

## Responsive Classroom Curriculum and its Impact on Student Behavior

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to observe any correlation between the implementation of social-emotional learning in the classroom and the social behaviors exhibited by students. Social-emotional programs, such as Responsive Classroom, have been observed to demonstrate positive effects on students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes, as well as on the classroom climate. The relationships between social-emotional learning and student behaviors inside of the classroom was examined. This study shows positive impact related to utilizing the Responsive Classroom elements such as Closing Circle and Morning Meeting on students, teachers, and the classroom environment. This reflective and responsive time of the school day is a sacred time for students and teachers to connect, learn, and grow together.

### INTRODUCTION

In schools today, teachers are required to meet the academic as well as the social-emotional needs of students. There is extensive research on this topic and how it is affecting overall school climate. Schools play a significant role in meeting students' social-emotional needs, as well as in their educational outcomes (Jayman, 2017). Our roles, as teachers, have changed. The classroom is focused on instructing students in standards-based educational content, in addition to group etiquette and social interaction skills. This is preparing them to enter the world outside of the classroom setting. While focusing on academics is certainly of importance, addressing social-emotional needs will empower students to be more successful in the job market and in their everyday lives.

Gregory and Fergus (2017) found that implementing social emotional lessons into the daily schedule created a healthier school environment and saw a decrease in disciplinary issues. Poulou (2017) found that the teacher-student relationship in the classroom is essential in academic success. When teachers engage in daily social-emotional lessons, they are encouraging positive social interactions between peers and adults. When respectful behavior is set as an expectation in the classroom, instead of only being integrated periodically throughout the year, students can focus on academics rather than social interactions. If students are required and encouraged to participate in daily social-emotional lessons, they form healthier relationships with both their teachers and peers. When the classroom climate is free of conflict, the students present less emotional and behavioral difficulties (Responsive Classroom, 2017).

Patterns in research on social-emotional learning (SEL) suggest that federal, state, and local policies should encourage all schools to focus on both students' academic and social-emotional development (Payton, et. al, 2008). Responsive Classroom is an effort that our school districts are doing to encourage consistent social emotional curriculum within the classroom setting.

Responsive Classroom is an evidence-based education approach associated with greater teacher effectiveness, higher student achievement, and improved school climate. The approach was developed by a group of public elementary and middle school educators, who had a vision of bringing together social and academic learning throughout the school day. (Responsive Classroom, 2017, p.3)

Responsive Classroom practices four domains: Engaging Academics, Positive Community, Developmentally Responsive Teaching, and Effective Management. In addition, Responsive Classroom embraces a core belief as well as guiding principles. When guiding principles and the core belief are integrated together it is believed that the classroom and school will be more successful. Responsive Classrooms' Core Belief indicates that to be successful in and out of school, students need to be instructed in a set of social and emotional competencies, which include cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, self-control, academic mindset, perseverance, learning strategies, and academic behaviors. Responsive Classroom's six Guiding Principles are as follows:

1. Teaching social and emotional skills is as important as teaching academic content.
2. How we teach is as important as what we teach.

3. Great cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
4. How we work together as adults to create a safe, joyful, and inclusive school environment is as important as individual contribution or competence.
5. What we know and believe about our students- individually, culturally, developmentally- informs our expectations, reactions, and attitudes about those students.
6. Partnering with families-knowing them and valuing their contributions- is as important as knowing the children we teach.

This is one approach to addressing the social deficit in today's classrooms. Teachers participate in professional development to learn how to implement Responsive Classroom within their own classrooms and are encouraged to have other teachers observe and offer suggestions (Responsive Classroom, 2017).

Social emotional lessons encourage students to become more aware of their emotions, give students strategies to manage conflict, and instruct them in how to collaborate with peers. While research has suggested the significant need for social emotional learning in the classroom, teachers have been encouraged to spend more time on core subject areas rather than focusing on SEL. If real changes are to be made, then it is essential that research is conducted to demonstrate the advantages of social-emotional lessons. This study hopes to discover how SEL lessons affect overall student behavior in the classroom and school. While also determining how SEL influences student relationships within the building.

According to Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011), educators that embrace and promote social-emotional learning teach students that exhibit more positive attitudes, better overall behavior, and higher academic performance. SEL also develops school connectedness and overall engagement, both of which are important concepts for building relationships within a school (Usakli, & Ekici, 2018).

Despite the convincing body of research, schools lack a curriculum devoted to social-emotional education, and as a result, many students are at a disadvantage. When schools lack these programs, antisocial behavior often happens in the classroom. This can include poor academic performance, discipline issues, disaffection, lack of commitment, alienation, and an increased frequency of student dropouts. All these factors have the potential to limit success in school or even lead to a school's failure (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).

Often, teachers feel like they have too many academic standards and simply do not have time to fit in another curriculum. However, Anderson (2015) explains, that educators should view a social curriculum as an integral part of their daily teaching instead of something else they need to fit in. Teaching students how to share, develop empathy for partners, excel in challenging situations, accomplish goals, and control impulsive behavior are just as important as academic skills (Anderson, 2015). Other educators claim that they do not know how to teach social-emotional skills. Anderson, 2015 states that social skills can be taught with the same structure that academic skills are taught. They should be modeled by the teacher, modeled by peers, coached in small groups or individually, practiced, and then potentially retaught before students acquire an understanding of the skill.

The primary focus of this study was to examine the influence of the Responsive Classroom Curriculum on student behavior at the upper elementary level. The upper elementary level is defined as third through fifth grade with student ages ranging from eight to eleven. "As classrooms become more diverse as a result of inclusion, the need to ensure that children develop pro-social and emotional skills and can create positive peer relationships in these settings becomes essential" (Sokal & Katz, 2017, p. 7). There has been a big push recently for schools to focus on the soft skills in combination with the core academic skills. The belief is that increased SEL awareness will increase positive classroom behaviors. "Current knowledge suggests that programs and approaches to enhance social and emotional growth hold promise for improving classroom social processes, peer interactions, and academic learning" (Rim-Kauffman & Chiu, 2007, p. 397). We want to focus specifically on implementing the Responsive Classroom Curriculum in schools that have students from diverse backgrounds including students that may have been affected by traumatic experiences as well as a population of "at risk" students. Slevin, Karweit & Madden (1989) define at risk students.

One possible definition is that students who are at risk are those who, on the basis of several risk factors, are unlikely to graduate from high school. Among these risk factors would be low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students. (p. 5)

As mentioned, an emphasis on SEL has heavily influenced the world of education in recent years. This study examined the true advantages that a social-emotional curriculum can have on the classroom and larger school environment. SEL programs, such as Responsive Classroom, have been observed to demonstrate positive effects on students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes, as well as on overall classroom climate (Responsive Classroom, 2015). For this reason, the primary stakeholders throughout this study are both students and teachers. As teachers' model and demonstrate these skills, students develop and fine tune their social-emotional competencies. Consequently, educators can cover more academic content while students are able to flourish in their given educational setting. This study will reveal the significant, educational assets that a social-emotional program like Responsive Classroom has on both students and teachers alike.

Throughout our research, we hoped to answer the following questions regarding SEL and the use of Responsive Classroom:

1. In what ways does Responsive Classroom affect student success in the classroom?
2. Which aspect of Responsive Classroom is viewed as most important by teachers?
3. Responsive Classroom stresses the importance of building relationships. Do stronger relationships between teachers and students as well as between peers help students gain higher self-efficacy?
4. How will students' behaviors be impacted by the Responsive Classroom Curriculum?

### **RELATED LITERATURE**

Social-emotional lessons encourage students to become more aware of their emotions, give students strategies to manage conflict, and instruct them in how to collaborate with peers. While research has suggested the significant need for social-emotional learning in the classroom, teachers have been encouraged to spend more time on core subject areas instead of focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL). "Current knowledge suggests that programs and approaches to enhance social and emotional growth hold promise for improving classroom social processes, peer interactions, and academic learning" (Rim-Kauffman & Chiu, 2007, p. 397).

If changes are to be made, then it is essential that research is conducted to demonstrate the advantages of the use of social-emotional lessons by teachers in the classroom. This study hoped to discover how SEL lessons affect overall student behavior in the classroom and within the school and how SEL influences student relationships within the building.

### **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Education means more than proficiency in content. The true purpose and function of schools should extend far beyond a place where students come to learn core subjects such as math, reading, and writing. Successful schools balance teaching basic skills while scaffolding a social environment to effectively build 21st century communication skills. Similar to academic disciplines, social-emotional learning (SEL) is best explained as a process by which skills are acquired, developed, and applied. Furthermore, SEL includes emotion management, effective problem solving, and positive relationship maintenance--competencies that clearly are essential for all students. Overall, SEL provides students with the ability to understand and regulate their emotions while equipping them with the necessary skills to understand the emotions of others. There are five overarching skills that are related to SEL: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Usakli and Ekici (2018) state that social-emotional learning is essential regarding the success of students, teachers, and school environments.

Research has shown many benefits of SEL, such as improved student ability to recognize and manage emotions, deepened understanding of emotional perspectives of others, interpersonal situational management, as well as increased responsibility in decision-making. SEL also develops school connectedness and overall engagement, both of which are significant components when it comes to building relationships within a school (Usakli, & Ekici, 2018). Although academics are not specifically measured in this study, according to researchers Patricia Jennings at the University of Virginia and Mark Greenberg at Pennsylvania State University, the level of quality maintained in teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and SEL programs all heavily influence student outcomes on both academic and social levels (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, if the abilities of teachers are optimized in the implementation of SEL lessons, students' social-emotional and academic competencies will build and grow from year to year.

## **THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Social-emotional learning has had a timeless and enduring history that has withstood centuries worth of educational ideologies. The true origins of SEL date back to ancient Greece and Plato's reflections of education. Through his writings, he suggested a comprehensive curriculum that requires a balance of physical education, the arts, math, science, as well as character and moral judgement ("Social and emotional," 2011). Plato writes, "By maintaining a sound system of education and upbringing, you produce citizens of good character" ("Social and emotional," 2011). In more recent years, James Comer--a significant professor at the Yale Child Study Center and prominent voice in the field of education-- began a program called the Comer School Development Program. The program, launched in the 1960s, focused on the idea that "...the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and that this in turn shapes academic achievement" ("Social and emotional," 2011). The Comer School Development Program chose two poor, low-achieving elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. With the help of the program, the school updated both academic and social policies that previously had adverse effects on the students in attendance. As a result, the academic performance of the two schools exceeded the national average and behavior problems had declined by the 1980s. James Comer's success drew attention to the SEL movement, encouraging a multitude of professional researchers to become involved. By the 1990's social-emotional learning has made its way as both a meaningful and significant approach to education. There is no denying the incessant need for teaching children how to be responsible, productive, caring, and engaged citizens ("Social and emotional," 2011). SEL has continued to support this pursuit throughout its long and lasting history.

## **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON EDUCATION**

The influential role that social-emotional learning plays on education is undeniable. Without an emphasis on SEL, students lack a sense of unity among peers as well as the learning community, and struggle more with overall academic content. When schools lack these programs, students are often at a disadvantage and may exhibit a number of negative behaviors. These behaviors include poor academic performance, discipline issues, disaffection, lack of commitment, alienation, and an increased frequency of student dropouts. As a result, these consequences have the potential to limit success in school or even lead to a school's failure (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). SEL is crucial to students, teachers, and schools in creating a safe environment as they work to build social skills, connect with peers through academic content, and to make connections with staff throughout the building. It is clear that a social-emotional curriculum influences the lives of those invested in education--but in what ways? Social-emotional learning is responsible for affecting behavior, relationships, as well as overall learning.

## **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND HOW IT AFFECTS BEHAVIOR**

According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), a recent report from the National Council on Teacher Quality found that there is relatively little attention paid to classroom management in pre-service teacher education. Today's teachers do not feel equipped to deal with the behaviors they are facing within their classrooms every day. Teachers who lack skillful classroom management allow the behaviors of students to take over the academic learning and daily routines. Gregory and Fergus (2017) found that implementing social-emotional lessons into the daily schedule created a healthier school environment and enhanced educators' overall abilities to teach students social-emotional competencies. Equally important, the researchers also saw a decrease in negative student behaviors and discipline issues overall. With the implementation of a social-emotional curriculum, teachers will spend less time focusing on student behavior and more time on academics.

Many schools have found that implementing this multi-tiered system of support has led to a decrease in students being disciplined outside of the classroom through the use of in-school (ISS) or out-of-school (OSS) suspensions. Therefore, these students are not missing academic lessons (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Instead of focusing on punishment for behavior, implementing SEL throughout schools has the potential to change the code of conduct within the building. Schonert-Reichl (2017) confirms that social and emotional skills can "be taught and measured [and] can promote positive development and reduce problem behaviors within the school setting"(p.138). Incorporating SEL within a classroom setting would create a healthier social-emotional environment, in addition to strengthening educators' own social and emotional competencies. Consequently, this leads to improved teacher abilities when it comes to instructing students (Gregory and Fergus, 2017).

## **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND HOW IT AFFECTS RELATIONSHIPS**

Educators are encouraged to support students' social-emotional development, with the full knowledge that this support will result in non-academic outcomes, particularly in the areas of relationship building and psychological health (Konishi & Park, 2017). Most researchers agree that this human side of learning, which includes problem-solving,

communication, and self-knowledge, are of equal importance to the development of academic knowledge (Hoffman, 2017). However, despite this consensus, social emotional learning often takes a backseat to core subject material--the three Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic--due to the pressures of standardized testing requirements (Konishi & Park, 2017). According to Poulou (2015), multiple studies have demonstrated that the role of the relationship between teachers and students is a strong predictor of student behavior. It is empathy, trust, and acceptance in these relationships that are the major contributors to students' emotional growth and development (Colley & Cooper, 2017).

Social learning theory suggests that the introduction and practice of social interactions influence the development of new behaviors. Ideally, this school-provided programming would translate to student home lives, as well (Domitrovich, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). In their research, Konishi and Park (2017) suggest that students who engage in social-emotional learning also exhibit good mental health in comparison to their peers who do not. Those students who do not have the same social emotional learning experiences tend to have poorer mental health, which may include anxiety or depression, and often have destructive relationships with peers and other people in their lives. Colley and Cooper (2017) point out that "all learning is emotion-based" and high-quality academic learning can only truly take place when social emotional abilities are adequately supported and taught (p. 12).

In her book, *Everyday SEL in Middle School*, Carla Philibert (2016) notes that an SEL equivalent to a standardized test exists in the form of students' everyday abilities to deal with stress and emotionally fired situations. Given that students frequently face these types of instances, it is pertinent that they are taught the necessary skills of communication and empathy. The essential nature of school-based academic learning is relational, meaning social emotional learning is required for students to both build and maintain relationships (Hoffman, 2017). Throughout their lives, students' management of their relationships with others will be crucial. Students without the abilities to effectively "negotiate conflict and resist pressure" will struggle to make their way in a world that deals in those skills (Colley & Cooper, 2017, p. 26). Engagement and self-esteem are the two most vital components of keeping students interested in their schooling. Both factors are inextricably linked to teacher-student and peer relationships, which rely upon social-emotional competencies (Hoffman, 2017).

### **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND HOW IT AFFECTS LEARNING**

Twenty-first century schools instruct diverse students with a variety of strengths, interests, and motivations for learning. While some students participate daily and enjoy coming to school, others are less engaged and less motivated. Preparing students for their future requires an education that not only teaches academics but prepares them to collaborate, problem-solve and cooperate with those around them (Payton et al., 2008). Social emotional learning provides those skills and opportunities for students.

In a 2011 analysis of 213 studies that collectively included over 270,000 students, results indicated that participants who took part in SEL programming through their schools demonstrated higher academic gains than those who were not enrolled in similar programs (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018). This analysis further demonstrates why social emotional learning is imperative for student success. Even considering this well-researched fact, SEL continues to be overlooked in the day-to-day school curriculum. SEL provides students with the necessary tools to interact with the world around them, including communication with themselves, their peers, teachers, and other adults. SEL also provides students with a sense of empathy while developing their sense of humanity. According to Jones and Kahn (2018), students who experience SEL in school are better able to work constructively and collaboratively with classmates, build a sense of perseverance, have a sense of overall purpose, and are much more likely to "maximize their opportunities and reach their full potential" (p. 16).

### **A RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM APPROACH**

According to Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Curby (2014) Responsive Classroom is a social emotional learning intervention with an additional focus on the delivery of content. It was developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC) with the idea that proper social-emotional learning will benefit a student academically and increase their overall well-being. There have also been studies to suggest increase in motivation and self-efficacy for teachers. Responsive Classroom is built on six guiding principles as well as specific strategies and competencies to help create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. The principles stress the importance of social interactions, understanding bias, and the idea of promoting a community of learners even extending to their families. The practices are built upon the same ideals of creating a safe space for children to learn and explore. Some examples of these practices include Morning Meetings, setting rules and goals, brain breaks, modeling, logical consequences, and reflection.

The basis for this approach requires teachers to understand their students and respective families on a more personal level with a focus on building rapport and relationships (Arby, Rimm-Kauffman, Hulleman, & Thomas, 2012). This is the purpose behind some of the practices put in place with this particular SEL program. They continue to recognize that relationships remain important, yet the benefits and outcomes seem to change over the course of a child's educational career, starting from increased academic growth to motivation and achievement gains. The hope is that through these practices teachers would be able to create an environment free of behavior issues, while providing opportunities to interact with others and allow for academic choice.

The Responsive Classroom Approach can be used in multiple classroom settings with remarkably diverse students. Bruce, Fasy, Gulick, Jones, & Pike (2006) describe the benefits of Responsive Classroom approach in both special and general education classes, noting the academic benefits as well increased communication skills specifically of Morning Meetings. Morning Meetings are one of the key Responsive Classroom practices at the elementary level and are intended to promote socialization skills as well as establishing a community within the classroom.

Responsive Classroom recommends that during the first week of the school year students should begin to articulate academic and social learning goals, or what others may call *hopes and dreams*, for the school year. These should be goals that students can work on throughout the year. This goal setting sets a tone for students for the rest of the school year (The First Six Weeks of School, 2015). They are then responsible for their goals and holding their peers accountable. Considering that these goals are both social and academic, these goals will set the foundation for what students are learning throughout the school year.

Responsive Classroom provides educators with resources and strategies for establishing rules, interactive modeling, teacher language, responding to misbehavior, engaging academics, academic choice, and implementing subjects into Morning Meeting (Responsive Classroom Course for Elementary Educators, 2017). When students can use their strengths and interests to make a desired choice, their academic achievement increases.

Although the SEL movement has gained extensive recognition and took off in the 1990's, some of the major gaps in research include: an overwhelming variety of curriculums, teacher choice, and the interpretation of SEL. As mentioned, social-emotional learning involves a variety of programs and curriculums to enhance classroom climate and learning. Therefore, it can be difficult for research to provide generalizations for the entirety of the field (Hoffman, 2009). Different programs include different requirements. There are in school lesson-based curricula, in school non-lesson-based curricula, and out of school programs. As a result, these programs have conflicting requirements and varied practices. For example, some programs suggest different times each week to spend on skills, other programs work on or provide different skills to practice, while many programs offer a contrasting way to practice these skills in the classroom.

A second gap are the explicit circumstances throughout each classroom regarding SEL. All teachers set up their classrooms differently and will interpret the curriculum in diverse ways. Therefore, it can be extremely difficult to determine consistency between teachers and classrooms (Hoffman, 2009). Teachers also have control of when, where, and how often they incorporate SEL into the curriculum. Some educators see SEL as another burden to fit into their standard curriculum.

Finally, there is much confusion and concern over the definition of the term social-emotional learning. Each study has a different term for what SEL means and what it looks like in the classroom. Another way individuals can interpret SEL differently is through diverse cultures. Talking and reviewing emotions openly is a cultural preference of American White middle-class. It is also the norm to work towards preserving students' ability to express their emotions freely (Hoffman, 2009). Students from other cultures may be taught to manage their emotions very differently than a specific SEL curriculum (Hoffman, 2009).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used to measure the effects of social-emotional learning in the classroom. Participating teachers collected qualitative data that pertains to the principles of Responsive Classroom. Four classrooms at four school districts in central Illinois were part of this study in which the researchers implemented different components of Responsive Classroom at different times.

Prior to the start of research, participating teachers filled out rubrics for each student. Data was gathered again at the midpoint of the study and at the conclusion of the research to see the effects Responsive Classroom may have on social-emotional behaviors. This rubric was intended to examine students' social-emotional behaviors within the classroom and throughout the school. The rubric consisted of social-emotional behaviors related to the research questions of this study paired with grade-level specific standards from the Illinois State Board of Education.

Participating teachers kept observation logs throughout the duration of the study. The observation logs included records of specific behaviors seen in the school setting. Participating teachers kept reflective journals throughout the study that was used for Responsive Classroom component launch dates, details that pertain to the different components of the lessons, and considerations for moving forward with social-emotional lessons specific for their classroom. At the completion of the study, the participating teachers exclusively completed a survey that was intended to help identify the effects these Responsive Classroom components have on social interactions, academics, behavior, and overall success. Participating teachers assigned a numerical value of 0-5 for every student and each corresponding behavior. A score of 0 indicated that the student never demonstrated the listed behavior, while a score of 5 indicated that the student regularly demonstrated the listed behavior.

Participating teachers completed a survey at the end of the study. The survey used a five-point Likert scale to examine the degree social-emotional lessons were beneficial in their classrooms, the ways in which social-emotional lessons affected students, in addition to the overall quality of specific components of Responsive Classroom. The survey included a comment section that allowed the researchers to look for trends in their responses.

After the completion of the rubrics, the researchers analyzed and summarized the data by graphing the initial, midpoint, and end of study rubric scores. This data was organized into a bar graph displaying the ways in which Responsive Classroom principles have had an impact on the social-emotional behaviors indicated by the rubric.

Once the surveys have been administered to the teachers participating in the study, the data was summarized by analyzing the amount of time that teachers spent teaching social-emotional lessons vs. academic content, while also examining the success of student behavior and relationships inside the classroom setting. Finally, the teacher surveys were studied for common trends and themes.

The research was set-up to include a diverse population sample. All four participating schools have a wide range of differences including the numbers, age, and gender of students in attendance, the racial makeup of students, as well as the socio-economic status of the surrounding communities. A diverse group of participants allows for more realistic and valid results. The research also examined multiple data points across a span of roughly 5 months to identify successes of Responsive Classroom. The participating teachers also have more than four years of teaching experience and have been able to use the first half of the school year to identify specific behaviors to target when implementing Responsive Classroom. This allowed for more reliable feedback in the teacher's journal and observation logs for the classroom.

The following questions regarding social-emotional learning and the use of *Responsive Classroom* was investigated throughout the research:

1. In what ways does *Responsive Classroom* affect student success in the classroom?
2. Which aspect of *Responsive Classroom* is viewed as most important by teachers?
3. *Responsive Classroom* stresses the importance of building relationships. Do stronger relationships between teachers and students as well as between peers help students gain higher academic achievement and/or higher self-efficacy?
4. How will students' behaviors be impacted by the *Responsive Classroom* Approach?

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms were used in the study:

- Responsive Classroom -- an evidence-based approach to teaching that focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness
- Social-emotional learning -- a wide range of skills, attitudes, and behaviors that can affect a student's overall success in school
- Socio-economic status -- the social standing or class of an individual or group

This research was intended to be as sound as possible. However, gaps in data may exist largely because each participating teacher began at a different point with Responsive Classroom. While some teachers had never implemented any of the Responsive Classroom principles, other classrooms have them embedded within their daily routines. Each classroom and school were diverse and what works in one classroom may not work in another. This study was limited in that results may be unique to the schools in the study and may not apply to all schools in general. One semester of collecting data on social-emotional learning lessons might not be enough to show definitive results in terms of the effect of the lessons. The high population of students being pulled out of the classroom or high mobility within the district may skew the data. The study was reliant on educators to include the social-emotional learning curriculum in the classrooms. Depending on other requirements placed on the teachers, school functions, and other daily tasks, this may prove difficult to consistently follow through with. Although some scores may show significant growth for students throughout the study, the growth may not be an effect of using Responsive Classroom in the curriculum.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The objective of this research was to examine the correlation between the implementation of social-emotional learning in the classroom and the social behaviors exhibited by students. Researchers examined students from four different schools of many sizes, in three different towns located in Illinois. The relationships between social-emotional learning and student behaviors inside the participating classrooms were also examined. More specifically, the following questions regarding SEL and Responsive Classroom were investigated:

1. In what ways does Responsive Classroom affect student success in the classroom?
2. Which aspect of Responsive Classroom is viewed as most important by teachers?
3. Responsive Classroom stresses the importance of building relationships. Do stronger relationships between teachers and students as well as between peers help students gain higher self-efficacy?
4. How will students' behaviors be impacted by the Responsive Classroom Curriculum?

Throughout the research, participating teachers completed rubrics on their students without personal identifiers created to assess the Illinois Social-Emotional standards. The rubrics assessed the following social-emotional standards: 1A Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior. 1B Recognize personal qualities and external supports. 1C Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals 2A Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others. 2B Recognize individual and group similarities and differences. 2C Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others. 2D Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways 3A Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions. 3B Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations 3C Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community. The graph is compiled of averaged data from all four classrooms by each individual standard.

After completing the rubrics, researchers analyzed and summarized the data by graphing the initial, midpoint, and end of study rubric scores. This data was organized into a bar graph illustrating the ways in which Responsive Classroom principles have had an impact on the social-emotional behaviors indicated by the rubric. At the end of the survey, participating teachers were also given a survey to determine the effectiveness of Responsive Classroom. Once the educator survey was administered, the data was summarized into pie graphs showing the amount of time that teachers spent teaching social-emotional lessons vs. academic content, while also examining the success of student behavior and relationships across the classroom setting. Finally, the teacher surveys were studied for common trends and themes. The following themes emerged from the data:

### **THEME 1: BUILDING COMMUNITY**

The first major theme that emerged from the data was that Responsive Classroom elements such as Morning Meetings and Closing Circles, positively affect building a classroom community. This finding specifically connects to the research question, do stronger relationships between teachers and students as well as between peers help students gain higher self-efficacy? The research data from fig. 1 shows the positive impact Closing Circles and Morning Meetings have on students. Recognizing the feelings and perspectives of others, demonstrating an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways are both areas that students grew. Considering the ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions, applying decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations, and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

In analyzing researchers' field notes, they provide insight into the growth of students throughout the study. One researcher shared in their field notes that, "Students understand that closing circle is a time when we can reflect on



our day, say goodbye to classmates, and learn from one another - building community.” Schonert-Reichl (2017) confirms that social and emotional skills can “be taught and measured [and] can promote positive development and reduce problem behaviors within the school setting”(p.138). Researchers also shared the positive impact of Closing Circles on their end of the day routine and students’ behavior during pack up. An example of one researcher’s field notes stated, “Closing Circles help end the day on a positive note no matter how the day started or how the day went.” Another researcher described, “Students are starting to help each other become more self-aware. Reminding each other of their goals, choosing partners that will improve them. They are relying on their classroom family for support.”

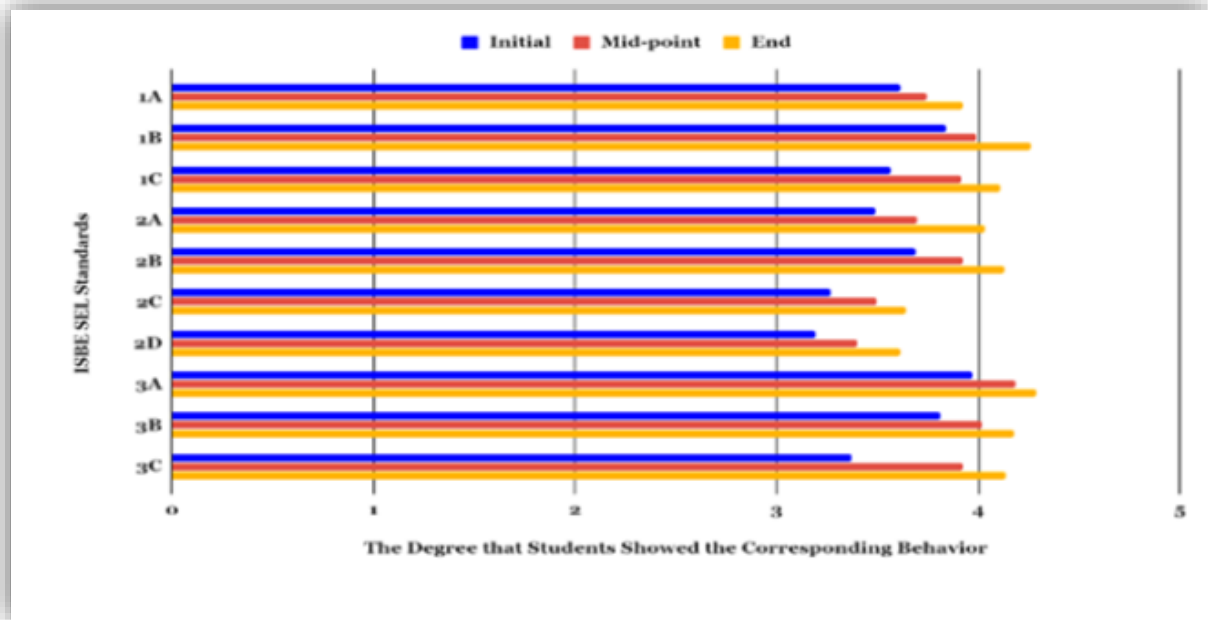


Figure 1. Effectiveness of Responsive Classroom.

Note. The figure shows the average of how teachers rated their students on each ESL standard from the beginning of the study to the end. The degree is determined with 5 representing the most and 1 being the least.

According to Jones and Kahn (2018), students who experience SEL in school are better able to work constructively and collaboratively with classmates, build a sense of perseverance [and] have a sense of overall purpose...” (p. 16). These skills all promote a positive classroom community.

Closing Circle and Morning Meetings not only help build classroom community between peers in the classroom but also help establish student to teacher relationships as well. Incorporating social-emotional lessons within a classroom setting creates a healthier social-emotional environment, in addition to strengthening educators’ own social and emotional competencies. Consequently, this leads to improved teacher abilities when it comes to instructing students (Gregory and Fergus, 2017). A researcher explained, “I learned a lot about my students that I did not know before. Much of what students shared gave a clearer picture into potential socio-economic and traumatic issues. I was surprised at how much I learned about my students.” Gregory and Fergus (2017) found that implementing social-emotional lessons into the daily schedule created a healthier school environment and enhanced educators’ overall abilities to teach students social-emotional competencies. Instead of focusing on student behavior, implementing social-emotional lessons throughout schools has the potential to change the code of conduct across the building.

Figure 1 illustrates how standard 2D (Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways) has drastically improved for participating students involved in this study. Students gained understanding and knowledge on how to respectfully problem solve through issues by identifying consequences of a solution and specific conflicts. In addition, reflecting on standard 3B (Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations), students showed growth by describing ways to promote the safety of themselves and others, while generating alternative solutions to problems. Figure 2 shows that 100% of the researchers

believed that using Responsive Classroom elements improved the interactions between students and made them more respectful.

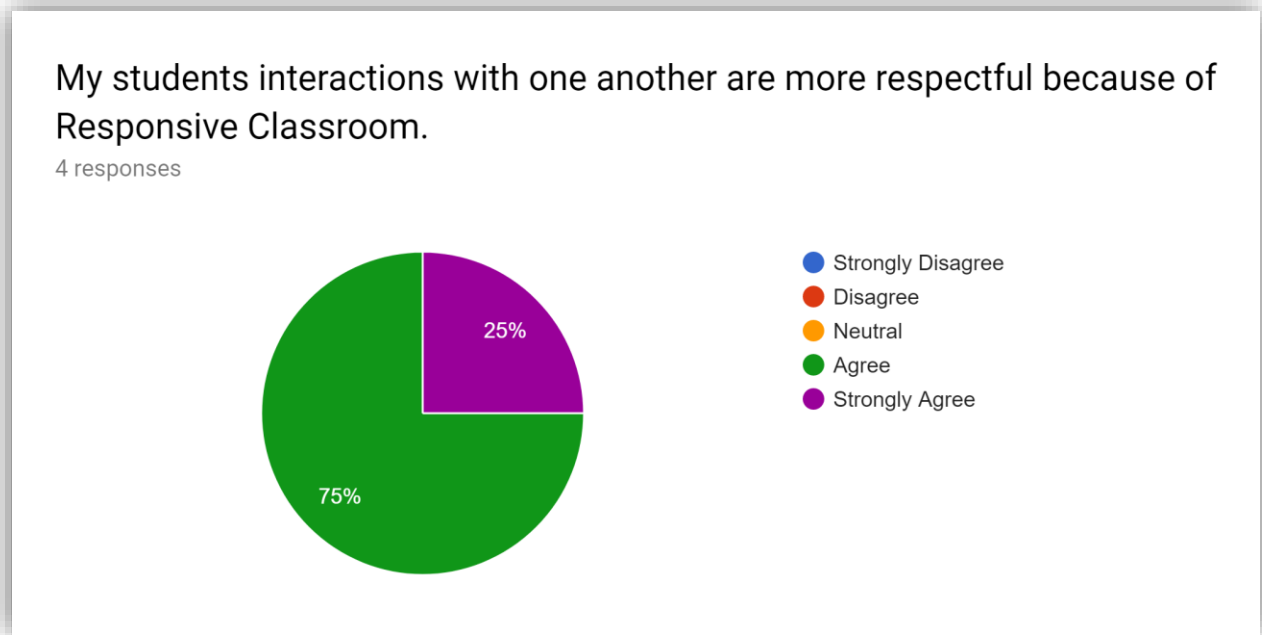


Figure 2. Improved student interactions due to Responsive Classroom.

Note: This figure shows the teacher researchers opinions of the impact Responsive Classroom had on student interactions

## THEME 2: COMMUNITY SKILLS

Our research has identified a second common theme; we have found that the addition of Responsive Classroom's Morning Meeting or Closing Circle encouraged communication between student to student, staff to student and staff to staff. This key finding is connected to many of the research questions and provides a better understanding for the impact Responsive Classroom has on students and their social-emotional learning.

A research question we continued to refer to throughout the study was, in what ways does Responsive Classroom affect student success in the classroom? Student success in the classroom is impacted by the communication skills students possess. Mahmud (2014) states, "...oral communication proficiency contributes greatly to academic performance." Our study found that student communication skills increased through the addition of Responsive Classroom elements. One researcher described in their field notes that, without any facilitating from the teacher after the implementation of Closing Circle, two students explained to one another that their feelings were hurt due to the other student's actions. Through their conversation students were able to problem solve their issues appropriately and independently. Another researcher wrote, "[The students] understand how to communicate with one another during these meetings." Teacher field notes as well as researcher surveys also support the idea that communication skills have increased since the implementation of Closing Circle or Morning Meeting. As shown in figure 1 pictured above, our data projects a clear increase from the beginning to the end of the study regarding student communication skills addressed in ISBE standard 2C (Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others). These findings show that the implementation of Responsive Classroom methods can lead to improved communication skills between students and staff.

Across all researchers' classrooms we have discovered that the addition of Morning Meeting or Closing Circle has helped provide opportunities for students to engage with one another in a safe, open space. Students use this time to practice and build their communication skills. One teacher recognized that when Morning Meeting was first implemented one student did not want to communicate with their peers. As the study continued, this child progressively improved his communication skills and participated in meeting time and in class time. Responsive

Classroom elements allow for the opportunity to gain experience from one another, build relationships and connections with peers, share stories, and positively engage with students and staff alike.

These findings are supported in other research as well. The Responsive Classroom Website states, “Independent research has found that the Responsive Classroom approach is associated with higher academic achievement, improved teacher-student interactions, and higher quality instruction.” The key findings of communication skills as a common theme across the four classrooms as well as the additional research provide significant support for the benefits that Responsive Classroom holds.

### **THEME 3: FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS**

The third overarching theme that was found through investigating and interpreting data, was that implementing Responsive Classroom fosters relationships inside the classroom setting. One of the questions that the study addressed were the ways in which Responsive Classroom affects student success in the classroom. Responsive Classroom encompasses social and academic skills into a learning environment that is responsive to all students’ strengths and needs. Through the implementation of Morning Meeting and Closing Circle, students were able to develop relationships with their peers and teachers more frequently. For example, one participating researcher’s field notes, in response to a prompt asking students what their favorite part of the day was, read as follows: “Hanging out with my friends and seeing my teacher.”

The analysis and interpretation of field notes led the researchers to believe that fostering relationships led to academic success. One participating researcher’s field notes, in response to a prompt asking students what made them laugh today, “The student related his laughter to our reading lesson on Hyperboles. After they shared, the class laughed with the student about that item.” This observation note identifies that students are building relationships with one another and are comfortable to share with each other. These observations also show that students are connecting their feelings to their academic successes. Another participating researcher stated, “This was the first time where a student brought up how they helped someone else accomplish the closing circle topic. This shows that closing circle and Responsive Classroom practices help encourage positive relationships between peers.”

### **THEME 4: GOAL SETTING**

A fourth overarching theme that became discernible throughout the consideration and interpretation of related research data, was the notion that Responsive Classroom practices encourage goal setting. One question this study addressed was the ways in which student behaviors were impacted by a Responsive Classroom curriculum. Because much of what Responsive Classroom emphasizes focuses on the use of reflective skills, it came as no surprise that student behaviors were significantly impacted by participating more in the goal setting process. Through the implementation of Morning Meeting and Closing Circle, students were articulating academic and social-emotional goals more regularly. For example, one participating researcher’s field notes, in response to a prompt asking students how they can show focus during the next school day, read as follows: “Student 2 responded that his wish was to become a better reader...and student 18 wished that everyone could practice great listening skills in order to really hear each other during closing circle.”

A second question investigated throughout the course of this study, uncovered the degree to which Responsive Classroom affected student success in the classroom. The analysis of field notes led to the discovery of an undeniable pattern across the research. As students were setting more academic and social-emotional goals, they were doing so with their own strengths and areas of improvement in mind. Furthermore, students began to really tailor their specific goals to a more day by day and need by need basis. A participating researcher’s observations and field notes, disclosed later in the study, explained that “...students were sharing more specific [goals]. One student did not just say I want to get better in math, that student said, ‘I want to memorize all of my multiplication math facts.’” These observations illustrate clearly that students were beginning to develop better understandings about both their academic strengths as well as potential areas for improvement. A second participating researcher observed students choosing partners based on their strengths and weaknesses, or partners that will “...help push them.” Because students now have a better understanding of their personal academic and social-emotional skills, they are better able to make deliberate decisions and seek out appropriate supports that will influence their overall accomplishments in the classroom. Student cognizance of academic and social-emotional strengths and weaknesses, paired with purposeful working partnerships, are both observed behaviors that demonstrate students’ trajectory for success in the classroom.

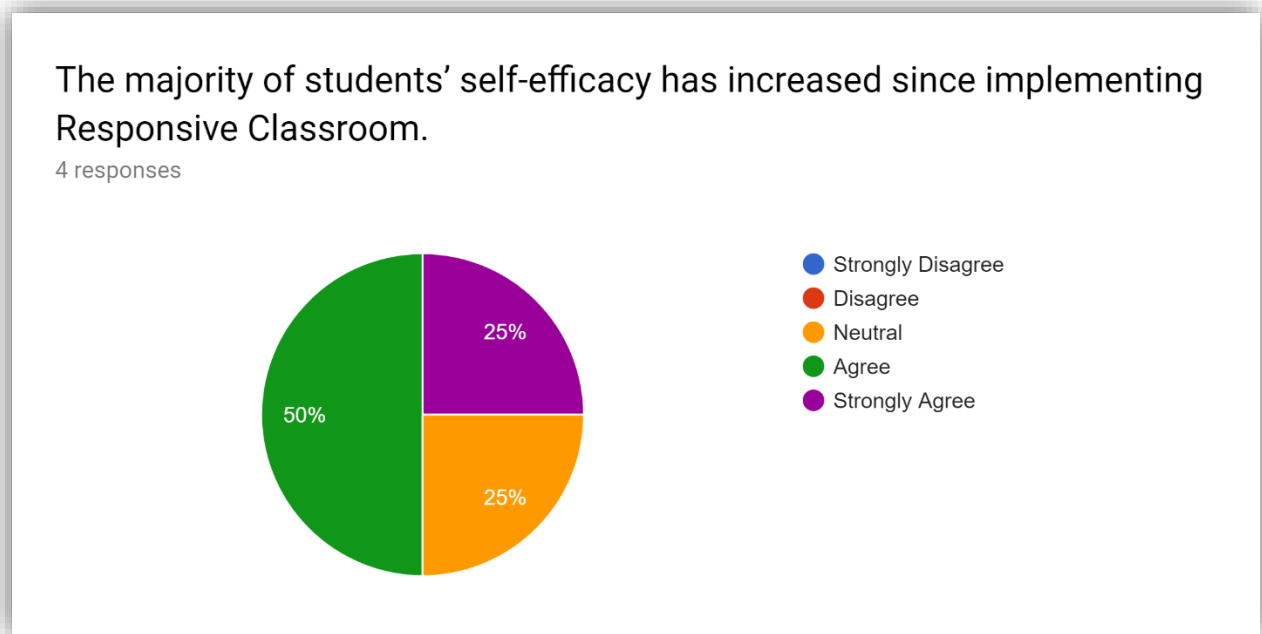


Figure 3. Improved student self-efficacy due to Responsive Classroom.

Note: This figure shows the teacher researchers opinions of the impact Responsive Classroom had on student self-efficacy

Figure 1 Clearly illustrates the key role of goal setting in education. From start to finish, student scores show that areas of the rubric that focused on goal setting behaviors, grew immensely. Social-emotional standards 1B (recognize personal qualities and external supports) and 1C (demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals), pictured on fig. 1, show consistent and steady growth when comparing scores from the initial, mid-point, and end of the study.

According to the teacher survey, given at the end of the data collection window, and the data shown on fig. 3, 75% of the participating educators found that Responsive Classroom significantly increased self-efficacy for most students in their classrooms.

The information and statistics listed above align with and confirm the previous findings examined in the literature piece of this study. Jones and Kahn (2018), referenced earlier, explained that students involved with SEL in school are better able to work constructively and collaboratively with classmates, build a sense of perseverance, have a sense of overall purpose, and are much more likely to “maximize their opportunities and reach their full potential”—all skills needed for goal setting in the classroom (p. 16). This study, heavily supported by previous studies, demonstrates that goal setting is an inherent part of any educational setting. For students to grow and thrive, they must possess an awareness of their strengths and embody the perseverance and drive to accomplish future goals. Social-emotional curriculums, like Responsive Classroom, teach and model these goal-setting behaviors. These elements better prepare students to engage with critical thinking and cope with potentially challenging circumstances both inside and outside of school walls. These skills will undoubtedly follow students as they work their way through our school system and beyond, as they face the everyday demands of life, employment, and adulthood.

In the end, our research shows the positive impact the Responsive Classroom elements such as Closing Circle and Morning Meeting can have on students, teachers, and the classroom environment. This reflective and responsive time of the school day is a sacred time for students and teachers to connect, learn, and grow together.

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## APPENDIX A

### Rubric

Directions: Fill out one rubric per child. There should be no personal identifiers included and all rubrics should be anonymous.

ISBE SEL Standard	0	1	2
<b>1A Identify and manage one’s emotions and behavior.</b>	Student cannot show a variety of emotions during role play.	Student sometimes shows a variety of emotions during role play.	Student can show a variety of emotions during role play.
<b>1B Recognize personal qualities and external supports.</b>	Student cannot describe the qualities needed for a successful student.	Student can describe the qualities needed for a successful student.	Student can describe the qualities needed for a successful student and understands how and from whom they can ask for help when needed.
<b>1C Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals</b>	Student cannot identify a personal area for growth.	Student can identify a personal area for growth, but is unsure how to approach the goal.	Student can identify a personal area for growth and describe the steps needed to achieve that goal, including addressing potential obstacles.
<b>2A Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.</b>	Student cannot distinguish between verbal and non-verbal cues and messages.	Student can distinguish between verbal and non-verbal cues and messages.	Student can distinguish, describe, and label the differences between verbal and nonverbal cues and messages.
<b>2B Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.</b>	Student cannot describe the differences between humans in stories.	Students can describe the differences between humans in stories.	Students can describe the difference (including culture and social) between humans in stories and real life.
<b>2C Use communication and social skills to</b>	Student cannot express how they feel when	Student can somewhat express how they feel	Student can express how they feel when they’ve

<b>interact effectively with others.</b>	they've been hurt emotionally.	when they've been hurt emotionally.	been hurt emotionally while practicing reflective listening.
<b>2D Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways</b>	Student cannot identify the consequences of a solution.	Student can identify the consequences of a solution.	Student can identify the consequences of a solution and identify passive, aggressive, and assertive conflict resolution behaviors.
<b>3A Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.</b>	Student cannot describe the consequences of breaking classroom or school rules.	Student can describe the consequences of breaking classroom or school rules.	Student can describe the consequences of breaking classroom or school rules and identify factors that make a situation unsafe.
<b>3B Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations</b>	Student cannot describe ways to promote the safety of themselves and others.	Student can describe ways to promote the safety of themselves and others.	Student can describe ways to promote the safety of themselves and others and generate alternative solutions to problems.
<b>3C Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.</b>	Student cannot brainstorm ways to contribute to their community.	Student can brainstorm ways to contribute to their community.	Student can brainstorm ways to contribute to their community and develops a plan.

## APPENDIX B

### Teacher Survey

Directions: At the end of the study, please mark which category you believe is most appropriate for the statement. You may only choose one category per statement.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Responsive Classroom has positively impacted my classroom.					
I plan to use Responsive Classroom again next school year.					
I feel that Responsive Classroom took up too much academic time.					
My students overall behavior has improved because of Responsive Classroom.					
My students have improved academically because of Responsive Classroom.					
My students interactions with one another are more respectful because					

of Responsive Classroom.					
The majority of students' self-efficacy has increased since implementing Responsive Classroom.					

Which aspect of Responsive Classroom do you believe has most significantly impacted teaching and learning in your classroom? Why?

Additional Comments: