

From the Desk of the Head of School

by Gerri Faivre



Responsive Classroom

As a homework assignment for the summer of 2009 the faculty of WFS were asked by me, the Head of School to read the book **THE MORNING MEETING** by Roxann Kriete with contributions by Lynn Bechtel. While this was the only book the faculty was required to read, throughout the summer several faculty came in asking if our professional library had copies of the other books, namely **THE FIRST SIX WEEKS OF SCHOOL** by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete, **CLASSROOM SPACES THAT WORK** by Marlynn K. Clayton and **RULES IN SCHOOL** by Kathryn Brady, Mary Beth Forton, Deborah Porter and Chip Wood. All of these books are published by Responsive Classroom, an arm of the Northeast Foundation for Children based in Turners Falls, Massachusetts.

To quote RC ***"The Responsive Classroom approach is a way of teaching that emphasizes social, emotional and academic growth in a strong and safe school environment. The goal of Responsive Classroom is to enable optimal student learning. The premise is that children learn best when they have both academic and social-emotional skills. The approach consists of classroom and school wide practices for deliberately helping children build academic and social-emotional competencies day in and day out, year in and year out."***

As September 2nd, the day for our first Responsive Classroom Workshop at WFS approached, faculty began to share that they felt the reading they had been asked to do over the summer was about basic common sense in the classroom, and that so much of it was already practiced in the classrooms of WFS. They felt, as I had shared with them so often over the past year, that this approach aligned itself beautifully with a Friends schools' philosophy. Once one became totally familiar with the information shared in the books published by RC it seemed as if it were written and developed with Friends schools in mind. The simple fact was that the Northeast Foundation for Children had the good sense to write it all down and make it available to schools, faculty and administration nationwide. And what we were about to experience with Gail Lunetta, our Responsive Classroom Workshop leader on September 2nd would simply underscore and wholeheartedly support the sound educational and development practices we have been implementing all along at WFS and motivate us to move ever onward doing even more of it each day!

Gail Lunetta began her day by sharing the ten classroom practices at the heart of the RC approach. They are:

- **Morning Meeting;** gatherings as a whole class to greet one another, share news, and warm up for the day ahead.
- **Rule Creation:** helping students create classroom 'guidelines', a term we use at WFS that allow all class members to meet their learning goals.
- **Interactive Modeling:** teaching children to notice and internalize expected behaviors through a unique modeling technique
- **Positive Teacher Language:** using words and tone to promote children's active learning and self-discipline
- **Logical Consequences:** responding to misbehavior in a way that allows children to fix and learn from their mistakes while preserving their dignity
- **Guided Discovery:** introducing materials using a format that encourages creativity and responsibility
- **Academic Choice:** increasing student motivation by differentiating instruction and allowing students teacher-structured choices in their work
- **Classroom Organization:** setting up the physical room in ways that encourage independence, cooperation and productivity
- **Working with Families:** hearing families' insights and helping them understand the school's teaching approaches
- **Collaborative Problem Solving:** using conferencing, role playing and other strategies to resolve problems with students

These ten practices set the tone all year long for students to learn best in classrooms where they feel safe, challenged and filled with joy...where they experience the freedom to learn.

Gail also stressed another aspect of the RC approach and the very reason why the Responsive Classroom workshop was for all members of the WFS faculty and administration. Classrooms exist within the context of the larger school and that consistency in climate and expectations between classrooms and the larger school is vital. When the adults at school work as a community to achieve such consistency, children can learn best. A school-wide approach to the RC philosophy is clearly proven to work best for students.

Schools that implement the Responsive Classroom approach school-wide adopt the following practices;

- **Align policies and procedures with RC philosophy:** make sure everything from lunch routine to the discipline policy enhances the self-management skills that children are learning through the RC approach
- **Allocate resources to support RC implementation:** use time, money, space and personnel to support learning and using the RC approach
- **Plan all-school activities to build a sense of community:** give children and staff opportunities to learn about and from one another through multi age level activities
- **Welcome families and the community as partners:** involve them in the children's education by maintaining two way communication, visits, volunteering and offering family activities within the school environment
- **Organizing the physical environment to set a tone of learning:** make sure that guidelines are posted prominently, student work is emphasized in displays and every space in the school is welcoming, clean and orderly

Through all the above, Gail shared that the RC approach translates research and best practices into wonderful, practical, caring and wise guidelines for all of us to follow. RC allows the school community to consistently implement a combination of classroom and school-wide practices that support children's academic and social growth. And as a result, the community, as a whole, is strengthened.

At the September 22nd full faculty meeting the WFS shared with one another some feelings and responses to the RC practices they have put into play since school began. Shared below are some of the things our faculty noticed as wonderful additions to their daily experiences with the children:

- ❖ ***Having children sit in a circle for Morning Meeting instead of facing me as the teacher changed everything. Now the children are all looking at each other...all of our eyes are on everyone. And the gentle sound of the triangle we use to get everyone's attention is simply beautiful and calming. What a difference a slight change has made!***
- ❖ ***We love the afternoon closing meeting...instead of rushing to get everyone packed and ready for dismissal, we are calm and enjoy hearing about how each of us felt about the day...a truly special feeling.***
- ❖ ***It certainly has helped to get us to know one another in a shorter period of time. The movement songs help to keep us all focused and centered and bring a nice balance to many parts of the day.***
- ❖ ***Using music to keep bringing everyone back to center after many different activities is wonderful. And the best is that the children are now doing it on their own, without teacher direction! They simply self-initiate and know when they need to do so!***
- ❖ ***The ongoing art of asking questions either verbally or within the Morning Message has helped us learn what to ask in order to learn something more.***
- ❖ ***Using different languages for our Morning Greeting, keeping eye contact as a central theme, implementing some of the energizers we were taught, asking questions and conducting spontaneous surveys all help to generate conversation in an easy and fluid manner. It has also been great fun and the students look forward to it and love it.***
- ❖ ***It is such a positive way to begin and end each day. If a child enters the classroom in the morning with some negativity, the Morning Meeting immediately helps to knock those***

issues right out of the box by immersion in other things. The same is true for the Afternoon Circle...if something happened during the day it can be erased before leaving campus by simply sharing and discussing and leaving it there.

Some 5500 teachers were trained in the Responsive Classroom Approach during the summer of 2009, the basis of which is grounded in child development and best practice. We are very happy to be part of this group of educators and of those who teach within a Quaker environment that clearly supports this type of behavior. Through the testimonies that guide our school and our mission each and every day....Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community and Equality, Responsive Classroom is a natural progression of life in Quaker schools.

Another aspect to the day for students at WFS this fall is the reintroduction of **YOGA** techniques that have also added to the calm and focused approach we are all experiencing this year. The faculty also shared with one another at the September 22nd meeting that the children can be heard chanting "Yea Yoga" when it is time for it throughout the day. And when it does begin, one can hear a pin drop in any classroom on the WFS campus. Faculty spoke about the Yoga techniques shared with us on August 31st by Theresa Gunyon, Yoga teacher, as offering a calm, centering moment that the children seem to understand the need for at different times each day. The faculty feels it is a great way to transition children from an active experience, such as PE or recess, to a more settled one such as Library or quiet in-class reading time. A few yoga moves and everyone is in their own personal space without losing a beat. It also allows for good posture habits to develop and slouching avoided, which can eventually affect one's overall health. And it offers every child a 'station break' of the most positive kind from the ongoing demands of their day, be they Nursery or Fifth Grade students.

Each of the new additions to our program at WFS, whether it be RC approaches or Yoga moves are all part of why we, as educators chose to teach here...all part of what the Quaker values and principles subscribe to...all part of the big picture of solid educational best practice at Westbury Friends School.

Onward we go keeping the children central to all we do and every decision made each and every day at WFS!