
“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”

~William Arthur Ward
Problem Statement

The area of social skills is becoming an increasing concern for teachers today. Children come to school lacking the social graces and skills necessary to effectively and productively communicate and interact with each other. There has been an increase in awareness surrounding the importance of social skills instruction. With this concern and awareness in mind, I decided to research an approach involving the implementation of strategies that focus on social skills instruction as well as academic instruction. This approach is known as Responsive Classroom.

It was important to understand the history, development, philosophy and desired outcomes behind this approach before considering personal implementation. I started from the “ground up” so to speak to lay a foundation of information, knowledge and vision surrounding Responsive Classroom to build upon. I decided to first narrow my focus to “What is Responsive Classroom Theory, how does this approach look and how is it implemented?”. Once a foundation of conceptual understanding was established, I was then able to further extend my investigation of research findings involving case studies where a Responsive Classroom approach was applied and finally, begin consideration for implementation in my own teaching. A compilation of various resources was utilized for this paper. They include: books, websites, newsletters, and journals.

Definition/Description (History and Founding Premise Behind Responsive Classroom)

Responsive Classroom is an approach to teaching and learning designed to help educators create safe, challenging, and joyful classrooms and schools, K-8. Developed by classroom teachers, this approach consists of practical strategies for bringing together social and academic learning throughout the school day (The Responsive Classroom, Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002).

A group of teachers founded the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC) in 1981 and co-developed the Responsive Classroom approach. The NEFC develops and promotes the principles and practices of the Responsive Classroom approach to learning, teaching, and school renewal. Their goal is to help create learning environments where children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (The Responsive Classroom, Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002). A Responsive Classroom approach focuses on building such skills as cooperation, healthy assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. The NEFC promotes this approach through teacher workshops, summer institutes, publications, and long-term collaboration with teachers, administrators, schools, and school districts.

RC is also an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to balance teaching of academic skills with the teaching of social skills as an integral part of everyday school
Application & Implications (*Responsive Classroom Components*)

Developed by classroom teachers, a Responsive Classroom approach consists of practical strategies for bringing together social and academic learning throughout the school day. In a Responsive Classroom approach there are 7 Guiding Principles:

1. Social curriculum is as important as academic curriculum.
2. How children learn is as important as what they learn: Process and content go hand in hand.
3. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
4. There is a specific set of social skills children need in order to be successful academically and socially: Cooperation, Assertion, Responsibility, Empathy, and Self Control (CARES).
5. Knowing the children we teach individually, culturally, and developmentally is as important as knowing the content we teach.
6. Knowing the families of the children we teach and inviting their participation is essential to children’s education.
7. How the adults at school work together is as important as individual competence; lasting change begins with the adult community.

In combination with the above listed guided principles are the 6 Key Components of classroom practice strategies that teach these skills in the Responsive Classroom approach. The teaching strategies include ([www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)):

1. **Classroom Organization**—A variety of strategies for school time, arranging materials, furniture, and displays to encourage independence, promote positive social interaction, and maximize learning. Space is provided for active interest areas for students, student-created displays of work, and an appropriate mix of whole class, group and individual interaction and instruction. (*The Responsive Classroom*, NEFC, is a helpful resource)

2. **Morning Meeting**—A daily routine that builds community, creates a positive climate for learning, and reinforces academic and social skills. The meeting consists of four components: greeting, sharing, group activity, and news and announcement. (*The Morning Meeting Book*, NEFC, and *The Responsive Classroom*, NEFC—recommended resources).
3. **Rules and Logical Consequences**—A clear and consistent approach to discipline that fosters self-discipline, self-control, and social responsibility. These are generated, modeled and role-played with students, and become the cornerstone of classroom life. (Charney, Ruth, *Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom*, NEFC and *The Responsive Classroom*, NEFC—recommended reference resources).

4. **Academic Choice**—A practical approach to giving students choices in their learning to help them become independent, self-motivated learners. Through differentiated instructional strategies, students have the opportunity to make choices about their learning within content areas. It encourages students to take control of their own learning in a meaningful way, both individually and cooperatively. (*The Responsive Classroom*, NEFC—recommended resource).

5. **Guided Discovery**—A structured format for introducing materials and areas of the classroom that encourages inquiry, active learning, and care of the school environment. (Charney, Ruth, *Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom*, NEFC and *The Responsive Classroom*, NEFC—recommended resources).

6. **Family Communication Strategies**—A range of ideas for involving families as partners in their children’s education. This is an evolving process of communication and understanding. (*The Responsive Classroom*, NEFC—recommended resource).

These components can be implemented independently or together to enhance the social and academic curriculum of any classroom or school. This approach is not a package, but rather the outcome of years of classroom experimentation and professional-development work with educators around the U.S. Implemented gradually, these components help build a cohesive social curriculum shaped around the particular demographic and community needs of a school. ([www.originsonline](http://www.originsonline))

By implementing the 7 Guiding Principles and 6 Key Components, the intent is to achieve the following desired outcomes: establish a positive classroom climate, increase learner investment and independence, enhance academic and social competence, decrease problem behaviors, a balance of teacher-directed instruction and child-initiated learning, student responsibility for work and environment, caring behavior, problem-solving ability both socially and academically and parental involvement and understanding. The Responsive Classroom approach has an established set of core classroom rules along with school-wide strategies to be implemented as well.

One of the fundamental beliefs behind the Responsive Classroom approach is that an understanding of child development is critical to good teaching practice. Teachers who understand child development adjust the curriculum based on their knowledge of each child’s physical, social, and emotional growth as well as on their understanding of the
group’s needs. Here are a few markers of what a developmental curriculum might look like (NEFC, *The Responsive Classroom*, 2002):

- Children have time during the day to be active and explore their environment.
- The teacher and the environment provide opportunities for children to experiment, solve problems, and make fruitful mistakes.
- Teachers use an inquiry approach, asking thoughtful, open-ended questions that stimulate and stretch children’s thinking.
- Each day, children make choices about learning.
- Teachers pay careful attention to how children treat each other and reinforce respect and caring as the basis for interaction.
- Children’s ideas, creations, and discoveries are valued and displayed around the room.
- Teachers spend a part of each day observing children at work; what teachers learn from these observations informs how they teach.
- To address individual learning styles and needs, teachers offer a variety of paths toward learning.
- Children’s work is measured and evaluated against developmental milestones.

**Facts, Statistics, Incidence**

In a classroom in which students’ voices are honored, the teacher gains access to information about children’s perspectives and subjective experiences that promotes responsiveness to children’s educational, social, affective, and physical needs (Dewey, 1904; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Oldfather, 1991; Weinstein, 1989). Rohrkemper (1989) proposed a Vygotskian perspective on adaptive learning that emphasizes the role of classroom interactions. Rohrkemper defined adaptive learning as “the ability to take charge of frustration and maintain the interior to learn while enacting effective take strategies in the face of uncertainty—taking charge of one’s motivation, emotion, and thinking” (1989, Elementary School Journal). Rohrkemper emphasized the importance of interactions with others, as well as with tasks, in working through problems with difficult learning.

Rohrkemper and Corno found that children can learn important adaptive strategies when they are confronted with stressful situations, and argued that these adaptive strategies can and should be deliberately promoted within classrooms. As students learn to cope with stress and boredom and to respond flexibly to new situations, they become able to take control of their own learning (1988, Elementary School Journal). They conclude that participating in the class not only enhances students’ motivation but also teachers will understand the students’ needs, and students can learn important adaptive strategies as well (http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu).
Research-Based Findings

In Monrovia, CA, Plymouth School began a Responsive Classroom program in the 1997/98 school year and saw changes rather quickly. The Plymouth School completed its first year of the Responsive Classroom program in the spring of 1998, with all 630 students in 31 classes participating. All adults in the building—not only teachers, but also secretaries, custodians, and other building staff—participated in the training so that messages and expectations would be consistent throughout the school. A general consensus among the staff indicated a change in the children’s attitudes and behaviors. The students were developing more empathy for each other and were better able to see another person’s point of view. There were also fewer discipline referrals, and kids seemed to be able to cooperate better. The principal felt a more orderly environment where kids are safer was created (The Harvard Education Letter, www.edletter.org).

I found several research pieces regarding the effectiveness of Responsive Classroom and they all indicate positive findings. One particular study found that students exposed to Responsive Classroom theory practices over the course of a school year generally were perceived to exhibit higher levels of social skills and fewer problem behaviors than those with limited or no exposure. These finding help up across racially diverse sub-samples (a one-year study done in West Haven, CT by Dr. Stephen N. Elliott of University of Wisconsin in 1993). Dr. Elliott conducted another study of 301 Responsive Classroom and control group students in the Springfield, MA public schools. Using three social skills measurement instruments and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) to measure academic achievement, Elliott found that over the 1996-97 school year:

- 34 percent of students in Responsive Classroom classes showed reliable improvement in social skills, while only 20 percent of students in the control group did;
- 30 percent of all students in Responsive Classroom classes showed reliable improvement in problem behaviors, while only 10 percent of students in the control group did;
- ITBS scores rose 22 percent for the Responsive Classroom students and 3 percent for the control group students;
- There is a correlation (determined by regression analysis) between social skills improvement and improved ITBS scores.

Elliott, who has also studied Responsive Classroom programs in other settings, says he sees the changes effected by the program occurring in several “waves”: “In the first wave of change, problem behaviors decrease. This creates the opportunity for more prosocial behaviors to replace some of the problem behaviors. And these prosocial behaviors serve as quite powerful academic enablers for a good 30-40 percent of the students we work with.” Dr. Elliott concluded, after numerous studies, results were duplicating previous findings. Repeatedly it was found that students exposed to Responsive Classroom practices over the course of a school year generally were perceived to exhibit higher levels of social skills and fewer problem behaviors than those
with limited or no exposure. These findings held up across racially diverse sub-samples (www.responsiveclassroom.org).

Another research case done by Oldfather (1993) included a series of 41 in-depth interviews over an eight month period and included 95 hours of observations involving 48 classrooms. The following is Oldfather’s conclusions about responsive classroom culture and motivation.

“A deeply responsive classroom culture that honors student voices supports both motivational and ethical goals in the following ways” (www.indiana.edu):

- It develops a community of learners that promotes the maintenance and enhancement of caring (Noddings, 1984);
- It gives teachers access to important insights for meeting children’s educational needs;
- It alleviates motivational struggles and promotes students’ perceptions of self-determination, and thus their ownership of their own learning agenda.”

Oldfather (1992) stated the responsive classroom environment has the potential to nurture students’ ownership of learning. The constructive process of each individual learner is respected. The teacher “shares the ownership of knowing”. This stance changes the power relations in the classroom. Connected teachers create a caring community of learners that encourages risk taking. Everyone in the community (including teachers) teaches, as well as learns. Connected teachers invite students’ collaboration in the construction of meaning, and they nurture students’ voices by facilitating “the having of wonderful ideas” (Duckworth, 1987). In such an environment, students become more fully engaged in their learning.

Weakness in Research

One weakness in the overall body of SEL (social and emotional learning) research is that many evaluations (including Responsive Classroom) have been commissioned or conducted by the organizations whose programs are under evaluation. SEL advocates agree that more independent research is needed. Second, the research does little to answer the question of whether the benefits of social and emotional learning stay with students beyond their experiences in a classroom or school with an SEL component. In other words, do SEL students really grow up to be better adjusted, or more caring adults?

Roger Weissberg, CASEL executive director and professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, notes that evaluating the long-term effects of social and emotional learning programs is complicated by a variety of factors. “Doing an accurate longitudinal study with this work would be extremely costly and complex,” he says. “How do you evaluate a 12 or 13 year multicomponent social and emotional learning program? Basically, any program that can be evaluated scientifically is probably
one that is less ambitious in scope.” Instead of checking outcome data, Weissberg suggest that educators who are considering an SEL curriculum look at what goes into each program: “How are the skills taught? How clearly designed are the lesson plans? How are people trained to implement the programs? Is there follow-up training to support skill applications? These are the kinds of questions to ask.” (www.casel.org)

What Responsive Classroom is “NOT”?  

Responsive Classroom is not an add-on character education or social skills program. It is also not a curriculum. It is an approach to teaching and learning that integrates social and academic learning and impacts every aspect of the curriculum. The RC approach seeks to help educators transform each individual classroom, and the school as a whole, into a more safe, caring, and supportive community where students and teachers take risks and responsibility for their own learning (www.responsiveclassroom.org).

Conclusion/Summary

Researching Responsive Classroom confirmed my desire to implement an RC approach into my teaching practices. Through my research I was able to clearly define the first part of my research question, “What is Responsive Classroom?” I learned what Responsive Classroom “is” as well as what it is “not”. The second part of my question, “How does it affect/impact the learning environment socially as well as academically?” does not come with quite as definitive response. The research-based findings have consistently demonstrated a positive social impact. It appears as though the jury is still out as to whether there is a long-term academic impact of Responsive Classroom. Personally, I feel offering students an environment that promotes and teaches respect of one’s own self as well as others, self-efficacy, self-regulation and social skills are lessons students will utilize throughout their life experiences. These life lessons in conjunction with academic choices relevant to personal interests and an environment consisting of a community of caring learners carries enough weight for implementing a Responsive Classroom approach from my perspective. Larrivee (2005, page 68) confirms this premise by stating, “Developing the classroom as a learning community calls for teachers to attend to students’ emotional and social needs concurrently with their academic needs”. It is important to remember that RC is not a curriculum, but rather an approach. A Responsive Classroom approach and the district curriculum need to be integrated to function together in a complimentary process. When meshing this approach with curriculum material occurs appropriately and productively, I believe students will take risks and achieve success on individual levels. As a teacher, this is what I strive for. Without hesitation I would suggest this approach to my peers for consideration in their practices. I feel the social and emotional benefits are worth the implementation and I also see a number of benefits stemming from student academic choice and material that is pertinent and relevant to their interests. We have discovered material relevant to students’ life, interests and experiences has a greater impact on their desire to learn,
understand, and ability to apply that knowledge. A Responsive Classroom approach embraces this philosophy as well as promoting social and emotional growth. With that said, I believe a Responsive Classroom approach offers all the necessary elements for achieving student success to practicing teachers who believe in its premise of balance between teaching of academic skills and social skills an integral part of everyday school life.

RESOURCES:

NORTHEAST FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN
39 Montague City Road
Greenfield, MA  01301
(800) 360-6332
(413) 772-2066
(413) 772-2097 Fax

REFERENCES:


**JOURNALS & NEWSLETTERS**

*Responsive Classroom Newsletter*

*Journal of Teacher Education*

*Elementary School Journal*

**WEBSITE RESOURCES:**

[www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)
[www.originsonline.org](http://www.originsonline.org)
[www.educationworld.com](http://www.educationworld.com)
[www.newhorizons.org](http://www.newhorizons.org)
[www.teachers.net/gazette/](http://www.teachers.net/gazette/)
[www.edletter.org](http://www.edletter.org)
[http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu](http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu)
[www.education.pitt.edu/leaders/faq/responsiveclassrm.htm](http://www.education.pitt.edu/leaders/faq/responsiveclassrm.htm)
[www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org)
[www.ktmurphy.org](http://www.ktmurphy.org)
[www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)
[www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)
[www.iidc.indiana.edu/cell/discipline.php](http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/cell/discipline.php)
[www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org)
[www.proteacher.com](http://www.proteacher.com)
[www.newhorizons.org/strategies-democratic/gimbert.htm](http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies-democratic/gimbert.htm)
[www.nea.org/classmanagement/ifc050125.html](http://www.nea.org/classmanagement/ifc050125.html)