IS RESPONSE-TO-INTERVENTION GOOD POLICY FOR SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY?

Kenneth A. Kavale, Ph.D.
Regent University

REAUTHORIZATION OF IDEA
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Specific Learning Disability Identification

Problems:
- 200% population increase since 1975
- 50% of the special population
- Over 5% of all students in school

~ Unparalled and unprecedent~
Primary Difficulties

- Inconsistent implementation of identification procedures
- Misclassification
- Overgeneralization of SLD construct

LD Summit Conclusions

- SLD construct valid
- Discrepancy criterion neither necessary nor sufficient
- Response to quality intervention promising identification alternative
IDEA Provisions

- “. . . LEAs shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability.”
- “. . . a LEA may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based interventions as part of the evaluation procedures.”

Response-to-Intervention (RTI)

- Systematic application of high-quality scientific research-based interventions
- Measurement of student response-level of performance and learning rate
- Use of data to inform instructional decisions
DISCREPANCY REGULATION

- Originated in Bateman’s (1965) SLD definition
- Why was this definition not incorporated into the law?
- Why did it only become an operational definition?

LD Summit Consensus

“IQ/Achievement discrepancy is neither necessary nor sufficient for identifying individuals with SLD”

but

Minority Opinion

“Aptitude/achievement discrepancy is an appropriate marker of SLD”
Discrepancy

- Difference between expected and actual achievement-
  - Unexpected
  - Unexplained
  \[\downarrow\]
  UNDERACHIEVEMENT

SLD is a classification associated with underachievement, not simply low achievement

DANGEROUS FORMS OF DISCREPANCIES

- Maintain terminology but distort meaning
  \[\downarrow\]
  RELATIVE Discrepancy
- SLD status depends on the level of individual student performance compared to other students in a particular school –
ABSOLUTE LOW-ACHIEVEMENT
Discrepancy

- Specified level of below-average academic performance results in SLD status-

PROBLEM
Each fails to identify the construct of underachievement

Is the learning failure unexpected?

RTI Regulation
Core Concepts
- Use of scientific, research-based interventions in general education
- Measurement of student response
- Response data used to modify the type, frequency, and intensity of intervention

*No universally accepted RTI model*
Questions

- How many tiers?
- Standard protocol vs. Problem-solving vs. Mixed
- Roles and responsibilities of general and special educators
- “More unknown than known about the [RTI] construct”

Questions (cont.)

- Not appropriate to assume “we-know-all-we-need-to-know” message about RTI implementation
- “RTI procedure is not at all clearly defined…especially compared to the expansive claims being made for the procedures”

CAN RTI BE BROUGHT TO SCALE?
IDEA Versus NCLB

- IDEA – Individual
- NCLB – Group

RTI

IDEA?  NCLB?

Present structure suggests RTI more aligned with NCLB, rather than IDEA

Positive
- Emphasis on scientifically validated treatments
- Professional development

Negative
- Focus shifts from individual to group
- Departure from original conception of SLD
- Reallocated special education funds for general education instruction
NCLB and Accountability

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Who will not achieve AYP?

Significantly Low Achievers (SLA)

RTI seeks to include SLA by classifying them SLD if they fail to respond.

Advantages

- SLA receive services through special education not otherwise available
- SLA classified SLD could be reported in AYP reports based on “disability” status
Disadvantages

- Runs counter to intention of special education (IDEA)
- Not consonant with conceptualization of SLD

Special education should not arbitrarily make SLD “a tempting target for [the] goal of creating a category for children experiencing academic failure, who, without additional instruction might be ‘left behind’”

Dangers of NCLB Focus for RTI

I. RTI cannot reveal the presence or absence of underachievement (i.e., differentiating expected and unexpected level)
II. Possibility of including the “slow learner” (student with IQ level between about 70 and 85)
III. With its almost exclusive focus on reading, RTI morphs SLD into reading disability
Dangers (cont.)

IV. The IDEA goals of individual enhancement and special treatment are lost in NCLBs “one-size-fits-all” group approach and overall focus on total school achievement

V. The reallocation of special education resources creates the paradoxical situation of using special education funds for non-special education purposes.

General Versus Special Education

Philosophical Foundation of RTI:  

*All children can learn*

Primary: To meet the needs of all students

Secondary: More efficient and effective process for determining SLD eligibility
Philosophical Foundation of RTI (cont.)

- “To join together to commit to a uniform system of education, where RTI plays a key role in identifying and working with struggling learners in any setting”

- “Special education eligibility decisions can be a product of these efforts, but is not the primary goal”

RTI: Prevention and Instruction

RTI “facilitates the integration of general and special education around instruction, line up IDEA with the laudatory goals of NCLB, and lead to . . . models of LD consistent with our best research about teaching and learning”

Regular Education Initiative
RTI as Identification Process

- Lacking are descriptions about how RTI functions as a reliable and valid diagnostic procedure

Therefore-

RTI creates only a diagnosis by fiat system
(“because you don’t respond, you are SLD”)

Limited research on RTI as an identification process

- What is the basis of the SLD classification?
- What essential markers of SLD have been investigated?

“The real problem with the RTI model lies not in the procedures themselves, but rather in the leap of faith necessary for unresponsiveness to become SLD”
RTI makes SLD a category of convenience
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SLD loses its identity

“logical relation shifts from All students with SLD have learning problems to All students with learning problems have SLD”

What is RTI?

“A multi-tiered approach to providing services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity [to create a] seamless system of instruction and intervention guided by child outcome data. RTI calls for early identification of learning and behavioral needs . . . . RTI is an initiative that takes place in the general education environment.”

Where is any reference to SLD identification?

  Conceptually
  RTI → Prereferral
RTI
Pre-diagnostic with no implications for identifying SLD

But RTI as *only* prereferral is *mythical* because “RTI is more . . . It is a comprehensive service delivery system that requires significant changes in how a school serves all students. . . . When thought of as a prereferral system, [RTI] remains the province of special education and the desired integration of general education and special education services around the goal of enhanced outcomes for all students will not be achieved.”

RTI and SLD Identification

**RTI Defined:**
- Large-scale, structured, and systematic prereferral process

**RTI:**
- Not a self-contained identification procedure
- Support system for improved learning for all students
- Screening process to establish need for comprehensive assessment
SLD Identification Process

RTI
Goal: Prevention
↓ If not successful
Psychometric Assessment
↓ ↓
Valid SLD Valid Intervention
Determination Planning Data

Advantages

- Reliable and valid SLD determination
- Ability to distinguish SLD from mild MMR and “slow learner”
- Identifies intra-individual differences contributing to unique learning needs
- Identifies best means to implement interventions
RTI and SLD Identification

RTI & Comprehensive Psychometric Evaluation

Why?

“An RTI model without comprehensive evaluation cannot identify SLD because it is not aligned with the construct of SLD”

Positive

- “RTI has us look through a wide-lens telescope at the entire school population whereas [comprehensive psychometric evaluation] provide a microscope with direct intensive focus on an individual’s specific needs”
Negative
(Unsupported Advocacy)

“If RTI is done thoroughly and correctly, there should not be a need for comprehensive evaluation. In fact, your ‘hit-rate’ for students in need of special education services will be better under a data-based RTI approach than if using the traditional method of discrepancy.”

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In need of special education – near 100%
“True” (i.e., valid) SLD classification – near 0%

RTI and SLD Policy

RTI
Prevention

“RTI procedures should be adopted in general education to help structure the support system for improved learning for all students (i.e., prereferral). The difference of opinion emerged when RTI was proposed as a basis for diagnosing SLD”
## RTI and SLD Policy (cont.)

**Identification**
RTI provides no basis for diagnosing SLD

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Limited discussion and research on RTI as an identification procedure

**Why?**
- Difficult to conceptualize RTI as a diagnostic process
- Greater interest in RTI as a preventative process aligned more with NCLB than IDEA

**Prevention vs. Identification**

## Policy Recommendations

I. Make RTI the exclusive province of general education

II. Reform RTI into a structured, systematic prereferral process

III. Involve special education only after RTI failure, when the emphasis shifts from prevention to identification

IV. Identification of SLD must be based on findings from a comprehensive psychometric assessment
Policy Recommendations (cont.)

V. Modify existing regulations to:

(a) require use of ability-achievement discrepancy

(b) require a referral procedure based on “a process that determines if the child responds to scientific research-based intervention”

(c) eliminate the 15% special education (IDEA) funding for early intervention (RTI) and fund all prereferral activities from NCLB monies.

Advantages

- “Both RTI and [comprehensive psychometric assessment] can serve to meet the eligibility guidelines outlines in IDEA 2004 by addressing the what, the how well, and the why, with the goals of meeting the needs of all students as well as the unique needs of the individual student with SLD”