The NEW RtI:

Response to Intelligence

Updated 2nd Edition

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Preface

Education is changing radically in its attempt to meet the demands of the 21st Century global economy. As we move from a public school system created to meet the needs of the Industrial Age to one designed for the Post Information Age (also called the Conceptual Age), the shift to creating appropriate education for ALL students becomes essential. Unfortunately, in public education, this has come to mean helping struggling students be successful in classrooms across the country–often at the expense of students who can easily master the age-level curriculum.

How did this happen?

It began with the 1983 report for educational reform known as *A Nation at Risk* where it was discovered that many students in classrooms across the United States were not learning and growing enough to prepare them for the world in which they were going to live. Then came the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) a punitive law that required all students to pass a yearly, high-stakes, state-determined test in reading and math. Schools who did not meet the federal requirements for passing the test (which, by the way, increased every year to the goal of 100% by 2014) were punished with sanctions. This put schools in fear of restrictions that would affect their federal funding, and that often led to the instructional charge to *teach to the test*. The focus again shifted to struggling students and often left high-average and gifted students behind.

But it remained that many students could not achieve the minimum competency levels required to pass the state test. They needed more intervention in order to meet federal guidelines.

In 2004, it was decided to include support for these students in the initiative named Response to Intervention (For the purpose of clarity, Response to Intervention is referred to as RtI) under the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The purpose of RtI began as a general education initiative. It was quickly adapted by the Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in 2007, to support the special education law by promoting evidence-based instruction in classrooms and to help general, remedial, and special education work together. Districts scrambled in order to meet the new guidelines. In Illinois, for example, districts were required by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) in Illinois Rules (2008), to submit a plan for meeting these guidelines by January, 2009.

According to CEC, the purpose of RtI is threefold:

1. research-based implementation in general education of instruction and interventions,
2. assessment of students of these interventions, and
3. use of assessment data for decision-making.

Once again, high-ability students could be left behind.

It seems as if there is always an up-and-coming initiative that proposes to close the achievement gap. Closing the achievement gap is usually interpreted as bringing up lower scores to be closer to the higher ones. Currently, the newest educational initiative called the *Race to the Top* provides competitive grants to districts that raise student achievement through implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Whether this act will ultimately benefit gifted learners remains to be seen. Unfortunately, the focus still appears to be on high-stakes testing for minimum competency and **not** for individual growth and challenge.

Will high-ability students be left behind again?

Evidence continues to accumulate supporting the loss of educational opportunity for high-end students. A study by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, indicates that the emphasis on bringing struggling students' scores up on high-stakes testing is affecting the growth of students at the high end (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010).The focus of current testing is for minimum competency instead of for excellence (Plucker et al., 2010).

A report titled *State of the States in Gifted Education* (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2009b) found that gifted children continue to be ignored in the United States. According to the report "there is a markedly insufficient national commitment to gifted and talented children, which, if left unchecked, will ultimately leave our nation unprepared to field the next generation of innovators and to compete in the global economy" (NAGC, 2009b, p. 2).

The data in this report states that:

- there is little support for funding,
- teachers are unprepared to meet gifted student needs,
- services for gifted children are very inconsistent, and
- there is a lack of accountability and reporting to support services.

There are over three million gifted and talented students in the United States, representing diverse experiences, expertise, and cultural backgrounds, who deserve an appropriate educational system to help them achieve their highest potential.

As a call to action, The Executive Summary of the *State of the States in Gifted Education* report states, "As high-ability learners sit bored in classrooms around the country, our nation is failing to meet their learning, social, and emotional needs that are key to their success" (NAGC, 2009b, p. 4).

In 2009, NAGC issued a position statement calling for the addition of interventions for gifted learners into the RtI framework (NAGC, 2009a). It addresses screening and assessment, establishing protocols, and the provisions of tiered supports and services to meet the needs of gifted students. It also addresses the importance of meeting the needs of twice-exceptional students through RtI.

RtI continues to guide all public education with its focus on struggling students. So what does this mean for gifted and talented students and THEIR education?

Chapter 1

Elements of Response to Intervention (RtI)

What does RtI mean for gifted students–What can be done about this current educational initiative and its impact on gifted education? What can we do to integrate RtI into curriculum for gifted and talented learners? What can be done to assure that all students are learning all that they can? How can we prevent the gifted from being left behind . . . again?

We begin by looking at the structure of RtI.

RtI was created to raise student achievement through a tiered model of intervention beginning with services in reading. It has come to include other content areas (usually math). It began with a desire to help students in the early grades but now has been stretched to middle and high school classrooms. Its objective is to modify teacher lesson plans based on frequent monitoring of progress. It was created as a general education initiative for all students, but it has evolved to meet the needs of struggling students who are having difficulty being successful in the regular education classroom. These students in the regular classroom were unable to pass the high-stakes state test, yet they did not qualify for special education services. As a result, districts received lower scores on state high-stakes tests resulting in punitive action for the district. RtI became the mechanism to support districts and to raise test scores. Some states have even made the use of RtI a requirement for funding. In many states, RtI takes on the following format (Figure 1.1):

Tier 1 is the foundation or the core curriculum (grade level) designed for ALL students. The majority of students–80-85%–are learning and growing in a grade-level curriculum.

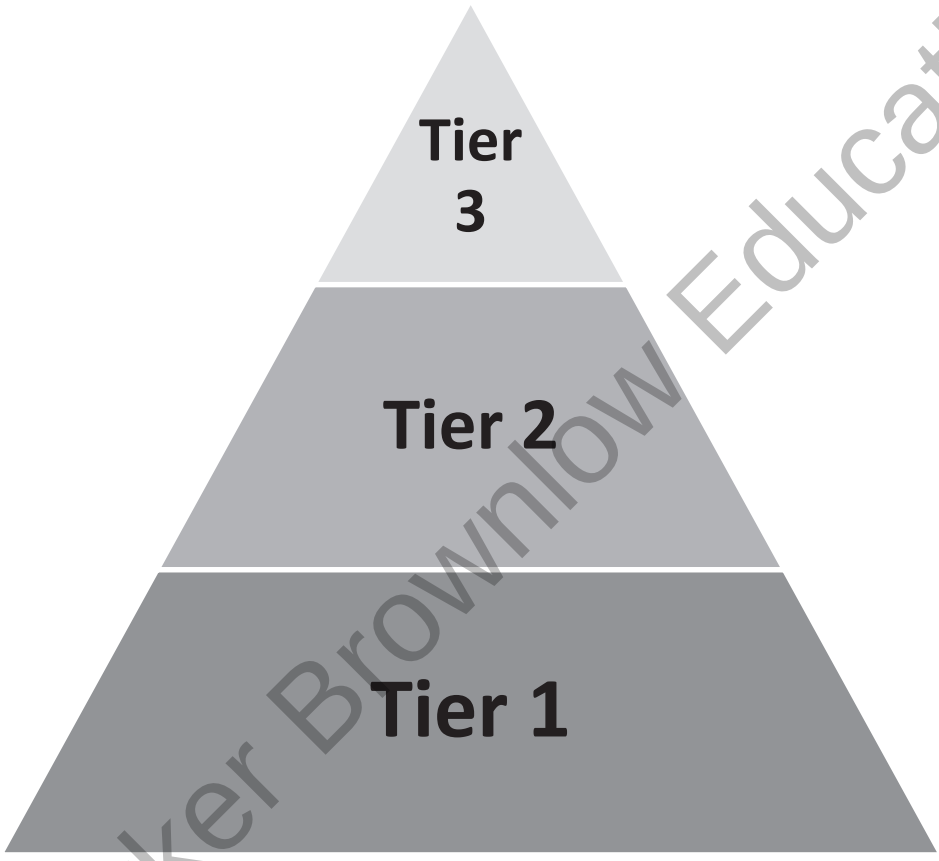

Figure 1.1. Response to Intervention Model.

Tier 2 includes **supplemental instruction and intervention** in ADDITION to the core curriculum instruction.

Tier 3 consists of **intensive instructional interventions** in ADDITION to the core instruction. Students are identified for Tiers 2 and 3 through ongoing assessment. Data-based decision making is applied across the tiers.

How does this design impact gifted students? The majority of students (80–85%) are assumed to be successful in Tier 1. **Does this seem to be a return to the *one size fits all* approach to education?** Tier 1 assumes that most students need the same curriculum and instruction that is appropriate only for those students who can master the curriculum with teacher support. Many gifted students master the grade-level curriculum very quickly. Although figures differ, up to 50% or more of gifted students have mastered the age-level curriculum before they enter the classroom at the beginning of the year (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). These students with one or two exposures often master the remaining curriculum. The implication is that many gifted students are frustrated, waiting to learn something new in the classroom for the majority of every school day.

Differentiation Is Not Guaranteed

Another assumption of RtI is that differentiated instructional practices are taking place in ALL classrooms. This means that classroom teachers are differentiating their instruction to provide multiple opportunities at various levels of learning. It is assumed also that differentiated instructional strategies are being provided for ALL learners, providing them with scientific research-based interventions.

Those strategies for gifted and talented students include active engagement, choice, compacting, extensions, flexible grouping, higher level thinking skills, independent study, learning centers, learning contracts, open-ended assignments, RAFT assignments, and tiered lessons.

Staff developers who have offered professional development in differentiation have found that, in fact, differentiation is very difficult to implement in the classroom. Teachers find it challenging to provide differentiation when they have up to 30 or more students in their classrooms and must simultaneously attempt to teach the regular curriculum **and** assess all students for readiness. Providing differentiation for students who have already mastered the content becomes a daunting task. Yet states suggest that differentiated practices take place in all classes.

Teachers have said that differentiation may take place less than 10% of the time they teach (P. Choice, personal communication, 1995; Gavin & Adelson, 2008;

Tomlinson, 2003). Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2003), well known in the field of differentiation, has said that teachers seldom differentiate in classrooms and less often for exceptionalities. Colleges and universities provide sporadic coursework in differentiation both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The result is that differentiation is randomly taking place in the classroom at any grade level or in any content area.

Assessment of Gifted Students

A brief mention of assessment that drives the RtI model: Assessment is essential, and RtI or any educational initiative must be data driven (Coil, 2009). However, one must be very careful about choosing assessments to determine intervention for gifted students. Many assessments are measures of minimum competency used to determine grade-level achievement. These assessments may demonstrate that the gifted student is at the top, but they do not show how much more the student knows. Special assessments are needed to go beyond the ceiling of grade-level competency. A district must work closely with gifted specialists to determine the value of any assessment used with gifted students. Assessment forms specific to gifted students are on pages 55-62 (Coil, 2008).