Understanding Reading Recovery as an Effective Component of RTI

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A fundamental concept of Reading Recovery is that there are “two positive outcomes” (Clay, 2005; Jones, Johnson, Schwartz, & Zalud, 2005) to the opportunity to participate in the intervention. One positive outcome is represented by the child who reaches grade-level performance and can actively participate in first-grade classroom instruction, and the second is the identification of any child who needs longer-term support to become literate. It is within this context that Reading Recovery has become associated with response to intervention (RTI), a provision of the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and the resulting regulations of 2006.

In 2009, the International Reading Association (IRA) Commission on Response to Intervention drafted a set of principles related to the implementation of RTI. IRA is interested in the implementation of RTI because the structure and recommended practices of RTI are designed to impact the literacy instruction of all children and include the full range of teachers included in IRA’s membership (classroom teachers, reading specialists, etc.). The purpose of this article is to present an overview of RTI for elementary reading program design, to review IRA’s principles for RTI implementation, to review Reading Recovery as an early intervention, and to discuss the links between Reading Recovery and IRA’s principles of RTI.

An Overview of Response to Intervention/Instruction

Prior to the 2004 IDEIA legislation, children were identified with a specific learning disability through documentation of a discrepancy between the child’s IQ and academic achievement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). The new legislation requires states to permit schools to use an identification process based on a child’s response to a scientific, research-based intervention on the premise that the opportunity to assess a child’s response to good instruction is a more-viable process for identifying learning disabilities. With the general idea that before a child is classified as learning disabled, the school must be certain that the child has had the best and most-appropriate instruction possible, the RTI approach is to provide not only good classroom instruction but additional, more-intense instruction to those who demonstrate the need for more support in order to be successful in literacy learning.

The legislation and regulations do not specify a particular model or program, but rather give the states and school districts the responsibility to establish approaches that will meet the needs of the local community. Most models have a tiered system of organization that is often represented in a triangle (Figure 1) to demonstrate differences in the intensity of instruction and teacher expertise.

While there is no set number of tiers required, and other models may suggest four or more tiers, the percentages displayed in this depiction of three tiers conform to the expectation that
most children are adequately served by the classroom program of instruction (Tier 1) and the alternative tiers representing more-intense instructional conditions serve much smaller numbers of children. In regard to this tiered approach, Dorn and Schubert (2008) caution that a tiered model can be a concern if it causes the most-struggling readers to wait too long to receive the most-intensive instruction that they deserve (e.g., Tier 3) as this leads to a remediation mindset rather than a focus on acceleration. An RTI plan should include multiple layers of intervention with the most-intensive intervention up front for the lowest-achieving students (Dorn & Schubert).

The intent of the alternatives depicted in the triangle is to provide the instructional support all individual children need to be successful and to prevent learners from falling so far behind their age cohort that the chance for success is narrowed. There is a back-and-forth link between assessment and instruction requiring the use of information, rather than intuition, to plan for the nature and degree of help a child needs in order to learn.

As displayed in this 3-tier model, Tier 1 instruction is the high-quality, core classroom instruction that all children require in order to learn successfully in the classroom setting. Tier 2 provides children who are not demonstrating adequate progress within the core classroom curriculum with additional support, typically through more-focused, small-group or individual instruction, and more-frequent monitoring of progress so that instruction can be continuously modified to meet their needs. Tier 2 instruction results in one of three outcomes: (a) the child returns to core classroom instruction because the intervention was successful, (b) the child continues to receive the Tier 2 intervention, or (c) the child is offered Tier 3 support because the Tier 2 intervention resulted in little to no impact on learning. Tier 3 instruction, the most intensive, is typically offered in a one-on-one setting by a highly specialized teacher. A key feature of the levels, or tiers of support, is that instruction is based on ongoing assessment which can take multiple forms (e.g., running records, work samples, teacher observation, informal assessment).

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Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) suggest that we consider the following six considerations when designing RTI for prevention and identification:

1. Number of tiers in the RTI system with general education as the first and core of the design
2. Universal assessment of all children to plan instruction based on needs not a particular form of instruction
3. Problem solving by experts within the school to design prevention opportunities
4. A system for classifying responses to instruction offered
5. Teaming for decision making about student’s needs
6. Special education services that provide a valuable tier in the RTI design

The IRA Commission’s Guiding Principles for RTI

The IRA Commission on RTI developed its principles for RTI to guide schools, teachers, and specialists in their planning. I will summarize the six principles offered by the commission and then discuss the links we can find between Reading Recovery and these principles. IRA’s six principles are interrelated, thus they may seem to overlap in the discussion.

Instruction

RTI can be viewed from two perspectives: instruction and measurement. RTI is first and foremost high-quality, core literacy instruction offered by the classroom teacher for all learners at all levels. Thus, the classroom teacher’s ability to provide good first instruction and help most learners demonstrate success with the core program is significant. Instruction is guided by assessment, and therefore, the measurement of learning conducted by the classroom teacher in an ongoing fashion is also a critical part of the RTI model.

Responsive teaching and differentiation

This principle is a key reason that so many RTI models include a tiered approach, tiering of instruction is a common method for offering responsive teaching and differentiation of instruction to meet the needs of all children. Classroom teachers offer small-group instruction and use alternative grouping patterns. Small-group and individualized instruction are effective in reducing the number of students at risk of being classified as learning disabled. In contrast, it has been documented that teachers who offer only whole-group teaching refer more students for special

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education services than those who use a variety of instructional structures within the classroom (Johnston, Honchell, Duvall, Reed, & Reindl, 2009). Because students have different instructional needs, there is no one process or program that will meet the needs of all children in a classroom. Therefore, instruction should be derived from student-teacher interactions and not constrained by packaged programs. Access to a variety of learning opportunities within the delivery of core instruction is essential.

Assessment
As mentioned in Principle 1, the purpose of assessment is to guide instruction and therefore improve its quality. Working together, classroom teachers, reading specialists, and literacy coaches implement, analyze, and use assessment results to both plan instruction and monitor student performance. Multidimensional assessments that reflect the true nature of language and literacy provide vital information for instructional design. Key in the use of assessment is instruction to meet student needs, not identification of who is or is not learning disabled, although that may be the outcome for a small percentage of students. Just as instruction is differentiated, assessment is differentiated to include screening, diagnosis, and progress monitoring.

Collaboration
Success for children depends on strong, respectful partnerships among the school professionals, parents, and students. Such collaboration prevents blind spots when trying to problem solve a child’s instructional needs and avoids fragmentation of learning opportunities. The professionals with expertise in literacy need to be a part of problem-solving committees in action as well as those who know the child and the school instructional program best. A shared vision and common goals provided by the theory espoused at the school facilitate communication and cooperation among general educators, any specialists involved, and family members for both instruction and assessment. Collaboration works best when there is dedicated time and appropriate data available to the team.

Systemic and comprehensive
While the focus of RTI is on prevention and early identification, RTI is also intended to be embedded in a coherent and comprehensive language and literacy curriculum. Core instruction and all other forms of instruction need to be offered with efficacy and consistency, having been selected because of the relationship between the needs of the school population and the connection to the theoretical beliefs of the school. There needs to be adequate resources and support for both the instructional model and the assessment process.

Expertise
All students have the right to receive high-quality instruction from well-prepared teachers in the area of language and literacy. Research shows (Snow, Barnes, Chandles, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991) the importance of the teacher to language and literacy learning. This is especially true for teachers providing supplemental instruction if the goal is for all children to reach grade-level performance. This means that some children will need to learn faster than their classroom peers. Providing children who are having the most difficulty learning with instruction from teacher assistants or parent volunteers does not match with this goal. If a school has a diverse student population, and most do, teachers must be knowledgeable about language and literacy instruction and understand how to teach culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Summing up the IRA commission principles of RTI in a few words includes the following list: exemplary classroom instruction from effective teachers (whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction); professional learning communities to support classroom instruction; seamless assessment (both formative and summative); and access to intervention provided by highly qualified teachers for all children needing additional support.

An Overview of Reading Recovery
Reading Recovery is best known as early intervention in literacy for at-risk first-grade children (Clay, 2005). While this is the reason most school districts adopt Reading Recovery, there are other essential aspects of the intervention that make it particularly important to consider in the context of RTI.

In addition to the opportunity to bring a significant number of first-grade children to the average of their classes in the area of literacy, Reading Recovery provides teachers with high-quality professional learning in the area of literacy. This professional knowledge provides the school with an onsite literacy expert to support the literacy instruction offered by all teachers in the primary grades. This is accomplished through collaborations established between Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers and by the work of the Reading Recovery teacher during the other part of her day. The school determines how to best use the services of the Reading Recovery teacher by
selecting the service that will best meet the needs of the school. Options include small-group teaching either within the classroom or beyond the classroom, half-day classroom teaching, literacy coaching, teaching English language learners, or teaching special education students. In all of these examples, the school benefits from the knowledge and expertise that the teacher has gained through specialized training in Reading Recovery.

In addition to these direct benefits to a school, each Reading Recovery site is affiliated with a Reading Recovery university training center which provides support for problem solving literacy questions within school districts and schools. Reading Recovery teacher leaders can work with their trainer to train teachers who work with special populations of students to work one-on-one with children who are at the beginning stages of literacy development but are not in the first grade. This new opportunity is offered under the Literacy Lessons™ umbrella explained by Clay (2005). With this brief background about Reading Recovery, I will connect Reading Recovery to each of the IRA commission principles for RTI.

**Instruction**
Reading Recovery provides one-to-one instruction for children who are the lowest achievers in the first grade and serves as a supplement to the classroom, core reading program (Tier 1). As a preventative intervention, Reading Recovery should be available as soon as possible for children with the greatest difficulties.

The teaching is provided by the specially trained Reading Recovery teacher using Clay’s assessments and lesson design (Clay, 2002; 2005). Teaching is based on Clay’s complex theory of literacy learning (Clay, 2001) and uses many opportunities for reading and writing throughout the carefully designed lesson. The outcome for most children is accelerated learning demonstrated by both measureable outcomes (Clay, 2002) and observations by both the Reading Recovery and classroom teachers. Research confirms that Reading Recovery is successful with a diverse population of students (Rodgers, Gómez-Bellengé, Wang, & Schultz, 2005).

**Responsive teaching and differentiation**
Instruction in Reading Recovery is based on what the student already knows (Clay, 2005) and what the child needs to learn next. Daily assessment and lesson records are used to plan the individualized lessons. Thus the lessons are based on a problem-solving model rather than on a standard protocol. How long a child remains in Reading Recovery is based on individual progress with a maximum of 20 weeks of instruction.

**Assessment**
Assessment in Reading Recovery consists of Clay’s *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2002). The six tasks of the Observation Survey reflect the complex nature of literacy. In addition, daily assessments using running records track progress and inform instruction. Progress monitoring includes a graph of weekly performance on books read and charts of known reading and writing vocabulary. The assessments provide valuable information for daily teaching and are used to identify the strengths and needs of students who may require additional service or testing.

**Collaboration**
Reading Recovery provides a context for joint ownership and shared responsibility among teachers for the lowest-achieving children in the first grade. Because Reading Recovery supplements the classroom instruction, the Reading Recovery teacher and the classroom teacher meet often and also observe each other interacting with the child. The school team meets to share information about student progress and to assist with decisions about children to be served in Reading Recovery. The data from Reading Recovery provides valuable information about student outcomes and implementation of other literacy services offered in the school.

**Systemic and comprehensive**
Reading Recovery is a first-grade literacy intervention within the school’s comprehensive literacy plan. It does not operate in a vacuum, but is a part of the overall district or school design for high-quality literacy instruction for all students. The training provided through Reading Recovery supports the multiple roles of a Reading Recovery teacher within the school. Reading Recovery does have a set of Standards and Guidelines (2008) which guide its implementation to assure fidelity of implementation. Implementations and student performance are also monitored by annual, national data collection (Schmitt & Gregory, 2005). The data demonstrates Reading Recovery can provide consistent results for children and documents the cost effectiveness of Reading Recovery when compared to alternatives (Schmitt, Askew, Fountas, Lyons, & Pinnell, 2005).

**Expertise**
It is impossible to achieve positive, accelerated outcomes with Reading
Recovery students, all of whom are the most-struggling literacy learners in their first-grade classrooms, without extensive teacher expertise. Through the relationship between school districts and universities, Reading Recovery teachers are provided with initial training through graduate course work and subsequent, ongoing professional development with the site-based teacher leader. This on-the-job training is unique in its use of live teaching examples, guided discussion, and professional study of both theory and practice in Reading Recovery (DeFord, Lyons, & Pinnell, 1991; Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993).

Conclusions
It is clear that there are many connections between the work of the IRA Commission on RTI and the theory and practice of Reading Recovery. Professional development training materials produced by the Reading Recovery Council of North America through a grant provided by the U.S. Department of Education are resources for school and district personnel interested in exploring these connections further. (See page 85 of this issue for more details regarding the resources available from RRCNA.) Included in one online learning webcast (Johnston, et al., 2009) are concrete examples from a range of school districts. The plans reflect what we believe as professional educators — early intervention, meeting individual needs, in-depth conversation and assessment that get to the root of the question, and an expectation that learning for both children and adults is continuous.

The IRA commission believes in “embracing a model of prevention as opposed to a model of failure” (2009). A prevention model is intended to rectify a number of longstanding problems. These include the disproportionate number of minorities and English language learners identified as learning disabled and the need to wait for documented failure before providing services. It is productive to think of RTI as a comprehensive, systemic approach to teaching and learning to address language and literacy needs of all students through appropriate instruction at the appropriate time.

One of the best ways to provide quality instruction for all students is through investment in professional development designed to enhance each teacher’s expertise in using assessments to guide literacy instruction and in working successfully with unique and challenging children. The RTI legislation and regulations allow school districts to use up to 15% of their funding for students with disabilities for general education interventions to serve students who are at risk of being identified as learning disabled. This provides schools and districts with flexible funding to offer services to children in a prevention mode, such as Reading Recovery, while enhancing the overall expertise of school-based personnel to serve children as effectively as possible.

References


### About the Author

Barbara Honchell is an associate professor of language and literacy in the Watson School of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She has written many articles about literacy for young children and is the co-editor of *Literacy for Diverse Learners: Finding Common Ground in Today’s Classrooms*. Barbara was a Reading Recovery teacher leader in Moore County North Carolina for 10 years prior to coming to UNCW.