

Middle Level Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student  
Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions  
A Mixed Methods Study

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*Keywords:* developmental responsiveness to young adolescents, transition to  
middle school, middle level leadership

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. A mixed-methods approach was used to address the study's research questions. Participants in the study included middle school principals and assistant principals in two Virginia school divisions. Participants completed an online questionnaire reporting their self-perceptions about their responsiveness to their students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. Participants rated their responsiveness to their students' developmental needs as fairly often and their responsiveness to supporting staff and structures related to those needs as falling between frequently, if not always, and fairly often. Middle school leaders also shared how their schools' transition programs aligned to their students' developmental needs in focus group interviews. Participants identified that young adolescents need additional emotional, social-emotional and organizational support during the transition to middle school. They also shared the need and desire for training to best serve young adolescents. Overall, the findings aligned with existing research underscoring the critical role middle level leaders play in meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents when transitioning to middle school. This study provided implications for middle level and school division leaders and principal prep programs to emphasize strategic, on-going, and collaborative learning opportunities to prepare middle level leaders.

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**GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools' transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. Middle school principals and assistant principals from two Virginia school divisions shared their levels of responsiveness to the needs of their students and how their school sites' programs aligned with their students' needs. Middle level leaders rated their responsiveness to their students' developmental needs as fairly often and rated their responsiveness to supporting the staff and structures related to those needs as falling between frequently, if not always, and fairly often. Middle level leaders identified that during the transition to middle school, young adolescents need additional emotional, social-emotional and organizational support. They also shared the need and desire for additional training and development to best serve young adolescents. Overall, the findings aligned with existing research underscoring the critical role of the middle level leader in meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly during the transition to middle school. This study provided implications for middle level and division leaders and principal prep programs to emphasize strategic, on-going, and collaborative learning opportunities to prepare middle level leaders.

*Keywords:* developmental responsiveness to young adolescents, transition to middle school, middle level leadership

## Dedications

The completion of the dissertation process affects many, so I dedicate this journey to my circle of folks who have consistently and passionately encouraged me along the way. I am so thankful for my faith, which always outweighed my doubts when I felt overwhelmed, tested, or unworthy! It is my hope that despite the obstacles and setbacks, my success is a testimony to the power of favor and grace. I am so grateful for the small miracles that occurred, the wonderful people I've encountered, and the commitment and dedication that I experienced throughout the process.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother. Although she passed a few months before I finished, I can still hear and feel her presence as I attain what she knew I would, long before I did. I am also extremely grateful for my sister and best friend, RaDiah, who has always seen my potential and believed in my abilities.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To Jeremy, my husband and best friend, I am grateful for your loyalty, your passion, and your partnership. You have been my biggest cheerleader and I sincerely appreciate your belief in me and my talents, your dedication to my success, and your patience on long days and late nights. To my children, Juwaan, Jairome, and Jayla, I will never be able to express my appreciation for your love and patience in words, but just know that the three of you represent what unconditional love is all about.

And finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the thousands of students who I have had the privilege to work with. You have and will continue to be my motivation for working in education. Thank you for the laughs, the happy tears, and the lessons you have taught me.

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## **Chapter One**

### **The Problem**

The transition from elementary to middle school occurs as adolescents experience a considerable amount of change (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Eccles et al, 1993). Young adolescents, those falling between the ages of 10- to 15-years-old, experience particular emotional and physical developmental changes (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019; Eccles et al., 1993). As these students transition from the elementary school setting to middle school, those changes, compounded with new settings and new relationships, can result in “declines in academic motivation and performance, lower self-concept and confidence, decreased classroom engagement, and increased psychological symptoms” (Xie et al., 2013, p. 265). To meet the challenge of creating an environment where young adolescents can flourish, middle school leaders must have “specific problem-solving and social judgment skills that meet the unique needs of young adolescents” (DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019, p. 1).

### **Historical Perspective**

The commitment to provide learning environments responsive to the needs of young adolescents has garnered attention since the early twentieth century, where the earliest attempts to push the movement resulted in the implementation of junior high schools (Weilbacher, 2019). Junior high schools, which were favored by advocates for meeting the unique needs of young adolescents, provided a middle ground for students in grades seven through nine, but lacked clearly defined structures (DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019; Weilbacher, 2019). By the 1940s, junior high schools moved toward acknowledging that their model should “provide for integration, exploration, guidance, differentiation, socialization, and articulation” (Weilbacher, 2019, p. 35). According to Weilbacher (2019), the shift toward meeting the developmental needs of students away from a focus on academic priorities was not fully supported; teachers and administrators were neither prepared nor committed to delivering this experience.

The middle school model emerged to emphasize the “importance of educators being prepared to understand the unique psychological, social, emotional, and physical needs of this

[student] age group and the need for them to possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively educate young adolescents” (DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019, p. 2). By the 1960s, many junior high schools had taken on the middle school label. The 1980s and 1990s found most former junior high schools embracing the middle school philosophy (Weilbacher, 2019). However, the momentum was hampered by the onset of standardized testing in the 1990s as “an emphasis on test scores, standards, and holding teachers and students accountable has led to a narrowing of the curriculum that disregards the developmental needs of adolescents” (Weilbacher, 2019, p. 36).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although middle schools intend to meet the needs of young adolescents, mismatches may “threaten students’ academic and relational belonging at school” (Borman et al., 2019, p. 16286; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). Despite intentions to do so, many middle schools inadequately provide a structured setting for meaningful relationships, relevant and rigorous curriculum, and developmentally appropriate structures (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Weilbacher, 2019). The shift to deliver a developmentally responsive program for middle school learners has faced challenges since the initial movement in the late 1800s. The challenges continue still today with limited training and licensure opportunities and standardized testing performance dictating course and scheduling options (Weilbacher, 2019). Despite the challenges, middle schools can still provide a responsive environment for young adolescents (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014).

The transition from elementary to middle school occurs as young adolescents experience a considerable amount of change in “pubertal developmental, social role redefinitions, cognitive development, school transitions, and the emergence of sexuality” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). This time of “considerable uncertainty and change” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 2) has been studied for decades as its impact on students’ future success may have considerable influence (Akos et al., 2015). Hamburg (1974) characterized the transition as “...representing the most abrupt and demanding transition of an individual’s entire educational career. This is a crisis period that has important educational as well as personal consequences” (Eccles & Midgley, 1989, p. 139). These consequences, including decreased academic

achievement, increased behavior issues, high school drop-out rates, and overall negative life outcomes, can have long term effects (Ellerbock & Keifer, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). As a result, middle school leaders have a great responsibility to provide responsive learning environments.

Staff working with young adolescents are best able to provide them with a responsive learning environment when they have a full understanding of their developmental needs (Coelho et al., 2017; Ellerbock & Keller, 2014). Bickmore (2014) suggested that middle school leaders, including principals and assistant principals, without a clear understanding of the “intellectual, physical, social, moral, and ethical characteristics of young adolescents” (p. 4) cannot be appropriately responsive to the needs of young adolescents. With little research available about middle school leadership, and decreasing requirements for middle level leadership, it is critical to understand what middle school leaders know and report about their responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents (Bickmore, 2011). Middle school leaders’ perceptions about their own experiences and responsiveness will provide insight into the misalignment that may occur as students transition from elementary school to middle school.

### **Developmental Needs of the Young Adolescent**

Young adolescents mature physically and emotionally at different rates; however, in early adolescence, the body “undergoes more developmental change than at any other time except birth to two years old” (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 1). Physical growth, including gains in height and weight, muscular and skeletal growth, and internal organ growth, can result in coordination issues, physical pain, and extremes of high and low energy. The brain is also actively developing to better make executive decisions. Finally, the onset of puberty contributes to physical and emotional developments that can lead to awkward and/or uncomfortable feelings (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).

Emotionally, young adolescents experience a wide range of intellectual abilities as they expand their cognitive abilities, explore moral and spiritual identities, and develop social-emotional maturity (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). During this time, they are moving from “concrete logical operations to acquiring the ability to develop and test hypotheses, analyze and synthesize data, grapple with complex concepts and think reflectively”



(Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 3). Young adolescents can understand how their intellectual and moral development work together and as they progress toward gaining a deeper understanding of the world around them, move from an egocentric mentality to one of more carefully considering others (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Weilbacher, 2019). As they navigate the complexities of social status, young adolescents strive for close peer connections, often test the boundaries established by adults, and battle with insecurities with self-identity (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).

As young adolescents experience particular developmental characteristics that may result in sudden shifts in abilities and behaviors, educational settings should provide supportive learning environments, rich in opportunities to develop physically and intellectually, explore self-identity, and create meaningful relationships with peers and adults (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Weilbacher, 2019). Ellerbock and Kiefer posit that responsive schools understand and meet these needs and that unresponsive schools neglect to consider how students' developmental needs can best be realized. Responsive middle schools purposefully provide young adolescents with "a sense of personalization, competence, relatedness, autonomy and care" (Ellerbock & Keifer, 2014, p. 229). However, some young adolescents may experience middle school environments that do not prioritize meaningful relationships, appropriately engaging curriculum, nor engaging academic activities.

Understanding and aligning middle school structures and practices to young adolescents' developmental needs during the transition to middle school is a major tenet of *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Successful middle schools prioritize structures that promote positive relationship-building, employ educators familiar with meeting the needs of young adolescents and create a developmentally appropriate academic program driven by purposeful learning (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Weilbacher, 2019). The middle school curriculum should be driven by student choice and voice and opportunities to connect to themselves, those around them, and the world (Weilbacher, 2019). Middle schools should be structured "to promote a sense of personalization, competency, relatedness, autonomy, and care" (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014, p. 229).

## **The Misalignment of Middle School Structures**

Systemic differences in school context and environment present new challenges for young adolescents as they move from elementary to middle school (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Ryan et al., 2013). Ryan et al. cited differences in hierarchical changes from being the oldest to the youngest; larger, less organized buildings with limited times for movement; navigation of several different teaching styles; the development of relationships with several teachers as opposed to few; and the “disruption” to social networks with peers. Eccles et al. (1993) provided research that suggested that the systematic changes during the transition from elementary to middle level classes and school structures may explain that some of the “motivational changes seen among early adolescents as they make the transition into middle school may be a consequence of the negative changes in the school environment rather than characteristics of the developmental period per se” (p. 92). Along with changing school structures, young adolescents transitioning to middle school must also contend with differing school practices regarding how staff deals with delivering instruction, handling classroom disruptions, and disciplinary practices (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ryan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2013).

Systematic differences in school structures and practices may lead to marked declines during the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos et al., 2015; Jamison et al., 2015; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ryan et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2013). Declines in self-worth, healthy relationships with peers and adults, behavior, and academic performance have been noted by several studies (Lippold et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2013). During the transition to middle school, students may be more vulnerable to others’ assessments of themselves and allow those perceptions to shape their own identities and school connections (Jamison et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2013). Considering the transition to middle school can be troublesome, the “lack of fit between their developmental stages, institutional circumstances, and educators’ responses to them” can prove to increase the likelihood of decreased motivation, self-esteem, and academic achievement” (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 101).

### **The Middle School Principal's Lack of Opportunities for Relevant Training**

Petzko et al. (2000) stated that middle school principals' "...knowledge, insight, commitment, and leadership will determine to a great extent how well equipped the school is to address its challenges and how poised it is to seize its opportunities" (p. 3). Despite the need for specific skills, training, and personal characteristics for middle level leadership roles, there is little emphasis on this topic, and as a result, many middle level leaders lack an in-depth understanding of the essential programs, training, and learning environment aspects to meet the needs of middle school learners (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000). Several components are recognized as beneficial to middle level leaders, including rich experiences in teaching and leading middle school learners, licensure-preparation programs to enhance leadership practices, ongoing training to improve performance, continual participation on middle level associations, and mentorship opportunities and central office support (Petzko et al., 2000). Although attempts to train, certify, and enhance the skills of middle school leaders have at times been favored, there are few opportunities available, and there is a dearth of research available for middle level leadership (Bickmore, 2011).

### **Significance/Justification of the Study**

Borman et al. (2019) suggest that the onset of disengagement with school "takes root at the start of middle school" (p. 16290). As early as sixth grade, students may struggle with attendance, discipline, and coursework. Preventative measures to engage these students are required to ensure personal, social, and academic outcomes that are positive. Because young adolescents, 10- to 15-year-olds, experience rapid and significant developmental change and display distinctive characteristics with regard to their physical, cognitive, moral, psychological, and social-emotional development, as well as spiritual development, middle school leaders must understand and consider young adolescents' developmental characteristics when planning curriculum, instruction, and assessment and organizing the environment of the school (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). There are few studies that clearly identify which skills middle level leaders need most to be successful, nor how those who can demonstrate them incorporate responsive practices into school environments (Bickmore, 2011).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools' transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. School leaders', including both middle school principals and assistant principals, responsiveness includes supporting staff working with these students and creating, implementing, and/or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the young adolescents they serve. Beyond the self-reported perceptions of middle level leaders' responsiveness, a broader understanding of how their transition programs align with the developmental needs of young adolescents was pursued using focus group interviews.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions addressed in this mixed-method study are:

1. What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school leaders to the developmental needs of young adolescents, as measured by the Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire?
2. How do middle level leaders report the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents?

## **Overview of the Study**

Leadership of the middle grades has specific challenges, including understanding and adapting to the quickly developing needs of young adolescents, building structures and limitations, and an increasing mindfulness of the implications of a quality education for these students in particular (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Although there is a wealth of research about general principal leadership, there has been little focus on the middle grades principalship (Bickmore, 2016). Existing literature on middle grades leadership suggests that effective principals should be knowledgeable about and promote appropriate learning experiences and

structures to meet the needs of young adolescents, but there is limited research about how the middle level principal's practices impact outcomes for students, teachers, or schools overall. The dearth of specific research related to the connection between middle level leaders' knowledge and how that impacts practice aligns with the limited opportunities available for middle level principals to participate in specific middle level training, certification or proven best practices. Navigating and supporting the developmental needs of 10- to 15-year old students can prove challenging considering students may escalate from one emotional extreme to the next; from confident and eager to immature and delicate, which requires that educational leaders promote specific school-wide implementation of positive practices, courses of study, and programs for students (Gale & Bishop, 2014). This study specifically sought to determine middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to the unique developmental needs of young adolescents.

The Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership Model (DRMLL) (Anfara, 2002) provides a manner to measure the "contextual uniqueness" of schools serving adolescents aged 10-14 (Bickmore, 2011, p. 2). The DRMLL (2002) is driven by three aspects: "(1) responsiveness to the developmental needs of middle grades students; (2) responsiveness to the developmental needs of faculty who support learning for middle grades; and (3) responsiveness to the development of the middle school itself as a unique, innovative entity" (Bickmore, 2011, p. 4). The DRMLL resulted in an instrument to examine the unique context of middle level leaders' practices called the Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire (MLLQ) (Bickmore, 2011). This verified instrument was used to survey middle level leaders in two Virginia school divisions to determine their perceptions about their own knowledge and practices (Bickmore, 2011). Along with the AMLLQ, focus groups were conducted to determine middle level leaders' responsiveness during students' transition from the elementary to middle school setting. This study will add to the limited base of research available for the middle level principalship.

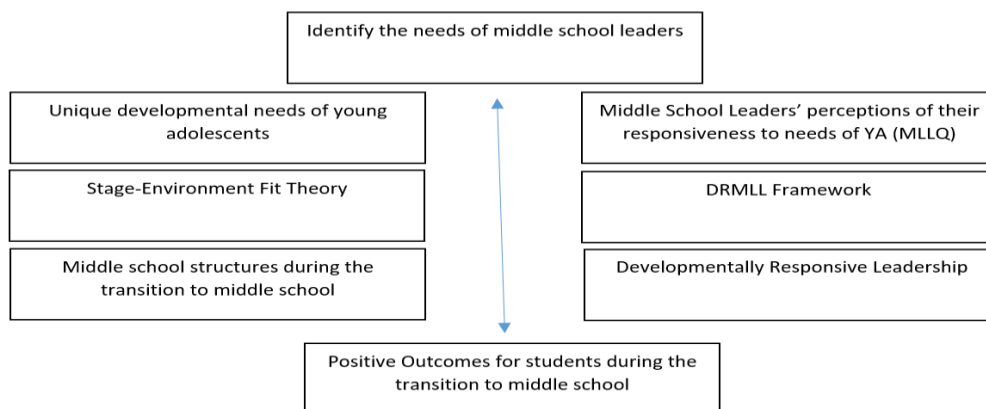
### **Conceptual Framework**

Middle level leaders work with young adolescents during a tumultuous developmental time, so practices must be "grounded in and sprung from a strong ethic of care that permeates

the entire organization” (Gooding, 2010, p. 6). Anfara et al.’s DRMLL framework attempts to gain insight into the behaviors of middle school principals in three primary areas: responsiveness to the changing needs of young adolescents, responsiveness to the faculty who work with young adolescents, and responsiveness to the structural needs of a middle school (Bickmore, 2011; Gooding, 2010). By identifying and analyzing middle level leaders’ perceptions of their responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, specific needs can be identified and opportunities for development in these areas can be enhanced to increase positive outcomes for students as they transition to middle school. Figure 1 displays the visual representation of the conceptual framework.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework of Middle Level Leaders’ Developmentally Responsive Leadership*



**Definition of Key Terms**

Developmentally Responsive refers to practices that promote a teaching and learning environment to the particular needs of 10-15 year-olds and the teachers and school structures that support them (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

*Middle School* is any school that includes either a configuration of Grades 5 through 8 or Grades 6 through 8 or has the term “middle school” in the school name (AMLE, 2014).

*School Structures* refer to effective middle grades practices that support “teaching, learning, and organizational structures,” such as course offerings and scheduling practices,

instructional priorities, discipline practices, social emotional priorities (Bickmore, 2011; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Ryan et al., 2013).

*Transition* refers to the move from the elementary school to the middle school setting. This typically happens as students finish fifth grade in an elementary setting and move on to sixth grade at a middle school setting (Lippold et al., 2013).

*Young Adolescent* refers to children aged 10-15-years-old (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).

### **Limitations**

This study researched how middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures that best meet the needs of young adolescents. Several limitations, of which the researcher did not have control when determining the boundaries of the study, were present. The first limitation was that a potential bias exists on the part of the researcher as she serves as a middle level leader in one of the two school divisions. Another limitation was that the questionnaire relied on self-report, which poses reliability issues. Also, the researcher assumed that the participants responded honestly to all questions posed in the study, which may not be true. Finally, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unprecedented changes have occurred since March of 2020 and there is an unknown impact on school practices and middle level leaders' perspectives and responses provided. As a result of the pandemic, limited school divisions were used for this study.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations may have occurred due to the boundaries established by the researcher for this study. This study pertained to the transition from elementary to middle school; however, only included the perspectives of middle level leaders. Only the middle level leaders from two school divisions participated. Only middle level leaders currently in the position of assistant principal or principal participated. This study collected the perspectives of middle level leaders about their responsiveness but will not discuss other factors that may influence the transition from elementary to middle school.

## **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study including historical perspective, statement of the problem, development needs of the young adolescents, the misalignment of middle school structures, the middle school principal's lack of opportunities for relevant training, significance/justification of the study, purpose of the study, research questions, overview of the study, conceptual framework, definition of key terms, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter Two presents an in-depth literature review about the developmental needs of young adolescents and the misalignment of middle school structures as young adolescents transition from elementary to middle school, and the role of middle school leaders and developmentally responsive leadership. Chapter Three discusses the methodology used for this study, including data collection, instrument design and validation, and how the data will be used. Chapter Four reports on the data collected and describes the analysis conducted. Chapter Five will present a summary of the findings, discuss implications of the findings, provide recommendations for future research, and conclude the study.



## **Chapter Two**

### **The Literature Review**

This literature review pertains to the transition from elementary to middle school and how leadership practices impact the experiences of young adolescents. I examined references related to adolescence during the transition, the declines that occur during the first year of middle school due to the misalignment of developmental needs and school structures, characteristics of engagement in middle school, middle school leadership, and developmentally responsive leadership. This review suggested that the transition can be problematic for many students but can be improved upon by responsive and trained middle level leaders.

The transition from elementary to middle school occurs as young adolescents experience a considerable amount of change in “pubertal developmental, social role redefinitions, cognitive development, school transitions, and the emergence of sexuality” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). This time of “considerable uncertainty and change” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 2) has been studied for decades as its impact on students’ future success may have considerable influence (Akos, et al., 2015). Hamburg (1974) characterized the transition as, “...representing the most abrupt and demanding transition of an individual’s entire educational career. This is a crisis period that has important educational as well as personal consequences” (Eccles & Midgley, 1989, p. 139), such as decreased academic achievement, increased behavior issues, high school drop-out rates, and overall negative life outcomes (Smith et al., 2016; Ellerbock & Keifer, 2016).

### **Historical Background**

Although the need for specific schools where staff could meet young adolescents’ needs has been proposed, little has been cemented to create a “unique curriculum or coherent mission” for middle schools (Weilbacher, 2019, p. 34). Junior high schools emerged in the late 1800s and grew in popularity as places where students’ academic needs were centered around preparation for high school in Grades 7-9 (Schaefer et al., 2016; Weilbacher, 2019). Some junior high schools attempted to address students’ developmental needs; however, little was required of middle-level educators or demanded that a specialized approach be considered. By the

1960s, a shift toward offering middle school education was proposed to rearrange the grade levels to 6 through 8 and educational philosophy to more appropriately address the needs of students of this age. By 1990, international attention was brought to middle-level reform; however, the beginning of standardized testing and emphasis on test scores outweighed the effort, resulting in a shift back to traditional core instruction (Schaefer et al., 2016; Weilbacher, 2019). Despite the work of middle school advocates, the “emphasis on test scores, standards, and holding teachers and students accountable has led to a narrowing of the curriculum that disregards the developmental needs of adolescents” (Weilbacher, 2019, p. 36).

### **Young Adolescent Characteristics**

According to the AMLE (2014), young adolescents, children ages of 10- to 15-years-old, experience a tremendous amount of change that results in particular developmental attributes. Children experience developmental changes in the following areas: physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, psychological, and social emotional (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). All children develop differently as many factors, including those that result from environmental effects (i.e., culture and community) and those that children are born with (i.e., race, ethnicity and gender) contribute to overall development.

### **Physical Development**

During early adolescence, the body experiences “accelerated and uneven” growth (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 2). Physical growth affects height, weight, internal organ size, and skeletal and muscular systems, which can lead to coordination issues, restlessness, and fatigue. The brain undergoes a tremendous amount of development; the brain’s neural circuitry is being actively restructured and the prefrontal cortex, which handles executive functioning, is continuing to develop, along with gender-specific differences (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 2) The onset of puberty produces both physical changes, like the development of breasts and facial hair, and hormonal changes, like body hair and skin changes, and can lead to uncomfortable feelings as children adapt to their new bodies. Young adolescents need support and guidance to understand these changes, to maintain healthy eating and an active lifestyle, and be aware of

the potential harm of risky behaviors, including promiscuity and substance abuse (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).

### **Intellectual Development**

According to Caskey and Anfara (2014) young adolescents experience intense intellectual growth. During this time, adolescents develop the capacity for abstract thoughts, reflection, and appreciation for the world around them. Personal experiences help children build their intellectual capacity, so they prefer peer-oriented exchanges, active learning driven by intimate connections, and exploring relevant topics. These experiences help adolescents develop beliefs about themselves and anticipate the future. Considering young adolescents demonstrate varying levels of intellectual development, they should be challenged by both structured and exploratory activities to make meaningful connections. Intellectually, children are also navigating their place in the world and need adult guidance to make sense of “school, home, and societal rules” (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 4).

### **Moral and Spiritual Development**

Young adolescents often form long-lasting “attitudes, beliefs, and values” during this time (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 5). Although adolescents often share the values of the adults around them, they have the capacity to consider values beyond their close circle of family and friends. By the onset of young adolescence, children have developed a strong sense of justice; males tend to view moral issues through a lens of fairness, while females view them with an interpersonal lens. As they experience situations, they move away from seeing things as black and white and move toward understanding shades of gray. According to Caskey and Anfara, although young adolescents understand this, they require assistance with making sound moral choices and benefit from structured opportunities to discuss dilemmas and resolve issues with others.

### **Psychological and Social-Emotional Development**

Young adolescents may develop their identity and relationships with others in “intense and unpredictable” manners (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 5). The development of identity occurs

in two phases; the first, happening around 10- to 11-years-old, when young adolescents identify by how well they perceive their ability to master tasks and skills; the second, happening around 12- to 15-years old, when they seek a variety of experiences for self-discovery. The variety of experiences may increase susceptibility to peer pressure and mood swings, lead to experimentation with peers and substances that may be harmful, and increase self-esteem issues that may persist for many years (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). As young adolescents mature and develop self-identity, they often seek more peer affiliation, invest in more intimate relationships with their peers, and rely on peer- and media-influence to navigate unfamiliar, complicated matters (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Ryan et. al., 2013). Despite their desire to refuse adult intervention, young adolescents need structured opportunities to explore and discuss common issues with their identity, paired with supportive environments where they can speak freely and develop independently (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).

Caskey and Anfara (2014) report that educational settings should provide supportive learning environments responsive to the particular developmental characteristics that may result in sudden shifts in abilities and behaviors in young adolescents. Educational settings should be rich in opportunities to develop physically and intellectually, explore self-identity, and create meaningful relationships with peers and adults. Ellerbock and Kiefer (2014) posit that responsive schools understand and meet these needs and that unresponsive schools neglect to consider how students' developmental needs can best be realized.

### **Adolescence During the Transition to Middle School**

The developmental stage that occurs during the transition to middle school is "...unique in its multitude of concurrent changes that exist across various contexts" (Gutman & Eccles, 2007, p. 522) including changes in physiological symptoms and peer and family roles. Drawing upon stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1989), adolescents respond poorly to environmental changes that are developmentally inappropriate and respond well to environmental changes that are developmentally responsive (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Goodin (2010) asserted that rather than viewing middle school as a "holding ground between elementary and high school" (p. 7), it should be considered as an opportunity to recognize and address the needs of young adolescent development.

Eccles et al. (1993) characterized adolescence as a “time of risk” and a period with increased likelihood for both positive and negative implications due to the many changes involved (p. 90) and proposed that their stage-environment fit theory offered insight into why many adolescents demonstrated declines in personal, social, and academic progress. Eccles and Midgley (1989) expressed the conflicting nuances of adolescence during the transition to middle school:

The changes that occur are particularly harmful at early adolescence in that they emphasize competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment at a time of heightened self-focus; they decrease decision-making and choice at a time when the desire for control is growing; they emphasize lower-level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher-level strategies is increasing; and they disrupt social networks at a time when adolescents are especially concerned with peer relationships and may be in special need of close adult friendships (p. 141).

The systematic differences between elementary and junior high classes and schools affected student motivation; hence, negative changes in the learning environment impacted overall development beyond typical adolescent characteristics (Eccles et al., 1993). Eccles and Midgley (1989) drew upon person-environment fit theory (Hunt, 1975), in which “behavior, motivation, and mental health are influenced by the fit between the characteristics individuals bring to their social environments and the characteristics of these social environments” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 91).

### **Stage-Environment Fit Theory**

Stage-environment fit theory suggests that the substantial changes that occur during the transition from elementary school to middle school do not align with the developmental needs of early adolescence (Borman et al., 2019; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ryan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2013). The misalignment may result in “declines in academic motivation and performance, lower self-concept and confidence, decreased classroom engagement, and increased psychological symptoms” (Xie et al., 2013, p. 265). The *mismatch* between the “nature of the middle school context and the needs of the early adolescents exacerbates the challenges experienced during this time” (Coelho et al., 2017, p. 558).

The social environment, or school context, of a middle school presents new challenges for young adolescents (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Ryan et al., 2013). The shift from being the oldest in elementary to the youngest in middle school and moving to a larger building with limited times to move around can prove demanding (Ryan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2013). Social networks are often *disrupted*, and new friendships are formed tentatively (Ryan et al., 2013). Students must navigate the teaching styles and expectations of numerous teachers throughout the day, which contrasts with the very few teachers they interacted with in elementary. At a time when stable peer and teacher relationships are critical, they are often strained due to the *mismatch* of adolescent developmental needs and school structures (Ryan et al., 2013). This mismatch, along with negative experiences during early adolescence, can have harmful effects on long-term academic progress (Borman et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2013).

Although middle schools may intend to meet the needs of adolescents, glaring mismatches “threaten students’ academic and relational belonging at school” (Borman et al., 2019, p. 16286). Teachers’ emphasis on academic evaluation and classification conflict with developing academic identities (Borman, et al., 2019; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Xie, et al., 2013). At a time when relationships with both caring adults and peers are critical, the physical transition from elementary to middle school and teacher control and classroom discipline proved disruptive (Borman et al., 2019; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). As a result of the mismatch, research documents declining academic performance, decreased engagement, and increased disciplinary infractions.

Stage-environment fit theory can be applied to explain how the misalignment of contemporary middle school structures and young adolescents’ developmental needs demonstrate a poor match (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Kennedy-Lewis (2013) asserted that teacher practices often emphasize “whole-class task organization” which is in contrast to the small group instruction often used in elementary; students complete more “lower level cognitive tasks” emphasizing completion over mastery; teachers focus more on high grades than mastery of material resulting in disengagement and decreased self-efficacy; and teachers expect for students to assume responsibility for their learning, a shift from the elementary, mastery-based learning environment (p. 101). Beyond instructional practices, Kennedy-Lewis (2013) stated

that diminished relationships with teachers and peers occur due to shorter class periods, more student interaction, and less community; and school disciplinary practices focused on compliance adversely impact students and often result in exclusionary practices. These factors singularly or combined can lead to “decreased motivation, self-esteem, and academic achievement” (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 101).

According to stage-environment fit theory, middle school is associated with several areas of difficulties, including marked decreases in academics, lower self-esteem, classroom disengagement, and an increased likelihood to experience psychological symptoms (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Xie et al., 2013). These difficulties combined with strained peer and adult relationships can result in a “reshuffling” of peer culture, resulting in an increase of aggressive and deviant behaviors (Xie et al., 2013, p. 265). Therefore, the transition to middle school can lead to significant declines that may prove detrimental to young adolescents’ well-being (Xie et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2013; Lippold et al., 2012).

### **Declines During the Transition to Middle School**

Several studies reviewed for this research discussed social and academic declines that may occur during the transition to middle school (Akos et al, 2015; Jamison et al, 2015; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ryan et al, 2013; Smith et al, 2016; Xie, et al, 2013). Each of these studies discussed how the declines, which may vary by student, can have drastic effects and serve as significant interruptions to psychological development. Relationships with peers and school staff, school context and classroom operations, academic expectations and instructional delivery change significantly during the transition to middle school (Lippold et al, 2012; Ryan et al, 2013; Xie et al., 2013).

### ***Self-Worth***

Ryan et al. (2015) asserted that the transition to middle school has been shown to impact self-worth, characterized as one’s regard for self, which is particularly critical during adolescence when students are building self-identity. During the transition to middle school, students may be more vulnerable to others’ assessments of themselves and allow those perceptions to shape their own identities and school connections (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ryan

et al., 2013). Ryan et al. stated that although students' personal self-worth was found to be consistent regarding teachers and peers, there was a noted decline in grade point average and the intrinsic value of schoolwork over the course of the first year of middle school. This was attributed in part to the impact of middle school teachers' practices and decreased motivation during the transition to middle school (Ryan et al., 2013).

### ***Friends and Popularity***

Jamison et al. (2015) focused on adolescents' heavy attention on the importance of friends and popularity, even more so than younger or older students, and the prioritization of popularity over academic achievement and compliance with rules which may result in a shift in norms. Moffitt (1993) described the gap between "pubertal maturity and societal maturity," as the *maturity gap*, which left adolescents demonstrating their independence with rebellion and recklessness with both social and academic responsibilities (Jamison et al., 2015, p. 387). This is particularly true at the onset of middle school, as this does not prove true over time; however, the transition to middle school is a critical time considering adolescents' shift towards peers and away from academic motivation and achievement.

### ***Gender and Ethnic Association***

Jamison et al. (2013) concluded that during the first year of middle school, students associate more closely with gender and ethnic groups "to promote social adaptation in the face of developmental challenges unique to each ethnic group" (p. 400). African American adolescents face unique challenges during the transition that can undercut academic engagement and positive social attainment as they face discrimination, alienation from school, and declines in academic performance (Jamison et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). African American males are especially vulnerable and compared to their female counterparts, experience lower academic outcomes, share fewer positive feelings toward school, receive lower grades and test scores, and are retained more frequently.



### ***Social Networks***

Youths face significant interruptions in friendships, peer group affiliations, and peer culture during the transition to middle school, which can result in “aggression, bullying and deviant behaviors to become more accepted by middle school students than by elementary students” (Xie et al., 2013, p. 278). These behaviors may be a part of competing for dominance in social standing and occur at a time when less adult supervision and support are available (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Xie et al., 2013). Students, including urban youths who contend with “contextual stressors such as violence in the neighborhood and family economic strain,” may be more susceptible to the challenges posed by the transition to middle school (Xie et al., 2013, p. 278). Youths of color, particularly Black and Hispanic/Latino students, who may have a higher likelihood of experiencing contextual stressors, are particularly susceptible to the adjustments required in moving from elementary to middle school (Jamison et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Xie et al., 2013).

### ***Discipline***

Although middle school students are disciplined more frequently than elementary and high school students, there is a particular increase for students of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Jamison et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Xie et al., 2013). Considering the transition to middle school can be troublesome, the “lack of fit between their developmental stages, institutional circumstances, and educators’ responses to them” can prove to increase the likelihood of decreased motivation, self-esteem, and academic achievement” (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 101). Persistently disciplined students describe their middle school transition as the onset of “serious and repeated trouble” due to teaching styles, lack of engagement with curriculum, and strained relationships with peers and teachers (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 103). Exclusionary practices tend to intensify the academic challenges that students of color already face, including achievement, classroom behavior, and disengagement (Jamison et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Xie et al., 2013).

Additionally, the teacher’s role in handling discipline from elementary school to middle school changed (Jamison et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). In elementary school, teachers

tend to have stronger relationships with students and develop measures to improve student behavior; however, middle school teachers resort to removing students from the classroom and submitting disciplinary referrals that are overseen by administrators. Removal from class seemed to be a preferred manner of handling student conflicts, resulting in decreases in the likelihood of strong relationships, adjusted behavior, and increased academic achievement (Jamison et al., 2013; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Even though teachers often perceived disruptive students as “those who do not want to learn,” students did have a desire to be engaged in the learning process (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 108).

### ***Academics***

Akos et al. (2015) characterized the transition effects along with the rapid personal growth and change as an “interruption” in achievement. Akos et al. referred to a study (Lee, 2010) that used national academic achievement over time to demonstrate that despite significant academic growth in elementary school, middle school students showed little to no gains, or a *flattening out* effect. This effect was particularly true with vulnerable students including those who may have learning deficits and/or be of low socioeconomic status). Smith et al. (2016) suggested that adolescents fare the worst in comparison to younger and older students who transition from one level to another due to increased uncertainty and change. Middle-grade organizational structures may challenge adolescents’ ability to create warm, meaningful relationships with staff members (Akos et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016). Although adolescents are capable of and in need of challenging cognitive tasks, middle grade courses may rely on more skill-and-drill oriented activities (Smith et al., 2016).

### **School Engagement During the Transition**

Several studies discussed the role of school engagement during the transition to middle school (Lippold et al, 2012; Mustafaa et al, 2017; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Wang and Eccles described school engagement as a *multidimensional construct* involving three components: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Emotional engagement describes one’s gratification and value in the classroom; cognitive engagement describes one’s personal involvement in his or her own learning; behavioral engagement describes one’s cooperation

with school expectations and participation in school-related activities. Wang and Eccles stated that school engagement declines when social contexts are not developmentally responsive over the course of an adolescent's academic career. These changes may include "larger schools, less teacher-student interaction, and shifts in social support from teachers, peers, and parents" (Wang & Eccles, 2012, p. 878). Lippold et al. (2012) attribute a student's *connection and attachment* to school to increased achievement and less problematic behaviors.

According to Symonds and Hargreaves (2014), engagement represents a "mixture of emotional responses" (p. 58). These responses form adolescents' opinions of school and trigger feelings associated with "doing work (e.g., frustration, curiosity), by thinking about work in relation to self (e.g., pride, anxiety), by work content (e.g., empathy with a protagonist), and by relationships (e.g., loving a classmate)" (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014, p. 59). Their research found that in general, students demonstrated less emotional engagement during the transition year to middle school and that the primary source of adolescents' emotional disengagement was teachers, due, in part, to limited independence, disciplinary procedures and classroom management, and more demanding academic expectations with less assistance.

Mustafaa et al. (2017) defined engagement as "the extent to which a student demonstrates affective, behavioral, and cognitive connection to the core activities of school, such as academic learning and peer group socializing" (p. 83). This engagement leads to consistent attendance, compliance and acceptance of school rules, and more emphasis on learning, resulting in increased academic success (Mustafaa et al., 2017; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014). A noted decline in engagement from the onset of middle school can be attributed to the lack of fit between adolescents' needs and school context, relationships and teacher practices (Lippold, 2012; Mustafaa et al., 2017; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014). However, teachers and the learning environments they facilitate can influence student engagement by providing opportunities for "competence, autonomy, and relatedness" (Mustafaa et al., 2017, p. 85). Mustafaa et al. found that despite the overall decrease that occurred over the course of the sixth grade, students who perceived their teachers as *supportive* showed increased engagement in classes. The study also suggested that when students perceived even one teacher as supportive, engagement increased indicating that if

more teachers used practices that were perceived as supportive, the overall lack of engagement could be decreased (Mustafaa et al., 2017).

To provide a quality middle school education, teachers must “use a variety of critical thinking strategies, while simultaneously promoting student engagement and supporting students’ developing academic needs” (Howard & Miller, 2017, p. 47). Teachers have a tremendous impact on student achievement, particularly in areas where schools have historically performed low on standardized tests (Howard & Miller, 2017; Lippold, 2012; Mustafaa et al., 2017). Pressure from high-stakes accountability has negatively impacted teaching practices by “focusing on low level knowledge and failing to promote critical thinking” (Howard & Miller, 2017, p. 49). Three dominant pedagogy practices, including teaching to the test, teaching skills in isolation, and emphasizing instructor-centered practices, have resulted in a *dumbing-down* of learning. This approach conflicts with middle school researchers’ recommendations for teachers to utilize developmentally appropriate instruction, appeal to diverse students’ needs, and promote a safe and supportive environment, to encourage a sense of belonging (Howard & Miller, 2017; Lippold, 2012; Mustafaa et al., 2017).

Borman et al (2019) suggest that the onset of disengagement with school “takes root at the start of middle school” (p. 16290). As early as sixth grade, students may struggle with attendance, discipline, and coursework. (Borman et al., 2019; Howard & Miller, 2017; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014). Interactions with people at school greatly affected a student’s engagement or disengagement and relationships with teachers was found to be important as it affected adolescents’ emotional and cognitive engagement, feelings of enjoyment at school, social conflict and friendship with peers, and independence (Borman et al., 2019; Howard & Miller, 2017; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014). Borman et al.’s study shared that internationally, declining relationships with teachers happened during the transition, but improved afterward. These findings suggest that teachers may be involved in the decline of adolescents’ attitudes toward school during the transition (Borman et al., 2019; Howard & Miller, 2017; Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014).

## The Middle School Teacher

During the transition to middle school, teachers “should provide the optimal level of structure for children’s current levels of maturity while providing a sufficiently challenging environment to pull the children along a developmental path toward higher levels of cognitive and social maturity” (Booker, 2018, p. 2). Teachers have the ability to create positive learning environments by utilizing strategies in their classrooms to encourage adolescents to build a community or alienate youths to disengage (Booker, 2018; Borman, 2019; Howard & Miller, 2017). Teachers can positively shape students’ daily experiences to maximize school connection and satisfaction by creating a sense of belonging by instilling a sense of community, demonstrating positive attitudes, prioritizing positive peer relationships, and using activities rooted in relevance to students’ lives (Booker, 2018; Borman et al., 2019). Teachers who demonstrated an understanding of adolescent development taught with warmth and caring, developed rapport from the onset of the year, developed trust and honesty, consistently enforced high expectations, and reached out to involve families in expectations (Booker, 2018; Borman et al., 2019; Howard & Miller, 2017).

The AMLE (2019) has proposed specific standards for the preparation of middle school teachers considering that the education of young adolescents must be “developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable” (“This We Believe,” 2019). The AMLE (2019) standards outline four principles that describe the specific needs of middle school students. The first principle emphasizes a broad knowledge as the “substantial basis upon which they can build an understanding of the implications of young adolescent development for teaching and learning” (AMLE Standards, 2019). The second underscores the critical nature of a teacher’s ability to use curriculum and middle school structures to “support and extend young adolescents’ learning” (AMLE Standards, 2019). The third principle discusses the importance of a middle school teacher’s ability to teach in “responsive ways that reflect what is known about effective middle level teaching strategies and assessment” (AMLE Standards, 2019). The fourth principle details the professional role that middle school teachers fill as advocates, colleagues, and role models for students, families, and communities.

## **Middle School Leadership**

Gale and Bishop (2014) posit that “leadership accounts for fully one quarter of total school effects on pupils, making it second only to classroom instruction among school-based factors affecting student achievement” (p. 1). Leadership of the middle grades has specific challenges, including understanding and adapting to the quickly developing needs of adolescents, building structures and limitations, and an increasing mindfulness of the implications of a quality education for these students in particular (Gale & Bishop, 2014; Grenada & Hackmann, 2014; Petzko et al., 2000). Navigating and supporting the developmental needs of 10-14 year old students can prove challenging considering students may escalate from one emotional extreme to the next, from confident and eager to immature and delicate. This requires that educational leaders promote specific school-wide implementation of positive practices, courses of study, and programs for students.

Middle level leaders of highly successful middle schools used their “knowledge, insight and commitment” to address the specific challenges in middle school (Petzko et al., 2000, p. 3). Additionally, they displayed more knowledge about middle grade practices and had studied and earned high levels of education in the field of middle learning (Gale & Bishop, 2014). These leaders recognized the “empathy and understanding to create a school culture in students’ best interest responsive to the varied physical, emotional and psychosocial needs of students” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 6), and they were more likely to share their leadership with others (Grenada & Hackmann, 2014).

Grenada and Hackmann (2014) described distributed leadership as “a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change,” (p. 55). Grenada and Hackmann also discussed the particular importance of shared leadership in middle schools. The typical middle school structure is ideal for distributed leadership. Based on the teaming that often occurs, collaboration is an expected part of facilitating learning and decision-making. These teams, which may occur during common planning time, enhance teacher leadership growth and development and can serve as professional learning communities. Although shared leadership

can prove challenging, middle level leaders who promote it, enhance school structures, professional learning, and student experiences (Grenda & Hackmann, 2014).

Several studies have examined the distinct nature of the middle school principalship (Anfara et al, 2002; Bickmore, 2011; Gale & Bishop, 2014). Gale and Bishop (2014) discussed several studies used to develop the basis of “essential leadership characteristics of middle grades principals” (p. 3). Little and Little (2001) worked with principals to identify 59 characteristics, of which five were specific to middle school: “commitment to developmentally responsive middle level education; knowledge of middle level curriculum, programs and practices; an understanding of the unique nature and needs of adolescent learners; a commitment to the centrality of interdisciplinary team organization and the skills in scheduling and supervision to make them effective groups; and a compassionate understanding of the nature and needs of older children and young adolescents” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 3). Another study, Swaim and Kinney (2010), emphasized the role of a principal’s knowledge of middle level education in creating a “whole school of excellence” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 3) along with establishing a united school vision, ensuring academic and personal growth, demonstrating evolving practices and an overall commitment to middle level education.

Principals play a key role in student achievement and the overall environment, but particularly in middle school, where hiring teachers who understand the developmental needs of young adolescents is critical (Mee & Haverback, 2017; Reaves & Cozzen, 2018). Reaves and Cozzens (2018) stated that because teachers “work best in stable and satisfying work environments,” school leaders should prioritize creating a positive school climate and welcoming culture (p. 51). Principals are tasked with hiring qualified teachers who have a “desire to work with young adolescents, possess knowledge of the unique developmental changes of this age group, are knowledgeable in the content they teach, and have autonomy to make decisions about curriculum” (Mee & Haverback, 2017, p. 38). Principals preferred hiring teachers who appeared to have the right “mindset” for working with young adolescents over teachers who may have had specific middle level certification training, but that they were limited by candidates and building-level priorities.

Middle school principals require a distinct desire to work with young adolescents (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000; Reaves & Cozzen, 2018). Even though specific skills, training, and personal characteristics should be considered for middle school leadership, there is little emphasis on this topic (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000). Many middle school leaders lack an in-depth understanding of the essential programs, training, and learning environment aspects to meet the needs of middle school learners. Several components of preparation include rich experiences in teaching and leading middle school learners, licensure-preparation programs to enhance leadership practices, ongoing training to improve performance, continual participation in middle level associations, and mentorship opportunities and central office support (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000).

### **Developmentally Responsive Leadership**

In 2002, Anfara et al. proposed a model of leadership for middle level leaders. The DRMLL model provided a manner to measure the *contextual uniqueness* of schools serving adolescents aged 10-14 (Bickmore, 2011). This model asserts that effective middle level leaders implement practices that positively affect this groups' specific needs, like providing access to developmentally appropriate curriculum and engaging instruction, encouraging meaningful relationships among staff and students, developing a positive climate for all stakeholders through communication and collaboration, and implementing program structures to support middle level learners (Bickmore, 2011; Goodin, 2010).

According to Bickmore (2011), the DRMLL (2002) is driven by three aspects:

1. Responsiveness to the developmental needs of middle grades students;
2. Responsiveness to the developmental needs of faculty who support learning for middle grades; and
3. Responsiveness to the development of the middle school itself as a unique, innovative entity. (p. 4)

Bickmore (2011) stated that although other models exist to measure educational leadership, they have been heavily based on general leadership models with adjustments. These models, including shared/participatory leadership, instructional leadership, and transformational leadership, align with examining principal practices but differ in their



assumptions and applications (Bickmore, 2011; Klar & Brewer, 2013). The shared/participatory model emphasizes collaborative leadership among staff, including teacher involvement in decision-making, to distribute and enhance leadership (Bickmore, 2011). The instructional leadership model is based on principal practice about “defining the mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting academic and professional development standards” within their schools (Bickmore, 2011, p. 30; Klar & Brewer, 2013). The transformational model centers around principal development of others to increase capacity and commitment; it is based on six tenets, including “building school vision and goals; providing intellectual stimulation, offering individual support, symbolizing professional practice and values, demonstrating high performance expectations, and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 3).

The DRMLL specifically “moved beyond these models to provide the contextual nuances of middle grades principal leadership” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 4). This model led to the measurement instrument, Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire, designed to examine the unique context of middle school leaders’ practices. The survey consisted of 33 questions and was administered to principals and teachers. The survey is designed to improve principal practice by comparing self-reflections with faculty perceptions. Five themes emerged to guide principal practice: “developmentally appropriate learning environments/support of teachers; best practices; developmentally appropriate learning environment/support of student needs; student self-confidence and competence; and responsiveness to student needs/support of teachers” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 5).

Bickmore (2011) conducted a study replication of the MLLQ to examine middle level leaders’ practices, as little research has been conducted to specifically examine practices best suited for middle school. Although a few adjustments were made to the survey, Bickmore confirmed the model’s validity and reliability for assessing middle grades principal practices. The study found that the DRMLL and MLLQ can serve to highlight middle school leaders’ perceptions of their own behaviors, as well as identify areas for professional development and training, and serve as model of leadership specific to “middle grades tenets, structures, and practices” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 13).

## **Literature Review Summary**

This literature review explored the factors involved during the transition from elementary to middle school-young adolescent characteristics, the misalignment of middle school structures with those characteristics, the declines that occur due to that misalignment, and the role of middle school leaders during this time. A historical perspective was provided to establish that the journey to creating effective middle schools has been ongoing. A discussion of the characteristics of young adolescents was provided to develop an understanding of the unique needs of children as they transition from the elementary to middle school setting. An extensive review was provided to explore young adolescence during the transition to middle school and how the misalignment of structures and training may lead to marked declines in student achievement and well-being. Additionally, research was provided that details the role and impact of the middle school teacher and principal. Middle school leadership has very few models; however, the DRMLL framework provides a tool to capture the nuances and provide a manner to measure and prepare for the role. The research will provide a means to improve middle school leaders' practices to better align supports for young adolescents during the transition to middle school.

## Chapter Three

### The Methodology

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools' transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. School leaders', including both middle school principals and assistant principals, responsiveness includes supporting staff working with these students and creating, implementing, and/or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the young adolescents they serve. Beyond the self-reported perceptions of middle school leaders gathered using a survey methodology, focus groups were used to provide a deeper understanding of their perceptions in this mixed methods study.

As young adolescents transition from the elementary school setting into middle school, they experience particular emotional and physical developmental changes (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019; Eccles et al., 1993). These changes, compounded with new settings and new relationships, can result in "declines in academic motivation and performance, lower self-concept and confidence, decreased classroom engagement, and increased psychological symptoms" (Xie et al., 2013, p. 265). To meet the challenge of creating an environment where young adolescents can flourish, middle school leaders must have "specific problem-solving and social judgment skills that meet the unique needs of young adolescents" (DiGaudio & Bickmore, 2019, p. 1).

Although middle school structures intend to meet the needs of young adolescents, some mismatches may "threaten students' academic and relational belonging at school" (Borman et al., 2019, p. 16286; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). Despite best intentions, many middle schools inadequately provide a structured setting for meaningful relationships, relevant and rigorous curriculum, and developmentally appropriate structures (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Weilbacher, 2019). The shift to deliver a developmentally responsive program for middle level learners has faced many challenges since the movement began in the late 1800s and continues

still today when training and licensure opportunities are limited and standardized testing performance dictates course and scheduling options (Weilbacher, 2019).

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures that best meet the needs of young adolescents. Beyond the self-reported perceptions of middle level leaders' responsiveness, a broader understanding of how their transition programs align with the developmental needs of young adolescents was pursued. The following research questions were investigated in this mixed methods study:

1. What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school leaders to the developmental needs of young adolescents, staff, and structures?
2. How do middle level leaders report the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents?

### **Research Design**

A study using a mixed methods approach captures information from both qualitative and quantitative methods to allow a "greater depth of understanding and insight" and combats the underlying biases that each may present (Creswell, 2009, p. 142). For this study, a self-reported survey was used to collect quantitative data about middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures the best meet the need of young adolescents; and, focus groups were used to collect qualitative data to provide the descriptive and complex details of those perceptions that cannot be captured through the survey alone (Creswell, 2009; McMillan & Wergin, 2010 ). Using both methods allow data to represent the "what with a possible why" through the summary of quantitative data along with participants' explanations (Creswell, 2009, p. 145). A concurrent embedded design was used to allow

“qualitative data to describe an aspect of the quantitative study that cannot be quantified” (Creswell, 2009, p. 215).

### **Research Design Justification**

Bickmore (2011, 2016) reported that existing studies about middle school leadership were outdated, had relied too heavily on self-report, and were difficult to use for generalizability. The MLLQ, developed by Anfara et al. (2006) as part of the Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership framework, is a tool that has been used to capture middle level leaders’ perceptions about how they meet the unique needs of young adolescents and the challenges of supporting staff and school settings. The questionnaire, which has been administered to middle school leaders and the staff they support, is based on meeting the needs of students and teachers, and the contextual uniqueness of schools that serve young adolescents (Bickmore, 2011).

Based on self-report data collected in previous studies, results have indicated that middle level leaders tend to rate themselves higher than their staff members rate their responsiveness to meeting young adolescent developmental needs, faculty needs, and contextual needs at middle schools (Bickmore, 2011). A mixed methods design was used to provide insight into this complex issue. The goal of this mixed methods research was to collect numerical data along with personal experiences and details about that data (Creswell, 2009). A mixed methods design was used to “collect more varied data and strengthen the validity of the final conclusion” (Butin, 2010, p. 76).

### **Mixed Method Research**

Mixed method research combines both quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry to “explore and explain” a problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 203). Using the mixed methods approach allowed the researcher in this study to gather generalized, quantitative data pertaining to middle level leaders’ perceptions of their responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures that best meet the needs of young adolescents, and also collect middle level leaders’ perceptions

through in-depth explanations of the issues facing middle level leadership during students' transition from elementary to middle school.

### ***Advantages and Disadvantages to Mixed Methods Research***

**Advantages of Mixed Methods Research.** Mixed methods design combines the structure of statistical data with anecdotal insight to gain a deeper understanding of an issue through a “systematic, rigorous and empirical” manner (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 134). Using the concurrent embedded design allows for the survey to be the primary mode of data collection and the focus groups to be secondary, or embedded into the overall study (Creswell, 2009).

**Disadvantages of Mixed Methods Research.** Mixed methods design may pose challenges to the novice researcher in navigating complexities of both quantitative and qualitative studies (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). Quantitative studies with a limited number of participants cannot serve as a representative sample (Butin, 2010). The quantitative portion of this study will have access to a maximum candidate pool of 62 middle school leaders in two Virginia school divisions. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, are prone to bias (Butin, 2010). An improper protocol can decrease the likelihood the researcher gathers relevant and rich data to analyze. Additionally, the interviewer must practice neutrality as response effect bias may occur when respondents alter their responses to answer in a manner that may seem more favorable to the interviewer.

### ***Concurrent Embedded Design***

This mixed methods research used a concurrent embedded design with one phase of data collection; both the qualitative and quantitative data collection occurred simultaneously (Creswell, 2009). This embedded design allowed one method to be the primary means of data collection while the other data collection method is secondary, or embedded into the overall study (Creswell, 2009). For this proposed study, the survey instrument, the Adapted MLLQ, was prioritized to collect quantitative, generalizable data, and focus groups served as a secondary means to collect broader, qualitative insights into the issues facing middle level leaders. This concurrent, embedded designed research provides data that can be combined, compared,

and/or analyzed alongside one another; it is useful when different research questions are posed and when various levels are studied (Creswell, 2009).

### **Quantitative Research**

Quantitative research was used to gather “numerical calculations to summarize, describe, and explore relationships among traits” (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 4). Numerical data was collected through a cross-sectional, web-based survey distributed to middle school leaders, including principals and assistant principals, in two Virginia school divisions. Collected data was used to identify, through generalization, middle level leaders’ perceptions about their level of responsiveness of the developmental needs of young adolescents. Middle level leaders’ responsiveness also includes supporting staff working with adolescent students and creating, implementing, or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the students they serve. Each survey question in the AMLLQ instrument is explicitly linked to research question one and connected to the literature review for this study (Butin, 2010).

Research Question 1 is:

1. What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school administrators to the developmental needs of young adolescents, staff, structures?

**Survey Methodology.** According to McMillan and Wergin (2010), “Credibility of research depends on the quality of the measurement of the variables and procedures for collecting the data” (p. 10). This study used a mixed method design to capture a “greater depth of understanding and insight” and combat the underlying biases that each type of research may present (Creswell, 2009, p. 142). This mixed methods research included the use of a survey instrument, the Adapted MLLQ. A survey instrument provides valid, reliable, and generalizable data to the researcher (McMillan & Wergin, 2010).

**Advantages of a Survey Methodology.** A survey methodology provides ease of use. A survey instrument can be “created, distributed, collected, and analyzed” with relative ease, particularly online (Butin, 2010, p. 91). Additionally, survey data can be collected confidentially and anonymously, and results can be generalized to be representative of large groups (Creswell, 2014). This study will utilize the previously developed and validated survey instrument, the AMLLQ, to collect generalizable data relating to middle school leaders’

perception of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents (Bickmore, 2011).

***Disadvantages of a Survey Methodology.*** Depending on the number of middle level leaders who voluntarily participate in this study by completing the survey instrument, it may prove difficult to generalize the overall results to the population. Additionally, a survey method as a means of data collection, based on self-report, has the potential for error and a threat to the validity of the research (Fowler, 2009). Although the survey, the Adapted MLLQ, has been validated and confirmed previously by Bickmore (2011), self-report data creates the potential for respondents to misunderstand and inadvertently respond inaccurately as well as provide more favorable answers than their actual performance may suggest (Fowler, 2009).

***Descriptive Design.*** Descriptive research “describes a phenomenon with statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, averages, and sometimes a measure of variability, such as the range” (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 6). Statistical data collected from this study’s survey instrument, the Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire, can allow for the generalization of middle level leaders’ perceptions of their responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Middle level leaders’ responsiveness also includes supporting staff working with adolescent students and creating, implementing, or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the students they serve. The descriptive statistics from this study provided data to answer Research Question 1.

### ***Qualitative Research***

In alignment with the research of McMillan and Wergin (2010), qualitative research was used in this study to gather “the direct experience” of middle level leaders in relation to the transition programs at their schools (p. 7). Additionally, qualitative studies serve to enrich statistical data, which were collected using a survey in this mixed method research. To capture “verbal descriptions, resulting in stories and case studies rather than statistical reports” (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 4), the researcher will utilize focus groups with a planned protocol to elicit feedback from study participants.

Focus groups with a planned protocol, including designed questions, allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of an issue through discussion. Moreover, the use of



focus groups provided the opportunity for the researcher to delve deeper into topics with follow-up questions, prompts, or cues to solicit responses from participants. Data collected from middle level leaders participating in focus groups conducted in this study will address Research Question 2:

2. How do middle school leaders report the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents?

**Focus Groups.** To gain a deeper understanding of middle level leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents as it relates to supporting staff working with adolescent students and creating, implementing, or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the students they serve, focus group interviews were conducted. The focus groups enhanced the quantitative data collected from participants through the Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire survey instrument. Focus groups collected data aimed at gaining a broader understanding of middle level leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly as young adolescents transition from elementary to middle school.

**Use of Protocol for Focus Groups.** A planned protocol for the focus groups conducted prioritized neutrality from the researcher, who provided prompts and subtle cues to elicit narrative responses and focused questions linked to the research questions guiding this study (Butin, 2010). Questions were posed to participants to discuss the alignment of their schools' elementary to middle school transition program as they work to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Focus group questions utilized in this study included:

1. Which developmental needs of young adolescents impact the educational experience during the transition to sixth grade?
2. Which school structures are needed to meet young adolescents' developmental needs during the transition to sixth grade?
3. How do the current structures at your site align with the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?

4. What extended learning opportunities do you think would enhance middle school leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?

### **Site Selection and Study Population**

The population selected to participate in this study was middle level leaders, including principals and assistant principals, in two Virginia school divisions ( $N = 62$ ). Participants within the study population were invited to complete the web-based Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire survey instrument. An invitation to further contribute to the study through participation in a focus group was extended to all participants completing the survey.

School Division 1, best described as urban, educates approximately 29,000 students in 42 school settings: five early childhood centers, 24 elementary schools, seven middle schools, five high schools, and one middle/high combination school. There are six traditional middle schools, housing Grades 6-8, and one middle school consisting of Grades 6 and 7 only within this selected school division. Five of the seven middle schools have one principal and three assistant principals; two middle schools have one principal and one assistant principal. Table 1 provides a representation of middle school leaders by school site in School Division 1.

**Table 1***School Division 1 – Middle School Leadership Chart by School Site*

School division 1	Principal	AP #	Total	Grade levels
Middle school #1	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #2	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #3	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #4	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #5	NA	3	3	6-8
Middle school #6	1	1	2	6-7
Middle school #7	1	1	2	6-8
Total	6	17	23	

School Division 2, best described as suburban, educates approximately 41,000 students in 45 traditional school settings: 28 elementary schools (Grades K-2, Grades K-3, Grades 3-5, Grades 4-5, or Grades K-5), 10 middle schools, and seven high schools. There are 10 traditional middle schools, housing Grades 6-8, within this selected school division. Nine of the 10 middle schools have one principal and three assistant principals, and one middle school has one principal and two assistant principals. Table 2 provides a representation of middle school leaders by school site in School Division 2.

**Table 2***School Division 2 – Middle School Leadership Chart by School Site*

School division 2	Principal	AP #	Total	Grade Levels
Middle school #1	1	2	3	6-8
Middle school #2	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #3	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #4	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #5	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #6	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #7	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #8	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #9	1	3	4	6-8
Middle school #10	1	3	4	6-8
Total	10	29	39	

**Sampling Procedure**

According to Creswell (2007), purposeful sampling allows for the selection of particular participants and locations that are connected to the research problem. The population for this study, consisting of 62 middle level leaders, was accessible on the public websites from the two Virginia school divisions. Email contact information was collected for each middle level leader ( $N = 62$ ). All middle level leaders were invited to participate in the survey via an email communication with a link to the web-based survey. The middle level leaders who completed the survey determined the sample of the population for statistical analysis.

Demographic information was collected on the survey to ensure that only middle school leaders' responses were included in the statistical analysis. The demographic questions included in the survey collected respondent's current position (middle school principal, assistant principal, or other). Surveys completed by respondents indicating they were not middle level leaders (principal or assistant principal) were to be excluded from the analysis

of data. All surveys completed were done so by participants who met the criteria included in the statistical analysis.

## **Instrument Design**

### ***Survey Items***

The Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire survey was designed to improve principal practice by comparing self-reflections with faculty perceptions; however, the survey instrument has also been confirmed to be valid without faculty responses (Bickmore, 2011). Bickmore (2011) administered the Adapted MLLQ (AMLLQ) to middle level leaders only and validated the instrument. The adapted survey instrument used for this study consists of three sections. The sections are listed as: Part One: Demographic Information, Part Two: Questionnaire, and Part Three: Open-Ended Response. All three sections will be completed within the web-based survey platform, Qualtrics.

**Demographic Information.** Demographic information was collected in the first section of the web-based survey. This section contained six questions and collected background information about the respondents. The questions collected information relevant to the sample and established whether the participant had met the criteria established for the study. The first two questions determined if criteria were met, including that the respondent was a middle level leader currently working in one of the two Virginia school divisions. All respondents indicated that they were current middle level leaders, working in one of the two Virginia school divisions selected for this study, and were included in the statistical analysis. Questions three and four collected data concerning middle level leaders' years of teaching experience and years serving in an administrative role. Questions five and six collected data regarding the middle level leaders' levels of education and types of principal certification. Questions three through six did not specifically answer a research question but did provide context to participants' survey responses about experience and training.

**Questionnaire.** The Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire is the second section of the web-based survey. This section required participants to reflect on their middle level leader behaviors and provide their perceptions of their responsiveness to the

developmental needs of young adolescents. Middle school leaders' responsiveness also included supporting staff working with adolescent students and creating, implementing, or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the students they serve. There were 33 statements that begin with the stem "As a middle level leader, I..." Participants responded with one of the following to indicate how often they displayed that specific behavior: (1) *frequently, if not always*; (2) *fairly often*; (3) *sometimes*; (4) *once in a while*; and (5) *not at all*. The questionnaire responses answered research question one: What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school leaders to the developmental needs of young adolescents, staff, and structures?

**Open-Ended Response.** Additionally, the survey concluded with an option for participants to indicate if they would like to participate in a focus group to discuss their site-based transition program at length to answer further research question two.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

The researcher invited the respondents who chose to participate in the focus group to do so by the email provided voluntarily. The following questions were used to expand on the data collected from the open-ended responses section of the survey instrument to answer research question two:

1. Which developmental needs of young adolescents impact the educational experience during the transition to sixth grade?
2. Which school structures are needed to meet young adolescents' developmental needs during the transition to sixth grade?
3. How do the current structures in place align with the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?
4. What extended learning opportunities do you think would enhance middle school leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?

These questions were constructed to capture subjective experiences and elicit narrative responses from middle school leaders who provided statistical data by completing the survey (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). The questions, designed as part of the planned protocol for the

focus groups, were linked to research questions one and two; however, the questions answered research question two with “rich descriptions that lead to insights and a more complete understanding” (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 90).

## **Instrument Validation**

### ***Survey Items***

The Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leader (DRMML; 2002) framework developed by Afara et al. (2002) was created to capture the “contextual nuances of middle grades principal leadership” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 4). This model led to a measurement instrument titled the *Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire* (MLLQ; Anfara et al., 2006), designed to examine the unique context of middle level leaders’ practices. The survey was designed to improve principal practice by comparing self-reflections with faculty perceptions. The survey collected demographic attributes of the participants, consisted of 33 questions, and used a five-point Likert scale to capture responses. The questions gathered data for addressing five factors that include:

1. Developmentally appropriate learning environments/support of teachers;
2. Best practices;
3. Developmentally appropriate learning environment/support of student needs;
4. Student self-confidence and competence; and
5. Responsiveness to student needs/support of teachers. (Bickmore, 2011, p. 5)

Anfara et al. (2006) confirmed the validity of the MLLQ by having 45 middle school principals and experts examine the original 65-question survey (Bickmore, 2011). The panel of experts evaluated and ranked the questions for clarity, importance, and relevance to middle level leaders’ practices. The analysis of these rankings resulted in fewer questions (35) and two identical survey forms: one for middle school principals (A) and one for middle school teachers (B), intended to capture the perceptions of both groups to guide middle school leaders’ practices. After administering the survey to both middle school principals and teachers, a principal axis factor analysis with a Varimax rotation was conducted on both surveys to establish construct validity. Five factors, as listed above, emerged from the analysis (Bickmore,

2011, p. 5). Two of the 35 survey questions did not fall within the factor construct, so the final instrument was decreased to 33 items. Reliability was established through measures of internal consistency (alpha coefficients) of items within each factor.

Bickmore (2011) conducted a study replication of the MLLQ Form A to examine if the middle school leaders' form could serve as a guide for best practices, as little research has been conducted to specifically examine practices best suited for middle school leaders. Bickmore administered the survey to the entire population of middle school leaders in one state ( $N = 393$ ) and used correlational statistical procedures, including an exploratory factor analysis, to confirm construct validity and internal reliability of the MLLQ being used with middle school leaders only. Bickmore found that, "The Adapted MLLQ is a valid and reliable instrument that supports a middle level leadership model and provides opportunities to further explicate the important nuances of leadership in the middle grades" (p. 8).

Permission to reproduce and use the MLLQ survey was provided to the researcher (Bickmore, D) by one of authors of the original study. Permission was granted via email. Additionally, permission was granted to reproduce and use the Adapted MLLQ from Dana Bickmore to the researcher of this study. Permission was granted to use with principals only per the research completed previously.

### ***Focus Groups Questions***

The interview questions were structured to be subjective to the context of each middle level leader's experience to provide a deeper understanding of the research topic (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). The four interview questions were designed to provide insight into both research questions and offered in-depth information about how middle level leaders reported the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents.

To establish validity of the interview questions, the researcher sought triangulation. Current and former doctoral students working as school administrators and school division leaders provided peer review of the focus group interview questions. Reviewers offered suggestions regarding clarity and relevance to the research questions. Responses were returned by email and logged into a matrix to monitor edits (Roberts, 2010). Additionally, three practice



interviews were conducted with administrators to identify issues with clarity, timing, and relevance.

### **Data Collection and Gathering Procedures**

The researcher received Institutional Review Board (IRB) training and IRB approval from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Upon IRB approval, the researcher sought and received approval from the two Virginia school divisions chosen to participate in the study. The researcher adhered to each division's guidelines and provided the research proposal, the IRB approval, and the survey instrument to the appropriate department for review and consideration.

#### ***Web-Based Survey***

Upon approval from each school division, the web-based survey was loaded into Qualtrics. The middle level leaders' email addresses were obtained from the schools' websites and the survey was distributed to the invited participants. An outline of the study, including the information sheet with consent to participate, details about the survey, and the nature of voluntary participation, were provided to the participants in the email that included the link to the electronic survey. Participants were sent two reminders to participate in the study. The study lasted approximately two weeks. The collected data was transferred into Excel for analysis.

#### ***Focus Group Interviews***

Participants selected the option to participate in the focus group as they completed the Adapted MLLQ questionnaire. The focus groups collected anecdotal data about site-based transition programs to answer research question two. Focus group questions were posed to the participants to discuss the alignment of their site's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents.

The focus group protocol prioritized open-ended questions to solicit meaningful responses, and the researcher recorded field notes by hand and recorded the sessions for accuracy (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). Focus group responses were transcribed, coded, and

analyzed for “patterns, themes, and distinctive perspectives” (Butin, 2010, p. 97) that allowed the researcher to make “generalizations and conclusions” (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 91). The researcher acknowledges that her own perspective might influence interpretations of the data due to experiences with middle school leadership.

### **Data Treatment and Management**

Survey data was collected via Qualtrics. Data will be securely stored electronically to ensure that there will be no data lost nor compromised. The data will be transferred to Microsoft Excel for analysis. Focus group data from the discussions will be stored electronically on the researcher’s computer with password-protected security. The data will be transferred to Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word for coding and analysis.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The quantitative data for this study was collected and analyzed using Qualtrics software. The Qualtrics platform collected survey responses and stored them confidentially and in an organized manner. The results were analyzed and interpreted. Qualitative data was analyzed by coding responses, organizing frequencies of responses, and identifying themes. It was completed in Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word, which facilitated a systematic analysis of all participants’ responses.

### **Methodology Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders’ perceptions of their responsiveness to students’ developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools’ transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. Beyond the self-reported perceptions of middle level leaders gathered using a survey methodology, focus groups were conducted to identify the alignment of their school’s elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents was researched. The mixed method design and methodology guided data collection, analysis, and highlight emergent themes that will be discussed in Chapter Four.

## Chapter Four

### Analysis of the Data

Chapter 4 discusses the data collected and analyzed to address the two research questions of this study. Data were reported by each research question. The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, as measured by the Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire, and how the middle school transition program aligns with the developmental needs of young adolescents. An electronic survey was emailed to the middle school leaders in two Virginia school divisions. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with those leaders who chose to participate following completion of the survey. This study collected and reported results and findings to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school leaders to the developmental needs of young adolescents, as measured by the Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire?
2. How do middle school leaders report the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents?

### Results

The researcher collected public email addresses from two Virginia school divisions' websites and forwarded the invitation to participate in the survey to all administrators identified as middle school principals and assistant principals ( $N = 62$ ). Of the 62 middle level leaders invited to participate in this study, 31 completed the electronic survey, for a completion rate of 50%. Although no agreed upon single standard for acceptable response rates to questionnaires is established, methodologists suggest that rates of 50% to 75% may be acceptable (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2009).

Purposeful sampling was used to invite middle level leaders from two Virginia school divisions ( $N = 62$ ) to participate in the study. Middle level leaders included both principals and assistant principals working at middle level schools. The population of middle school

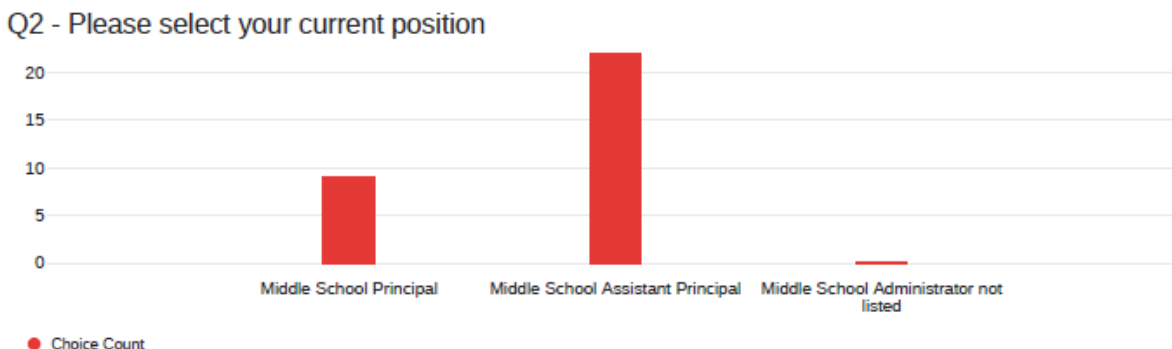
administrators—principals and assistant principals—identified on the school divisions’ websites were invited to participate in an electronic survey via Qualtrics. The second item in the demographics section of the survey asked respondents to identify whether they were a middle school principal, middle school assistant principal, or middle school administrator not listed. All respondents indicated that they were either a middle school principal or middle school assistant principal; no respondents selected middle school administrators not listed from the survey responses provided. Accordingly, the researcher established that all respondents met the criteria of serving as a middle level leader at the time they participated in the study.

The electronic survey used for data collection in this study consisted of 33 items. In reviewing the data for incomplete responses and/or the potential impact on results, the researcher found two survey items were left unanswered by two respondents. Due to the anonymous nature of the electronic survey, the researcher was not able to follow up with the respondent for completion. Two survey items were left incomplete but did not reduce the total number of participants ( $n = 31$ ).

## **Respondent Demographics**

### ***Administrative Positions of Study Participants***

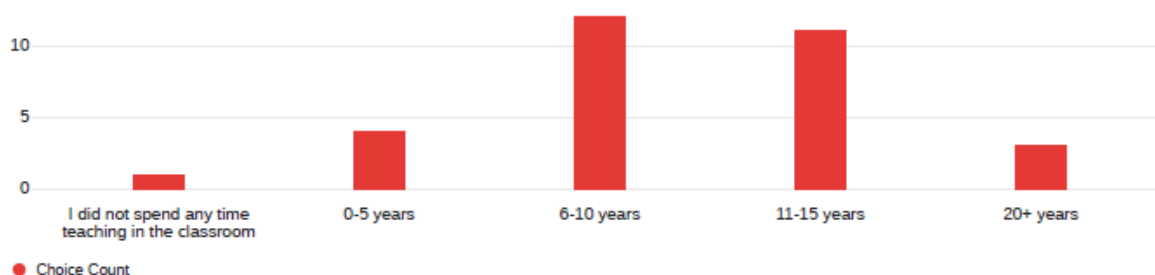
Two Virginia school divisions were invited to participate in this study. Demographic item number 1 asked the participants to indicate their school division. Of the participants ( $n = 31$ ), 12 were from School Division One and 19 were from School Division Two. The two school divisions combined, employed 16 middle school principals and 47 middle school assistant principals ( $N = 62$ ). Demographic item number 2 asked the participants to indicate their current administrative position. The study sample population ( $n = 31$ ) included nine principals, accounting for 29% of the study sample and 22 assistant principals, accounting for 71% of the study sample. Figure 2 displays the frequency of study participants.

**Figure 2***Current Administrative Positions of Study Participants****Classroom Teaching Experience***

Demographic item number 3 on the survey instrument asked participants to indicate their years of teaching in the classroom prior to becoming an administrator. One administrator (3.2%) spent no time teaching in the classroom, four administrators spent (12.9%) 0-5 years teaching in the classroom, 12 administrators (38.7%) spent 6-10 years teaching in the classroom, 11 administrators (35.5%) spent 11-15 years teaching in the classroom, and three administrators (9.7%) spent 20+ years teaching in the classroom prior to becoming an administrator. Of the study participants ( $n = 31$ ), 26, or 84%, spent a range of at least 6 years to 20 or more years teaching in the classroom prior to becoming an administrator. Figure 3 displays the frequency of years teaching in the classroom by study participants.

**Figure 3***Years of Classroom Teaching Before Becoming an Administrator*

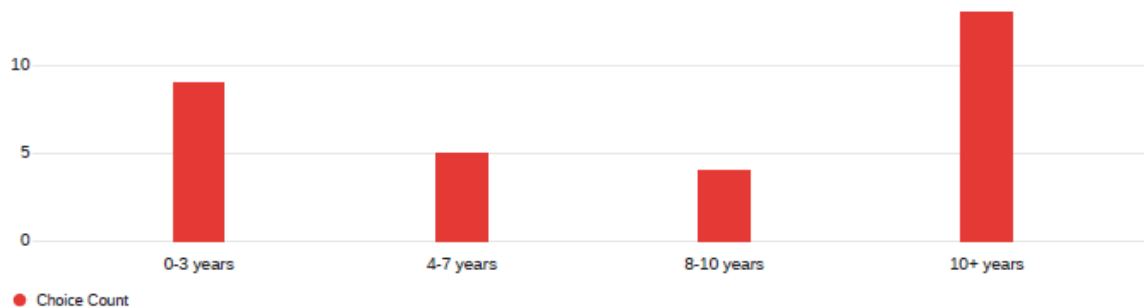
Q3 - How many years did you spend teaching in the classroom prior to becoming an administrator?

***Administrative Experience***

Demographic item number 4 on the survey instrument asked participants to indicate the number of years they had served in an administrative position. Nine participants (29.0%) selected 0-3 years, five participants (16.1%) selected 4-7 years, four participants (12.9%) selected 8-10 years, and 13 participants (41.9%) selected 10 or more years of administrative experience. Of the study respondents ( $n = 31$ ), 22, or 71%, indicated they have been in an administrative position beyond a probationary period while nine, or 29%, indicated they are in the early stage of their administrative career. Figure 4 illustrates the administrative experience of study participants.

**Figure 4***Years of Administrative Experience of Study Participants*

Q4 - How many years have you served in an administrative position?



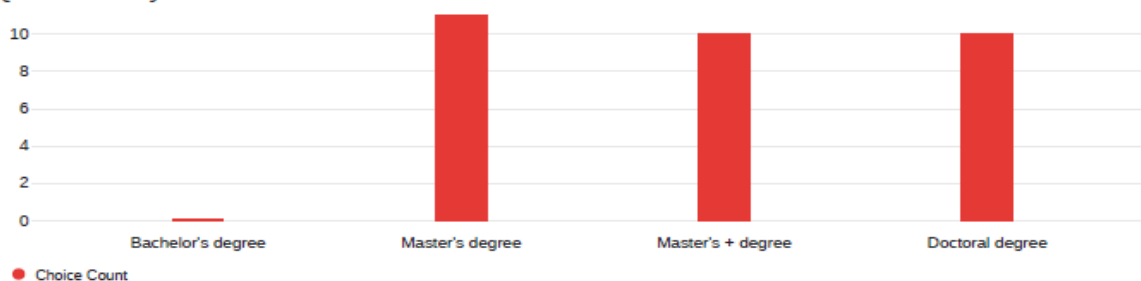
### ***Educational Background***

Demographic item number 5 on the survey instrument asked participants to indicate their current level of education. Eleven participants (35.4%) indicated they had earned a master's degree, 10 participants (32.3%) indicated they had earned a master's degree plus additional graduate training, and 10 participants (32.3%) indicated they had earned a doctoral degree. Overall, there was an equal distribution of graduate levels of education for the participants: 35% master's degree, 32% master's degree plus, 32% doctoral degree. Figure 5 displays the current level of education of study participants.

**Figure 5**

*Current Level of Education of Study Participants*

Q5 - What is your current level of education?

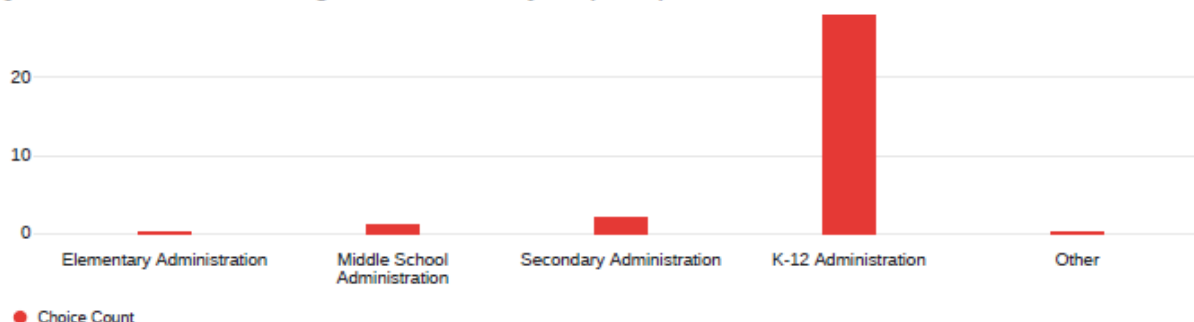


### ***Principal Certification***

Demographic item number 6 on the survey instrument asked participants to indicate the type of principal certification they had earned. No participants had an Elementary or other certification in education, one participant (3.2%) had a Middle school certification in education, two participants (6.5%) had a secondary certification in education, and 28 participants had a K-12 certification in education. Overwhelmingly, 28, or 90.3%, of the participants indicated that they held a K-12 certification. Figure 6 displays the administrative certification held by study participants.

**Figure 6***Administrative Certification of Study Participants*

Q6 - Which of the following best describes your principal certification?

**Research Question 1**

**What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school leaders to the developmental needs of young adolescents, as measured by the Adapted Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire?** Study participants were asked to reflect on their middle school leader behaviors and provide their perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Middle school leaders' responsiveness also includes supporting staff working with adolescent students and creating, implementing, or revising school structures and routines to best meet the needs of the students they serve. The survey instrument had 33 items that began with the stem "As a middle level leader, I..." Participants responded to indicate how often they displayed a specific behavior using the following scale. The purpose of the electronic survey was to identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures that best meet the needs of young adolescents. Results from the survey were collected and analyzed based on the three survey themes as listed.

***Developmental Needs of Young Adolescents***

Of the 33 survey items in the survey instrument, nine items, or approximately 27% of the survey, were designed to measure a middle level leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Using a Likert scale from (1) *frequently, if not*



*always* to (5) *not at all*, participants indicated their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Overall, the mean self-reported level of responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents by study participants was 2.08 with a *SD* of 1.79, indicating they perceive their responsiveness as *fairly often* according to the scale. Table 3 presents the survey items and response frequencies for middle level leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Middle Level Leaders' Responses to Survey Items Relating to the Developmental Needs of Young Adolescents*

Survey Item As a middle level leader, I...	Frequently, if not always	Fairly often	Sometimes	Once in a while	Not at all	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Provide Curricular materials that enhance young adolescents' acceptance of self and others and that enable them to accept differences and similarities among people</i>	7	11	7	4	2	2.45	2.21
<i>Provide adequate counseling/advisory opportunities for students</i>	14	11	5	1	0	1.77	1.44
<i>Provide students with opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics in order to develop their identity and demonstrate their competence</i>	3	16	7	2	3	2.55	2.36
<i>Develop connections with and involve families in the education of their children</i>	10	15	3	3	0	1.97	1.65
<i>Provide age appropriate, co-curricular (or extra-curricular) activities</i>	12	11	6	2	0	1.94	1.63
<i>Provide students with opportunities to explore, make mistakes, and grow in a safe and caring environment</i>	15	15	1	0	0	1.55	1.08
<i>Encourage mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study the consequences of various actions</i>	8	15	5	2	1	2.13	1.87
<i>Regard young adolescents as resources in planning and program development and involve them in meaningful roles</i>	2	13	14	1	1	2.55	2.18
<i>Allow teachers and students to plan activities that integrate genders</i>	13	14	2	1	1	1.81	1.58

Study participants' self-perceived responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents ranged from a mean of 1.55 to 2.55. Participants reported that they *provide students with opportunities to explore, make mistakes, and grow in a safe and caring environment*, which had a mean of 1.55 with a *SD* of 1.08 as closest to *frequently, if not always*. Following that statement, four survey items had a range of means between 1.77 and 1.97: *provide adequate counseling/advisory opportunities for students*, which had a mean of 1.77 with a *SD* of 1.44; *allow teachers and students to plan activities that integrate genders*, which had a mean of 1.81 with a *SD* of 1.58; *provide age appropriate, co-curricular (or extra-curricular) activities*, which had a mean of 1.94 with a *SD* of 1.63; and, *develop connections with and involve families in the education of their children*, which had a mean of 1.97 with a *SD* of 1.65. These four items indicated a self-reported level of responsiveness that falls closer to *fairly often*.

Four survey items ranged from a mean of 2.13 to 2.55, indicating that participants perceived their responsiveness to meeting the needs of young adolescents as *fairly often*: *encourage mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study consequences of various actions*, which had a mean of 2.13 with a *SD* of 1.87; *provide curricular materials that enhance young adolescents' acceptance of self and others and that enable them to accept differences and similarities among people*, which had a mean of 2.45 with a *SD* of 2.21; *regard young adolescents as resources in planning and program development and involve them in meaningful roles*, which had a mean of 2.55 with a *SD* of 2.18; and, *provide students with opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics in order to develop their identity and demonstrate their competence*, which had a mean of 2.55 with a *SD* of 2.36.

### **Supporting Staff Working with Young Adolescents**

Of the 33 survey items in the survey instrument, 12 items, or approximately 36% of the survey, were designed to measure a middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents. Using the Likert scale, respondents ranked from (1) as being *frequently, if not always* to (5) being *not at all*. Overall, the participants indicated a self-reported level of responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents as 1.54 with a *SD* of 1.18, indicating that they perceived their responsiveness as falling between

frequently, if not always to fairly often. Table 4 presents the survey items and response frequencies for middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents.

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Middle Level Leaders' Responses to Survey Items Relating to Supporting Staff Working with Young Adolescents*

Survey Item As a middle level leader, I...	Frequently, if not always	Fairly often	Sometimes	Once in a while	Not at all	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Have a vision of what an exemplary middle school is and strive to bring that vision to life</i>	17	12	1	1	0	1.55	1.16
<i>Demonstrate an understanding of the intellectual, physical, psychological, and social characteristics of young adolescents</i>	22	8	1	0	0	1.32	.84
<i>Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the cognitive and affective needs of young adolescents</i>	18	11	2	0	0	1.48	1.05
<i>Make decisions based on young adolescent development and effective middle level practices</i>	16	13	2	0	0	1.55	1.11
<i>Provide time for general education teachers to collaborate with special education teachers in order to meet the diverse needs of young adolescents</i>	20	8	1	1	0	1.43	1.06
<i>Encourage teachers to modify time, grouping, and instructional strategies to help individual students achieve mastery of subject matter</i>	17	11	2	0	1	1.61	1.38
<i>Encourage mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study the consequences of various actions</i>	30	1	0	0	0	1.03	.25

(continued)

Table 4 (cont.)

Survey Item	Frequently, if not always	Fairly often	Sometimes	Once in a while	Not at all	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
As a middle level leader, I... <i>Encourage teachers in the use of a wide variety of instructional approaches and materials</i>	22	8	1	0	0	1.32	.84
<i>Encourage active discovery learning by students rather than teacher lecture</i>	15	10	5	1	0	1.74	1.41
<i>Encourage activities such as special interest classes and hands-on learning</i>	14	13	2	2	0	1.74	1.41
<i>Encourage teachers to make connections across disciplines to reinforce important concepts</i>	13	11	6	1	0	1.84	1.50
<i>Require teachers to provide classroom activities that address the needs of academically diverse learners who vary greatly in readiness, interest, and learning profile</i>	16	10	4	0	0	1.60	1.21

As displayed in Table 4, 30 of the 31 participants, or approximately 97%, rated their responsiveness to *encourage mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study the consequences of various actions as frequently, if not always*; this survey item indicated the highest level of self-perceived responsiveness to supporting staff working with young adolescents with a mean of 1.03 with a SD of .25. Four survey items ranged in means from 1.32 to 1.48 indicating high levels of self-reported responsiveness to supporting staff working with young adolescents: *demonstrate an understanding of the intellectual, physical, psychological, and social characteristics of young adolescents*, which had a mean of 1.32 with a SD of .84; *encourage teachers in the use of a wide variety of instructional approaches and materials*, which had a mean of 1.32 with a SD of .84; *provide time for general education teachers to collaborate with special education teachers in order to meet the diverse needs of young adolescents*, which had a mean of 1.43 with a SD of 1.06; and, *demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the cognitive and affective needs of young adolescents*, which had a mean of 1.48 with a SD of 1.05.

Seven survey items, which ranged in means from 1.55 to 1.84, indicate self-reported responsiveness to supporting staff working with young adolescents as between *frequently, if not always* to *fairly often*. Four survey items shared means from 1.55 and 1.61: *have a vision of what an exemplary middle school is and strive to bring that vision to life*, which had a mean of 1.55 with a *SD* of 1.16; *make decisions based on young adolescent development and effective middle level practices*, which had a mean of 1.55 with a *SD* of 1.11; *require teachers to provide classroom activities that address the needs of academically diverse learners who vary greatly in readiness, interest, and learning profile*, which had a mean of 1.60 with a *SD* of 1.21; and, *encourage teachers to modify time, grouping, and instructional strategies to help individual students achieve mastery of subject matter*, which had a mean of 1.61 with a *SD* of 1.38. Finally, three survey items shared means from 1.74 and 1.84: *encourage active discovery learning by students rather than teacher lecture*, which had a mean of 1.74 with a *SD* of 1.41; *encourage activities such as special interest classes and hands-on learning*, which had a mean of 1.74 with a *SD* of 1.41; *encourage teachers to make connections across disciplines to reinforce important concepts*, which had a mean of 1.84 with a *SD* of 1.5.

### ***School Structures Needed to Support Young Adolescents***

Of the 33 survey items, 12 items, or approximately 36% of the survey, were designed to measure a middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the school structures needed to support young adolescents. Using the Likert scale, respondents indicated their level of responsiveness to the survey items from (1) as being *frequently, if not always* to (5) being *not at all*. Overall, the participants self-reported a level of responsiveness to supporting school structures needed to support young adolescents as 2.04 with a *SD* of 1.86, indicating that they perceive their responsiveness as *fairly often*. Table 5 presents the survey items and response frequencies for middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the school structures needed to support young adolescents.

**Table 5**

*Frequency of Middle Level Leaders' Responses to Survey items Relating to Supporting the School Structures Needed to Support Young Adolescents*

Survey Item As a middle level leader, I...	Frequently, if not always	Fairly often	Sometimes	Once in a while	Not at all	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Design and implement policies and procedures that reflect the needs of young adolescents</i>	14	10	5	2	0	1.84	1.54
<i>Promote the development of caring relationships between teachers and students through structures like advisory periods, etc.</i>	13	8	8	0	2	2.03	1.92
<i>Provide transition programs from middle to high school for my middle school students</i>	6	9	0	1	5	2.68	2.63
<i>Provide transition programs from elementary to middle school for my middle school students</i>	6	7	10	2	6	2.84	2.83
<i>Organize the curriculum around real-life concepts</i>	4	14	5	2	6	2.74	2.74
<i>Advocate for middle schools and middle school concept in the school division</i>	11	8	8	3	1	2.19	2.01
<i>Prepare a daily schedule that includes time for team planning and meeting</i>	26	3	1	0	1	1.29	1.09
<i>Stay current on what the research says about the best practices for middle schools</i>	8	14	9	0	0	2.03	1.63
<i>Group students and teachers in small learning communities</i>	11	11	6	1	2	2.10	1.97
<i>Spend time each day with students</i>	28	3	0	0	0	1.10	.44
<i>Create opportunities for professional development of teachers/staff that address strategies for meeting the needs of young adolescents</i>	11	14	4	2	0	1.90	1.57

(continued)

Table 5 (cont.)

Survey Item As a middle level leader, I...	Frequently, if not always	Fairly often	Sometimes	Once in a while	Not at all	M	SD
<i>Support appropriate instructional strategies with the necessary resources (i.e., money, time, etc.)</i>	15	11	3	1	1	1.77	1.58

Participants' self-reported responsiveness to supporting the school structures needed to support young adolescents ranged from a mean of 1.10 to a mean of 2.84. This category demonstrated the largest range of means. Participants reported their level of responsiveness to *spend time each day with students*, which had a mean of 1.10 with a *SD* of .44; and *prepare a daily schedule that includes time for team planning and meeting*, which had a mean of 1.29 with a *SD* of 1.09, as *frequently, if not always*. There were three additional survey items that had a mean indicating a self-reported level of responsiveness falling between *frequently, if not always* to *fairly often*: *support appropriate instructional strategies with the necessary resources (i.e. money, time, etc.)*, which had a mean of 1.77 with a *SD* of 1.58; *design and implement policies and procedures that reflect the needs of young adolescents*, which had a mean of 1.84 with a *SD* of 1.54; and, *create opportunities for professional development of teachers/staff that address strategies for meeting the needs of young adolescents*, which had a mean of 1.90 with a *SD* of 1.57.

Seven (58%) of the 12 survey items in this category had a mean between 2.03 and 2.84, indicating a self-reported level of responsiveness as *fairly often*. Four survey items had a reported level of responsiveness as *fairly often* with a range of means from 2.03 to 2.19: to *promote the development of caring relationships between teachers and students through structures like advisory periods, etc.*, which had a mean of 2.03 with a *SD* of 1.92; *stay current on what the research says about the best practices for middle schools*, which had a mean of 2.03 with a *SD* of 1.63; *group students and teachers in small learning communities*, which had a mean of 2.10 with a *SD* of 1.97; and *advocate for middle schools and middle school concept in the school division*, which had a mean of 2.19 with a *SD* of 2.01. Three survey items fell between *fairly often* and *sometimes*, with a range of means from 2.68 to 2.84: *provide transition*



*programs from middle to high school for my middle school students*, which had a mean of 2.68 with a *SD* of 2.63; *organize the curriculum around real-life concepts*, which had a mean of 2.74 with a *SD* of 2.74; and *provide transition programs from elementary to middle for my middle school students*, which has a mean of 2.84 with a *SD* of 2.84.

### ***Self-Reported Responsiveness Survey Summary***

The Adapted Middle Level Leaders Questionnaire (AMLLQ) was administered to identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures that best meet the needs of young adolescents. Table 6 contains the category summary results.

**Table 6**

*Frequency of Middle School Leaders' Survey Item Responses for the Three Themes Analyzed*

Survey Item Themes	Frequently, if not always	Fairly often	Sometimes	Once in a while	Not at all	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>9 Survey items Supporting the developmental needs of young adolescents</i>	84	121	50	16	8	2.08	1.79
<i>12 Survey Items Supporting the staff working with young adolescents</i>	233	130	29	7	2	1.54	1.18
<i>12 Survey Items Supporting the school structures needed to support young adolescents</i>	153	11	69	14	24	2.04	1.86

Of the 33 survey items, nine were designed to measure a middle level leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, 12 were designed to measure a middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents, and 12 measured a middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the school structures needed to support young adolescents. Survey results demonstrate that middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents

as 1.54 with a *SD* of 1.18, indicating they do so between *frequently, if not always* and *fairly often*. Results demonstrate that middle level leaders perceive their responsiveness to supporting the school structures to meet the needs of young adolescents, with a mean of 2.04 and a *SD* of 1.86; and responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, with a mean of 2.08 and a *SD* of 1.79 as *fairly often*.

## **Research Question 2**

**How do middle school leaders report the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents?** The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools' transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. Beyond the self-reported perceptions of middle school leaders gathered using a survey methodology, focus group discussions to identify how middle school leaders report the alignment of their schools' elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents were conducted.

Participants were identified for a focus group based on willingness conveyed at the conclusion of the electronic survey. The final item on the survey instrument was an open-ended question that posed an opportunity for willing participants to participate in a focus group to discuss their thoughts about meeting the needs of young adolescents as they transition from the elementary school setting to the middle school setting. Although the responses on the electronic survey were anonymous, participants provided their email address to be contacted for the follow up focus group. Of the 31 participants who completed the survey, eight provided an email address. Following the initial communication via email, another three participants requested to participate in the focus group. Overall, 11 participants agreed to participate in the focus groups, but eight participated in the discussions.

Determining an acceptable percentage of participants with qualitative research requires consideration of several factors, including the homogenous nature of the survey population, the breadth of the phenomena being researched, and determining when sampling reaches

saturation (Sigmond, C, 2022). Populations that share similar characteristics with a limited focus should “aim for a sample size of 10” (Sigmond, C, 2022). This study used purposeful sampling with a homogeneous group of middle level leaders. This portion of this study was limited to middle level leaders’ responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to middle school. Sigmond stated that the third factor, determining when sampling reaches saturation, is the “key to determining sample size” (2022). Sigmond went on to say that “you stop collecting data when you keep hearing the same things again and again” (2022). For this study, the three focus group discussions resulted in emergent themes and similar trends.

The focus group questions were designed to elicit information about middle school leaders’ experiences with young adolescents and their school site’s alignment of their transition program to the developmental needs of young adolescents. The questions in this study were:

1. Which developmental needs of young adolescents impact the educational experience during the transition to sixth grade?
2. Which school structures are needed to meet young adolescents’ developmental needs during the transition to sixth grade?
3. How do the current structures in place align with the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?
4. What extended learning opportunities do you think would enhance middle school leaders’ responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?

Qualitative data were collected through a virtual focus group format using Zoom. The discussions were conducted in line with protocol expectations. Data were analyzed by coding responses, organizing frequencies of responses, and identifying themes. It was organized in Microsoft Excel, which facilitated a systematic analysis of all participants’ responses. Focus group #1 included two principals and two assistant principals. An individual interview was held with one principal. Focus group #2 included one principal and two assistant principals. The interview protocol was used to ensure researcher neutrality.

The researcher conducted a thematic analysis and identified three consistent themes that emerged for Interview Questions 1-4.

### ***Interview Question 1***

#### **Which developmental needs of young adolescents impact the educational experience during the transition to sixth grade?**

**Emotional Needs.** Most participants indicated that during the transition to middle school, students are impacted by their need for emotional support. The participants discussed the demands of the transition to sixth grade and how it can affect the emotional well-being of students during this time. P6 stated that emotional support was needed as these students' "brains are still developing... that prefrontal cortex is still developing their decision-making" (P6, /16). P3 shared that both cognitive and physical changes make it more difficult for young adolescents to "sit and focus as they have been ideally able to in elementary" due to physical growing pains and a shift in awareness of the world around them (P3, /29). P2 described the impact of some mental and physical body changes as "hormone poisoning" leaving students "reactionary" when they do not know what to do (P2, /26). P7 stated, "...sometimes they just don't have the maturity level to understand what is going to be expected of them" (P7, /22-23). P1 shared that often young adolescents do not yet understand their feelings nor how to deal with them and P4 shared that it can be "overwhelming" (P4, /45) for students as they interact with new students, structures, and expectations.

**Social-Emotional Needs.** The participants expressed that beyond the mental and physical changes young adolescents may be experiencing as they transition to middle school, they also need support with navigating social situations and mastering new routines. P4 shared that leaving elementary and entering middle school may leave young adolescents feeling challenged by how to "deal with being the babies in the building, bigger kids and grades, the space (the bigger building), the amount of people to interact with..." (P4, /44-45). P2 described this unfamiliar environment when young adolescents are placed in a larger building with many more students as "the pool that they're swimming in has gotten a lot bigger" reinforcing the need for social support to be in place (P2, /23). P1 shared that at this time, social acceptance and peer-approval become more important than parent approval, and both P1 and P2

emphasized how learning strategies to deal with peers is important as the strategies they learned during elementary may not have prepared them to deal with conflict in middle school effectively.

In addition, P1, P2, P7, and P8 stressed the importance of assistance with organization. P2 stated that “learning to keep track of many different things” from different teachers can be a challenge (P2, /37-38); P1 discussed how students frequently leave important items behind and need reminders and structures to assist them not to do so. P7 stated the importance of helping young adolescents develop organizational skills as the expectations in middle school vary greatly from elementary, where most students have spent a majority of the day in one room compared to being in several rooms in middle school. P8 advised that support is needed for organizing and “prioritizing and recognizing how important or unimportant certain events are and identifying whether certain things are major or minor” (P8, /25-27). P6 shared that the social challenges during the transition to middle school can leave students feeling “embarrassed” and result in “giving up” when they are not as successful as they were in elementary (P6, /35-36).

**School Structure Support.** Several participants discussed that the school setting itself presents challenges for young adolescents as they transition to middle school. P2 stated the importance of recognizing that the transition to middle school involves “management of all of the systems and procedures of many teachers” and that “...procedurally, every teacher has a different way” to handle a variety of tasks, from sharpening a pencil to charging a Chromebook, which is a contrast from the elementary routines most students have established (P2, /34-36). P2 added that the shift in building movement, number of classes, and higher level of accountability for one’s actions may prove challenging. P6, P7, and P8 also shared that the shift in the number of teachers and classes and how the classes operate can lead to struggling with processing, organizing, and prioritizing tasks.

P4 shared that the “independence of being in a different environment...can be overwhelming” (P4, /41-44). P2 and P5 discussed the importance of providing school support for specialized groups like students with disabilities and English as a second language students, who may need more individualized support beyond their learning plans during the transition.

P5 stated that it was the school’s responsibility to “create an environment so that students have opportunities to get along, to get to know their peers, and to lead” (P5, /45-46); and P6 expressed that it is important that “teachers are sensitive” to the fact that students are given small opportunities for success during this “pivotal age” (P6, /36-37). Table 7 provides a summary of middle level leaders’ responses to the developmental needs of young adolescents impacted during the transition to middle school.

**Table 7**

*Middle Level Leaders’ Responses to Developmental Needs Impacted During Transition to Middle School*

Developmental needs	Participants							
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8
Emotional needs	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Social-emotional needs	X	X		X		X	X	X
School structure needs		X		X	X	X	X	X

**Interview Question 2**

**Which school structures are needed to meet young adolescents’ developmental needs during the transition to sixth grade?**

**School Structures for Emotional Support.** Several participants expressed the need for emotional support structures for young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade. P1 stated “If we know these are the habits of sixth graders, let’s make sure that we strategically plan what kind of expectations we have... let’s be specific about what we expect stated in the affirmative... and continually revisit” (P1, /107-109). P3 also emphasized the importance of providing clear examples and reteaching expectations as many times as needed. P4 stated that consistency (with expectations) “cuts down on confusion and keeps clarity” and went on to share that students need familiar faces and consistent messaging (P4, /75). P2 reiterated that sentiment by adding that “being visible (for students) and having a gradual release...puts people

in accessible places (for students)” and this guidance can decrease negative behaviors and consequences and increase student well-being (P2, /82-85).

Several participants shared that during this time of transition, young adolescents need compassionate staff. P1 shared the following anecdote to express his approach to working with young adolescents

I heard this research that it takes students seven or eight times to hear something before they really understand it. And, as I told that to the staff, they were like, yeah, that’s true, we always have to keep talking to them. Before you laugh at them, it takes adults 27 or 28 times, so let’s not be too critical of kids. (P1, /103-104)

P4 and P2 shared that it is important to view young adolescent behavior, particularly in sixth grade, with compassion and understanding. P4 stated that it is important to work with students as they transition from the elementary setting to middle school where consequences may be more severe; P4 stated “...so you can’t just throw the hammer right away; you counsel or offer a mediation session; but let them know that these are the consequences to expect” (P4, /67-71). P2 expressed the importance of having available staff, including counselors, on hand to be available as students’ needs arise to resolve issues in a timely manner. P3 shared that student emotions, including anxiety, depression, anger, and frustration, can “manifest in a variety of different ways,” so school staff must provide support and structures to help young adolescents succeed, particularly as they navigate the different world of middle school (P3, /111-112).

Several participants discussed the need for guidance in the form of staff supervision to help sixth graders. P1 stated “We have to have extra hallway supervision to help kids with their lockers and not forgetting their things, so as we see those needs come up, we’ve just had to provide more structure for them” (P1, /56). P4 reiterated P1’s thoughts about adult supervision serving as “strategic checkpoints” to help sixth graders make positive behavior choices (P4, /73). And, P2 added that staff “stationed in different points along the way” makes staff accessible. P2 also shared that it is important that “children are guided to where they should be” by staff to develop expectations for students (P2, /82-85).

**School Structures for Social-Emotional Needs.** Six of the eight participants discussed the need for social-emotional support for young adolescents as they transition into sixth grade. P2 and P3 mentioned a structure called *Morning Meeting*, in which students are exposed to social emotional learning, including how to “identify and deal with their own feelings” (P2, /88-89); and “Teach-tos on a variety of expectations which are constantly revisited as needed” (P3, /100-101). P1, P3, P7, and P8 emphasized the need to help students understand their feelings in the context of the setting around them. P1 shared that young adolescents often do not “understand the gravity” of their actions nor the impact their actions may have on others, so it is critical to “continually teach and reteach empathy to sixth graders” (P1, /58-59). P3 expressed the importance of providing clear examples of expectations and the need to continually revisit expectations to ensure that sixth graders know what “kindness and respect (as examples) look like” (P3, /97-100). P1 reiterated P3’s statement about being explicit with expectations, providing examples, and continually revisiting them for sixth graders. P7 stressed the importance of supporting sixth graders’ relationships with each other, and P6 agreed. P8 stated that it would be helpful for sixth graders to develop routines by having a “blueprint of what the routine is for middle school, so they understand exactly instead of learning trial by error” (P8, /68). P2 and P3 mentioned the importance of involving the parent for support during the transition. P2 discussed the nature of being intentional in helping the parent transition as we help the sixth-grade student transition. P2 stated that communicating updates with parents and asking for “home reinforcement to help” can result in a partnership (P2, /121). P3 shared that parental support can help students develop routines.

**School Structures.** All participants discussed the need for deliberate school structures to be in place for students as they transition to sixth grade. Overall, the participants focused on intentional scheduling, consistent routines, and activities to connect fifth graders to middle school prior to the start of sixth grade. P3 stated that when scheduling for sixth grade that “the master schedule...should consider their (sixth graders) developmental needs” and emphasized the need for “interdisciplinary teams with a smaller group of teachers and students so they have a house within sixth grade” (P3, /92-95). P7 stated that “teaming is critical in middle school, especially sixth grade; we are very tight and intentional with our schedulers” (P7, /73-





### ***Interview Question 3***

#### **How do the current structures in place align with the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?**

**Emotional Support.** Very few of the participants discussed specific structures to provide emotional support for young adolescents transitioning to sixth grade. P2, P3, and P7 shared that clear expectations and consistency are part of their structure to help students during the transition to sixth grade. P2 shared that at her school, repetition is used to remind students of expectations, as assistance with remembering is an appropriate support for sixth graders' development. P3 and P4 shared the need for tiered interventions with disciplinary practices. P3 stated that reinstatement and restorative practices "definitely tie in with sixth grade developmental needs" (P3, /165). P4 stated that mediations and conflict resolution work well for the sixth-grade student.

**Social-Emotional Support.** Several participants discussed the structures in place to provide social emotional support for sixth graders. P2, P3, P4, and P7 expressed that the *Morning Meeting* structure provides support for social emotional learning. P3, P4, and P7 stated that the time spent each morning discussing a variety of topics is a positive way to start the school day. P4 stated that the meetings serve as a format to discuss school- and non-school-related topics and provide time for teachers to deliver teach-tos and are a "a good way to start every morning" (P4, /136-138). P7 made a similar statement that the time is spent discussing important topics and teach-tos to address "some of the skills they're lacking in" (P7, /88). P3 stated that the structure is effective, but inconsistently implemented due to the lack of a much-needed curriculum.

**School Structures.** P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P7 discussed how their current school structures align to the developmental needs of young adolescents as they transition to sixth grade. P1, P3, P4, and P7 discussed using developmentally appropriate disciplinary practices that allow sixth graders to learn how to make better decisions. P1 stated that the administrative team uses reflective practices to determine if "what we planned and what we intended is coming to fruition" and adjusts as needed to address minor behaviors with logical consequences. P3 and P4 discussed using restorative practices like mediation and conflict

resolution to help sixth graders as they transition into middle school. P7 shared that her school uses similar practices that provide opportunities for students to have a “second chance” to decrease failure. P1 and P2 discussed the constant practice of reflecting and reassessing situations to determine effective and ineffective practices. P3, P5, and P7 discussed that their schools had a specific team of resources for sixth graders, including an assistant principal, counselor and security officer to provide support as needed. P3 and P4 shared that their sites had a specific schedule for the sixth-grade students, which one felt was appropriately aligned for sixth and the other felt should be flipped to be more appropriately aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents as the transition to sixth grade. Table 9 provides a summary of middle level leaders’ responses to the aligned structures currently in place during the transition to middle school.

**Table 9**

*Middle Level Leaders’ Responses to Aligned Structures Currently in Place During Transition to Middle School*

Developmental needs	Participants							
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8
Emotional needs		X	X	X			X	
Social-emotional needs		X	X	X			X	
School structure needs	X	X	X	X	X		X	

**Interview Question 4**

**What extended learning opportunities do you think would enhance middle school leaders’ responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?**

**Emotional Support.** P2, P3, P5, and P7 expressed the need for additional opportunities for leaders to learn about the middle school model and the transitioning sixth-grade student. P5 shared that “Professional development is huge. Because you know, we teach what we teach

and we know what we know until we get that extended learning and so it's important" (P5, /122-123). P5 also stated that it is important for all staff to know "Who a middle schooler is; we were all middle schoolers, but this is different, we're in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (P5, /125-127). P7 stated that it is critical for middle school leaders to understand the middle school concept and philosophy, particularly if they did not teach at the middle school level. P7 stated that administrators who lead a middle school need to "know the why behind it (the middle school model) and the structures that are in place" (P7, /114). P2 and P3 discussed the importance of ensuring that staff and leaders understand what "a day in the life of a middle schooler" is like (P2, /225) and getting everybody on board and refreshing it (middle school philosophy), however often" as needed (P3, /203).

**Social-Emotional Support.** Several participants discussed the role of extended learning to help "support us supporting the kids" as they transition to sixth grade (P2, /180). P5 expressed that leaders and school staff must shift their approaches to increase the success of our students and it is through reflection and being aware of whether our practices are creating a conducive environment for students or not, particularly during the transition. P8 discussed having middle level leaders collaborate with elementary leaders to assist with the transition to decrease the "shock" to the students as they enter sixth grade (P8, /103). P2 stated the need for extended learning with restorative practices or other approaches that help students process the situations around them to return to focus on learning. P2 and P3 discussed the need for professional development about how the characteristics of the middle school student impact classroom management, instruction, and social-emotional needs.

**School Structures.** Although the majority of the participants focused on extended learning in regard to meeting the emotional and social-emotional needs of young adolescents during the transition to middle school, there were some suggestions about opportunities to develop stronger school structures through focused and continual development. P1 emphasized the need for a focused professional development plan over a two- or three-year period as opposed to "dumping a whole bunch of other things" on schools, as he indicated often occurs (P1, /184-185). P1 stated "I think if we were strategic about it (professional development plan) with a multi-year plan, that's ideal (P1, /190). P3 reiterated the need for

focused and continual professional development about the middle school student. Table 10 provides a summary of middle level leaders' responses to extended learning opportunities to enhance leaders' responsiveness during the transition to middle school.

**Table 10**

*Middle Level Leaders' Responses to Learning Opportunities to Enhance Leaders' Responsiveness During Transition to Middle School*

Developmental needs	Participants							
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8
Emotional needs		X	X		X		X	
Social-emotional needs		X	X		X			X
School structure needs	X		X					

### Summary of the Data

Eight middle level leaders participated in the focus groups to discuss their understanding of the developmental needs of young adolescents as they transition to middle school. Responses about their transition programs and how they align with those developmental needs shared many similarities in the areas of emotional needs, social emotional needs, and school structures. In response to interview question one, the demands of the transition to sixth grade can prove to be overwhelming to students during this time as they encounter new students, structures and expectations. Sixth graders need support with navigating social situations and mastering new routines. In response to interview question two, during this time, students need consistency, compassion and guidance. They need clear expectations and many reminders to stay on task, patient staff who recognize how to work with sixth graders, and intentional scheduling for consistency. In response to interview question three, middle level leaders recognize that sixth graders require intentional, and at times, flexible, support during the transition to middle school, including clear expectations, structured activities, and opportunities for deliberate social emotional learning. In response to interview

question four, leaders working with middle level students need focused and extended learning to meet the needs of the transitioning sixth grader, in particular, on preparing students for the transition and implementing practices that best serve these students. Chapter Five will provide a summary of study findings, implications of those findings, recommendations for future research and reflections of the study.

## Chapter Five

### Findings and Implications

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools' transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. Beyond the self-reported perceptions of middle level leaders' responsiveness, a broader understanding of how their transition programs align with the developmental needs of young adolescents was pursued using focus group interviews. The research questions that guided this mixed methods study are listed below.

1. What is the self-reported level of responsiveness of middle school leaders to the developmental needs of young adolescents, staff, and structures?
2. How do middle level leaders report the alignment of their school's elementary to middle school transition program with the developmental needs of young adolescents?

#### Summary of the Findings

The data collected via survey and focus group interviews were analyzed and revealed several findings. Several themes emerged. The following section lists the findings and connects those findings to prior research.

#### ***Finding 1***

**Middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents as fairly often.** Overall, the mean self-reported level of responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents by study participants was 2.08 with a *SD* of 1.79 (see Table 6). Nine (27%) of the survey items measured middle level leaders' responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents. Middle level leaders reported their highest level of responsiveness to *providing students with*

*opportunities to explore, make mistakes, and grow in a safe and caring environment as close to frequently, if not always.* Middle level leaders perceived their level of responsiveness between *frequently, if not always* and *fairly often* for half (4 out of 8) of the remaining survey items regarding meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents. The items included *providing adequate counseling/advisory opportunities for students, allowing teachers and students to plan activities that integrate genders, providing age appropriate, co-curricular (or extra-curricular) activities, and developing connections with and involving families in the education of their children.*

The four remaining items revealed a perceived level of responsiveness as *fairly often*; they included *encouraging mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study consequences of various actions, providing curricular materials that enhance young adolescents' acceptance of self and others and that enable them to accept differences and similarities among people, regarding young adolescents as resources in planning and program development and involve them in meaningful roles, and providing students with opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics in order to develop their identity and demonstrate their competence.*

Previous literature discussed in this dissertation highlighted the essential characteristics of middle school leadership, including the critical role of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Of the 59 leadership characteristics identified as essential, five were specific to leading a middle school: “commitment to developmentally responsive middle level education; knowledge of middle level curriculum, programs and practices; an understanding of the unique nature and needs of adolescent learners; a commitment to the centrality of interdisciplinary team organization and the skills in scheduling and supervision to make them effective groups; and a compassionate understanding of the nature and needs of older children and young adolescents” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 3). As young adolescents experience significant developmental changes physically, intellectually, morally, spiritually, psychologically, and social-emotionally, educational settings should be rich in opportunities to develop physically and intellectually, explore self-identity, and create meaningful relationships with peers and adults (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).



## **Finding 2**

**Middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents as falling between frequently, if not always and fairly often.** Overall, the participants indicated a self-reported level of responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents as 1.54 with a *SD* of 1.18 (see Table 6). Twelve (36%) of the survey items measured a middle level leaders' responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents. Middle level leaders perceived a high level of responsiveness to understanding the developmental needs of students and helping staff to plan and provide a variety of approaches with instruction and behavior. The majority (97%) of the participants indicated their highest level of responsiveness with a mean of 1.03 and a *SD* of .25 to *encouraging mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study the consequences of various actions, as frequently, if not always*. Four additional survey items indicated a perceived responsiveness falling close to *frequently, if not always*, including *demonstrating an understanding of the intellectual, physical, psychological, and social characteristics of young adolescents, encouraging teachers in the use of a wide variety of instructional approaches and materials, providing time for general education teachers to collaborate with special education teachers in order to meet the diverse needs of young adolescents, and, demonstrating an understanding of the relationship between the cognitive and affective needs of young adolescents*. Middle level leaders perceived a high level of responsiveness to understanding the developmental needs of students and helping staff to plan and provide a variety of approaches with instruction and behavior.

Middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness for seven of the twelve survey items between *frequently, if not always* to *fairly often*. These items collectively represented leadership of staff about providing vision of effective practices to meet the needs of young adolescents. Those items included *having a vision of what an exemplary middle school is and strive to bring that vision to life, making decisions based on young adolescent development and effective middle level practices, requiring teachers to provide classroom activities that address the needs of academically diverse learners who vary greatly in readiness, interest, and learning profile, encouraging teachers to modify time, grouping, and instructional strategies to help*

*individual students achieve mastery of subject matter, encouraging active discovery learning by students rather than teacher lecture, encouraging activities such as special interest classes and hands-on learning, and encouraging teachers to make connections across disciplines to reinforce important concepts.*

Literature previously discussed in this study emphasized that middle level leaders play a critical role in student achievement and the overall environment, but particularly in middle school, where hiring teachers who understand the developmental needs of young adolescents is critical (Mee & Haverback, 2017; Reaves & Cozzen, 2018). Reaves and Cozzens stated that school leaders have the responsibility of maintaining a positive school climate and welcoming culture. Principals are tasked with hiring, maintaining, and training staff who have a “desire to work with young adolescents, possess knowledge of the unique developmental changes of this age group, are knowledgeable in the content they teach, and have autonomy to make decisions about curriculum” (Mee & Haverback, 2017, p. 38).

### ***Finding 3***

**Middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to supporting school structures needed to support young adolescents as fairly often.** Overall, the participants self-reported a level of responsiveness to supporting school structures needed to support young adolescents as 2.04 with a *SD* of 1.86 (see Table 6). Twelve (36%) of the survey items measured a middle level leaders’ responsiveness to supporting the school structures needed to support young adolescents. Middle level leaders perceived the largest range of responsiveness in this category, ranging from a mean of 1.10 to a mean of 2.84.

Middle level leaders perceived the highest level of responsiveness to spending time with students each day and planning time for staff to plan and meet as *frequently, if not always: spending time each day with students and preparing a daily schedule that includes time for team planning and meeting*. Next, middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to providing resources, designing policies, and supporting staff with professional development as falling between *frequently, if not always to fairly often: supporting appropriate instructional strategies with the necessary resources, designing and implementing policies and procedures*

*that reflect the needs of young adolescents, and, creating opportunities for professional development of teachers/staff that address strategies for meeting the needs of young adolescents.*

Seven (58%) of the survey items had a perceived level of responsiveness as *fairly often*. The survey items closest to *fairly often* involved contributing to a caring environment for young adolescents: *promoting the development of caring relationships between teachers and students through structures like advisory periods, etc., staying current on what the research says about the best practices for middle schools, grouping students and teachers in small learning communities, and advocating for middle schools and middle school concept in the school division*. Three items fell between *fairly often* and *sometimes*. These items involved providing transition programs and exposure to real-life concepts: *provide transition programs from middle to high school for my middle school students, organize the curriculum around real-life concepts, and provide transition programs from elementary to middle for my middle school students*.

Previous literature discussed in this study highlighted the challenges that middle school education can present and the role of the principal to “promote specific school-wide implementation of positive practices, courses of study, and programs for students (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Leadership of the middle grades has specific challenges, including understanding and adapting to the quickly developing needs of adolescents, building structures and limitations, and an increasing mindfulness of the implications of a quality education for these students in particular (Gale & Bishop, 2014; Grenada & Hackmann, 2014; Petzko et al., 2000).

#### ***Finding 4***

**Middle level leaders indicated that during the transition, young adolescents need emotional support, social emotional support, and support with navigating new school structures.** All participants discussed how the transition could impact young adolescents’ well-being and their need for emotional support. Participants discussed that physical, cognitive, and emotional changes make it “difficult for students to ‘sit and focus’ (P3, /29), make sound decisions (P6), and ‘understand the structures around them’ (P7),” and interacting with such a demanding unfamiliar environment could result in becoming “overwhelmed” (P4, /45) and

“reactionary” (P2, /26). The participants also expressed that beyond the mental and physical changes young adolescents may be experiencing as they transition to middle school, they need support with navigating social situations and mastering new routines.

Participants discussed that leaving the elementary setting and entering the middle school setting is challenging and described the transition to a new environment where young adolescents are placed in a larger setting with more students as “the pool that they’re swimming in has gotten a lot bigger” (P2, /23), which reinforced the need for social-emotional support to be provided. Additionally, participants emphasized the need for support with learning strategies to deal with peers and peer-conflict effectively (P1, P2), and prioritizing tasks and organizing materials (P1, P2, P7, P8). Participants also discussed that the school setting itself presented challenges for young adolescents during the transition to middle school, including the assignment of more teachers, different systems and procedures for handling school and classroom tasks, and the frequency of building movement to access classes in various parts of the school. Participants shared that the “independence of being in a different environment can be overwhelming” (P4, /41-44). for young adolescents as they transition to middle school, and that it was the “school’s responsibility to create an environment so that students have opportunities to get along, to get to know their peers, and to lead” (P5, /45-46); and one participant expressed that “teachers must be sensitive to the fact that students are given opportunities for success during this pivotal age” (P6, /36-37).

Literature previously discussed in this study explained that young adolescents are experiencing a considerable amount of change as they transition to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993). Developmental changes that occur at that time can include physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, psychological, and social-emotional (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). The AMLE asserted that these changes may result in particular developmental attributes (2019). According to Caskey & Anfara, young adolescents need support and guidance to understand unpredictable physical growth, intense intellectual growth, and constantly changing expectations of the world around them. Young adolescents need both “structured and exploratory activities to make meaningful connections” (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. 4) and opportunities for “competence, autonomy, and relatedness” (Mustafaa et al., 2017, p. 85). A *mismatch* between the “nature of the middle

school context and the needs of the early adolescents exacerbates the challenges experienced during this time” (Coelho et al., 2017, p. 558).

### ***Finding 5***

**Middle level leaders indicated that during the transition to middle school, young adolescents need consistency, compassion, and guidance.** Participants expressed that students need clear expectations, reminders to stay on task, patient staff who recognize how to work with sixth graders, and intentional scheduling for consistency. Additionally, they stated that emotional support systems are critical during the transition to middle school. Participants emphasized the need for consistent, strategic planning, specifically for sixth graders (P1); clear expectations, modeling of examples, and reteaching (P3); and consistent messaging (P4) to “cut down on confusion” (P4, /75). Another participant stated that “visible staff and utilizing gradual release with guidance” (P2, /82-85) can decrease negative behaviors and consequences and increase student well-being.

Several participants shared that during this time of transition, young adolescents need a compassionate and understanding staff available as their needs arise. Students’ emotions, including anxiety, frustration, and anger, may “manifest in a variety of different ways” (P3, /111-112), so school staff is required to provide support and structures to help them succeed. Participants also discussed that young adolescents entering middle school need counseling and guidance to understand more severe consequences for poor behavior choices and responsive disciplinary practices (P2, P4). Six of the eight participants shared that targeted social-emotional learning is a critical part of the transition. Most of the participants emphasized the need to help students understand their feelings in the context of the setting around them, including understanding the severity of negative decisions and the impact on others (P1, P3, P7, P8), learning about and revisiting examples of kindness and respect (P1, P3), and maintaining positive relationships with peers (P6, P7).

Participants also discussed the importance of staff guiding students to develop consistent routines to “understand exactly what to do instead of learning trial by error” (P8, /68). All participants discussed the need for deliberate school structures to support the transition to middle school, including intentional scheduling that considers the developmental

needs of young adolescents. Specifically, participants shared the need for *teaming* (P3, P7), to create “a smaller group of teachers and students, so they have a house within sixth grade” (P3, /92-95). Teaming allows for consistency with classroom routines and expectations and a smoother transition to middle school (P3, P7). Participants also discussed the need for parental involvement for reinforcement outside of school (P2, P3). Finally, participants discussed the need for bridge activities between elementary and middle schools to start the transition prior to the first day of sixth grade (P5, P7).

Literature previously discussed in this study explained that as young adolescents enter middle school, they may become disengaged due to limited independence, disciplinary procedures and classroom management, and more demanding academic expectations with less assistance (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2014). Successful principals recognize the “empathy and understanding to create a school culture in students’ best interest responsive to the varied physical, emotional and psychosocial needs of students” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 6). Additionally, teachers and school staff can ease the transition by prioritizing positive school structures, developing meaningful relationships with students, being consistent with high expectations, and teaching with relevance (Booker, 2018; Borman et al., 2019; Howard & Miller, 2017).

### ***Finding 6***

**Middle level leaders indicated that their transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents through intentional, and at times, flexible, support, clear expectations, dedicated resources, and opportunities for deliberate social emotional learning.** Most participants discussed how their current school structures were aligned to the developmental needs of young adolescents (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7). Participants discussed the use of intentional scheduling, which specifically included “teaming” to establish smaller groups within the larger grade level and ensuring that related arts classes were assigned at appropriate times during the school day (P3, P4). Participants emphasized the importance of a dedicated team for the grade level to provide support, including an assistant principal, counselor, and security officer (P3, P5, P7). P1 and P2 specifically discussed the consistent practice of reflecting and reassessing progress to determine effective and ineffective

practices. Additionally, clear expectations and consistency are part of their structure to help students transition to sixth grade (P2, P3, P7).

Several participants discussed the structures in place to provide social emotional learning for young adolescents as they transition to sixth grade. P3 and P4 discussed the use of tiered interventions with disciplinary practices, and particularly providing support through mediations and restorative practices for conflict resolution. P2, P3, P4, and P7 expressed that the *Morning Meeting* provides opportunities for students to begin the school day in a positive manner. When consistently implemented, the meetings serve as a format to discuss a variety of topics, including both school- and non-school related items and provide time to teach and address a wide range of skills; however, varying levels of implementation and the lack of a set curriculum often result in inconsistent effectiveness.

Literature previously discussed in this study, discussed that successful middle level leaders were more informed about middle grades practices and recognized the “empathy and understanding to create a school culture in students’ best interest responsive to the varied physical, emotional and psychosocial needs of students” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 6). As the transition occurs at a time when positive relationships with both caring adults and peers are critical, the physical transition from elementary to middle school setting, combined with new expectations, can be stressful for young adolescents and lead to poor academic performance, disengagement, and more discipline (Borman et al., 2019; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Swaim and Kinney (2010) highlighted the critical role of the middle level leader to unite the entire school community with goals committed to student well-being through evolving practices.

Middle school structures not aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents can compound the challenges faced during the transition (Coelho et al., 2017). Wang and Eccles (2012) stated that school engagement declines when social contexts are not developmentally responsive over the course of an adolescent’s career. These changes may include “larger schools, less teacher-student interaction, and shifts in social support from teachers, peers, and parents” (Wang & Eccles, 2012, p. 878). Lippold et al. (2012) attributed a student’s “connection and attachment” to school to increased achievement and less problematic behaviors (p. 822). School disciplinary practices focused on compliance and

resulting in exclusionary practices adversely impact students (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Therefore, the transition to middle school can lead to significant declines that may prove detrimental to young adolescents' well-being (Lippold et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2013).

### ***Finding 7***

**Middle level leaders indicated that leaders working with middle level students need focused and extended learning to meet the needs of the transitioning sixth grader; in particular, on preparing students for the transition and implementing practices that best serve these students.** Several participants expressed the need for additional opportunities for leaders to learn about the middle school model and the transitioning sixth grade student. P2, P3, and P5 emphasized the importance of understanding the middle school student. P7 underscored the critical nature of middle level leaders understanding the middle school model and philosophy, particularly those who have not taught in the middle school setting. P2 described the need for this professional development as “support us (middle level leaders) supporting the kids” especially as they transition to middle school (/180).

P5 expressed that leaders and school staff need extended learning opportunities to shift their approaches to increase the success of students; she also discussed the role of reflection and awareness in evaluating practices, particularly during the transition. P2 and P3 discussed the need for professional development regarding how the characteristics of the middle school student impact classroom management, instruction, and social-emotional needs. Participants also expressed the need for training for implementing effective middle school structures and restorative practices to ease the transition to middle school.

Participants also stressed the importance of focused professional development that is well-thought out and continually provided and revisited (P1, P3). P1 stated the need for “strategic, multi-year” (/190) professional development and P3 stressed the need for continual professional development about the middle school student. P8 discussed the power of collaborative training with elementary leaders to “decrease the shock” to students as they enter middle school.

Literature shared previously in this study expressed that despite the fact that specific skills, training, and personal characteristics should be considered for middle school leadership,



there is little emphasis on this topic (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000). As a result, many middle school leaders lack an in-depth understanding of the essential programs, training, and learning environments aspect to meet the needs of middle school learners (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000). Several studies have examined the distinct nature of the middle school principalship and found that principals of highly successful middle schools displayed more knowledge about middle grades practices and had studied and earned high levels of education in the field of middle learning (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Previous research has identified specific leadership characteristics for middle level leaders, including “commitment to developmentally responsive middle level education; knowledge of middle level curriculum, programs and practices; an understanding of the unique nature and needs of adolescent learners; a commitment to the centrality of interdisciplinary team organization and the skills in scheduling and supervision to make them effective groups; and a compassionate understanding of the nature and needs of older children and young adolescents” (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 3). The Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Leadership Model (DRMLL) model provided a manner to measure the “contextual uniqueness” of schools serving adolescents aged 10-14 (Bickmore, 2011, p. 2). This model asserts that effective middle level leaders implement practices that positively affect this groups’ specific needs, like providing access to developmentally appropriate curriculum and engaging instruction, encouraging meaningful relationships among staff and students, developing a positive climate for all stakeholders through communication and collaboration, and implementing program structures to support middle level learners (Bickmore, 2011; Goodin, 2010). Middle level leaders will benefit from several components of preparation, including rich experiences in teaching and leading middle school learners, licensure-preparation programs to enhance leadership practices, ongoing training to improve performance, continual participation in middle level associations, and mentorship opportunities and central office support (Bickmore, 2011; Petzko et al., 2000).

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study have implications for middle level leaders, school division leaders, and educational leader preparation programs. Middle level leaders can use the findings

of this study to be responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents, the staff collaborating with them, and effective school structures. Division leaders can use this study to determine and implement best practices for staffing middle schools, professional development to support the staff working with young adolescents and implementing organizational structures that are appropriate to support the developmental needs of young adolescents. Leader preparation programs can use the findings of this study to provide rich learning experiences for middle level leaders.

### ***Implication 1***

**Middle level leaders should consistently promote specific school-wide implementation of positive practices, courses of study, and programs that are responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents.** Finding one determined that middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents as fairly often. Middle level leaders should consistently consider the developmental characteristics of young adolescents as they interact with these students, design instructional programs for their learning, develop opportunities for social emotional learning to support them, and provide structures to promote high levels of engagement with school.

### ***Implication 2***

**Middle level leaders should support school staff with the appropriate resources to support young adolescents.** Finding two determined that middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents as falling between frequently, if not always and fairly often. Middle level leaders should prioritize and maintain a positive school culture for staff to positively impact student engagement. Middle level leaders should practice shared leadership to improve school structures, professional learning, and student experiences by including staff perspectives. Middle level leaders should communicate a clear vision of effective practices and provide appropriate training to ensure that the staff working with young adolescents possesses the knowledge of the particular traits of young adolescents and how to work with them.

***Implication 3***

**Middle level leaders should consistently promote middle-grade organizational structures that reflect the needs of young adolescents.** Finding three determined that middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to supporting school structures needed to support young adolescents as fairly often. Middle level leaders should consistently design and implement policies and procedures that reflect the needs of young adolescents. Middle level leaders should schedule time for staff to collaborate, promote advisory periods, and create small learning groups to enhance the education of young adolescents.

***Implication 4***

**Division leaders should implement middle-grade organizational structures that reflect the needs of young adolescents.** Finding three determined that middle level leaders perceived their responsiveness to supporting school structures needed to support young adolescents as fairly often. Middle level leaders perceived the largest range of responsiveness in this category, indicating varied practices across two school divisions. Division leaders should ensure that middle level leaders consistently implement school structures rooted in supporting the developmental needs of young adolescents. Specifically, division leaders should ensure the consistent implementation of the middle school model, structures for social emotional learning, and transition programs from elementary to middle school.

***Implication 5***

**Division level leaders should provide on-going professional development for middle level leaders to support the developmental needs of young adolescents as they transition to middle school.** Finding four, five, and six found that the demands on young adolescents as they transition to middle school require emotional, social-emotional, and organizational support. Middle level leaders are tasked with recognizing the characteristics of young adolescents and structuring responsive support aligned with those needs. Division level leaders should provide division-wide professional development to develop middle level leaders who are able to identify and support the developmental needs of young adolescents. Professional development

will support the consistent implementation of a transition program that is appropriately aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents.

### ***Implication 6***

**Division leaders should ensure that middle level leaders are trained and developed to provide responsive support to the young adolescents they serve.** Middle level leaders indicated that they need focused and extended learning to meet the needs of the transitioning sixth grader. In response to findings one through seven, division leaders should ensure that middle level leaders are provided with learning opportunities about the characteristics of young adolescents and the middle school model. Middle level leaders should be trained in the specific developmental needs of young adolescents and how these traits impact school structures, instructional practices, and social emotional learning. Division leaders should provide strategic, ongoing, and collaborative learning to enhance the middle level leaders' ability to maintain positive school cultures.

### ***Implication 7***

**Principal preparation programs should prepare middle level leaders to provide responsive leadership to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents.** This implication is associated with findings one through seven. Middle level leaders indicated that they need focused and extended learning to fully understand the characteristics of young adolescents and how best to serve them. Principal preparation programs should ensure that all leaders are prepared to lead K-12 schools by providing in-depth training of the developmental characteristics of young adolescents and how these traits impact school structures, instructional practices, and social emotional learning. Principal preparation programs should enhance leaders' knowledge about middle grades practices by providing rich learning opportunities and authentic experiences.

### **Suggestions for Future Studies**

The results of this study shared middle level leaders' perceived levels of responsiveness to meeting the needs of young adolescents; however, results were limited due to several

factors. Listed below are suggestions for future studies to gain a better understanding of the topic.

1. This study could be replicated and modeled after the initial DRMLL study which includes staff measurement of middle level leader responsiveness to determine the difference between leader- and teacher-perceived responsiveness.
2. This study could be conducted with a larger pool of middle level leaders to increase the generalization of results.
3. The study could include student perspectives to consider their levels of perceived responsiveness of the middle level leaders with whom they spend time.
4. This study could analyze current transition programs specifically for responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents
5. This study could be conducted with central office personnel to determine perceived levels of responsiveness of the support provided to middle level leaders

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to identify middle level leaders' perceptions of their responsiveness to students' developmental needs and their support of staff and structures related to meeting those needs. This study also sought a broader understanding of how schools' transition programs aligned with the developmental needs of young adolescents. In the study, middle level leaders rated their responsiveness to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents as fairly often; rated their responsiveness to supporting the staff working with young adolescents as falling between frequently, if not always, and fairly often; and rated their responsiveness to supporting school structures as fairly often. Middle level leaders identified that during the transition to middle school, young adolescents need additional emotional, social-emotional and organizational support. Middle level leaders also shared that some components of their transition programs seem to be aligned to the developmental needs of young adolescents. They also shared the need and desire for additional training and development to best serve young adolescents. Overall, the findings aligned with existing research underscoring the critical role of the middle level leader in meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly during the transition to middle school. The transition

and ensuing struggles that young adolescents may experience during that time warrant additional investigation and research. Although the participants indicated fairly high levels of perceived responsiveness to meeting the needs of young adolescents, it is difficult to measure middle level leaders' actual responsiveness without additional inquiry.

Reflecting upon the process of this study, the researcher would consider making several adjustments if the study were to be conducted again.

1. Conduct the study with a larger number of participants; invite additional school divisions to participate.
2. Conduct the focus group interviews with additional middle level leaders to have greater perspectives about transition programs.
3. Provide more detailed follow up questions and prompts during interviewing to solicit more specific information about transition programs.

The dissertation process has positively impacted both my personal and professional growth. Studying middle level leadership and how best to serve young adolescents has made me a stronger leader and better advocate for students and positive school practices. I will continue to seek ways to grow as a middle level leader and share my learning with others to impact the learning and well-being of students and staff.

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**Appendix A**  
**Survey Instrument**

---

## Adapted MLLQ Survey

---

**Start of Block: Default Question Block**

Q1 Please select your school division

- Chesapeake Public Schools (1)
  - Newport News Public Schools (2)
- 

Q2 Please select your current position

- Middle School Principal (1)
  - Middle School Assistant Principal (2)
  - Middle School Administrator not listed (3)
- 

Q3 How many years did you spend teaching in the classroom prior to becoming an administrator?

- I did not spend any time teaching in the classroom (1)
- 0-5 years (2)
- 6-10 years (3)
- 11-15 years (4)
- 20+ years (5)

Q4 How many years have you served in an administrative position?

- 0-3 years (1)
  - 4-7 years (2)
  - 8-10 years (3)
  - 10+ years (4)
- 

Q5 What is your current level of education?

- Bachelor's degree (1)
  - Master's degree (2)
  - Master's + degree (3)
  - Doctoral degree (4)
- 

Q6 Which of the following best describes your principal certification?

- Elementary Administration (1)
- Middle School Administration (2)
- Secondary Administration (3)
- K-12 Administration (4)
- Other (5)

Q8 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) design and implement policies and procedures that reflect the needs of young adolescents.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q9 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) promote the development of caring relationships between teachers and students through structures like advisory periods, etc.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
- Fairly often (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Once in a while (4)
- Not at all (5)

---

Q10 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide transition programs from middle to high school for my middle school students.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q11 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide transition programs from elementary to middle for my middle school students.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q12 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) organize the curriculum around real-life concepts.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
- Fairly often (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Once in a while (4)
- Not at all (5)

---

Q13 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) advocate for middle schools and middle school concept in the school division.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q14 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) prepare a daily schedule that includes time for team planning and meeting.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-



---

Q15 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) stay current on what the research says about the best practices for middle schools.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q16 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) group students and teachers in small learning communities.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q17 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) have a vision of what an exemplary middle school is and strive to bring that vision to life.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
- Fairly often (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Once in a while (4)
- Not at all (5)

---

Q18 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide curricular materials that enhance young adolescents' acceptance of self and others and that enable them to accept differences and similarities among people.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q19 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide adequate counseling/advisory opportunities for students.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q20 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) demonstrate an understanding of the intellectual, physical, psychological, and social characteristics of young adolescents.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q21 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the cognitive and affective needs of young adolescents.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q22 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) spend time each day with students.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q23 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide students with opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics in order to develop their identity and demonstrate their competence.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q24 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) develop connections with and involve families in the education of their children.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q25 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide age appropriate, co-curricular (or extra-curricular) activities.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q26 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide students with opportunities to explore, make mistakes, and grow in a safe and caring environment.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q27 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage mature value systems by providing opportunities for students to examine options of behavior and to study consequences of various actions.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q28 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) regard young adolescents as resources in planning and program development and involve them in meaningful roles.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q29 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) make decisions based on young adolescent development and effective middle level practices.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q30 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) allow teachers and students to plan activities that integrate genders.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q31 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) provide time for general education teachers to collaborate with special education teachers in order to meet the diverse needs of young adolescents.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-



Q32 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage teachers to modify time, grouping, and instructional strategies to help individual students achieve mastery of subject matter.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q33 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage teachers to respond to the needs of young adolescents.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q34 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage teachers in the use of a wide variety of instructional approaches and materials.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q35 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage active discovery learning by students rather than teacher lecture.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q36 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage activities such as special interest classes and hands-on learning.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
- Fairly often (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Once in a while (4)
- Not at all (5)

Q37 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) create opportunities for professional development of teachers/staff that address strategies for meeting the needs of young adolescents.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q38 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) support appropriate instructional strategies with the necessary resources (i.e. money, time, etc.)

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
-

Q39 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) encourage teachers to make connections across disciplines to reinforce important concepts.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q40 As a principal of a middle school, I (as a middle school leader) require teachers to provide classroom activities that address the needs of academically diverse learners who vary greatly in readiness, interest, and learning profile.

- Frequently, if not always (1)
  - Fairly often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Once in a while (4)
  - Not at all (5)
- 

Q41 Would you be willing to participate in a focus group to discuss your thoughts about meeting the needs of young adolescents as the transition from the elementary school setting to the middle school setting? If so, please provide your email address in the box below.

---

End of Block: Default Question Block

---

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Protocol

#### Interview Protocol

**Title of the Study:** Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions

Time of the Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer(s): Natia Smith

Confirm receipt of information sheet (emailed to participant before the meeting)

Turn on the Zoom record and audio recorder.

Say:

Thank you for meeting with me this [timeframe]. I appreciate your agreeing to participate in this study. The interview today centers around how middle level leaders respond to the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly as they transition from elementary to middle school. The first question will begin with, Which developmental needs of young adolescents impact the educational experience during the transition to middle school? Then, subsequent questions will address which school structures are needed to support young adolescents as they transition from elementary to middle school, which structures you currently have in place at your school, and finally, your thoughts on what kinds of extended learning opportunities would enhance middle level leaders' responsiveness to the needs of young adolescents as they transition to middle school.

The interview should take between thirty and forty-five minutes. At this time, please provide a verbal acknowledgement of your consent to participate. Additionally, please note that although your images and responses are being recorded, your responses will be transcribed, coded, and analyzed with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. It is also expected that responses will be kept in this setting and I ask that participants respect the anonymity of each member by maintaining confidentiality today. Thank you in advance for participating in this interview today.

Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning  
to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions  
Interview Protocol

1. Which developmental needs of young adolescents impact the educational experience during the transition to middle school?
2. Which school structures are needed to meet young adolescents' developmental needs during the transition to sixth grade?
3. How do the current structures at your site align with the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to middle school?
4. What extended learning opportunities do you think would enhance middle level leaders' responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents during the transition to sixth grade?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses will inform our research, and add to a unique body of literature.

## Appendix C

### Permission to Use AMLLQ



Natia Smith <natia8@vt.edu>

**(no subject)**

5 messages

Natia Smith <natia8@vt.edu>  
To: dana.bickmore@univ.edu

Tue, Mar 23, 2021 at 1:13 PM

Hello, Dr. Bickmore,

I am a doctoral student at Virginia Tech University completing a dissertation in the Educational Leadership and Policy program. I have cited much of your work about middle school leadership and am particularly interested in using the MLLQ that you cited in 2011. I have had a difficult time determining from whom to seek permission and was wondering if you could steer me in the right direction. I have included my request below for your reference.

I am writing to ask permission to use the Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire in my research study. I am researching middle level leadership, particularly middle level leaders' perceptions about their responsiveness during students' transition to sixth grade. My research is being supervised by my professor, Dr. Carol Cash, Program Leader for Educational Leadership.

The MLLQ will be administered to middle level leaders, including principals and assistant principals in two Virginia school divisions. The data collected will identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, supporting the staff working with these students, and the school structures that best meet the needs of young adolescents. I will use all 33 survey questions, but will modify the demographic information. I plan to eliminate the following questions: school name, participant age, gender, and race, and the short answer section requesting any additional information.

Beyond your permission to use the survey, I would also appreciate receiving any materials or protocol used to administer the test and/or analyze the results. I also request permission to reproduce it in my dissertation appendix. The dissertation will be published in \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to use and reproduce the MLLQ under the following conditions:

- I will use the MLLQ only for my research study and will not sell or use it for any other purposes
- I will include a statement of attribution and copyright on all copies of the instrument. If you have a specific statement of attribution that you would like for me to include, please provide it in your response.
- At your request, I will send a copy of my completed research study to you upon completion of the study and/or provide a hyperlink to the final manuscript.

If you do not control the copyright for the MLLQ, I would appreciate any information you can provide concerning the proper person or organization I should contact.

If these are acceptable terms and conditions, please indicate so by replying to me through email at [natia8@vt.edu](mailto:natia8@vt.edu).

Any assistance would be appreciated!

Sincerely,

Natia Smith

---

Dana Bickmore <dana.bickmore@unlv.edu>  
To: Natia Smith <natia8@vt.edu>

Tue, Mar 23, 2021 at 2:21 PM

Natia,

It is great to hear that you are planning on examining middle grades leadership and how middle grades leaders meet student developmental needs. Unfortunately, I do not have the right to give permission for the MLLQ. I am assuming you have this reference:

Anfara, V. A., Roney, K., Smarkola, C., DuCette, J. P., & Gross, S. J. (2006). *The developmentally responsive middle level principal: A leadership model and measurement instrument*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

Dr. Anfara has passed away and I would suggest contacting Dr. Roney to determine who should give permission. Here is her contact information:

### Dr. Kathleen Roney

Professor

Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle, Literacy, and Special Education

Education Building 262  
(910) 962-7195 Phone  
(910) 962-3988 Fax  
roneyk@uncw.edu

I hope this helps.  
Dana

Dana L. Bickmore, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Educational Policy and Leadership  
<http://edleadership.sites.unlv.edu/m-ed-educational-policy-and-leadership/>  
702-895-2560

**Co-Author: The Charter School Principal: A Nuanced Description of Leadership**

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475829310/The-Charter-School-Principal-Nuanced-Descriptions-of-Leadership>

**Co-Author: Unexplored Conditions of Charter Principals**

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475838688/Unexplored-Conditions-of-Charter-School-Principals-An-Examination-of-the-Issues-and-Challenges-for-Leaders>

[Quoted text hidden]

---

Natia Smith <natia8@vt.edu>  
To: Dana Bickmore <dana.bickmore@unlv.edu>, "Cash, Carol" <ccash48@vt.edu>

Tue, Apr 6, 2021 at 5:30 PM

Hello, Dr. Bickmore-Thank you for your response and suggestion to reach out to Dr. Roney. I reached out to her, but unfortunately have not heard back. I would love to use the existing survey as I would like to have results that can be comparable to past studies.

Might you be able to assist me further in securing permission to use the MLLQ?

I have also included my chair and program director, Dr. Carol Cash, as we are working to seek permission on all fronts! Again, thank you for your consideration.



10/25/22, 4:53 PM

Virginia Tech Mail - (no subject)

Natia Smith  
[Quoted text hidden]

Dana Bickmore <dana.bickmore@unlv.edu>  
To: Natia Smith <natia8@vt.edu>  
Cc: "Cash, Carol" <ccash48@vt.edu>, roneyk@uncw.edu

Thu, Apr 8, 2021 at 5:06 PM

Natia,

I am sorry you have not heard from Dr. Roney. I am cc'ing her again on this missive in hopes she can weigh in on this email.

Originally, I had to receive permission to use the MLLQ from Dr. Anfara, however the instrument was published by the National Middle School Association (now AMLE) after I received permission.

Anfara, V. A., Roney, K., Smarkola, C., DuCette, J. P., & Gross, S. J. (2006). *The developmentally responsive middle level principal: A leadership model and measurement instrument*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

As a result I see two ways you may be able to use the Instrument.

1. In my research (Bickmore, D. L. (2011). *Confirming a Middle Grades Leadership Model and Instrument*. *RMLE Online*, 34(10), 1-15) I tested MLLQ with a **principal only** sample using Form A. I renamed the principal instrument the **Adapted MLLQ**. I give you permission to use the Adapted MLLQ, however, the actual questions are the same as the MLLQ form A. If you use the Instrument with the term **Adapted MLLQ and use it with principals only**, my permission may be adequate.
2. Since the Instrument was published by AMLE in 2006, you may be able to cite the book and that would be adequate. You may also seek permission from AMLE, especially if you want to use the teacher form.

I would check with your advisor, Dr. Cash, to see if either of these options seems appropriate.

I would love to have you continue the work of the MLLQ and DRMLL. I hope that these options will help you with finding a way to continue.

Dana

Dana L. Bickmore, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Educational Policy and Leadership  
<http://edleadership.sites.unlv.edu/m-ed-educational-policy-and-leadership/>  
702-895-2560

**Co-Author: The Charter School Principal: A Nuanced Description of Leadership**  
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475829310/The-Charter-School-Principal-Nuanced-Descriptions-of-Leadership>

**Co-Author: Unexplored Conditions of Charter Principals**  
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475838688/Unexplored-Conditions-of-Charter-School-Principals-An-Examination-of-the-Issues-and-Challenges-for-Leaders>

[Quoted text hidden]

Natia Smith <natia8@vt.edu>  
To: "Cash, Carol" <ccash48@vt.edu>

Fri, Apr 9, 2021 at 10:00 AM

Good morning. Considering I am only using the principal form, technically the Adapted MLLQ, her suggestion may be the way to go!

[Quoted text hidden]

**Appendix D**  
**IRB Training Certificate**



Completion Date 03-Nov-2021  
Expiration Date 02-Nov-2024  
Record ID 45902509

This is to certify that:

**Natia Smith**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Social & Behavioral Research**  
(Curriculum Group)  
**Social & Behavioral Research**  
(Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic Course**  
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)**

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w7130efad-ac81-465a-9325-76a439a037c1-45902509](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w7130efad-ac81-465a-9325-76a439a037c1-45902509)

## Appendix E

### IRB Approval



Division of Scholarly Integrity and  
Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)  
300 Turner Street NW  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-3732  
irb@vt.edu  
<http://www.research.vt.edu/irohrpp>

#### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** December 20, 2021

**TO:** Ted S Price, Natia Keem Smith

**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Middle School Leaders's Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions

**IRB NUMBER:** 21-914

Effective December 1, 2021, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(i),2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

#### PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(i),2(ii)**  
Protocol Determination Date: **December 1, 2021**

#### ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

*Invent the Future*

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY  
*An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution*

**SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:**

\*\*\*Please note: The HRPP office has stopped stamping documents for Exempt protocols. It is your responsibility to maintain these documents and make current versions available on request.

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

\* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the HRPP office ([irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)) immediately.

**Appendix F**  
**School Division Approval**



Department of Strategic Planning and Partnerships

312 Cedar Road  
Chesapeake, Virginia 23322  
(757) 547-5562

December 6, 2021

Natia Smith  
Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech

Dear Ms. Smith:

Your request to conduct research for your doctoral degree at Virginia Tech is approved. Specifically, you are approved to conduct your research – *Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions*. The approval is granted with the understanding that the following conditions will apply:

- o Participation of school personnel is strictly voluntary. Approval to contact specific groups does not guarantee participation.
- o Names of individuals, school names, or the name of the school district cannot be used in the reporting of your data or your findings without prior permission from the Department of Strategic Planning and Partnerships.
- o All copies, distribution, retrieval of materials, and arrangement of interviews/collections will be your responsibility.
- o Questions/procedures must be limited to those detailed in your proposal and submitted to Chesapeake Public Schools in your request to conduct research application.

You may use this letter as a cover letter when contacting administrators and teachers in Chesapeake. However, please be advised that all contact and distribution will be your responsibility. Should you have further questions, feel free to contact me at [Molly.Sullivan@cpschools.com](mailto:Molly.Sullivan@cpschools.com). Best wishes with your research study and continued pursuit of your educational goals.

Sincerely,

Molly L. Sullivan, Ed. D.  
Supervisor of Strategic Initiatives  
(Research Review)




Office of Equity, Assessment, and Strategic Operations

12465 Warwick Blvd., Newport News, VA 23606-3041 • phone: 757-283-7850 • fax: 757-595-2017

DATE: December 15, 2021

TO: Natia K. Smith

FROM: Danielle H. Ross   
Research Authorization Committee

SUBJECT: Research Authorization Request, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, IRB #21-914

TITLE: Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions

Thank you for submitting your research authorization request to Newport News Public Schools. After a thorough review of your request and accompanying documentation, I am pleased to inform you that your study has been approved for data collection.

Please note that the standard conditions of approval made by Newport News Public Schools are:

- a) Conduct the study strictly in accordance with the proposal as submitted, including any amendments or revisions made to the proposal as required by Newport News Public Schools;
- b) Make submission for approval of amendments to the approved study before implementing such changes;
- c) Provide Newport News Public Schools with an executive summary upon completion of the study;
- d) Advise Newport News Public Schools in writing if the study is discontinued.

Additionally, please note the Newport News Public Schools does not provide research assistance, and cannot assist with contacting administrators, teachers, and/or students pursuant to your study.

APPROVAL NUMBER: SY2122-04

## Appendix G

### Request for Participation in the Study

Study Cover Letter and Invitation to Participate Final Notice

Subject Line: FINAL REMINDER: Invitation to Participate in a Middle School Leadership Study

#### FINAL (WEEK 3)

Over the past two weeks, an email invitation has been sent seeking your participation in a research study about middle school leadership. Thank you to those of you who have already completed and submitted the survey.

If you have not already completed the survey, this is a final reminder to participate. The original email is included, along with the informed consent agreement. The link is included again here for your quick access. The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Please note that your completion of the survey will imply your consent to participate in the research study. You may withdraw from this research study at any time.

If you will consider participating in a follow up focus group interview via Zoom, please indicate your intent at the end of the survey. The focus group interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be recorded with participant permission using the Zoom feature to do so.

#### LINK TO SURVEY:

My research study, titled "Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions" is being conducted to identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly during the transition to middle school.

The deadline to submit the survey is quickly approaching (**include date, pending approval**).

Please note that your completion of the survey will imply your consent to participate in the research study. You may withdraw from this research study at any time.

If you will consider participating in a follow up focus group interview via Zoom, please indicate your intent at the end of the survey. The focus group interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be recorded with participant permission using the Zoom feature to do so.

Please see the original email for points of contact in regards to the research study and/or the study's procedures.

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey!

Natia Smith

Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech

#### REMINDER (WEEK 2)

Last week, an email invitation was sent to you to seek your participation in a survey about middle school leadership. A sincere thank you to those who have already completed and submitted the survey.

### Study Cover Letter and Invitation to Participate Final Notice

If you have not already completed the survey, this is a reminder to participate. The original email is included, along with the informed consent agreement. The link is included again here for your quick access. The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete.

#### LINK TO SURVEY:

My research study, titled "Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions" is being conducted to identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly during the transition to middle school.

The deadline to submit the survey is quickly approaching (include date, pending approval).

Please note that your completion of the survey will imply your consent to participate in the research study. You may withdraw from this research study at any time.

If you will consider participating in a follow up focus group interview via Zoom, please indicate your intent at the end of the survey. The focus group interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be recorded with participant permission using the Zoom feature to do so.

Please see the original email for points of contact in regards to the research study and/or the study's procedures.

Again, I express gratitude for you taking the time to complete the survey!

Natia Smith

Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech

#### ORIGINAL (WEEK 1)

Dear Middle School Leader,

I am reaching out to request that you take a few moments to complete a survey about middle school leadership.

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. My research study, titled "Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in Two Virginia School Divisions" is being conducted to identify middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents, particularly during the transition to middle school.

The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) has reviewed my research study (IRB Protocol Number: 21-914) and it has been approved by your school division's Research Authorization Committee. To complete this research study, I am requesting that middle school leaders in two school divisions participate in a survey that will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey will collect some demographic data and middle school leaders' perceptions of their level of responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents. I am also



### Study Cover Letter and Invitation to Participate Final Notice

seeking participants to take part in a focus group interview to capture additional insight into leadership during the transition to middle school. Survey participants will indicate their willingness to be interviewed at the conclusion of the electronic survey.

Participation in the survey and interview is completely voluntary; anonymity will be maintained to the greatest extent possible. No identifying information will be collected nor link participants to a particular school. No data collected will have any effect on employment. Data obtained from the survey and interview will be analyzed and reported as part of my dissertation defense. Upon successful completion of the program, results will be shared as publishing occurs and only to discuss implications for middle school leadership and middle school leadership during the transition to middle school.

I have included a detailed Information Sheet, which provides additional details about the research study, confidentiality, participation and withdrawal from the study, as well as how the collected data will be used, managed, and protected. If you do not wish to participate in the study, please reply to this email with the word *remove* to be exempt from any additional communications about this research study. There will be no negative effects from being removed.

If you have questions pertaining to this research study, please do not hesitate to reach out to a member of the research team:

Natia Smith (804) 433-6586 or [natia8@vt.edu](mailto:natia8@vt.edu)

Dr. Ted Price (804) 869-2015 or [pted7@vt.edu](mailto:pted7@vt.edu)

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study's conduct, your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research related injury or event, please contact:

VT HRPP (540) 231-3732 or [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu) [IRB Protocol Number: 21-914]

Please access the survey at the link below. Please complete the survey by **(date contingent on approval and submission)**

Survey Link:

Please note that your completion of the survey will imply your consent to participate in the research study. You may withdraw from this research study at any time.

If you will consider participating in a follow up focus group interview via Zoom, please indicate your intent at the end of the survey. The focus group interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be recorded with participant permission using the Zoom feature to do so.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to take the time to contribute to this research study.

Natia Smith

Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech

**Appendix H**  
**Study Information Sheet**



**Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study**

Principal Investigator: Ted Price, PhD (804) 869-2015 [pted7@vt.edu](mailto:pted7@vt.edu) and  
Natia Smith, Doctoral Candidate (804) 433-6586 [natia8@vt.edu](mailto:natia8@vt.edu)

IRB# and Title of Study: 21-914 Middle School Leaders' Responsiveness to  
the Needs of the Sixth Grade Student Transitioning to Middle School in  
Two Virginia School Divisions

Sponsor: NA

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about  
the study and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of  
my course work.

➤ **WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete an electronic survey and may  
participate in a follow up focus group interview if you choose to. As part of the study,  
you will indicate your level of responsiveness to the needs of young adolescents and  
share how you and your school meet the needs of the sixth grade student as they  
transition to middle school. Descriptive data will be collected through completion of the  
survey and anecdotal data will be collected through optional participation in the  
interview. The focus group interview will be conducted virtually using the Zoom format  
and be recorded to allow the researcher to transcribe and analyze responses to  
contribute to a greater understanding of middle school leadership and the middle level  
leaders' responsiveness to adolescents as they transition to middle school.

The survey should take approximately 15 minutes of your time. The voluntary interview portion will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. Your consent to participate will be collected prior to recording.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study. The researcher anticipates that the time involved (maximum time if participating in both the electronic survey and focus group interview will be approximately one hour) may serve as a slight inconvenience.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

### ➤ CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Your survey responses will be anonymous, so no one can associate your answers back to you. Please do not include your name or other identifying information in your responses that can identify you. If you choose to participate in the focus group interview, your email address will be collected, but not associated with your survey responses. The focus group interview will be conducted virtually using the Zoom format. Your consent to participate will be acknowledged prior to recording.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio- and video-recorded using Zoom features and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer in the researcher's office. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

### ➤ WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Ted Price, PhD. at (804) 869-2015 or [pted7@vt.edu](mailto:pted7@vt.edu) or Natia Smith at (804) 433-6586 or [natia8@vt.edu](mailto:natia8@vt.edu). You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding

your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 ([irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)).

## Appendix I

### AMLLQ Results

Question #	Response					Freq	Often	Some times	Once	Not	Freq	1	1	
1 (DIV)	CPS 12	NNPS 19									Often	2	4	
2 (Cur Pos)	AP 22	PR 3									Some	3	9	
3 (Yrs Tch)	0Y 1	0-5Y 4	6-10Y 12	11-15Y 11	20Y+ 3						Once	4	16	
4 (Yrs MS Ldrshp)	0-3Y 3	4-7Y 5	8-10Y 4	10Y+ 13							Not	5	25	
5 (Educ)	M 11	M+ 10	DR 10											
6 (Cert)	MS 1	SEC 2	K12 28											
											<b>Total</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mean2</b>	<b>SD</b>
8						14	10	5	2	0	31	1.83871	4.225806	1.545023
9						13	8	8	0	2	31	2.032258	5.387097	1.831622
10						6	9	10	1	5	31	2.677419	8.806452	2.475688
11						6	7	10	2	6	31	2.83871	9.870968	2.651841
12						4	14	5	2	6	31	2.741935	9.258065	2.552671
13						11	8	8	3	1	31	2.193548	6.064516	1.967478
14						26	3	1	0	1	31	1.290323	2.322581	1.016001
15						8	14	9	0	0	31	2.032258	4.677419	1.626395
16						11	11	6	1	2	31	2.096774	5.645161	1.883716
17						17	12	1	1	0	31	1.548387	2.903226	1.163975
18						7	11	7	4	2	31	2.451613	7.354839	2.214323
19						14	11	5	1	0	31	1.774194	3.83871	1.436842
20						22	8	1	0	0	31	1.322581	2.032258	0.842424
21						18	11	2	0	0	31	1.483871	2.58064	1.04727
22						28	3	0	0	0	31	1.096774	1.290323	0.439941
23						3	16	7	2	3	31	2.548387	7.645161	2.257604
24						10	15	3	3	0	31	1.967742	4.677419	1.64611
25						12	11	6	2	0	31	1.935484	4.580645	1.626395
26						15	15	1	0	0	31	1.548387	2.709677	1.077632
27						8	15	5	2	1	31	2.129032	5.483871	1.831622
28						2	13	14	1	1	31	2.548387	7.129032	2.140244
29						16	13	2	0	0	31	1.548387	2.774194	1.107161
30						13	14	2	1	1	31	1.806452	4.129032	1.524002
31						20	8	1	1	0	30	1.433333	2.566667	1.064581
32						17	11	2	0	1	31	1.612903	3.354839	1.319824
33						30	1	0	0	0	31	1.032258	1.096774	0.254
34						22	8	1	0	0	31	1.322581	2.032258	0.842424
35						15	10	5	1	0	31	1.741935	3.741935	1.414214
36						14	13	2	2	0	31	1.741935	3.741935	1.414214
37						11	14	4	2	0	31	1.903226	4.354839	1.565763
38						15	11	3	1	1	31	1.774194	4.096774	1.524002
39						13	11	6	1	0	31	1.83871	4.096774	1.502686
40						16	10	4	0	0	31	1.6	3.066667	1.21106
<b>Students</b>						84	121	5	16	8	279	2.078853	5.283154	1.790056
<b>Staff</b>						233	130	29	7	2	401	1.541147	2.932668	1.179628
<b>Structures</b>						153	112	696	14	24	372	2.043011	5.5	1.859298