Book Review

RTI in Literacy—Responsive and Comprehensive

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What is response to intervention (RTI), and why is it having such an impact on literacy programs in our country today? The new book *RTI in Literacy—Responsive and Comprehensive* edited by Peter Johnston (2010) answers these questions, and many others. Reading Recovery professionals and other educators will find this text to be particularly helpful in mounting, monitoring, and adapting schoolwide plans to identify and support students who encounter literacy difficulties.

Johnston drew together articles from international journals, chapters from previously published books, as well as new scholarly contributions to explore key issues surrounding effective practices that fall under the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law stipulates that identification of specific learning disabilities be based on the child’s response to “appropriate instruction in regular education settings, delivered by qualified personnel” (IDEA regulations, section 300.309). Language within this law spawned the term response to intervention and RTI as its acronym. RTI offers a different framework to think about services to children who struggle in regular classrooms as well as those more traditionally labeled learning disabled.

Today’s context, in which RTI plays a significant role, is due in large part to the efforts of Marie Clay. Her contributions are prominent in Johnston’s new book, as is Reading Recovery, as an effective intervention. As an innovator, Clay won the struggle to move the field beyond the era of remedial reading and its focus on mental disabilities to describe struggling readers. She did this through careful research, sound theoretical arguments, and methodical use of the term early intervention to describe Reading Recovery. With every child who responded to effective teaching, and with each argued point, she reoriented the field and revolutionized instructional practices for children and teachers alike.

As Johnston notes, Marie Clay was the first to clearly articulate the logic behind RTI in her article *Learning to be Learning Disabled* (Clay, 1987). She argued that, “learning disability is more often acquired through inadequate instruction than through genetics” (Johnston, p. 3). She felt that ruling out the possibility of inadequate instruction first might avoid more costly, long-term services. These concepts are the foundation of the new law, which Johnston frames in two ways. The first frame provides “an alternative assessment to the IQ-achievement discrepancy strategy for identifying students who have a learning disability” (p. 3). This strategy requires “data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals, reflecting formal assessment of student progress during instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The second frame within the law is insistence on the use of “data that demonstrates that prior to, or as part of, the referral process, the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education settings, delivered by qualified personnel” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). These two frames are also key components of Reading Recovery.

In six different sections and the introduction to *RTI in Literacy—Responsive and Comprehensive*, Johnston provides the history behind RTI and the IDEA law and its impact on schools, a thorough overview of RTI itself, descriptions of effec-
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differences among the different skills, and why there may be more or less stability in certain areas that make interpretations difficult. The second is by Anne McGill-Franzen, Rebecca Payne, and Danielle Dennis. These authors describe responsive intervention and the role assessment plays in formulating effective instruction and building teacher capacity. The third new piece by Linda Dorn and Shannon Henderson describes how to design a comprehensive literacy assessment system as part of an RTI process. The last chapter in this section is by Carol Lyons, wherein she recounts how one Reading Recovery teacher learned to effectively teach a child who was instructionally disabled rather than learning disabled. It also demonstrates the power of a coach, close observation, and ongoing assessment in guiding teachers through difficult periods in a child’s learning path. This section is a must-read for districts trying to balance assessment and instruction in the RTI plan.

The review of high-quality interventions in Section IV brings together two key reprinted chapters that people may find harder to get and two newly written chapters. Salli Forbes, Beth Swenson, Tonya Person, and Jolene Reed lead off this section with a discussion of Reading Recovery as one intervention and Literacy Collaborative used for Tier 1 classroom instruction and professional development in an RTI model. Donna Scanlon and Joan Sweeney contributed a new chapter about an experimental design research study they conducted of a successful kindergarten intervention program. Sharon Craig authored another research study of an effective kindergarten intervention using Interactive Writing. The final chapter in this section reports on a national research project entitled A Third Chance to Learn conducted in New Zealand by Gwenneth Phillips and Pauline Smith. This research examined what kind of teaching was necessary to bring the hardest to teach children (N = 35) to average performance when they did not progress in the regular classroom or in Reading Recovery.

“Professional Development and Teacher Expertise,” Section V, explores the idea that adaptive, responsive teaching is core to effective interventions. Mary Lose discusses how assessment, close observation, and responsive teaching work together in a coordinated RTI model to assure success. The chapter by Donna Scanlon, Lynn Gelsheiser, Frank Vellutino, Christopher Schatschneider, and Joan Sweeney offers a unique perspective on how they studied the impact of professional development on student achievement in their RTI model. Debra Peterson, Barbara Taylor,
Bobbie Burnham, and Rynell Schock examined reflective coaching conversations between literacy coaches and elementary teachers. The last chapter, newly written by Stuart McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai, describes a K–12 school change RTI model that closed the achievement gap and raised comprehension abilities for culturally and linguistically diverse students in New Zealand.

Section VI on systemic intervention includes three reprinted chapters. The first describes a comprehensive intervention model written by Linda Dorn and Barbara Schubert. The second reports on a summer-setback program that raised minority student achievement, contributed by Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen. Doris Alvarez and Hugh Mehan describe a charter middle/high school established for the purpose of preparing students from low-income backgrounds for college. The critical ingredient in this instance is the notion of *detracking*, or providing a rigorous academic program supplemented by academic and social supports to underserved students. They found this is a means to successfully and equitably prepare these students for college.

*RTI in Literacy—Responsive and Comprehensive* is a must-have book. The articles that Johnston wove together are informative and particularly suited to guide educators and administrators about how to mount an effective RTI plan at the school and district level. The closing discussion guide helps to frame a school-wide inquiry to address questions, celebrate successes, and critically examine the complex array of issues that will need exploration to mount, monitor, and adapt RTI plans within schools. In his acknowledgments, Johnston recognized both the potential of RTI to improve the lives of many children as well as the potential for doing harm if RTI plans take the wrong direction. With this volume as guidance, I believe schools can improve the lives of the students they serve.

**References**


