

The Influence of Implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* Approach on Teacher-Student Interaction Quality¹

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The study examined the direct and indirect effects of training in the *Responsive Classroom*[®] (RC) approach on teachers' implementation of RC practices and the quality of teacher-student interactions. Teachers that received RC training had higher levels of implementation of RC practices in their classrooms and, in turn, had higher quality teacher-student interactions compared to teachers not trained in the RC approach.

Children spend nearly half of their waking hours in school. Therefore, classrooms are very important settings in which to intervene to improve students' social and academic adjustment. Increasingly, schools are implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) programs designed to optimize conditions for students' learning and development in both academic and social domains. While the link between SEL programs and student outcomes is well-documented, less is known about how SEL programs work. One idea is that SEL programs improve student outcomes by enhancing the quality of day-to-day interactions between teachers and students. However, few studies have empirically examined this hypothesis.

One example of a widely used SEL program is the *Responsive Classroom* (RC) approach. The RC approach is designed to foster elementary children's social, emotional, self-regulatory, and academic development through the creation of well-structured, supportive learning environments. RC principles and practices emphasize the importance of social interaction, process-oriented learning, and knowing and respecting students' cultural and individual differences. Previous studies link the RC approach to improved teacher attitudes as well as students' gains in reading and math. Still, little is known about the effect of RC on the quality of classroom interactions.

The goal of the present study, conducted at the University of Virginia Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, was to examine the effect of RC

on the quality of teacher-student interactions using a rigorous research design: a randomized controlled trial.

The Responsive Classroom Approach

Responsive Classroom is a widely used program designed to optimize elementary school and classroom conditions for children's social and academic adjustment. Examples of RC practices include:

- *Morning Meeting* is a daily circle-time focused on building classroom relationships. Students greet one another, play a learning-related game, share personal news, and process an interactive message written by the teacher.
- *Interactive Modeling* helps students learn classroom routines and expectations through a multi-step process consisting of modeling, practice, and feedback.
- *Academic Choice* provides students with developmentally appropriate autonomy by providing them with teacher-structured choices.

¹This research brief is based on the following published study: Abry, T., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Larsen, R. A. & Brewer, A. J. (2013). The influence of fidelity of implementation on teacher-student interaction quality in the context of a randomized controlled trial of the *Responsive Classroom* approach. *Journal of School Psychology*, 51, 437-453. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2013.03.001>

Measuring Teacher-Student Interaction Quality

This study used an observational measure, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), to rate teacher-student interaction quality. CLASS divides teacher-student interactions into three domains:

- *Emotional Support* considers classroom relationships and teachers' sensitivity to students' needs and incorporation of their ideas into classroom activities.
- *Classroom Organization* measures teachers' ability to proactively manage behavior and use materials that actively engage students in learning.
- *Instructional Support* assesses teachers' promotion of higher-order thinking skills, use of individualized feedback, and promotion of language use.

The Study

The present study examined the direct and indirect relations among *RC* training, teachers' implementation of *RC* practices, and teacher-student interaction quality. Direct relations consider the impact of *RC* training on interaction quality. Indirect relations consider the impact of *RC* training on interaction quality via teachers' implementation of *RC*. Looking at direct and indirect relations of *RC* training on interaction quality is important because not all teachers trained in *RC* are equally effective at using *RC* practices in the classroom.

Participants included 239 third- and fourth-grade teachers from twenty-four elementary schools in a mid-Atlantic school district. Schools were randomly assigned to treatment ($n = 13$) and control ($n = 11$) conditions. Teachers ($n = 132$) in the treatment group received training in the *RC* approach while teachers in the control group ($n = 107$) continued "business as usual" practices and received *RC* training upon study completion. All teachers were assessed on their implementation of *RC* practices and on the quality of their interactions with students during five one-hour observations spaced throughout the school year. In addition, teachers completed an online question-

naire at the end of the school year on their implementation of *RC* practices.

Findings

Results indicated that *RC* training had a direct and positive impact on teachers' implementation of *RC* practices, but not on increases in teacher-student interaction quality. However, there was an indirect association between *RC* training and improved teacher-student interaction quality through teachers' use of *RC* practices. That is, teachers that received *RC* training were more likely to implement *RC* practices frequently and with sufficient quality showed greater improvements in teacher-student interaction quality.

Practical Implications

This study highlights the potential for SEL programs such as the *RC* approach to improve the quality of teachers' interactions with students. Teacher-student interaction quality has been linked to children's academic and social functioning in many studies. SEL programs such as *RC* stand as important levers for change. In addition, the findings suggest that SEL training alone may be insufficient to foster changes in the quality of classroom interactions. Rather, the extent to which teachers use SEL practices contributes to classroom-level changes. Such findings underscore the importance of promoting teachers' buy-in to adopted programs, providing teachers with pre- and post-training support, and monitoring teachers' use of adopted program practices as part of program evaluation.