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Rules and Rituals: Tools for Creating a Respectful, Caring Learning Community

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*The authors describe the
positive changes at John B.
Murphy Elementary School on
Chicago's northwest side that
have come about through
implementation of the
Responsive Classroom
approach.*

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MS. MEYERS will be attending a computer workshop tomorrow. "While I'm away," she reminds her second-graders, "I want you to remember our class rules and take care of our things and each other." She is helping her students recall the rules not just to remind them of the behavior she expects but also to indicate her trust. "Let's name some ways you can be responsible and caring," she suggests. Her students respond eagerly: "Put the games away when we're done." "Listen when someone is talking." "Ask if you can help if someone doesn't understand." "Be a good friend."

Across the hall, Ms. Stafford's first-grade class gathers around the news and announcements chart, ready to answer the challenging question of the day: How many words are in the daily message? "There are 36!" "I think there are five!" "These are words, the ones with spaces between them." The children record their answers on the chart and assemble on the rug for "morning meeting," a daily ritual in the classroom.

Ms. Meyers and Ms. Stafford are teachers at John B. Murphy Elementary School on the northwest side of Chicago. The school serves children in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, and its multiethnic and socioeconomically diverse student body mirrors the urban neighborhood in which it is located. Since Illinois' 1988 school reform legislation, Murphy School has been transformed. The old windows, peeling paint, and staid, old-fashioned classrooms are gone. Now the school boasts bright, inviting classrooms with computers, cheerful rugs, and scores of books for the children to read. The playground has been marked for group games, and the hallway walls are covered with bulletin boards whose displays relate to such student projects as a drama about the water cycle and a study of Diego Rivera.

But more than the physical space at Murphy has changed in recent years. Today a caring atmosphere and an effective style of classroom management foster children's development and guide them to respect other people, their environment, and their own learning. Even teachers and parents at Murphy now feel cared for and listened to. This change has been achieved in part through implementation of the Responsive Classroom approach, a social curriculum developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children in Greenfield, Massachusetts, and introduced to Chicago schools by the Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development.

Understanding the Responsive Classroom

The Responsive Classroom approach acknowledges children's need to feel both pleasure and significance as members of a classroom community. It is grounded in knowledge about children's development and capitalizes on their natural desire to engage in learning when they feel safe, valued, and respected. 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 frame instruction in the social skills of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control within the context of daily classroom life. They help teachers create a respectful, caring learning community that promotes the development of both academic and social competencies.¹ While the following thumbnail sketches of the six components are by no means comprehensive, they give the flavor of the Responsive Classroom approach.

Morning meeting. This event builds a sense of community while setting a positive tone for the day. At the beginning of each school day, students in a classroom gather in a circle with their teacher to welcome one another and any visitors to the classroom. After the greeting, the teacher goes over the daily news and announcements, the children share their own news, and then the entire class plays a group game. Each of these rituals provides an opportunity for the children to learn and practice a variety of social and academic skills, including speaking in front of others about meaningful experiences, actively listening to peers and responding appropriately with questions and comments, working cooperatively, and using and synthesizing recently acquired knowledge. Such skills are often difficult for young children to acquire, but the supportive atmosphere of morning meeting makes taking risks easier.

Rules and logical consequences. These classroom management tools are intended to instill "habits of goodness" in children and to promote and sustain community.² Developed at the beginning of the school year, rules are *positive* statements that establish guidelines and expectations for classroom behavior;

they are the cornerstones of classroom life and are used to encourage conversation and problem solving related to ethical issues that arise at school. For example, first-grade rules include "Take care of friends and materials" and "Be a good listener and use your words to solve problems."

Logical consequences are nonpunitive responses to student wrongdoing. There are three categories of consequences: you break it, you fix it; loss of a privilege; and thinking time. All three are designed to be situation- and child-specific. Logical consequences are meant to support children as they learn to behave in socially responsible ways; they are also meant to help children learn how to make amends to their peers and soothe feelings when they've hurt someone.

Guided discovery. This is a process by which classroom materials (e.g., games, art supplies, books, and computers) and learning methods (e.g., writing or reading workshops) are deliberately and carefully introduced to students. This exploratory process focuses on open-ended questions and tasks in order to promote conceptual thinking, develop the children's sense of self-efficacy, and increase the likelihood that they will use the materials and methods in novel and productive ways.

A "guided discovery" introducing felt-tip markers, for example, could be carried out with either a small group or an entire classroom. It is critical that all the children have a marker in hand so that they can explore its physical properties, such as the felt tip and the tight-fitting, color-coordinated cap. The students would then be given an opportunity to draw with the marker to explore its creative possibilities -- the width of lines made by the marker, perhaps, or the range of shades that can be achieved by pressing down more or less firmly. Each child would present the drawing to the class, giving the students a chance to practice such social skills as listening to one another, appreciating other people's ideas, asking thoughtful questions, and making respectful comments. Finally, as a group and guided by their teacher, the children would determine how best to care

for the markers so that they will be available for future use -- for example, by putting the caps on when finished and returning the markers to the container in which they are stored.

Classroom organization. When organized thoughtfully, the classroom environment itself can serve as a teacher.³ In the Responsive Classroom approach, the organization of the classroom is intended to maximize children's independence at the same time that it facilitates their interactions; the physical environment is also supposed to reflect the common culture that the teacher and students build together over time. In a typical Responsive Classroom, the furniture is arranged to create well-defined areas that permit children to work in a variety of configurations: alone, with partners, in small groups, and as a whole group. The teacher also makes sure that there are artifacts around the room representing individual students and their heritage and that the display areas document the engagement of the children in the educational program of the classroom.

Academic choice. Giving children choices at school helps them develop a sense of ownership in regard to the learning process.⁴ In a Responsive Classroom, the teacher regularly provides opportunities for students to make choices about their own learning by allowing them to choose a topic for study or the method or materials for the study. For example, a student could engage in reading activities on a computer, write a play that summarizes a chapter or a book, listen to stories on tape, or illustrate favorite passages from a book. The students plan the work, carry it out, and then present what they have learned to the class.

Assessment and reporting to parents. Ongoing communication between school and home is critical. This communication can take place in a variety of ways, not only through regular parent/teacher conferences and informative evaluations of students' progress, but also through scheduled parent visits to morning meeting, through weekly classroom newsletters, and through other creative formats.

Frequent, meaningful communication leads to a better rapport between teachers and parents and helps both parties understand how best to promote the children's academic learning and social/emotional development.

The Journey Begins

Early in 1995, a group of teachers from Murphy School came to the Erikson Institute in frustration. They had been trying to introduce more child-centered strategies into the classroom to foster students' development and motivation but had been thwarted by misbehavior. As the teachers moved away from traditional classroom-management approaches, peer conflict and aggression seemed to increase. The teachers knew that large classes, a multilingual student body, and a range of social, emotional, and academic problems all impeded their progress, but they also felt that they lacked an understanding of how to create the learning environment they envisioned. They hoped that the Erikson Institute would be able to help them.

As a first step in their collaboration with Murphy School, consultants from Erikson suggested that the teachers read and discuss *Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom*.⁵ The consultants noted that the philosophy of the Responsive Classroom approach resonated with the teachers' objectives. They thought the approach would also appeal to the teachers because they were coping with a short school day and needed to find a way to interweave instruction in social skills and academic instruction -- there wasn't enough time in the day to implement a separate social curriculum.

During the summer of 1995, the Erikson Institute sponsored a three-day introductory workshop on the Responsive Classroom approach that was open to all interested teachers and administrators in the Chicago Public Schools. The delegation from Murphy School included nine classroom teachers, two special education teachers, the librarian, and the assistant principal. They participated in small groups that learned how to conduct morning meetings, establish rules and

logical consequences, and lead guided discoveries (these three components are considered the initial steps of the Responsive Classroom approach). In addition, they explored how to use empowering and encouraging language and how to model desired social behaviors. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the workshop for the teachers from Murphy was that it validated their belief in the importance of allocating time at the beginning of the school year to create a safe, caring classroom environment in order to stimulate learning and community.

Initial Implementation

Armed with new techniques and high hopes, the teachers who had attended the introductory workshop began to implement morning meetings, rules and logical consequences, and guided discoveries in their classrooms when school opened in September. In the beginning, the morning meetings were implemented most thoroughly, and the students responded positively to this component of the Responsive Classroom approach. They loved interacting as a group in this new way, and the teachers found that they learned more about their students as individuals, which enabled them to structure learning activities more effectively. Parents reported that their children sang morning meeting songs and played morning meeting games at home; one Saturday morning, a first-grader even created a news and announcements chart to begin his family's day.

The caring, engaged behavior so evident among the children during morning meeting did not always carry over to the rest of the day, however. At grade-level meetings, the teachers began to discuss ways to integrate the teaching and practicing of social skills throughout the rest of the school day. In effect, this meant working on fuller implementation of the other Responsive Classroom components, particularly rules and logical consequences and academic choice. The teachers had received training in rules and logical consequences during the workshop, but they were finding it difficult to shift from more traditional disciplinary practices, and academic choice had not been covered in depth

during the workshop, so they needed training in that component. With technical assistance from Erikson in the form of classroom consultation and grade-level discussion groups, the teachers began to find ways to weave the social curriculum throughout the rest of the school day.

In January 1996, Murphy's faculty met to discuss the progress of new initiatives at the school, including the Responsive Classroom approach. During this midyear evaluation, one teacher said, "It takes a lot of time to create a caring community." Others at the meeting interpreted "a lot of time" as a criticism. "No, no, no," the teacher responded. "It's not a negative. It's just a fact. This is one program that really works."

This exchange set off a chorus of support for the intervention. The physical education teacher and the librarian said that they had perceived a noticeable difference in students whose teachers were implementing Responsive Classroom components: they were exhibiting more caring behavior and acting as a team even when they were outside their classrooms. The students also appeared calmer, which made them more able to take advantage of learning opportunities. Murphy's principal took note. Something powerful was happening here.

Schoolwide Implementation

Each spring, public schools in Chicago must develop a school improvement plan for the next year. In the spring of 1996, based on the recent midyear evaluation, Murphy's school improvement committee decided that the Responsive Classroom approach should be implemented schoolwide. That summer, the school organized a training workshop for all its teachers and staff; administrators and teachers from other Chicago-area schools were also invited. Murphy staff members who had attended the first workshop participated in an advanced seminar, and in July the assistant principal and a lead teacher also attended a weeklong Responsive Classroom leadership forum in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

When the new school year began in the fall of 1996, Murphy's daily schedule was reorganized so that all students, as well as ancillary staff members, could participate in classroom morning meetings. In addition, faculty meetings sometimes incorporated morning meeting rituals in order to build a sense of community among the teachers. While morning meeting was the focus of the schoolwide implementation effort, many teachers also began to implement other Responsive Classroom components, particularly rules and logical consequences.

In the three years since schoolwide implementation began, the Responsive Classroom approach has made a tremendous difference at Murphy School. Most noticeably, student behavior has improved, as the children have developed more sophisticated social skills. For example, a kinder, friendlier language is now heard throughout the school. Even kindergarten students, many of whom speak English as a second language, can be heard saying: "Remember the rule . . ." "I'm reminding you . . ." "I don't like it when . . ." Words, not fists, are the children's first response to challenging situations during the school day.

The improved behavior also seems to be related to the greater sense of stability that the children now feel because they can more readily anticipate daily events in the classroom. They know that the day will begin with morning meeting, and they look forward to it. Morning meeting, in turn, helps them understand what will occur during the rest of the day, and it reinforces the expectations teachers have for them, both academically and socially.

Of course, misbehavior hasn't entirely disappeared at Murphy, but the Responsive Classroom approach has dramatically changed teachers' interactions with students in disciplinary situations: teachers' responses now demonstrate their trust in the children's ability to grow and improve and their willingness to help the children do this. When a few students vandalized a school bathroom, for example, the current assistant principal turned to the basic principles of rules and logical consequences to formulate a response: she

provided the offenders with paint and stencils for the bathroom walls, which gave them a chance to make reparations to the school community. In another situation, a child who had been calling other students names was instructed to think of an "apology of action"; the child's genuinely funny card, presented to the students he'd hurt, made them all laugh and restored their relationship.

Parents of Murphy students have also noticed changes. Many chose to live in the neighborhood because their children would be able to have friends from diverse backgrounds, and they are happy to see that the Responsive Classroom approach is fostering such friendships. Before the approach was implemented, students tended to work and play only with familiar friends. But as the children have learned about one another during morning meetings and have had a chance to work with different people during the day, they have expanded their circle of friends and developed a greater sense of empathy and caring for their peers. One mother expressed delight at a new friend who appeared at the family's front door to work on a math project with her child. To support crossover to the home environment, Murphy's parent/teacher organization has sponsored several workshops for parents to learn specific practices being used at school to address behavioral problems such as tattling and name-calling.

Teachers, administrators, and parents believe that the Responsive Classroom approach has had a positive effect on academic achievement at Murphy as well. Scores on standardized tests in math and reading have steadily risen. Because most students are now more comfortable in school, they are more willing to take the risks required to learn. They also enjoy school more and want to be there, so overall attendance is better. And because there are fewer discipline problems in the classroom, teachers have more time to develop engaging learning activities.

Why the Responsive Classroom Approach Works at Murphy

There are many reasons why the Responsive Classroom approach has worked so well at Murphy School. Some are inherent in the approach itself, while others

reflect specific circumstances at the school that helped the program take root and flourish.

- The Responsive Classroom approach is consistent with Murphy School's mission -- to foster children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development -- and the components of the approach provide a set of clearly defined practices for achieving that mission.
- There is strong administrative support for the Responsive Classroom approach at Murphy School. The principal (then the assistant principal) participated in both of the training workshops and also attended the leadership forum. Her involvement has been critical to the success of the program at Murphy because it is important not only for teachers to feel that administrators appreciate and endorse what they are doing in the classroom but also for administrators to approach serious student misbehavior from the same perspective as teachers do. Without disciplinary consistency between the classrooms and the administrative offices, schoolwide change would not have been possible at Murphy.
- Most of Murphy's teachers participated in Responsive Classroom training, and a significant number of teaching assistants and ancillary staff members did so as well. This widespread participation was important to the success of the intervention at the school, as was the follow-up support provided by consultants from the Erikson Institute.
- The training that teachers and staff members received was both theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, the training demonstrated the sense of belonging, significance, and fun that emerges in a caring learning environment. At the practical level, the training provided concrete guidance about how to implement the approach without radically changing existing routines. This was possible because the components of the approach can be integrated into virtually every type of curricular topic or skills instruction.
- While there has been some variation from classroom to classroom in the degree of implementation of the Responsive Classroom approach, Murphy School's administrators do expect every teacher to conduct morning meetings each day. This shared ritual provides a level of continuity that allows for a dialogue among staff members about the purposes and practices of the school community as a whole. Through morning meetings, each classroom has become part of the larger school community, and each student has become the responsibility of all the teachers.

Challenges still abound at Murphy School, but they don't seem insurmountable anymore. Decisions are always made by answering the question "What is best for our students?" and teaching is structured so that all the children are actively engaged in acquiring and practicing skills and behaviors valued by the entire

school community. Today, membership in the John B. Murphy School community requires respectfulness for all its members and enthusiasm for learning.

- [1.](#) Ruth Charney, Marlynn Clayton, and Chip Wood, *The Responsive Classroom: Guidelines* (Pittsfield, Mass.: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1997).
 - [2.](#) Ruth Charney, *Habits of Goodness: Case Studies in the Social Curriculum* (Greenfield, Mass.: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1997).
 - [3.](#) Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman, *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1994).
 - [4.](#) Ruth Charney, Marlynn Clayton, and Chip Wood, *The Responsive Classroom: Guidelines* (Pittsfield, Mass.: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1995).
 - [5.](#) Ruth Charney, *Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom* (Pittsfield, Mass.: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1991).
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