



RTI Roundtable - Issue #16

Response to Intervention with Emphasis on Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

By

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Abstract

This paper reviewed the literature on the response to intervention framework with respect to culturally and linguistically diverse students. This discussion begins with a rationale for implementing response to intervention (RTI) as an identification model. Then, it discusses the most important characteristics for teachers to consider when working with diverse learners in order to improve the learning environment for all students. It reviewed literacy research on RTI tiers, including the limitations and outcomes of each model. There is a paucity of research on the implementation of RTI with diverse students, which means fewer outcomes are available regarding producing RTI.

Introduction

Urban school teachers have encountered challenges working with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Correa, McHatton, McCray, & Baughan, 2014). These students come from different cultures, vary in socioeconomic status, and speak different languages. Teachers may not address all the needs students have to succeed in school. So, students may qualify as at risk of failure and then become eligible for response to intervention (RTI). RTI is an approach designed to deliver intervention strategies to limit the amount of academic failure that occurs (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007). Hence, RTI has hope and promise to help students achieve basic goals and success. However, teachers who implement RTI must have high expectations for all students, provide culturally-mediated instruction, reshape curriculum related to students' cultures, and include small-group instruction and cooperative learning (Kashim, Schleich, & Spradlin, 2009). This author also includes the three tiers of RTI and how they are implemented with diverse students. Specifically, the paper addresses importance of using RTI, considerations for teachers working with diverse learners, and how the three tiers can be implemented with diverse students?

Response to Intervention

RTI is a multi-tier approach to scaffolding instruction for a variety of learners that includes high-quality, research-based instruction and continuum student assessments (James Lopez, Wilkins, & Fergus, 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) has the option of discounting the use of IQ-achievement discrepancy formulas and implementing the RTI approach as a part of the special education identification process (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). It seems that RTI assesses over a long period and may provide more reliable results than IQ-achievement tests. Furthermore, RTI models have promise for reducing and preventing student failure by providing intensive support in academia for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Donovas & Cross; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). One of the hopes of RTI is to reduce disproportionate placement of ethnic minority groups in special education, as well as the disproportionate use of expulsion and suspension (Artiles et al., 2010). For instance, African-American students are overrepresented in special education programs, as are other minority groups such as Latino students (Ford, 1998). However, a study that was conducted using RTI in the Minneapolis public schools found that by implementing RTI, there was a positive impact on the disproportion of African-American students in special education over a four-year period, from 1997 to 2001 (Marston et al., 2003). This leads us to consider the diversity of the student population in any educational framework such as RTI. The implementation of RTI has moved from a discussion on providing a free and public education to including wellness intervention support (James et al., 2014). On the other hand, there is a challenge in urban schools to implement RTI. Challenges can include the lack of consistent attention to personnel development for teaching students with a wide range of learning needs, intensity of racial and socioeconomic segregation within the communities and schools, and an annual ebb and flow of resource allocation (James et al., 2014). Thus, it imperative that a framework such as RTI be investigated fully to meet its promises and the needs of a diverse population such as students of lower socioeconomic status and English language learners (Finch, 2012).

Teacher Consideration of Diverse Learners

Urban schools have a variety of populations, including students of color, students with diverse socioeconomic states, and English language learners. Teachers have to consider the diversity of each group culturally and linguistically. Educators should be prepared well and have an awareness of diversity in belief and attitude. There are nine characteristics that culturally responsive teachers possess that impact the classroom environment. The components are as follows: communicating high expectations to all students, using different teaching methods, facilitating learning, having positive perspectives on families of culturally and linguistically diverse students, demonstrating cultural sensitivity, reshaping the curriculum, providing culturally-mediated instruction, promoting student-controlled classroom discourse, and including small-group instruction and cooperative learning (Kashima et al., 2009). In the first component, the school community needs to convey the message to students that all students are able to succeed and be respected (Kashima et al., 2009). The second is to encourage teachers to incorporate instruction in which all students can engage and in which they can play active roles in developing curriculum and learning activities (Kashima et al., 2009). In the third component, teachers should cooperate as guides, mediators, and consultants to their students (Kashima et al., 2009). The fourth characteristic is to open communication between teachers, students, and families (Kashima et al., 2009). The fifth characteristics include increasing teacher awareness of diverse learners, which means that teachers should have a strong sense of the pattern of racial and ethnic identity development (James et al., 2014). In addition, teachers should test their own vision around issues of social justice, race, and students from diverse groups (Mills, 2008). A sixth factor is that teachers should be flexible in modifying the curriculum that meets the needs of diverse learners (Kashima et al., 2009). Another characteristic is to provide instruction to pupils using culturally appropriate social situations for learning, along with culturally valued knowledge in the curriculum (Kashima et al., 2009). Students from diverse populations have unique styles of learning. For instance, most White students are independent learners, while Black or Latino students are dependent learners. Consequently, teachers in urban settings should be aware of and have positive relationships with parents in order to improve the quality of learning. Parents are an effective component of student outcomes. Family members can provide teachers with details about their students' strengths and weaknesses and about methods or strategies that they prefer for learning. This leads teachers to note those details and provide instruction that is appropriate within a minority group. Thus, teachers should be well qualified before working in urban settings and meeting the needs of diverse learners.

RTI Models for Diverse Learners

Tier 1. The first tier centers around eighty percent of the school population and should be focused on cultural response and quality instruction with ongoing progress monitoring in the general education classroom (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). This model includes two essential components: evidence-based intervention (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003) and instruction by teachers who have perceptions of cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2000). Educators should be familiar with instructional strategies linked to student outcomes as well as assessment procedures that can be used to monitor progress in language and literacy (Ortiz, 2001). The success of the implementation of the RTI process depends on teachers having access to appropriate evidence-based instructional approaches that are validated with diverse learners (Klingner & Edwards, 2008). To ensure culturally responsive RTI, schools must ensure that any differences noted are due to individual students' needs and not systemic problems with supporting culturally responsive teaching and instructional differentiation (Orasco & Klingner, 2010). For instance, English language learners can be examined by using the same early reading indicators as native English speakers in areas such as letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and word or text reading (Kashima et al., 2009). "Screening measure in either or both students' native language and English must be highly reliable and valid, and take into consideration the proficiency level of students in both their first language or native language and in English" (Kashima et al., 2009 p.8). The limitation of Tier 1 provides universal screening and differentiated high-quality evidence-based instruction to all students (Xu & Drame, 2008). Also, there is less research that involves culturally responsive provisions within Tier 1 (Garcia & Ortiz, 2008; Xu & Drame, 2008). Furthermore, several researchers have noted that with English language learners, most studies involved interventions and programs implemented by researchers rather than educators in the RTI process (Orasco & Klingner, 2010; VanDerheyden et al., 2007). Thus, teachers should document whether an intervention process is validated and think about providing instruction for pupils who do not seem to respond (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

Tier 2. This model serves approximately fifteen percent of students who do not show progress at the first tier (Batche et al., 2006). This tier provides a level of intensive instruction and support based on students' needs for identified and ongoing progress monitoring (Klingner & Edward, 2006). There is a need for more research with English language learners who show early signs of difficulty. This research may be likely to use approaches developed and validated with native English speakers; it is important to consider that English language learners may benefit from strategies that have been adapted or are different altogether (McCardle et al., 2005). In Tier 2, teachers should have high expectations of English language learners and should not delay instruction until ELL speaking skills are mastered; rather, teachers and school staff should provide resources and opportunities while promoting English language development (Kashima et al., 2009). The strategies that are used at this stage are clustered through a standard treatment protocol, a problem-solving model, or a combination of both (Batches et al., 2006). The limitation associated with this tier is that RTI often relies on special education and eligibility for assessment and identification for specific learning disabilities (Zirkel, 2011). "The research suggests that effective RTI must consider a systemic school wide proactive approach involving effective practice" (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). Students at this level who do not meet the criteria move for possible referral for special education.

Tier 3. When students do not achieve specific goals in the previous tier, they qualify for the third stage of RTI. Tier 3 is classified as an intensive intervention often serving around five percent of the student population in school. (Batches et al., 2006). The notion of intensive support does not need to stop for referral to begin (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Research has shown that systemic approaches which involve classroom-wide instruction intervention and progress monitoring may be considered to be better resources than a teacher alone (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). So, the team should be diverse and include several members with expertise in culturally responsive pedagogy (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). For instance, ESL specialists should be involved when assessing non-English speakers (Harry & Klingner, 2006). The most important role of the team is to observe students in the classroom and other settings to obtain reliable results. Teachers can use a variety of resources to improve the special education referral process for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Klingner & Edwards, 2009). The limitation present at this level is that diverse learners continue to be challenged as students who qualify as special needs students (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). The other concern is that African Americans are twice as likely as Whites to be placed in more restrictive settings, thus denying greater numbers of these students an extended opportunity to engage with typical students and to have exposure to the general curriculum and

content (Finch, 2012). Thus, “not much has been changed or addressed in Tier 3 to distinguish it from the traditional, separate deficit-based systems afforded by special education” (Finch, 2012. p. 292).

In conclusion, researchers are encouraged by the use of RTI models to reduce students’ cultural and linguistic failure and to shrink the disproportionate representation in special education of diverse students (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). However, there are few studies to ensure the outcome of producing RTI with diverse students. Klingner and Edwards (2006) stated the following:

Culturally responsive RTI, if it is to succeed and to be beneficial to all students, must strive to be more than a new form of categorical mindset of a deficit model. Additional research that is contextual, detailed, precise, and provides sufficient specificity of the samples is needed before we can assert with certainty that RTI can produce positive outcomes and equitable education for all learners. (p. 294). Thus, RTI in urban school should be implemented with consideration for students’ diversity to ensure that all students receive equitable education before referral to special education setting.

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