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Dr. Elizabeth Bondy: Creating The Responsive Classroom

CHRIS WALTHER-THOMAS AND MARY BROWNELL

Dr. Elizabeth Bondy received her bachelor's degree in child study and psychology from Tufts University. Upon graduation she taught adolescents with learning disabilities at a private school in Massachusetts. She then transferred to Florida, where she taught elementary education students in a multi-age setting. Most of these students also experienced difficulty in school, and as a result, Dr. Bondy developed a strong interest in reading. Because of her interest in reading, she decided to obtain an MEd and PhD in reading at the University of Florida. Currently, she is an associate professor at the University of Florida and is working closely with faculty in special education to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. She teaches classes in the unified elementary and special education teacher education program and works closely with general education teachers to facilitate the development of inclusive academic and social curriculum.

Q: You work with teachers on an approach to teaching called "responsive classroom." Could you explain this approach?

The responsive classroom (RC) is an approach developed at the Greenfield Center School in Massachusetts. It is based on a philosophy about teaching and learning that focuses on creating a balance between academic and social learning in classrooms. I believe the dual



Elizabeth Bondy conducts a morning meeting in Sue Harner's K-Grade 2 multi-age classroom.

focus is extremely important for all teachers, because many teachers, particularly those in general education, tend to focus primarily on academic learning. However, there is always a social curriculum operating in classrooms even if it is not acknowledged explicitly. What is important is that teachers ask themselves, "Is the social curriculum in my room by default or deliberate design?" and "Have I planned social learning lessons in the same way that I have planned for academic learning?"

To facilitate academic and social learning, RC proponents believe that

in their classrooms teachers must put in action seven important principles:

- The social curriculum must be as important as the academic curriculum. Students cannot learn in environments that are not socially healthy and safe.
- How students learn is just as important as what they learn. The emotional and social context for learning is just as important as the content of academic learning.
- The greatest cognitive and social growth comes from interaction with peers.

- Students need a specific set of social capacities with related skills and attitudes to be effective in and out of the classroom.
- The teacher must know each student individually, developmentally, and culturally to teach them well.
- Families must participate as partners in the learning process in order for children's social and emotional learning to be maximized. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that families are welcomed, encouraged, and supported as partners.
- Collegial relationships among adults in schools are essential because we are the role models for our students. We must show our students how we respect and care for our peers, so that they can demonstrate the same attitudes and behaviors with their peers.

What these principles have in common is a focus on the social context for learning. They highlight the belief that a positive learning environment is critical to the effectiveness of teaching and learning and that schools have a responsibility to teach students the skills to establish cohesive social relationships. More importantly, RC proponents help students learn positive social abilities and attitudes because they want them to become responsible citizens in a world community that values peace and nonviolence. To put these beliefs in action, students and teachers work together to create caring classroom communities. They establish appropriate rules, norms, and beliefs about how things should be to ensure the happiness and well-being of all classroom members. Specifically, teachers engage students in learning the following essential social capacities: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control (CARES). RC teachers believe these are the capacities that are essential to a positive school culture and successful academic learning.

Q: Tell us about some of the basic responsive classroom strategies.

To facilitate a balance in academic and social learning, RC advocates promoting specific teaching and learning strategies. Perhaps one of the most important strategies is morning meeting because it provides multiple opportunities for building community and social skills. Morning meetings have a very clear structure. First, they must take place every day. Second, they should be held at the beginning of the day. Third, they should be conducted in a circle; teachers and students all participate as circle members. The circle format is used because it is the best formation for achieving face-to-face contact. Fourth, students must greet each other. They must face each other and say hello. One student in the circle turns to face the student sitting next to him or her and says "hello" while shaking hands. This action is repeated all around the circle as others listen and watch the interactions. Although this activity may sound somewhat trivial, there are many important social skills that students must use to complete this process successfully. The greeter and the students being greeted must look at each other. Both must have appropriate body language, voice, and volume, and the teacher will have to help them learn these skills. Students must also have the courage to say hello and to touch someone else. When I first teach the greeting to students, I don't include shaking hands because it can be so threatening. Usually I start by asking students to greet someone by simply saying "hi" and using the person's name ("Hi, Colin"). We then proceed to shaking hands and maybe even hugging each other. This way, students gradually develop more sophisticated skills for greeting.

After greetings are completed, sharing takes place. When we say sharing, however, we don't mean traditional "show and tell." Instead stu-

dents share information that is important to them (e.g., "Yesterday my hermit crab died"). The first student's brief opening statement helps the group know about what he or she wants to share. Following the opening statement, the sharing student calls on others who raise their hands and ask questions or make comments regarding the topic. Sharing students often respond to five or six questions. To participate, students must learn how to ask a good question or make an appropriate comment. Students also need to develop good listening skills, learn how to show empathy as classmates share personal details of their lives with one another, and develop the courage to share. Through this process, teachers help students learn how to have meaningful conversations with their peers in a structured and focused way. Once again, the skills students learn through this activity are necessary for meaningful participation in and outside of the classroom. It is also important to note that only several children can reasonably share each day. Based on students' skills and classroom norms, teachers may choose participants ahead of time or may select students more spontaneously.

Next comes the morning meeting activity. These activities are designed to be fun and to provide opportunities for the students to bond with one another. For instance, the party game "Telephone" is a fun and easy activity that works with students of many ages and requires little time, teacher preparation, and no materials. Most teachers who have had experience with scouting, church groups, or other groups for children and adolescents are familiar with activities that can be used in this segment of the meeting.

News and announcements comprises the last activity of the morning meeting. Each day RC teachers write a message on chart paper or a dry erase board for students to interact with upon entering the classroom. For instance, one teacher drew a pic-

ture of dragon and asked the students where they might keep a dragon. Students responded by writing their responses in the box. This brief letter welcomes students into the classroom and gives them a preview of something that will happen in class today. It may also remind them of something that happened in class yesterday. This activity helps students establish a focus when they enter the classroom in the morning. During news and announcements, the teacher shares the daily chart responses with the members of the circle. Sometimes the teacher reads the written responses and other times students do so. Frequently, this brief interaction takes on an academic focus. For example, the teacher might say, "You have been working on different types of punctuation in class. Let's see how many types of punctuation we see on this chart." News and announcements starts the students and teacher thinking about the curriculum for the day.

The entire morning meeting is designed to build a bridge from school to home. It is one of the most important strategies of the responsive classroom approach. The basic strategies in morning meetings are both teaching and learning strategies. They are designed to help teachers improve their ways of working with the students, which, in turn, helps improve students' social and academic outcomes. The morning meeting strategies, however, are not a magic formula in and of themselves. Conceivably, a teacher could move through all the steps of morning meeting without creating opportunities and encouragement for students to verbally participate. The language and active listening skills a teacher uses can guarantee or inhibit the effectiveness of these strategies. If the teacher does not use language that welcomes student involvement, provides encouragement, and gives students specific feedback on their behavior and contributions to the discussion, then these strategies are unlikely to work.

RC teachers also need good classroom management skills. They have to be able to get students to participate in the circle in ways that are appropriate and positive. It is very important to emphasize that morning meeting participation requires the same type of planning that academic lessons require. Teachers have to plan and rehearse what they will do first, second, and so forth. Effective RC teachers think through the potential difficulties some students will face. For example, some students may not want to sit next to a particular boy or girl. A teacher needs to anticipate possible problems and plan appropriately. In this situation, the teacher may decide to plan a strategy that will eliminate the problem or may decide to teach students how to deal with this issue directly. The complexities involved in morning meeting make it imperative that RC trainers and experienced coaches make sure that novice RC teachers really understand the morning meeting components.

Q: Besides morning meetings, what are some other RC strategies?

There are several other strategies that are particularly good to use at the beginning of the school year. For instance, RC proponents recognize the importance of having students establish classroom rules and determine the logical consequences that need to be associated with the rules. Teachers can facilitate rule development by focusing on students' hopes and dreams for themselves and for the group. Students might begin by individually talking about their hopes and dreams for their class that year; this conversation can then be moved to the group level. Teachers can ask students to respond to questions, such as, "What do I really hope will happen for me this year in school?" Typically, there is a wide range of responses. For example, one student may say, "I want to learn more about computers," and another may say, "I want to make some new

friends." It is important for teachers and students to value and recognize the hopes and dreams of all class members. These hopes and dreams become the basis for establishing classroom rules and consequences. They provide a rationale for rules and consequences by helping students understand why it is important to agree on common rules that will support their hopes and dreams.

Teachers should also involve family members, such as parents and guardians, in the discussion of hopes and dreams. Effective classroom rules must be constructed with participation from all stakeholders to gain support and to ensure that important individual and group hopes and dreams are achieved.

Guided discovery is another important RC strategy that helps students understand guidelines for using class materials. We cannot expect students, especially young students or students new to a particular environment such as a chemistry or computer lab, to know how to use the classroom materials and equipment appropriately. We can't expect all students to know how to behave responsibly and to interact effectively with the learning environment until they have had some type of instruction. Guided discovery provides a structure for introducing students to new classroom features such as materials, equipment, rotation routines, and independent centers. This strategy helps students to explore learning opportunities and materials effectively. It helps students who are not risk takers try something new. It also helps students who have impulsive behavior stay on track so they follow rules and have a positive learning experience.

Guided discovery strategies can be used in many instances. For example, math manipulatives are common classroom tools that are often misused. Teachers need to take time to help students really examine the manipulatives and learn how to take care of them to make sure they work well. RC teachers follow several steps that

encourage students to understand the purposes of manipulatives, the ways in which they can be used, how they can help them to learn, and how they can be cared for. Similar procedures can be used with all classroom items that are frequently misused, such as pencils, paper, books, and desks. Guided discovery is an important strategy because it involves a lot of proactive work on the part of the teacher to prepare students to perform well.

Q: How do teachers respond to this approach?

They respond in powerful and moving ways. Let me give you several examples that illustrate this point. Last Friday, one experienced teacher said, "I think there must be something in the water this week. Things have really been rough! Fortunately, there is one thing I can always count on, our morning meetings. They start us off on the right foot, smiling at each other, being friends. It helps build cohesiveness in class that takes us through the day."

Teachers often talk about the impact on student behavior. They notice a change in their students as a result of RC strategies. The students become friendlier and more willing to help one another. Teachers also mention that resource teachers, such as art and music teachers, observe changes in RC students. It is interesting to note that teachers' behaviors also change. They talk about having more fun teaching and sharing and laughing more with their students. One third-grade teacher told me that RC has changed her life. It has helped her become the kind of teacher she's always wanted to be. She needed some type of strategies to help structure her classroom to create the kind of community she wanted. She said it helped her learn to laugh with her students and feel good.

The way RC has spread in Florida also tells me that teachers believe in its power to help students. In 1992, I stumbled across a book called *Teaching Children to Care*, by Ruth Charney

(1991), who developed many of the RC strategies. Her book is filled with powerful scenarios, examples, and stories about how this approach worked in her urban classroom. I was so impressed with the content that I began using the book in my classes. Later, I was invited to join a teachers' reading group. One of the group's members had been a student in my class and had introduced the Charney book to the group. After reading the book and discussing it, 12 members decided they wanted to implement RC in their classrooms. As they did we met and talked about what was going on in their classrooms. The teachers were so excited about the strategies they were learning that we applied for a state grant. We used the money we received to obtain further training in RC. The enthusiasm of these teachers began to spill over to other members of the faculty. Soon the ideas spread to all the teachers in the school. Within the past 3 years, the approach has expanded to teachers in others schools in the district and other districts in Florida. Recently, I attended a Holmes Partnership meeting in Boston where we talked about new initiatives. For our session, we presented a timeline of what has happened with responsive classrooms in Florida. A growing number of teachers are involved in this effort because they believe it helps students socially, and consequently, academically.

Q: How do the students respond to RC?

Very well. Let me tell you about an interesting study we did last year that illustrates this point. One of the teachers I worked with was thrilled because her students had scored so high on the IOWA Basic Skills subtests. She said that her students were very typical of students she had taught in previous years. She felt that her use of morning meetings had contributed to the students' success this year. So, we decided to interview third-grade students about their perceptions of morning meetings. We

knew that we could not determine if morning meetings caused the difference, but we thought student interviews might be illuminating, and they were. After individually interviewing the students, we found three strong patterns. First, students said that morning meeting helped them to know each other and to be comfortable members of the class. For instance, Sam said, "When people greet me, it makes me feel good." Second, students emphasized the fun they had together. Leteisha noted, "We laugh a lot in morning meetings. Ms. Ketts is always the first one to laugh." Third, students said that morning meeting helped them focus. It got them ready for the day. Scott said, "Morning meeting helps kids get awake and do their work." Lyndsey added, "Mrs. Ketts helps us feel excited in morning meeting and this helps us feel excited about the day." "Morning meeting helps kids, like when you play Kooshball [a morning meeting activity], you have to watch and pay attention—like when you are working," said Stephen.

Q: What concerns have teachers, administrators, and families raised?

Teachers have concerns about the time it might take to use this approach. When I teach about RC, I teach the morning meeting strategy first. It packs such a powerful punch that I think teachers quickly see the potential benefits they will reap and become less worried about time. Also, as with all innovations, some teachers who learn about RC are simply not going to use it. Either they believe it will take too much time or maybe this philosophy doesn't make sense to them. With teachers who are interested in trying it, we try to work with them to help them make some adjustments with their daily schedules. Sometimes this involves working with principals to ensure their support for any adjustments that are made. We have been able to address concerns about the time required for morning meetings effec-

tively with most interested teachers by assuring them it is OK to make modifications or only use some of the components at first. Sometimes new implementers need help thinking about adjustments they can make to use RC strategies in their classrooms. Frequently, when teachers are learning about RC, they create mental images of the strategies that stand in their way. They might envision the morning meeting lasting 30 to 45 minutes, when in fact, an effective morning meeting can be conducted in about 10 minutes. Many of the strategies can be blended quite easily to fit with students' academic work. New RC teachers often find that, by making minor adjustments in their classroom schedules, they find the time to use the strategies on a daily basis. If a teacher is genuinely interested, we can find ways to work with the time issue.

Q: How are increasing academic standards affecting the use of RC?

This is an interesting question. Our focus on increasing standards is making professionals look more closely at how students learn effectively. Cognitive researchers are suggesting that attitudes and beliefs are powerful mediators of learning. One would assume that classroom environments and cultures would play an important role in students' attitudes and beliefs about learning. RC has the potential to foster classroom cul-

tures that would engender positive beliefs and attitudes about learning, and just maybe improve student learning. Perhaps, that is what happened in the third-grade classroom I described earlier. Although it is too early to tell, one thing is for certain, in our intensity to help students achieve academically, we cannot forget the emotional aspects of learning.

Q: Do these strategies work with older students?

Over the years, proponents have learned that elementary and preschool teachers do have an easier time implementing RC than teachers of older students. The structure of middle and high school programs, that is, 40- to 50-minute learning periods, tend to work against implementation. Content teachers often find it challenging to cover the basic academic curriculum and may be reluctant to add anything else. RC advocates, however, are determined to establish middle school and high school programs because the social skills and the quality of the learning environment are so important for older students.

Q: How can teachers learn more about this approach?

Teachers can call the Northeast Foundation for Children (NFFC) at 800/360-6332 and get on the newsletter mailing list. The quarterly NFFC newsletters are packed with strategies for the classroom. The

newsletters also include lists of related books and other materials that support RC. The mailing address for the Foundation is 71 Montague City Road, Greenfield, MA 01301. The website is www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Persons interested in submitting material for An Interview With . . . should contact either Mary T. Brownell, Department of Special Education, G315 Normal Hall, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2053, or Chriss Walther-Thomas, 304 Jones Hall, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23185.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

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- Nelsen, J., Lott, L., & Glenn, H. S. (1997). *Positive discipline in the classroom* (2nd ed.). Rocklin, CA: Prima.
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