

Table of Contents

About the Author xi

Introduction
Response to Intervention and the Characteristics of Effective Learners 1

 The Effective Learner Framework 2
 The Characteristics of Effective Learners 2
 General Characteristics 3
 Literacy Characteristics 3
 Mathematics Characteristics 4
 Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Characteristics 4
 About This Book 5

Chapter 1
The ABCs of RTI 7

 A Focus on RTI 8
 Tier 1 9
 Tier 2 10
 Tier 3 10
 A Ten-Step RTI Plan 12
 Conclusion 15

Chapter 2
Preassessment, Vigilance, and Ongoing Assessment 17

 Preassessment 17

Vigilance	18
Ongoing Assessment.	18
Literacy	20
Mathematics	20
Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Domains.	22
Screen and Intervene: Literacy-Based Challenges	24
Dyslexia	24
Dysgraphia	27
Screen and Intervene: Mathematics-Based Challenges.	28
Screen and Intervene: Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Challenges.	31
Emotional Disturbance and Difference.	32
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	34
Use Self-Reflection.	36
Classroom Connections.	41
Conclusion.	42
 Chapter 3	
Evidence-Based Interventions	43
Scaffolding for Analytic, Creative, and Practical Learners	44
Classroom Connections.	45
Elementary Scenarios.	46
Middle School Scenarios	49
High School Scenarios	54
Conclusion.	57
 Chapter 4	
Instruction That Engages and Motivates.	59
Initiating Engagement	59
Engaging Students in Instruction	60
Stories and Storytelling	60
Humor	62
Poetry	63
Current Events.	65
Conclusion.	67

Chapter 5

Lessons for Diverse Learners 69

Grade 2 Literacy 71

Group One: Word Play 72

Group Two: Text Citations 72

Group Three: Cooperative Pairs 72

Grade 5 Literacy 72

Vocabulary Forum 74

Historical and Cultural Forum 74

Game Forum 74

Final Phase 75

Grade 10 Literature 76

Grade 1 Mathematics 79

Grade 4 Mathematics 81

Grade 9 Mathematics 82

Conclusion 84

Afterword

Positive Outcomes 85

Appendix

Additional Resources 87**References and Resources 91****Index 103**

Introduction

Response to Intervention and the Characteristics of Effective Learners

Educators today face many challenges—instructing students with diverse needs and simultaneously meeting high benchmarks for student achievement, all while keeping students engaged and learning at different levels within one classroom. The intervention process can be overwhelming for teachers and other school support staff. This book—*Developing Effective Learners: RTI Strategies for Student Success*—is designed to help support the intervention process. It focuses on steps teachers and support staff can take to lead learners from their baseline skills to high achievement through intervention. Students are not passive recipients of this intervention; rather, they take an active role in the learning process. Educators and students both must respect and accept differences and learning challenges, share responsibility, and increase accountability to improve student outcomes in school and ultimately in life.

What schools need today is a framework for identifying students in need of support, collecting data to justify intervention, and then implementing a collection of research-based strategies for intervention followed by assessment of progress. A system of support that is delivered with fidelity and a focus on individuality should seek to reach students who require assistance in three areas: (1) literacy, (2) mathematics, and (3) social, emotional, and behavioral skills. These areas all require content-specific skills as well as organizational skills and self-regulation.

Response to intervention (RTI) is a multitiered approach educators can use to identify and support students with learning and behavior needs (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2013). The basic premise of RTI is that students should receive support in a timely, targeted, and systemic way (Björn, Aro, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2016; Buffum et al., 2012; Buffum, Mattos, Weber, & Hierck, 2015). The RTI process is made up of three tiers, beginning with high-quality core instruction and screening of all students in the general education classroom (Buffum et al., 2012). Tier 1 instruction is general instruction for the whole class that includes universal supports. However, not all learners master the learning with synchronization in Tier 1. Therefore, Tier 2 intervention provides supplemental instruction in small groups, as needed. Tier 3 intervention provides more intensive

instruction for individual students who require additional scaffolding and practice. A multitiered system of support such as RTI recognizes that diverse learners require differentiated tiered instruction to achieve mastery. The levels of supports of each tier are driven by student need. The research tells us that RTI is responsive to learner levels and the diversity that each student exhibits, whether academic, behavioral, or cultural (Björn et al., 2016; Fan, Denner, Bocanegra, & Ding, 2016; Klingner & Hoover, 2014; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2013).

The Effective Learner Framework

The Effective Learner framework in this book outlines a list of characteristics of effective learners. These learners are self-regulated, task oriented, focused on goals, and motivated to achieve, and they take responsibility for their learning (Lin, Lai, Lai, & Chang, 2016; Wang, 2011). Teachers and school staff must work together to provide interventions that focus on developing these learning characteristics so that all students succeed—academically, socially, and emotionally. Effective learners are primed to learn, and their teachers and families work together with them in their learning, which includes fidelity to the RTI framework from preassessment to the selection of evidence-based practices used during instruction, to progress monitoring, and through the assessment that determines whether learners have achieved the desired outcomes. All students benefit from RTI and the Effective Learner framework—those with and without classifications, those who have individual education programs (IEPs), and 504 plans, English learners, and so on. Responsive intervention within the framework provides students with opportunities for whole-class, small-group, and individualized instructional interventions designed to increase their knowledge and skill sets from baseline levels.

The Characteristics of Effective Learners

The characteristics of effective learners in this section fit into four categories: (1) general characteristics, (2) literacy characteristics, (3) mathematics characteristics, and (4) social, emotional, and behavioral characteristics. These characteristics are drawn from my years of experience teaching and coaching in general and special education K–12 settings and a review of the evidence-based practices in the literature (Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, & Willingham, 2013; Freire, 2000; Gagné & Parks, 2013; Hattie, 2012; Marzano, 2009; Morcom, 2016; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.; Spangler, 2017; State University of New York at Plattsburgh, Center for Teacher Excellence, n.d.; Tomlinson, 2002; Vygotsky, 1987; Willis, 2007; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011). By focusing on teaching and reinforcing effective learner traits in addition to teaching content within the tiers of RTI, students are poised to achieve more than just academic standards—they become aware of the skills they need to be able to master the content. For example, a learner who needs intervention with short vowel sounds, how to infer an author’s point of view from a nonfiction text, or how to solve a multistep word problem cannot achieve these objectives if he or she does not listen to feedback, connect to the content, or develop practices to apply the learning.

General Characteristics

Effective learners know that learning is a process that is unique to them. They are aware that mastery and perfection cannot happen in a day, but information and learning gains occur through trial and error and guided reflection. Effective learners self-reflect and gauge their level of progress based on effort, not by comparison to other students. The following are some general characteristics of effective learners.

1. Effective learners understand their learning profiles; they know their strengths and weaknesses. They are aware of the steps they need to take to increase their proficiency.
2. Effective learners transform mistakes into something positive, understanding that learning is sometimes messy, and sometimes getting it wrong takes them one step closer to getting it right.
3. Effective learners are self-directed.
4. Effective learners are aware of the need for repeated practice.
5. Effective learners know that learning has no finish line.
6. Effective learners connect to the content; they value not just what they learn but how they learn.
7. Effective learners absorb, express, and engage in content and information in multiple ways. For example, if a learner does not understand a vocabulary word in a novel, he doesn't skip over the word, but instead uses an online or a handheld dictionary and checks to see if the word makes sense in the context. Other examples include watching an instructional video to better understand how to solve a geometric theorem, listening to a mathematics rap song to learn a concept, engaging in game-based learning, or cooperatively writing a research report.
8. Effective learners know where they need to go before they begin (their learning goals) and offer evidence of their learning along the way.
9. Effective learners use the feedback they get to catapult their learning forward.
10. Effective learners evaluate their mistakes to construct a *learning schema*, a mental framework for understanding and retaining information.
11. Effective learners transfer their learning from one subject to another, from one grade level to the next, and from school to real-world situations.
12. Effective learners play with concepts and skills in creative ways to make them their own.
13. Effective learners ground concepts in reality by adapting their learning to real-life situations.

Literacy Characteristics

Effective learners are not intimidated by the use or study of language. The following are some characteristics of effective literacy learners.

1. Effective learners relate to stories and make connections during oral and silent readings.
2. Effective learners hear the rhythm of words.

3. Effective learners do not view reading and writing as chores, but as fun activities.
4. Effective learners plan their writing; they construct, revise, and edit sentences to organize their verbal and written expressions.
5. Effective learners, from the early grades onward, examine the similarities and differences of text through organized and diverse formats that range from online articles to persuasive essays, editorials, fiction, poetry, and books from a variety of genres.
6. Effective learners capitalize on their stronger modalities to achieve literacy gains. There is more than one way to manipulate letters to decode and encode words, read and apply comprehension skills, and extract relevant information, and effective learners take advantage of their strongest skills.
7. Effective learners gain information from multiple sources to establish inferential skills.
8. Effective learners take an active role during the reading process, from decoding the letters, listening to read-alouds, asking questions during guided reading, contributing to collaborative discussion, and responding to text-based questions, to name a few.
9. Effective learners analyze complex text ideas, convey information, organize content with valid verbal and written expressions and arguments, and require the scaffolding of appropriate interventions to do so.

Mathematics Characteristics

Effective mathematics learners calculate, think logically, and follow step-by-step procedures with precision and care to analyze, compute, and solve expressions and word problems in all operations. The following are traits of effective mathematics learners.

1. Effective learners are self-directed and aware of the steps they need to take to increase their mathematics proficiency.
2. Effective learners do not allow their mathematics deficits to escalate. They analyze their errors and identify patterns.
3. Effective learners do not give up; they know that there are multiple ways to compute and solve problems and multiple ways to engage in mathematics, includes valuing concrete, representational, and abstract presentations.
4. Effective learners embrace abstract mathematics concepts and think logically across many curriculum domains.

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Characteristics

Effective learners recognize and apply social, emotional, and behavioral traits across the domains and environments.

1. Effective learners reflect on their behavior.
2. Effective learners acknowledge and take responsibility for their emotions.

3. Effective learners are the ones who sculpt the clay. This means that students are active participants in their learning process to develop, formulate, and hone their skills.
4. Effective learners know how to ask for help and interact and collaborate with peers and adults.
5. Effective learners are proactive and independent in their learning. They do not wait to be told that they do not know something before seeking help.
6. Effective learners infuse cognitive buy-ins to personalize their learning, leading to increased interest, relevance, competence, and ownership.
7. Effective learners accept and respect their differences as a norm—not a deviance—realizing that everyone possesses strengths and weaknesses.
8. Effective learners do not point fingers; they hold hands.
9. Effective learners smile and laugh.
10. Effective learners understand that learning accommodations are not an excuse to stop listening or learning.
11. Effective learners understand that accommodations present opportunities for growth.
12. Effective learners think about the now, then, and next (in other words, they are mindful of what is, what was, and what could be).

These characteristics are goals to keep in mind throughout the RTI process so students can develop as effective learners while also receiving initial instruction and support through the tiers of RTI using a collaborative and planned approach that involves preassessment, vigilance, and ongoing assessment.

About This Book

Developing Effective Learners is written for both beginning and veteran teachers and staff who often know what they want to do to design and teach excellent lessons, but are frustrated by the fact that their learners are not achieving progress. This book is organized into five chapters starting with an overview of RTI and ending with specific lesson ideas for educators to implement with diverse learners. The afterword and appendix provide additional resources for educators. Readers will find the following within these pages:

- Chapter 1, “The ABCs of RTI,” sheds light on the RTI process, highlights the goals of RTI using the ABCs as an acrostic, and provides a ten-step RTI plan.
- Chapter 2, “Preassessment, Vigilance, and Ongoing Assessment,” looks at the process of identifying struggling students and using ongoing assessment to intervene when they need support.
- Chapter 3, “Evidence-Based Interventions,” discusses the benefits of evidence-based interventions within an RTI framework.

- Chapter 4, “Instruction That Engages and Motivates,” looks at engaging students in instruction—how to initiate engagement and strategies for engagement.
- Chapter 5, “Lessons for Diverse Learners,” examines how instructional support targets diverse learners in RTI’s tiered system.
- The afterword, “Positive Outcomes,” wraps up the book with additional RTI applications and a focus on how educators can collaborate with families and one another so that students achieve positive outcomes.
- The appendix includes a list of additional resources for educators as they implement RTI in their classrooms.

Content is important, but the most important component in teaching is the learners themselves. Educators and other staff seeking to develop effective learners in their K–12 classrooms will find this book’s strategies and processes valuable additions to their teaching repertoire.

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