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RTI Framework: Big Issues and Guiding Questions for Supporting Student Success

by Laura Buck, Danielle Frimenko, Cynthia Richardson,
and Rachel Ward

As teachers in today's classrooms, we recognize that response to intervention (RTI) is the up-and-coming structure for helping struggling students find academic success. The four of us all teach in vastly different settings and have had different experiences related to RTI. As we began to locate research about RTI we discussed our experiences and impressions of the RTI framework. What follows is a transcript of an audio recording we made as a part of our ongoing conversation about RTI.

Laura: RTI can be very confusing. Teachers and interventionists are not always sure which students enter the process. Some students are in the RTI process, and then some aren't that should be. What are your experiences?

Danielle: I know that RTI is a general education initiative, but I'm wondering how it fits with the special education identification process.

Laura: Right, as of now, it's not being used as the identification process.

Cyndi: Well, in respect to RTI, I feel that my role is not completely defined. I implement several interventions with students who struggle. Is there more I should be doing?

Rachel: Are you documenting and monitoring their progress?

Cyndi: I do running records at least once every two weeks.

Rachel: That sounds like RTI. If RTI was implemented in my building, who would train

us? We don't have interventionists or a literacy specialist. Did any of you receive RTI training?

Laura: Some discussion of RTI has occurred at staff meetings. The special education staff works with the interventionists, but the general education teachers are only involved when there is a specific student's progress being discussed.

Cyndi: I received differentiation training, which is geared toward intervention, but not PD that is specific to RTI.

Danielle: Intervention training is so critical, but I have not had training in RTI at all. The schools see it as something that's coming, but it's not implemented yet. We read about RTI and hear that it will be of benefit to students, but in the field, is it truly being done correctly?

Our conversation revealed the following big issues in RTI:

1. There is confusion regarding using RTI as the process for determining specific learning disabilities.
2. Clearly defined roles need to be established to promote collaboration among team members.
3. Progress monitoring is not consistent at the different tiers of intervention.
4. Ongoing professional development is vital for each team member involved in RTI.

These issues affect the successful implementation of RTI. School administrators who are currently implementing or planning to implement the RTI framework can support student success by structuring the implementation in ways that increase collaboration among staff at all levels. Other best practices include having a clear vision for the purpose of RTI, using consistent assessment practices at all levels, and providing professional development. Throughout this article, we provide sets of guiding questions that administrators and teachers could use to structure their dialogue about effectively implementing RTI.

Using the RTI Process

Response to intervention (RTI) is intended to identify and address the needs of struggling learners and to provide effective academic instruction and intervention support for students who are not meeting growth benchmarks. A 2009 national survey of special education administrators reported by Denton, et al. (2010) indicated that 71% of school administrators responding were implementing RTI models in their districts.

It is generally accepted that RTI models include the following features: a) universal screening of all student; b) multiple tiers of intervention; and c) monitoring of student progress with data collection to make informed decisions about student instruction at each tier of intervention. Many models also include a team-based, problem-solving approach to decision making (Rinaldi, 2010, p. 43). However, the U.S. Department of Education (2009) recognizes that there are many approaches to RTI and does not endorse any one particular approach. Therefore, confusion exists regarding the use of RTI as the process for determining eligibility for special education and, in particular, for determining whether a child who does not demonstrate progress with RTI presents a specific learning disability or is eligible for special education under some other category of disability.

Historically, a student referred for special education was administered aptitude and achievement tests, and the results of these tests were used to indicate or rule out the presence of a learning disability. Previous methods for determining the presence of a learning disability include the discrepancy model and the pattern of strengths and weaknesses model. Berkeley, Bender, Peaster and Saunders (2009) note that, while these models were criticized for their lack of consistency, RTI seems to be heading for a similar fate, as “it is unclear how consistency between states, districts, schools, and even grade levels will be obtained” (p. 94). Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) noted that the relative effectiveness of the two approaches—RTI *versus* traditional psychometric—for identification for special education has not been studied within an experimental design. This lack of clarity leaves some schools implementing an RTI model, then turning to traditional testing to qualify for special education those students who do not respond to intervention. Denton and colleagues (2010) note that more research is needed to determine how to validly measure RTI gains in students and found that “application of differing RTI criteria identify different populations of students as having adequate intervention response” (p. 412).

Guiding Questions: RTI Process

- A. What does the IEP form used by the district indicate as criteria for qualifying a student for special education? As learning disabled?
- B. Are research-based interventions being implemented at each tier of the RTI process?
- C. Are sufficient data kept at each tier of RTI to make informed decisions about the students’ progress?
- D. Who is involved in the decision-making process? Are special education professionals from a variety of disciplines (speech/language, occupational therapy, social work, etc.) involved?

- E. What is the minimum and maximum amount of time a student will spend at each tier? What will determine whether a student exits the intervention program?
- F. What will happen to a student with adequate progress who exits the intervention and is unable to maintain the requisite skills in the regular classroom?

Roles of the Team

There is often confusion among educators in schools that use the RTI model as to what the roles are of each educator. Does it solely rely on the special education teacher? Is the general education teacher only responsible for tier 1? Is the support staff responsible for working with students in small groups? Many educators may have these or similar questions in mind when considering the RTI model.

The RTI framework suggests that all educators be encouraged to be involved in a successful RTI program. This includes general education teachers, Title 1 teachers, literacy specialists, special education teachers, and teacher support staff. The Council for Exceptional Children position statement on Response to Intervention approaches states that RTI must be viewed as a school-wide initiative, with special education as an explicit part of the framework... to identify and address the academic and behavioral needs of the learner” (Denton et al., 2010, p.394). General education teachers need to be on board to provide early interventions to the at-risk students. Special education teachers and/or Title 1 teachers need to be ready to aid the general education teachers with extra interventions and options when students do not respond to initial interventions. Literacy specialists need to be available for coaching the teachers in their interventions. If all members work as a team, the RTI process can be successful.

There is a strong emphasis on teacher collaboration in RTI today. In Shepherd & Salembier

(2010), Liz Black, principal of an elementary school where RTI was implemented, commented on the power of having general and special education teachers working so closely during literacy block, noting that their collaborative efforts help them to “blur their roles to create unified systems... The benchmarking and progress monitoring keep people looking at all kids and provide a starting point through which they can work together to provide additional supports that kids need to meet standards” (p.42). Successful RTI programs set roles for each team member, but encourage continuous collaboration to better support the teachers in providing strong interventions.

Effective RTI interventions start with clearly defined roles and continuous collaboration among all team members. Weekly or monthly team meetings with scheduled time set aside for collaboration can be useful to all members. Sharing data and intervention methods will help everyone stay informed and unified. Everyone should feel comfortable enough with his/her role to be able to share and receive feedback on the practices used.

Guiding Questions: Roles of the Team

- A. Which educators need to be involved?
- B. What are the responsibilities of each team member?
- C. How frequently and for how long will the team meet to collaborate?
- D. What is the process for sharing data?

Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is a main component of the RTI approach. Most programs currently in place agree that all students should be universally screened three times a year—in the fall, winter, and spring. This universal screening is used for

determining who needs further intervention through RTI support in tier 2. It is unclear and undetermined which students qualify for the extra support (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster & Saunders, 2009). Qualification could be based on areas of deficit such as comprehension, fluency or decoding. Or, it could be based on how far below the grade-level benchmark the student falls. Since districts and schools are using different assessments and approaches to universal screening and progress monitoring; a student who would receive extra RTI support in one building, may not receive it in a different school, even within the same district.

Once students enter the second tier of RTI, progress monitoring needs to occur to check how they are responding to the intervention they are receiving. Some schools and districts require students in tier 2 to be monitored monthly, while others require monitoring every other week or even every week. Documentation of progress monitoring varies among districts, schools, and even classrooms. Accountability measures are not in place for many programs, as well. Assessment cannot overtake the program. According to Shepherd and Salembier (2010), “Some teachers were concerned that the amount of time devoted to assessment activities might be detracting from, rather than contributing to, instruction” (p. 45). Teachers need to keep in mind that the goal of RTI is to give intervening instruction to students, not add extra assessments.

Whether progress monitoring assessments are a simple running record or curriculum-based assessments, it is vital that teachers and interventionists use the results to guide their instruction. Orosco and Klinger (2010) found that when assessment and instruction were misaligned, students’ instructional needs were not met. Teachers must utilize the information gained through progress monitoring to figure out areas of student need and tailor instruction to build up these areas. Shepherd and Salembier (2010) found that when assessment and classroom instruction were linked together, teaching became “more inten-

tional, purposeful and thorough” (p. 41). Liz Black noted, “Kids’ lack of progress is an instructional problem, not a kid problem” (p. 41).

Guiding Questions: Progress Monitoring

- A. What will progress monitoring look like at each tier?
- B. What assessments will we use?
- C. How frequently will they be used?
- D. Are they going to be norm referenced, criterion referenced, or teacher made assessments?
- E. How will assessment be linked to instruction?

Professional Development

Educators are expected to provide high-quality instruction, conduct various formal and informal assessments, collect and analyze assessment data, and document interventions during the implementation process of the RTI model. Yet, where do teachers gain the knowledge and confidence to carry out the roles and actions defined in the RTI model? The answer according to Shepherd and Salembier (2010) is that *professional development* is important in order for teachers to develop competence in implementation.

Because of the many elements involved in successfully implementing the RTI model, it is vital for school administrators to provide educators with professional development. Rinaldi, Averill, and Stuart (2010) state that educators implementing RTI need “professional development that focuses on articulation of core curriculum, data collection and analysis, collaborative problem-solving and teaching, intervention development and monitoring, and shared-leadership” (p. 9). School administrators who provide this type of support during the implementation of the RTI model will ensure success of the program.

Most importantly, educators involved in implementing and executing instructional plans for RTI require training and support throughout the entire process. According to Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, and Saunders (2009), professional development is either planned to be provided or already provided in 44 of the 50 states. However, Orosco and Klinger (2010) found that some teachers were inadequately trained in the RTI model and received only 4.5 days of RTI training per year, and were expected to carry out interventions daily. Inconsistency and insufficient professional development will not allow teachers to have a positive effect on student progress in RTI; therefore, it is imperative that professional development be well planned and ongoing.

Guiding Questions: Professional Development

- A. What *pre-service* professional development can we provide in order for educators to understand the principles and elements of RTI?
- B. What type of support do educators need to conduct assessments?
- C. What type of support do educators need to collect and analyze assessment data?
- D. Who is available to coach educators in intervention strategies?
- E. Can we provide individualized professional development in order to differentiate for educators?
- F. What plans do we have to provide educators with *on-going* professional development that will ensure the continuing success of RTI?

Conclusion: Summing It Up

In conclusion, RTI is designed to be a process to support and enhance success for all students. To implement RTI with integrity, some issues need to be addressed. One issue relating to RTI is that

there is a lack of clarity and consistency in using the RTI process for special education consideration. Therefore, school districts need to ensure that research-based interventions are being used at each tier. Also, clear guidelines need to be provided outlining the transition through the different tiers of support. Another major RTI issue includes collaboration among staff members. Ongoing communication among team members is necessary for sharing data and aligning interventions in order to best promote student success. A third issue concerns progress monitoring. Assessment at all levels of RTI needs to be consistent. RTI guidelines need to address the type of assessments, the frequency of administration, and the way in which assessment will be linked to instruction. Lastly, the consistency of professional development is also an issue. Educators need ongoing professional development in order to support the use of assessments, the analysis of assessment data, and the implementation of intervention strategies. The guiding questions provided serve as an outline for structuring RTI in order to appropriately implement the framework by addressing these four issues.

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