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Within all classrooms of public schools, teachers greet general education students acknowledging broad differences in their learning readiness and social skills (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010; Martin, 2010). The needs of some students may be so diverse that educators find implementing differentiated instructional strategies with integrity extremely difficult. Many individually research-based strategies have been implemented to provide helpful instruction to all learners. This paper presents the concept of a merger between two of these strategies: Response to Intervention (RTI) and grade retention. As a result, the conceptual framework for this manuscript is anchored within the RTI and grade retention literatures, highlighting their reported effectiveness on student outcomes.

RTI can be implemented in any public school system or building (Baker, Fien, & Baker, 2010; Harlacher, Walker-Nelson, & Sanford, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). Grounded in general education and federal laws, RTI seeks primarily to support students who are struggling with reading and math; catching and helping these children in the early grades. RTI's systematic and preventive orientation toward identifying students who are at risk encourages teachers and administrators to shift their thinking from the "wait to fail" model currently in use, to a more proactive, formative, and positive approach to learning.

Conversely, grade retention is a summative decision, typically initiated by the school site or required by policy or statute (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008; Greene & Winters, 2006; Penfield, 2010) with lasting consequences (Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011). Conceptually, grade retention is used because practitioners believe low performing students need more time to mature (Biegler, 2000; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Range, Yonke, & Young, 2011) and should not be socially promoted (Brophy, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2011). Others speculate the application of grade retention ensures low performing students do not progress which might make instruction easier because classrooms would be more homogeneous (Ehmke, Drechsel, & Carstensen, 2010).

Both RTI and grade retention are interventions used to help underperforming students meet proficiency standards and as a result, they are connected. Yet little literature attempts to determine how grade retention fits into the intervention framework laid out by RTI (Rogers, 2010). There is a need to consider how these two interventions fit with one another. In sum, this paper puts forth the proposition that RTI, when implemented with fidelity, may diminish or lessen the need for grade retention.

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Response to Intervention

The current growth of RTI has its roots in public policy and federal laws (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), 2004; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2002). The overall concept within these policies and laws encouraged the joining of general and special education. Instead of continuing to approach them as two separate systems, RTI addressed a process for general and special education to work together (Wedl, 2005). A second concept within these policies and laws continued the recommendation from IDEIA (2004) that reliance on the IQ test as a qualified indicator of a learning disability needed to be replaced (Wedl, 2005). The requirements of *significant discrepancy* were changed to offer states an alternative to IQ testing utilizing instead the process of RTI. These changes were promoted to develop a more systematic screening process and provide support to students with learning disabilities (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). Due to flexibility in implementation, the framework for RTI is modified from school-to-school due to variances in cultures, student demographics, and school personnel (Ehren, Ehren, & Proly, 2009; Mellard, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010).

RTI begins in the general classroom environment with the practice of assessment and then offers specific interventions for individual students. These interventions will look very different in each school. The most common list of consistent RTI principles includes: (a) research based instruction, (b) fidelity of implementation, (c) universal screenings, (d) multi-tier levels of interventions, and (e) progress monitoring (Dorn, n.d.; Pearce, 2009; Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). There are numerous variables which can lead to increased instructional intensity such as the amount of time for instruction, how often instruction is given each day, how quickly feedback is given to students, differences in requirements to achieve mastery, and requirements for mastery at each level.

The most notable characteristic of RTI is its foundation within general education as a tiered process of interventions (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Harlacher et al., 2010). Three tiers is the most common number but some RTI designs include up to eight tiers (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Fuchs et al. 2010; Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009). Briefly, as students move through the tiers, the interventions provided become more individualized, specific to the needs of each student, and time intensive (Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

Tier 1, or universal interventions, are implemented school-wide within the general education classroom and all students receive this instruction (Pavri, 2010). For example, routines such as differentiated instruction, high-order thinking activities, cooperative learning, and assertive discipline are common Tier 1 interventions. Typically, 80-90% of students in Tier 1 receive the appropriate instructional and behavioral interventions and do not move on to Tier 2 (Fuchs et al., 2010; Pearce, 2009).

Tier 2 is often referred to as providing targeted interventions; these interventions are more specifically concentrated for students than those in Tier 1 (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). Tier 2 interventions are designed to supplement the core program and are typically administered within the general education classroom (Ehren et al., 2009). Five to 10% of students in Tier 2 receive the appropriate intervention and do not move to Tier 3.

Tier 3 interventions, which are the most intense, are instructional strategies that are highly individualized and time consuming (Sailor, 2009). Approximately 1 to 5% of students require Tier 3 instruction (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008) such as intense small group tutoring or one-on-one instruction. Some schools place the process of referral for special education in Tier 3; other schools place special education after Tier 3 (Fuchs et al., 2010; Pearce, 2009; Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008).

Throughout the literature on RTI, there is a tremendous amount of emphasis concerning the importance of fidelity of implementation (Ehren et al., 2009; Mellard & Johnson, 2008; Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008; Sailor, 2009). Fidelity refers to the ability of educators to remain consistent in the implementation of RTI from classroom to classroom (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). This concept is critical because, as with any educational reform model, change can create fear and as a result, RTI implementation can be misapplied (Sailor, 2009; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). Most importantly, fidelity ensures that effective RTI interventions are the authentic source of student progress (Harlacher et al., 2010).

Effectiveness of RTI

RTI has been described as a promising endeavor that has created an opportunity for schools to expand support models to assist struggling students (Pavri, 2010; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008; Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010). Moreover, some researchers argue that RTI has replaced the need for educators to rely so heavily upon remedial and special education (Simmons et al., 2008). According to Dorn (n.d.), RTI is the primary method by which students can be helped before they are referred for special education. This identification starts once students enter kindergarten, where developmental and social needs are diverse (Fuchs et al., 2010).

The primary mode of measuring RTI effectiveness is by conducting frequent observations and consistent data collection from those observations. However, Ehren et al. (2009), questioned whether school administrators could identify the breadth of implementation by observations alone. Therefore, the logical place to determine the effectiveness of RTI is to study the performance of students within Tiers 2 and 3 of the model. Relevant research describing the effectiveness of the RTI process at the elementary and secondary levels is briefly addressed.

Effectiveness in elementary. Because one of the aims of RTI is early identification, most of the published literature describes the RTI process at the elementary level (Sansosti et al., 2010). In sum, this research base has reported positive trends. For example, Simmons et al. (2008) found that RTI interventions significantly increased the reading achievement of 41 kindergarten students over a four year period. Specifically, these students received repeated bouts of intense, small group instruction throughout the extended study. Furthermore, the authors concluded not only did RTI interventions move students to reading proficiency levels, but also supported them in maintaining that status.

In two related studies, Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) and Duhon, Mesmer, Atkins, Greguson, and Olinger (2009), explored both the intensity and breadth of interventions within the RTI framework (Harlacher et al., 2010). Wanzek and Vaughn focused on

interventions applied after students had already been provided previous Tier 2 interventions and found students who received double dosed interventions did not perform significantly better than those who received a single dose intervention. However, students within the treatment group who received some sort of tiered intervention showed larger gains in reading achievement than those in the control group. In a similar study, Duhon et al. (2010) attempted to determine if varying intervention intensities impacted the math skills of at-risk students. Initially, all students received the same intervention once per day and interventions were increased up to five times a day for students who were initially non-responsive. Results of the study found that increased frequency of interventions led to "improved functioning of the entire group" (p. 114).

Finally, O'Conner, Fulmer and Harty (2003) and Koutsoftas, Harmon, and Gray (2009) sought to uncover the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 interventions on the reading performance of elementary students. O'Conner et al. (2003) focused solely on the effectiveness of Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions on the reading achievement of 92 Kindergarten through second grade students and found that tiered interventions increased the reading achievement of students and also reduced rates of special education identification. Koutsoftas et al. (2009) studied Tier 2 interventions on the phonemic awareness of 34 pre-school students. Results showed that 71% of students benefited from Tier 2 interventions, remained in the general education classroom, and were able to progress to benchmark level.

Effectiveness in secondary. Limited research exists describing the effective implementation of RTI at the secondary level, especially at the high school (Duffy, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2010). Brozo (2010) argued that RTI implementation at the secondary level is more challenging because students have difficulties with content driven text. These difficulties have little to do with remedial reading problems or learning disabilities, and more to do with content vocabulary instruction.

Moreover, Fuchs et al. (2010) stated that the theory behind RTI is based on presumptions which are more ambiguous at the secondary level. Specifically, a universal screening instrument that measures the complexities of literacy at the middle and high school levels has yet to be produced (Duffy, 2007). Despite these barriers to implementation, Duffy (2007) stressed the importance of RTI at the secondary level because students who arrive in secondary settings with learning problems have less time to catch up to grade level peers. Fuchs et al. (2010) argued that parts of RTI could be modified at the middle and high school levels. For example, because RTI at the secondary level is more concerned with eliminating academic deficits quickly, the need for universal screenings is not vital. As a result, secondary students who are considered at-risk during their first year in middle or high school should be moved immediately to Tier 2 and 3 interventions (Fuchs et al. 2010).

Vaughn et al. (2010) reported on the success of RTI at the secondary level and followed the reading achievement of 241 middle school students supported by Tier 2 interventions. These Tier 2 interventions were year-long and were administered by trained tutors in groups of 10-15 students for 50 minutes each school day. In sum, gains in reading achievement were positive, but small. Vaughn et al. (2010) attributed these findings by

utilizing a large sample which might have skewed effect size and variances in both the fidelity of interventions and instruction.

Grade Retention

Grade retention, the practice of requiring students to repeat a grade, is a prominent debate in early childhood education (Biegler, 2000; Lorence, Dworkin, Toenjes, & Hill, 2002; Penfield, 2010; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008, 2010) because educators and policymakers believe retaining students in grades earlier, rather than later, is best for their academic, social, and emotional well-being (Abbott, Wills, Greenwood, Kamps, Powell-Heitzman, & Selig, 2010; Eide & Showalter, 2001; Range et al., 2011b; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Similar to RTI, both policy and legislation fuel the argument for grade retention (Bowman-Perrott, 2010; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; NCLB, 2002) which have blamed lack of rigor as the primary reason for student underperformance within US schools (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009). In response to this scrutiny, some states (Florida, Missouri, Texas) and school districts (Chicago, New York City) have adopted retention standards as proof of increased student accountability (Greene & Winters, 2004, 2007, 2009; McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009; Range, 2009; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) predicted that by 2007, about 10% of students in kindergarten through eighth grade had been retained at one time. Yet, a closer look at these retention numbers shows that its administration exhibits gender, cultural, and socioeconomic bias. For example, a greater percentage of male and African American students are retained and the majority of retained students come from poverty (Bowman-Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010; Haberman & Dill, 1993; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; NCES, 2009; Willson & Hughes, 2006).

Despite these findings, K-12 practitioners, policy makers, and the public at large believe retention benefits immature students by providing more time to learn (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Chen, Chengfang, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Penfield, 2010; Range et al. 2011b; Xia & Kirby, 2009) and reduces the skill variance between students (Xia & Glennie, 2005). These beliefs do not align with the majority of research findings (Bonvin et al. 2008) concerning the effectiveness of grade retention and Witmer, Hoffman, and Nottis (2004) described this gap between research and practice by stating, "teachers alter their personal beliefs [about retention] based primarily on their own experiences or through shared experiences of their colleagues rather than through the acquisition of knowledge derived from current research" (p. 186).

Literature on retention focuses on retention's impact on both short term and long term outcomes for students and is either designed in a *same-grade* or *same-age* format. A *same-grade* design compares the performance of retained students, although now older due to retention; with the performance of students who are in the same grade (Ehmke et al., 2010). The results of such studies might be skewed because retained students are receiving instruction for a second time. *Same-age* retention studies compare retained students to promoted peers and provide a description of how the achievement between the two groups differs (Ehmke et al., 2010). Yet, this design does not take into

consideration the fact that promoted peers might perform better because they have access to more difficult curriculum.

Regardless of design, many studies are speculative because of extraneous variables which are difficult for researchers to control (Wu et al., 2008). The main flaw in retention research is making causal inferences without randomized experimental design (Greene & Winters, 2011) which forces researchers to attempt to control for pre-existing, extraneous variables (Allen et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2010). Additionally, because some occurrences of grade retention are initiated by teachers' recommendations as opposed to policy, the reader is not explicitly told how retained students differed from promoted students making it difficult to predict whether their future struggles in school are caused by grade retention or other variables (Greene & Winters, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011). To alleviate this problem, Greene and Winters (2006) recommend objective standards, discussed previously, as a way to differentiate who and who should not be retained. Such standards "might significantly change the effects of retention in ways that previous research could not anticipate or measure" (Greene & Winters, 2006, p. 67).

Retention and Student Outcomes

Critics argue that student outcomes as a result of grade retention are compellingly negative (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson et al., 2006; Siberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). For example, Martin (2010) found that grade retention negatively impacted the academic self-concept of students, homework completion of students, motivation of students, and increased students school absences. The most prevalent negative outcome associated with grade retention is its connection to dropping out of school (Jimerson, 2001; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004).

However, researchers have challenged the creditability of retention studies that report negative outcomes based on methodological limitations (Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010) and retention's positive impact on student outcomes in US schools (Greene & Winters, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; Lorence et al., 2002; McCombs et al., 2009; Southard & May, 1996; Wu et al., 2010) and internationally (Ehmke et al., 2010; Bonvin et al., 2008) can be found within the literature.

Retention Based on State Mandates

To remove teacher bias from retention decision making, some states and school districts have adopted promotion policies based on performance on a standardized reading test. Both Florida and Texas banned social promotion by requiring all third grade students to pass the state's reading test before they moved on to fourth grade, clearly holding parents and students accountable for learning (Ladner & Burke, 2010).

Florida. Greene and Winters (2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011) explored the impact of retention on student performance one and two years after Florida students were retained and found positive academic increases in student achievement the year after retention and substantial increases in gains the second year (Greene & Winters, 2007). In fact, Ladner and Burke (2010) concluded that "retained students learned how to read, while the [low performing] promoted students continued to fall behind" (p. 12). However, Chatterji

(2010) disputed these findings and stated Ladner and Burke (2010) did not account for over-age grade repeaters and did nothing to provide information on how the policy impacted students over time. Additionally, Briggs (2006) argued the Greene and Winters (2006) analysis did not account for other interventions, like summer school, that were applied to students before they were retained.

Texas. Lorence et al. (2002) found that Texas third grade students who had low reading scores and were retained, increased their scores about 18 points when they retook the reading assessment a year later. Similarly, Lorence and Dworkin (2006) found that socially promoted pupils reading scores were worse than retained students and Hughes et al. (2010) concluded that students who were retained in first grade were more likely to pass the third grade reading and math tests than similar, low performing but promoted peers. Wu et al. (2010) found retained students benefitted from grade retention due to decreased teacher rated hyperactivity, decreased peer-rated sadness, and increased teacher rated student engagement. Conversely, Wu et al. (2008) matched retained Texas students with low-performing promoted peers and compared their growth on mathematics and reading scores and found grade retention had a negative impact on mathematics scores but had no impact on reading scores two years after the retention year.

Retention Based on School District Mandates

Following the lead of some states, individual school districts have also implemented promotion policies based on student performance on standardized tests (Ou & Reynolds, 2010; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). The policies are typical in large urban school systems, like Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles and are initiated because administrators are faced with the issue of "how to motivate teachers and students to set high expectations while dealing with the problem of persistent poor student performance" (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005, p. 310).

Chicago Public Schools. Jacob and Lefgren (2002) concluded grade retention had positive academic impacts on Chicago students' math and reading at the third grade and found summer school and grade retention increased student achievement by 20%. After the second year, the effect was not as large but was still significant, yet findings for sixth grade students were not significant for any year analyzed. Jacob and Lefgren (2002) found evidence "that summer school and grade retention have a modest but positive net impact on student achievement scores for third grade students" (p. 27). Additionally, Jacob and Lefgren (2007) concluded grade retention in the sixth grade had little effect on the probability of dropping out of school, yet eighth grade retention did increase the risk of dropping out.

Yet, Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) did not concur with these positive findings and found retention in third grade did not increase the reading achievement for students two years after retention and sixth grade retentions were associated with decreased reading achievement. Additionally, because of the policy, the authors reported that teachers, frustrated with the fact they had perpetually low performing students with little plan for remediation, turned to special education for help. In sum, Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) stated that in order to get around the retention policy, more students qualified for special education than in the past.

New York City Public Schools. McCombs et al. (2009) reported on the impact of a fifth grade mandatory retention policy on student academic and socio-emotional outcomes and found that retained students' performance the subsequent year improved drastically in pass rates on the promotion test and proficiency levels. Most importantly, proficiency rates on the state test continued to increase in sixth and seventh grades and students who had been retained out performed promoted students in their cohort on the same-grade assessment. Additionally, the emotional well-being of retained students was not negatively impacted by retention, even four years after the retention year.

Los Angeles Unified School District. Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) found that mandatory retention in the Los Angeles public schools benefited both first and second grade students concerning reading skills on the California Standards Tests. Specifically, retained first grade students scored 64% higher the second year and retained second grade students were more likely to be proficient on the state test and retained second grade students were more likely to be proficient on the third grade state assessment. Additionally, retention aided students from various sub-groups (minority and low income) in becoming proficient.

RTI and Grade Retention Link

When educators encounter students who are underperforming, they are faced with a choice of either applying interventions to build their skills or retain them in grade (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Research has shown that retention is detrimental to a host of student outcomes (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Martin, 2009, 2010), yet scholars argue that some of these studies do not provide a clear view of its effectiveness because of faulty research designs. Although many studies highlight the short term benefits associated with retention, the primary rebuttal to these positive findings is that student performance is not tracked longitudinally making short-term gains only a temporary solution for student performance (Briggs, 2010; Chatterji, 2010). As a result, it is important to understand how grade retention fits within the context of RTI.

Limited research has been conducted attempting to link RTI and grade retention (Rogers, 2010). Haught (2007) found little relationship between the frequency of students retained in kindergarten through third grade before and after the implementation of RTI. In a significant study, Murray, Woodruff, and Vaughn (2010) found that retention rates of first grade students decreased by 47% after the implementation of RTI. Additionally, Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, and Swank (1999) and Hartman and Fay (1996) found that Instructional Support Teams (IST), a process similar to RTI, reduced the number of students who were retained.

Bowman-Perrott (2010, p. 1) argued that early intervention, the kind "that is focused, intensive, and implemented by knowledgeable, skilled practitioners" is the key to preventing grade retention. It seems plausible to view grade retention, the most extreme intervention that can be applied to struggling students, as the last resort intervention (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Research has shown that once students are retained, the intensity and duration of interventions provided are too weak to remediate student learning, therefore "it is the responsibility of school administrators to provide some type of system [e.g. 3-tier] by which to move students into appropriate instructional

placement" (Abbott et al. 2010, p. 22). Based on this evidence, if schools would implement a more proactive, tiered intervention approach with fidelity, like RTI, the need to administer grade retention should be diminished (Bowman-Perrott, 2010).

Strategies for School Leadership

The most effective strategy for a successful RTI program is to involve the administration often and early in the process. Strong administrators can be invaluable in order for RTI to be implemented with consistency and collaboration. Further, building administrators are essential to providing leadership which supports RTI (Consistency and collaboration, 2010); in short, building administrators must support and be involved if RTI is to work (Batsche, n.d; Harlacher et al., 2010; Johnston, 2010; Mellard et al., 2010; Response to Intervention – Idaho, 2009; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008; Sansosti et al., 2010). To further highlight the role of administrators in the importance of RTI, numerous educational administrators contributed to a list of Six Strategies for Effective RTI Leadership:

1. Have a vision – a vision is a bridge from the present to the future.
2. Be unexpected – take actions that are unexpected. For example, personalize communication about struggling readers and follow up with team members.
3. Be concrete – advocate for RTI. Leaders need to be perceived as working consciously and consistently on behalf of struggling students.
4. Be credible – promote situational interest and commitment to students by honoring all data at the RTI table. Carefully analyze how and why interventions are working or not working.
5. Encourage emotions – feelings inspire people to act. Emotional discussions encourage RTI team members to view struggling reading as humans (as opposed to numbers on tables or trend lines).
6. Share stories – invite discussions that bring a wide range of data to the table (Consistency and collaboration, 2010, p. 37).

Once school leadership teams make the decision to adopt RTI, they need to establish how their philosophical view of grade retention fits within the school's RTI framework. This begins by connecting the school's philosophical view about retention to the district's or state's stance. Is grade retention mandated, and if so, at what grade level(s)? Are grade level promotion gates established by board policy or state statute? Once this connection is made, school leadership teams need to also answer:

1. How does grade retention fit within the RTI tiered intervention system? Is it a Tier 3 intervention or is it completely separate from the tiers?
2. Who initiates grade retention recommendations? Is it a single individual’s decision or does the RTI team make the decision?
3. What specific interventions made the most impact on a struggling student’s academic outcomes? Should these interventions be delivered with more intensity and duration to keep the student from being retained?
4. What data should be collected to determine if a student will be retained?

5. If a student is retained, how can schools ensure they are prepared to give him/her a different educational experience (Allen et al., 2009)?

Conclusion

Both RTI and grade retention are interventions utilized to aide low performing students in meeting proficiency standards. RTI, the more proactive approach, makes more sense in light of the mixed research findings behind grade retention, the more summative approach. In short, returning retained students to the same environment in which they struggled the first time sets them up for failure once again (Abbott et al., 2010). Early screening and prevention using a tiered intervention system is the best answer to providing struggling students with better quality instruction. Hopefully, as RTI continues to expand and practitioners understand its value, the need for grade retention should be lessened (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2010). Most importantly, teachers and administrators must advocate for policies that expand tiered intervention services, like RTI, as opposed to policies that mandate grade retention (Murray et al., 2010).

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