# Responsive Teaching

## A Narrative Analysis of Three Teachers' Process and Practice

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## Introduction

Andrea reads at a fourth grade level but comprehends poorly. She is shy and dislikes working in groups. Robert is gregarious, loves to read, but struggles with basic math facts. He loves to work with peers, but only if they are his close friends. Judy seems to find school easy and participates in class discussions, but any time she is given a test, she scores poorly. She would prefer to do science experiments all morning long, especially those that involve messy materials. Zachary doesn't get along well with classmates. He is quiet and gets his work done quickly, but it is often done so quickly that careless mistakes are made. When he is asked to review his work for errors, he will often throw it on the floor and put his head down on his desk. Imagine that these are students in a fourth grade classroom along with 26 others, all equally unique. What is a teacher to do to meet all of their instructional needs? What about their behavioral, social, and emotional needs?

To meet these needs, many teachers attempt to adjust their instruction in ways that will reach both students who are having success as well as those who experience a range of struggles with the school

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curriculum. Differentiated instruction (DI) (Tomlinson, 2003) is an approach to teaching that suggests planning for and then responding to the instructional needs of each and every student with a high-quality curriculum. Though DI is not a new term in educational settings, many teachers still struggle with the enactment of the suggested strategies (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006). Despite good intentions—and even hard and focused work—it is difficult to reach all students in a classroom of varied needs, interests, and readiness levels, as differentiated instruction is incredibly complex (Parsons, Dodman, & Burrowbridge, 2013).

Initially describing DI as a way to help each learner move as far along as he/she can, Tomlinson (2003, 2013) added the term *responsive teaching* to her earlier definition (1999). Responsive teachers are adjusting instruction to meet individual student needs as opposed to using a one-size-fits-all approach. Though responsiveness has always been a part of DI, Tomlinson (2003) specifically used the term *responsive teaching* as a synonym for DI in order to emphasize the teacher's behavior as opposed to specific teaching strategies. In this project, I used the term responsive teaching because it is a somewhat neutral term, and calls to mind how teachers quite literally respond to individuals and groups of students, addressing whatever needs are presented to them.

The goal of this study was to investigate teachers' decision-making strategies in high-poverty, heterogeneous classrooms. My intention was to see how teachers discussed responsive teaching as it related to academic instruction. However, the results of the teacher interviews and observations opened up a much different area of study. Originally concerned with the differentiation of instruction in heterogeneous classrooms, especially for those students who have already mastered portions of the school curriculum, the teachers' responses and observed behaviors were focused on the care and attention provided for students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs. A study that began to investigate how teachers made instructional decisions, I saw that these decisions were constantly at play with teachers' awareness of students' emotional needs. The teachers' attention to one type of need could not exist without focused attention on the other.

## Literature Review

This literature review examined issues related to differentiated instruction and the access students have to high quality instruction by examining these issues through the preparation and perceptions teachers

have. First, I began with a discussion of the literature on differentiated instruction, which, as is mentioned above, is used by Tomlinson (2003) as a synonym for responsive teaching. I then closed with a discussion of the concept of an ethic of care in instructional practice.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Differentiated instruction attempts to address the needs of multiple groups of students in a heterogeneous setting. It can be defined as an approach to teaching where teachers proactively modify the curriculum, their teaching methods, resources, and learning activities to address the diverse student needs in the classroom (Tomlinson, 2003, Tomlinson et al., 1995; Tomlinson et.al., 2003). Somehow, one teacher, who may or may not have adequate training in drawing on a wide range of talents and experiences in order to meet a wide array of needs, is expected to move each of these students through a grade-level curriculum.

While this may seem logical to practitioners, it is considerably harder to actualize in practice than it is to articulate in theory. While some studies discuss teachers' willingness or ability to differentiate (Edwards, Carr, & Siegel, 2006; Fairbanks et al, 2009; Maloch et al., 2013) others indicate that teachers may have negative perceptions of the abilities of students to excel if they are students of color, from a low socioeconomic background, or English language learners (Anyon, 1981; Tettegah, 1996).

### *Ethic of Care*

Relationships are fundamental to teaching (Noddings, 2005, 2012; Vogt, 2002), and care ethics is one way to conceptualize the importance and variety of these teacher-student relationships. For any *carer* to truly establish a caring relationship with the cared-for, he or she must focus on the expressed needs of the *cared-for* (students) as opposed to needs they are assumed to have.

Noddings (2012) described qualities that are involved in being a carer—or in the case of K-12 education, the caring teacher. The carer is attentive, listening to the expressed needs of the cared-for (the student in this case). Carers are good listeners and good thinkers. The carer feels a need to help, even if there is a feeling that an expressed need is not necessarily appropriate at a particular time. At that point, the caring teacher will respond in some way to the need, while also providing for academic needs of which the teacher is also aware. This aspect of care ethics can be connected to the notion of responsive teaching described above: Both are ways of considering students as individuals with vary-

ing and variable needs, and both involve the teacher responding to some type of expressed need.

Sometimes the expressed need cannot be satisfied, and sometimes it can. Noddings (2012) wrote:

> We can therefore anticipate a possible conflict that will have to be resolved by caring teachers: When should teachers put aside the assumed need to learn a specific aspect of subject matter and address the expressed need of the student for emotional support, moral direction, or shared human interest? (p. 772)

Care ethics and responsive teaching may seem distinct. However, they are closely tied together when it comes to the relationships teachers and students create with one another, and how this relationship is enacted in a responsive classroom. Noddings (2005) suggested that we think of the classroom as a large heterogeneous family. In care ethics, teachers as the carers are ideally taking into account multiple expressed needs in the classroom. Caring teachers, ones who respond to students in ways suggested by care ethics and a responsive teaching approach, "listen and respond differentially to their students" (p. 19), but keep in mind that all have both emotional and educational needs that must be attended to as part of responsive teaching.

## Methodology

This study employed narrative case study techniques to document not only the techniques and strategies used by three teachers in heterogeneous classrooms, but also the articulated personal beliefs teachers held about learners and their decision-making processes. My two main research questions became: What decisions do teachers make when meeting diverse needs in a heterogeneous classroom? What do teachers think *responsive teaching* really is?

### ***Participants***

I chose three teachers, one in third grade, one in fourth, and one in fifth. These three teachers were chosen based on years of teaching experience, grade level taught, and interest in the topic of responsive teaching. The teachers had from three to 23 years of classroom experience.

Nina taught third grade at Central Elementary School, and she was in her third year of teaching at the time of our interviews. Nina is a White female who described a significant interest in learning more about teaching, especially when it came to her literacy groups. Danielle was a fourth grade teacher who came to her current school district

after working for several years in a neighboring district. Danielle is an African American woman who entered the teaching field after a number of years in the field of law. She described at length how the topic of responsive teaching was closely related to the ways she addressed her son's special needs. Hilary is a White fifth grade teacher with 23 years of teaching experience. Hilary received her doctoral degree a number of years before our interview, and based on the number of interruptions to our interviews, was obviously considered by other teachers to be a helpful source of information. Throughout our conversations, she described her solid commitment to teaching, though the field had changed in some disturbing ways during her tenure.

The school district from which participants were chosen was a small urban district of approximately 4,000 students in grades EC-12. There were eight schools in this particular district, six of which were elementary schools. Almost 70% of the students in the school district were considered low-income. The district was also racially and ethnically diverse, with approximately 36% of its students identifying as Black, 39% White, 11% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 8% multi-racial.

### *Data Collection*

I created a short interview protocol that was divided up into two sections. The initial interview, which lasted anywhere between 30-45 minutes per teacher, asked teachers to describe what they believed the term *responsive teaching* represented and what they believe they did in a responsive classroom. While the goal was not necessarily to see if teachers agreed with my broad definition of responsive teaching; a term that involved both differentiated learning opportunities and an ethic of care, teachers did share responses that indicated a belief in the importance of, but difficulty in, responding to multiple student needs simultaneously.

The classroom observation was an opportunity for me to (1) see if the teachers enacted their articulated beliefs about responsive teaching, and (2) identify some responsive teaching behaviors about which I could ask during the second interview. I conducted an hour-long observation in each classroom and took copious field notes on the interaction between teacher and student.

These notes included direct quotes from students and the teacher, other adults who were involved in classroom instruction, and student behaviors during the class period. I then highlighted sections of this script that identified classroom events where the teachers were responding to some expressed or assumed need of a student. Sometimes this was

verbal, and often it was non-verbal: a pat on the back, for example, was seen multiple times in one classroom to respond to students struggling with a learning activity. Other notes of mine focused on the differentiated activities in which students were engaged during class; during guided reading groups, for example, or independent work time, when students were working on varied tasks.

The follow-up interview was focused on the classroom observation. The interview protocol included specific questions about observed interactions between the teacher and student, specifically those that involved what appeared at the time to be a change in plan (the teacher ending a discussion, stating, "I think we've run out of focus today," for example), or when the work students received was differentiated. I asked the teachers to describe how they came to respond to student needs in a particular way. I followed up by asking where they imagined their instruction continuing with a student or the whole group as a result of the instruction happening that day. Finally, I asked the teachers what else they would like to tell me about responsive teaching in their classroom.

I highlighted portions of the transcript that were examples of ways each teacher was somehow responding to the needs of students. Examples included a change in the plans for instruction, varied materials for certain groups of students, ways teachers encouraged students to participate, and a number of interactions between the teacher and her individual students. I then asked the teachers about these events, and asked them to describe how they made decisions to conduct instruction or support in these particular ways.

### *Data Analysis*

In this study I used narrative analysis to represent the individual stories of each teacher, as well as the common elements of the observations and interviews across classrooms. As I transcribed this data, I noticed how often the teachers told stories during their interview. None of my questions specifically asked, "Tell me a story." However, teachers told stories that included details of their personal and professional lives, and each story was distinct and unique. I also noticed how much teachers discussed the care involved in teaching. Originally, my goal was to focus on the academic side of teaching and on how teachers made instructional decisions in a responsive classroom. However, I never specifically said this in the interviews, and as I listened to the audio files, I found that my original goal of this research study—classroom instruction—was not addressed as much in the interviews as were other student needs.

**Narrative analysis: A more in-depth focus**. Many scholars have

written about narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Riessman, 1993; Wells, 2011) and its use in the field of education (Carter, 1993; Chen, Wei, & Jiang, 2017; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Clandinin (2013) described the use of narrative in research as a way of "understanding and inquiring into experience" (p. 13). It is an approach that studies human lives and humans' lived experiences as important sources of knowledge

Narrative research welcomes the rich and indeterminate nature of schooling. Lyons & LaBoskey (2002) wrote, "Teaching is about the construction of knowledge and meaning by individuals, not simply the transmission of information" (p. 3). If teaching itself is more than a model of transmission, then the study of, about, and with teachers should also respect this complexity. Narrative research respects the "messy" of teaching. It also welcomes the knowledge that teachers, both expert and novice, have about their work. As well, narrative inquiry allows for an awareness of the ethics in teaching, including the care teachers have for their students (Chen, Wei, & Jiang, 2017).

The space in which these teachers worked was also a consideration in this research. All three teachers worked at a high poverty school. At the time of this study, Central[1] had an enrollment of 287 students (http://www.illinoisreportcard.com/), 91% of whom were identified as low-income. Twenty-five percent were English language learners and 7.7% of the student population identified as White. Central also did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), AYP was the measure holding schools and districts accountable for student performance (Education Week, 2011). In 2014, Central had been identified for School Improvement, which involved creating a plan to establish measureable objectives for continuous student progress. A constant question throughout this research was whether or not the results would have been different had the teachers taught in a different space. What would their responsive decisions have been had they worked in a suburban school district? A rural school district? One in which AYP was never a concern?

## Results

While common threads existed throughout the narratives, the teachers' stories differed based on their levels of teaching experience. Nina, the newer teacher, told stories related to her professional learning. She described attempts to become more effective in the classroom by learning about and from her students, colleagues, and administrators. Danielle and Hilary, the more experienced teachers, also told stories about

their professional development, but included more information about the emotional aspects of successful responsive teaching. Their work in high needs classrooms focused a great deal on the emotional needs of the students and the emotional toll on the teachers as they responded to these needs.

All three teachers told consistent stories about being well aware of, and constantly responding to, the needs of their students, no matter the age. They described a range of emotional needs, academic needs, and behavioral needs they had to plan for as well as those that required in-the-moment responses. Apparent in these interviews and observations was also a great awareness of how teachers' knowledge of students as individuals was of the utmost importance when being a responsive teacher.

### *Nina: Learning to Respond*

Nina is a White, female teacher who, at the time of our interview, was in her third-year teaching at Central Elementary School in a small urban school district. Throughout my initial and final interviews, Nina told a number of stories about how she learned and was continuing to learn to be a responsive teacher from her classroom experiences, colleagues, and reading materials. She initially discussed this in response to my question, "How did you learn to be a responsive teacher?" In this first anecdote, Nina is discussing how *responsive teaching* is essentially *effective teaching*. In her view, one could not be a good teacher without being aware of and responding to multiple needs on multiple levels.

> I think I just realized for the most part that you can't be a successful teacher without being a responsive teacher. And it comes with experience, you talk about it in your classes, and you learn the ways to meet the needs of the kids, and what the best practices are. But being, in my experiences with kids, being in the classroom is the only place to learn that. In the building that I work at, and in the first three years, this is my third year, so many of them, I had to learn right away that learning wasn't going to happen that day unless there were a variety of other things met first. Whether they felt safe, whether they felt respected, whether they felt that, all of those things, teaching just wasn't going to happen. I couldn't accomplish my job if I wasn't being responsive all of the time….

In our second interview, Nina told another story specifically about how she learned to conduct her differentiated literacy centers. She began by addressing what she learned in college and the strong teachers and classes she encountered in her university experience. She remembered terms like "zone of proximal development" and knew how that was related to students' individual needs and challenge levels. However, she

placed learning via her teaching experience above other types of learning. She referred to her classroom experience again in this narrative, and described all of the individuals at Central Elementary who were essential in helping her develop professionally. Her principal at the time would come in (at Nina's request) to observe, give feedback, and even do guided reading groups while Nina watched. Other teachers who acted as informal instructional coaches for Nina included the school literacy specialist, her mentor, and another primary teacher.

> Of course I had those ideas already swarming in my head from college, and from hearing and seeing and listening, we watched a lot of videos, so of course my initial ideas came from that. But it didn't become developed, it didn't become fully developed until I was here and trying it, and seeing what worked and didn't work.

Nina's story was filled with examples of her seeking out official and unofficial mentors in order to improve her teaching. While it is possible to look at Nina's narrative and think that she was uncommonly lucky to be in such a supportive building, it is also possible to view this story as one of a responsible, reflective teacher who was willing to open up her classroom to others in order to grow, becoming potentially vulnerable in the process.

### *Danielle: Responsive Parenting*

Danielle is a female, African-American fourth grade teacher, also at Central Elementary School. At the time of our interview she had taught for almost 10 years, half of which were spent in a neighboring school district before she moved to Central. Before her teaching career began, she worked in the field of medical malpractice and injury law for 20 years.

Danielle had a unique and very personal story to tell about learning to work with the varied needs of the struggling students in her class. When I asked her how she became a responsive teacher, she replied with a narrative about her son, who is now 21 years old. Danielle described him as ADHD and dyslexic; a "sensory integration child" who did not talk until he was four years old. A self-described young mother, she had a difficult time communicating his special needs to his teachers. As she said,

> It became, oh my God, and so I needed to know something, it wasn't that I was uneducated, but I didn't understand what his needs were, how to address his needs and what I needed to ask for….And so my fight began this process. I went back to get a teacher background, it was not necessarily to teach, it didn't start out that way. I was becoming an advocate for my son.

Danielle went on to describe the developmental clinic into which she was able to place her son, and how they evaluated him mentally and emotionally in multiple school settings. In the interview, Danielle noted that her responsive teaching really began at home.

The personal aspects of becoming a responsive teacher came up several times in our conversation, as Danielle spoke about her natural inclination toward students who struggle with the school curriculum. She felt that because of her experience with her son, she attempted to respond quickly to the needs of these particular students. It is possible that she was describing the proactive response that she wished had taken place in classrooms when her son was a young student. This became clear in her realization of how her son's difficulties opened her eyes to others' needs:

> But when I began to notice that my son was not the only one that struggles, not the only one that's like this, [I asked:] what can I do and what can I bring to the classroom that is appropriate for these kids? And I do hone in on, I admit, those that speak to my heart more diligently, because they're the ones that get left behind. And I know that my son, not to sound arrogant, is blessed because I was able to respond in the manner that I did….

However, Danielle's story of becoming a responsive teacher was not limited to her son's school experience. She described how an administrator, early in her career, offered some practical advice that resonated with her. Though the administrator was describing how to reach students behaviorally as well as academically, the advice aligns with Danielle's inclination toward the "struggling" students in her class. One of Danielle's evaluations had gone rather poorly. She had tried to utilize some hands-on science materials, including small worms, and several of her students reacted with dismay while her administrator was watching. She describes their post-observation conversation:

> But the best piece of advice that she gave me was first, "Did you ask yourself who was scared of worms?" Nope. She talked me through, and it wasn't, you know, post-observation, but 40 years of teaching, she knew the game. She said, "Danielle, did you think about that?" So my decision making is looking at the kids that struggle the most and are really going to test the patience, and I begin to hash that out, and I take it from there.

Throughout her narrative, Danielle described the power of responding to individual students' needs. Her collaboration with special service providers, a local hospital, and the school system resulted in success for her son, and a corresponding feeling of success for her as a parent. Later in her

narrative she described how she focuses in on the students who struggle significantly because “those…speak to my heart more diligently.”

***Hilary: Feeling Powerless***

Hilary is a White, female, fifth grade teacher at Central Elementary. At the time of our interview, she had taught for 23 years. Hilary’s narrative was spread throughout our two interviews. There was a constant thread of *tired* during our conversations, and she elaborated on that during the final portion of our last interview, without much prompting. This may have been in part because after our interview, she was on her way to a local fast-food restaurant for a school fundraising event. The previous evening, there had been a school event that had kept her from getting home until after 7:00 pm. She was also visited at least once during our interviews by other teachers, which may have been distracting. At the very least, it is one piece of evidence that demonstrates her position as a resource to other staff in the building.

Her narrative, like Danielle’s, began by focusing on the struggling students in her class, and how much harder she thought they were struggling than they used to:

> My first year in 5th grade, it was rosy, this is just heaven, they can do everything! They must have just given me the class that can do everything. Then I found out, this doesn’t happen every year. Little bit harder….I really see a change. But maybe that’s just education.

She then moved on to describe the attachment she had to her students, and the ownership she takes of their well-being and instructional needs:

> I know I can’t give to everybody. I try at different times. That’s what I’m trying. Sometimes I’m trying to make the others feel great, while the others are struggling. That’s the thing I’m working with mostly, to meet everyone’s needs.

Hilary seemed to be describing her attempts to reach all students in as many ways as possible. In essence, she was trying to “give to everybody.” Realistically, and by her own admission, this is impossible. Yet I observed her trying to do exactly that which she described she could not.

In a later conversation, Hillary described how the pressures that teachers face today impact her negatively and get in the way of her instruction. She noted she found herself taking ownership of her students and their growth to the point of wanting to block everything else out:

> Honestly, if I could say, OK, take my class, put them in a trailer, knock out everything else, I think I could make a lot more progress. No one wants to hear that. I could. I know that sounds egotistical, doesn’t it? If

> I could block out everything else and be like the one room schoolhouse person, I really feel like there are so many other things that negatively impact me, in a way, as a teacher, I just would like to just be alone with them, and I could take them on.

We moved on from our discussion of her fifth grade class to teaching in general. I wanted to find out what kinds of decisions she made in order to respond to the needs of her students. Answering that question caused Hillary to think and respond about issues far outside her classroom, and consider the world of education more globally. She described how these decisions are much less teacher-driven than they used to be:

> I kind of feel like there's too many things that teachers are being asked to do. So I don't feel I'm thinking the way…I feel like that creative way I have is just being put on the back burner. I think that's what makes me a good teacher, but I just don't have that time. There's just too many things we're being asked to do.

She continued with this point in a later conversation, describing feeling powerless and having less control than ever in her career. Hillary had been at Central Elementary School long enough to see several administrators pass through, and she fondly reflected on the days when an administrator would let the staff sort things out themselves.

> You can't really, I don't know, you can't really speak up about things…. Maybe I've been here long enough, that I'm like, I'm going to say something, but then you do kind of, it depends on what it is, but then you do suffer a little bit…I would never have believed me, and I don't think it was like this when I started. I did not see, and maybe it always was there, but I don't know, we've talked about it.

It would be too easy to read through these comments and attribute them to the exhaustion felt by a teacher nearing retirement. What Hillary described here is a change she felt was happening in the teaching field, a drop in the flexibility and creativity she was encouraged, and even allowed, to use in the classroom. She described the difference in the culture of a school when teachers are allowed to make decisions and when they are not. This had apparently taken a toll on her and on others with whom she had shared her feelings.

## Discussion

In a study of 32 Swiss and English primary school teachers, Vogt (2002) found caring within teaching to appear as commitment, relatedness, physical care, expressing affection, parenting, and mothering. The three teachers in this responsive teaching study responded to their

students with these kinds of care and considered it to be directly connected to their ability to be responsive to students' instructional needs. I witnessed teachers expressing deep commitment to their students, one teacher even joking about wanting to move into a trailer with them to teach them without external distractions. All expressed a sense of relatedness to their students, especially Danielle, who could not separate her responsiveness as a parent from her teaching requirements. They demonstrated physical care, including a "shoes off" day in one case. Affection, such as pats on the back or one-on-one time with the teacher, was also witnessed in classroom observations and interviews. These are just a few of the examples that show the relational ethics expressed by these three teachers.

Considering the overwhelming number of female teachers in the profession, it is not a surprise that the field of education and an ethic of care are connected. Ethic of care has been suggested as a traditionally-held female moral perspective (Vogt, 2002). However, Vogt challenged this perspective with her study on Swiss and English teachers, and it would be a logical next step to this study to consider male teachers' perspectives on responsive teaching. The three teachers chosen for this study were different in many ways, including age, race, grade level, and experience teaching. However, considering the feminist perspectives involved in an ethic of care, it would be interesting to extend this work to see to what degree male teachers focused on instruction alongside social and emotional responsiveness, and to what result.

The lines between instruction and "non-instructional" needs as indicated in this paper are quite blurred; it is hard to imagine being able to conduct effective instruction in a classroom where students' social/emotional needs were not considered. Caring for and about students must be extended to a teacher's ability to "identify and meet students' needs," (James, 2012), and students should consequently recognize what is being said and done as caring. Additionally, care must be considered within the lived experience of students, including the need for teachers to become aware of sociocultural implications of power and privilege within the teacher-student relationship. Further research would have to be conducted with a wider and even more diverse population to see if the stories told by teachers were similar.

## Note

[1] The identified school, and all names of participants, including those referenced in participant narratives, are pseudonyms.

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