

Is RTI Working to Prevent or to Identify?

“RTI offers us an important opportunity to reduce the number of children becoming disabled in literacy,” says CUNY/Albany professor Peter Johnston in this important *Elementary School Journal* article, “but there is a real danger that its potential will not be realized.”

“How should we understand a child’s limited progress in acquiring literacy?” he asks. There are a number of reasons educators might believe a student has a specific learning disability (SLD) and needs to be shunted into special education: genetic history, brain scans, cognitive assessments, entering school way behind in language and literacy, or having difficulty processing language in school. “But we should not lose sight of some important facts,” says Johnston:

- “Just as with measures of height or weight, or intelligence, there is no clear line of demarcation between SLD students and others.”
- With appropriate instruction, even students who have serious limitations can be taught to read.
- As these children learn to read, he says, “the measures of cognitive processing on which they previously appeared deficient improve as well and no longer look as disabling.”
- A small number of students (1-2 percent) will still have difficulty learning to read, even after various interventions, but three-quarters of these students can be brought up to par with their peers by fine-tuning their instruction.

In other words, we currently know how to prevent almost all children from becoming disabled in literacy.

This is the aspiration of Response to Intervention (RTI), a provision in the 2004 revision of the federal special-education law (IDEA). But Johnston believes that the way RTI is being implemented in many schools doesn’t fully support that aspiration. Too often, he says, RTI focuses on identifying students with disabilities rather than reducing the need for such identification, “emphasizing measurement at the expense of instruction.”

In practice, says Johnston, the only way to tell if a person has a specific learning disability is to eliminate all the other possibilities. Years ago, if there was a discrepancy between IQ and reading performance, and no other impediment could be found, educators concluded there must be an SLD. But the IQ-achievement disparity approach fell out of favor for a number of reasons: assessment issues, the burgeoning number of students classified as SLD, the expense of special education, the overrepresentation of minority-group students in special education, and the documented effectiveness of early-intervention programs that reduced the need for special education. In 2004, RTI emerged as a better alternative. Schools were asked not to classify children as SLD until they were sure the problem was not with regular-education instruction.

RTI represents “a major shift in institutional priorities,” says Johnston. But in the process, it creates three “awkward tensions”:

- A major focus of RTI is improving regular-education teaching, and 15% of special-education budgets can be devoted to this. But “the RTI funding stream, intended to reduce the

need for special education, is in the special education budget,” says Johnston. “If states and schools productively and aggressively take up the RTI option, it will reduce the funding and the need for special education teachers.”

- Previously, school psychologists were spending about 75 percent of their time on IQ testing (key to identifying students as SLD under the discrepancy model). Under RTI, they need to gain expertise in literacy teaching and learning. “The majority of school psychologists, however, report little knowledge of reading assessment and interventions,” says Johnston, “let alone literacy more broadly defined.” And he believes that in most cases, this deficit is not being remedied.

- Because RTI is part of the IDEA law, it’s seen as being about children with disabilities and therefore within the school psychologist’s and special educator’s beat. It’s therefore not surprising that so far, most of the books and articles about RTI have been written by people from those fields. On the whole, says Johnston, “both professional groups appear to share a belief in the permanence of SLDs, a behaviorist view of literacy teaching and learning that emphasizes the speed and accuracy of reading words, a belief that it is reasonable to assess literacy development as if it were linear, a central concern for psychometrics, and a positivistic view of science.” All of this, he believes, is problematic.

The 2004 RTI language can be read in two quite different ways. RTI can be seen as a *measurement* initiative – frequent assessments that prove a student needs special education – or an *instructional* initiative – intervening successfully so the student never needs special education. “Although identifying an SLD and preventing one (i.e., identifying, instead, how to improve instruction) might be viewed as different parts of the same process,” says Johnston, “they are different activities requiring different tools and strategies and different discourses and relationships. Although it is not a simple dichotomy, these differences along with limits on time and other resources mean that emphasizing one means limiting the other.” Some details:

- *RTI as identification: it’s mainly about measurement* – For those who see RTI as primarily about identifying which students have and don’t have SLD, the focus is on psychometrics and measurement – finding a standardized procedure to replace the IQ-discrepancy model. Standardization is important, including the use of a “scientific, research-based” reading program, making sure it is implemented with fidelity, increasing the intensity of interventions after a certain time period (Tier 2 and Tier 3), and deciding when special education is necessary. Students are often assessed twice a week on the number of words read correctly in a minute. Johnston says that this approach contains a number of assumptions:

- A standardized intervention will work in different settings regardless of teacher experience, expertise, context, instructional history, age of students, etc.
- An approach that works with most students will work with each child having difficulty with reading. “If the child’s reading improves, it is assumed that the instructional package

worked,” says Johnston. “If not, the child is framed as the problem... The instructional package remains ‘scientific and research based.’”

- The problem is a fixed trait in the child.
- The program, rather than a responsive teacher, is what’s working.
- Increasing the “dosage” will increase the effect.
- It assumes “a narrow, behaviorist view of literacy, focusing centrally on accurate and rapid identification of words rather than on a broader definition of literacy,” which is harder to measure.

All of these assumptions, says Johnston, are problematic: “In a measurement frame, the valued expertise is not the teacher’s ability to adapt instruction but the design and selection of tests and packaged programs... The measurement frame represents a serious underestimation of the significance of human interaction and expertise in literacy teaching and learning and a problematic view of social science.” He points out that the most effective RTI-related reading interventions are Reading Recovery and the Interactive Strategies Approach (ISA), neither of which is scripted and both of which rely on teacher judgment and expertise (within a clearly defined structure) as students work to solve their reading difficulties.

Of course monitoring of student progress is essential, says Johnston, but it must be balanced: “Monitoring needs to determine whether a child is responding to instruction and whether instruction is responding appropriately to the child.”

• *RTI as prevention: it’s mainly about teaching* – Another way of looking at RTI is optimizing instruction to prevent the need to classify students as needing special education, and there is language in the legislation that supports this view. “If the emphasis is put on instruction,” says Johnston, “then evidence that the child is not learning adequately is primarily evidence that instruction is not yet appropriate and needs to be further optimized. It is evidence of a need for greater instructional expertise and perhaps a reduced teacher-student ratio... Assessment practices would capitalize on and extend teachers’ expertise, particularly their ability to optimize instruction for individual students.”

Teacher expertise is the key to student learning, says Johnston, especially for students having difficulty. This calls into question having instructional assistants working with struggling students, or having failing students sent to special educators who are not strong in literacy. The emphasis should be on improving the literacy expertise of regular-education and special-education teachers through expert coaching. “Most current models of RTI do not address this,” says Johnston, “in part because of their emphasis on standard protocol intervention packages rather than on teacher expertise, and in part because of the logic of research-based instruction, which commonly renders the program valid regardless of the lack of effect on an individual.”

“In the instruction frame,” Johnston continues, “assessment that informs instruction is key, and teacher assessment expertise is central. A core dimension of teacher expertise is the teacher’s ability to notice and respond to what children can and cannot do. A teacher who does

not notice that a child is not yet able to analyze their speech into phonemes will not know to teach that skill. A teacher who does not recognize that a child already has a skill may go ahead and waste time teaching it anyway, particularly if using a packaged program. Similarly, a teacher who notices that a child makes many reading errors and attributes it to the child's inability rather than to the text's difficulty will keep the child in an unproductive learning situation... In other words, teachers who do not understand the children they are teaching will be more likely to decide that a child is learning disabled. Their understanding of children's learning has a lot to do with what they know about children's literacy acquisition and how to organize and make literate behaviors noticeable and respond to them productively, which is exactly the point of RTI."

Assessments are key components, and they need to be sensitive and specific in what they tell teachers is needed in their classrooms, says Johnston. For example, a simple test of alphabet knowledge in kindergarten is an excellent predictor of future learning difficulties, and the results suggest specific classroom interventions to prevent that fate. For other students, the Observation Survey is ideal for figuring out the learning problem and intervening effectively. Johnston is concerned that many RTI programs focus on much less sophisticated assessments – reading speed and ability to decode nonsense words – which contribute nothing to instruction.

Far more helpful and effective are measures of students' reading levels, which make it possible for teachers to get students working in materials at the right level of challenge, and students' self-corrections, which help teachers understand what kinds of interventions are needed. "Records of children's reading behaviors, because they are process focused, are more likely to lead to strategy-focused instruction that will turn attention away from trait-oriented interpretations of performance and build resilience," says Johnston. The best questions for teachers to ask: "Is instruction taking place in appropriately difficult materials? Is the child building a meaning-directed system? Is the child taking control of monitoring and problem solving in reading? How is the child using strategies and resources in the process of making meaning? How is the child's literacy changing?"

"If we want to capitalize on the promise of RTI," concludes Johnston, "we must focus on prevention-instruction models, recognizing the complexity of literacy, its teaching and its learning, and centralizing the ongoing development of teacher expertise. None of this can be purchased in canned packages."

"Response to Intervention in Literacy: Problems and Possibilities" by Peter Johnston in *Elementary School Journal*, June 2011 (Vol. 111, #4, p. 511-534); available for purchase (\$9.00) at <http://www.jstor.org/pss/10.1086/659030>; Johnston can be reached at johnstonnz@aol.com.

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