Responsive

> Using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made.
>
> *This We Believe*

Since the beginning of the middle school movement in the 1960's, student-centred pedagogy that is developmentally responsive has been a fundamental distinguishing feature (Alexander & Williams, 1965; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; George, 2011; NMSA, 2010). As explained by Thornton (2013), "the middle school movement is grounded in the notion of the developmentally responsive practitioner" and this "commitment to developmental responsiveness affects all decisions related to organization, policy, curriculum, instruction and assessment" (p. 2). To be responsive in their pedagogy and practice, educators must understand the unique nature of young adolescents. This understanding includes an awareness of the physical, cognitive, social-emotional and psychological changes that typically occur during this phase of development.

However, focusing on typical development and characterization based on general traits of the young adolescent can be limiting and often over-emphasizes deficits or stereotypes. Being responsive is about much more than understanding child development and puberty. A broader understanding of responsive practices considers individual contexts and experiences including factors such as home circumstances, race, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and social class (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Vagle, 2015; Yoon et al., 2015). By taking these factors into consideration, educators adopt a more holistic, nuanced, and inclusive approach to meeting the needs of each young adolescent than offered by the limited perspective of developmental traits.

When getting to know young adolescent learners and responding to their needs, educators must consider cultural and social identity (Branson and Marra 2019; Khalifa, Gooden and Davis 2016). Culturally responsive pedagogy builds on students' diverse and rich cultural backgrounds and experiences to enhance learning and engage learners (Farinde-Wu, Glover and Williams 2017). Examples of cultural influences and practices include fasting, prayer routines, hunting season, clothing and holidays.

In terms of social identity, young adolescents may experience marginalization based on race, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation. They may also experience challenges as a result of their home circumstances (such as having to care for younger siblings, work part-time or translate for their parents). Hurtado-Prater (2021, 32) recommends adopting a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) mindset of "recognition, acceptance, appreciation and respect of the uniqueness and differences that exist within humanity

and people combined with providing the necessary resources to ensure every individual has the essential tools needed to be successful."

In essence, educators are encouraged to consider each young adolesceNT within their particular context, and shift away from a limiting developmental approach to young adolesceNCE (Vagle, 2015). Recognizing that young adolescents experience "rapid, and many times tumultuous emotional, physical, social and intellectual development...in a very random and unpredictable manner" (Howell, 2012, p. 53) remains relevant. This awareness of developmental traits is enhanced by responsive approaches that considers and supports each young adolescent within their unique context. In this way, educators are encouraged to embrace developmental responsiveness within a broader understanding of responsive pedagogy.

Practices That Are Responsive

The following examples were provided by middle level educators at the MYC's 2023 annual conference.

Student Clubs

A rural middle school educator described how students went from annoying each other on the playground to being engaged in a variety of student clubs that her school now offers. Staff supervise the clubs, which are based on student interests.

Exploratory Option Courses

The middle grades are a perfect time for students to expand their horizons by taking a wide variety of option courses, such as career and technology foundations (CTF) courses. These option courses can be based on student and teacher interests.

Alternative Learning Environments

Some schools provide breakout spaces as alternative learning environments for students to use when they need to regulate, need a quiet place to work or need to catch up on missing assignments. A quiet study space and a "zen den" are examples.

Leadership Opportunities

In many schools, students in the middle grades can take on leadership and mentorship roles. Examples of opportunities to develop student leaders include clubs, sports, reading buddies, cross-grade and cross-curricular activities, grade-level or leadership retreats, Genius Hour or passion projects, and student-led activities (such as Walk for Wenjack).[6]

Meeting Student Needs

One educator pointed out that a positive behavioural interventions and supports (PBIS) approach is responsive, as it identifies universal, targeted and individual supports for

students.[7]

Essential Attribute: Responsive
Using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made. (*TWB*)
TQS Indicators *Fostering Effective Relationships* 1.(c) Providing culturally appropriate and meaningful opportunities for students and for parents/guardians, as partners in education, to support student learning. 1.(f) Honouring cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understanding. *Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge* 3.(a) Planning and designing learning activities that consider student variables, including demographics; social and economic factors; maturity; relationships amongst students; prior knowledge and learning; cultural and linguistic background; second language learning; health and well-being; emotional and mental health; and physical, social and cognitive ability. *Establishing Inclusive Learning Environments* 4.(g) Incorporating students' personal and cultural strengths into teaching and learning. *Applying Foundational Knowledge About First Nations, Métis and Inuit* 5.(d) Supporting the learning experiences of all students by using resources that accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit.
LQS Indicators *Fostering Effective Relationships* 1.(b) Demonstrating empathy and a genuine concern for others. 1.(g) Acting consistently in the best interests of students. *Leading a Learning Community* 4.(b) Creating an inclusive learning environment in which diversity is embraced, a sense of belonging is emphasized, and all students and staff are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe. *Providing Instructional Leadership* 6.(a) Building the capacity of teachers to respond to the learning needs of all students. *Managing School Operations and Resources* 8.(b) Applying principles of effective teaching and learning, child development and ethical leadership to all decisions. *Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context* 9.(b) Representing the needs of students at the community, school authority and provincial levels.