The Responsive Classroom® approach for improving interactions with children

Educators and policy makers often ask, “If we focus our attention on children's social learning, will we diminish their academic achievement?” Sara Rimm-Kaufman discusses one approach designed to support both these aspects of learning.

The Responsive Classroom® approach

Second, teachers who use the Responsive Classroom approach spend time and effort creating caring classroom environments. For example, teachers use daily Morning Meetings to give their students opportunities for positive social interactions with each other. As another example, teachers use positive teacher language (e.g., language that is direct and simple and shows respect) to promote children's sense of community and active learning. Taken together, these elements support children's development of cooperation with one another, self-control, and positive social exchanges throughout the school day.

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Two aspects of the Responsive Classroom approach stand out most prominently. First, teachers who use the Responsive Classroom approach favor proactive over reactive approaches to organizing and managing their classrooms. Teachers use interactive modeling to teach students the norms of classroom behavior (e.g., children watch their teacher show a skill such as pencil sharpening or table wiping and then imitate his/her actions). Teachers use a collaborative approach to rule creation to empower students to create classroom rules that foster cooperation and respect.

Research findings on the Responsive Classroom approach

Current research on the RC approach offers promising findings. Children enrolled in classrooms using the RC approach appear to show more improvement in their social skills compared to children who are not enrolled in these classrooms. Specifically, teachers’ use of RC practices contributed positively to teachers’ perception of closeness with their students, children's assertiveness, and children's prosocial behavior. In addition, children in classrooms using the RC approach reported greater enjoyment of school, and more positive feelings about learning, teachers, and fellow students.

Further, research has been conducted on how the RC approach relates to teachers’ experience of teaching. Studies examining teachers’ self-efficacy and attitudes toward teaching show that teachers using more RC practices perceived themselves as more effective in relation to discipline, their ability to create a positive school climate, and their ability to influence decision-making at their school. Teachers at RC schools held more positive attitudes toward teaching than those at schools not using the RC approach.

Finally, researchers have examined the relationship between teachers’ use of the RC approach and children's achievement. Results show that children in classrooms using the RC approach show greater achievement gains in math and reading compared to children in classrooms using conventional practices. The achievement gains were larger in math than reading. Results were equivalent for children from family backgrounds that place them at risk of school failure versus children with more typical family backgrounds.

Teachers face challenges balancing their goals to meet children's social and emotional needs with academic learning. Although most teachers strive to create classrooms that offer both pleasant social environments and academic challenge, the daily demands on teachers make it difficult for them to be responsive and sensitive to children while also creating stimulating academic environments. The Responsive Classroom® (RC) approach offers a set of principles and practices designed to support elementary school teachers’ efforts. Examples of these principles and practices can be found in Figure 1.

The developers of the Responsive Classroom approach, Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC), have developed training sessions for teachers to learn RC principles and practices. One-day workshops introduce teachers to the principles and practices, and one-week institutes offer further instruction. It takes time and support to create changes in teaching practices. To meet those needs, NEFC offers follow-up school-based consultations to support learning, as well as assistance with school-wide implementation to create consistent and sustained use of the RC approach.

Additional resources:
- Responsive Classroom® (RC) approach
- NEFC website
- Responsive Classroom® training sessions
- Responsive Classroom® one-week institutes
- Responsive Classroom® one-day workshops

For more information, please visit the Responsive Classroom® website at responsiveclassroom.org.

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Given the present findings, it is worth asking: What supports need to be present in order for teachers to use the RC approach? Like many social and emotional learning interventions, teachers have an easier time implementing the practices when they feel well-supported by the administrators and principals in their district, and when teachers perceive that all the adults in the school environment offer consistency in their interactions with students.

**Current Research on the Responsive Classroom approach**

The RC approach offers principles and practices that are consistent with well-grounded theory and research in education and developmental psychology. Further, existing research offers promising and positive findings. Recent trends in education science point to the importance of both the quality and quantity of evidence for establishing the credibility of interventions used in schools.

**What we know**

Teachers who use Responsive Classroom practices:
- feel more effective at handling discipline issues and hold more positive attitudes toward teaching;
- have students who feel more positive toward their teachers, classmates, and learning;
- enhance children’s academic learning, as measured by standardized math and reading tests.

The findings reported here are based on a quasi-experimental study, meaning that there is a need for a more rigorous test of the effectiveness of the Responsive Classroom approach. In other words, research up to this point suggests the contribution of the Responsive Classroom approach, but does not allow us to make causal inferences about the effect of the Responsive Classroom approach.

**Guiding principles of the Responsive Classroom approach**

- The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- How children learn is as important as what they learn: Process and content go hand in hand.
- The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- To be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
- Knowing the children we teach – individually, culturally, and developmentally – is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- Knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children’s education.
- How the adults at school work together is as important as their individual competence: Lasting change begins with the adult community.

Taken from [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)

**Examples of Responsive Classroom practices**

- **Morning Meeting** – Gathering as a whole class each morning to greet one another, share news, and warm up for the day ahead.
- **Rule Creation** – Helping students create classroom rules to ensure an environment that allows all class members to meet their learning goals.
- **Interactive Modeling** – Teaching children to notice and internalize expected behaviors through modeling techniques.
- **Positive Teacher Language** – Using words and tone as a tool to promote children’s active learning, sense of community, and self-discipline.
- **Logical Consequences** – Responding to misbehavior in a way that allows children to fix and learn from their mistakes while preserving their dignity.
- **Guided Discovery** – Introducing classroom materials using a format that encourages independence, creativity, and responsibility.
- **Academic Choice** – Increasing student learning by allowing students teacher-structured choices in their work.
- **Classroom Organization** – Setting up the physical room in ways that encourage students’ independence, cooperation, and productivity.
- **Working with Families** – Creating avenues for hearing parents’ insights and helping them understand the school’s teaching approaches.
- **Collaborative Problem Solving** – Using conferencing, role playing, and other strategies to resolve problems with students.

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**Further reading**


**About the author**

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