

RTI: The Nutshell Revisited

A parachute is of no value without a harness and a ripcord. How is RTI like a parachute? Well, it doesn't work unless all the components are in place and used correctly. If RTI doesn't work, it is not because the concept is faulty.

I wrote *RTI and Reading: Response to Intervention in a Nutshell* (Dickman, 2006) to show the simplicity of the *concept*. Now I am going to indicate that, although the concept is simple, its implementation is challenging. RTI requires that we rethink how and why we do what we do.

Informed Times 3: When we look at educational intervention or remediation, effective instruction requires a minimum of three elements: (1) an informed program, delivered by (2) an informed instructor, in (3) an informed environment. For instance, a wonderful program is of no value if the instructor is not sufficiently trained to deliver it as intended, with fidelity to design. And no matter how good the program and the instructor may be, instruction has limited value if it is not delivered with sufficient intensity and duration with due consideration given to frequency and length of sessions, homogeneity of grouping, and location.

Prevention: As I and many others have written *ad nauseam* for many years, the aptitude/achievement formula used by most states to identify children for special education and related services is an immoral, wait to fail model that does immeasurably more harm to children than the presumed administrative convenience that it appears to provide. The benefit is not remotely sufficient to justify the cost. RTI can help by minimizing the failure experienced by those who have a deficit that has not yet matured to a disability.

Deficit Versus Disability: It is necessary to distinguish between intervention and remediation as well as deficit and disability. RTI provides intervention intended to address an identified deficit that places a child at risk for failing to develop a functional ability. For the student with dyslexia, RTI provides intervention as soon as a deficit in the phonological component of language is identified. If we view an identified deficit as a marker that places a child at risk for developing a disability, then RTI is a preventative measure. Intervention prevents; remediation cures.

Scaling: We all recognize that good teachers instinctively use an RTI approach in their classrooms. They identify who is in need and provide extra help with increasing intensity until the intervention provided is effective or the teacher recognizes that the student's needs exceed her or his ability. However, scaling what is done in the classroom for implementation in the entire grade, building, district, and state requires the institutionalization of a process that is replicable and reliable.

Each step in the RTI process (i.e., screen, teach, intervene, probe, chart, and adjust) must follow a protocol that ensures that the entire process is carried out with fidelity. Micro-environments informed by anecdotal experience are not scaleable. Macro-environments must be informed by replicable research-based findings to be effective.

Professional Roles: Understanding RTI requires a significant paradigm shift in defining the traditional roles of educational professionals. The paper “New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children” (IRA, 2006), compiled by 13 professional organizations, including IDA, brought together by the International Reading Association, identifies how various organizations representing educational professionals view the impact that RTI will have on the roles and responsibilities of their memberships.

Clinical Judgment: Increasingly, the advent of administratively convenient arbitrary cut point formulas, such as aptitude/achievement discrepancy, has eroded the prerogative of educational professionals to exercise clinical judgment in decision making. It will take an act of courage for professionals involved in the education of children to reclaim their hard earned ability to exercise clinical judgment. RTI relies on data supported by clinical judgment. The apparent fear that administrators have of being subject to criticism has robbed educational professionals of their ability to use experience and knowledge to express a subjective, albeit *expert*, opinion in the service of the children to whom their careers are dedicated.

Teacher Training: Assuming that every teacher has the ability to be excellent and effective is like saying that every block of marble has within it Michelangelo’s Pieta. It may be true, but the need for a master craftsman to design, plan, chisel, hammer, sculpt, and polish to realize this intrinsic potential is often overlooked. Professional development is costly in terms of money and time; and the commitment is ongoing. However, this is one instance where the benefit clearly outweighs the cost. RTI is doomed if teachers are not given the tools to deliver instruction as intended; with “fidelity to design.” Good teachers are always receptive to new ways to be more effective. The system must respond to this receptivity by providing opportunities for meaningful training and development.

The Marketplace: Many claim to be authorities on RTI and its implementation. How do you tell the “Real McCoy” from all the others? Besides using the “*if it looks too good to be true, it probably is*” approach, the state or district seeking authoritative direction should not hesitate to go to the source. Do a literature search. Who is doing the research? The person who wrote the book is as easy to contact as someone who merely read the book. RTI can only be successful if it is done right, and it can only be done right if we are willing to question the assumptions that have guided our actions and decision-making in the past.

References

Dickman, G.E. (2006). RTI and reading: Response to intervention in a nutshell [Electronic version available at www.readingrockets.org/article/14596]. *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 32, 33-34.

International Reading Association. (2006, November). New roles in response to intervention: Creating success for schools and children. Retrieved June 24, 2008, from http://www.ira.org/downloads/resources/rti_role_definitions.pdf