

Influences on Implementation of the *Responsive Classroom*[®] Approach¹

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Researchers asked teachers about the factors that influenced their level of adherence to the *Responsive Classroom* approach and then had teachers, principals, and intervention coaches rate each principal's "buy-in" to the approach. The coaches' ratings of principal buy-in were most related to the observed practice of the teachers.

Educational strategies that are found to be effective in improving children's learning are often scaled up to the school level for maximum impact. However, these strategies are not always implemented—or implemented as designed—by all teachers or even *most* teachers in a school. The effectiveness of educational interventions often depends on the proportion of teachers in a school who practice the strategies in the manner in which they were designed.

Researchers continue to explore the reasons some schools have high rates of teacher adherence to an educational strategy and others do not. Researchers in the Social Development Lab of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning examined this issue in the context of 13 schools implementing a social-emotional learning approach called *Responsive Classroom*[®] (*RC*).

Third grade teachers from elementary schools in a large district in the mid-Atlantic U.S. completed *RC* training and their first year of implementation of the approach. At the end of the year, 33 teachers volunteered to participate in focus groups. These teachers were asked to identify the factor that was most helpful for implementation of the *RC* approach and to identify the factor that was most challenging to implementation. Teachers selected "Schools/Administration" as the largest barrier and "RC Coaches" as the largest support (see Table 1).

These teachers also responded to questions about their implementation of the *RC* approach over the previous year. The researchers categorized teacher responses into three overarching themes describing influences that affected teacher adherence to the *RC*

Table 1

Largest Barrier	
Schools/administration	69.23%
Teachers	15.38%
Students	15.38%
RC coaches	0.00%
Largest Support	
RC coaches	70.37%
Teachers	14.81%
Schools/administration	11.11%
Students	3.70%

approach.

Principal buy-in. In the focus groups, the teachers indicated that the principal's judgments about the relevance of the *RC* approach—whether positive or negative—was instrumental to their implementation. Teachers felt that "it takes an administration to kind of set that tone" for implementation. In speaking of her administrators, one teacher said, "You can tell when they are behind something." Specifically, they perceived buy-in by principal behavior in the following three areas:

Motivation. If teachers perceived that a principal was merely seeking recognition for adopting the *RC* approach, their enthusiasm for the approach decreased. Teachers felt positive about implementation when principals appeared to be motivated by a belief in the intervention's principles and an interest in improving child outcomes.

¹This research brief is based on the following published study: Wanless, S.B., Patton, C.S., Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., Deutsch, N.L. (2013). Setting-level influences on implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* approach. *Prevention Science*, 14, 40-51. doi: 10.1007/s11121-012-0294-1 This published study can be purchased at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11121-012-0294-1>

The Responsive Classroom Approach

The RC approach was developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc., and focuses on building the overall capacity of teachers and thus places a high demand on fundamental teacher change. The RC approach asks teachers to align their beliefs, practices, and language about children to reflect a teaching philosophy based in developmental psychology.

This intervention has been widely used in schools. Most importantly, the RC approach shares features with other school-based interventions that use training and coaching to build teacher capacity and improve classroom social interactions.

Consistency. Teachers looked for schoolwide use of practices, including by the principal, or at least practices that did not conflict with the intervention. They also were encouraged by all-school adherence to all practices instead of a partial adherence, a so-called “picking and choosing” approach. Teachers viewed principals as the vehicle through which consistency could be achieved.

Accommodation. Teachers also needed principals to accommodate implementation by providing them with appropriate supplies and dedicated time in the master schedule to conduct RC practices.

Individualized coaching. Coaches from the Northeast Foundation for Children provided teachers with consulting, workshops, three visits during the school year, and email exchanges. Teachers said that support came from the coaches’ (a) ability to show real-world applications and (b) provision of on-demand resources.

Psychologically safe context. Teachers also spoke about how both administrators and coaches conveyed encouragement that helped them feel safe to take risks and attempt new ways of interacting with students. Teachers discussed the importance of a psychologically safe context; one that provided (a) validation, that is, administrators and others understood the relevance of the practices happening in classrooms; (b) time to work at their own pace, and (c) social support.

Because teachers indicated such an important role for the principal, the researchers next examined the relationship between principal buy-in, as perceived by a variety of constituents, and observed RC imple-

mentation by the teachers.

The next year the researchers developed questions leading to a buy-in rating for each of the 13 principals in the study. A different set of questions was developed for each of four groups of participants in the study: the principals (who rated themselves), the teachers, the six RC teacher coaches, and the individual RC coach who worked with all 13 principals.

Teachers and principals were from the same schools as studied the prior year, but were fourth-grade teachers who were in their second year of RC implementation. All 48 fourth-grade teachers and all 13 principals participated in this portion of the study.

The researchers found that teacher and principal ratings were not significantly related to the level of teacher implementation of the RC approach. Teachers’ ratings of principal buy-in ranged from high to low, but those ratings were not related to their own adherence to the RC approach. Principals all rated themselves highly on buy in, but as a group their ratings were not related to teacher implementation in their school.

The ratings of coaches—both types of coaches—were most strongly related to actual teacher implementation. This finding suggests that having an outside rater of principal buy-in may provide useful information about the likelihood that teachers will adhere to RC practices.

Summary

Each of the 13 principals in this study had agreed to participate in this project to use the RC approach in third and fourth grades, and every one of them indicated a high level of support for the approach in their self-ratings. Yet teachers looked beyond a principal’s declarations to specific types of behavior when determining whether the principal truly supported the approach. Principal buy-in did indeed seem to influence teachers’ implementation of the approach, and RC coaches had the most success in predicting implementation based on their ratings of principal support.

It may be useful to further develop a tool that can be used to assess principal buy-in so programs can identify schools where interventions are likely to be successfully implemented and those which may need additional support. This tool may be more accurate when administered by an external coach rather than by the principal or teachers in the school.

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