Chapter 5

Literacy and RTI on the Secondary Level: Students’ Needs, Educators’ Responses

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ABSTRACT

The application of response to intervention (RTI) for reading in secondary schools is difficult yet achievable. As adolescents read texts that will prepare them for college and careers, they require support from highly qualified professionals. Educators meet that need with effective instruction and guidance. The framework of RTI, especially the Tier 1 level that occurs in all general education classrooms, can be developed around literacy components that combine to result in skilled reading. This chapter will encourage secondary educators to consider the RTI framework as not only a means to identify the possible literacy needs of their students but also as an opportunity to examine and optimize the realistic responses that they might provide in an effort to meet those needs.

INTRODUCTION

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 was passed by Congress, secondary schools across the nation found themselves more responsible than ever for providing structured, research-based pre-referral services, usually referred to as interventions, to struggling adolescent readers. Although Response to Intervention (RTI) was not named in the law as mandated, the RTI framework was the process by which many schools came to organize the legally-required services. RTI became not only an alternate process through which a student might be officially qualified as having a disability but also a process that, if of high enough quality, might disrupt the failing trajectory and support a struggling student so that services provided through special education were not required. Ideally, a struggling student would be placed in an intervention, his or her needs would be met, gaps would be closed, and the student could then go back to flourish as a learner in the regular classroom.
Elementary school routines and theoretical underpinnings lent themselves more easily to the RTI framework, but for reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter, middle and high schools struggled and, in many cases, continue to struggle to meet the requirements of IDEA addressed through the RTI process. The struggle, however, must not disturb the action. Middle and high school educators must see themselves as the first responders. Student response must then be considered as teachers continue responding. Adults must be willing to accept the idea that, in some cases, a student is struggling because he or she is in a classroom or school that is not prepared for him or her. While much of the RTI process legally is focused on supporting students, a part of the RTI process is to assist teachers and schools in identifying areas where they need to become more focused and even better prepared to meet student need.

BACKGROUND

As early as 2003, Iowan educators were engaged in conversations concerning RTI (Marston, 2013). Pennsylvania began discussing the implementation of RTI as a framework in 2005 (Kovaleski, 2012), and Colorado educators began their own discussions in 2006 (Ramirez, 2017). No one particular person is credited for discovering RTI since it is recognized as more of a movement than a single event. The need for support like RTI developed in response to dissatisfaction associated with the identification process for a learning disability (LD). In addition, according to some, an overidentification in the area of LD existed that was perhaps situated in the lack of genuine effort on the pre-referral side of LD identification.

Thus, while RTI has been recognized as a framework for intervention and learning for approximately 15 years, conversations continue in secondary settings, where RTI still feels new; there are secondary settings where an RTI framework or an equivalent has not been established at all. There are settings where interventions are in place, but they differ greatly from the intent of the RTI framework, focusing more on test prep than on interventions that address learning gaps, and there are secondary settings where RTI is in place and is being implemented with as much fidelity as possible. That fidelity and the difficulties that at times hamper the RTI process will be discussed later in this chapter.

A Highly Influential Conversation

One of the most important recorded conversations concerning secondary RTI took place in 2010 when Sharon Vaughn from the University of Texas and Doug Fuchs from Vanderbilt University held a powerful published conversation about RTI in middle and high schools. First, Vaughn and colleagues (2010) published their year-long study concerning sixth-graders and Tier 2 intervention. They included in their article a couple of meta-analyses of research concerning secondary students with reading difficulties and the effectiveness of interventions with those students. Vaughn et al.’s findings were that, even with researcher-provided intervention, students who received interventions made small gains compared to students who did not. The conclusion was that further research was needed.

In the same 2010 issue of *School Psychology Review*, Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton wrote a commentary to Vaughn et al.’s findings described above. While allowing for some possible reasons that might have contributed to the minimal effect size, Fuchs and colleagues described the results of Vaughn et al.’s year-long study as “sobering” (p. 23). Fuchs et al. noted three assumptions made in elementary RTI that may be questionable for secondary RTI: The first assumption is that “screening is required to identify risk before academic deficits materialize” (p. 24); the second assumption is that “determining