Response to Intervention and Authentic Assessment

Early intervention with children from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds can lead to long term success in education. This article outlines a detailed method of meeting these children at their skill level and giving them the attention they need to excel.

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Jackson is a five-year old boy who lives in a "lower socio-economic" financially insecure home. His caretakers are his grandparents whose primary income is the grandfather's disability social security income. Jackson does not have siblings and rarely plays with other children. There are no books in the house and Jackson's primary form of entertainment is watching television. When Jackson entered kindergarten he had not experienced a group setting with other children, was unfamiliar with a structured schedule, and had little exposure to literature or language experiences. At the end of the kindergarten year, Jackson's teachers suggested that he repeat kindergarten because his academic and behavioral development lagged behind his peers. His teachers feared that he did not have the skills to be successful in first grade.

This brief description of a real child highlights some of the obstacles faced by many children in the United States today, particularly those who come from low-income homes. There is an increasingly large chasm between the number of children who are on target for success in school and those who need extra help to close challenges in behavioral and academic development. In fact, evidence suggests that the trend is irreversible if these gaps are not closed by 3rd grade (Neuman, 2006).

There is, however, an effort to ensure that all children, such as Jackson, start school ready to learn. Families, teachers, administrators, and policy makers are seeking ways to intervene early in the lives of young children to understand what young children know and what they can do in the early years to ensure success across the child's school career (National Head Start Association, 2014).

One method that has emerged as a way of reversing this trend is the use of early intervention services (EIS) within early childhood education. Early intervention is emphasized in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). The goal of early intervention is to provide the necessary support a child may need to succeed before gaps in learning become too large to overcome without intensive and specialized help (National Head Start, 2014).

Early intervention usually begins with an assessment of the child's academic or behavioral performance to determine where strengths and weaknesses occur. During the initial phase, assessment may reveal that the child has a particular skill that must be addressed before he or she can move forward. Teachers will also use assessment data to determine how far a child's performance deviates from other peers of the same age group or within the same classroom. Early intervention services may then use this assessment data to set appropriate and individualized goals and plan instruction based on ways that best meet the child's strengths and weaknesses.

Aligning Assessment with Recommended Early Childhood Practices

The task of the early childhood educator is to view assessment as a useful tool that helps teachers achieve long-term and short-term goals with children, it occurs as children work, and provides information to teachers about how children learn best (Johnston & Costello, 2005). Appropriate assessment is based on what teachers know about the children they teach, the culture and abilities of the child, and the basic components of development (Wasik, 2012).

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Early intervention can help every student achieve success in their educational journey.

To achieve this end, a system of support has emerged that guides teachers who embrace appropriate use of assessment in the early grades. Aptly named, Response to Intervention (RTI) is an early intervention practice offering all students access to high quality instruction, based on students' academic needs (Department of Education, 2007; McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). The RTI model is built on a multi-tier system of support designed for K-12 students. The first level is defined as primary instruction (Tier I) in the general education classroom with the regular class-wide curriculum. Those who are not successful at Tier I level may move to more intensive evidenced-based interventions at the secondary level or Tier II. This may be conducted in or out of the general education classroom. The highest

level of intervention or Tier III is reserved for targeted individualized instruction among students who demonstrate negligible response to the interventions used in Tier II (Gentry & Windfield, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2011; McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). Tier III students may be part of general or special education based on results from progress monitoring and individualized special education assessment (Ervin, 2014).

Within Tiers I, II and III, RTI serves as an integrated service delivery system that works across general education and special education. Common agreements about the core suppositions of RTI provide a foundation for teachers, parents, and administrators who collaborate and plan for their students. Five core suppositions of RTI are described below with accompanying descriptions.

Core Suppositions of RTI

The RTI method emerged as a way of supporting students who struggle in school. Understanding of the RTI model differs among local school districts due to the slowly evolving understanding and varying fidelity to the model (McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). The RTI approach seeks to provide a comprehensive approach to educational planning (Brozo, 2010; McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). The core suppositions of RTI are described in this article with examples for classroom use.

Supposition One: The educational system can effectively teach all children.

When teachers use a scientific, research-based curriculum with con-

sistent implementation all students can be successfully served by the education system. When instruction is matched to the learning needs of individual children, success occurs.

Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998) describe scientific, research-based curriculum as precise instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics integrated with many reading and writing experiences. Programs based on these principles will include four core practices: (a) instruction in sound structures, (b) familiarity with spelling-sound correspondences, (c) sight word recognition, and (d) independent and reading aloud experiences.

For example, a child who does not successfully develop fluency skills in a core reading program with his or her peers may become successful when receiving supplemental intervention in a small group of students to practice one of the principles listed above. Example: *During a class read aloud, Jackson may move to a small group to work with two other students. His teacher provides a separate activity that uses a matching game to help Jackson recognize high frequency sight words in the text the class is reading. The read aloud continues with the small group after the sight-reading activity.* This example clearly illustrates how Supposition One may be addressed in classroom practice.

Supposition Two: Early intervention prevents later problems.

Early screening and regular monitoring of academic skills will help identify problems before they progress. Students will receive intervention early and be able to build a strong foundation for future academic success (McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). Standardized screeners are produced for both math and reading and have been developed as brief assessments that help to identify students who may face challenges in their academic outcomes. One example of a screener designed for Kindergarten is the FAST: earlyReading English Screener (FastBridge Learning, 2016). This screener can be administered in two-three minutes and will assess reading skills such as concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding. Teachers may administer the FAST: earlyReading English Screener at the beginning of the academic year to the whole class and at multiple times throughout the year to monitor student progress. As a result of using the screener, children can receive intensive support quickly. This will increase the likelihood that the child's reading skills will improve at the same rate as his or her peers.

> # *Early Intervention can help underprivileged kids succeed.*

Example: *As a result of using the FAST: Early Reading English Screener at the beginning of the school year, the teacher realizes that Jackson has trouble identifying the number of sounds in one-syllable words. Jackson receives small group instruction that helps him repeat nursery rhymes to practice sound repetition. Jackson's teacher uses the screener again in December to monitor the progress of the student's in her classroom. The screener reveals that two other children have trouble with syllable segmentation. Intensive support is provided through the use of a game using tokens to count syllables.*

Supposition Three: Multi layers of intervention must address academic problems.

Three levels of support (Tiers I, II, and III) within the RTI framework gradually increase in intensity and provide a guide for delivering interventions to children with academic issues. Most children within a classroom will achieve academic success with the same type instruction. This initial layer of instruction is known as Tier I of the RTI model. However, a small percentage of children in a classroom may need extra support in a small group. This is referred to as Tier II in RTI. An even smaller percentage of children may need help that is individualized for their specific learning needs. This layer of intervention is known as Tier III. When all three approaches are used in the classroom and school, the student who struggles will get the help they need and experience success early (McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). Example: *Jackson has been receiving support in Tier II with other children as they develop better phonemic awareness skills. Jackson's teacher gives weekly assessments to the small group and determines that two children in the group have made progress. Jackson, however, has not made progress with the intervention provided by the teacher. Tier III, independent one to one instruction, is now provided to Jackson. This intervention is very intensive and focused on specific sounds that Jackson does not hear. Instead of repeating nursery rhymes, Jackson's teacher allows him to match blocks with the sounds in a word. This technique allows Jackson to use both auditory and physical modalities to recognize the word sounds.*

Supposition Four: Academic

interventions emerge from a collaborative problem solving approach.

Teachers work together to examine academic problems that children encounter. Rather than relying solely on a standardized score to plan instruction, or one teacher deciding upon the course of intervention, teachers work together review a student's response to instruction. Decisions are then made concerning further implementation of an instructional method. Problem solving with other professionals help teachers identify the student's strengths and choose alternative interventions based on those strengths (McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). For example, it may be noted by one teacher that a student is not successful with a particular learning strategy. This teacher will notify the other teachers who work with the child to determine how this child learns best. They may review different assignments, teaching methods, personal observations, anecdotal notes or other assessments to come to a conclusion about the student's capabilities. The team of teachers will then devise a plan together that uses the child's strengths to plan instruction. Example: *Jackson's teacher analyzes her notes concerning Jackson's progress in phonemic awareness. She has used different instructional techniques with Jackson. However, as she looks at her notes and reflects on Jackson's work, she realizes that Jackson has made little progress. She calls a meeting of other teachers who work with Jackson and asks these teachers to help her identify Jackson's learning strengths. They realized that Jackson's high activity level and willingness to participate in dramatic play at school could be viewed as two overlooked strengths. The group suggested using nursery rhymes in a*

Teachers work together to examine academic problems that children encounter.

Photos Courtesy of Nancy Alexander

dramatic play scenario. Jackson could memorize the words to the rhyme and create a play based on the rhyme. As Jackson learned the words to the rhyme he would be instructed to clap out the syllables. After learning the play, Jackson could perform the play for his friends.

Supposition Five: Instruction is based on frequent monitoring of student outcomes.

Regular assessments that monitor the child's progress alert the teacher to academic difficulties, enabling a shift in instructional methods to quickly occur. Progress monitoring is also the tool that can highlight the need for the secondary and tertiary (Tier II and Tier III) services and

provide an entryway into Special Education placement (McLane, 2016; McLnerney & Elledge, 2013). For instance, implementation of progress monitoring begins with measuring the student's current level of performance. Long-term academic goals are identified and the student's academic performance is measured on a weekly or monthly basis. This is demonstrated when a student who is screened for vocabulary knowledge three weeks after entering an early childhood program may demonstrate poor expressive vocabulary skills. Small group instruction is provided and the student's expressive vocabulary skills will be assessed each week to determine growth. If no growth is noted through the weekly assessments, the student may receive intensive supports. At each phase of the plan, regular assessments are used to determine if the student is responding to the extra support and progressing in expressive vocabulary knowledge. Example: *Jackson's teacher uses a running record to assess his progress each week. At the end of three weeks, the running records are analyzed to determine if progress is being made in phonemic awareness.*

Monitoring Student Progress within the Multiple Layers of RTI

RTI is driven by examining the progress of individual children through the use of frequent tests that assess a child's demonstration of a specific skill. Progress is measured by comparing the teacher's expected rate of learning for the child with the child's actual rates of learning (McLane, 2016). Issues such as the child's attention span and interest can make an assessment score vary from one day to the next. In addi-

tion, many children in today's early childhood classrooms are English language learners who are learning a first and second language simultaneously. Full understanding of an assessment question may be difficult if the child does not completely comprehend the language of the assessment instrument (Gottlieb & Hamayan, 2007; Malone, 2011; Wasik, 2012).

> ### RTI provides a toolbox of assessment methods.

Using Appropriate Assessment Methods

One way of overcoming these issues while assessing children within the varying RTI layers is the use of authentic assessment to monitor academic progress. Authentic assessment is based on the assumption that students and teachers participate in assessment in ways that enable and encourage students to assume more control over their learning and to provide teachers with information for improving instruction (Layton & Lock, 2007; Lidz, 2009; Wortham & Hardin, 2016). Authentic assessment provides practice-based evidence that has become recognized as "more developmentally appropriate, representative, accurate, functional, and strengths based" (Bagnato, McLean, Macy, & Neisworth, 2011, p. 246). For example, teachers may use writing to assess content knowledge or develop a portfolio of student work to assess reading, writing or math growth over time (Bag-

nato, McLean, Macy, & Neisworth, 2011). Use of these types of assessment artifacts helps teachers understand growth within children and the metacognitive skills children use to complete the assignments. Both outcome data and metacognitive understanding can help students and teachers plan more effective instruction in the future. Authentic assessment benefits teachers, students, and families in substantial and equitable ways (Serafini, 2010).

The following assessment practices describe a variety of authentic assessment practices that could be used in an RTI framework. They are included in this paper because they have been widely accepted as part of a balanced literacy system by early childhood practitioners in an effort to monitor the ongoing developmental milestones of every child. Appropriate ages for individual use of assessment practices are also noted within.

Anecdotal records. (subhead) Observation is an important technique for making academic assessments. Teachers are actively observing as children engage in classroom activities. Teachers often doubt if they have the ability to assess the strengths and the needs of children by simply observing them. Gullo (1987, 2005), however, has shown that teachers' evaluations based on observations correlate highly with objective measures of children's academic performance. Although traditional assessment focuses on what children have learned, observation allows teachers to assess learning processes as children actively engage in behaviors such as problem solving. Anecdotal records enable teachers to understand the behaviors of children. Brief, objective narrative descriptions of specific events

are recorded as children interact in reading, writing, class discussions, or other activities. Observations are made of academic, emotional, social, and physical behaviors. These records are useful in noting changes in developmental behaviors. Questions such as the following could provide information concerning the developmental growth of individual children.

- *"What would happen if …?"*
- *"How do these activities show that Miguel is . . .?"*
- *"What is James' thinking in regards to…?"*
- *"Are these age appropriate behaviors for Contessa?"*

Checklists. (subhead)Checklists are often used by teachers to assess the academic development of children. Using checklists, teachers can record and examine a series of behaviors and responses, which can help determine children's skills and developmental characteristics. Categories may include descriptive and specific statements of traits, social or emotional behaviors, developmental characteristics, interests, academic skills, knowledge, or concepts. These instruments are useful in preparing children's progress reports and for providing specific information to parents.

Conferences

Conferences are an indispensable assessment method of teachers. Reading and writing conferences provide children with the opportunity to participate in their own journal writing and is a good source for determining progress in skill development and evaluation. Teachers have the opportunity to note concerns and interests, as well as invented spellings, grammatical errors, and usage errors. This information can be used to form instructional groups. Although journals should not be graded, they give teachers insight into children's conceptual understanding of mathematical, scientific or literacy-based information.

Story retelling

Story retelling is a popular activity with both teachers and students. As children retell a story in their own words, teachers can assess their comprehension of what was read. Some teachers like to take a retelling for later comparison or assessment. When not limited to only answering questions, children have the opportunity to recall as much of the content as possible, yielding a more thorough assessment. The teacher can use a beneficial procedure by asking children to retell a story as if they were telling it to a friend who had never heard the story before. If necessary, teachers can prompt children by suggesting a beginning such as "Once upon a time . . .", asking what comes next, or asking relevant questions, such as "What was the problem in the story?" Looking beyond small details of recall, teachers can examine retelling holistically. In addition, teachers can often see how children relate the story to their lives.

Running records

Teachers record exactly the words children read to assess children's reading behavior (Clay, 2007). Running records are easy to use and do not require much teacher preparation. Teachers record everything a child does or says as they read a passage of at least 100 words. Running records help make teachers aware of the types of miscues a child is making and provide some evidence of why the miscue was made. These records also help teachers estimate the child's reading level. After the running record, comprehension is also evaluated.

Child observation

Child observation has been used for many years in early childhood classrooms to monitor children's development. Moreover, observation is a method accepted by practitioners as a way of gathering authentic and useful information regarding children's development. The Preschool Child Observation Record (COR) is one example of an observation-based assessment instrument designed by High Scope for children ages two and one-half to six years old. To use the COR, the trained teacher assesses each child's behavior in six key developmental indicators (KDIs): (a) initiative, (b) social relations, (c) creative representation, (d) movement and music, (e) language and literacy, and (f) mathematics and science (High Scope, 2010).

Self-assessment

Self-assessment enables older students to benefit greatly as they assess their own work in reading and writing. The children have opportunities to determine their strengths and needs, evaluate their progress over time, think about ideas in their work, and feel ownership of their work. Self-assessment helps students assume ultimate responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers can help students discover options for improvement. When assessing their writing, the children make decisions about what to change. Students can help each other with self-assessment by learning to co-edit and listen to fellow classmates. Sentence frames, which

Observation is a great tool for gathering authentic and useful information about a child's development.

Photos Courtesy of Nancy Alexander

are useful in establishing dialogue, may include phrases such as: (a) *"This is an interesting story about . . ."*, (b) *"Can you tell me about . . . "*, (c) *"Give us more details about how it looked (sounded, smelled, tasted, felt, etc.)?"*, (f) *"Explain how . . ."*, (g) *"What happened to the . . ."*.

Portfolios

Portfolios involve a systematic collecting of children's work. The work includes process samples and product samples. Process samples are works-in-progress that show how a student thinks, emphasizing strategies, and uses procedures. Product samples are finished, revised works that show a student's achievements. Product samples can include a variety of items such as stories, reports, projects, surveys, letters, journal

writing, literature extensions, logs of books read and comments, responses to literary components, unedited first drafts, revised first drafts, writings in progress, interesting thoughts to remember, audio tapes of reading, a list of favorite books and authors, and self-evaluations.

There are various types of portfolios which allow teachers many options for finding what works best for their students. When using portfolios, the teacher and child assess and evaluate together. Both the teacher and student choose samples for the portfolio. The teacher adds other records such as checklists, anecdotal notes, running records, and conference notes. Chen and Martin (2000) assert that the aforementioned "represent evidence of the child's performance and development" (p. 1). The

strength of the working portfolio is that it represents the most accurate picture of the children's progress, and it includes process and product samples showing daily progress. Teachers must be careful not to dominate the decision-making involved in placing materials in the portfolio. The portfolio should be kept in a central place to encourage the children's involvement and to ensure a sense of ownership.

Portfolios can serve as the basis to examine effort, improvement, process and achievements. Students and teachers can work together to understand student's strengths, needs and progress. Bredekamp (2011) cites seven values of an ongoing assessment that occur through the use of portfolios: (a) represents the range of reading and writing in which

children are engaged, (b) engages children in assessing their progress and accomplishments, and in establishing continuous learning, (c) measures each child's achievement while allowing for individual differences, (d) represents a collaborative approach to assessment, (e) has a goal of child self-assessment, (f) addresses improvement, effort, and achievement, and (g) links assessment and teaching to learning.

> **The RTI method supports struggling students.**

Summary and Conclusions

The increased concern over closing the achievement gap among all children in the early childhood years has prompted the creation of a fresh approach to the instruction of young children. RTI is considered an early intervention tool for closing these gaps by identifying weaknesses early before the learning or behavioral chasm becomes too wide. The core suppositions of RTI (i.e., schools can teach all children effectively, early intervention prevents later problems, multiple layers of intervention is necessary, collaboration is required, and instruction is based on frequent monitoring) provide a way to plan appropriate instruction and embed needed supports within varying levels of intervention. For RTI to accomplish this mission, assessment techniques are necessary that help teachers understand the full depth and breadth of the child's knowledge.

Effective authentic assessment strategies as described above can achieve this goal by providing a holistic picture of the child's level of functioning through a rich pool of data that captures a student's deep knowledge and understanding within an authentic context. Authentic assessment will create a powerful force to identify strengths and weakness of all children, aiding teachers in designing more successful interventions. Moreover, the effect will also ensure a stronger RTI model and, thereby, achieve the overall goals of early intervention.

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President's Message, continued

6. SECA and Kaplan have partnered to create a new annual award, the "*Phil Acord Award*," that will recognize and honor a "male" in the field who has distinguished himself in his work for the well-being of young children in the South. This award has been created in honor of Phil Acord, a native from Tennessee and past SECA President, who has tirelessly advocated for young children across the South. Dr. Floyd Creech, from South Carolina, was recognized at the SECA Conference in Biloxi as the first recipient of this award!

As you've now heard, SECA and affiliates have their work cut out for them. But the list is organized, the tasks are clear, and the commitment is strong! Together we will *move forward* and we will *make a difference*!

SECA's second transition involves the challenging process of hiring an Executive Director. Glenda Bean will be retiring in May 2017. She has been an exemplary Executive Director, having guided our association forward for many years! Words can't begin to express our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for her many years of service!

The Succession Committee, chaired by Dr. Janie Humphries and comprised of devoted SECA Past Presidents and Affiliate Presidents, has worked diligently *reviewing* applications for the SECA position of Executive Director and *interviewing* prospective candidates. On behalf of SECA, I thank the Committee for their commitment and arduous work on carrying out these tasks. An annoucement will be forthcoming

I invite you to enjoy this edition of *Dimensions*. The articles reflect a wide range of topics that are at the forefront in the field of Early Care and Education.

Sincerely,

Carol C. Montealegre, M.S.

SECA President