
Editor's Note

Response-to-Intervention

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a topic that is becoming one the most confusing and controversial issues for all students with special needs, as well as students with learning disabilities. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) published a summary and a discussion of RTI in an official paper of the NJCLD in June 2005. (see www.lidaamerica.org and *LDA Newsbriefs*, 40 (6) November/December, 2005, and the National Research Center for Learning Disabilities website: <http://www.nrclld.org/research/rti.shtml>)

In this Editors' Note, we are reprinting an answer to a question about RTI written by Doug Fuchs that appeared in the Division for Learning Disabilities of Council for Exceptional Children website: <http://www.teachingld.org/expert.connection/> (Reprinted with permission from www.teachingLD.org. This response also appears on <http://www.LDBlog.org> for October 31, 2006)

What Does Response-to-Intervention Mean for Me?

Question: I have a case load of more than 24 middle school students and I have been doing a lot of inclusion during English, social studies, and math for them. Lately though, most of what I'm hearing about is response-to-intervention teams and plans, which leaves me curious about what role a special education teacher like me will play. What should I know and be ready to do?—Chuck, Washington, DC.

We asked Dr. Douglas Fuchs, a professor at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College and is the co-director of the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, to be our Expert for this question. Dr. Fuchs has contributed to the Division for Learning Disabilities in many ways over the years and TLD appreciates him taking the time to help with this question.—Eds.

Answer: Chuck, I'm not surprised that you've heard a lot about response-to-intervention (RTI). It's been a popular topic in many circles the last few years. There has been a lot said and written about it, and much of what has been said and written is conflicting. Given the ambiguity, I can understand your question about what role you, and other special educators, will play in an RTI context. My Answer: Not much of one. Why? Because RTI has been conceptualized by policymakers in Washington, DC as a general education initiative to be implemented by general educators. This isn't to say that you and other special educators nationwide won't be affected by it. I believe you will be. And for this reason alone, you and your colleagues across the country need to understand as much as you can about it. Before I explain why special educators will not likely play a major role in the RTI process, but will nevertheless be affected by it, I'll provide a brief description.

The RTI process begins with the identification of an at-risk group in each (regular) classroom. This may be accomplished by looking at scores on last year's high-stakes test, or by administering an achievement test or screening measure to everyone in the current school year. Next, at-risk students' performance in the classroom (also known as *Tier 1*) is monitored frequently (e.g., weekly) for 8-10 weeks to determine the degree of their responsiveness to general education instruction. *Unresponsive* children (e.g., those whose rates of growth and levels of performance are below benchmarks appropriate for their grade and subject) are given *Tier 2* instruction. Tier 2 is characterized as more intensive. That is, it may be delivered in small, homogeneous groups; conducted by someone with greater expertise than the teacher in a particular subject or skill (e.g., reading); or occur with greater frequency or duration. Tier 2 instruction may last 10 weeks during which students' performance is again frequently monitored to determine responsiveness. Those found unresponsive to Tiers 1 and 2 either move to a third Tier of more intensive instruction than in Tier 2, or they are evaluated by a multi-disciplinary team for special education eligibility, depending on the RTI model. States like Iowa, whose RTI process involves three increasingly intensive tiers of instruction, are typically non-categorical; students unresponsive across the tiers go directly into special education without formal multi-disciplinary evaluations. In Iowa, such children are given the label *eligible for special education*, rather than *LD*,

MR, or BD.

I've provided this description to make a point. The primary purpose of RTI is to provide general education services to at-risk children who, heretofore, have often fallen between the proverbial cracks in service delivery. In the past, many instructionally-needy children, including many children of color in large, poor, urban districts haven't qualified for additional services, partly because there weren't any, save for special education; and because they didn't show a significant IQ-achievement discrepancy, thereby failing to qualify for special education.

RTI is also meant to be preventive. According to data collected by the Office of Special Education Programs in Washington, the modal age at which school-age children get an *LD* label is 11 years. RTI advocates say with reason that this is too long for at-risk children to wait to get instruction. So, RTI is meant both to offer instructional services to children who previously did not get them and to offer them much sooner than has often been the case. In short, RTI represents an effort to reorient general education toward early intervention; toward a more proactive, rather than reactive, system of service delivery.

To facilitate RTI implementation, policymakers in Washington have rewritten IDEA to permit up to 15% of IDEA monies to be used by general educators. A central assumption is that, by *front-loading* IDEA monies to support more effective and preventive general education instruction in Tiers 1 and 2, there will be fewer students requiring special education. Although such thinking seems logical enough, it is not yet supported by data. What little data exist suggest the opposite may be the case. That is, the number of children placed in special education in Iowa's Heartland Area Education Agency (Intermediate Unit) has increased not decreased since adoption of RTI. This issue needs further scrutiny because if special education budgets are reduced to help pay for general education preventive services—if the number of special educators is reduced—and if numbers of children eventually requiring special education does not diminish, then there would be less resources for the same number of special-needs children. If special education resources are reduced to facilitate Tier 1 and Tier 2 implementation and, as a consequence, the number of special education placements indeed goes down, will the severity of the typical special-needs child become greater? One might expect so if, to qualify, children must be unresponsive to two increasingly intensive instructional tiers. In such a case, will special education require greater resources to serve a smaller number of children? Either way, the *15% rule* has potential for depriving special education of much needed resources. And, at the same time, it offers general educators an opportunity to provide quality preventive services.

As mentioned, Iowa and other states have adopted a non-categorical approach to special education service delivery. In such places, RTI represents a *severe low-achievement* definition of disability; students performing below a specific cut-point in a distribution of achievement scores are disabled; those scoring above are non-disabled. (For this reason, it is misleading to characterize such an RTI as a *new and more valid means of identifying children with Learning Disabilities* as some have said. There are no children with learning disabilities in Iowa.) One practical implication of this operationalization of RTI and of non-categorical service delivery is that resource rooms will be more heterogeneous. Children with mild mental retardation, behavior disorders, and learning disabilities will be grouped together, thereby making it more difficult for talented, hardworking special educators to provide effective instruction. Some special educators may say, *My classes are already heterogeneous!* To which I say, *Then they are likely to become even more so.*

With this in mind, I'd hope that two tiers of RTI will be followed by a strong multi-disciplinary evaluation, which, among other things, attempts to distinguish children with learning disabilities from those with mild mental retardation and behavior disorders.

Finally, in the various descriptions I've read of different RTI models, school psychologists are often named as likely professionals to help with the increased emphasis on student progress monitoring during Tiers 1 and 2; reading teachers are often mentioned as likely support staff to help implement Tier 2 instruction. (In the RTI research to date, reading has been addressed almost exclusively; and early reading-reading at the word level in the primary grades—much more often than more advanced reading for comprehension. How RTI will play in the area of math and in the intermediate elementary grades, in middle school, and in high school, is unclear. Who will do what is still in flux and, when the dust settles, different professionals will likely assume different roles from state to state and district to district.

Suggested Reading

Fuchs, D., Mock, D., Morgan, P.L., & Young, C.L. (2003). Responsiveness-to-intervention: Definitions, evidence, and implications for the learning disabilities construct. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 18*, 157-171.

- Fuchs, L.S., & Fuchs, D. (1998). Treatment validity: A unifying concept for reconceptualizing the identification of learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 13*, 204-219.
- McMaster, K.L., Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L.S., & Compton, D.L. (2005). Responding to nonresponders: An experimental field trial of identification and intervention methods. *Exceptional Children, 71*, 445-463.
- O'Connor, R.E. (2000). Increasing the intensity of intervention in kindergarten and first grade. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 15*, 43-54.
- Vaughn, S., Linan-Thompson, S., & Hickman, P. (2003). Response to instruction as a means of identifying students with reading/learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 69*, 391-409. ([PDF](#))
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Overview of Articles in This Issue

This issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* contains articles on important issues for the field of learning disabilities.

The Relationships between Nonword Spelling Activities of K-3 Teachers and Student Spelling Outcomes by Judith Kosese, Nancy Mathers, & Janice Sammons explores how teachers' spelling abilities relate to student outcomes. The findings suggest that both teacher knowledge of phoneme-grapheme relationships, as well as their own abilities to apply this knowledge influences teaching effectiveness.

Learning from Lectures: The Implications of Note-taking for Students with Learning Disabilities by Joseph Boyle describes how students with learning disabilities lack effective note-taking skills for a variety of reasons. This article familiarizes the reader with research-based note-taking techniques that students can use to improve their learning during lectures.

Comparison of Parents' and Teachers' Perspectives of Children's Behavior: A Study of Attentional Problems in a Natural Setting by Lisa Rappaport reports on an investigation of concordance of reports of hypoactive and distractible behavior from three difference sources: parents, teachers and the child. The study calculated the incidence rate of attentional problems from the three sources.

Effects of Self-Monitoring on Classroom Preparedness Skills of Middle School Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder by Chrissy Creel, Cecil Fore, III, Richard T. Boon, and William N. Bender examined the effects of a self-monitoring procedure to increase classroom preparedness skills of four sixth grade students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The results demonstrated that the self-monitoring intervention increased classroom preparedness for all of the students in the study.

Technology and Young Children by M.E.B. Lewis, Robin Church, and Linda Tsantis reviews how technology can be used in the preschool years. In past generations kindergarten was often the first academic encounter a child had. Now we regard the preschool experience as essential to preparing an academically ready individual. Technology can play an important role in this process.

Richard Lavoie's latest book, *It's So Much Work to Be Your Friend* is reviewed by Bev Johns. This book is for teachers and parents and contains practical information about dealing with children who have social difficulties.

We hope you enjoy reading these timely articles.

Janet W. Lerner
Frank Kline
Co-Editors