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*THE RESPONSIVE  
CLASSROOM APPROACH  
A Caring, Respectful School Environment  
as a Context for Development*

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Most classrooms have students with behavioral problems, but such students tend to be more prevalent in low-income urban neighborhoods, and teachers in these schools often do not have adequate training or resources to address the children's social-emotional needs. During the Schools Project—a partnership between the Erikson Institute and nine public schools in low-income Chicago neighborhoods—some of the partner schools addressed this dilemma by implementing the Responsive Classroom approach, created by the Northeast Foundation for Children to support students' social-emotional development. No other intervention during the project ended up looking so different from school to school. At one extreme, an entire school community was transformed. At the other extreme, a school came to see the approach as an ivory-tower program unsuited for inner-city children. This article briefly describes the Responsive Classroom approach and conveys the range of implementation experiences in the Schools Project through four case histories.

**The Schools Project** was an 11-year partnership between the Erikson Institute and nine public elementary schools in low-income Chicago neighborhoods. The goal of the project was to optimize learning opportunities for young inner-city children through a variety of school-based interventions, particularly the introduction of developmentally appropriate curricula and instruction. Erikson staff provided ongoing technical assistance to teachers and administrators in the partner schools, creating opportunities for professional development and then working with teachers to implement the new ideas and techniques in their classrooms and evaluate their effectiveness.

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Several years into the Schools Project, teachers in the partner schools began to express a new set of concerns. Although pleased with the methods of instruction they were learning through the project, teachers were troubled by students' underdeveloped social skills and lack of academic initiative. Meanness and aggression erupted often among children, disrupting learning time, and even students whose conduct was good frequently were unfocused and disengaged. These problems had always existed, but they became more pronounced as teachers shifted toward child-centered instructional strategies, whose success required a higher degree of social-emotional maturity and self-motivation among students than the success of traditional strategies.

Children's negative behaviors usually originated outside the classroom—stressful events at home, an unresolved playground conflict, even lack of sleep or poor health. The routines of pencil-and-paper tasks had limited the opportunities for children to act out, but the more cooperative and open methods of learning made it easier for their feelings to overflow in the classroom. "Ooh, you got that wrong" became a familiar insult when a child made a mistake at the blackboard. Or when assignments were returned, it was not unusual to hear one student say to another, "You dummy, you only got one right." Children more and more frequently could be heard making derogatory comments about their classmates, and teachers began to feel they were more often in the role of conflict mediator than learning facilitator. With their new understanding of child development gained through the project, they were hesitant to employ punitive modes of discipline, yet most had no other strategies to fall back on.

The new instructional approaches teachers were using also highlighted how unprepared or unwilling children were to be partners in the learning process and assume age-appropriate responsibilities. When teachers were introducing an activity using new materials, for example, many students would dart for the supplies before the introduction was finished and they understood their purpose. In group activities, many children also had trouble understanding what their role should be: Some would disrupt the group, whereas others would sit silent. "It's not fair" and "She won't do her part" were common laments.

All in all, teachers were at a loss for ways to help students develop the capacity to act in a caring, respectful manner toward their classmates or for ways to create a classroom atmosphere that would make children feel safe and supported so they would be able to focus on their work and take the risks necessary for learning. Further, the circumstances in which the teachers worked made any efforts that much harder: Classes were generally large and multilingual, often there were no teacher aides and inadequate instructional supplies, and many students had particularly serious social, emotional, and

cognitive problems. Also, the pressures of high-stakes testing, which had taken hold in the Chicago public schools by this point in the project, left teachers wondering how they could find time in the already packed required curriculum to teach social competencies—skills not assessed by the board of education. “Help us resolve our dilemma,” one teacher said during a Schools Project meeting, and others echoed her plea.

### **FINDING THE RIGHT TOOL TO SUPPORT STUDENTS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

From research and experience, Schools Project staff understood that a caring, respectful classroom environment would strengthen students’ sense of belonging, thereby motivating them to identify with the goals of the school; conversely, a classroom environment of criticism and disapproval would have a negative effect on achievement (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996; Schaps, Battistich, Solomon, & Watson, 1997). But they also understood that a caring, respectful environment alone is not enough: When teachers are academically focused—providing clear instruction, ensuring opportunities for practice and feedback, and structuring time for real engagement in tasks—students achieve more (Brophy & Good, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996).

After a review of models to support young students’ social-emotional development, project staff suggested the Responsive Classroom approach to the partner schools. Developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, the Responsive Classroom strives to develop in students an “ethical ideal,” the desire and knowledge to act in more caring ways (Charney, 1991, 1997). The approach has six components: Morning Meeting, Rules and Logical Consequences, Guided Discovery, Classroom Organization, Academic Choice, and Assessment and Reporting to Parents. These components work alone and in concert to help students develop the social skills of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control and also to promote in them a deeper knowledge of academic subject areas, reasoned decision making, and motivation for learning (Charney, Clayton, & Wood, 1995). Overall, the components are consonant with the theories underlying developmentally appropriate educational practice (Bredekamp, 1989; Charney, 1991; Charney et al., 1995) and therefore were in keeping with the philosophy of the Schools Project.

*Morning Meeting.* This daily ritual builds a sense of community while setting a positive tone for the day. Its four components—greeting, sharing, a group game or activity, and a daily letter and news from the teacher—provide an opportunity for children to learn and practice a variety of social and academic skills, including speaking in front of others about meaningful experiences, listening to peers and responding appropriately with questions and comments, working cooperatively, and using knowledge recently learned in class (e.g., new vocabulary words or numeric tasks). The supportive atmosphere of Morning Meeting makes it easier for children to take the risks necessary to master these skills.

*Rules and Logical Consequences.* These classroom management tools are designed to promote and sustain a sense of community and instill “habits of goodness” in children (Charney, 1997). Developed at the beginning of the school year by the teacher and students together, rules are positive statements that establish guidelines and expectations for behavior; they are the cornerstone of classroom life and are used to encourage conversation and problem solving related to ethical issues that arise in school. Examples of classroom rules include “Respect yourself,” “Respect others,” and “Respect the environment.”

Logical consequences are nonpunitive responses to student wrongdoing. They are designed to be situation and child specific. A child who is irresponsible with classroom materials, for example, might be required to repair or replace something he or she has ruined or broken. Logical consequences are meant to support children as they learn to behave in socially responsible ways and to help them make amends and soothe feelings when they have hurt someone.

*Guided Discovery.* This is a process for introducing students to classroom materials (e.g., games, art supplies, books, and computers) and learning methods (e.g., writing or reading workshops); it is intended to generate their excitement and invite their active participation in constructing knowledge about the potential and use of the materials and methods. Like other direct-teaching methods, a Guided Discovery uses modeling and demonstration to teach skills and concepts, but a Guided Discovery goes further. The interactive process between students and the teacher includes naming the object or learning activity to establish a common vocabulary, generating ideas about its potential and use, actively exploring the ideas with the group, and making decisions about the care of materials. During a Guided Discovery, students also learn and practice social skills that promote cooperative learning, such as

listening to one another, appreciating each other's ideas, asking thoughtful questions, and making respectful comments. Materials and methods introduced through a Guided Discovery are subsequently made available for student use in the classroom.

*Classroom Organization.* In a Responsive Classroom, the physical space is organized to both maximize children's independence and facilitate peer interactions, whether for partners, a small group, or the entire class. A carpeted area or open space invites the whole group to gather and see one another face to face, for example, and tables around the room or specific interest areas offer opportunities for partner or small-group interactions.

The physical environment should also contribute to the development of a classroom culture, constructed by the students and teacher together over time. A part of the classroom, for example, might be set aside for the display of student projects completed as part of the science curriculum. As the class moves through the curriculum, new projects are continually added to the display alongside earlier projects. Over the months, the display becomes a representation to the children of their progress through the curriculum and their growing body of knowledge and achievement.

*Academic Choice.* Giving children choices at school helps them develop a sense of ownership in regard to the learning process. In a Responsive Classroom, students regularly are given the opportunity to make choices about their own learning. The teacher presents options or provides guidance for choosing a topic of study or a method or materials for a project. The choice might be as simple as a book for independent reading or as complex as a semester-long research project.

*Assessment and Reporting to Parents.* Ongoing home-school communication is critical for a productive rapport between parents and teachers; it helps both parties understand how best to promote children's academic learning and social-emotional development. The Responsive Classroom approach recommends that teachers initiate the first contact with parents early in the school year. The teacher should invite the parents to share their concerns and goals for their child, and he or she should express his or her own as well. The teacher should also communicate to the parents that they are welcome in the classroom at any time. The guidelines for the Responsive Classroom approach suggest many activities for parents, both those who help out in the classroom regularly and those who visit only occasionally or spontaneously.

### CREATING A CARING, RESPECTFUL COMMUNITY: FOUR CASE HISTORIES

When a partner school decided to implement the Responsive Classroom approach, project staff would arrange for interested teachers to attend an introductory 3-day workshop led by trainers from the Northeast Foundation for Children. In some cases, the workshop was also attended by teacher assistants, administrators, and even parents. The participants watched demonstrations and videos, role-played, and discussed the literature provided by the trainers. They learned the nuts and bolts of the approach: for example, how to devise Rules and Logical Consequences, how to conduct Morning Meetings, and how to lead Guided Discoveries. They explored and practiced using effective language—language that reminds, redirects, and reinforces. They discussed the need to model desired social behaviors. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the workshop was that it validated teachers' belief in the importance of allocating time at the beginning of the school year to create a safe, caring classroom environment to stimulate learning and promote community.

After teachers began to implement the Responsive Classroom approach in their own schools, with follow-up support from project staff, some of them decided to get advanced training from the Northeast Foundation for Children. In addition, leadership teams of administrators and teachers from four of the partner schools attended a weeklong Responsive Leadership Institute offered by the foundation.

Evaluations of the training workshops and leadership institutes by Schools Project participants were consistently high, and everyone who attended was filled with enthusiasm and determination. Despite these auspicious signs, no other intervention during the project ended up looking so different from school to school as the Responsive Classroom. At one extreme, an entire school community—students, teachers, administrators, even parents—was transformed. At the other extreme, teachers in a couple of the schools came to see the approach as little more than an ivory-tower program unsuited for inner-city children. The four brief case histories in this section convey the range of experiences among the partner schools that implemented the approach, and they serve as a springboard for a more general discussion of the intervention's effects in the next section of the article.

*Nolan School: Theory into practice, perfectly.* As you enter Nolan (the names of the schools have been changed for this article), a welcome message taped to the wall greets you. Original student work from every classroom lines the halls: book reports, science projects, paintings and drawings, essays

on “what it means to be me.” The principal speaks to children by name, telling them she is sorry she could not come out to jump rope yesterday but that she will be there today. In each room, a brightly colored rug provides a space for everyone to gather; bookcases and pillows mark the library corner; and there are learning centers that children use during designated times of the day for reading, playing board games, or working on individual and group projects.

Even though the bell has not rung yet, many children are already in their classrooms, excited and full of energy. In a first-grade classroom, several students have gathered around the News and Announcements chart, where they are trying to figure out the answer to the question of the day: How many words are in the daily message? “There are 36!” “I think there are 5!” “These are the words, the ones with spaces between them.” The discussion continues until their teacher calls the students to the rug for Morning Meeting. In a rhyming chant, they welcome each other to class. A noncompetitive game follows to build group spirit and heighten the enjoyment of being in school. Then the teacher leads the class through the News and Announcements letter, helping the children decode the words as they discover the exciting plans for the day.

In a fifth-grade classroom, Morning Meeting looks somewhat different—it is more appropriate for older children—but the ritual has the same comfortable feeling. Monday through Thursday, students plan and lead Morning Meeting, including writing and reading the News and Announcements letter. On Fridays, the teacher leads the class in a new song or activity. This carefully crafted shift in power nurtures student responsibility.

At the end of the Schools Project, teachers at Nolan considered the Responsive Classroom the most important initiative they had undertaken. Their exceptional experience with the approach might have been predicted from the outset. They were the most insistent among the partner schools in asking for help to address children’s social-emotional development, and project staff’s first step was to invite interested teachers to participate in a critical exploration of the ideas behind the Responsive Classroom. The 12 teachers who chose to get involved at this stage—representing about a third of Nolan’s faculty—were asked to read *Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom* (Charney, 1991), and a number of before-school meetings were scheduled to discuss the book. The teachers’ efforts were wholly supported by the principal, who provided stipends for time spent in the meetings.

Over the course of reading and discussion, teachers became excited about the approach. It focused on the whole child. It validated the kinds of behaviors valued by the school. Importantly, it interwove development of social skills with academic instruction: Teachers were already coping with a school



day too short to cover the curricular material required by the Chicago public schools, and there was no time to implement a separate social skills curriculum. During discussion sessions, project staff facilitated teachers' reflection on the compatibility between the Responsive Classroom approach and their own pedagogical beliefs. For this group, the approach was an almost perfect fit.

Following this introduction to the Responsive Classroom, nine teachers, two special education teachers, the librarian, and the assistant principal (who later became the principal) joined teachers from another partner school for their initial training by the Northeast Foundation for Children. When school started in the fall and the teachers began to implement the approach in their classrooms, project staff provided technical support, but from the beginning, Nolan's teachers took ownership, working hard to find ways to make the new strategies work for them and their students.

That winter, Nolan's staff and faculty gathered for a midyear evaluation of new initiatives at the school, including the Responsive Classroom. One teacher remarked that it was taking a lot of time to create a caring community. This comment was interpreted by others as a criticism of the Responsive Classroom. "No, no, no," the teacher responded. "That is just a fact. It is not a negative. The Responsive Classroom really works." Other teachers joined her in support of the intervention, and the physical education teacher and the librarian both commented that they already perceived a noticeable difference in students whose teachers were implementing the approach. These students exhibited more caring behaviors, were more cohesive as a class, and were generally calmer and more ready to learn.

The principal took note, and when the new school improvement plan was drawn up, schoolwide implementation of the Responsive Classroom approach was a central feature. The administration was committed to cultivating the values of a caring, respectful community throughout the entire school. During the summer, all of Nolan's teachers and staff attended a weeklong training workshop, and when school started in the fall, the daily schedule was reconfigured so that every student as well as all ancillary staff would participate in a classroom Morning Meeting. Project staff worried that the Morning Meeting mandate might actually hurt the initiative. At Nolan, it did not. Most teachers had a deep understanding of the Responsive Classroom approach and it meshed with their own goals, so even those who found the new schedule inconvenient adjusted to it. (See Table 1 for teachers' feelings about the Morning Meeting mandate.)

Misbehavior did not disappear entirely at Nolan with the introduction of the Responsive Classroom, but teachers' responses to it changed dramatically. Their responses demonstrated their trust in children's ability to grow

**TABLE 1**  
**Teachers' Responses to the Morning Meeting Mandate**

- 
- I think the school is very connected now that every teacher in the school has been trained in Responsive Classroom. Everyone from 9:00 to 9:30 does a common thing in the school no matter if you are kindergarten or sixth grade.
  - There is a sense of unity. Everyone does their own thing, but there is one thing that we all do at the same time, and it also involves nonclassroom teachers. Everyone must be involved. So I think that one thing provides unity. I don't mean uniformity as in behavior modification.
  - Morning Meeting I don't think has taken away from [academics], I really don't, and that's strange, because it is taking time out of class. But with the time it's taking out of class, you may solve some problems that we would have been dealing with the same amount of time or more during the day anyway, so it's not really lost time, in my opinion.
  - I really do think that [Morning Meeting] takes too much time away from the day period. . . . I wish we did it at another time in the day, maybe after recess. The kids need it more at that time, and it provides a good transition from the morning to the afternoon.
  - The teachers have been forced to work with the Responsive Classroom. Some people verbalize it, but still run their classrooms in a dictatorial manner. I know that sometimes when somebody comes up to see what's going on, they have a [Morning] Meeting.
- 

and improve and also their own willingness to help children along. When students hurt others' feelings, teachers helped them salve relationships through an "apology of action," which offered a reparation for the misdeed. When one student insulted a classmate, for example, his apology of action was to make a card for the child. The genuinely funny card, when presented to the student, made her laugh. A lesson was taught and a relationship restored. At Nolan, 100% of teachers surveyed said that the Responsive Classroom approach had influenced their classroom interactions with students.

In turning the whole of Nolan into a caring community, it was important that the administration modeled the principles of the Responsive Classroom in interactions with staff and students. Sometimes they even incorporated elements of Morning Meeting into faculty meetings to build collegiality and interdependence.

Parents of Nolan students were introduced to the Responsive Classroom approach during Parent-Teacher Association and local school council meetings. They were extremely supportive of the approach, especially as they began to notice changes at home. One mother described how her first-grader prepared a News and Announcements letter for his family on a Saturday morning. Another parent commented, "I was so happy to see Nicole at our door one Sunday morning to work with my daughter on a science project. The sense of community created by the Responsive Classroom has made this

happen.” Parents uniformly expressed appreciation that the school was helping to break down social and racial barriers between children, allowing them to make new friends.

For Nolan, one teacher summed up the school’s experience with the Responsive Classroom approach: “Definitely the Responsive Classroom has added a wonderful dimension for the school, for reaching the whole child.”

*Trujillo School: The toll of teacher turnover.* Soon after joining the Schools Project, Trujillo’s principal left for another position. A new principal was chosen by Chicago’s reform school board, but the choice deeply divided staff, and over the next few years many teachers left the school, including a large number of those who had received Responsive Classroom training from the Northeast Foundation for Children. Each fall, new teachers started at the school who knew nothing about the approach.

The new principal was committed to implementing the Responsive Classroom schoolwide, but Trujillo was placed on academic probation soon after she started, and she had to make hard choices about how to spend time and money. Instead of sending new faculty to a weeklong training course or organizing one on-site, the principal decided to institute a 45-minute weekly meeting before school during which project staff worked with all of the school’s faculty on the Responsive Classroom approach. The fact that all teachers were required to attend these meetings presented a host of challenges for project staff, as they tried to meet the very different needs of those who were already using the approach in their classrooms and those who were just learning about it. To make matters worse, a variety of circumstances prevented the meetings from occurring on a weekly basis until the second semester, leaving the new teachers with a mandate to implement the Responsive Classroom but little information or support to do so. Even when the meetings became regular, many teachers expressed a desire for more in-depth training. “We are supposed to meet on Thursdays, and we do get some training,” said one teacher. “We do, but I don’t think it is enough. I think we should do an all-day thing [workshop].” During the weekly meetings, there was no time for meaningful collaboration among colleagues or reflection on personal practice.

Resource constraints were not the only problem at Trujillo, however. Tensions between the new administration and some teachers had an effect on the initiative as well. Explained a teacher,

I think if you’re going to make the Responsive Classroom as the base for what our school is about, make it consistent not only with the students but among the staff and with the teachers. For example, I’m a new teacher here. When I walk

into the building, sometimes I walk right in front of the office. Who says good morning? Nobody. How does that make a teacher feel? It doesn't make me feel welcome. I can see that if I did that to my students, if I just ignored them and let them come in, how is that going to make them feel?

The new principal hoped that the weekly training meetings would bring the adult community at Trujillo closer together. Ironically, the rift only widened when some old teachers refused to attend the meetings. They felt that the meetings merely repeated the training they had already received and provided no time to reflect on implementation issues with which they were dealing. They were also frustrated by the fact that the school administrators failed to model caring behaviors in their interactions with staff and children.

Despite all these problems, many teachers at Trujillo saw value in the Responsive Classroom approach. Morning Meeting provided an effective way for teachers to welcome children who had traveled across the city to get to school and help them settle in for the day, and teachers spoke enthusiastically about the ways that Guided Discoveries helped children take ownership in the classroom and accept more responsibility. In describing the effects of the Responsive Classroom, one first-grade teacher said, "The children know the right thing to do; they are happy. The behavior of the children is better and they are more engaged in classroom routines. I am happy too. I feel more comfortable with myself and more confident as a teacher."

Trujillo's new principal also continued to view the Responsive Classroom approach as a means for building community and countering the pressures of high staff turnover and academic probation. Each year, she kept the concept of the Responsive Classroom alive in the annual school improvement plan and allocated some funds for staff training. So although Trujillo never matched Nolan in implementation of the approach, to this day the community benefits from Morning Meeting and other aspects of the Responsive Classroom that have been integrated into the daily routine.

*Xavier South School: Little teacher interest, even less administrative support.* Xavier South had been part of the Schools Project from the beginning. Despite many project successes, including the development of an Afrocentric curriculum, there was ongoing tension between project staff and many of the teachers, who believed the school's low-income, African American students needed disciplined, structured, traditional classrooms. These teachers considered the Responsive Classroom approach to be a mismatch for their students, and their attitudes only intensified as pressure grew to improve standardized test scores. "Responsive Classroom is too mild for these children," said a third-grade teacher. "They need firmness." Some teachers did

recognize the potential of the approach for building personal responsibility and group efficacy, but they did not see how they could take the time to implement it and at the same time meet the Chicago public schools' curricular requirements. "It's bad to say that it took up too much time, because it probably would work," said one teacher, "but we have so much to do."

Although the principal seemed to like the approach and encouraged teachers to implement it—he even attended the summer leadership institute in Massachusetts offered by the Northeast Foundation for Children—he did not follow through with administrative support. He was willing to spend time and money on initial training but not to provide opportunities for ongoing professional dialogue among teachers as they implemented the approach. He gave the school's curriculum coordinator responsibility for facilitating implementation, but she had many other responsibilities that took priority. And on a more conceptual level, school administrators did not model Responsive Classroom behaviors themselves in their interactions with teachers and students.

As a result, the Responsive Classroom was a stray at Xavier South, and implementation varied dramatically from classroom to classroom: One room would have learning centers and Morning Meetings, whereas the one next door would have desks in rows and a teacher who could be heard yelling at students when they misbehaved. Many teachers did not want to take up the approach in full, although they were interested in adopting parts of it. "The things my students love, I keep," said one. Another said,

By the third day, I knew I was going to commit to the Morning Meeting. I was comfortable with it and I saw its potential for third-grade students. I was impressed with the News and Announcements letter as a way to address skill development like editing a document. . . . I also liked the fact that students were reading as soon as they walked in the room. The fact that students sat in a circle and made eye contact with one another impressed me too.

At Xavier South, the school's collective professional capacity to create a caring, respectful environment did not change significantly, although some classrooms did reflect individual teachers' efforts to learn from their exposure to the Responsive Classroom approach.

*Doyle School: An adaptive strategy.* As at Xavier South, Doyle's student body is comprised primarily of low-income, African American children, yet the school's teachers did not consider the Responsive Classroom approach to be a cultural mismatch. Indeed, interest in the approach was high: Nearly all

Doyle's staff attended the training workshop, and the curriculum coordinator and a teacher went on to attend the summer leadership institute.

Doyle's positive attitude toward the Responsive Classroom approach was influenced by the school's long, productive relationship with the Schools Project: Teachers had developed a solid knowledge base since 1989, when the partnership began, that paved the way for a real understanding of the approach; also, teachers viewed the partnership as a source of creative ideas and pedagogical support, yet they felt a sense of ownership, that decisions about how to teach ultimately rested in their hands.

This sense of ownership was strongly evidenced with the Responsive Classroom approach as teachers adapted features to meet their needs and circumstances. Overcrowded rooms led some teachers to leave desks in their regular positions for Morning Meeting instead of moving them into a circle. Teachers who felt children had a hard time moving from Morning Meeting to academic lessons began to save the meeting as a reward for completed schoolwork. For older students, many teachers eliminated components of Morning Meeting that felt too childish.

Just as Doyle was beginning with the Responsive Classroom, the school was put on academic probation for low test scores. This circumstance strongly influenced teachers' feelings about using the approach:

It's just that we have so many things to do here to get off probation. There are so many problems every morning between 8:45 and, say, 9:15 that come up. . . . I found that I needed to get to work. I found that I needed to get my reading in, and I just found that it [Morning Meeting] was too difficult to do. . . . I can see the importance of it in some ways, but I guess we're all trying so hard to bring scores up that you just feel a certain drive to get that stuff done. Even though you know these kids in particular really need a lot of counseling, loving, and all that, but you don't have the time for that because [the board of education] is holding something over your head, so you can't do that kind of stuff.

Even with this test-score pressure, Doyle's teachers did not abandon the Responsive Classroom; they simply continued their adaptive strategy. Their assessments of the approach showed that although they took only what they liked, they liked what they took. As one teacher put it, "Out of the teachers that I know who had the training, they liked it. We've all had problems or difficulties at one point or another and discontinued some parts of it. Like I don't use the Morning Meeting anymore. But I still use other aspects of it."

Because of this flexible attitude toward the Responsive Classroom components, the approach escaped precise definition at Doyle, although teachers

universally considered it one of the school's focal points during the last years of the Schools Project.

### STUDENTS, TEACHERS, SCHOOLS: THE EFFECTS OF THE RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM APPROACH

In the Schools Project, full implementation of the Responsive Classroom approach was rare, yet even partial implementation yielded meaningful effects on students, teachers, and schools as a whole: Teachers did not have to take up all the components to start to see changes in themselves and their students, and schools did not have to mandate full participation to start to look and feel different.

*Changes in students.* The component of the Responsive Classroom approach that was adopted most widely in the partner schools was Morning Meeting, and students universally loved it. They delighted in coming together in an informal manner at the start of each day. "We have fun at the meetings, we laugh. It's like jokes," a third-grade student said. Teachers, too, noted the positive effects of Morning Meeting. "I like the fact that it's given a different structure to the day," commented one teacher. "I like the fact that the kids feel that sense that they are part of a group. They fix each other. They are a unit. They care about each other."

Morning Meeting provided an opportunity for students to learn about one another and become more empathic. A second-grade student at Nolan School, for example, developed diabetes and had to keep an insulin kit at school for emergencies. Her classmates' frequent questions about her illness began to bother her. She asked her teacher if she could use Morning Meeting to explain her diabetes to the other students and show them her insulin kit. Her sharing during the meeting enabled her to communicate important information about herself, and it gave her classmates a chance to communicate understanding and respect.

In some classrooms, the sense of community engendered by Morning Meeting spilled over into the rest of the day. "There is no bickering in our classroom," said a child. "Students in our room stick around each other." In these classrooms, Rules and Logical Consequences often served as an ongoing reminder and reaffirmation of the desired social behaviors. As one student related, "The rules help us remember to treat others as we would like to be treated. We don't harm each other." In a similar vein, a student from another school said, "One of our rules is to be friends, to treat others like you

want to be treated. This means we can't leave anyone out or say things to hurt other people's feelings."

Children's actions showed that they were internalizing the Responsive Classroom philosophy and accepting responsibility for their role as a member of a caring learning community. One morning, a Nolan student was crying inconsolably over a family problem. Three classmates asked the teacher if they could talk to the distraught student. One explained earnestly, "Remember when I shared? I talked about that very same problem. I know how she feels." The four children were allowed to go out into the hall to talk privately; within 10 minutes they reentered the classroom, the troubled student comforted and ready to settle into the school day.

As children's behavior improved and their sense of belonging grew, their capacity for learning increased. As one teacher explained,

A lot of the teachers came to visit my room to see how it works, and a lot of people said that my classroom was one of the better-behaved classrooms because of what I attribute to the Responsive Classroom. Getting to know each other better, working on social skills, kind of helped to improve the behavior in my classroom. And, of course, when you can improve behavior, you can finally get to teach.

Teachers also felt that the approach contributed in more direct ways to children's cognitive development. Morning Meeting activities, for example, were often credited with improving students' reading and oral skills: "The students absolutely love it. They come together. They learn speaking skills. They learn to focus on the speaker, to have eye contact, to ask questions. It's genuine. It's a real-life situation where they have to use communication skills."

There was one more effect of the Responsive Classroom on students that was especially gratifying to teachers: Many children began to develop a love of school. A third-grader at Xavier South exclaimed, "I think my classroom is happy! People are smiling every time they come into the classroom, because they are happy to come to school."

*Changes in teachers.* Teachers in the partner schools fell into three groups in regard to the Responsive Classroom approach (see Table 2 for teacher perspectives on the approach). For the first group, the approach represented a philosophy that could encompass everything from community building to curricular development. These teachers had a deeper understanding of the principles of the Responsive Classroom, and they were able to wholly incorporate it into their classrooms and adapt components as needed.



**TABLE 2**  
**How the Responsive Classroom Approach Transformed Teachers**

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- It gave me a desire to change. It gave me the ability to change. It gave me concrete stuff that I could do to change.
  - I found myself becoming a calmer teacher. I refocus on what I am saying to these children and how I am saying it. I became motivated, calmer, and better able to express [myself] without screaming and yelling, "I am upset with you." It gave me a better sense of what I actually say when I discipline a child, or when I am teaching and I'm frustrated. That was absolutely invaluable, because I really did start paying attention to what was coming out of my mouth, and I was shocked. I haven't completely licked it, but I have the sense of when I do something or say something. I am conscious that I did it.
  - It gave me ideas, positive ideas, enhanced some of the ideas that I was using.
  - I can just speak for myself. I really think I'm a better teacher. Just in how I talk to the kids, how I handle the kids. I have a greater respect for them.
  - We always say in the meeting that we're building a community. I don't feel it at all. I don't have connections with anyone.
- 

The second group understood the Responsive Classroom as a toolbox of techniques, particularly in regard to behavior management. They generally had little understanding of the approach's theoretical framework and implemented activities in a prescriptive, superficial manner, although even at this level the approach had noticeable effects and the teachers valued it.

Finally, some teachers considered the Responsive Classroom to be the brainchild of educators who did not understand the needs of children in disadvantaged communities. These teachers believed that their students needed tight structure and discipline to achieve. Although there was at least one teacher in each partner school who held this opinion, in two schools the majority of teachers considered the approach to be inappropriate for their students.

Throughout the years of the Schools Project, staff members had encountered such diverse views among teachers; in fact, they expected to encounter them and had always made a point of cultivating teacher buy-in for interventions by providing opportunities for them to explore the consonance and dissonance among the tenets of the intervention, their own beliefs about teaching and learning, and the realities of their professional situations. Through this process, teachers were often able to move closer to a shared vision and find at least some elements of value in the intervention for their own classrooms. The process also established personal connections between teachers and project staff and provided valuable information to staff about teachers'

work settings, instructional skills, and attitudes toward professional change, which enabled project staff to customize interventions.

The training model used by the Northeast Foundation for Children did not follow the same approach as the Schools Project. It offered a set of preestablished tools for building a caring school community, assuming that the workshop participants were philosophically aligned with the principles of the Responsive Classroom. Although true for some participants, it was not the case for all, and the training did not provide extensive enough opportunities for the kind of in-depth conversation and reflection necessary for skeptical teachers to modify their beliefs and attitudes. Just how problematic this could be became evident when teachers returned to their classrooms and began to implement the approach. As some of them struggled with implementation, the value of coconstructing goals and strategies became clear to both project staff and teachers. Neglecting this process lessened the effects of the Responsive Classroom in many cases. It also colored the view of the partnership for schools that did not have prior experience with the Schools Project: Many teachers in these schools saw project staff as advocates of a single strategy instead of as facilitators of problem solving around a particular issue.

In retrospect, project staff members realized they should have augmented the foundation's training or preceded it with the type of reading and discussion period they had organized at Nolan School. Nolan was the only partner school where teachers had the opportunity to critically explore the philosophy of the Responsive Classroom in relation to their own values, practices, and school setting. And in the end, Nolan was the only partner school where the approach really took root and flourished.

Whether converts or dissenters, all teachers in the partner schools recited the same litany of implementation difficulties: large class sizes, limited classroom space, and not enough time in the day. For some teachers, these challenges were a justification for rejecting the Responsive Classroom approach; for others, they were the impetus for generating a stronger commitment to the approach and for assuming ownership and finding ways to make it work.

*Changes in schools.* For whole schools to become caring, respectful communities, administrative leadership and support are essential. It is not enough, however, for administrators to verbally endorse the approach or attend a summer leadership institute or even mandate that teachers implement the approach. Administrators did these things in nearly all the partner schools, yet in most of the schools, change was limited to particular classrooms and did not extend to the community at large.

At Nolan School, which was completely transformed by the Responsive Classroom approach, administrative leadership and support were manifest at

many different levels, from paying stipends to teachers for time spent learning about and discussing the approach to reorganizing the daily schedule so that everyone would participate in a Morning Meeting to modeling the principles of the approach in interactions with staff and students. Nolan's administration helped the entire school community, including parents, acquire a shared understanding of the philosophy and purposes of the Responsive Classroom, and it also embraced schoolwide rituals that sustained and celebrated the school as a caring, respectful learning community that values all its members.

Nolan represents the potential of urban schools. It stands in stark contrast to the highly publicized images of disorderly classrooms, helpless teachers, frustrated administrators, and disinterested parents. Although everyone in the Nolan community deserves credit for the changes the school has undergone, the depth and breadth of change would not have been possible without the active and sensitive participation of the administration.

### CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL REFORM

During the Schools Project, the introduction of developmentally appropriate curricula and instructional practices in the partner schools—all of which were located in low-income Chicago neighborhoods—tended to aggravate behavioral problems among students. Responding to teachers' requests to help them support students' social-emotional development, project staff recommended the Responsive Classroom approach, developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children.

The extreme variation in implementation and outcomes among the schools that adopted the Responsive Classroom approach should be a warning sign to policy makers and administrators who believe all that is needed for successful school reform is a good intervention. The varying levels of change that occurred in the partner schools—whether high, low, or somewhere in the middle—were the result of a host of external and internal factors converging in different ways, completely independent of the intervention itself: factors such as school system supports and pressures (e.g., high-stakes testing), the school-specific environment and culture (e.g., strong, consistent administrative leadership), teacher individuality and diversity (e.g., progressive vs. traditional training), and even the resources and limits of the agency or institution providing training or technical assistance to implement the intervention (e.g., cultural differences between teachers and project staff).

Given the idiosyncratic and complex interplay of all these factors in schools, it is hard to imagine any single intervention “taking” across an entire school district, an entire state, or the entire country. Perhaps the most important lesson of the Schools Project is that individual schools might require different interventions—or at least customized versions of a particular intervention—to address the same problems.

To adapt a Vygotskian concept, just as each child has a zone of proximal development at any given time (Vygotsky, 1978), so too does each school have one. And just as a new skill must fall within a child’s zone of proximal development if the child is to master the skill, so must an intervention fall within a school’s “zone” if the school is going to achieve the expected outcomes. When an intervention falls beyond the zone—that is, when it is inconsistent with even some of the external and internal factors that make up the context for implementation—only limited change can be expected to take place.

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