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Running Head: RTI as Systems Change

Systemic Change for RTI: Key Shifts for Practice

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Abstract

RTI and the Systemic Change Process

Be careful of what you wish for… Be the change that you want…

Three contemporary major initiatives have set the stage for change in the identification process for students with LD (SWLD): (1) the President's Commission on Excellence in SPED recommended shifting practice to a focus on results through a prevention model that acknowledges that SPED services support access to education, not SPED; (2) the Office of SPED Programs's (OSEP) consensus panel on eight principles related to LD and the eventual use of RtI as a means of facilitating more appropriate identification procedures for students with LD (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002); and (3) the National Research Council (NRC) report on minority students in SPED (Donovan & Cross, 2002) that emphasized the widespread use of early screening and intervention practices and RtI models.

With these initiatives as a backdrop, Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). The new law promoted RtI as way to identify SWLD, as well as EIS to provide students with support as soon as they show signs of struggling, along with other important features about contextual factors and cultural issues that align with prevention. RtI requires collaboration among general educators, special educators, and, where relevant, Title 1 support personnel, and as such is quite different than previous models in which each group tended to carry out its work separately. Greater emphasis is placed on providing students with improved instruction and supplemental supports within general education rather than on finding within-child deficits. While no single model is currently accepted as the "gold standard" of RtI, core features of RtI have been identified: (a) high quality, research-based classroom instruction, (b) universal screening, (c) continuous progress monitoring, (d) research-

based secondary or tertiary interventions, (e) progress monitoring during interventions, and (f) fidelity measures (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005).

Large scale effects. First, despite RtI's sound conceptual basis, we urgently need to know what the large-scale implementation of evidence-based reading interventions in the early grades should look like and do not know enough to attribute effects to a specified intervention. Gersten and Dimino (2006) suggest the need to implement large-scale field studies that include a qualitative component so that we can reliably describe how teachers who receive professional development actually implement various interventions. The National Joint Committee on LD (2005) emphasized evaluating the implementation of RtI particularly in large-scale applications.

Disproportionate representation. Although RtI holds promise as a way to improve outcomes for CLD students and more accurately determine which students need SPED (Artiles, 2005; Klingner & Edwards, 2005), little is known about the actual effects of well-implemented RtI models on students' long-term achievement or on their disproportionate representation in SPED. Several aspects of RtI seem to hold promise for culturally and linguistically diverse students: the emphasis on EIS, the focus on making sure children receive appropriate instruction, the push to match instruction to a child's needs based on ongoing classroom assessment, and a shift from focusing on finding within-child deficits to providing the best instruction or intervention. Yet it will take a great deal of professional development and support to help the practitioners implementing RtI move away from a deficit-based model. Many practitioners assume that a child must have an internal deficit of some kind if she is not progressing, or (conversely) that she comes from a supposedly "disadvantaged" background and her underachievement cannot be helped (Harry & Klingner, 2006). With previous LD identification criteria, students presumably could not be identified as disabled if environmental factors could not be ruled out. The RtI model

potentially addresses this challenge by focusing on a child's need for support, regardless of the reason, rather than on whether or not the child has a disability. A related issue is that the instruction students receive might not match their needs, and yet erroneous decisions about the child might be made because the child did not "respond" to the instruction. It is essential that we ensure that children have in fact received appropriate, quality instruction—instruction that is "evidence-based," but evidence as determined with the target population; moreover, instruction that is designed with an explicit attention to the cultural and linguistic dimensions of learning.

To ensure that students are receiving appropriate instruction, classroom observations must be part of every RtI model. Vellutino and colleagues (2003, 2007), D. Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, and Young (2003) and others include an analysis of classroom instruction and corresponding instructional modifications in their models. Intervention at this level is based on the assumption that many if not most struggling readers will be able to profit from relevant modifications in classroom literacy instruction, *despite the fact that they were (apparently) less well equipped than their normally achieving classmates to compensate for inadequacies in reading instruction"* (p. 186). This recognition that many students struggle when their instruction is inadequate is an important one, with significant implications for CLD students who tend to be disproportionately educated in high poverty, high need schools in which teachers are often not as qualified as in more affluent schools (Darling Hammond, 1995; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Similarly, a significant assumption underlying RtI models is that a stronger focus on classroom instruction, progress monitoring, and early intervening services will suffice to properly address the problem of disproportionate representation. Yet instruction as well as decisions about who needs what type of additional support depend on the quality of training (or the lack thereof) of the individuals involved in making those decisions. We believe that, in spite

of RtI's potential for promoting more valid educational decisions for CLD students, *significant improvement in educational practices will not take place unless closer attention is paid to the ways in which researchers and practitioners think about culture, language, and learning* (Artiles, 2005). As with previous criteria for eligibility to SPED programs, without proper training about cultural and linguistic diversity, individuals implementing RtI models may presume that a child who does not make progress at a certain pace must have a disability rather than understanding that the child may need additional time and support while learning English. Or they may equate cultural differences with cultural deficits, which may influence their interpretations about their diverse students' behavior (Klingner & Solano-Flores, 2007). Practitioners may also ignore that most educational interventions were conceptualized with little or no attention to the role of culture in human development. Similarly, researchers and practitioners may be oblivious to the fact that researchers' practices and decisions are also based on cultural assumptions and values which privilege certain perspectives on teaching and learning that advantage of certain groups of students (e.g., middle class learners). Or teachers may not attend to the role of school and classroom cultures in shaping student performance (Artiles, 2003; Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, & Harris-Murri, 2007).

Uneven research base. A third significant challenge is the almost exclusive focus of RtI research on reading interventions and a lack of attention to behavioral interventions and other academic areas. Although students who struggle with reading represent the largest proportion of students identified as LD, a significant number of students struggle because of difficulties in other areas, such as mathematics. Researchers have recently begun investigating the potential of RtI to support students in mathematics (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hollenbeck, 2007). And even though researchers have studied Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) using a

multi-tiered model that is similar in many ways to RtI (e.g., Tobin & Sugai, 2005), they are just beginning to make explicit connections between the two models (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007). Yet many states have moved forward with efforts to integrate PBIS and RtI models (e.g., Illinois, Maine, New York, Wyoming), and would benefit from additional support with these initiatives.

A focus on individual children rather than on school-wide change. A fourth challenge is that efforts to implement RtI should be located in the larger context of educational practices and reforms, since practitioners might misunderstand RtI as having a narrow focus on SPED instructional strategies or LD identification. RtI must be designed and implemented as part of a more complex process of school improvement. This entails coordinating curriculum and assessment considerations, addressing teacher learning needs, attending to school climate issues that might constrain change efforts, and enhancing leaders' capacities to orchestrate and respond to multiple (often contradictory) reforms. Adelman and Taylor caution that if RtI is treated simply as a problem of providing more and better instruction, it is not likely to be effective for many students. With broad-based school-wide models, schools are in a better position not only to address problems successfully when they are first detected, but also to prevent many problems from occurring. Adelman and Taylor note that an effective RtI model reduce the numbers of students who are inappropriately referred for SPED and also enhance attendance, reduce misbehavior, close the achievement gap, and increase graduation rates.

Implementation issues. A fifth challenge concerns the many barriers faced by practitioners trying to figure how to implement RtI. While the bulk of RTI research has been conducted in experimental and quasi-experimental conditions, with researchers rather than practitioners implementing interventions, SEAs and LEAs have begun the enormous task of

using emerging research knowledge in far more complex and rapidly changing conditions to provide early intervening services and redesign their SPED identification systems. LEAs and SEAs need help to build their capacity as they assume these challenges, particularly LEAs that are required to address disproportionate representation. Yet there are no clear answers in the research literature for many of the dilemmas faced by practitioners. Five kinds of implementation issues seem most common: confusion about the conceptualization of RtI, uncertainties about new roles, concerns about English language learners, gaps in knowledge and skills, and challenges related to systemic issues (e.g., program and reform alignments). There is overlap among these areas.

1.) *Conceptual*: Practitioners express confusion about the similarities and differences between the SPED referral process and RtI (e.g., in one school they talk of “referring students to RtI”; Orosco, 2007). They are unclear about the differences and overlap between EIS and RtI, what it means to provide "evidence-based" instruction, the extent to which instruction should be differentiated to meet students' needs in the first tier; the differences between a standard treatment protocol and a problem-solving model; and what should "count" as a secondary intervention. They may be confused about how to determine if a student should be placed in SPED and unsure how to think about students who make progress when they receive secondary intervention but then regress when the intervention is discontinued. Can the student continue receiving secondary interventions for an indefinite period of time?; should the student be placed in SPED? Some practitioners struggle with the idea that secondary interventions are provided as part of general education (Klingner, Vaughn, & Hoover, 2007). Conflicting beliefs and values contribute to this confusion (Burdette, 2007).

2.) Roles: Uncertain about changing roles in RtI, practitioners wonder what their new responsibilities will be as well as what roles families will play. Who should monitor the fidelity of primary and secondary interventions? Who should conduct progress monitoring? Who should provide secondary interventions, and what should their qualifications be? What should be the new roles of SPED teachers, psychologists, administrators, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, social workers, and other support personnel? Professional organizations acknowledge this confusion, while also providing helpful guidelines for their membership to consider (e.g., Carter, 2006, the National Association of School Psychologists; Usaj, Shine, & Mandlawitz, 2006).

3.) English Language Learners (ELLs): Some practitioners are especially concerned about using RtI with ELLs (Klingner, Artiles, Baca, & Hoover, 2007). They are aware that second language acquisition, best practices for ELLs, and cultural variations should be considered when assessing student progress, designing interventions, and interpreting ELLs' responses to interventions, but are not always confident they have sufficient expertise to carry out these activities. They are unsure how to think about the intersection between existing bilingual or ESL programs and RtI. For example, one district leader placed pull out ESL services at the third tier of their draft RtI model.

4.) Insufficient Knowledge and Skills: Despite some professional development training, many practitioners still have gaps in their knowledge and skills related to RtI procedures (Burdette, 2007). Unsure about how to implement progress-monitoring and unclear about the differences between screening and progress monitoring, as well as other forms of assessment, and how to use assessment information to determine who should receive secondary interventions and what these interventions should be, practitioners need help. They need to know how to calculate

students' rate of growth, apply a dual discrepancy model for identifying students for interventions, and how to use a data management system. They need skills to address the majority of a class (not just a few students) that seems not to be progressing and how to qualify students for secondary interventions.

5.) Systemic issues: Systemic change is challenging for many reasons. Some practitioners would prefer to continue with "business as usual," and may ask, "What are we already doing we can say is RtI?" Practitioners may be confused about how RtI will impact other SPED and GENED reform efforts, concerned that hard won gains will be lost once students are pulled for intensive Tier 2 or 3 interventions. Sustained implementation of RtI will require strong leadership and an established infrastructure (Burdette, 2007). Yet, at the federal, state and local levels, GENED administrators are focused on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, which does not reference RtI, whereas SPED administrators are focused on IDEA requirements and reducing disproportionality (Burdette, 2007).

To conclude, RtI promises to address many current problems in identification and education of learners with learning and behavioral challenges. Nevertheless, many issues and challenges are still unresolved including the degree to which the policy makers and the field of special education share a common resolve to implement RTI as a transformative agenda. Further, since RTI as a transformative policy requires that education reformers in general understand and align behind the implications of a response to intervention approach that places great responsibility on a complex set of practices in general education. Beyond agreeing in principle to these changes, the redistribution of resources in the form of personnel and professional knowledge is critical.

Transforming or Tinkering?

- RTI is a systemic response to structural and equity issues within special education

Context Matters:

- Those structural and equity issues are embedded within larger sociocultural, political, and economic issues that have historic origins but play out currently in a variety of attempts to reform schooling.

Selling Change:

- Marketing approaches to "selling" RTI are doomed to failure because they don't account for the deeply ingrained cultural practices that inform local implementation.

The Silk or the Slick Road?

- Best understood by examining the ways in which macro policies instituted at the federal level travel to the local level.
  - The journey is not linear
  - Interpreters along the way alter the messages
  - Political advantages – power and privilege
  - Opportunity Knocks: Researchers, Consultants, Universities, State and Local Policy Makers

    Formal, Nested Organizational Structures

    - Roles of Federal Agencies
      - Technical Assistance Providers
      - Research Arms

- Role of State Agencies
- Role of Universities and NGOs
- Role of Local Education Agencies
- Role of Professions
- Role of Families
- Involvement of Students

- Receivers and Resisters – Practitioners and Families
- Forms of Capital

Economic, Cultural, Intellectual

Who has it and who doesn't

Tensions

- Compliance vs Continuous Improvement Models
- Importance of Research and Inquiry to inform policy and the distribution of resources
- The danger of data aggregation systems

Leadership for Equity and Transformation

- Distributive
- Evidenced
- Voiced
- Technical, Contextual, and Critical

Technical	Raise student achievement	Improve school structures	Recenter and enhancing staff capacity	Strengthen school culture and community.
Contextual	Sees all data through a lens of equity.	Ends segregated and pull-out programs that prohibit both emotional and academic success for marginalized children. Knows that building community and differentiation are tools to ensure that all students achieve success together.	Strengthens core teaching and curriculum and insures that diverse students have access to that core. Seeks out other activist administrators who can and will sustain her or him	Embeds professional development in collaborative structures and a context that tries to make sense of race, class, gender, and disability. Becomes intertwined with the life, community, and soul of the school. (p. 252)
Critical	Knows that school cannot be great until the students with the greatest struggles are given the same rich opportunities both academically and socially as their more privileged peers.		Demands that every child will be successful but collaboratively addresses the problems of how to achieve that success.	Places significant value on diversity, deeply learns about and understands that diversity, and extends cultural respect.

(1) *RtI is an activity system nested within a larger system of influences and practices*. Thus, RtI is designed, implemented, and evaluated as part of comprehensive school improvement academic and behavioral efforts. (2) *RtI focuses explicitly on the diversity of the student*

population. The design and implementation of RtI is adapted to respond to the diverse academic and behavioral needs of students from all backgrounds. Thus, RtI models must gather impact evidence across subgroups of students across racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups as well as on placement patterns in SPED; (3) *Because of the distance between RtI models in research and school practices, impact is assessed at multiple levels*. The goals and shape of RtI models will look different at the national, regional, state, and LEA levels. For this purpose, impact is assessed at multiple levels through myriad means; (4) *RtI is context sensitive*. A deep understanding of RtI models is obtained through the examination of local demands and needs as well as the investments that LEAs and SEAs are making for system and school improvement purposes; (5) *RtI technical assistance is responsive to the interplay among people, policy, and practices*. Attention to these three aspects demands that TA activities focus on the interactions between policy implementation, systems' capacity to engage in data-based decision making, professional learning needs, capacity to understand and use research knowledge, and effective use of networking and dissemination for systems improvement efforts. (6) *RtI technical assistance makes effective use of resources through targeted efforts of varying intensity*. NCRISS will target all states and territories in the nation with a wide net of TA periodic activities. Through the application of systematic criteria, more intensive kinds of TA activities will be provided to SEAs and LEAs depending on the nature and magnitude of their needs. (7) *RtI is mindful of validity considerations, particularly consequential validity*. In addition to the traditional attention to validity, we use Messick's notion of consequential validity to gauge the *(un)intended* consequences of RTI models. This is a neglected key aspect in the RtI research and policy literatures.

Second, systems change will result because NCRISS will rely on multilevel (SEA, LEA, school) networks to promote professional learning related to a systemic vision of RtI. The objectives and activities to promote these changes are based on state of the art research based principles of professional learning. The most complex dimension of professional learning is reaching the right audiences at the right times. In one of the most extensive studies of knowledge diffusion, Rogers (1995) found three important elements. First, for knowledge to spread there must be experts able to demonstrate practice in real life settings. Second, a network of highly regarded and respected practitioners must promote and engage in the new practices. Third, the communities in which practitioners work, must value and support innovation and improvement. NCRISS has incorporated all three diffusion strategies in its work. Fourteen school systems representing over 1 million students have agreed to support us as test drivers for our materials, as early adopters to examine the implementation effects of RtI, and as networkers to other systems across the country (see Agreements). These districts represent only a sample of the school networks that NCRISS will tap through PBIS, NIUSI, Juniper Gardens, NEA, and NASP. In addition, we are partnered with some of the largest professional education organizations in the U.S. including the NEA (2.8 million), the AFT (1.3 million), NAPSO (1 million), and CEC (43,000) (see Appendix B for letters from organizations and technical assistance networks).

Summary: The Leadership for Systemic Change that We Need

- The leadership and inquiry that we need

References

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