
RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM NEWSLETTER

Fall 1999

Vol. 11, No. 4

Questions and Comments

...from educators around the country who are using the *Responsive Classroom*[®] approach

The First Year of Teaching

New teachers talk about what helped

Q: What helps first-year teachers feel successful? How can colleagues and administrators best support their efforts? We asked several new teachers to talk about what helped them most in their first year.

A: **Tamar Philbrook is a third grade teacher in Fort Kent, Maine. This is her third year of teaching.**

What I needed most during my first year of teaching was someone I could go to who would take the time to answer all my questions and talk about my concerns (no matter how silly or insignificant they might seem to anyone else.)

I'll never forget the anxiety I had a few weeks before school began. I had spent many hours getting my classroom in order and I had thought long and hard about my daily schedule, but there were so many lingering questions. What were the rules of the school? When do I go to lunch? What about recess? What part of the playground do the third graders go on? And who would I go to for help? Who had time for all my questions when everyone was busy preparing their own classrooms?

Luckily, my principal came to my rescue. He quickly arranged for me to have a mentor teacher who became my lifeline throughout my first year. She took the time before school began to answer all my questions, and on the first day of school, she was in my classroom helping to calm my jitters. Throughout the year, she was always there to help and would even take over my duties at times during her planning period to give me a chance to catch my breath.

My principal was also a lifeline for me. I could go to him with both the major and minor issues in my classroom and he would always find time to listen and give advise. It meant a lot to me during that first year to be able to voice my concerns and also my joys and never have them brushed off as being insignificant.

A: Billy Homan is in his second year of teaching fourth grade at Plymouth School in Monrovia, California.

The thing that helped me most during my first year of teaching was knowing that the school staff shared common goals. Our staff has been working for several years now, with the strong and passionate leadership of our principal, to implement *Responsive Classroom* practices school-wide.

It was so comforting for me to know that there was a consistency in teaching approaches, teacher language, and discipline strategies throughout the school. Knowing this eliminated any inhibitions I had about asking for help. Because we were all working with the same model, I knew that I could go to anyone on the staff--including paraprofessionals--for help, and I did. I did have a mentor teacher whom I relied on heavily throughout the year but I also felt comfortable seeking help from many other colleagues.

My need for information was enormous during that first year: how do I build community in my classroom, meet the individual needs of students, help children become better problem-solvers, improve teacher/child and child/child communication, etc? *The Responsive Classroom* model provided me with the framework I needed--it gave me the language, the activities, and the structures, but most importantly, it provided me with the confidence and sense of empowerment I needed to become a better teacher.

A: Kyle Houghton, a first grade teacher at Jonathan M. Daniels School in Keene, NH, is now in his second year of teaching.

During my first year of teaching, my colleagues constantly reassured me that I didn't have to be perfect and that I could ask as many questions as I wanted. There were two teachers in particular who helped me a lot.

In our district, all new teachers are assigned a mentor. But even before she was assigned as my mentor, Amy (a third grade teacher) began to check in with me frequently to see if there was anything she could do to help. I still remember one of the very first things she told me as I was setting up my classroom: "Book take is the only thing that will hold stuff on your wall all year." Now, at the time, this seemed like odd advise to offer someone who was frantically arranging a classroom and preparing for the first year of teaching. But months later, I realized the importance of her advise: it was one of those innumerable bits of practical knowledge that only come from experience and can make your life as a teacher just a little bit easier.

I was also fortunate to have a first grade teacher to work with. Carol was extremely patient and helped me become familiar with all the school procedures. She was always prepared to handle the details that new teachers often forget to consider, such as what to do when you're on a mountain with 20 students and half of them have to go to the bathroom, and she answered each of my five million "How do we...?" questions without so much as a blink. The acceptance I felt from her and everyone else in the school really made me feel like I belonged, which is probably the best support a new teacher could ever get.

©1999 Northeast Foundation for Children
39 Montague City Road
Greenfield, MA 01301
800-360-6332 413-772-2066
www.responsiveclassroom.org