

# Does Emotional Support and Classroom Organization Early in the Year Lead to Higher Quality Instruction?<sup>1</sup>

Timothy W. Curby, Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, & Tashia Abry

This study examined whether teachers' provision of emotional support and organizational support earlier in the year related to improved instruction later in the year. Results indicated a positive association between earlier emotional support and later instructional support. Further, findings showed a positive association between earlier instructional support and subsequent emotional support. When comparing teachers' use of practices associated with the *Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> (RC) approach, those who used more RC practices showed higher emotional support suggesting the usefulness of RC for enhancing emotional support and subsequent instructional support for student learning.

Teachers' days are spent interacting with children. Many teachers think that providing a great deal of emotional and organizational support earlier in the school year allows them to provide better instruction later.

Why do many teachers think that greater emotional support should lead to better instruction? There are many reasons why, but one foundational reason stems from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The classic Maslow model states that people need to have their basic needs met before they can meet higher-order needs. Applied to classrooms, Maslow states that children need to have their feelings of emotional security met before they can learn effectively.

Why do many teachers think that greater classroom organization would lead to better instruction? The behavior management systems and the classroom routines are viewed as foundational for instruction. So, many teachers believe time invested at the beginning of the year setting up classroom routines will create the environment necessary for better instruction.

This study examined these questions in the context of the Responsive Classroom Efficacy Study, a randomized controlled trial of the *Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> (RC) approach led by Sara Rimm-Kaufman at the University of Virginia. The RC approach is a social and emotional learning

## **Classroom Social Supports**

**Emotional Support:** Teachers help students feel as if they are known and cared for as individuals through expressing warm feelings for the students, tending to their emotional and academic needs, and allowing the children appropriate levels of autonomy and responsibility in the classroom. Higher quality emotional support leads to students having better social competence, higher levels of school satisfaction, fewer problem behaviors, better attitudes towards mathematics, and higher engagement.

**Classroom Organization:** Teachers help students navigate classroom activities, leading to the smoothest functioning of the classroom possible. To do this, teachers use proactive discipline strategies, give the students less down time, and use a variety of modalities for teaching. Better classroom organization leads to students being more engaged in their work. This minimizes the time spent on discipline and transition.

**Instructional Support:** Teachers provide students with opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills, learn and practice language, and communicate with their teachers about their learning process. Teachers use lessons and activities that promote analysis and reasoning that expand learning and understanding through discussions and feedback. Instructional support leads to students being more engaged in their school work and learning more academically in kindergarten and elementary school.

<sup>1</sup>This research brief is based on the following published study: Curby, T. W., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Abry, T. (2013). Do emotional support and classroom organization earlier in the year set the stage for higher quality instruction? *Journal of School Psychology, 51*, 557-569. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2013.06.001

intervention designed for elementary teachers. The RC approach emphasizes classroom practices designed to help teachers provide caring classrooms that support children's social and academic development. (Please see <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/> for more information.) For example, one RC practice is Morning Meeting when teachers begin the day with a group time focused on creating a positive social atmosphere. In this way, the RC approach is designed to help improve classroom social interactions. The goal of this study was to look at whether higher levels of either emotional support or classroom organization, like those associated with RC, implemented earlier in the year contributed to improved instruction later in the year.

### **The Study**

This study considered the effects of RC in two ways. One way looked at teachers' use of RC practices, regardless of whether or not they were in the intervention condition. The other looked at random assignment to intervention or control conditions (regardless of how many RC practices were actually used.)

Participants included 181 third- and fourth-grade teachers from 24 schools from a single district in the mid-Atlantic. Teachers' emotional, organizational, and instructional supports were observed at five points throughout the year using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Teachers' use of RC practices was observed and measured using the Classroom Practices Observational Measure (CPOM).

### **Findings**

Results indicated that higher levels of emotional support earlier in the year were related to higher levels of instructional support later in the year. Similarly, higher levels of instructional support earlier in the year were related to higher levels of emotional support later in the year. Thus, results showed a positive feedback loop between emotional and instructional supports. Greater classroom organization earlier in the year did not result in higher levels of instructional support later in the year.

The pattern of associations between emotional and instructional supports was similar regardless of the use of RC practices and whether or not teachers were assigned to the intervention condition. However, teachers who used more RC practices also had higher levels of emotional support and classroom organization. Thus, the use of RC practices was associated with higher levels of emotional support, which in turn, may have facilitated improved instruction later in the year.

### **Practical Implications**

These findings suggest that creating a safe and supportive environment earlier in the year is helpful in providing later instruction. Thus, students will experience better instruction if teachers take time to establish a nurturing and positive classroom environment where students and teachers know and show respect toward each other. Furthermore, and unexpectedly, findings suggest that providing better instruction earlier in the year is helpful in creating a more emotionally supportive and nurturing classroom environment later in the year. Thus, one conduit to better classroom relationships seems to be through better instruction. Classroom organization, which has demonstrated importance in other research, does not seem to lead to later improved instruction.

The present study also found that the use of RC practices was helpful in providing higher levels of emotional and organizational supports. Thus, training in the RC approach helped teachers foster a safe, supportive, well-functioning and productive learning environment.