PAST ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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Three broad issues continue to dramatically impact the education of children with specific learning disabilities (SLD): (a) the development and implementation of scientifically defensible methods of identification, (b) the development and implementation of scientific interventions to ensure that children with SLD have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum, and (c) ensuring that children with SLD benefit from school improvement and accountability efforts that are underway across the country.

Recently, active discussion has focused on the methods of identifying students with SLD (Bradley & Danielson, 2004; Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002). In this brief article, no attempt will be made to summarize these discussions; however, we will provide hypotheses regarding the near-term future of LD identification.

The amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) specifically state that "a local educational agency (LEA) may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures. ..." [§ 614(b)(6)(B), IDEA 2004)]. This language, along with research findings that have emanated from the recent work of the OSEP Learning Disabilities Initiative, will likely encourage many states to pursue response to intervention (RTI) as an approach to SLD identification. States will most likely review the RTI models in place across the country as they consider which procedures to adopt, such as problem-solving models or prereferral strategies.

In the next few years, we anticipate that information will be disseminated to SEAs and LEAs regarding models of identification, which will include the present level of scientific support for the various approaches. Further, OSEP-funded technical assistance centers will help states and, to some extent, school districts identify and implement new approaches to identification. Although there is currently no one preferred, validated model of RTI, as an approach to identification RTI has significant conceptual appeal. Most important, RTI begins with the implementation of scientifically based, schoolwide interventions and promotes intervention at the first indication of non-response.

The greatest challenge in implementing RTI is that we have limited experience implementing it on a large scale, across all academic areas and age levels. Ideally, large-scale implementation of innovations would be preceded by large research and development efforts. However, policy often precedes and drives research and development. We have seen this in the past with assessment, access to the curriculum, and discipline issues. As a result, there will likely be significant innovation at the state and local level, some of which will prove to be effective and, eventually, may lead to more formalized policies and practices. Although we have much to learn by continuing to evaluate such innovations, we remain optimistic that this new approach to identification will be more effective and efficient in identifying children with SLD.

It is our belief that an emphasis on RTI will be consistent with a shifting of emphasis from process to outcomes for students with SLD. This is an important shift both practically and theoretically for the field of SLD, which has historically concentrated more on the search for the specific condition and its cause than on intervention effectiveness (Ysseldyke, 2002). As reflected in IDEA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), current policies

require that students with disabilities: (a) have access to the general curriculum, (b) have their progress in the curriculum monitored, and (c) participate in accountability assessments in a meaningful way.

When RTI procedures are used, interventions and their specific effects on the student are monitored continuously, ensuring that modifications can be made in the student's instruction as needed (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004). Students with SLD are a heterogeneous group with varied needs; thus, the match between student and intervention is not guaranteed without individualizing instruction based on assessment (Lloyd, 2002). RTI reinforces a more direct link between assessment procedures and instructional interventions, which will be more useful than current practices to teachers making instructional and curriculum decisions.

Continuous monitoring of academic achievement informs the IEP process and enables practitioners to support students in accessing the general curriculum. The 1997 amendments to IDEA incorporated critical requirements regarding access to and participation and progress in the general curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The most recently reauthorized legislation (IDEA, 2004) maintains this critical focus, requiring the individualized education program, among other elements, to specify: how the child will be involved and progress in the general education curriculum, how the child's disability affects involvement, and how the child's specific needs will be met to enable the child to be involved and progress in the general education curriculum.

Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS2; U.S. Department of Education, 2002) found that students in special education were only receiving a basic level of access to the general curriculum. That is, although they were present to receive the subject matter, they did not achieve cognitive access to the subject matter. Failure to connect with the general curriculum is often a direct result of local environments that do not adapt supportively to individual differences (Gersten, 2002). The recent reauthorization of IDEA includes universal design as a method of supporting students' ability to connect to the general curriculum. Advocates of universal design believe that by using flexible curricula, multiple representations of information, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of motivation and engagement, practitioners will more effectively help students to progress in the general curriculum (Orkwis, 1999). In order to successfully modify the curriculum with the use of universal design or other evidence-based strategies, general education teachers will need appropriate training or, at least, access to special education teachers who have received high-quality training.

The recently reauthorized IDEA strongly encourages teacher education institutions to train both general and special educators in specific support strategies for students with disabilities. Most students with disabilities (93.6%) spend at least some of their day in a general education classroom, an average of 4.8 hours per day (Wagner & Blackorby, 2002). All educators must be prepared to assist all students, including those with disabilities, in accessing the general curriculum.

Advocates of IDEA have been a critical force in working for the inclusion of students in the general education reform movement. OSEP funded the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) in the early 1990s based on the assumption that if students with disabilities were included in accountability measures, the improvement in education that was contingent upon test results would occur for all students – with or without disabilities. NCLB has also been important in furthering the rights of students with disabilities, specifically including them in general education reform and accountability. Previous to the implementation of NCLB, many students receiving special education services were assessed by out-of-level tests or were not included in accountability assessments. Now, students with disabilities are required to be included in accountability assessments aligned with content at their grade level. With the exception of the 1% of students who are held to alternate standards, expectations for students with disabilities are the same as for other students in the same grade. Policy, in the form of both IDEA and NCLB, mandates higher expectations for students with disabilities, thus advancing the belief that students will rise or sink to our expectations.

Students with SLD make up almost one half of all students with disabilities. Appropriate, effective, and efficient identification of children with SLD is a critical step in designing effective curricula and interventions to address their individual needs and ensure their participation and progress in the general education curriculum. Although numerous questions remain regarding broad implementation of RTI, this process currently reflects the best thinking on how to better link assessment and instruction for children with SLD, and holds the most promise, with further study and refinement, for a more effective method of ensuring that the appropriate children are identified in an efficient manner.

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AUTHORS' NOTE