Obstacles in the Implementation of Response to Intervention

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Abstract

To meet the increasing needs and diversity of students many schools are adopting the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Three main obstacles interfere with the successful implementation of this three-tiered intervention structure: failure to deliver quality whole-class instruction, problems with early identification and monitoring, and lack of diversification in the school setting. Schools need to ensure that all students receive quality, whole-class instruction. Educators must continuously monitor and identify students who require additional support. This is only possible when all staff collaborate to meet the diverse needs of all students. Full commitment is required by all staff to overcome the obstacles that threaten the successful implementation of the RTI structure.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a preventive, three-tiered system. It was developed to facilitate the inclusion of students with exceptionalities into the classroom, but later evolved into an instructional and intervention structure to meet the needs of all students (Gilbert et al., 2013; Sugai & Horner, 2009). The philosophy of RTI is an intentional and comprehensive model designed to be implemented school wide. However, there are obstacles in the implementation of RTI in the classroom and school setting. First is the need for quality whole-class instruction. Second is the need for early identification and monitoring, which is supported by collaboration. Third is the need for diversification to educate all students. Many schools are implementing portions of the essential elements, but must address the obstacles that interfere with successful tiered system delivery.

Quality Instruction

It is crucial that educators ensure that whole-class instruction is explicit and purposeful, based on the needs of all students. In a whole-class setting, all students, including at-risk students, receive the majority of instruction, so effective, quality instruction is essential (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012; Nelson-Walker et al., 2013). Educators need to organize their whole-class instruction based on skills necessary for at-risk students to develop academically (Algozzine et al., 2012; Sandall & Schwartz, 2013). This quality of instruction can result in more significant and meaningful gains than simply increasing the length of instruction (van Kraayenoord, 2013). Providing quality whole-class instruction can minimize the need for supplemental instruction for the students who are unresponsive to whole-class instruction (Gilbert et al., 2013). The assumption is made that at-risk students had explicit, expert whole-class instruction whereby the majority of their classmates thrived prior to the recommendation for further intervention (Algozzine et al., 2012). High-quality, whole-class instruction can mitigate the need for additional intervention for most students.

Explicit instruction and interventions must be delivered by knowledgeable and trained educators. Skilled educators offer at-risk students interventions that are flexible and based on individual student needs, in order to ensure substantial improvements (Fuchs et al., 2012; Curenton, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2013). Inexperienced teachers may lack the confidence and ability to provide whole-class quality instruction (Winton, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative that knowledgeable educators mentor and support new teachers and support staff with the implementation of instruction and intervention. However, interventions should not be a replacement for explicit, quality whole-class instruction whereby students are given the opportunity for success (Gilbert et al., 2013; O’Connor & Fuchs, 2013). We need all classroom educators to be proficient at differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students.
(Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczak, 2013). Empowering and supporting new teachers with the skills and strategies necessary to differentiate instruction and intervention instruction is a crucial role of experienced educators.

Lack of quality whole-class instruction can lead to behaviour issues. Students may exhibit academic difficulties and/or behavioural issues that need to be addressed (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Dealing with problem behaviours can impede the quality of whole-class academic instruction (Algozzine et al., 2012). Educators must plan to meet the diverse academic, social, and emotional needs of their students in order to establish an environment wherein students can thrive. Enriching the whole-class instruction results in positive gains for at-risk students (Nelson-Walker et al., 2013). Therefore, educators must be skilled at providing students with essential academic skills while managing behaviour through good classroom management. It would be a mistake to believe that educators can teach academic or behaviour skills in isolation, especially in schools with higher numbers of at-risk students (Algozzine et al., 2012). An inclusive and purposeful system of quality, explicit whole-class instruction is necessary to meet the vast academic and behavioural needs of all students.

**Continuous Monitoring**

Quality whole-class instruction may not be sufficient to meet the needs of the most at-risk students. Some students will require additional support. The RTI model emphasizes the collaboration of all educators and staff who are responsible for the implementation. Educators make intervention decisions based on initial assessments, continuous observations, and constant monitoring (Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczak, 2013; Sandall & Schwartz, 2013). Educators need a support system that includes time to assess student progress, collaborate with colleagues, and adjust interventions (Dodge, 2013). Most schools do not provide professional collaborative time to share, discuss, and reflect on the effectiveness of interventions (Algozzine et al., 2012). Staff collaboration is one of the key elements necessary for the success of the RTI model (van Kraayenoord, 2010). Without this dedicated time, it is difficult to establish consistent collaboration to reflect on the success of interventions.

Time to collaborate facilitates the early identification and implementation of interventions. Students who are experiencing difficulty mastering academic skills benefit from supplementary intervention (Current et al., 2013; O’Connor & Fuchs, 2013). Adapting interventions based on continuous assessment is crucial to the successful implementation of RTI (Algozzine et al., 2012). Students who are unresponsive to tier 3 interventions are referred for further assessment and the possible need for an individual education plan (Current et al., 2013; Sugai & Horner, 2009). Interventions are continuously monitored and examined in order to determine the success of interventions (O’Connor & Fuchs, 2013; van Kraayenoord, 2013). Educators use their observations and assessments to direct their instruction and intervention (Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczak, 2013). Education is essential for all staff in the identification, monitoring, and interventions necessary for implementation, which includes time dedicated for collaboration.

Many schools implement RTI, but neglect to monitor the long-term progress made by students. There is a lack of continuity and objectivity when passing student progress from teacher to teacher or school to school. Providing consistent, explicit, quality whole-class instruction from year to year is the foundation of monitoring positive student achievements (Dodge, 2013; Sandall & Schwartz, 2013). The objective of RTI is to provide long-term positive outcomes for all students (Gilbert et al., 2013). Simply repeating the instruction provided in previous interventions is not an effective or positive intervention; the instruction must be specific to the needs of the individual student (Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczak, 2013). However, schools lack the continuity of intervention strategies when students move to a new grade and/or new teacher. Students who receive and make positive gains in supplemental interventions do not necessarily avoid future academic deficiencies (O’Connor & Fuchs, 2013). There is a need for continuous monitoring of all students in the subsequent grades, to ensure they are
maintaining success and prevent further difficulties (Gilbert et al., 2013). Monitoring and communicating long-term progress of at-risk students will ensure consistency in the delivery of comprehensive strategies throughout the students’ academic career.

A goal of the RTI model is to provide resources, assessment tools, and time to collaborate, in order to establish the most appropriate interventions. A supportive learning environment is essential in the implementation of a tiered system that emphasizes quality whole-class instruction to encourage successful interventions (Algozzine et al., 2012). Mutual respect and positive connections must be established and integrated with explicit whole-class instruction, in order to create an environment beneficial to student learning (Dodge, 2013). The RTI model can support the decision making and planning process of both educators and administrators (van Kraayenoord, 2013). The educators responsible for student assessment and interventions are often not involved in the long-term planning and often change on a yearly basis, which hinders consistency. The RTI model structure offers whole-class instruction based on best practices and assessment, in order to make collaborative team decisions regarding the need for interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial that not only collaboration, but consistency of strategies, is encouraged and implemented.

**Diversification**

Our schools are becoming more diverse. Students are entering school with a wide range of abilities, backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses that influence their educational needs. More students enter school with language and academic deficits due to a variety of factors, including EAL or socio-economic status (Curenton et al., 2013). Educators must take into consideration the students’ academic skills, social and emotional well-being, cultural diversity, and abilities (Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczak, 2013). In addition, students may be lacking in only one area or skill, for example weak oral language, which emphasizes the importance of individualized support to meet the specific needs of students (Curenton et al., 2013). A student’s academic progress is influenced by his background experiences, oral language, and vocabulary (Fuchs et al., 2012). As our school populations become more diverse, there is more of a demand on educators.

A team of educated and knowledgeable staff is essential to the successful implementation of the RTI strategies, especially with the increasing diversity in our classrooms. Many interventions are provided by educational assistants who are not trained or knowledgeable about academic and literacy interventions. However, early intervention can improve the reading outcomes of at-risk learners (Gilbert et al., 2013). Some students enter school with large discrepancies in language and literacy backgrounds and abilities, which are predictors of later school achievements (Dodge, 2013). Educators must be knowledgeable in programming for quality, explicit instruction, especially when teaching students who lack well-established language and literacy skills.

The successful integration of the RTI model requires whole-school implementation to meet students’ diverse needs. The organization and collaboration of all educators, educational assistants, and specialists are an essential component of the RTI model (Sandall & Schwartz, 2013). When all staff is actively engaged in the philosophy, benefits, and implementation of RTI, there can be positive results for both the school and students (Algozzine et al., 2012). Implementing best practices can be a challenge for many reasons, including staffing changes, complacency, and lack of support by administrators (Winton, 2013). RTI should facilitate the organization of best practices (Sugai & Horner, 2009), but educators must be prepared to implement the suggested strategies. Educators can be well-informed about RTI instructional practices but still fail to implement in a manner that result in positive student results (Nelson-Walker et al., 2013). Encouraging all staff to adopt best practice strategies and work collaboratively is indispensable in meeting the diverse needs of all students.
Often, professional development is offered to only a few select staff, which rarely includes educational assistants. However, educational assistants routinely work with the most at-risk students. Therefore, training and education must be provided to all staff, including educators, educational assistants, and specialists, to encourage the change process (Algozzine et al., 2012). The professional development must be organized and implemented around the specific school culture and needs (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Education must be continuous and based on current best practices, intentional, and provided to all staff to facilitate the cohesive implementation of quality instruction and interventions (Nelson Walker et al., 2013). The professional development must be based on the resources available, establishing supportive systems and providing guidance (Winton, 2013). Professional development also facilitates the opportunity for school staff to develop strategies, communicate, and collaborate (Sandall & Schwartz, 2013; van Kraayenoord, 2010). Administrators can provide leadership and guidance in creating an environment conducive to respectful collaboration (Winton, 2013). Whole-school education and training must provide the opportunity for collaboration and development of consistent best strategies, assessments, and interventions necessary for implementation by all staff, including educational assistants.

Conclusion

The RTI model has reshaped the traditional approach to delivering instruction. It is a preventative model that emphasizes the need for whole-school implementation. Many obstacles interfere with its effectiveness. Schools need to ensure that all students receive explicit, quality, whole-class instruction. This instruction must include continuous monitoring, early identification, and implementation of interventions to meet the needs of all students. There must be school-wide professional development and collaboration to meet the needs of the diverse school populations. The goal is to meet the needs of all students, including the most at-risk students, in a three-tiered intervention system. Many schools have integrated portions of the RTI model, but must continue to work toward full implementation. This implementation requires a commitment of time, financial resources, materials, and professional learning opportunities.

References


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