Social and Academic Learning Study

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This preliminary research found a link between the Responsive Classroom® (RC) approach and improved student social and academic learning. Children whose teachers and schools used the approach had higher scores on math and reading tests. Further, teachers using the approach felt more effective, had a greater sense of closeness with their students, and used more high-quality instructional practices than teachers not trained in the approach.

Background

The Responsive Classroom® (RC) approach is a practical way of teaching that integrates social and academic learning. The goal of its developers was to help children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Intuitively, many educators know that the practices teachers use are important for fostering children's academic and social growth. Knowing intuitively that an educational intervention should work is different from pointing to scientific data showing that it does work, which was the goal of this study.

Previous studies had examined only the development of children's social skills with the RC approach, while this study focused on educational outcomes of students, as well as changes in teacher attitudes and behaviors.

The Research

The study included six schools in a single urban district in Connecticut during the school years from 2001-02 through 2003-04. Three schools adopted the RC approach, and their teachers participated in two week-long institutes to learn about its principles and strategies. Certified coaches also worked with them during the school year to help with classroom implementation. The other three schools served as a control or comparison group and received no training in the RC approach.

This study design was quasi-experimental, meaning that schools in the treatment group decided on their own to try the approach rather than being randomly selected to participate.

Researchers working through the University of Virginia Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) used a longitudinal design—one in which they studied children and teachers over several complete school years. Built into the RC approach is the recognition that social and academic skills typically improve only over time as children are given many opportunities to learn and practice these skills.

Findings

The researchers collected their data through standardized test scores, teacher questionnaires, classroom observations, student questionnaires, and teacher and principal interviews. After analyzing their data, the researchers summarized their findings as follows:

• Children showed greater increases in reading and math test scores.

Children at schools widely using the RC approach performed better in reading and math than children at the comparison schools. The gains were greater over three-year periods than over two-year periods, and greater in math than in reading. No difference appeared in students' test score performance between schools using the RC approach and comparison schools when children had been exposed to RC practices for only one year.

• Teachers felt more effective and more positive about teaching.

These findings are important because teachers' beliefs about teaching often forecast the kinds of behaviors they exhibit in the classroom as well as the academic experiences of their students. The quasi-experimental study design prevents the researchers from saying that the RC approach caused these differences in beliefs and attitudes, but this finding does suggest a strong association between use of the RC approach and those differences.

• Children had better social skills, felt closer to teachers, and were less fearful.

Children taught according to RC practices did better socially and were more comfortable trying new things in school. Teachers using the practices felt closer to the
Responsive Classroom Approach

The RC approach was developed in 1981 by classroom teachers who formed the Northeast Foundation for Children to explore ideas for teaching academic and social skills in an integrated way throughout the school day. Not only do children learn better through social interaction than alone, but social skills, these teachers believed, are essential to academic learning. Only when children know how to manage themselves and their interactions with others are they free to focus on the academic challenges that lie ahead of them. School then becomes a safe and productive learning community in which children willingly invest their trust and their energies. Over the years, the approach has been refined on the basis of further collaboration with classroom teachers, continuous learning about children, and the evolving landscape of U.S. education. For more about the RC approach, see www.responsiveclassroom.org

Children they were teaching.

- Teachers offered more high quality instruction.
- The RC approach appeared to contribute to both the instructional and emotional support teachers offer children. Surprisingly, the findings were stronger for instructional quality than emotional quality. It is important to note here the growing body of research showing that the types of instructional practices used more often by teachers using the RC approach actually enhance children’s learning.
- Children felt more positive about schools, teachers, and peers.
- Children taught with the RC approach liked school more, had better social skills, and enjoyed their peers and teachers more. Children taught with this approach also did better at school work, but the research did not find an association between liking school more and better academic performance.
- Teachers more frequently engaged in and placed higher value on collaboration
- Teachers using the RC approach were more likely to collaborate formally with their colleagues and to value collaboration more than teachers not using the approach.

Does the RC approach work? The simple answer—is yes, most likely. Children appear to perform better in schools that use the RC approach. While there is an association between use of the RC approach and children’s educational outcomes, researchers cannot claim for certain that the approach was the cause of the results.

Taken together, the findings show that the RC approach is equally beneficial for children considered “at risk” for school failure on the basis of sociodemographic indicators (such as poverty) and children considered not at risk. This finding is important in light of criticisms frequently raised by practitioners and policy makers about socio-emotional programs. One such criticism is that such interventions are more effective in schools serving children with ample economic and social resources at home, because such programs use social resources as a springboard to effectiveness.

A second criticism is that socio-emotional interventions may actually harm children deemed at risk, because they decrease the amount of instructional time in the classroom.

Our results suggest that these criticisms are not well founded. First, children at risk and children not at risk appear to profit equally from the benefits associated with the RC approach. Second, the approach does not appear to harm children who are exposed to difficult environments outside school.

Conclusion

The Social and Academic Learning Study offers support for the contribution of the Responsive Classroom approach to better social and academic outcomes for elementary school children. Teachers’ use of the RC approach was linked to gains in test scores, particularly in math; greater teacher selfefficacy and more positive attitudes toward teaching; better social competence among children; better classroom quality; children’s more positive perception of school; and increased formal collaboration among teachers.

More research is needed before we can say conclusively that the approach works. But the evidence looks highly promising so far. The Responsive Classroom Efficacy Study, currently in progress, extends this line of research (see www.socialdevelopmentlab.org/)

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Additional members of the research team included Robert C. Pianta, Laura Brock, Karen L. Paro, Iris Chiu, Lauren Decker, and Brook Sawyer.

For more information on CASTL research at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education, see http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/castl