



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Responsive Teaching*

“... the biggest mistake of past centuries in teaching has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual, and thus to feel justified in teaching them the same subjects in the same ways.”

Howard Gardner

in Siegel, J., & Shaughnessy, M. F. (1994).
Educating for understanding. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(7), p. 564

TEACHING TODAY

More than any other generation, today's educators have the opportunity to significantly influence student learning. Recent research and technological advances provide teachers with information and access to effective pedagogy, world knowledge, and cultural differences that may have separated students in the past. Gone are the days when educators grouped children according to intellectual abilities and native languages. In contrast, today's learners are diverse students who bring a variety of experiences, languages, and cultural differences to the classroom. Therefore, today's teachers must differentiate instruction by crafting lessons that meet the needs of all students and designing classroom curriculum that celebrates cultural differences. Responsive Teaching is one method teachers are using to meet these goals.

WHAT IS RESPONSIVE TEACHING?

Responsive Teaching is “a teacher's solid (and growing) understanding of how teaching and learning occur, and it responds to varied learners' needs for more structure or more independence, more practice or greater challenge, a more active or less active approach to learning, and so on” (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003, p. 2). Responsive teachers are knowledgeable about the expectations of their curriculum and how students learn. In most classrooms, students' abilities range from severely below grade level to significantly above grade level. These teachers work hard to identify each student's independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels. By identifying an accurate instructional level, these teachers can provide appropriate instruction and support each student as he or she learns. Additionally, responsive teachers use assessments to screen, monitor, and diagnose

reading progress so that each student works at his or her fullest potential. Assessments are used to inform instruction as “a healthy part of effective teaching and successful learning” (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002, p.40). This type of learning environment is treated as a “[C]ome as you are party” (Soderman, Gregory, & McCarty, 2005) where differences are acknowledged and a community of learners are celebrated.

Responsive teachers are guided by the connections to four instructional elements: the student, the environment, the content, and the instruction (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). These elements comprise an instructional system where each is equally important. If one component is omitted, then learning is diminished. In the following sections, each element is discussed in greater detail.

THE STUDENT

Our students are diverse and come to our classrooms with a variety of differences. They bring native cultures and unique experiences that contribute to the learning environment. These variations include gender, culture, cognitive abilities and social skills. While these differences provide opportunities for enrichment and growth, it can be very challenging to meet the needs of all these learners. Responsive teachers analyze their students' differences and discover ways to capitalize on each student's strengths and enhance learning.

THE ENVIRONMENT

In order to provide optimum learning opportunities, a literate environment is crucial. This environment includes the physical arrangement of the classroom, the materials used, various grouping practices, and a

culture for creating safe learning. Responsive teachers create a healthy learning environment so that all students feel valued and accepted.

Developing a literate environment for all learners

The physical arrangement of the classroom is critically important for the responsive teacher. Teachers should plan for large and small group areas. These areas might include space for workstations, shared reading activities, classroom library, tables for small group instruction, and a large group meeting area. Other items might also include charts that support reading and writing instruction, a word wall or chart, and examples of student work. The responsive teacher recognizes that the items (charts, word walls, and classroom library) must be used in conjunction with teaching to create a literate environment; the items in isolation do not make a difference in student learning. It is the responsive teacher who makes the difference.

Materials

The literate environment includes a host of on-line and off-line reading materials. These materials might include newspapers, magazines, picture books, novels, and poetry books. The responsive teacher tailors instruction to individual student's needs by using a variety of reading materials. The materials are selected using student interest, varying reading levels, and different literary genres that include expository as well as narrative text (International Reading Association, 2000). Having diverse materials in the classroom increases the likelihood of students reading on his or her instructional level as well as the possibility of creating life-long readers.

Groupings

Teachers who use responsive teaching are responding to student needs. This quest may call for large group, small group, or individualized instruction. Large group instruction addresses a curricular need for all or most of the students in the class. This type of instruction might include introducing a new concept, modeling a new skill, or shared reading/writing activities. Small group instruction is typically a homogeneous grouping for a specific purpose. Students who gather in small group instruction may be grouped according to academic needs, social needs, interests, or learning

preferences. Curriculum for small group instruction might include remediation of a specific skill, advanced instruction for those interested in a particular topic, or a specific type of instruction based on learning preferences. Individualized instruction is provided for students who need specific one-on-one time with the teacher. Responsive teachers use a variety of flexible grouping practices based on student needs. Regardless of the grouping practice (large group, small group, or individualized), the purpose is to maximize student learning.

Culture for learning

Students in a responsive classroom are part of a learning community. Each is a valued member of the classroom where needs are addressed and differences are celebrated. The classroom is a physically and emotionally safe environment that is filled with learning opportunities. The responsive teacher creates a non-threatening environment where student learning is carefully scaffolded so that each learner is successful. The responsive classroom is a safe culture that promotes academic, social, emotional, and physical learning experiences (Tomlinson, 1999).

THE CONTENT

Today's teachers are highly knowledgeable educators who must demonstrate pedagogically sound instructional techniques in a variety of content areas. Responsive teachers participate in continuous learning experiences through professional development opportunities, taking university courses, and attending professional organization conferences. By participating in these (and other) opportunities, teachers update their content knowledge and instructional techniques.

Engaging Content

Responsive teachers have great knowledge of children and learning as a process. They understand that learning is a social event and that children need time to interact with each other and the teacher through discussions and hands-on activities. At any given moment, a visitor walking into one of these classrooms might expect to see children gathered in small groups working on a science project, discussing a novel together, or tutoring each other in math. Children in these classrooms set goals for themselves and make decisions about their own learning. In responsive classrooms, children

develop confidence and a sense of self-efficacy. While responsive teachers are still the leaders or managers of these classrooms, they do not feel the need to direct each learning opportunity. They support students when they need it and step back when they are no longer needed.

Understanding the developmental process of children is critical to responsive teaching. Responsive teachers plan instruction that meets the needs of their students based on the developmental stage in which students are operating. The curriculum in a responsive classroom should provide a moderate challenge for students, but not frustrate them. It should also be motivating and interesting.

Monitoring Progress

Responsive teachers provide responses to students that is “specific, descriptive, and immediate” (Black & William study as cited in Chappuis & Stiggins, 1998, p. 42). Telling students what they are doing well and helping them develop their strengths will increase motivation and learning. Using constructive language and offering children ways to improve their performance is productive. A detailed, timely response to students helps them define their learning goals. Chappuis and Stiggins (2002) call this process *assessment for learning*. High-quality, formative assessment can have a profound impact on student achievement and is a healthy part of effective teaching (Chappuis and Stiggins, 2002).

THE INSTRUCTION

The student is at the heart of responsive instruction. The responsive teacher closely monitors the student’s progress and adjusts the curriculum accordingly. For example, if the student is demonstrating a high level of proficiency concerning the concepts, then the teacher offers instruction that is more challenging. However, if the student demonstrates a lack of mastery of the presented skills or knowledge, then additional assessment and instruction is needed. The teacher closely monitors student progress by assessing the skills and/or knowledge and providing appropriate instruction based on the assessment results.

Intensive Instruction

For the student who has continued difficulty learning the concepts, the Response to Intervention

model might be employed. The Response to Intervention (RTI) model is more than an attempt to limit unnecessary placement of students in Special Education services. RTI focuses on making data-based decisions to improve instruction for all students. The model calls for intentional assessment and data collection, a solution-seeking process, and a three-tiered approach linking instruction with assessment.

- **Tier 1:** The teacher provides evidence-based instruction in the classroom. Student progress is monitored on a weekly basis using appropriate assessments.
- **Tier 2:** The teacher responds to students whose progress is less than desired. These students receive different or additional support from the teacher or another educational professional in a small group setting. Student progress continues to be monitored through appropriate assessment techniques.
- **Tier 3:** The teacher responds to those students whose progress continues to be insufficient in Tier 2 with instruction that is more intensive. This instruction can be provided in a variety of ways: small group, individual, or another professional educator). If the student continues to be unsuccessful, then special services may be investigated.

Instruction for the Whole Child

The responsive teacher provides classroom instruction that centers on the individual as a whole: the student’s academic, social, emotional, and physical needs. A student in the responsive classroom feels a sense of belonging and actively participates in classroom instruction. The teacher is careful to support the social and emotional aspects especially when academic and physical needs are great.

Curriculum is intentionally designed and progress carefully monitored, in order to ensure learning success. The responsive teacher responds to student needs.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

In Thesaurus.com, the word “responsive” means active, compassionate, perceptive, sensible, and willing. The responsive teacher is all of these

things. Learning in a responsive classroom is active and the responsive teacher actively seeks to remain up to date in his or her content knowledge and instructional practices. The responsive teacher is compassionate and finds strength in the cultural differences of his or her students. He or she is perceptive, tuning into each student's strengths and

areas of need. He is sensible, staying focused on the learning objectives for his or her students and providing a variety of learning opportunities. Finally, the responsive teacher is willing to create a safe learning environment using sound instructional techniques in a variety of content areas for each and every student.

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