



# Setting Students for Success: Incorporating Responsive Classroom into the Elementary Music Room

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It is often said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. With summer winding down and our attention turning toward the first day of school, that initial impression we make with our students is a pivotal point in their perception of music class. Beyond our preferred lessons and activities for this inaugural day (and as music specialists, we know we have multiple “first” days), how can we setup our classroom and introduce procedures that lift our students up the moment they cross the threshold into our music-making space?

Based on research and developed by teachers in 1981, Responsive Classroom revolves around how students learn and provides “concrete, common-sense practices that help children build academic and social-emotional competencies every day...[and] are ideal for time-pressured special area teachers because they blend seamlessly into our daily teaching” (*Responsive Classroom for Music, Art, PE and Other Special Areas*, 2016, p. 3). As an Orff-Schulwerk certified teacher, I was initially skeptical of any approach that might co-opt my teaching style; to the contrary, Responsive Classroom strategies effortlessly blend with the ideals of Orff Schulwerk and have become an essential everyday part of my classroom.

What follows are some simple ways to incorporate the ideals of Responsive Classroom into your own teaching. From preparing your space to thinking about teacher language to opening routines, these ideas are much like seeds. And just as the Schulwerk comes from wildflower seeds that grow in their own exceptional fashion, I hope these ideas become an innate aspect of your classroom and that you cultivate them alongside your students.

## PREPARING YOUR CLASSROOM

All students deserve an open and welcoming space to play, create, learn, and share. Zaretta Hammond (2015) reminds us that “when our neuroceptive mechanisms confirm that our surroundings are physically, socially, and intellectually safe, we go into a state of relaxed alertness and are primed for learning” (p. 144). The flow, usage, and visuals of your classroom send a clear message to your students about values and can unconsciously validate or suppress students’

feelings of well-being.

How students physically move to unpitched percussion instruments, to attain pencils and other materials, and to creative movement open space is part of creating a seamless flow for learning. Uncluttered and safe spaces for learning prevent students from overstimulation and safety concerns (Clayton and Forton, 2001). For example, there are only six chairs in my entire classroom: one for me and five for larger xylophones. Each has its place and a sole purpose.

It can be all too easy to collect materials and resources over time. Suddenly, three years later, the classroom is full of unnecessary papers, posters, worksheets, books, broken instruments, and more. In fact, a classroom that is “crowded or cluttered may obscure the values you have in mind” (Hammond, 2015, p. 144). Is there an instrument that students never play and you seldom reference? What about that visual that goes without mention year after year? These superfluous items take away from the more important parts of your classroom. Instead, consider having students create artwork that means something to them or bring in an instrument from home to showcase in the classroom. Recognizing an environment to be similar to our own family or community increases our sense of safety and security.

## OPENING YOUR DAY

One principle of Responsive Classroom is a daily morning meeting where students greet one another, explore an activity together, share and learn about one another, and read a message from the teacher. Of course, if music educators did a full-length, twenty-minute morning meeting in each class, our classes would practically be over by the time we finished! Instead, an orderly entrance and defined opening routine can be an effective way to start each class.

Routines offer students opportunities to take part in “communal activities that create social bonds among students” (Hammond, 2015, p. 146). When students can predict these procedures in the classroom, teachers can spend more time on instruction because students are able to put “desirable behaviors on autopilot” (p. 147). Consider the following approach—by starting each class with a consistent routine, teachers can

establish a positive class ethos and allow students the opportunity to develop independence:

- Students knock on the door and wait for the teacher
- The teacher silently opens the door and students follow as the teacher makes a circle and the last student closes the door
- While entering the space, students imitate the teacher's use of body percussion, mirroring or other silent movements and patterns (over time, this responsibility can be passed along to the student)
- This may be done while recorded music is playing to incorporate various works from your music curriculum (e.g. Sousa, Prokofiev, ragtime, jazz, current popular music)
- The teacher gives a nonverbal cue for students to sit and turn their bodies toward the posted message
- Students read the message aloud and, if prompted, discuss the query within the message

At the beginning of the year, I often play “The Stars and Stripes Forever” by John Philip Sousa as students enter the classroom. We march to the steady beat and students imitate other patterns I make with my body. The message welcomes them to my classroom and asks what instruments they heard as they entered. Students are encouraged to discuss with a shoulder

partner and then share out. Then, we are ready to continue with our learning for the day.

Give this routine a try, find the process that works best for you and your students, and consistently implement this procedure each and every day with minimal variation (*Responsive Classroom for Music, Art, PE, and Other Special Areas*, 2016). As a teacher of multiple grade levels, finding what works best for several grades can make this consistency easier to implement. Responsive Classroom reminds us that how we teach is as important as what we teach and by focusing on opening routines, we can ensure our academic instruction embodies the ideals of “social belonging and emotional safety” (Berman, Chafee, and Sarmiento, 2018, p. 13) and sets the tone for a meaningful and inclusive class.

### REFINING YOUR LANGUAGE

Words are one of the most powerful teacher tools. The words we use with our students can either empower them to learn more or convey the sense of disregard. Teacher language, or the “professional use of words, phrases, tone, and pace to enable to students to engage in active, interested learning” is a key aspect of Responsive Classroom and rests on the understanding that students inherently want to learn and do their best (Denton, 2015, p. 3). But because language is heavily ingrained in our culture, changing the language



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we use can also be exceptionally challenging. Here are three ways to craft your language with students:

*Less Is More.* We all know the feeling when someone goes on, and on, and on. Eyes glaze over and day-dreaming begins. Rather than give a long explanation, consider a brief reminder or even a question to spur student engagement. For example, instead of a lengthy review of proper xylophone technique, consider asking, “Who can share how we correctly hold the mallets and safely play the xylophone?” You can take this idea even further through the use of silence. When students share the many aspects of appropriate xylophone technique, let their voices stand for themselves instead of using a voice-over and repeating what they said. This can diminish the student voice even if your well-meaning intention is to amplify their response (Denton, 2015).

*Keep A Calm Tone.* Using a sarcastic tone, raising the voice, and giving directions in the form of an aggressive question are all commonplace in society, but can quickly and negatively impact the teacher-student relationship. Breaking this trust through disrespectful language or a resentful tone can close students off to the “perilous uncertainties of new learning” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 162). Instead, building rapport with students through careful words and graceful body language affirms the meaningful role you play in a student’s life. Additionally, younger students may be confused by any sarcastic “joke” and older ones may feel ridiculed by someone they previously regarded as an emotional authority figure (Denton, 2015). Try gentle and direct language instead. For example, instead of using a mocking tone to say “Excuse me?” consider saying “Stop. We use friendly words and a kind tone when speaking with classmates.”

*Be Specific.* A strategy more effective than saying “good job” when recognizing the class for positive behavior is to reinforce the behavior directly. Instead, try saying, “I notice we moved to the xylophones by silently walking around the instruments and sitting without touching the mallets.” The same applies when giving a direction to a class that may be off-task. Asking students, “please, will you come back to the circle quietly?” when the class is yelling and throwing rhythm sticks across the room implies that you are both asking for a favor and that they may choose not to follow your request. Rather, saying, “Freeze. Everyone sit with voices off now.” with a matter-of-fact but unemotional tone is both respectful and direct.

## MOVING FORWARD

Growing as teachers is a never-ending journey. Some days present enormous triumphs while others

feel like colossal steps backward. While some educators may be ready to tackle all these ideas on day one, others may want to set more manageable goals for modifying their language or implementing routines. Either way, we enter the upcoming school year prepared to better ourselves and create a safe space for our students to make music, take risks, and learn.

## REFERENCES

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*Matthew Stensrud will be presenting a workshop for the Kentucky Orff-Schulwerk Association on September 21, 2019 at the University of Kentucky. For more details, see <https://kentuckyorff.com/upcoming-workshops/>*