

Response to Intervention

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Abstract

This introduction provides a context for the other articles included in this volume. The Learning Disabilities Initiative, a multiyear effort at the Office of Special Education Programs, has been focused on a more efficient and effective process for determining specific learning disability eligibility.

Learning disability (LD) eligibility determination has been controversial since its inception despite the fact that it is the only disability category for which eligibility criteria are provided in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA states that an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team may determine that a child has a specific learning disability if the team finds that the child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, or mathematics reasoning [§300.541(a)]. The requirements in P.L. 94-142 are complex. One reason for much of the controversy over LD determination may be that the eligibility criteria were not well operationalized, leaving each state to decide on its own how it would determine the discrepancy between ability and achievement. Questions about the eligibility process, as well as observed limitations in how students are served, have led researchers, professional organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders in the field of special education to come together to attempt to find a better method of assessment—a method that will lead to appropriate identification as well as instructional improvements for students with LD.

The number of students identified as having learning disabilities has increased more than 200% since the category was established in 1977, with some researchers asserting that many students have been misidentified or unidentified (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). The primary issue of concern is that the right students are determined eligible in a timely fashion. The current reliance on discrepancy to determine eligibility often leaves students with LD unidentified and often floundering academically well into the upper grades of elementary school until the discrepancy becomes significant enough to warrant services. In addition, the current identification process does not provide information that can be used to make instructional decisions. These concerns regarding LD eligibility are again in the forefront of the current IDEA reauthorization discussion. The current bills in both the House and the Senate address LD identification issues. In short, the bills align with the emerging premise behind response-to-intervention models that students should receive effective instruction with progress monitoring before being considered for special education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Speece, 2002).

The early and accurate identification of children with disabilities is critical to ensuring that students receive services that will help them to be successful academically. During the 1997 reauthorization process the Na-

tional Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) wrote a letter expressing concern that neither early nor accurate identification of specific learning disability (SLD) was occurring. The response from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to the NJCLD letter has become known as the *LD Initiative*, a multiyear process intended to bring researchers, professional organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders to a consensus regarding the identification and implementation of improved procedures for LD identification. A series of roundtables, commissioned papers, work groups, and an LD summit produced the following conclusions about the concept of learning disabilities, IQ/achievement discrepancy, and response to intervention: (a) Strong converging evidence supports the concept of SLD, which is specific in the sense that this disorder significantly affects a relatively narrow range of academic and performance outcomes; (b) IQ/achievement discrepancy is neither necessary nor sufficient for identifying individuals with SLD—IQ tests do not need to be given in most evaluations of children with SLD; and (c) response to quality intervention is the most promising method of alternate identification—any effort to scale up response to intervention should be based on problem-solving models that use progress monitoring to gauge the intensity of intervention in relation to the student's response

to intervention (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002). The consensus on these ideas has made it possible for researchers as well as advocacy organizations to move forward and focus on operationalizing the implementation of response to intervention (RTI) and measuring its effects, rather than concentrating on the inadequacy of the discrepancy method of assessment.

RTI has been broadly described as a process in which students are provided quality instruction, their progress is monitored, those who do not respond appropriately are provided additional instruction and their progress is monitored, and those who continue to not respond appropriately are considered for special education services (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003, p. 159). Proponents of RTI believe that a successful model for making special education decisions should be based on structured, data-based problem solving, flexible service delivery, regular monitoring of student progress on socially valid outcome measures, and a focus on the natural classroom contexts. The basic RTI model has been conceptualized as a three-tiered prevention model, with primary intervention consisting of the general education program; secondary intervention involving fixed duration, targeted, evidence-based small group interventions; and tertiary intervention involving individualized and intensive services that may or may not be similar to traditional special education services. There are variations in how the levels are operationalized, and thus no single model is currently accepted as the "gold standard" of RTI. However, these core features of RTI have been identified: (a) high quality, research-based classroom instruction, (b) universal screening, (c) continuous progress monitoring, (d) research-based secondary or tertiary interventions, (e) progress monitoring during interventions, and (f) fidelity measures. Decisions about needed services are based on the quality of student responses to research-based interventions.

The discussions of the LD initiative, and more specifically the work of the OSEP-funded National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD), established to conduct research in the area of LD identification with a focus on determining a more efficient and effective process for identifying children with learning disabilities, and to provide assistance to schools to improve the manner in which they assess and identify students with learning disabilities, have done much to further operationalize RTI models and examine their effectiveness in identifying students with LD. However, certain questions still need to be addressed: (a) How should screening for secondary intervention occur? (b) How should secondary intervention be formulated? (c) What are the feasibility and consequences of RTI? (d) How should *unresponsiveness* to secondary intervention be operationalized in an RTI approach to LD identification? (e) How many tiers are needed within RTI to achieve acceptable prevention outcomes and to achieve acceptable patterns of LD identification? and (f) What models are available for LD identification other than RTI?

Next Steps

Currently, the House and Senate bills presented for the reauthorization of IDEA indicate that local education agencies are not required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in any of the main academic areas (House Bill 1350; Senate Bill 1248). Both bills also provide that the local education agent (LEA) may use a process that determines if the child responds to research-based intervention. Although this language does not mandate the use of RTI, it does authorize states to determine a more efficient and effective method of LD identification, and current thinking is focused on some RTI process. As the papers featured in this issue demon-

strate, there are many facets of RTI that still need to be closely examined and validated, and consensus around a clearly operationalized process has still not emerged. As the papers also demonstrate, special education and the students it helps will benefit from an identification process that moves away from focusing primarily on problems within the learner, toward a process that focuses on improving student achievement by improving the overall instructional process.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Office of Special Education Programs or the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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