

A Critical Commentary on Response-to-Intervention

Summary

In 2004, the United States revised the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (originally passed in 1975) to allow schools to use a new educational model -- Response to Intervention (RTI) --to identify students with learning disabilities who would be eligible for special education. Since then, there has been much discussion of this model in the American educational field.

The RTI model requires regular teachers and special education teachers to cooperate with each other and deliver evidence-based instruction to students while systematically monitoring their progress. Only those students who cannot meet particular goals can receive special education services. Many see the RTI model as a response to the long-lasting controversy regarding the identification of learning disabilities. It is viewed as an improvement over the previous model, the “discrepancy model.” For instance, one group of researchers has argued that the discrepancy model is not capable of distinguishing students with learning disabilities from those with low achievement. The discrepancy model has also been criticized as a “wait-to-fail” model, because schools must wait until a student’s performance reaches a certain low threshold before they can provide intervention.

The introduction of RTI has led to significant changes in the American educational system. For example, it requires all educators to focus on students’ performance to a greater degree than before. Through the provision of various levels of instructional intervention, the model has the potential to provide every child the opportunity to learn successfully in school. However, it has not yet been demonstrated that it can solve all the problems that may emerge related to the identification of learning disabilities. In fact, several issues have been observed in this regard since the implementation of RTI. For example, some students may spend too much time in the stage of instructional intervention before receiving the special education services

they need. In terms of educational investment, the cost of a successful RTI model that emphasizes individualized intervention may be too high to be practicable. In addition, children for whom several levels of intervention have already failed to provide a diagnostic label that makes them eligible for special education services may not benefit from the delabeling project intrinsic to the RTI model. Finally, while one of the expectations on RTI is that it will reduce the high rate of students being identified as in need of special education services, some RTI field studies have not shown a decrease in the number of students in tier three, which is the level at which the most intensive instruction is provided -- thus, it does not show an improvement when compared to the previous discrepancy model of identification.

Although the RTI model as presently implemented may be not perfect, it does solve some issues in the current US education system. It mediates the gap between general education and special education, and as such it is an approach that benefits all disadvantaged children. In the RTI era, an education system needs to address the following questions: (a) which children count as “at-risk children” needing more intensive instruction than other children? (b) who are “nonresponders,” or students who cannot benefit from the services available under a specific level of intervention? (c) who should be responsible for delivering RTI interventions? (d) what instructions should be included in these interventions? (e) how can education professionals of various sorts best bridge the gap between research and practice? and (f) can student with learning disabilities overcome their deficits and be successful in school by means of this model?

In Taiwan, the system for identifying learning disabilities has adopted the discrepancy model from the United States, and this model has evidenced similar flaws and been similarly controversial there as in the United States. Some Taiwanese researchers have suggested borrowing the RTI model from the United States to solve the challenges of identifying learning disabilities. This idea, however, should be carefully reviewed before being committed to. The concept of learning disabilities is only at an infant stage in Taiwan, and many educators and members of the public have only learned this term in the last fifteen years. The lack of public awareness of the characteristics of learning disabilities is still a great concern in Taiwan. In addition, the effects of the different language systems of Chinese and English on the

individual manifestation of learning disabilities in Chinese students are still a mystery. While the theoretical framework needed to tackle these issues is still “under construction,” using RTI as an identification tool may lead teachers, researchers, and policymakers to a wrong conclusion: that there are no differences between students with learning disabilities and low achievers and that students with learning disabilities need assistance only in academic areas. In addition, evidence-based instruction and highly qualified teachers will surely go hand in hand in a successful RTI model. In short, more evidence-based research and teacher preparation need to be conducted before the implications of the RTI identification model in Taiwan can be safely predicted. Otherwise, even with good intentions, the RTI model in Taiwan may be as ineffective as the current (discrepancy) model of identification.

This article first reviews the fundamentals of RTI, then goes on to evaluate various effects of the implementation of the model, and finally discusses potential challenges in RTI implementation. It is hoped that this article can help educators in Taiwan take advantage of the experiences of the United States in order to rethink the Taiwanese model of identification and remediation for students with learning disabilities.

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