationships with students. Some administrators indicated that the key difference of working with students at the middle school level was the challenge of building relationships with them. Bruce indicated “you have to be more creative in how you connect with kids” as he described how working with middle school students was different than working with elementary or high school students. Michelle explained that part of the “adventure of middle school” was “rolling with” the unpredictable nature of young adolescents:

You never know which kid is going to show up on which day. One day, the child might roll in and they had a great day, they’re ready to roar, they’re happy, they’re ready to learn, they’re fed, everything’s great. The next day, the same child might’ve had a fight with Mom or Dad, or brother or sister, and they’re off, they’re not there, not prepared... You don’t know which child is rolling in, whether the child is rolling in, or the more adult child is rolling in, or a crab is rolling in, or whether the joyful child is rolling in. And so we get every part of them, the sweet, and the not so sweet.

Given these emotional fluctuations, Michelle emphasized the importance of consistent, unwavering support on the part of the adults when she stated that “we have to be able to let them know that we’re there for them every single day and they get a fresh start, every single day.” In addition to the importance of positive relationships, this also illustrates how those that work with young adolescents need to be cognizant of and responsive to this unique developmental period.

Binard mentioned that “you really have to work at building relationships with the kids, connecting with them.” Foster made the following insightful comparison that further highlights the challenge of working with middle school students:

High school kids, they see the light at the end of the tunnel. They know where they want to go, potentially jobs, things like that. That’s inspired them to do what they need to, get through the curriculum. Elementary, they just love you because you’re a teacher. Middle school, they hate you because you’re a teacher (laughing).

Part of the challenge of helping students find their voice in middle school can lead to strained relationships, as Foster noted: “It’s just, you’ve got to work on those relationships because they’re starting to become their own unique people and their views might be different than yours, and they’ll tell you that. In elementary, whatever you say is the word.” According to Max, “the real task in middle school to find whatever the hook is for that child.” For these administrators, establishing positive relationships with middle school students presented unique challenges.

Three administrators referred to being the hammer when it came to dealing with middle school students. Kerry highlighted how she needed to be consistent and the expectations of her staff when a student was sent to the office:

I also need to be the hammer. So that's important at this age, right. This age is their...Part of their journey in life right now is to push the boundaries. That's part of their journey. So

I never take it personal. But when they're sent to me by one of my teachers, I know it's hit a point that it's too much. So I need to be viewed as the person that's going to ensure everyone is safe and cared for. And that's kind of where the buck stops with me... So if you're journeying different things with them all the time, you know that consequences need to change and my predictability needs to be high because they need to know, 'okay I'm not going to waiver. I don't fly off the handle here.' I think you need to be predictable at that age because they are not predictable. They are so all over the map that my predictability is important.

This administrator indicated how he was at times tempered by his staff to not be too harsh with a student:

I'm ready to drop the hammer on a kid, for lack of a better term, and I've got a staff member who's going: "No, no, they need one more chance." And I'm going: "No, no they don't, it's time to...this is the consequence they need." "Oh, well, are you sure?" Which is good. That's what I want in my staff. My job is to make sure that I'm keeping the school safe and caring but I want them to advocate strongly for their students, on a regular basis. (Bruce)

It is interesting to note that Bruce illustrates both shared leadership and collaboration in decisions regarding consequences for students. Using a "soft hammer" with middle school students is perhaps a way to describe being caring while helping students understand the consequences of their actions, as explained by Max: "I think our role is to always bolster and let students know that we...while we can be the hammer sometimes, we're also that soft velvety-covered hammer that needs to be there to help them in any way that we can." These administrators described the

delicate role they have in maintaining relationship with students while helping them see the errors of their ways.

Also key to relationship development was trust. Max described the importance of the relationships when disciplining a student: “And if you come out guns a-blazing the first time, you’re lost with them. They won’t trust you. They won’t make that connection to what it was they need to improve upon.” Binard also commented on building trust and rapport with students:

I found this year, and in past experiences, they really need to be able to see you, be able to see you as someone outside of the school, as well as someone they can trust in the building. They can tell very easily if you are somebody who is superficial, a surface type of connector, in regards to the conversations you’re having with the kids, when you’re asking them how their day is, that type of thing. So, you really have to take time to get to know the kids and build that trust.

It would seem that middle school administrators work hard to build trust and foster positive relationships with students.

Relationships with staff. When asked how they foster their vision for effective middle level education, middle school administrators identified some key actions they took in their school to bring their vision to life. Focusing on the *verbs of leadership* highlights a different aspect of the role of the middle school administrator. While leaders take many actions, some common themes surfaced including empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking and influencing. These administrative actions are each explored in more depth.

Empowering (and not micromanaging). A few administrators indicated that as leader, one of their roles was to empower their staff. Kerry explained how in her school, teachers had a say in problem solving and finding solutions:

If there's a problem, come to me with a solution. Don't just come... but not only was that to help support me, but it also gave them this power. That oh, I have a say in the solution. So they would come and 'I have a problem but I have a solution' and so we'd sit and sometimes we tweaked it and sometimes I was like, 'yeah, looks good, perfect.' Because they need to be owning part of the school as well...I do not need to micromanage them. Similarly, Bruce discussed having his staff take the lead and highlighted his desire to empower but not micromanage them:

And again, it's not micromanaging them. If I have to okay every decision and if I have to be involved in everything that's going on, they're going to let me do that. And they're going to sit back and let me do that. Whereas if I let 'em go, and sometimes I've got to go, 'whoa, come back for a sec, let's talk!' And sometimes it's frustrating, or a little bit scary as a leader, but I think that's key. They've got that energy and they've got a team working together. And so if you empower them to do that, they'll do really good things, is what I'm finding here. I think for the most part, they're pretty happy with that.

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. I've become good at coming up with some ideas, sharing them with people who are passionate about it and saying, "ok, take off with this." Whether it's the math supports that we do, whether it's the maker space that we've come up with, whether it's with technology. 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. These three middle school administrators evidently value shared leadership.

Supporting. Playing a supportive role was identified as another key leadership action.

Max talked about providing support for everyone as they interact with students:

I think our role in that is to support the teaching staff, the EA staff, the secretarial staff, the custodial staff, because they all have interactions with those kids all the time. And I think that our role is to support them in those areas so that the school is smooth. As smooth and as balanced as it possibly can be.

He added that support can be both removing roadblocks and providing professional development, all in the goal of promoting student learning. Likewise, Bruce referred to removing barriers. Michelle also focused on the importance of supporting teachers through both coaching and professional development:

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. So that they need to be able to know that they can come and talk to us when they are not feeling that. Or, we need to be able to see that when we're in their classrooms, that they need a little bit of extra support. Or, we need to be able to figure out a way to help them believe that they are capable of doing what they're doing.

In his reflection on working with a younger staff that he referred to as millennials, Bruce indicated he sometimes felt like a father figure: "And as principal, sometimes I feel like I'm

having more parent conversations than I am boss conversations.” Jack strived to support his staff by encouraging and motivating them. Scott talked about 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.”

As Kerry stated, “We're making sure things are safe and caring. We're making sure that we're all supportive, that we're a family.” Bruce echoed: “My job is to make sure that I'm keeping the school safe and caring.” Promoting a safe and caring learning environment is perhaps synonymous with supporting others. Both Bruce and Kerry referred to 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 mindset and encouraging risk taking was an important aspect of her leadership role as she explained:

And, to me, growth mindset is huge in that because that's about: if we fail, we help each other up, and we try again and that's okay. It's okay to do that. Take the risk. Try it. Like, you have all of us here to support you. So even us as teachers are saying that to each other. Then what's happening is they're going into a classroom and saying “risk it, try it, it's okay if you're not perfect the first time. That's 100% fine. But try it. Give it your best.” So, I think the more you do that, the more it becomes a school culture.

Binard referred to giving teachers permission to try new strategies and not limit themselves out of fear that provincial achievement test scores might dip:

A lot of it, I think with the engagement, comes with giving teachers permission. It used to be the provincial achievement tests, those types of assessments were what was driving the successes in schools. If you do well on those, your school is successful, you're doing

your job as a teacher. And that's not the case anymore. Just because you're doing well, we still want to do well on those assessments, but 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." Bring some more authentic, and when we say authentic, we mean more meaningful, more hands-on type of learning into your classroom where it's not textbook, drill and kill type of instruction.

By encouraging risk taking, these administrators are providing a safe place to learn and make mistakes for both students and teachers.

Influencing. Administrators referred to other actions that could be considered influencing such as negotiating, modelling, facilitating, and manipulating. 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 in a bit of a give and take relationship. For both Bill and Kerry, it was important to model behaviours they were hoping to see in their schools. As Bill stated: "model what you want kids to be like." In her goal to provide a safe and caring school environment, Kerry explained that modeling appropriate behaviour was even more powerful when you named it:

So we do use all of that language so that they're seeing that. Also in the way we interact as a staff with each other, is essential for them to see how we speak to with each other, even how we laugh...And so I think that, you have to name those things. You have to talk about them. You have to. It doesn't just happen. It's not, it becomes a feeling. It

becomes a vibe in the school. But nothing just grows, just...you gotta feed it. You gotta feed it. You gotta talk about it. It doesn't just flourish by itself.

For other administrators, the influencing was perhaps subtler. As Claire explained, "it's not about standing in front and manipulating, that's not what we're saying." She identified that school leaders often need to facilitate or manipulate process to make things happen in the school. Influencing others, through negotiating, modeling, facilitating, and/or manipulating were actions that middle school administrators took to accomplish their work and fulfill their role.

Relationships with parents. In addition to building relationships with students and staff, a few administrators indicated that they were working to enhance relationships with parents and community members. Scott indicated that his administrative team was focused on "creating a positive, nurturing, safe, inclusive place for kids." He added that "it starts with our staff, it goes through our kids, it goes through our parents, work with our parent council. I think we want this to be our community." Jack also recognized how relationships between students and staff was important to parents, as was "making sure that I have a relationship with everybody in that building, and their parents." Max focused on 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 doing our absolute level best for their charges." Binard described how his school is focusing on engaging parents and again, how it differs between elementary and middle school:

Looking at this, one of the things that we have for sure on our improvement plan is actually, focuses on involving families more in middle school, more meaningful involvement. So often they come from elementary where it's a very strong school council

and that school council's responsible for hosting a few events after school, being responsible for the fundraising to help support the classrooms and doing some volunteer work in school. They get to middle school and, in the past, it's been, "ok, we want independence for our kids, so parents you need to go and..." But now, we're really finding that, at least I am as the principal, that meaningful involvement from parents and our community really can strengthen our education program.

He added that inviting parents to provide enrichment activities is one way to engage them in the school community. Even though parents may step back as their child becomes more responsible and independent during middle school, these administrators recognized their role in helping parents continue to be involved in their child's education. Michelle explained how it can be difficult to engage parents as partners:

And I think also, with the culture and community, one thing that we've been challenged with in our school, and I don't think that we're alone in this, is actively involving families in the education of our children. 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, and 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. (Michelle)

Building relationships with parents and striving for their meaningful engagement in the education of their children can therefore be an important aspect of the role of the middle school administrator.

Relationships with students, staff, and parents were a significant means for middle school administrators to foster effective middle level education. In regards to students, administrators needed to establish trust and work hard to build a relationship with them, especially when it came to “being the hammer.” When working with staff, administrators focused on empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking and influencing others. The other three ways that administrators promoted their vision for effective middle level education was through creating a shared vision, building a collaborative culture, and being strategic about personnel decisions.

If the primary purpose of effective middle level education was to help students transition toward adulthood, then middle school could be considered a bridge between elementary and high school. Administrators used a variety of analogies to describe their leadership role as middle school administrators. Whether they saw their role as ship captain, buffer, hammer, parent, cheerleader, builder, visionary, or village member, the collaborative nature of middle level leadership was highlighted throughout this section.

Chapter Summary

This chapter conveyed the perspectives of 43 central Alberta middle level administrators that were gathered through an online questionnaire and six focus group interviews on effective middle level education. It began with a description of the case and study participants. The five integrated findings were presented according to the three constructs of the conceptual framework: middle school concept, effective teaching and effective leadership. The findings were:

1. Teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential to middle level education; curriculum integration and advisory are less important and less prevalent.

2. Effective beginning middle school teachers should develop professional knowledge and skills, including an ability to create learner-centred, inclusive environments.
3. Effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships.
4. Middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school.
5. Middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships.

Each of these five major findings are further analyzed and interpreted in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: SYNTHESIS

This case study examined the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators on effective middle level education. Their perspectives on the middle school concept, middle level leadership, and effective teaching provided insights into the current practices of central Alberta's middle schools, which may inform the middle level teacher preparation program that is provided through Red Deer College.

The conceptual framework and research questions that drove this study guided the integrated analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data from both phases, leading to five major findings that were presented in Chapter Four and are listed in Table 5.1. This chapter provides further analysis, interpretation and synthesis of the findings in order to address the central research question that guided this study: *What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?* This chapter explores a tentative result that effective middle level education means being responsive to student needs and fostering positive relationships in order to help young adolescents transition through the middle grades. Two other themes pertaining to teaching and leadership competencies are also developed in this chapter, as a result of further consideration of the five major findings. A summary of the synthesis and interpretation is provided at the end of the chapter.

Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis

The aim of this chapter is to provide to a holistic account of effective middle level education (Merriam, 2009). The synthesis in this chapter is a result of interpreting and considering patterns across the findings, comparing the findings to the literature, and my own reflections on the findings (Creswell, 2012). As shown in Table 5.1, the five findings are presented and interpreted according to how they related to the three analytic categories

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) that emerged: teaching competencies, leadership competencies, and effective middle level education.

Table 5.1

Analytic Category Development

Research Question	Finding Statement	Outcome/Consequence	Analytic Category
1. Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?	Finding 1: Teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential middle school concepts; curriculum integration and advisory are less important and less prevalent.		
2. According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher?	Finding 2: Effective beginning middle school teachers should develop competency in meeting student needs by creating learner-centred, inclusive environments and by applying subject-area knowledge and effective use of instructional and assessment strategies. Finding 3: Effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships.	Teacher preparation programs should focus on the competencies needed for the current middle school realities	Category 1: Teaching competencies
3. How do middle school administrators foster effective middle level education in their schools and view their role as leaders?	Finding 4: Middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school. Finding 5: Middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through relationships, shared vision, collaboration and placing people in the right positions.	Middle school administrators determine to what extent a school can be responsive to young adolescent developmental needs	Category 2: Leadership competencies
CENTRAL QUESTION			
What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?		Relationships and responsiveness were essential to effective middle level education	Category 3: Effective middle level education

The remainder of this section explores how the findings from this case study relate to the literature and the extent to which the research questions have been addressed. Each analytic

category is presented separately: teaching competencies, leadership competencies, and effective middle level education.

Analytic Category 1: Teaching Competencies

Analytic Category 1 pertains to teaching competencies and was derived from Findings 1, 2, and 3 that addressed research questions 1 and 2, as shown in Table 5.1. The middle school administrators in this study provided valuable insights into the middle school concept and the competencies needed for beginning middle level teachers to be effective with young adolescents. The findings are presented separately in order to fully develop the ideas related to teaching competencies.

Finding 1: Teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential to middle level education; curriculum integration and advisory are less important and less prevalent. Although the middle school concept as expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) is intended to be a comprehensive approach to middle level education with its components fully implemented, it seems that this ideal is rarely achieved (Lounsbury, 2013; Schaefer et al., 2016). The typically middle school practices of teaming, developmentally responsive, curriculum integration, and advisory programs are each discussed individually.

Teaming. As explained in *This We Believe*, “the interdisciplinary team of two or more teachers working with a common group of students in a block of time is the signature component of high-performing schools, literally the heart of the school from which other desirable programs and experiences evolve” (NMSA, 2010, p. 31). Teaming is viewed as the “organizational structure that has been a cornerstone” (Arhar, 2013, p. 616) of middle level education. Similar to the statement that teaming was “the most critical component” (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 12) of the middle school concept, teaming was viewed as an essential middle school practice by the

administrators who participated in this study. They indicated strong support for teaming on three separate questionnaire items: 98% of participants identified teams as a very important (5) or important (4) middle level practice; the ability to work as an effective team member and collaborate with colleagues was very important or important to 92% of participants; and being a team player was mentioned by four administrators (15%) when asked about attributes of an effective teacher. During the focus group interviews, teaming was identified as an organizational structure that facilitated teacher collaboration, maximized student-teacher relationships, and enabled teacher teams to better meet student needs.

Although teaming was a practice that was valued by all participants, its implementation varied significantly between schools. While some schools had grade-based teams, most schools seemed to organize their grades in dyads: one person who taught math/science and the other who taught language arts and social studies to shared groups of students. This reflects Lounsbury's (2013) statement that teaming has become "firmly established" in middle level education, and "likely to become nearly universal with more effective partner or smaller teams becoming more common" (p. 40). In some schools, cross-graded teams were more common, especially for character and/or culture building in the school.

In their review of the literature over the past five decades, Schaefer et al. (2016) identified teaming as an enduring and essential research-based middle school practice. The support for teaming that is evident in the literature is parallel to the central Alberta administrators' support for this essential middle level practice. Working with a teaching team or partner clearly provides benefits for both teachers and students including closer student-teacher relationships, improved student achievement, increased flexibility, distributed leadership, and teacher professional growth (Arhar, 2013; CCE, 2003b; Cook & Faulkner, 2010; Schaefer et al.,

2016). Teaming can also increase teacher job satisfaction, the work environment and parental contact (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2007).

The administrators identified lack of time, the number of students in a grade, and getting the right people together on a team as challenges of teaming. Numerous studies have found that the benefits of teaming may be limited in those schools that have not paired this organizational structure with common planning time and flexible schedules (Arhar, 2013; Cook & Faulkner, 2010; Flowers et al., 2007). Cook and Faulkner (2010) found that common planning time was essential to the work of effective teaching teams: “Teachers at all grade levels and in all core subjects expressed the positive effects the regularly scheduled planning time had on student performance, instruction, and faculty morale” (p. 6). In central Alberta, time for teacher collaboration varied from five periods a week, to once a week, to once a month. Arhar (2013) pointed to limited budgets as the main reason that schools have moved away from built-in teacher collaboration time. As explained by Kerry, as a result of the limitations of assignable time imposed by the recent centrally bargained collective agreement (Chamberlain, 2017), some administrators have increased the teachers’ instructional loads and thereby reduced the amount of teacher planning time. Middle school administrators in the region could consider the amount of time and the organizational structures in place to fully capitalize on the benefits of teaming in their schools.

As some administrators explained, the work of the team seemed to be shifting from a curricular or planning focus to more of a student-focus. They spoke of being data-driven and using student results to regroup certain students using an intervention model. In their study, Cook and Faulkner (2010) described the work of the interdisciplinary teaching team as “primarily focused on individual student behavioural and academic issues, team “housekeeping” tasks (e.g.

field trips, rewards, and daily schedule changes), parent communication and conferences, guidance and support, and planning integrated units of instruction” (p. 7). This description is similar to what I experienced as a middle school teacher 15 years ago when teacher teams focused on planning grade-based events and integrated curriculum units for their shared students. As Scott mentioned, “for two teachers to get together to do this project that integrates these four subjects, you just don’t see that anymore.” However, with a perceived decline in emphasis on curriculum integration, as explored later, the focus of the team has perhaps become more student-centred. Both Mark and Maggie explained that the teacher teams in their respective schools were looking at data to inform instruction and student groupings, using a Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Mark explained that the teacher teams in his school had shifted from a managerial role, perhaps similar to the housekeeping referred to in the Cook and Faulkner (2010) study, toward more intentionally focusing on the academic and social-emotional needs of students.

As middle schools become increasingly focused on academic achievement, it is important to not lose sight of the capacity of teacher teams to foster positive relationships and school culture. Referring back to Mark’s comment that middle schools need to “push both academics and positive culture,” middle school teaching teams are uniquely positioned to meet a wide range of student needs as they work collaboratively to foster growth in all areas of young adolescent development. The RTI model and other intervention-based approaches provide opportunities for targeted instruction that supports the academic development of students. Teaming in middle schools also has the capacity to encourage students’ sense of belonging, promote relationships, and contribute to a positive school culture. The magic of middle school happens when teacher teams are able to promote both the academic and personal development of each student.

Developmentally responsive. Being developmentally responsive means attending to the intellectual, social, physical, psychological, and moral needs of young adolescent learners (CCE, 2003a). All questionnaire items pertaining to developmentally responsive teaching were rated as very important (5) by the majority of participants with “making instructional decisions based on students’ developmental characteristics” selected as the most important of the four statements. Administrators described various aspects of developmental characteristics of young adolescents and were able to provide many examples of how their schools were responsive to the developmental needs of their students. Although practices that recognized the moral and physical needs of young adolescents were mentioned, most administrators were primarily concerned with meeting the social-emotional needs of students. Some administrators focused on increasing students’ sense of belonging (Bruce and Claire), while others described initiatives to address a range of topics including health and mental health, anti-bullying, suicide awareness, friendship, and social media (Binard, Kerry, and Scott). A few administrators also described other factors they considered when responding to diverse student needs including culture, ability, and sexual orientation.

Developmental responsiveness is intended to be at the foundation of all middle level educational decisions (CCE, 2003a & 2003b; NMSA, 2010; Thornton, 2013). This aligns with Mark’s description of using a developmentally appropriate lens to view everything at the middle level, from academics to extracurricular activities. Some researchers have recently called for a broader conception of developmental responsiveness that includes recognition of culture, context and other social factors that make adolescents unique (Vagle, 2015; Yoon et al., 2015). However, the participants in this study were not overly concerned with diversity. Instead, their focus seemed to be meeting the needs of individual students, not because of their developmental

characteristics or diverse backgrounds, but because of the needs that the student presented in that moment. Max described it as “figuring out what’s more important for this kid right now” and 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 adolescen(CE) to particularizing young adolescen(TS)” (p. 25, emphasis in original). In other words, Vagle suggests 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. However, the participants in this study seemed to reject the dichotomous notion that it needs to be one or the other. The middle school administrators tended to use their understanding of the developmental characteristics of young adolescence to support their decisions related to individual young adolescents. Michelle’s description of “rolling with” the unpredictable nature of young adolescents on a daily basis illustrates the student-centred approach that is at the core of developmental responsiveness. Being developmentally responsive was viewed as an essential middle level practice for the participants in this study.

Curriculum integration. The middle school concept calls for curriculum that is “challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant” (NMSA, 2010, p. 21). Described as units of instruction designed around a cross-curricular theme that ties together learning outcomes from multiple subject areas (NMSA, 2010), curriculum integration is not a ubiquitous middle school practice. Even though there has been a recent resurgence of interest in project-based learning (PBL) in the central Alberta region, curriculum integration seems to be less important to middle school administrators in the region than other typical middle school practices. Of all of the

questionnaire items, those related to curriculum integration were the lowest rated in terms of importance.

While most administrators seemed to support the idea of curriculum integration during the focus group interviews, only a few administrators indicated that it was a commonly occurring practice in their schools. In the schools where PBL was used, the administrators described a shift from it being the main instructional strategy toward it becoming one strategy of many to promote authentic learning. They also noted that their integrated projects were of a smaller scale and shorter duration. On the contrary, one participant indicated that PBL wasn't the reality in middle schools and that it might be better suited to elementary. The perceived benefits of curriculum integration included deeper, more authentic learning, increased engagement for students, and teacher collaboration. A few administrators identified lack of teacher time to collaborate, plan and implement cross-curricular projects as the main obstacles to curriculum integration.

Curriculum is often the target of middle school criticism (Dickinson & Butler, 2001). Whereas Beane (2013) touted a democratic curriculum in which the "general content and skills from various disciplines would be integrated, learned, and applied to work on pressing social issues, offering a real-life context more meaningful to young people than the separate subjects so many find remote and abstract" (p. 11), Schaefer et al. (2016) found that "the issue of creating a truly integrated, responsive, relevant and engaging middle school curriculum remained a promise yet unfulfilled" (p. 13). According to Dickinson and Butler (2001), curriculum integration's time in the limelight was short-lived due to standardized testing and mandated curriculum. They further claimed that a "lack of adoption of integrated curriculum and the unexamined adherence to a secondary separate subject approach may forever doom middle schools to arrested development" (Dickinson & Butler, 2001, p. 9).

Considering the provincially mandated curriculum for separate subject areas at each grade level, and emphasis on standardized tests at grades six and nine, Albertan teachers are perhaps challenged to enact the NMSA (2010) vision of an integrated curriculum. As Bruce explained, teachers are under pressure to teach the Albertan curriculum and they need to ensure the time taken for cross-curricular projects is worthwhile, focusing on essential learning outcomes. Compounded with the time required to plan, collaborate and implement a cross-curricular project, teacher teams may have limited capacity to design effective integrated units, especially if they are not provided with common planning time (Flowers et al., 2007). Based on the findings in this study and the trends identified in the literature, curriculum integration is perhaps worth being familiar with but is considered less important than other middle school practices.

Advisory programs. Advisory programs are an organizational structure that have the potential to positively impact students and school culture (NMSA, 2010). Advisory programs 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). This description matches my own middle school teaching experience when my cross-graded advisory group met daily to touch base about a wide variety of topics related to school success, including individual attendance and achievement.

According to Lounsbury (2013), advisory programs that matched students with an adult advocate were an accepted obligation that had “claimed a permanent place” (p. 41) in middle level education. However, this view seems to contrast with the findings in both this study and in the Schaefer et al. (2016) review of the literature that advisory programs seem to have fallen out of favour as a typical middle school practice. Although 96% of administrators in this study

identified that adult advocacy was very (5) or quite (4) important, only a few schools had formal advisory programs, and many of these seem to fulfill managerial functions such as a means 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.” In the few existing programs, the purpose was related to building relationships, character education, and promoting school culture.

Whereas advisory programs “dominated the literature” in the 1990s, Schaefer et al. (2016) explained its decline as follows:

...advisory itself appeared to suffer due to pressure from engagement in high-stakes testing preparation. This, combined with an increased focus on meeting students’ individual socio-cognitive needs within subject-area classrooms instead of a separate class such as advisory, might have contributed to a decrease in interest about advisory. (p. 12)

Their explanation supports my observations of advisory programs in the region and my experience. As the administration in my former school changed over the years, the advisory program disappeared. Emphasis on student achievement, especially on government standardized tests, was cited as a reason to abandon advisory programs and other core middle school practices. Similar to Mark’s statement “we used to have formalized advisory,” it would seem that few middle schools in the region currently have advisory programs designed to advocate for individual student needs. Perhaps the classroom teacher now fulfills the role of adult advocate.

The finding that teaming and developmental responsiveness were more important to the administrators in this study than curriculum integration and advisory programs seems to parallel the literature on these middle level practices. This finding provides a clear response to the

research question: “Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?” It can also serve to inform middle level teacher preparation inasmuch that more emphasis should be placed on teaming and developmentally responsive practices, and less emphasis on advisory programs and curriculum integration. This implies that courses on adolescent development and developmentally responsive practices, pertaining to both curriculum and instruction, should be central to middle level teacher preparation. A further implication is that middle level teachers should develop collaborative skills and an ability to be a productive team member during their preservice teacher education. This finding also provides insight into current middle school practices in the central Alberta region, which can serve as a means for administrators to gauge practices in their middle schools. Circling back to Analytic Category 1 and teaching competencies, an effective middle level teacher should be given opportunities to develop their understanding of the middle school concept and related practices.

Finding 2: Effective beginning middle level teachers should develop professional knowledge and skills, including an ability to create learner-centred, inclusive environments. The administrators in this study indicated that middle level teachers should be able to meet a wide range of student needs by using their professional knowledge and skills to create learner-centred, inclusive environments. These two areas are addressed separately.

Professional knowledge and skills. In addition to a debate regarding the importance of subject-area knowledge, the professional knowledge that surfaced as most important to the participants in this study related to engaging instructional strategies and assessment. Instructional strategies and assessment were identified as keys to effective teaching in many teaching frameworks (Alberta Education, 2018b; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Friesen, 2009; Hattie, 2012;

Howell et al., 2013). Although the middle school administrators were especially concerned with engaging, authentic instruction that makes learning relevant for young adolescents, this could be a reflection of provincial shifts in teaching practices toward more authentic, engaging learning environments. This aspect of effective teaching is explored below.

The middle school administrators repeatedly emphasized the importance of engaging instructional strategies and authentic learning. This coincides with the statement from *This We Believe* that “students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning” (NMSA, 2010). On the questionnaire, “designing learning activities that make curriculum relevant, challenging and engaging” was the most important of four professional knowledge statements. When asked in an open-ended question to describe effective teaching, engagement was referred to by 65% of participants. During the focus group interviews, the administrators spoke passionately about teachers needing a range of instructional strategies to engage students in authentic learning. Many discussed how they focused on professional development related to engaging instruction and a few administrators (Bruce, Binard) were challenging their staff to consider ways other than project-based learning to provide authentic learning activities for students. In two schools, exploratory curriculum or the academy approach was identified as a means to provide engaging, interest-based, authentic learning opportunities for students. Another school was intentional about its use of technology to help “kids be engaged learners” (Scott).

Although authentic, engaging instruction was synonymous with effective teaching for many middle school administrators, it is not included in all of the teaching frameworks cited in this study (see Table 2.5). In the “Professional Body of Knowledge” section of the new *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b), there are a few indicators that refer to engagement: “(a) planning and designing learning activities that...are varied, engaging, and

relevant to students; (b) using instructional strategies to engage students in meaningful learning activities...” (p. 5). Similar statements are found in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). Friesen (2009) recognized the importance of “worthwhile work” and Danielson (2016) included “student intellectual engagement” in her framework. However, student engagement is not featured as a main component of either Hattie’s *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012), or the Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices (Howell et al., 2013). The lack of mention of engagement could be due to the age of the publication. For example, student engagement was perhaps not as popular in 2010 when Darling-Hammond wrote about the qualities of effective teachers. It could also be that engagement is a component of broader category. The Howell et al. (2013) description of curriculum and instruction includes the statement: “Instructional choices are student-centred, hands-on, and engaging and relevant to students’ lives” (p. 6). Although many aspects of effective teaching from the various frameworks would apply to all levels of instruction, it would seem that engaging instruction was not as much of a priority as it was to the middle school administrators in this study. Perhaps middle school students are more difficult to engage than students at other levels? Either way, the participants indicated that the ability to engage young adolescent learners was certainly important to effective teaching at the middle level.

Regarding assessment, the focus group participants most often referred to common assessments that the teaching team would develop and utilize to provide targeted supports for students. While this may not be unique to middle school, the organizational structure of teaching teams facilitates meeting student needs in unique ways. Stephanie noted that by working with a teaching partner to develop common plans and assessments, teachers can use interventions for groups of students with similar gaps in their learning. This is an example of “using assessment to

inform instruction” that was selected as the most important statement related to assessment on the questionnaire. Although it was not a major theme, assessment was recognized as an important teaching competency in this study and in the teaching frameworks.

Although the majority of teaching frameworks included content knowledge (see Table 2.5) only 58% of questionnaire respondents chose “subject-area knowledge and competency” as very important in the professional knowledge category of competencies. A competency listed in the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) refers to teachers needing “specialized knowledge of the subject areas they teach” (p. 5). When asked about the importance of subject-area knowledge and their preference for hiring a generalist or specialist teacher, the focus group participants were divided. More than half of the middle school administrators indicated that they preferred to hire generalists as “if you’re a good teacher, you can learn to teach almost anything” (Maggie). Because of the teaming that occurs in middle school, teachers often teach at least two subjects. Thus, some administrators indicated that a generalist was better suited to teaching in middle school. Instead of choosing between generalist and specialist, some administrators focused instead on effective teaching, good communication skills and passion for the subject area. In the opposite camp, a few administrators were concerned that a generalist would not be adequately prepared to teach at the grade eight or nine level and therefore sought a subject-area specialist (Bruce, Binard). One administrator explained how teacher teams of two (dyads) were difficult to implement at the higher grade levels because a teacher may be strong in one subject area but not the other. Therefore, that teaching team that is essential to middle school, can also create challenges if the teacher at the higher grade levels does not have the

subject-area expertise needed for more than one subject. This observation led to some recommendations for teacher preparation, explained later in this section.

Creating learner-centred environments. The perspectives of the participants in this study clearly aligned with the competency pertaining to inclusive learning environments in the Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2018b). The statement “creating and maintaining a welcoming, safe, caring, and respectful learning environment” was one of the highest rated items on the questionnaire with 92% of respondents indicating it was very important (5). Administrators described effective teaching as recognizing and being responsive to a wide range of student needs in an inclusive classroom environment. They identified learner-centred practices such as differentiation, providing students with voice and choice, and knowing each students’ needs and interests. Armed with an understanding of a learner’s needs, effective middle school teachers should be able to differentiate instruction and provide targeted intervention and supports. A few administrators also indicated the importance of teachers having effective classroom management skills to “create a positive, nurturing, safe inclusive place for kids” (Scott). They sought what is described as “employing classroom management strategies that promote positive, engaging learning environments” as an indicator of such a classroom in the Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2018b).

Classroom management is explicitly stated in two of the effective teaching frameworks cited in Table 2.5 (Danielson, 2016; Howell et al., 2013). Classroom management was described by Howell et al. (2013) as follows:

To the middle level teacher, classroom management involves designing and organizing a pleasant physical learning space, establishing rules and procedures, managing the instructional time to minimize disruptions and inefficient use of time, enforcing school

and classroom discipline policies, and preventing misbehaviour while enhancing individual and collaborative learning, active engagement, and motivation (p. 5).

In this study, both Kerry and Bruce recognized that without classroom management, there is no learning. Kerry's description of a structured learning environment would certainly align with Canter's *Assertive Discipline*, for example, described by Manning and Bucher (2012) as "educators insist on responsible behaviour and use a hierarchical list of consequences to manage behavior" (p. 212).

However, some educators reject the notion of management and its behavioristic implications. Instead, they promote a more harmonious, humanistic approach to interactions, based on upholding dignity and fostering positive relationships. For example, Manning and Bucher (2012) describe Curwin and Mendler's *Discipline with Dignity* as a classroom management philosophy that is "student-centred, democratic, nonauthoritarian, and responsibility based" (p. 219). They further state that to treat students with dignity, teachers can establish mutually respectful relationships by listening, receiving student feedback, providing a rationale for their desired behaviours, and accepting student input into classroom decisions.

Recognizing that classroom management "is one of the most challenging parts of teaching," (p. 208), Manning and Bucher (2012) recommended a developmentally responsive approach that recognizes how young adolescent thoughts and behaviours can be attributed to the physical, emotional, social, cognitive and moral changes they are experiencing. As Bruce explained, when working with middle school students, "your approach has to be really differentiated for different kids." Establishing a positive learning environment in the middle school classroom can be challenging, especially for beginning teachers who may struggle with classroom management. Perhaps more can be done during teacher preparation to help pre-service

teachers better understand how to create positive, safe, caring and respectful learner-centred environments.

Teacher preparation. According to the participants in this study, teacher preparation programs should focus more on developing beginning middle level teachers' ability to meet diverse student needs in inclusive classrooms, with an emphasis on instructional strategies, differentiation, and classroom management and focus less on curriculum integration.

Administrators were provided a list of the courses offered in the middle level teacher preparation program offered at Red Deer College (see Appendix B) and invited to make recommendations based on the competencies they thought beginning middle level teachers needed to develop.

Although some administrators indicated that that recent program graduates and student teachers were “outstanding” (Mark), “committed” (Max), and “really good at engaging and building relationships with kids” (Bruce), the consensus was that very few beginning teachers were adequately prepared for the demands of today's inclusive classrooms. The administrators called for increased emphasis on differentiation and bolstering understanding of different learning needs and the skills to adapt and modify instruction. Most recommended decreasing emphasis on curriculum integration and incorporating inclusive practices across the program curriculum so that teachers would be more adequately prepared to differentiate in all subject areas. It seemed that curriculum integration was perhaps nice to know, however, as it wasn't a typical middle school practice, it wasn't essential learning for pre-service teachers. On the contrary, as stated by Scott: “I think you heard very clearly that the inclusion thing is something that our teachers need to be prepared for.” A number of administrators also underlined the importance of classroom management and often related this aspect of effective teaching to having an arsenal of instructional strategies to engage learners.

It should be noted that differentiation and curriculum integration both require a strong curriculum background. In the discussion of whether generalist or specialist teachers were best suited to middle school, a few administrators found that generalists tended to not know enough subject area knowledge, especially in mathematics. Kerry referred to a science teacher in her school who is able to differentiate, “teach to the edges” and provide cross-curricular learning experiences because “he knows his stuff so well that he can really dig deep with kids.” Foster suggested that preservice teachers take extra curriculum courses in a few subject-areas in order to create a “better-equipped generalist.” The means to develop generalist teachers with deep subject-area knowledge is unclear and worthy of further investigation.

In terms of middle level teacher preparation program content, administrators did not question or suggest content related to the middle school concept. Perhaps they felt that graduates of the middle level teacher preparation program had adequate knowledge pertaining to middle school practices. It could also be that they did not articulate practices such as teaming or developmental responsiveness as recommendations, even though they were deemed important to their current middle school realities. In some cases, the administrators were not familiar with *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) and thus would not be likely to comment on related middle level practices. This suggests that middle school administrators may need to gain deeper understandings of the middle school concept in order to make recommendations related to middle level teacher preparation. In absence of this, they focused instead on more practical aspects of teaching, such as inclusion, differentiation and instructional strategies, that would likely apply to teacher preparation for any level.

Some administrators commented that pre-service teachers were often not prepared for the demands of teaching that “impacts a lot more than just my seven-hour day” (Binard). Maggie

commented that pre-service teachers' lack of understanding of the demands of the realities of classrooms is related to "high numbers of beginning teachers who leave the profession." She also questioned the admission criteria for BEd programs. Her concerns are similar to those raised in the *Task Force for Teaching Excellence* (Alberta Education, 2014) that proposed "providing access to legitimate classroom experiences throughout the teacher education program would serve the dual purpose of ensuring the very best are attracted to the profession and that they are prepared to achieve success as an excellent teacher" (p. 170). More time spent in classrooms during teacher preparation, as recommended by Max, Jack, and Foster is one means to help prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of today's inclusive classrooms.

The lack of coherence or disconnection between the local schools and the teacher preparation program is at the heart of the rationale for this study. Jack lamented that during their pre-service education, student teachers are "sitting in there, in the pretend world of the ideology, or of what it was, or what it should be" and as a result may not be prepared for current teaching and classroom realities. Falkenberg (2015) indicated that the "university-based course work and the school-based field experiences need to be much more integrated than they currently are" (p. 13). In their exploration of the design of over 50 Canadian teacher preparation programs, Russell and Dillon (2015) found that the majority emphasized theory and placed minimal importance on the practicum, often placing it at the end of the program. They added that "the uniformity of theory-into-practice design is problematic, given the extensive body of research that has documented the general ineffectiveness of such a design. Teacher candidates appear unable to use the theory-driven guidelines offered in their course work when they later engage in practicum experiences" (p. 162). In his discussion of concerns related to teacher preparation, Davis (2015) called for a "higher dose of K-12 reality" (p. 104) and explained that

“real-world issues and multicultural implications can only be learned and navigated through experience in K-12 schools with a mentored, scaffolded approach” (p. 104). As such, the calls in the literature for increased access for pre-service teacher to K-12 classrooms seemed to be echoed by the middle school administrators who participated in this study.

Teacher preparation programs play a significant role in developing the competencies needed for effective middle level teaching. The administrators in this study recommended that middle level teacher preparation programs focus on building professional knowledge related to subject-area expertise, instructional strategies, differentiation, and classroom management such that beginning teachers are able to establish learner-centred, inclusive classrooms. Their recommendations emphasized practical classroom realities and notably lacked reference to the middle school concept and related practices. In addition to more time in classrooms, further investigation is needed to determine how teacher preparation programs might better prepare middle level teachers to support young adolescent learners.

The professional knowledge discussed in this section contributes to addressing the research question regarding the competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher, as part of Analytic Category 1. In addition to the effective teaching competencies explored in Finding 2 above, the administrators also had important insights into the relationship-oriented and dispositional aspects of effective teachers.

Finding 3: Effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships. The top three personal characteristics of effective middle school teachers indicated on the open-ended questionnaire item were passionate, flexible, and personable. Caring and reflective were also mentioned, corresponding to the closed-ended item that was later in the questionnaire. When the

administrators were asked on the questionnaire to indicate the importance of a list of 13 attributes of effective teachers (see Table 4.8), caring was of utmost importance (96%). Being a learner and adaptable had the next highest mean scores and reflective was selected as most important by half of the participants. During the focus group interviews, there seemed to be general consensus regarding the top four responses (caring, learner, adaptable, and reflective), followed by varied opinions on the remaining dispositions. Some administrators were surprised at how low leadership and enthusiasm were rated and ranked, however they recognized that the other attributes were likely more important when respondents were asked to select their three most important dispositions. Ultimately, as Max stated, “all of these are very important.”

Administrators were also asked about the teaching competencies needed to foster positive relationships. Next to being passionate, relating well to students was noted as an attribute of an effective teacher by 42% of respondents to the open-ended questionnaire item. On the closed-ended item, 92% of administrators identified respectful and productive relationships as very important (5). In the focus group interviews, such relationships were identified by the administrators as essential to both learner and teacher success in the middle level classroom. Several administrators described how building rapport with middle school students was different than at other levels and that the effective middle school teacher needs to be a “masterful connector with kids” (Scott). The ability to work effectively as a member of team and collaborate with colleagues was also mentioned by multiple administrators (Daisy, Stephanie, Bill, Scott). Others such as Michelle and Binard commented on being able to engage parents and the community as attributes of an effective teacher. In this study then, effective teachers needed to be caring, adaptable, and reflective learners who are able to build productive relationships with students, colleagues and parents.

Perhaps not surprising given the myriad dispositions of effective teachers, there didn't seem to be consensus in the literature on the dispositions needed for effective middle level teaching. As noted by Max, the list of characteristics used in this study (see Table 4.8) were all important as the list was derived from the dispositions common to multiple sources (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Howell et al., 2013; NMSA, 2010; Thornton, 2013). The results of the current study are similar to the top five qualities of effective Canadian teachers (all grade levels) generated by McKnight, Graybeal, Yarbrow, & Graybeal (2016): "patient, caring, and kind personality; ability to develop trusting, productive relationships; dedication to teaching; engaging students in learning; professionalism." (p. 5 - 9). They further claimed that the "most valued quality is dispositions of relatedness, i.e. being a compassionate (patient, caring, kind) person capable of developing and maintaining trusting and compassionate relationships with students" (McKnight et al., p. 10). Teacher dispositions are thus closely linked to relationships.

Fostering positive relationships is a primary competency in the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b): "A teacher builds positive and productive relationships with students, parents/guardians, peers, and others in the school and local community to support student learning" (p. 4). According to Howell et al. (2013), "relationships are at the core of effective teaching practices at the middle level and go hand in hand with developmentally responsive pedagogy" (p. 5). Thornton (2013) emphasized "the role of teacher dispositions in cultivating developmentally responsive practices and inclusive, safe learning communities" (p. 1). This body of literature seems to support the findings of the McKnight et al. (2016) study that relationships are essential to effective teaching, likely at all grade levels. Relationships are thus clearly as important in the Canadian education system as they are to the administrators in central Alberta.

There are clear indications in the literature that teacher dispositions are related to their ability to establish positive and productive relationships. In both the present study and the literature, effective teachers should be caring and able to foster positive relationships. As noted by the administrators in this study, perhaps what is unique about middle school is that educators have to work extra hard to build relationships with unpredictable and sometimes challenging young adolescents. Being able to relate to middle school students and being responsive to their developmental needs is therefore an added layer of difficulty for teachers to be effective at the middle level. Preservice teachers should gain both theoretical and practical knowledge on adolescent development in order to support their work with middle school students.

Analytic Category 1 on the teaching competencies necessary to effective middle level education has explored Findings 1, 2, and 3 and the literature pertaining to middle level practices, effective teaching and effective teachers. Similar to the competencies explored above, Ingle et al. (2011) found that principals in their study “shared common preferences for caring, subject matter knowledge and strong teaching skills” (p. 601) as the most important features of teachers they hired, regardless of context. Teacher dispositions that foster relationships such as being caring and responsive, combined with professional knowledge that included instructional strategies, classroom management, and differentiation skills were identified as the competencies needed to meet students’ needs in inclusive, learner-centred classrooms. Middle level teachers should also be prepared to view teaching young adolescents through a developmentally responsive lens and contribute to a team environment in middle school. These findings provide some important insights for middle level teacher preparation programs.

Analytic Category 2: Leadership Competencies

Analytic Category 2 pertains to leadership competencies and was derived from Findings 4 and 5 that addressed the third research question, as shown in Table 5.1. These findings explored how middle school administrators view their role and foster effective middle level education. Each finding is interpreted separately to fully develop the ideas that led to Analytic Category 2 regarding leadership competencies.

Finding 4: Middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school. Transition is a term commonly associated with young adolescence. In their 1996 report, *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century*, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (CCAD) stated: “Adolescence is one of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the life span: a time of accelerated growth and change second only to infancy; a time of expanding horizons, self-discovery, and emerging independence; a time of metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood.” (p. 3). During this unique developmental period marked by the onset of puberty, “the many transitions individuals undergo during early adolescence would make growing up difficult enough in an unchanging world” (NMSA, 2010, p. 8). Middle school can therefore provide a safe, supportive environment for students to experience the physical, social, emotional, intellectual and moral changes that typically occur between the ages of 10 to 15.

The administrators who participated in this study recognized their role in helping students through this developmental stage. As illustrated in Chapter Four, they often made comparisons between elementary and high school students when highlighting the unique attributes of young adolescents. Max highlighted that middle schools are “very aptly named being the middle of childhood and adulthood.” Mark offered that middle schools help bridge the gap between

elementary and high school. Perhaps then, middle schools can be viewed as a bridge to help students transition between childhood and adulthood.

The idea of middle school as a bridge is not new. In 1965, William Alexander, the founder of the middle school movement, pondered whether the junior high schools of the time were “a bridge between elementary and high school or a vestibule to the latter” (Alexander & Williams, 1965, p. 217). He proposed that middle schools could better meet the needs of young adolescents than subject-oriented junior high schools. Many tenets of the current middle school concept have their roots in Alexander’s work.

Although some may question the link between transition and middle school and perhaps propose that students are continually transitioning throughout their school years, transition is closely linked to developmental responsiveness, an essential attribute of the middle school concept as explored in Finding 1. Transition during this developmentally unique time is explained as follows in *This We Believe*: “All stakeholders must recognize that middle level education serves a distinct developmental period, one in which youth undergo major changes in every aspect of their being” (NMSA, 2010, p. 43). The administrators who participated in this study seemed to consider the transitions experienced by young adolescents as unique to that age group of students, and different compared to elementary or high school students (Foster, Bruce, Max). The administrators also recognized that they had a role to play in helping students through the changes they were experiencing such as increased independence (Kerry, Bruce, Foster) and identity development (Binard, Stephanie, Daisy) at the same time as promoting their academic growth (Maggie, Scott). They saw middle school as important time for social development as young adolescents place increasing importance on friendships (Michelle). Both Bruce and Max

referred to how they help students gain interpersonal skills, learn how to interact with their peers and as Max stated, “show good character.”

Given their apparent understanding of young adolescence as a unique time of transition, it is worthwhile to note the administrative backgrounds of this study’s participants. Based on the questionnaire results, it would seem that the participants had relatively little middle grades administrative experience as almost half had less than five years of experience as an administrator and 82% were in their current building three years or less. This supports Yee’s (2016) finding that many middle school administrators have “little to no background” educating at the middle level. However, of the participants, approximately two-thirds were familiar with the middle school concept and had recently participated in professional development related to middle level practices or young adolescent learners. Some of the participants in the focus group interviews were able to compare being a middle school administrator to being an elementary or a high school administrator. Max, Jerry, Jack, and Bruce, in three separate focus group interviews referred to how middle school was more student-centred compared to a focus on curriculum at high school. Jerry, for example, commented “Coming from a high school, it’s that collective responsibility approach. It’s way more a natural fit. In middle school, where you still have some kind of generalist teachers, where high school is so much more, it’s changing, but so much that siloed nature.” Bill, Binard, and Foster referred to the challenge of building relationships with middle school students compared to elementary students:

At the elementary level, kids just inherently love you, right. They want to be close to you, and they want hugs, all that kind of stuff, and they inherently want to please, right? And at the middle school level, you really have to work at building relationships with the kids, connecting with them. (Binard)

As such, the participants in this study were able to recognize the differences and unique attributes of the young adolescent learner, even though they may not have had a great deal of administrative experience at the middle grade levels.

One of the 16 characteristics of the middle school concept is that “leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices” (NMSA, 2010). As 31% of the questionnaire participants had not had professional development related to young adolescent learner or middle level practices, it may be necessary for some middle school administrators to enhance their professional knowledge specifically about this age group to be more effective in providing middle level education. Based on my observations of recent administrative appointments in the three school divisions, principals and vice-principals are often assigned to middle school without any training or professional development related to the middle school concept or the specific age group. For example, in the Red Deer middle schools, four of five administrators became middle school principals following appointments as high school vice-principals and the other had been an elementary principal. Further, the administrators often lacked teaching experience at the middle school level.

Arguably, it would be difficult for an administrator to promote effective middle level education without an understanding of the unique attributes of young adolescents or the middle school concept to guide one’s decisions. Requiring both of these types of knowledge of new and experienced middle school administrators would address Yee’s (2016) call for leaders with “the expertise, experience, and passion to work with middle years students.”

One of the *This We Believe* characteristics states: “educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them” (NMSA, 2010). Similarly, middle school administrators should appreciate the unique attributes of the young adolescent learner and, as the participants in this

study indicated, understand their role in helping students transition from childhood toward adulthood. In terms of leadership competencies then, effective middle level education hinges upon administrators' understandings of young adolescence as a unique developmental stage and their role as helping young adolescents to transition through the middle grades. Other competencies related to how they accomplish their leadership role are examined next.

Finding 5: Middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships. Although this finding seems consistent with the current literature on school leadership, each of the four leadership actions are interpreted separately.

Four leadership models, as presented in Table 2.3, were used to interpret the findings related to leadership (Alberta Education, 2018a; NMSA, 2010; Leithwood, 2007 & 2011; Robinson, 2011). These four leadership models are used, among others, to explore the following leadership actions: shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships.

Shared vision. A number of administrators referred to the development of a shared vision in their school to get everyone “moving in the same direction” (Jack), to “know what the plan is” (Max), and to have “a common language” (Stephanie). As stated in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), “a shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.” As one of the 16 characteristics of the middle school concept, it is not surprising that the middle school administrators would recognize the importance of a shared vision.

Their views align with Williamson and Johnston's (2013) statement: “middle grades leaders must maintain a clear and persistent vision of the role and purpose of the middle grades school” (p. 145). In Alberta Education's (2018a) new *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS), the competency “embody visionary leadership” is described as: “A leader collaborates with the

school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being” (p. 3). Leithwood (2011) identified “building a shared vision” as a core leadership practice. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that establishing goals and expectations was a leadership dimension that had a significant impact on student achievement. They explained that “goals provide a sense of purpose and priority in an environment where a multitude of tasks can seem equally important and overwhelming” (p. 661).

Scott was perhaps the clearest about the priorities in his school: “So, literacy is a priority at our school. Numeracy is a priority at our school as is the mental health side of things. So, if there were three things that we really focus on here in our school, that would be it.” Scott also recognized that he had a role to maintain the focus on a few key goals, filtering through the initiatives and acting as a buffer to protect his staff:

I think one of the things that I try to work on is trying to protect the staff. Not have too much, it’s focusing in on key things, so, like I said, literacy, numeracy and mental health. And just focusing on some key things and making that the thread that runs through the whole school, use the same language with everyone. I think we’re guilty of having too many add-ons. I’m right in line with that sometimes. Because of what happened, I think our senior admin is guilty of that too, of having too many things come through and so it’s sifting through and being responsive but being protective at the same time.

Interestingly, Leithwood (2007) found that “buffering staff from distractions to their work” was a core leadership practice. Also of note, Scott identified that being a middle school principal was very demanding and unpredictable.

Your day is full from the time you get here until you leave...With all the things that are happening in the school, it is never ending. There were times in my experience at the high

school and at elementary where I could easily just go for an hour and visit classrooms and be in classrooms with the kids. I try to put it in my calendar and I'm always renegeing on it. I'm not able to do that. Something is always coming up.

Having a shared vision and a few key priorities would therefore be essential in a middle school environment that can be as unpredictable as the students it serves.

Collaboration. Another common means to foster effective middle level education was through collaboration. Invariably during the focus group interviews, an administrator would refer to working collaboratively with the staff. Max referred to working with his staff to identify the key priorities for the school, while Bill talked about his school's collaborative effort to plan a special event day. Claire described how she worked with her staff to build a more cohesive school culture. Scott stated that "distributed, shared leadership is crucial in middle school." He explained how he strives to empower other school leaders and stated that "without those people, I couldn't do my job." Bruce remarked that many of the decisions in his school are made by grade teams and that he viewed his role as removing barriers and not micromanaging the teams.

The administrators who participated in this study seemed to exemplify the characteristic of *This We Believe* that states: "Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration" (NMSA, 2010, p. 29). This aspect of the middle school concept is further described as follows:

Successful principals use the expertise of a variety of people to ensure the academic growth and well-being of every student. Working together with a leadership team, the principal is responsible for building a culture of collaboration that values input from all members of the school community, cultivates leadership in others, and empowers them to make decisions and enact changes (NMSA, 2010, p. 29).

In the newly released *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) the competency of embodying visionary leadership is described as: “A leader collaborates with the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being” (p. 5). Collaboration is also mentioned as part of other competencies, such as in this statement about relationships: “engaging in collegial relationships while modeling and promoting open, collaborative dialogue” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). Leithwood (2007) recognized that collaboration depended on organizational structures: “Developing and sustaining collaborative cultures depends on putting in place complementary structures, typically something requiring leadership initiative. Practices associated with such initiatives include creating common planning times for teachers and establishing team and group structures for problem solving” (p. 56). Although Leithwood doesn’t specify middle school leadership, his emphasis on the role of the leader to ensure that the typical middle school practices are supported by organizational structures certainly applies.

The administrators’ descriptions of shared decision making, such as Bruce who described a teacher advocating for a reduced consequence for a student, are indicative of how they develop leadership capacity in their school and fulfill this *Leadership Quality Standard* competency: “(a) demonstrating consultative and collaborative decision making that is informed by open dialogue and multiple perspectives; (b) identifying, mentoring and empowering teachers in educational leadership roles; (e) promoting team building and shared leadership among members of the school community” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 7). Similar to Bruce, collaborative or shared leadership is evident in Kerry’s description of how decisions are made in her school:

Because they need to be owning part of the school as well....And so it's just reminding them that they're part of that leadership role. And I'm at the helm, but they're part of that

piece that's so important. And it makes you feel like you're important in the picture, when you have that shared leadership...They are some brilliant people I work with, so I think reminding them that they are leaders in their own right.

This study's participants seem to be demonstrating the leadership competencies related to collaboration and shared leadership.

Whereas collaborative leadership was pervasive in the new *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), it was interesting to note that collaboration was absent from Robinson's (2011) model of student-centred leadership. Although they recognized the necessity of the principal to foster effective middle level practices, Howell et al. (2013) surprisingly did not mention the collaborative nature of this work. Nevertheless, Leithwood and Jantzi (2011) identified collective leadership as having "a stronger influence on student achievement than does individual leadership" and they therefore supported shared or distributed leadership approaches, typically found in middle schools. In their study, Gale and Bishop (2014) indicated that collaboration didn't mean consensus but rather that "establishing a culture of shared leadership began with everyone feeling respected for their contribution to the discussion" (p. 10).

The literature on collaborative leadership, as well as the administrators' descriptions, resonated with my experience as a middle school teacher and leader. Through grade teams and team leaders, a collaborative approach to leadership fostered a highly learner-centred and effective means to meet middle school student needs. In other school settings such as in my first year teaching in a junior high, a lack of collaboration led to feelings of isolation and desperation as I attempted to provide quality learning experiences for my 100+ young adolescent learners. I strongly believe that whenever I was in a school setting that fostered collaboration, my students benefited from a more team approach to their learning. Perhaps collaborative leadership can best

be described as “adults working together on behalf of the whole child” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 10). The administrators in this study seemed to live by those words in their leadership approach.

Personnel. Another important means to foster effective middle level education mentioned by the focus group participants was through personnel management: making sure the right people were in the right positions, through hiring and shifting people as necessary. In the literature, principals have an important role in hiring effective teachers that are well-suited to a specific school context (Howell et al., 2013; Ingle et al., 2011; Mason & Schroeder, 2010; Nixon et al., 2010).

In this study, both Kerry and Jack referred to strategic hiring as a significant means to ensure effective middle level education. Others such as Max and Mark referred to having to shift people to different positions in the school. Mark spoke of the effort required of a leader to ensure that a teacher fits within a team. In a different focus group interview, Max explained: “It’s about knowing people’s strengths and placing them so that they can be successful. Sometimes it’s having fierce conversations.” As stated by Bruce, “So, when we hire, when we add people to our team, part of that is, do they fit into the culture of the school.” These approaches to ensure the right people are in the right positions seem to align with the Howell et al. (2013) statement: “it matters who the principal chooses to place in classrooms of our middle schools” (p. 3).

Hiring practices were also central to discussions regarding administrators’ preference for specialist or generalist-trained teachers. While most administrators seemed to seek generalist teachers, others focused on effective teachers that had good instructional strategies and classroom management skills as being most important in their hiring considerations. As stated by Maggie, “I think if you’re a good teacher, you can learn to teach almost anything.” However, a

few administrators, such as Binard and Jack, indicated a need for some specialized knowledge, especially in math.

The administrators' statements seem to align with a framework for job fit as described by Ingle et al. (2011) who considered person-organization fit, person-group fit, and person-job fit. When hiring or considering shifting a teacher to a different position therefore, an administrator would need to consider how well a teacher fits with the school culture (as identified by Bruce), with their intended teaching team (as identified by Mark) and whether or not they would have the required background to fulfill the duties related to the teaching position (as identified by Binard).

Given the prominence of teaming in the middle school concept, a person-group fit may be a more important consideration for administrators when hiring at this level, compared to elementary or high school. However, all three types of fit can likely influence a beginning teacher's success. In retrospect, I would say that although I was well-qualified for my first year teaching position as I was teaching in my major and minor subject areas, I was not a good fit for the school as an organization and struggled to adapt to the individualistic culture.

Considering the person-organization, person-group and person-job fit may provide a helpful lens to middle school administrators when hiring or adjusting teacher teams. As identified by the participants in this study and in the literature, administrators certainly play an important role related to personnel management in their middle schools.

Relationships. The topic of relationships frequently surfaced during each of the focus group interviews. Middle school administrators described how they strived to build relationships with both students and staff. This supports Westerberg's (2016) claim that "the importance of the

principal's role in promoting productive relationships between adults and students on campus is second to none" (p. 60). Relationships with parents were also mentioned by a few administrators.

In terms of dealing with students, several administrators commented on the challenge of building relationships with young adolescents who, by nature, are starting to question authority and seek autonomy (NMSA, 2010). 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." Gale and Bishop (2014) found similar results and stated: "connecting and feeling comfortable with young adolescents was viewed as pivotal to success in the middle grades because principals felt it was important to know students as people first" (p. 8). As Bill stated, "it's about knowing the kids."

It was interesting to note that when it came to discipline, during different interviews, three administrators described their role as being a hammer. For Kerry, it was important to enforce consequences in a consistent manner due to the unpredictable nature of the students. Max strived to provide consequences in a supportive way, such that the hammer was "soft, velvety-covered." For Bruce, the consequence was important to maintain a safe, caring school environment, however, he was open to dialogue with his teachers about appropriate consequences. These statements seem to reflect "an unwavering devotion to the growth and development of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2010, p. 29) and demonstrate how these leaders understand their students developmentally and make their decisions accordingly.

The relationships with staff were considered in terms of the leadership actions used by the administrators including empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking and influencing.

These verbs seem to differ significantly from those of the indicators identified in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) as part of the “Fostering Effective Relationships” competency such as “(a) acting with fairness, respect, and integrity; (b) demonstrating empathy and genuine concern for others; (c) creating a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment; (h) engaging in collegial relationships while modeling and promoting open, collaborative dialogue” (p. 4). This is not to say that the participants in this study do not also demonstrate these leadership indicators; simply that they identified different ways that they relate to their staff.

Looking at leadership models provided some insight into these leadership actions as there were some commonalities. Although one of Leithwood’s (2007) core leadership practices was “building collaborative cultures,” he did not go so far as having leaders empower others. However, this is an indicator under the “Developing Leadership Capacity” competency: “identifying, mentoring, and empowering teachers in educational leadership roles” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 7). By striving to empower (and not micromanage) their teachers, administrators such as Kerry and Bruce are well on their way to meeting this leadership competency. Robinson (2011) indicated that “all five dimension of student-centred leadership involve relationship skills” (p. 34).

Supporting teachers was more commonly found in the literature. Leithwood’s (2007) reference to “developing people” as a core leadership practice, involved promoting effective teaching and self-efficacy, which was mentioned by Michelle as part of supporting her teachers. Jack was also concerned with promoting self- efficacy when he 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.” Both Leithwood (2007) and Robinson (2011) identified providing

instructional leadership through professional development as a way that leaders supported their teachers, as mentioned by Michelle and Max.

A number of administrators also encouraged their teachers to take risks, whether it was with a new instructional strategy (Binard) or to generally adopt a growth mindset (Kerry and Stephanie). Robinson (2011) indicated that relational trust was 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). Leithwood (2007) also promoted intellectual risk taking as a leadership practice related to developing people. A leadership indicator under “Embodying Visionary Leadership” is “(e) promoting innovation, enabling positive change, and fostering commitment to continuous improvement” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 5). A few administrators in this study seem to be on the right track when it comes to encouraging risk taking in their teachers.

Finally, the middle school administrators recognized that they often need to influence others in order to foster effective middle level education. Some influenced through modeling (Kerry and Bill), while others referred to manipulating (Claire and Mark) to achieve their vision. Influence was a key action in 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.

It would seem that influence, while somewhat intangible, certainly is an important means for administrators to relate to the teachers in their building.

Although not stated in the same way in the school leadership literature, empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking, and influencing their staff were all significant leadership practices used by the participants in this study to foster effective middle level education.

Productive relationships with parents were also important to a few administrators in this study. Whether it was to engage parents through parent council (Scott), connect with them through social media (Michelle), or invite them as guest presenters (Binard), the relationships with parents were deemed important to effective education at the middle level.

The involvement of parents is expected of administrators in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) which describes the category of “Fostering Effective Relationships” as: “A leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community” (p. 4). Two key indicators relating to parents are: “(d) creating opportunities for parents/guardians, as partners in education, to take an active role in their children’s education; (j) implementing processes for improving working relationships and dealing with conflict within the school community.” This aligns with Leithwood’s (2007) call for principals to build “productive relationships with family and communities” (p. 56).

One of the 16 characteristics of successful middle schools listed in *This We Believe* is: “the school actively involves families in the education of their children” (NMSA, 2010, p. 40). According to the administrators in this study, parental involvement can be challenging and is something they are working on improving. The principals in the Gale and Bishop (2014) study “described building relationships with families as not always easy but essential” (p. 11). The challenge was attributed to the larger middle school context, increasing content difficulty, and the young adolescents’ desire for increased autonomy.

Another characteristic indicated in *This We Believe* is “The school includes community and business partners” (NMSA, 2010, p. 41). Although this aspect of the middle school concept is perhaps present in certain schools in the region, the only mention of something similar was related to bringing in community members to talk to students as part of a Heroes character education program. Although community and business partnerships were thriving when I was a middle school teacher in the region, this is perhaps no longer the case.

This section has considered what some of the literature indicated about the four ways that middle school leaders in this study fostered effective middle level education in their schools: shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships with students, staff, and parents. This finding seemed to be generally supported by the literature, although the emphasis or language used was not always the same. Of particular significance is that the administrators in this study frequently demonstrated quite a few of the leadership competencies and indicators found in the newly released *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) as well as the characteristics of leaders identified in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). As noted in Table 5.2, three of the four leadership actions important to middle level education were explicitly stated in both leadership models (Alberta Education, 2018a; NMSA, 2010). With the addition of teaming as it relates to personnel management, the leadership competencies required of a middle school administrator are therefore very similar to being an Albertan school administrator at any level.

Analytic Category 2 on leadership competencies has explored Findings 4 and 5 and the literature pertaining to how middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education. Leithwood (2007) identified that one quarter of the variation of total school effects on student learning can be attributed to school leadership. He also found that “leadership has very significant effects on the quality of the school organization and on student

learning” (p. 46). The participants in this study seemed to recognize the importance of their role in promoting effective middle level education. As 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.”

In terms of leadership competencies, it is important that middle school leaders recognize young adolescence as a unique developmental stage and embrace their role as helping young adolescents to transition through the middle grades. The leadership actions taken by middle school administrators, including shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships with students, staff, and parents, were similar to being a school leader at other levels. What perhaps makes the middle school administrator role somewhat unique is the organizational structures aspect, and especially teaming as a core means to foster positive and productive relationships.

Analytic Category 3: Effective Middle Level Education

The central question that guided this study was: What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education? The findings presented thus far can be considered more holistically and synthesized into two central themes: relationships and responsiveness. These themes surfaced in relation to the each of the three elements of the conceptual framework: middle school concept, effective middle level leadership, and effective teaching. To elaborate, based on the findings of this study, effective middle level education means being responsive to student needs and fostering positive relationships to help young adolescents transition through the middle grades. To address the central research question, first relationships and then responsiveness, as they relate to the three areas of the conceptual framework, are considered as central themes in effective middle level education. The conceptual framework is then reconsidered in light of the findings from this study.

Relationships. Relationships are at the heart of effective middle level education. This theme came through as significant in each section of findings. In the middle school concept section, relationships were highlighted as a core component of the middle school team. Administrators discussed the importance of getting the right teachers on the team to foster positive collaboration and the necessity of effective teacher to teacher relationships. They also identified that a key purpose of middle school teams is to promote more productive relationships with students. Teams work to not only promote academic development, but also build in the “collective responsibility” (Allan) for all aspects of student success in middle school, as explained by Bill, Mark, and others. 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 opportunities to develop appropriate social bonds were highlighted by Bruce, Claire and Michelle.

The ability to build relationships was viewed as an essential attribute of effective middle school teachers. Although the professional knowledge and skills are important, if a teacher isn’t able to build relationships with students, they may struggle to meet diverse student needs, manage their class or establish a learner-centred environment. As Bruce said, middle school teachers “know to make relationships with kids, and they understand that they’re not going to be able to teach them anything if they don’t have a relationship with them.” Given the importance of relationships, it is perhaps not surprising that caring, a relational characteristic, was the top-rated disposition of effective teachers.

Administrators considered their relationships with both teachers and students as being central to their work. Good relationships can lead to shared vision, collaboration and building teacher teams, all essential for effective middle school leadership. Administrators such as Claire,

Kerry and Scott all recognized that collaborative and shared leadership were essential in middle school. As Scott stated, “Without those people, I couldn’t do my job. I can’t imagine what it would be like without them.” Some administrators focused on their relationships with teachers and how they strive to empower, support, encourage risk taking and influence teachers in their leadership role. Other administrators, including Bruce and Binard, discussed how building relationships with middle school students can be challenging because developmentally, teens tend to push back against authority, but still need to feel cared for and supported as they are transitioning toward adulthood. Again, it would seem that relationships underpin much of the work of middle school leaders.

Relationships were a common thread in each section of findings and are therefore essential to effective middle level education.

Responsiveness. Although not explicitly stated as responsiveness, administrators indicated in each section how middle schools respond in myriad ways to the developmental needs of young adolescents. In addition to the portion of the middle school concept section that highlighted developmentally responsive practices in local middle schools, administrators explained how middle school teams, advisory programs and curriculum integration are designed to address student needs. As Mark explained, middle school teams are concerned about all aspects of their students’ development: “I think we all kind of work within grade teams as far as a teacher structure to make sure that, not just the needs of those kids are being met, but moving forward with curriculum and academics.” Kerry promoted curriculum integration as a means to foster the cognitive development of students. Michelle and Binard zeroed in on the social and emotional development of young adolescents. Addressing the physical developmental needs was noted by Scott. Terry referred to student moral development and capacity to “make a difference.”

Being responsive to student developmental needs was a key theme in the findings related to the middle school concept.

Responsiveness was also important to effective teaching, especially an ability to differentiate and use instructional strategies to engage learners. Teachers who are able to meet diverse learner needs in inclusive classrooms was a top priority for middle school administrators, as was demonstrated by almost half (46%) of the questionnaire participants. Stephanie was one of the administrators who underlined the importance of differentiation and being able to “meet the needs of a variety of different kids.” Responding to a range of needs was described by this administrator:

The classroom is not 30 relatively similar students. They are multicultural, they are multilingual, they're different levels of abilities, and if you can't literally reach every end of the spectrum, and every end of the spectrum is important, the easy thing to do is teach to the middle and hope that everything else works out like that... It's easier to deal with the 30 that kind of get what you're talking about and just completely ignoring those two. Well, those two kids are your responsibility as well. (Max)

As such, teachers require subject-area knowledge and a repertoire of instructional and assessment strategies to engage students, differentiate and respond to their individual learning needs. Middle school teachers should also be able to effectively manage their classrooms to maintain a conducive learning environment, as noted by Kerry and Bruce. Not surprising then, administrators indicated that *adaptable* was one of the most important dispositions needed to work with young adolescents. Perhaps Bruce said it best when he explained why the best teachers tend to have taught in middle school:

I think the best teachers come out of middle years. I think the strongest teachers I've worked with have some background teaching middle school. Because, you need a variety of skills, you deal with a variety of stuff, behaviours, learning styles, needs. They're a hard group, just developmentally, to engage.

Being an effective middle school teacher is therefore about being responsive to the wide range of needs of young adolescent learners.

Regarding effective leadership, administrators viewed their role as helping students transition from elementary to high school through a developmentally responsive lens. They recognized that the students were undergoing many types of transition and that they needed to adjust their interactions with students accordingly. Administrators explained how the way that they set up school structures such as the teacher team, access to grades, or an intervention program can help students acquire increased responsibility and independence (Kerry, Binard, for example). Exploratory programs were highlighted by Stephanie and Foster as other school structures that helped students develop their identity and personal interests. Very cognizant of young adolescent social development, administrators such as Bruce and Max focused on their role in helping students interact with others and become good people. Michelle, Daisy and Stephanie also highlighted how they respond to student needs by helping building resilience or coping in helping students deal with peer conflicts that are often prevalent at middle school. Through their many interactions with both students and staff, as well as the structures they establish in their schools, middle school leaders are responding to the developmental needs of the young adolescents in their buildings.

Much like relationships, responsiveness was a pervasive theme in each section of findings in this study on effective middle level education. Middle schools, their leaders and their

teachers are attuned to responding to the needs of young adolescent learners through their organizational structures, their interactions and all that they do to help students transition through this unique developmental stage.

Effective middle level education means using middle school concepts such as teaming and collaborative leadership to promote relationships and help young adolescents effectively transition through the middle grades in a developmentally responsive manner. Relationships and responsiveness were pervasive across the three main constructs of this study: middle school concept, effective teaching and effective middle level leadership. This realization led to a more fully developed conceptual framework.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

In the initial conceptual framework, the middle school concept, effective teaching, and effective middle level leadership are the three constructs that contribute to effective middle level education (see Figure 2.2). The overlap between the three constructs of the conceptual framework was represented by a triple Venn diagram, illustrating both the shared elements and those that exist on their own within that construct, and are applicable at other levels of schooling. However, the shared or common elements between the three constructs were not provided in detail. A closer examination of three main sources that served as a foundation for this study (*This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010); the Alberta Education (2018b) *Teaching Quality Standard*; and the Howell et al. (2013) study), combined with the evidence from the present study, led to the revised conceptual framework shown in Figure 5.1.

The major themes related to effective middle level education are indicated around the outside of the revised conceptual framework: relationships, responsive (learner-centred) environments, professional knowledge and professional dispositions. Leadership was

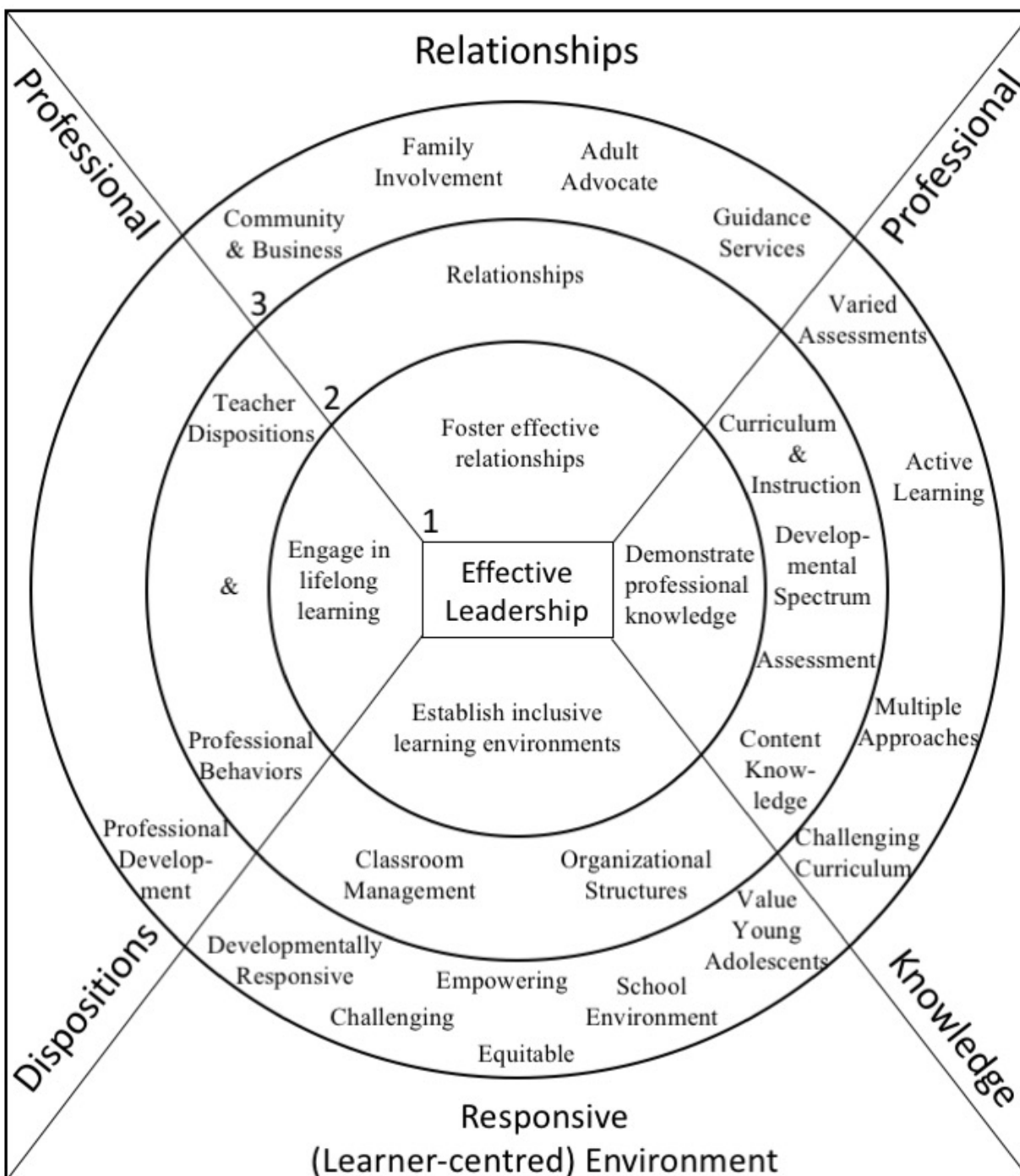


Figure 5.1. Revised conceptual framework for Effective Middle Level Education.

The sources for this revised conceptual framework were: 1. *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b); 2. *Framework for Effective Middle Level Practices* (Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013); 3. *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010).

intentionally placed at the centre. In my initial analysis of the three main sources featured in Figure 5.2, I noticed that leadership didn't seem to fit as it was only mentioned in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). As I worked through the transcripts of the focus group interviews, I realized that without leadership, many of the developmentally responsive practices that foster those essential relationships, such as teaming, advisory programs, exploratory programs, and curriculum integration, may not exist. As noted by Claire, middle level leadership is "crucial." Thus, it seemed natural to place it at the centre of the revised conceptual framework in order to represent that effective middle level education stems from effective leadership.

It would seem that both *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) and the Howell et al. (2013) framework are applicable to a Canadian context as the administrators in this study identified most of the components of both, although with varying degrees of importance. The middle school administrator that does not utilize the middle school concept as a foundation to all decisions related to the education of young adolescents, may ultimately struggle to provide effective middle level education. By establishing a shared vision, working collaboratively with their staff, being intentional about personnel, and focusing on relationships, the middle school leader can ensure that teachers have the necessary professional knowledge and dispositions as well as establish the conditions for the relationships and responsive, learner-centred environments to flourish.

This revised conceptual framework serves to perhaps emphasize the elements necessary to effective middle level education and represent a response to the central research question that guided this study: *According to the middle school administrators who participated in this study, effective middle level education requires particular teacher and leadership competencies*

(knowledge and dispositions) resulting in being responsive to student needs and fostering positive relationships that help young adolescents transition through the middle grades.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education. Their perspectives provided insight into current practices in middle schools and into possible adjustments needed in the middle level teacher preparation program. As I considered the findings in relation to the research questions that guided this study, it became apparent that larger analytic categories provided possible interpretations of the findings and plausible answers to the research questions. Thus, the five major findings were synthesized and interpreted according to how they related to the three analytic categories:

- Teaching competencies: Middle level teachers should be caring, developmentally responsive team players that can use instructional strategies, classroom management, and differentiation skills to meet students' needs in inclusive, learner-centred classrooms.
- Leadership competencies: Middle level administrators should understand young adolescence as a unique developmental stage and their role in helping young adolescents to transition through the middle grades.
- Effective middle level education: Finally, effective middle level education means being responsive to student needs and fostering positive relationships in order to help young adolescents transition through the middle grades.

Based on the importance of responsiveness and relationships in this study, a revised conceptual framework was developed. In this framework, I proposed that all other aspects of effective middle level education stem from effective leadership, including professional

knowledge and dispositions, relationships, and responsive, learner-centred environments.

Effective middle level education surely requires effective middle level leadership.

In the next chapter, I present conclusions as they pertain to the research questions and discuss my ensuing recommendations.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perspectives of middle school administrators in the central Alberta region on effective middle level education. Middle school administrators' perspectives on the middle school concept, effective teaching, and effective middle level leadership were provided through an online questionnaire and focus group interviews which helped to identify discrepancies between current middle school practices and the middle level teacher preparation program at Red Deer College (RDC).

In this chapter, I provide conclusions derived from investigation of the central research question: *What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle level administrators on effective middle level education?* I also provide conclusions pertaining to the three sub-questions that helped to inform the central research question:

1. Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?
2. According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher?
3. How do middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education?

These research questions were the thread that connected the conceptual framework and the research literature to the collection, analysis, interpretation and synthesis of the data in this study. This chapter therefore serves to draw this research to a close as it provides conclusions to the research questions. In this chapter, I also offer recommendations and researcher reflections, which may lead to threads from this research being woven together in new ways.

Conclusions

The conclusions provided here are derived from the layered analysis, interpretation and synthesis of the data collected in this case study. The five major findings were a compilation of major themes that surfaced during the data analysis:

1. Teaming and developmentally responsive practices are essential to middle level education; curriculum integration and advisory are less important and less prevalent.
2. Effective beginning middle school teachers should develop professional knowledge and skills, including an ability to create learner-centred, inclusive environments.
3. Effective beginning middle school teachers should possess certain dispositions, especially those that promote positive, productive relationships.
4. Middle school administrators viewed their role as helping young adolescents transition from elementary to high school.
5. Middle school leaders foster effective middle level education through shared vision, collaboration, personnel, and relationships.

The conclusions in this chapter are grouped according to the three main analytic categories used in Chapter Five: teaching competencies, leadership competencies and effective middle level education.

The *Know, Do, Be* (Drake et al., 2014) framework that was introduced in Chapter Two is used to distinguish the conclusions. *Know* refers to knowledge, *Do* refers to skills and *Be* refers to dispositions (Drake et al., 2014, p. 28). Each conclusion is identified as a *Know, Do or Be* competency. Some conclusion statements represent more than one competency.

Conclusions Regarding Teaching Competencies

This set of conclusions addresses the central research question and Sub-questions #1 and #2 above. These conclusions provide important insights both into the competencies needed to be an effective beginning middle school teacher, and into the elements of the middle school concept that should be emphasized in middle level teacher preparation. Effective middle level education requires particular teaching competencies, including:

1. *An understanding of the middle school concept and related practices.* During their teacher preparation program, pre-service teachers should experience teaming to develop their collaboration and interpersonal skills. They should also learn about young adolescent development and how developmentally responsive practices can address individual student needs. These understandings underpin effective middle level education. (Know)
2. *An awareness of advisory programs and curriculum integration.* Although these practices were not deemed as important as teaming and developmental responsiveness, they have the potential to contribute to a progressive, student-centred learning environment. However, these middle school practices rely on organizational structures to be in place and were not deemed essential by the administrators in this study. (Know)
3. *Professional knowledge and skills that promote learner-centred environments.* Adequate content knowledge, instructional strategies and the ability to differentiate instruction were especially important to being able to meet student needs in inclusive classrooms. Effective classroom management skills were also essential. (Know, Do)
4. *Dispositions that foster positive, productive relationships.* Middle level teachers should be caring, adaptable and reflective learners to enable them to work effectively with

students, colleagues and parents. The ability to build rapport and relationships was viewed as essential to a middle level teacher's success. (Be)

It would seem that effective middle level teachers need particular competencies including an understanding of the middle school concept, specific knowledge, skills, and relationship-oriented dispositions. Based on this study, middle level teachers require a particular set of *Know*, *Do*, and *Be* competencies. These conclusions provide potential directions for the middle level teacher preparation program at RDC.

Conclusions Regarding Leadership Competencies

In addition to addressing the central research question, this set of conclusions addresses Sub-question #3 regarding how middle school administrators foster effective middle level education in their schools and view their role as leaders. In sum, I found that effective middle level education requires particular administrative *Know*, *Do* and *Be* competencies. These include:

1. *Understanding their role in helping young adolescent learners transition from childhood toward adulthood.* Familiarity with the middle school concept and young adolescent development enables middle level administrators to provide the leadership and structures necessary for developmentally responsive learning experiences during middle school. (Know, Do)
2. *Establishing a shared vision.* It is important that administrators establish a clear vision and a few key priorities for the school, in collaboration with their staff, in order to be effective at the middle level. According to the participants, a shared vision provides a common language and gets everyone moving in the same direction. (Do)
3. *Collaborative leadership.* The administrators in this study frequently referred to how they worked together with their staff, empowered them to make decisions, and shared

leadership of various elements of the school. The teaming structure in middle school lends itself well to shared, collaborative leadership. (Do)

4. *Personnel management.* Middle level administrators should be especially mindful of how a teacher may fit with a particular middle school position, team or school culture. The participants in this study underlined the importance of making sure the right people were in the right positions in order to provide students with an effective middle level education. (Do)
5. *Build relationships with students, staff, and families.* The administrators indicated that it can be difficult to build relationships with middle school students and their families. Through their relationship with staff, they focused on empowering, supporting, encouraging risk taking, and influencing them. Establishing relationships is a leadership competency that is essential to effective middle level education. (Do, Be)

Based on the leadership models examined in this study, these leadership competencies are not unique to middle school. These competencies can easily apply to any grade level and align with the competencies outlined in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a). What is perhaps unique is how knowledge of the middle school concept and young adolescent development, identified in the first conclusion of this section, serves as a lens for the other competencies and therefore influences the decisions and leadership actions identified in the conclusions. To illustrate, a savvy middle school leader would build a shared vision around a developmentally responsive purpose, establish teaching teams to facilitate collaborative leadership, consider the fit of a prospective middle school teacher and be skilled at developing relationships with all middle school stakeholders, especially students.

Conclusions Regarding Effective Middle Level Education

In response to the central research question, effective middle level education means being responsive to student needs and fostering positive relationships in order to help young adolescents transition through the middle grades.

1. *Relationships were identified in each section of findings and were a central theme to effective middle level education.* Both teachers and administrators should be skilled at fostering positive relationships. Organizational structures such as teaming in middle schools can promote relationships, increase collaboration and establish collective responsibility for students. (Know, Do, Be)
2. *Effective middle schools are responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents.* Middle school teachers and administrators strive to provide learning experiences that promote each students' intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral development. Implementation of middle school concepts can provide the structures and environment conducive to helping young adolescents transition through the middle grades. (Know, Do, Be)

Responsiveness and relationships seem to be core to effective middle level education.

The conclusions pertaining to teaching competencies, leadership competencies, and effective middle level education drawn from this study provide an opportunity to consider recommendations for various middle level education stakeholders.

Recommendations

This study has explored the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators on effective middle level education. However, the findings, interpretations, and conclusions may be of interest to audiences both within the boundaries of this case study and to various external

organizations or stakeholder groups. The recommendations are therefore organized by stakeholder group and are likely transferable to other settings. Recommendations for further research conclude this section.

Middle Level Teacher Preparation

The administrators provided insights that may lead to better alignment of the middle level teacher preparation program at Red Deer College with the realities of local classrooms, thus reducing the theory-practice gap (Falkenberg, 2015):

1. Increased emphasis on instructional strategies, classroom management, and differentiation so that beginning teachers are better prepared for inclusive classroom environments.
2. Less emphasis on curriculum integration. It is nice to know, but not essential for the realities of middle schools in the region.
3. Maintain the cohort model that focuses on collaboration and working in teams.
4. Seek opportunities to increase the time pre-service teachers spend in schools to promote better theory-practice integration.
5. Explore means to deepen subject-area knowledge to better prepare graduates for differentiating in inclusive classrooms. Consider means to develop a “specialized” generalist, perhaps with increased knowledge in math and science or the humanities.

Although case studies are not generalizable, these recommendations may be transferable to other teacher preparation programs.

School Divisions

To foster effective middle level education, school divisions might be able to transfer the knowledge gained from this study and consider the following recommendations:

1. Ensure their middle school administrators are well-equipped with both the knowledge and experience to lead middle schools. This may include providing training in both the middle school concept and young adolescent development. It is important that middle school administrators understand their role in fostering effective middle level education and that they are able to use a developmentally responsive lens to make decisions.
2. Hire teachers for middle school who have a keen understanding of young adolescent development and the middle school concept. This will enable them to provide developmentally responsive learning experiences for their students.
3. Seek opportunities to increase collaboration with the middle level teacher preparation program. There is potential for a more symbiotic, mutually beneficial, relationship that can result in a greater level of integration of pre-service teachers in the school system. This will not only provide the pre-service teachers with valuable experience, they can also share their knowledge and talents in service to the schools. Similarly, the teacher educators can also be of service and gain valuable experience through increased collaboration with the school divisions.

Alberta Teachers' Association

Although the Alberta Teachers Association has a Middle Years Council, there are perhaps opportunities to expand its mandate.

1. The Middle Years Council might consider how it could become a stronger advocate for middle level education in Alberta. This Council could become the voice that calls for increased prominence of middle level education in the Albertan education system. This could result in systemic changes across the province, such as an increase in Middle Schools across the province or developmentally responsive middle level curriculum.

2. The Middle Years Council currently hosts an annual conference. Closer affiliation with the teacher preparation program could result in all pre-service teachers in the middle level teacher preparation becoming members of the Middle Years Council. As the Council grows, it could increase its presence in the educational realm by providing training and presentations on effective middle level education, the middle school concept and developmentally responsive practices.
3. More generally, the Alberta Teacher's Association might consider ways to promote increased teacher interest in mentoring pre-service teachers. A cultural shift is needed if pre-service teachers are to spend more time in classrooms before graduation.

Alberta Education

The education system in Alberta is currently in a state of flux. Curriculum redesign is being organized around three divisions including the Middle Years: Grades 5 to 10 (Alberta Education, 2016b) which is a major shift from the currently existing programs of study that are generally for elementary (K to 6), junior high (7 to 9), and senior high (10 to 12), as noted in Chapter Two. Alberta Education might consider:

1. Developing a provincial vision for effective middle level education, similar to the work done in Manitoba (2010).
2. Promoting the tenets of the middle school concept as the conditions that can support teaching and learning of the new curriculum designed for the Middle Years.
3. Expanding the mandate for middle level teacher preparation. Only 40 students are admitted annually to the program offered at Red Deer College. As the Albertan education system increases emphasis on middle level education, more teachers with training to work with young adolescents and Middle Years curriculum will be needed.

Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)

This study has identified some important middle level education practices and insights that could influence future directions for the AMLE:

1. While the attributes and characteristics identified in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) provide an ideal framework for the education of young adolescents, all aspects are perhaps not of equal importance. I question the position that anything less than full implementation of the middle school concept is deemed “arrested development” (Dickinson & Butler, 2001), “limited progress” (Lounsbury, 2013), or a “promise yet unfulfilled” (Schaefer et al., 2016). Perhaps full implementation is unrealistic. This study asked administrators to identify the essential components of the middle school concept for their schools. In a similar vein of inquiry, perhaps the AMLE could identify what is essential, and what is nice to know or be able to do when it comes to middle level education.
2. Consider reframing the middle level concept around relationships and responsiveness as core means to *Know, Do, and Be* at the Middle Level.
3. Increase attention on middle level leadership. Very little research has been conducted on this crucial aspect of middle level education. Middle school administrative forums and journals targeted to a leadership audience could have far-reaching benefits.

Further Research

This case study was limited to the perspectives of middle school administrators in the central Alberta region. Recommendations for further research include:

1. In order to obtain a more holistic and nuanced account of effective middle level education in the region, it would be important to obtain the perspectives of other stakeholders such

as middle school teachers, students and their parents, and graduates of the middle level teacher preparation program. This work could be extended to explore middle level education at a provincial level.

2. Research that can inform initial teacher preparation should be conducted in other regions of Canada (Falkenberg, 2015). Research on middle level education and teacher preparation is needed in other provinces and territories in Canada. This study may be the first to provide clear recommendations for middle level teacher preparation in Alberta.
3. Building on the strengths of the study, I would recommend an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) for any researcher who is seeking both general and particular (Greene, 2008) data. I was able to both corroborate and gain deeper insights into the initial results of the questionnaire during the focus group interviews.
4. In terms of questionnaire design, it was beneficial to have respondents distinguish which of the four statements in each section they felt was most important. The ratings for all questionnaire items were relatively high, as all statements were derived from effective teaching practices (Alberta Education, 2018b; Howell et al., 2013). Selecting the most important statement from a set, in addition to using the Likert scale on each item, increased the internal validity of each set of items. I would recommend this rating and ranking of questionnaire items, where feasible.
5. Seek a broader sample so that inferential statistics can be used to provide comparisons and correlations on a larger scale. For example, it might be interesting to correlate previous teaching and administrative experience at the middle level with educational background of middle school administrators.

Researcher Reflections

The progressive underpinnings of the middle school concept are realized as holistic, student-centred, experiential, and equitable learning opportunities for young adolescents. It was incredibly encouraging to realize that the middle school administrators' descriptions of their student-centred approaches to working with young adolescents align with progressive education views. For this reason, I am buoyed with hopeful anticipation that recommendations from this study may benefit middle level education and teacher preparation in central Alberta, and on a broader basis.

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APPENDIX A: THIS WE BELIEVE



(NMSA, 2010)

APPENDIX B: MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM COURSES

3rd Year FALL	3rd Year WINTER	4th Year FALL	4th Year WINTER
EDES 301: Introduction to Middle Years Education	EDPY 303: Educational Assessment	EDPS 445: Issues in Middle Years	EDPS 410: Ethics and Law
EDPS 401: Organizing for learning	EDES 340: Active/interactive curriculum	EDES 366 : Social Studies curriculum	EDES 440: Integrated curriculum
EDES 362: Language Arts Curriculum	EDES 363: Math curriculum	EDES 365: Science curriculum	<i>EDFX 425: 9 week field experience</i>
<i>IFX 325: 5 week field experience</i>	EDES 401: Language and literature	EDES 364: PE curriculum	
	EDU 211: Aboriginal Perspectives	EDPY 301: Inclusion	

APPENDIX C: SCHOOL DIVISION LETTER

September 22, 2017

Dear (Superintendent):



Re: Study on Effective Middle Level Education in Central Alberta

What: As a key stakeholder to the Middle Years Bachelor of Education program at Red Deer College, I am writing to inform you about an opportunity for middle school administrators from your school division to participate in a research study I am conducting about effective middle level education. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study and I hope to also gain your approval to conduct this research study in your school division. The information below outlines the benefits, use of data and details of the project.

Who: My name is Julia Rheame and I am a University of Calgary doctoral student and Associate Dean in the School of Education at Red Deer College. As you may be aware, I have been involved in the Middle Years program for the past 7 years and have been an educator in the Central Alberta region for over twenty years. As a former middle school teacher and instructor in the Middle Years program, I am passionate about providing excellent learning opportunities for young adolescents in our local middle schools.

Why: When I was visiting Middle Years practicum students in middle schools throughout the region, I noticed there were a wide range of experiences being offered in the middle schools and I began to wonder if we were teaching the students in the Middle Years program what they needed to know in order to be successful beginning middle school teachers. I became especially interested in how the middle school concept is being experienced in local middle schools. Middle school administrators are well-positioned to provide important insights regarding middle level education in the region.

How: In order to investigate middle school administrators' perspectives on effective middle level education, I plan to collect data in two phases. The first phase consists of a web-based questionnaire that will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. It will provide administrators with an opportunity to explore what current research says about effective teaching and middle level education (NMSA, 2010; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner (2013); Teaching Quality Standard, Alberta Education, 2016 draft). They will be asked to provide some demographic information and then answer both open-ended and closed-ended questions on a variety of topics including beginning teacher knowledge of pedagogy, assessment, young adolescence as well as desirable teacher dispositions. I intend to provide a two-week window in October for this questionnaire to be completed.

The second phase of this project consists of a focus group involving middle school administrators from your school division having a professional dialogue on effective middle level education. It will be an opportunity to explore the questionnaire data as well as discuss individual and collective experiences as middle school leaders. During the focus group session,

administrators will provide recommendations for the Middle Years program, specifically on what they deem as important competencies for beginning teachers. I would like to conduct the focus group as early as November on a suitable date in your school division.

Risks and benefits: There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study as all participant information will remain confidential. Participation of the middle school administrators is completely voluntary. Participation is based on informed consent and administrators may choose to not participate, not answer questions or discontinue participation without consequence.

A potential benefit of participation is that it may enhance the administrators' awareness of, and therefore interest in, the middle school concept and promote effective middle level education practices. By providing feedback to the Middle Years program, administrators will have an opportunity to impact how teacher education is provided in the region, to your benefit as an employer of beginning teachers.

Data: Data collected in both phases of this study will be used primarily for this research project and will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding effective middle level education. Study data will be stored in a secure location to which only Julia Rheume will have access. All electronic data files will be encrypted on a password-protected computer and backed up on a password-protected, encrypted portable USB drive. Your school division will be supplied with a summary of the results of this study.

Action: Thank you for considering this invitation to your school division to participate in this important research on effective middle level education. I would be happy to meet with you to discuss any questions or concerns you may have about this project. Please contact me at (403) 403-342-3204 or julia.rheume@rdc.ab.ca. **to let me know if you are willing to allow me to conduct this study in your school division, before October 4th, 2017.**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact my research supervisor: Dr. Jim Brandon, Director Professional Programs, Werklund School of Education who can be reached by phone: (403) 862-3090; or email: jbrandon@ucalgary.ca.

Sincerely,

Julia Rheume
University of Calgary, doctoral candidate
Associate Dean, School of Education, Red Deer College



APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE CONSENT

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Julia Rheame, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education, (403) 342-3204, julia.rheame@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Jim Brandon, Graduate Programs in Education

Title of Project:

Middle School Administrators' Perspectives on Effective Middle Level Education in Central Alberta

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. Participation is completely voluntary and you are free to discontinue participation at any time prior to data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to consider how administrators' views on effective middle level education align with the Middle Years teacher education program curriculum that is offered at Red Deer College. The researcher, Julia Rheame, is specifically interested in discussing the competencies administrators deem important for beginning middle school teachers.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

You are invited to complete a questionnaire on effective middle level education. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes and will provide you with an opportunity to explore what current research says about effective teaching and middle level education (NMSA, 2010; Howell, Cook, & Faulkner (2013); Teaching Quality Standard, Alberta Education, 2016 draft). You will be asked to provide some demographic information and then answer both open-ended and closed-ended questions on a variety of topics including beginning teacher knowledge of pedagogy, assessment, young adolescence as well as desirable teacher dispositions.

Your participation is completely voluntary and your responses will remain anonymous. You may choose to not participate, not answer questions or discontinue participation without consequence. Your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your relationship with the Middle Years program or its affiliates.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide information about your school context and years of experience as a teacher and an administrator. No personally identifying information will be requested as part of the questionnaire.

Are There Risks or Benefits If I Participate?

There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study. The potential benefits include enhancing your professional knowledge and practice. Your responses may also impact how teacher education is conducted in the region, to your benefit as an employer of beginning teachers.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Only the researcher, Julia Rheume, and her supervisor, Jim Brandon, will have access to the questionnaire responses which will remain confidential. If you agree to participate, you will be e-mailed a unique code to input into the questionnaire which will facilitate follow-up with non-responders. Once the questionnaire has been closed to submissions, the identifying code will be removed so that your responses will be anonymous during data analysis. Partially completed questionnaires will be included in the data set.

The data collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location to which only Julia Rheume will have access. All electronic data files will be encrypted on a password-protected computer and backed up on a password-protected, encrypted portable USB drive.

The consolidated, anonymous data from this questionnaire will be shared and discussed in a focus group session as a means of exploring, verifying, and providing a deeper understanding of the results.

This study is being conducted as part of the researcher's requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. Findings may be disseminated through presentation at conferences and/or publications. A summary of the study's results will be provided to your school division.

Consent to participate

By selecting *I agree* below, you indicate that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

- I agree to participate in this research project.
- I do not wish to participate in this research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Julia Rheaume

Faculty of Graduate Studies, Werklund School of Education
(403) 342-3204, Julia.rheaume@ucalgary.ca

or

Dr. Jim Brandon (Supervisor)
Werklund School of Education
(403) 862-3090, jbrandon@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-6289/220-4283; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

APPENDIX E: QUESTIONNAIRE ON MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

Instructions:

For questions 1 - 7, please select one by checking the box.

School Context

1.School Division:

In which school division do you work?

- Red Deer Catholic
- Red Deer Public
- Chinook's Edge

2. Grade Configuration:

Which of the following best describes the grade configuration in your school?

- K - 12
- K - 9
- Middle (5 or 6 to 8 or 9)
- Other: _____

Participant

3. Experience as Teacher:

Which of the following reflects the number of years since you began your teaching career (including the current year)?

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 15- 20 years
- more than 20 years

4. Experience as Administrator:

Which of the following reflects the number of years since you became a school-based administrator (including the current year)?

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- More than 15

5. Years as administrator in current building:

Which of the following reflects the number of years since you became a school-based administrator in your current school, including this year?

- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- More than 10 years

6. How familiar are you with the Middle Years program at Red Deer College?

- 5 - very familiar
- 4 - quite familiar
- 3 - familiar
- 2 - somewhat familiar
- 1 - not familiar

7. How familiar are you with the Middle School concept (This We Believe, AMLE, 2010)?

- 5 - very familiar
- 4 - quite familiar
- 3 - familiar
- 2 - somewhat familiar
- 1 - not familiar

8. How recently have you attended professional development specific to the young adolescent learner and/or middle school practices (ex: Middle School conference, journal, etc.)

- Within the last 12 months
- Within the last 2 years
- Within the last 4 years
- 5 or more years ago

9. Imagine you are visiting some middle level (approximately grades 5 - 8) classrooms.

What are three words or short phrases you would use to describe the most effective teaching you might observe at the middle level (ie - what would you be looking for/hope to see)?

10. When you think of an effective middle level teacher, what three personal attributes or characteristics come to mind?

Middle Level Practices

11. How important are each of these typical middle school components in your school setting?

Please rate the LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE using this scale:

5 - very important 4 - quite important 3 - important 2 - somewhat important 1 - not important

	<u>Importance</u>
a. Teaming (planning and working collaboratively with grade or subject-area partners)	5 4 3 2 1
b. Interdisciplinary instruction (project-based learning, curriculum integration, cross-curricular learning)	5 4 3 2 1
c. Adult advocate for each student (through advisory, homeroom, etc)	5 4 3 2 1

- d. **Flexible schedules and groupings** (larger blocks of time to bring together different groups of students) 5 4 3 2 1

12. What makes your school unique? Describe areas of focus or strength in your school, if possible, as it relates to the middle school concept.

Instructions: For each of the following sets of questions (13 -18), please use the following guiding question and scale.

Imagine you are deciding whether or not to retain a beginning teacher. In your opinion, how important is it that a beginning teacher demonstrate the competency described by each statement?

Part A: Please **RATE** the **LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE** using this scale:

- 5 - very important
- 4 - quite important
- 3 - important
- 2 - somewhat important
- 1 - not important

Part B: At the end of each section, **CHOOSE** the most important statement.

Note: There is an opportunity to comment on each section, if you wish.



13. Developmentally Responsive:

A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:

	<u>Importance</u>
a. Understanding of young adolescent development (physical, social, emotional, and intellectual)	5 4 3 2 1
b. Making instructional decisions based on students' developmental characteristics	5 4 3 2 1
c. Providing opportunities for students to express individual interests, strengths and opinions	5 4 3 2 1
d. Considering student variables (demographics, maturity, cultural background, etc) when determining how best to meet their needs	5 4 3 2 1

B. Which of the above statements do you think is MOST important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate?

Circle one: a b c d

Comments (optional):

14. Professional Knowledge (Curriculum and Instruction)

A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:	<u>Importance</u>
a. Designing learning activities that make curriculum relevant, challenging, and engaging	5 4 3 2 1
b. Setting clear goals and intellectual challenges for student learning	5 4 3 2 1
c. Subject-area knowledge and competency	5 4 3 2 1
d. Using a variety of instructional strategies and resources, including technology, to promote learning	5 4 3 2 1

B. Which of the above statements do you think is MOST important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate?

Circle one: a b c d

Comments (optional):

15. Assessment

A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:	<u>Importance</u>
a. Using varied assessments to generate evidence of student learning related to learner outcomes	5 4 3 2 1
b. Providing accurate, constructive and prompt feedback to students concerning their performance	5 4 3 2 1
c. Providing different ways for students to demonstrate their learning	5 4 3 2 1
d. Using assessment to inform instruction and teacher practice	5 4 3 2 1

B. Which of the above statements do you think is MOST important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate?

Circle one: a b c d

Comments (optional)

16. Inclusive Learning Environment**A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:**

	<u>Importance</u>
a. Creating and maintaining a welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning environment	5 4 3 2 1
b. Planning for individual differences and responding to diverse student needs	5 4 3 2 1
c. Believing that every student can learn and be successful	5 4 3 2 1
d. Employing strategies that promote a positive, engaging, student-centred learning environment	5 4 3 2 1

B. Which of the above statements do you think is MOST important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate?*Circle one: a b c d**Comments (optional):***17. Relationships****A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:**

	<u>Importance</u>
a. Communicating and interacting effectively with students, parents and colleagues	5 4 3 2 1
b. Establishing respectful and productive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues	5 4 3 2 1
c. Honouring cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understandings	5 4 3 2 1
d. Involving parents and/or community members in support of student learning	5 4 3 2 1

B. Which of the above statements do you think is MOST important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate?*Circle one: a b c d**Comments (optional):*

18. Organizational Structures / Middle School Concept

A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:	<u>Importance</u>
a. Willingness to serve as a role model, advocate for and guide young adolescents	5 4 3 2 1
b. Working collaboratively with colleagues, as an effective team member	5 4 3 2 1
c. Planning cross-curricular, exploratory and/or authentic learning opportunities	5 4 3 2 1
d. Using varied groupings of students to promote collaboration and interaction	5 4 3 2 1

B. Which of the above statements do you think is MOST important for a beginning teacher to demonstrate?*Circle one: a b c d**Comments (optional):*

19. Teacher Dispositions and Professional Behaviours*Use the following scale for each of the statements below:***5 - Very important** (I would likely not retain a teacher if they didn't have this attribute)**4 - Quite Important** (Not having this attribute would make it difficult to be successful)**3 - Important** (This attribute is good to have but not essential to being successful)**2 - Somewhat important** (This attribute is nice to have but not needed to be successful)**1- Not important** (This attribute is not necessary to be successful at the middle level)

A. How important is it that a beginning middle level teacher (ie - Grades 5 - 8) demonstrate:	<u>Importance</u>
a. Showing enthusiasm for teaching and working with children	5 4 3 2 1
b. Communicating effectively	5 4 3 2 1
c. Organizational skills, punctual, good time management	5 4 3 2 1
d. Good sense of humour	5 4 3 2 1
e. Positive attitude	5 4 3 2 1

f. Intelligent, thoughtful and reflective	5 4 3 2 1
g. Willingness to contribute to school activities	5 4 3 2 1
h. Motivation, possessing a healthy work ethic	5 4 3 2 1
i. Creativity	5 4 3 2 1
j. Professionalism	5 4 3 2 1
k. Flexibility	5 4 3 2 1

B. Of the above attributes, please choose your top three (1,2,3) by placing a number beneath the corresponding letter. (1 = most important)

a b c d e f g h i j k

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey on effective middle level education. If you have any further comments, please share them below:

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW CONSENT



**UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY**

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Julia Rheame, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education, (403) 342-3204, julia.rheame@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Jim Brandon, Graduate Programs in Education

Title of Project:

Middle School Administrators' Perspectives on Effective Middle Level Education in Central Alberta

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. Participation is completely voluntary and you are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to consider how administrators' views on the middle school concept, effective teaching, and effective middle level leadership align with course content of the Middle Years teacher education program offered at Red Deer College. The researcher, Julia Rheame, is specifically interested in discussing the competencies administrators deem important for beginning middle school teachers.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

You are invited to participate in a focus group session on effective middle level education that will last approximately 1 hour. The focus group will be an opportunity to discuss the questionnaire data and findings from the initial phase of this project with the researcher and middle school administration colleagues in order to provide recommendations to the Middle Years program offered at Red Deer College. The researcher, Julia Rheame, will be taking notes and video-recording the focus group session. The video-recording will only be used to facilitate transcription of the conversation and will never be shown in public. Pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality during data analysis and the sharing of results.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to not participate, not answer questions or discontinue participation without consequence. Your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your relationship with the Middle Years program or its affiliates.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Your name and school are the only personally identifying information that will be collected during the focus group session, as you introduce yourself to the other middle school administrators from your school division. The focus group will be with your administrative colleagues who you will likely know and anything you say will not be shared anonymously. Participants will be asked to respect confidentiality and the research will ensure that data released publicly is anonymized.

The focus group session will be video-recorded in order to facilitate transcription of the conversation. Only the researcher and a professional transcriber will view the recording. The recording will never be shown in public. The professional transcriber will be required to complete a confidentiality agreement before transcription may begin.

You will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used in all references to your involvement in this study. The researcher will assign you a pseudonym if you do not choose one.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in the focus group part of this project. You can choose all, some, of none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| 1. <i>I grant permission to be video-taped for the purposes of transcribing the focus group:</i> | Yes: ___ No: ___ |
| 2. <i>I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym:</i> | Yes: ___ No: ___ |

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

Are There Risks or Benefits If I Participate?

There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study. The potential benefits include enhancing your professional knowledge and practice. Your feedback may also have an impact on how teacher education is conducted in the region, to your benefit as an employer of beginning teachers.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Information collected will only be accessible by the researcher, Julia Rheume, the professional transcriber and her supervisor, Jim Brandon. If you agree to participate in the focus group, your responses will be transcribed and used as part of the study data set and attributed to the pseudonym you choose for this project. Should a participant choose to withdraw their data from the study, this would need to occur prior to data analysis which is anticipated to begin approximately one week from when the focus group was conducted.

Should you agree to participate in the focus group, you will be interacting with middle school colleagues

who you likely know. It will therefore be difficult to remain anonymous during the focus group session. However, the researcher will not use any identifying information you provide when reporting results. Anonymity cannot be assured if you share your pseudonym with others or reveal your responses to anyone other than the researcher. While anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups, focus group participants will be asked to keep comments confidential.

The data collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location to which only Julia Rheume will have access. All electronic data files will be encrypted on a password-protected computer and backed up on a password-protected, encrypted portable USB drive.

This study is being conducted as part of the researcher's requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. Findings may be disseminated through presentations at conferences and/or publications. A summary of the study's results will be provided to your school division.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns: If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this

research and/or your participation, please contact:

Julia Rheume

Faculty of Graduate Studies, Werklund School of Education
(403) 342-3204, Julia.rheume@ucalgary.ca

or

Dr. Jim Brandon (Supervisor)
Werklund School of Education
(403) 862-3090, jbrandon@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-6289/220-4283; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A Focused Conversation on Effective Middle Level Education

Instructions and Norms

Thank you for being here today to participate in this focused conversation about middle schooling. I am interested in your thoughts on how the various elements of the middle school concept are experienced in your school and the role that you play as a middle school administrator. We will discuss the competencies that you feel are important for beginning middle level teachers and make recommendations for teacher education programs.

This session is intended to last approximately 1 hour and is being recorded for transcription purposes only. As discussion facilitator, I will be watching the time and moving the discussion along so that we can finish in a timely fashion. Please don't take offense if I interrupt you, or call on you directly, as I want to hear about each of your unique perspectives and experiences.

During our time together, I ask you to please:

1. Share the air. (*One person at a time speaking, jot thoughts, ok to pass*)
2. Show respect. (*keep comments confidential, own opinion ok, no right answers*)

Participants:

Start time:

A. Middle School Leadership

RQ4: How do you view your role as a MS leader? How do you foster effective middle level education?

1. What is your vision for the purpose of middle school?
2. How do you foster that vision?
3. How is being a middle school administrator different than at other grade levels?

->Refer to the middle school concept from *This We Believe* (AMLE, 2010):

4. Which aspects of the middle school concept are a focus for your school?

B. Questionnaire results - Middle School Concept

RQ3: Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?

5. Teaming was identified in the questionnaire results as being very important (92% rated very high). What does teaming look like in your school? (cross-subject, cross-grade, common planning time?)
6. How important is an advisory program in your school?
7. The ratings for cross-curricular instruction or curriculum integration were relatively low. What are your thoughts on it?
8. Please describe a few of the ways your teachers and/or your school responds to the developmental needs (physical, social, emotional, and intellectual) of your students. In what ways do race, culture, sexual orientation and/or language play a role when determining how best to meet student needs?

C. Questionnaire results - Effective Teaching

RQ2: According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective middle school teacher?

9. In terms of professional knowledge, subject-area knowledge was rated the lowest. Should middle school teachers be generalists or specialists?

->Give list of teacher dispositions

10. Are there any surprises in the results on the most important teacher dispositions?

D. Recommendations

RQ1: What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?

11. What would you recommend for a teacher education program that is focusing on preparing effective middle school teachers? (What should middle school teachers know, do and be?)

APPENDIX H: QUESTION CORRELATION

RESEARCH QUESTION:	Central	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
	What are the perspectives of central Alberta middle school administrators regarding effective middle level education?	Which elements of the middle school concept are deemed essential to effective middle level education by the middle school administrators?	According to central Alberta middle school administrators, what competencies are needed to be an effective middle school teacher?	How do middle school administrators view their role in fostering effective middle level education?
DATA SOURCE:	Questionnaire on Effective Middle Level Education			
<i>Question Number and Topic</i>				
Participant Information				
1	School Division			
2	Participant Code			
3	Grade Configuration			
4	Experience as Teacher			
5	Experience as Administrator			x
6	Admin Years in School			x
Middle Level Practices				
7	Familiarity with Middle Years			x
8	Familiarity with Middle School Concept			x
9	Middle Level Professional Development			x
10	Importance of Middle School Practices	x	x	
11	Unique School (open ended)	x		x
12	Effective Teaching (open-ended)	x	x	
13	Effective Teacher (open-ended)	x	x	
Middle Level Concepts				
14	Developmentally Responsive	x	x	
15	Professional Knowledge	x	x	
16	Assessment	x	x	
17	Inclusive Learning Environment	x	x	
18	Relationships	x	x	
19	Organizational Structures	x	x	
20	Teacher dispositions	x	x	
Focused Group Interviews on Effective Middle Level Education				
<i>Question Number and Topic</i>				
1	Purpose of MS	x		x
2	Foster vision	x		x
3	Unique about MS admin	x		x
4	MS concept focus	x	x	x
5	Teaming	x	x	
6	Curriculum Integration	x	x	
7	Advisory	x	x	
8	Developmental needs	x	x	
9	Generalist or specialist	x	x	
10	Teacher Dispositions	x	x	
11	Teacher Education	x	x	

APPENDIX I: TEACHER DISPOSITIONS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE**Effective Middle Level Education
Questionnaire results**

N = 26

Teacher Dispositions

in order of importance

(participants were asked to pick their top three)

Caring (62%)

Reflective (50%)

Adaptable (42%)

Learner (39%)

Positive (27%)

Dedicated (19%)

Respectful (15%)

Professional (15%)

Enthusiastic (15%)

Fair (8%)

Creative (4%)

Intelligent (4%)

Leader (0%)