

RTI & Reading: The Middle Years Classroom Connection

Response to intervention (RTI) is a proven research-based, problem-solving process to help struggling learners succeed. Although it has been most effectively applied in primary schools with students who have difficulty reading, educators in the middle years are now beginning to utilise RTI as a systematic way to address underachieving students who are struggling with reading. This reference guide is designed to provide middle years educators with critical information about reading within an RTI process, as well as practical strategies to address the major areas of reading within general education classroom settings.

Understanding Reading in the Middle Years

Reading at the middle years level differs greatly from the early primary years as the focus of reading shifts in year four from one of “learning to read” to that of “reading to learn”. Research indicates that approximately 25% of middle years students struggle to keep up with content area information due to a deficit in their reading abilities. Approximately 69% of year eights fall below the proficient level in their ability to comprehend the meaning of text, which in turn has a significant impact on their overall achievement at school.

Therefore, many students need to improve their reading comprehension skills before they can take full advantage of instruction in the content areas. It is important to first distinguish the characteristics of “struggling” versus “effective” readers.

Struggling Readers:

- generally have limited comprehension skills.
- may have deficits in word decoding skills, especially multisyllabic words, morphological or word structure knowledge and fluency.
- very often lack motivation to learn and withdraw or display challenging behaviours.
- are likely to suffer psychological, emotional and cognitive consequences due to their lack of reading success.
- need some level of instructional support to be successful.

Furthermore, students who are reading one to two levels below their year level may require additional targeted and intensive interventions beyond those provided as part of the core classroom instruction. A specialist who has the dedicated time and resources to address the more severe skill deficit may be best suited to provide these interventions.

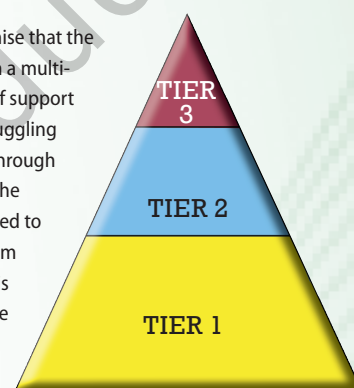
Effective Readers:

On the other hand, effective readers have a repertoire of skills and attributes. They:

- use a variety of word analysis strategies to figure out unknown words.
- understand at least 90% of the words they read.
- read 100–180 words per minute, with expression and accuracy depending on text difficulty.
- are exposed to a breadth of vocabulary words at an early age.
- have prior knowledge of content specific information.
- link new content with prior knowledge.
- monitor their reading for comprehension.
- use several “before, during and after” reading strategies.
- are interested in reading and make personal connections with text.

Understanding the RTI Process

It is critically important to recognise that the RTI process is generally based on a multi-tiered model in which the level of support and intervention provided to struggling readers increases as they move through the process. Tier 1 is focused on the core instructional content provided to all of the students in the classroom where differentiated instruction is utilised and reading strategies are incorporated consistently. Tiers 2 and 3 provide increasingly targeted and intensive reading



interventions for those students who need additional support, most often provided in small groups and/or individually with the assistance of a speech therapist, reading specialist or special education teacher.

Reading and Language

Middle years teachers, as content area specialists, generally have little or no formal training in reading instruction. Therefore, they are often not equipped to address students who present significant reading difficulties in their classrooms. So, it is important to begin with a basic understanding that “language” is the foundation of all teaching. Consequently, core classroom instruction at the Tier 1 level begins with strengthening language development as an integral part of academic instruction.

Language is comprised of the ability to speak, listen, read and write. Recognising that a student’s classroom success is highly dependent on their language ability, it is therefore reasonable to consider every classroom teacher, regardless of subject area, a “language teacher” first (Jacobs, 2006). Incorporating speaking, listening, reading and writing into all content area instruction is vital to fostering student achievement regardless of the subject matter. This interrelationship of content material and language development is organised around five general areas at the middle years level. Each area, if not effectively addressed, can result in reading difficulties for students, thus negatively affecting classroom performance:

Word Study – using decoding and structural analysis to break words into meaningful units for understanding.

Fluency – decoding words effortlessly and accurately in ways that promote understanding of what is being read.

Vocabulary – knowing the meaning of the words and using them consciously in spoken and written language.

Comprehension – gaining meaning from text through the use of specific strategies.

Motivation – engaging in an activity successfully and having the desire to continue with the activity.