

---

# Responsive Classroom Newsletter

Fall 2000

Vol. 12, No. 3

---

## *Teacher to Teach*

Ideas from teachers who are using  
*The Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> practices

### ***The Power to Choose:***

#### **A Teacher Reflects on Learning to Share Control in the Classroom**

*By Joan Riordan, kindergarten teacher at Newfield School in Stamford, Connecticut*

When I was about five years old, my parents went out for an evening on the town—alone—without the six of us kids tagging along. This, as you can imagine, was a rare event. My oldest sister, simply by virtue of being the oldest, was put in charge. She had five of us she could boss around, and my next oldest sister had four, and so on down to me who, being second to the last, had only one to boss around—and that was just my baby brother who couldn't follow any commands at all. Oh, how I longed for more power. I wanted to be the one to make the decisions, the one to control the others, the one to rule.

The next time my parents went out for an evening alone, I became assertive. I told my mother that I wanted to be in charge. I never got to be in charge of anything and I wanted a chance. My mother okayed the plan. I was to be in charge and all my brothers and sisters would have to do what I said: Yippee! To make it official, my mother gave me a ladle. Like a queen's scepter, this would be the symbol of my power. All would have to obey the holder of the ladle. I could see my siblings bowing down before me with a flourish of baseball caps and bandanas, proclaiming, "All hail the holder of the ladle." Ah . . . power.

I share this childhood memory because it holds two important insights for me as a teacher. The first is that I have a strong need to feel in control. Just as I did at five, I still want to be the one to make decisions and be in charge. The second insight is that children need to feel in control of their own lives. I can remember very clearly what it was like as a child to want to have some control over my life (and okay, maybe a bit of control over my siblings' lives, too). How frustrating it was to always be told what to do and how uplifting it felt to make decisions for myself. My struggle as a teacher has been how to balance my need to be in control with the students' need to be in control. When I began teaching ten years ago, my need for control ruled the classroom. I told the children what project to do and what materials to use and I showed them a sample of the finished work. I also kept total control of all the classroom routines.

As I have grown more confident as a teacher, my need to be so totally in control has lessened. In addition, I attended a *Responsive Classroom* workshop several years ago in which I learned about Academic Choice. The combination of these two factors prompted me to make some changes in my classroom.

While being careful to maintain my authority as a teacher—as much as children need control, they also need to know that there is a strong adult in charge who will guide them, set limits, and keep them safe—I gradually began thinking more about the children's need for control. I resolved to provide students with more choices in their learning and more opportunities to make decisions. However, being the ladle wielding person that I am, I found that I had to do it slowly, very slowly.

## Warming up with small steps

My first step was to provide very limited choices regarding materials. Rather than keeping materials under my strict control which I had previously done, I began giving children options about what materials they wanted to use. Markers or crayons? White paper or colored paper? This may not seem like much of a choice but it was where I needed to begin. And no matter how minor the choices, the children always appreciated them.

Feeling a little bolder, I began offering limited choices within a planned academic activity. For instance, during language arts, the activity was to make a bag puppet from the story Mrs. Wishy-Washy. Rather than assigning characters which I had typically done, I asked children to choose the character they would like to make. In taking these small steps, I built up my comfort level. I saw how well the children handled these choices and began to notice the children's enthusiasm and level of investment increasing. The children were not only up to the task of choice, they reveled in it.

## Opening Up: Increasing the choices

As I slowly opened myself up to the idea of giving children choices in the classroom, I recalled a lecture I attended in which the presenter offered a helpful piece of advice. In talking about the mounds of work that teachers take home every night, he said, "If the children could do it, the teacher should not be doing it." I decided to begin applying this idea to my efforts at giving children more choices in the classroom.

Now as I planned each activity, I thought about what parts I had to do and what parts and decisions could be the children's. My job was to plan the activities, to set the objectives, and to make sure that children met the objectives. How they met them, I realized, could be left largely up to them.

This thought further opened up my thinking about giving children choices. I could now focus on an objective—for example, the children will retell Mrs. Wishy-Washy, demonstrating their understanding of a beginning, middle, and end—and then provide a variety of options for meeting this objective. Some students might paint a mural, others might act it out with masks and puppets which they made, and still others might retell it in the block corner using figures found there. Depending on the objective and the availability of materials and time, I might structure the choices for the children, "choose from one of the following three options," or brainstorm with them the various possibilities for meeting the objective and let them choose from this wide range of options.

The results of these early experiments were dramatic. Students became more invested in their learning and my teaching became more focused. When choices went awry, I reflected upon how clear my objective was and the appropriateness of the choices. As a class, we talked about ways to make it go more smoothly next time. Children grew in problem solving. They grew more interested in one another's work and were more able to help one another and learn from one another. The sense of community and ownership grew, and the more choices children had, the more ready and eager they were to take on more.

## More and more choices

Encouraged by these results, I began wondering how I could empower children during others parts of the day. The more I thought about it, the more opportunities I discovered for children to be making choices and taking on more responsibility. Here are just a few of them:

*Morning Meeting:* Children take turns choosing the daily greeting, making up their own greetings, and leading the news and announcements portion of the meeting. Children choose where to sit, when and what to share, and on whom to call for questions and comments.

*Center time:* Children preside over choosing at which center they will work. Each child has a chance to hold up student name cards and ask each child in the class where they would like to work. Also, the children have free access to the art supplies during this time. I no longer ration them out.

*Recess:* Children learn to use the “circle up” call to organize their own tag games—many of which they invent themselves. In the beginning of the year, I organize the games, but as the children learn them, I turn this job over to them. If a child wants to play a tag game, s/he calls “circle up” and takes charge of organizing the game.

## **An ongoing challenge**

Even with all this success, I continue to struggle with the question, “How can I retain control as a teacher and yet give students the power and control they need?” It’s an ongoing challenge which I believe is critical to effective teaching. I find that continuing to ask myself two questions—“Why am I doing what I am doing?” and “Is this something that I have to do or could the children do it?”—helps me to maintain the right balance. Over time, I have come to see that my power does not come from a ladle or the mantle of a teacher. It comes instead from touching the lives of my students and empowering them to make choices and be independent.

---

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Joan Riordan is a kindergarten teacher at Newfield School in Stamford, Connecticut, where she has worked since 1990. Prior to becoming a teacher, Joan worked as a credit analyst.

Joan has been using the *Responsive Classroom* approach in her classroom for four years. She is a Responsive Classroom presenter for her school district and for Northeast Foundation for Children. Joan has a B.S. in Finance from Fairfield University and a M.S. in Elementary Education from the University of Bridgeport.

©2000 Northeast Foundation for Children  
39 Montague City Road  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
800-360-6332 413-772-2066  
[www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)