The 2004 IDEA legislation introducing RTI invites schools to use 15% of their special education money for regular education interventions. The law requires “appropriate,” “scientific, research-based” instruction, by “qualified personnel” (Federal Register 2006, p. 46786). It offers considerable flexibility and does not specify separate instructional tiers or interwoven layers or any other structure. It requires regular assessments but specifies neither the nature nor frequency—three times a year or three times a week.

The law describes RTI in two ways: as a strategy for identifying students with learning disabilities (LD), replacing the IQ discrepancy identification approach, and as a strategy for reducing the number of students who end up with disabilities, part of guaranteeing “appropriate instruction.” These two framings have different assumptions and implications.

Framed as a strategy for identifying students with LD, RTI becomes a measurement problem, emphasizing standardization. Proponents favor standard assessments and interventions, preferably scripted, for standard amounts of time, to increase the reliability of the identification process. In this frame, the valued expertise is the design and selection of tests that can be used by people with limited expertise, and packaged, often scripted, intervention programs.

Framed as a strategy for preventing LD, RTI becomes an instructional problem, emphasizing responsive teaching and the most instructionally useful assessment, and providing the means and context for improving teaching and teacher expertise.

Framed as identification, RTI focuses on the qualities of the student. Framed as prevention, it focuses on the qualities of instruction in relation to the student. The International Reading Association’s (IRA) position statements on RTI and Assessment favor the latter. Indeed, IRA and the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) joint Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing (hereafter, The Standards) Standard 3 asserts that “The primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning” (IRA & NCTE, 2010).

An Instructional Frame for RTI

There is good reason to take up the instructional frame. Although there are differences in students’ abilities that make it harder for some to acquire literacy, given appropriate instruction, students with the most limited competencies have almost all been taught to read on par with their peers.

Some programs have reduced the number of students still having difficulty learning to read to 1–2% of the population (Al Otaiba & Torgesen, 2007; Clay, 1990; Vellutino & Scanlon, 2002). By collaboratively fine-tuning teaching interactions, it is even possible to bring most of that lowest group to average performance in 26–30 weeks (Phillips & Smith, 1997).
Ensuring optimal instruction implies, first, focusing attention on teacher expertise. Students experiencing the most difficulty acquiring literacy should be taught by teachers with the most expertise in literacy. Professional development that expands a teaching community’s expertise in literacy teaching is critical (Dorn & Schubert, 2008).

Second, we must guide instruction with research and evidence. Third, assessment practices must provide data, focus, and a process and context that will increase the responsiveness of instruction. Fourth, if our most expert focused instruction produces inadequate results, we must turn our assessment attention to our instructional interactions before concluding that a student has a LD.

**Expert Teaching**
The Federal Register (2006) pointed out (often), that “the clear intent of the Act is to ensure that all children with disabilities have teachers with the subject matter knowledge and teaching skills necessary to assist children with disabilities to achieve high academic standards” (p. 46555). This focus on relevant expertise applies both before and after classifying a student as having LD.

Because the majority of students identified as having LD have difficulties acquiring literacy, expertise in literacy teaching and learning is central. Scanlon and her colleagues trained interventionists to work with small groups of kindergartners, reducing the number of students at risk enormously. They then repeated the intervention by teaching the kindergarten teachers to do the same thing and got the same effects (Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, & Sweeney, 2008). After a subsequent year of first-grade interventions, none of the intervention students lost ground in some schools, while in others, more than 50% did. Teacher expertise and school context are crucial.

**Research-Based Instruction**
The law requires grounding intervention instruction in research and evidence. When we use research to inform our instruction, we must be careful not to overgeneralize. For example, research showing an intervention to be effective on average does not mean it was effective for each student. In studies that show an effect on average, some students do not gain, and often some regress (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008).

Similarly, in general, intervention research showing an effect on word recognition does not generalize to comprehension, and this is particularly true for nonmainstream students and students from poverty (Al Otaiba & Torgesen, 2007). Good teaching decisions require viewing literacy minimally as personally and socially meaningful problem-solving practices.

**Assessment and Instruction**
*The Standards* (IRA & NCTE, 2010) assert that “Assessments must recognize and reflect the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing” (Standard 5) particularly because assessment practices shape instructional practices. If assessments focus on reading and ignore writing, or on word reading speed and accuracy, and ignore engagement and comprehension, instruction will be similarly narrow.

Standard 7 asserts that “The consequences of an assessment procedure are the first, and most important, consideration in establishing the validity of the assessment.” Assessments that help focus instructional attention on the processes of reading and writing are particularly important for students experiencing difficulty because, among other things, focusing on the process prevents students from drawing conclusions about permanent deficits (Dweck, 2006).

The *Standards* also make it clear that the most important assessment is the teacher’s ability to notice and document what the student knows and can do and to provide feedback and adjust instruction accordingly. Personally memorable assessment information will be most important.

Consider two ways of documenting student’s developing knowledge of the alphabetic principle: (1) regular, speeded testing of phonemes and letters, or (2) regular conferences with students, collections of dated writing samples, and a cumulative record of alphabet knowledge in a portfolio. These two approaches have different instructional implications and offer different information. They also position students differently with respect to their own learning.

Similarly, records of the processes a student uses when reading material of appropriate difficulty provides very different information from records of how many words a student can read accurately from a
grade-level passage, focusing instruction differently. Besides collecting data that productively focus instruction, there must be a context and process for examining the data that enables teachers to confront challenging data, and to gain support for changing teaching accordingly (Dorn & Schubert, 2008).

**Instructional Interactions**

When our best instruction is not as effective as we hoped for particular students, the reason often lies in our instructional interactions. When we collaborate with colleagues to examine the strategies these students are using in the context of the guidance we are providing in our interactions with them, we can change our interactions and their learning trajectories (Lyons, 1991; Phillips & Smith, 1997). This is difficult assessment in which we make ourselves vulnerable, which is why it is dependent on a supportive learning community.

Teaching students who experience difficulty acquiring literacy requires paying close attention to how they go about literate activities and carefully choosing places to support them while keeping them in control of processing. This involves noticing patterns of behavior (assessment), which requires a deep understanding of literacy and how students acquire it.

References


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