Response to Intervention

Lynden Haley

EDSP 5319

Dr. Fontenot

H01192030

In 2004 the face of special education was dramatically changed to reflect new and more effective ways to help those who struggled. No longer were educators waiting for children to fail before intervening. IDEA 2004 was signed into law in December 2004 and with that went away the discrepancy model that had been used to determine if a child was performing below their IQ level. With the introduction to the Response to Intervention model (hereafter referred to as RTI) educators were given more money in their schools to intervene early for students who presented the characteristics of learning disabilities. Ann Gavazzi explains the benefits to RTI vs. the discrepancy model very succinctly by saying, “The Response to Intervention and Instruction (RTII) model is based on preventing student failure and placing students in levels or tiers of instruction based on student needs” (Gavazzi, 2011). RTI was developed to prevent student failure. Students who are allowed to fail and fail again until they hit rock bottom can seldom recover from the years of feeling like failures whereas RTI allows early interventions so that children learn how to deal with their shortcomings as they grow. RTI provides a way for students to learn at an early age that they may have to work differently and use different methods to achieve, but with early intervention educators can hopefully provide a way for students to never experience the crippling lack of confidence that comes with being consistently behind your peers.

I chose to research the RTI process because I have always been interested in special education, but have never worked directly with the special educators in a school. When I worked in HISD I originally applied to teach SPED, but was instead offered a general education classroom in 6th grade English. I had one co-teach class and a few other students that received accommodations, but I was never involved in the process of determining what types of ways specific children could benefit from these. After leaving HISD I was still very interested in helping my lowest performing students to achieve despite the limitations that they had grown up with. I have always been drawn to my lower performing students and have always loved seeing the moment when they finally grasp a new concept. Knowing this, and knowing that I wanted to work with these kids, I chose to pursue my degree as an educational diagnostician, knowing next to nothing about the special education process. Being in a private school had limited the knowledge that I had on how these interventions were implemented, so I wanted to write my paper on something that I really needed to research more and learn about more. Like the children I teach, I think the harder things (or less familiar things) are the more rewarding to learn about.

According to *Teaching Students With Learning Problems*, “In this model [RTI], students receive instruction in a tiered framework usually comprising three tiers. With each tier of instruction, the level of support becomes more intensive” (Mercer, 2011, p.10). RTI begins with all students, learning differences and average altogether, on tier one where students are in a general education classroom with large group instruction. Tier one provides universal instruction to all children, but includes teachers using observation and data collection as a way to see if any one particular student is falling behind in a more noticeable way than his or her peers. Success at tier one requires students to perform at an average of his or her age or grade level. Tier one can include teacher initiated interventions when they see something troubling to see if it is just one concept or a more prevalent inability to succeed. General education teachers at this level should communicate with parents and administrators when they see warning signs in a child’s growth. In tier one the main observer of any possible learning disabilities is the classroom teacher who sees the child every day and may notice that the student did not grasp a specific lesson or is generally falling behind in one particular subject or even everything. It is very important during this stage to maintain communication with parents and administrators and make sure that it is a learning difference instead of a rough time outside of school that is affecting the child’s learning.

In tier two students who have not performed at the expected level in tier one are provided with specifically tailored interventions to aid in their learning. For example, “providing 30 minutes a day of additional reading or math instruction to 1st grade students who have not met grade-level benchmarks,” (Brown-Chidsey) is one way that a student in tier two may be individually targeted. Students in tier two are monitored frequently by teachers and special educators for improvement. Students are given differentiated instruction and accommodations by the regular classroom teacher and are frequently monitored for improvement. If a student begins to improve with these interventions they are gradually weaned off of this extra instruction go back to the tier one model of teacher instruction with no intervention. If a student does not begin to improve, however, they are moved to tier three where they will receive greater interventions. It is very important for the teacher to maintain parent contact throughout every stage of the RTI process to let them know what is or is not working. The collection of data and progress monitoring in both a formal and informal manner are very important in tier two.

It is not until tier three that a school takes the steps to determine what specific learning disability a student has. At this stage the school will begin the testing process to diagnose a learning disability to determine whether or not a student qualifies for special education. At this tier all data from tiers one and two are combined with testing and interviews of the child to determine what special education needs the student has and why they are not performing at the same level of their peers. It is very important when creating an intervention plan at this tier to include the parents of the child and to inform them of all of their rights. It is so important for teachers to keep parents informed of all steps, including, “that they have the right to request that their child be evaluated under IDEA—a full and individual evaluation” (Response to Intervention (RTI)). Many parents are unaware of the rights that their child has under educational law and are not aware that they can request testing for their child if they notice something at home that the school may not have noticed. Tier three is where a student who cannot recover during tiers one and two truly receives the additional instructional support that they need to succeed.

RTI is a model that allows students to receive additional support, whether they are labeled with a specific disability or not. The RTI model has leveled the educational playing field by allowing all students to receive additional help whenever they need it. There is no longer a need for educators to deny extra help to children who are not labeled. RTI really is an idyllic model. It encourages teachers to provide individual intervention whenever they see a problem, every time they see a problem. Special interventions in the classroom are no longer limited to the students who have been allowed to fail for so long that they have been tested and labeled. Additional support is given to each and every student in the classroom, and that is really the best way to ensure student success: by allowing every child the opportunity to experience a one on one learning experience that best suits their personal learning style. RTI has allowed students to correct their mistakes before they completely fail. “Outcomes from schools that have practiced RTI for a number of years have shown that it raises education attainment of students in general and reduces the number of students who need special education” (Brown-Chidsey). If teachers can intervene in the classroom with students that they know the best, that they see everyday, and that they have established relationships with, they can help to prevent a student’s struggles getting to the point of rock bottom. I expected to learn that RTI was simply a way to identify special education students. In the end, I learned that RTI is not only a way to intervene to aid in a student’s learning, but it is also a way to prevent the students that don’t actually need it from getting to the point of needing to be put into special classes. If intervention can be practiced early with a child, errors can be prevented from the start and students have a greater chance of success. As educators we know that the best and most effective way to help a student succeed is by tailoring our instruction to their learning needs. If we can provide accommodations to our students without the need for a label we are potentially saving them from a lifetime of feeling like a failure.

References

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