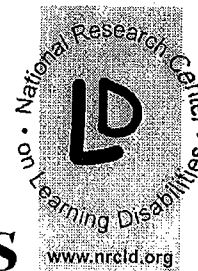


Responsiveness to Intervention in the SLD Determination Process



- Defining RTI, page 3
- A Conceptual Model, page 5
- Profiles, page 8
- RTI & SLD Determination, page 11
- Conclusion, page 12
- References, page 13

Purpose of this overview

The purpose of this document is to provide a conceptual overview of responsiveness to intervention (RTI)—including hypothetical examples of how RTI might operate within a school setting and for a particular student—and to discuss its role within the larger context of specific learning disabilities (SLD) determination.

Introduction

The reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-446) (IDEA 2004) was signed into law on December 3, 2004, by President George W. Bush. IDEA 2004 includes provisions that could lead to significant changes in the way in which students with SLD are identified. Of particular relevance to the process of SLD determination are the following provisions of the statute:

1. Local educational agency (LEA) shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability (IDEA 2004).
2. LEAs may use response to scientific-based instruction.
3. “Responsiveness to Intervention” (RTI) is not specifically identified in the law.
4. LEAs are given flexibility in determining SLD implementation options.
5. Using special education funding to provide early intervening for *all* students is permitted.

This movement toward change stems from criticisms of current SLD determination components, procedures, and criteria. Although the focus and scope of the debate varies, much of the criticism stems from discrepancies between *conceptual* definitions and *operational* definitions of SLD (Reschly & Hosp, 2004). Most notably, although conceptual definitions are multi-faceted, operational definitions have typically reduced the construct of SLD to a single dimension, a discrepancy between achievement and ability. In improving the process of SLD determination, understanding the components of the conceptual definition of SLD is important. In general, SLD involves learning and cognition disorders intrinsic to the individual, which are specific in that they each significantly affect a relatively narrow range of academic and performance outcomes (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 regulations define SLD as follows:

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY - 20 U.S.C. § 1401(26)(A); 34 C.F.R. § 300.7(c)(10)

The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) conducts research on the identification of learning disabilities; formulates implementation recommendations; disseminates findings; and provides technical assistance to national, state, and local constituencies. Funding for NRCLD is provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Award No. H324U010004. Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the U.S. Department of Education.



RTI in the SLD Determination Process

(A) GENERAL - The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

(B) DISORDERS INCLUDED - The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia.

(C) DISORDERS NOT INCLUDED - The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

SLD identification procedures, therefore, need to adequately address the components in the conceptual definition in a systematic and analytical fashion to accurately identify the presence of a learning disability. Ideally, identification of SLD should include a student-centered, comprehensive evaluation and problem-solving approach that ensures students who have a learning disability are efficiently identified. Additionally, general education must assume significant responsibility for delivery of high-quality instruction, research-based interventions, and prompt identification of individuals at risk while collaborating with special education and related services personnel (2004 Learning Disabilities Roundtable, 2005).

Previous SLD determination procedures and practices have been faulted in several areas: irrel-

evance of aptitude-achievement discrepancy and cognitive measures to instructional planning or outcomes; lack of equitable treatment across educational settings; and delays in disability determination. Another criticism of practices has been that students were judged to have an SLD without assessing the availability and use of general education interventions that have proven their effectiveness for youngsters presenting similar behaviors of concern (e.g., limited reading acquisition). One could not be confident that the achievement and behavior problems that a child presented were inherent to the child or attributable to shortcomings in the instructional settings.

Earlier statutes regarding the determination of SLD included a provision for evaluating the extent to which students had received appropriate learning experiences. However, no systematic process was outlined in the earlier regulations for ensuring that the "learning experiences" provided before referral for evaluation were those that have been found to be typically effective for the child's age and ability levels (i.e., "appropriate"). The responsiveness to scientific-based intervention (e.g., RTI) concept in IDEA 2004 is an elaboration or greater specification of this basic concept. With this emphasis, school staffs may consider how a youngster's performance in general education and, more specifically, the youngster's performance in response to specific scientific research-based instruction, informs SLD determination.

Definition

Defining RTI

In principle, RTI is proposed as a valuable construct for schools because of its potential utility in the provision of appropriate learning experiences for all students and in the early identification of students as being at risk for academic failure. Students need and benefit from a close match of their current skills and abilities with the instructional and curricular choices provided within the classroom. When a mismatch occurs, student learning and outcomes are lowered. For some students, typical classroom instruction is appropriate and meets their needs, but for others, success is not easy. The hypothesis is that the earlier these floundering students can be identified and provided appropriate instruction, the higher the likelihood they can be successful and maintain their class placement. Thus, their underachievement is reduced or eliminated. The RTI approach to defining SLD can follow a variety of models: predictor-criterion models that best predict reading competency; dual-discrepancy models that address failure at general education interventions; and functional assessment models that manipulate environmental events (Bradley, Danielson & Hallahan, 2002).

One might be in a better position to help those learners who are experiencing difficulty if an assessment method could match the student with appropriate instruction. It is the intent of RTI to combine important features of assessment and instruction and to address many of the limitations currently associated with aptitude-achievement discrepancy models of SLD identification. The following are core features of strong RTI (Mellard, 2003):

1. *High quality classroom instruction.* Students receive high quality instruction in their general education setting. Before students are identified for specific assistance, there must be assurance that the typical classroom instruction is of high quality. This quality can be assessed by comparing students' learning rates and achievement in different classrooms at the same grade level.
2. *Research-based instruction.* General education's classroom practices and the curriculum vary in their efficacy. Thus, ensuring that the practices and curriculum have demonstrated validity is important. If instruction is not research-based, one cannot be confident that students' limited gains are independent of the classroom experiences.
3. *Classroom performance.* General education instructors and staff assume an active role in students' assessment in the general education curriculum. This feature emphasizes the important role of the classroom staff in designing and completing student assessments rather than relying on externally developed tests (e.g., state or nationally developed tests).
4. *Universal screening.* School staff conducts universal screening of academics and behavior. This feature focuses on specific criteria for judging the learning and achievement of all students, not only in academics but also in related behaviors (e.g., class attendance, tardiness, truancy, suspensions, and disciplinary actions). Those criteria are applied in determining which students need closer monitoring or an intervention.
5. *Continuous progress monitoring.* In RTI models, one expects students' classroom progress to be monitored continuously. In this way, staff can readily identify those learners who are not meeting the benchmarks or other expected standards. Various curriculum-based assessment models are useful in this role.
6. *Research-based interventions.* When students' screening results or progress monitoring results indicate a deficit, an appropriate instructional intervention is implemented, perhaps an individually designed instructional package or a standardized intervention protocol. The standardized intervention protocols are the interventions that researchers have validated through a series of studies. School staff is expected to implement specific, research-based interventions to address the student's difficulties. These interventions might include a "double-dose" of the

RTI in the SLD Determination Process

classroom instruction or a different instructional method. These interventions are not adaptations of the current curriculum or accommodations, because one would expect those procedures to have been implemented already. These research-based interventions are 8 to 12 weeks in length and are designed to increase the intensity of the learner's instructional experience.

7. *Progress monitoring during interventions.* School staff members use progress monitoring data to determine interventions' effectiveness and to make any modifications, as needed. Carefully defined data are collected, perhaps daily,

to provide a cumulative record of the learner's response to the intervention.

8. *Fidelity measures.* While the interventions themselves are designed, implemented, and assessed for their learner effectiveness, fidelity measures that focus on those individuals providing the instruction also are completed. The fidelity measure, usually an observational checklist of critical teaching behaviors, is completed by a staff member other than the teacher being observed and indicates whether or not the intervention was implemented as intended and with consistency.

RTI Model

A Conceptual Model

RTI is a multi-tiered service delivery intervention. Much discussion continues surrounding the issues of how many tiers constitute an adequate intervention (O'Connor, Tilly, Vaughn & Marston, 2003). Most frequently, RTI is viewed as a three-tiered model, similar to those used for other service delivery practices, such as positive behavioral support. The three-tiered model is the structure we will discuss here. Figure 1 depicts a three-tiered model as conceived in an RTI framework.

Like other models, RTI is meant to be applied on a school-wide basis, in which the majority of students receive instruction in Tier One (the general classroom), students who are at risk for reading and other learning disabilities are identified (such as through school-wide screening) for more intense support in Tier Two, and students who fail to respond to the interventions provided in Tier Two may then be considered for specialized instruction in Tier Three. Each of these tiers is described in more detail below (adapted from Vaughn, 2003).

- the general education teacher
2. Progress monitoring of students such as through curriculum-based measurement (CBM)
3. Analysis of the progress monitoring results to determine which students are at risk and require more intense instructional support.

This first level of instruction is designed to serve *all* students with well-supported instructional programs. General education teachers would be required to adopt evidence-based instructional programs in reading, math, and writing and to be responsible for the continual monitoring of their students' progress. Results of the progress monitoring would be reviewed periodically to determine which students were failing to make adequate progress and would qualify for Tier Two intervention.

Tier Two Intervention

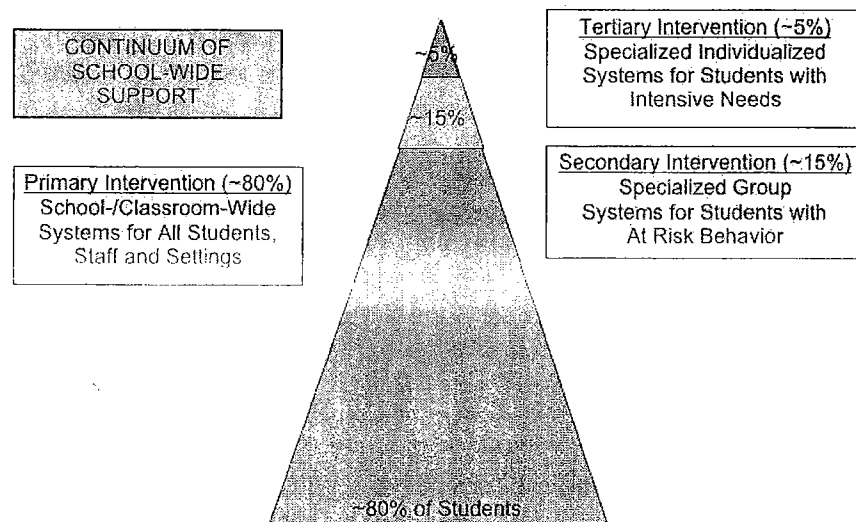
Tier Two intervention is for those students for whom Tier One instruction is insufficient and who are falling behind on benchmark skills and require

Tier One Instruction

One concern about current approaches to SLD identification is the number of students who may actually be "instructional casualties," those students who have not received scientific, research-based instruction in reading or other academic skill areas. Tier One instruction is designed to provide for the majority of students' needs and consists of three elements:

1. Research-based core instructional programs provided by

Figure 1. Continuum of Intervention Support for At-Risk Students



Adapted from "What is School-Wide PBS?" OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Accessed at <http://www.pbis.org/schoolwide.htm>.

