INEQUITIES OF INTERVENTION AMONG CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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Abstract:
Although Response to Intervention (RTI) has been generally studied in relation to student outcomes, the system itself requires further study, particularly for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. CLD students have consistently suffered inequities in the educational system, including overrepresentation in high incidence disability categories and unequal access to general education curricula and settings. Students with disabilities, particularly those from CLD backgrounds, continue to achieve below their peers. RTI implementation has been touted to ameliorate these discrepancies. This article calls for systematic and culturally responsive study of RTI implementation within urban districts.

Keywords: diverse learners, urban schools, structural inequities, response to intervention

Since the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Response to Intervention (RTI) models are being implemented nationwide with the intent to promote equity by ensuring that all students receive intensive, systematic, and evidence-based interventions prior to consideration for special education services. Many schools have adopted the RTI model for screening, assessment, and progress monitoring across subject content areas to intervene early with students who are struggling in the general education curriculum and decrease referrals to special education (The IRIS Center, 2009). This multi-tiered approach begins with high-quality instruction for and regular screenings of all students to ensure they are learning. Struggling learners are provided with interventions that become increasingly intense as needed. These levels of intensity occur in tiers; if students are not learning at Tier 1, they are moved to Tier 2 for specialized intervention. If students do not learn at Tier 2, they are moved to Tier 3, where interventions become even more intensive. RTI was designed to provide high-quality, scientifically-based intervention matched directly to student needs by using measurements of learning rate over time and changes in level of performance to make data-based decisions regarding student programming and placement (Batsche et al., 2005). Assessment is essential to RTI because the assessment process and measurement tools must be sensitive to small changes over time within and across grades and must directly assess the skill(s) thought to be in need of remediation. In RTI venues, curriculum-based measurement serves as a formative assessment. Universal screening, which is characterized by short, inexpensive, repeatable assessments of age-appropriate skills, is universally administered to all students to assist school personnel in determining if adequate progress is being made and to determine if lower scores are indicative of performance or skill deficits.

The aim of this paper is to engage with the existing literature on RTI in order to argue for the importance of studying RTI as it pertains, in particular, to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners, a group defined in this paper as encompassing students of color, English language learners (ELLs), and students living in poverty. This review of literature suggests that RTI is understudied in urban contexts, and furthermore, that its effects for CLD learners are, as yet, unknown. This paper will emphasize a call to action for the field to examine the effectiveness and equity of implementations of interventions such as RTI in urban schools and with struggling learners from CLD backgrounds.

Although RTI is widespread, its implementation has not been widely studied. A 2008 survey of all 50 states and Washington, DC found that all 44 states that responded were implementing RTI on some level (Hoover, Baca, Wexler-Love, & Saenz, 2008). A more recent report (Spectrum K12, 2011) on the results of a web-based survey of K-12 district administrators found that the majority of schools (94%) were in some stage of implementing RTI, although only a few (24%) had reached full implementation. The full implementation rate was higher for elementary schools, 80% of which had fully implemented RTI in one or more specific domain areas such as reading, math, and behavior (in that respective order of frequency). Large, diverse, urban districts are often slow to fully implement change. The 2011 report also found that although only 7% of districts using RTI were implementing with fidelity district-wide, 56% of districts had a formal RTI implementation plan. Additionally, 70% of districts reported that they did not yet have sufficient data to make a judgment on the impact of RTI on annual yearly progress (AYP), although those who had enough data saw improvements. Of the 51% of responding districts that had sufficient data, 35% saw a reduction of 10% or higher in special education referrals. However, this report did not address the impact on the racial or ethnic proportionality of the reduction in referrals, nor did it examine the impact of RTI on CLD populations.

RTI for CLD Learners

RTI was specifically designed as an approach to encompass all learners, but questions remain about the equity of access to appropriate interventions in the implementation of an RTI process. Artiles, Bal, and King Thorius (2010) recommended using Fraser's (2007) definition of "social justice" as a theoretical lens to examine struggling CLD learners within RTI models. Fraser defines social justice as "parity of participation," whereby status injustices or "misrecognitions" can occur when individuals are not able to fully participate due to their lower cultural status (p. 20). If we apply this definition in educational terms, all students must be provided an adequate and equitable opportunity to learn.

While RTI is an empirical, evidence-based procedure supported by a growing body of research on its effect on student outcomes (e.g., Gersten et al., 2009), research on the effects of RTI specifically for children who are CLD and have a history of educational inequities is missing. As the United States population continues to change and become more racially/ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse, so does the population in public schools (Ford, 2012). As the achievement gap for minority and impoverished youth persists, it is critical to examine what is and is not working for this population in the RTI process. Using Fraser's (2007) social justice lens within Klingner et al.'s (2005) conceptual framework, designed for addressing disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education, is one way to examine the complexities of race, ethnicity, language, social class, and ability within the context of RTI implementation in urban school districts. This framework calls for the creation of culturally responsive educational systems to utilize evidence-based interventions that cut across the three interrelated domains of policies, practices, and people. The Klingner et al. system implies that one standardized approach, even if guided by a proven evidence base, will not serve as a cure-all for the intricacies involved in complex children who do not fit the mold of the average learner. At the core is the assumption that in order for RTI to be an effective tool for all learners, implementation must be equitable across all students and schools, using culturally responsive instruction that has been established as effective for the population receiving the instruction, and provided by high-quality educators, regardless of the student's school setting, cultural background, or ability level.

Institutionalized Inequities

Students of color have long been documented as being overrepresented in special education (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Brosnan, 1983; Dunn, 1968; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Patton, 1998). For example, although Black students make up 15.3% of the total population of students enrolled in public schools, approximately 20% are receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) (Planty et al., 2009). Brayboy, Castagno, and Maughan (2007) examined research on race in education and found that offering the "same" resources to students may not be enough to overcome the long history of structural racism on American schools and racialized communities. In essence, equality or sameness does not create equity. Reid and Knight (2006) have argued that the principles of "normalcy" create disadvantaged systems of education for ethnically diverse students because they naturally allow for students of color to be seen as "other" by associating them with a disability.

CLD students in the United States continue to encounter educational deficits at a high rate due to unequally structured learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Losen & Skiba, 2011; Townsend, 2002). The overwhelming majority of students with disabilities from CLD and/or low-income backgrounds attend high-poverty, low-performing schools where educational decision-making is not centered around race, ethnicity, culture, language, or disability, despite that students are highly diverse in these ways (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Of all the public school students in the United States, more than a third attend school in urban settings. Urban education has been defined as "those schools and systems that provide schooling for students in inner-corridor, densely populated, communities in which vast disparities in commerce, population density, transportation, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural backgrounds characterize the lives of people who live there" (Kozleski & Smith, 2009, p. 428). Students who attend urban schools as well as those who are placed in special education share a history of being under educated, miseducated, and treated inequitably by the U.S. education system. Students of color, students with disabilities, and students in poor schools in urban settings have also experienced a common struggle when it comes to receiving quality instruction (Blanchett, 2009; Blanchett et al., 2009).

A number of factors, including inadequate teacher preparation or poor quality of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2004) and insufficiently funded or resourced schools (Blanchett, et.al, 2009) are challenging issues in high-poverty, high-minority areas. The most prevalent disability category, specific learning disabilities (SLD) was typically classified using a discrepancy model whereby students would have a discrepancy between their potential achievement (based upon their Intelligence Quotient) and their actual achievement. One of the main reasons for the widespread implementation of RTI was to use the inability of students to respond to interventions instead of the traditional discrepancy model for SLD identification, thereby reducing inappropriate referrals to special education., However, even since widespread RTI implementation, twice as many students in low socioeconomic status (SES) schools are placed in classes for SLD than those from high SES districts (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013). The demographics of SLD programs have also shifted from primarily White students to CLD students, and students with SLD in urban settings are more likely to be serviced in more restrictive environments than their suburban peers (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Racial inequalities and discrimination in U.S. public schools lead to higher rates of students who drop out and/or are pushed out of school due to decreased opportunities to be successful for students of color. Black and Hispanic students are also overrepresented in remedial and vocational tracks, and low-achieving students from minority groups have

typically been placed in class structures not conducive to their success. School reform measures have added pressure to provide equitable and quality educational programs for minority learners with disabilities. As Obiakor and Utley (2004) describe it, "Misidentification leads to misassessment, misassessment leads to miscategorization, miscategorization leads to misplacement, and misplacement leads to misinstruction-misintervention" (p. 150). The intent of RTI was to address such issues, but to date, there is little research that examines whether or not it has actually increased access to a quality education or decreased disproportionate representation.

CLD students are often excluded from the general education classroom (Reid & Knight, 2006). Historically, marginalization and exclusion of minority students has been justified by an overlap in the rhetoric of race and disability. This suggests that the amount of time a student with a disability spends in the general education setting is highly correlated to the student's race (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Even with the push for more inclusive practices from the national and state level (IDEA, 2004; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), the presence of CLD students with disabilities within in the general education setting does not guarantee educational equity (Townsend, 2002). While NCLB calls for teachers who are highly qualified in content areas, there are not parameters in the law to measure qualifications in cultural competence for educators. According to school reform mandates, access to the general education curriculum coupled with the competence of educators to teach diverse learners are both key factors in the success of students with disabilities (Nagle, Yunker, & Malmgren, 2006). As Karger (2005) explains, IDEA requires access to the general education curriculum so that students with disabilities can meet the standards applicable to all children, while NCLB requires that all students—including those with disabilities—perform at grade level. RTI requires that all students receive high-quality, scientifically-based instruction based on their individual progress; however, more than a decade after these requirements, achievement gaps still persist, suggesting we need to examine if RTI is being implemented as prescribed for all populations.

Research on RTI for CLD Students

RTI and its relationship to student outcomes has been studied extensively; yet there is little research on implementation regarding CLD students in urban settings. This is a significant concern as urban schools are where the majority of students from CLD backgrounds receive their education (Blanchett et al., 2009), and the exclusion of a focus on these schools raises social justice concerns. Existing research indicates that RTI is an effective method of identifying children at risk for learning difficulties (e.g., Coleman, Buysse, & Neitzel, 2006), and Burns and Ysseldyke's (2005) meta-analysis of particular RTI programs yielded strong positive effects on student outcomes. Yet, when Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) reviewed the history of the evidence base for RTI development, they discovered that the research did not specifically study culturally and linguistically diverse students. Donovan and Cross (2002) reported that, "Of the 180 intervention studies of students with [S]LD that were synthesized by Swanson et al. (1999), the majority did not report ethnicity.… Findings disaggregated by ethnicity were neither provided nor possible to calculate," (p. 30). RTI has not yet been systematically studied as a culturally responsive educational model across policies, practices, and people as described by Klingner et al. (2005). There exists a need to examine the design, implementation, and outcomes of RTI for CLD students at risk for and diagnosed with high-incidence disabilities through all of these lenses to create a full picture of whether or not true "parity of participation" (Fraser, 2007, p. 20) has occurred.

Few studies have examined actual implementation of RTI. VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) studied RTI implementation in five elementary schools in a primarily White, English-speaking suburb over a two-year period and found that there was no statistically significant disproportionate representation of CLD students during RTI implementation. However, it is important to note that disproportionality had not existed prior to implementation of RTI. The low number of English language learners (ELLs) in the study, as well as the need for further study of this population, was noted by the researchers.

Orosco and Klingner (2010) studied RTI implementation in one urban school composed primarily of ELLs. This study yielded important findings about the failure of RTI to appropriately address the complexities of instruction for this population starting in Tier 1 settings, which ultimately lead to a deficits-based approach and insufficient support for the majority of students. However, we are not aware of any studies to date that have systematically studied the cultural responsiveness of RTI or the relationship between implementation, equity of access, and achievement for CLD learners on a large scale or across urban schools. An analysis of special education referral and placement rates, representation rates of minority groups within special education categories, and culturally responsive teaching within RTI models is needed.

Research must provide a clearer picture of what the RTI process is like for struggling CLD learners who are either at risk for or are currently receiving special education services. By identifying which factors within the RTI process are related to improved or diminished outcomes for CLD students, we can begin to explain the relationship between RTI, educational placements, and outcomes for struggling CLD learners. Garcia and Ortiz (2008) proposed a framework for culturally and linguistically responsive design of RTI models, calling for the need to move beyond classroom and school implementation and toward an exploration of systemic factors that contribute to lack of achievement of CLD populations. This framework incorporates sociocultural and linguistic contexts with local, state, and federal contexts and is premised on culturally and linguistic responsive curricula and instruction taking place within the classroom environment. Similarly, Klingner and Edwards (2006) provide cultural

considerations to consider in RTI models suggesting a four-tiered process in which teachers are adequately prepared in both appropriate evidence-based interventions and cultural responsiveness. Their model offers an additional tier on top of the typical three-tiered model to allow for more time and more intensive supports before considering possible special education placement. However, none of these considerations were present in the school observed in Orsoco and Klinger's (2010) study, nor are these frameworks and considerations incorporated into mainstream literature routinely provided to schools and districts when designing RTI models. Such frameworks must be considered when establishing tiered educational systems in urban schools, where CLD populations often comprise the majority of students.

Need for Further Study

This information is of importance to educational practitioners and stakeholders because social justice dictates that students are afforded equal educational opportunities and access to education. As RTI has never been thoroughly studied for CLD students, it is important to systematically investigate each part of the RTI process and its relationship to educational outcomes for CLD students. This is necessary to ensure that all students are receiving systematic, high–quality, and appropriate instruction, intervention, monitoring, and evaluation—the original intention of this approach. In 2005, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (NCCRESt) issued a position statement on cultural considerations and challenges in RTI models (NCCRESt, 2005). They suggested that RTI models should be based on a theory of how culture mediates the learning processes and that traditional intervention research cannot always capture highly complex school environments. They recommend studying RTI with a systems approach that looks at RTI and student performance within the larger context of classroom teachers, types of instruction, relationships between students and teachers, and societal implications.

Studies on the effectiveness of RTI implementation for CLD students can provide important information about the equitable education CLD students may or may not receive. Findings of this work should inform policy on future implementation of RTI to promote equity for all students, including those who are from CLD backgrounds and in urban settings. It is important to study these factors because, while RTI has become the norm for instruction nationwide, its implementation varies dramatically across states, districts, and even schools. No standard protocol has been developed or widely implemented for this process. RTI research has evaluated models as a whole and has identified common features of RTI programs (i.e. multidisciplinary teams, tiered instruction, student monitoring), but has yet to identify and study components of this approach in direct relation to outcomes for CLD students. District-wide implementation of RTI is too new and limited for any systematic study of these factors prior to this time, particularly in large, diverse, urban districts. Existing studies have been limited to studying specific interventions rather than the systemic components of large-scale RTI implementation (e.g., O'Connor & Klingner, 2010). This remains a critical need because despite educational mandates of the past 10 years (i.e. NCLB and IDEA 2004), disparities in access to quality educational opportunities and gaps in achievement persist.

Disparities in Access

The existing literature base has identified the potential of RTI to improve disparities of access, but thus far, these improvements have not been actualized. RTI has been touted as a tool that can be used in the transformation of schools into agents of social change (e.g., Robinson, 2010). RTI has also been described in the literature as a model that can potentially improve the academic performance of struggling learners by providing high-quality instruction within general education settings, thereby reducing inappropriate special education referrals (e.g., Batsche, Castillo, & Dorman, 2007; Xu & Drame, 2008). The logical connection is that a reduction in inappropriate referrals can ultimately lead to a reduction in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. However, as Harris-Murri et al. (2006) point out, "Without consideration of culturally responsive instruction, discipline, and interventions within all stages of the RTI decision making model, there is continued possibility of misinterpretation of student behavior…" (p. 781). When classrooms are not culturally responsive, a mismatch between CLD learner characteristics and the materials and teaching methods presented in school contributes to underachievement among CLD students (Powers, 2001; Vogt & Shearer, 2011).

CLD students labeled as having a disability often experience double jeopardy: in addition to the experiences associated with attending urban schools and living in poverty, these students also experience the inequalities of the special education system (Blanchett et al., 2009). The Supreme Court's landmark decision in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case not only mandated the desegregation of schools but also laid the foundation for challenging the segregation of students with disabilities, eventually leading to the passage of IDEA. However, there has not been an equal distribution of the special education benefits under IDEA, and segregation on the basis of race, social class (Losen & Orfield, 2002), and disability continues in special education programs as evidenced by disproportionality (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Furthermore, Black students with disabilities are more likely to receive one of the disciplinary provisions of IDEA, with the greatest racial disparities found in the provision that calls for suspension or expulsion for more than ten days (Skiba et al., 2008). This is relevant because high-incidence disabilities (those that affect the most students [e.g., SLD, emotional/behavioral disorders, and intellectual disabilities]) are referred to by Harry and Klingner (2014) as "judgment categories" (p. 3) because identification depends on clinical judgment rather than biological data. These are the same categories in which CLD students are disproportionately represented and in

which RTI has the potential to prevent inappropriate referrals.

Students with disabilities are increasingly being served in general education settings. During the 2006-2007 academic year, 33 states reported that more than 50% of their students with learning disabilities were served in general education, as compared to just 24 states reporting the same during the 1996-1997 academic year (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013), nationally, 65.1% of students with SLD spend 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms. However, this is not the case for Black students with disabilities. The trend of placing Black students with disabilities in more restrictive, segregated settings instead of more inclusive, general education classrooms has been documented by researchers. Black students with disabilities are more likely to be underrepresented in general education settings and overrepresented in more restrictive settings (Blanchett, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006), regardless of gender or type of disability (LeRoy & Kulik, 2001). The U.S. Department of Education (2005) revealed that only 38.6% of Black students with disabilities spent most of their school day in the regular classroom in comparison to 54.7% of White students.

Disparities of Achievement

Staggering performance gaps for students with disabilities have long suggested that existing special education practices need to be reconsidered (Artiles, 2003; Lipsky, 2005). In a nationwide study, Bielinski and Ysseldyke (2000) found a 37% difference in pass rates between students with disabilities and students without disabilities on statewide reading and mathematics assessments. Schools must assess how educational services are being delivered and how student placement decisions are made in order to understand achievement trends for students with disabilities. In the 2007-2008 school year, public pre-K to 12 schools enrolled 5.3 million ELLs, approximately 11% of the total school enrollment. ELL enrollment increased 53% while general Pre-K to 12 enrollments increased only 8% between the 1997-1998 and 2007-2008 school years (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). ELLs consistently underperform compared to their English-speaking peers. Nationally, achievement gaps exist for ELLs. On the 2005 NAEP, 4th grade ELLs scored 35 points below non-ELLs in reading, a huge gap considering that ten points are equivalent to approximately one grade level. In 2007, the differences between ELLs and non-ELLs were nearly identical to the 2005 data. On the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 12% of fourth graders scored "at or above proficient" in mathematics, compared to 42% of their non-ELL peers. The math NAEP is available in Spanish and English, but reading is not (Slavin, Madden, & Calderon, 2010). Gaps between English-proficient students and ELLs are even larger and have increased across all subject areas among eighth and twelfth graders since the widespread implementation of RTI (NCES, 2011). These results suggest that RTI as it is now practiced is not an effective means of closing achievement gaps for this population.

In a post-NCLB, RTI-mandated era, there is a disconnect between what we require and how we actually provide equitable intervention to students. What is appropriate instruction for some may not be the most appropriate instruction for all. Performance gaps exist for CLD students in general as Hispanic and Black student subgroups consistently score below their White peers on formal assessments. In the 2011 Nation's Report Card (NCES, 2011), fourth grade Black students scored an average of 23 points lower in math and 25 points lower in reading than White students. Hispanic students scored an average of 14 points lower in math and 15 points lower in reading than White students. Separate from racial and ethnic classification, students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch (a common indicator of poverty status) scored 20 points lower in math and 23 points lower in reading than their peers who did not qualify for free and reduced lunch. These gaps generally do not close as students go through school, with eighth grade gaps for Black students at 29 points for math and 22 points for reading, for Hispanic student at 14 points for math and 11 points for reading and for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch at 24 points for math and 19 points for reading.

Call to Action

In sum, we need to examine the relationship between the implementation of RTI in large, diverse, urban school districts and outcomes for CLD students with or at risk for high-incidence disabilities. Although RTI is an evidenced-based practice and has been studied in relationship to student outcomes, the system itself has yet to be studied specifically in terms of its impact on CLD students. CLD students have consistently suffered inequities in the educational system, ranging from overrepresentation in high-incidence disability categories to unequal access to general education curricula and settings. Both students with disabilities and CLD students continue to achieve below their peers. Part of the reason for widespread RTI implementation has been to ameliorate these discrepancies. The number of CLD students in schools has been steadily increasing, yet the research base for the implementation of RTI for this group is scarce. It is critical that parity of access to appropriate interventions be achieved for youth who have a long-standing history of educational inequities stacked against them, including a lack of access to quality instruction.

Further study must explore RTI implementation and related variables, such as movement of students between tiers, the number and socio-demographic characteristics of students who receive intensive interventions outside the general education classroom, and the number and socio-demographic characteristics of students referred to and placed in special education. The proportion of

CLD students in tiers with more intensive levels of intervention needs to be explored, as well as whether students from CLD backgrounds are more likely to be segregated to receive more intense supports. Additionally, we must systematically examine the type of instruction taking place within general and special education classrooms, particularly in urban settings, to ensure the best outcomes for CLD youth. RTI implementation is a complex system to measure; however, studying this practice separate from the context of implementation (i.e. the policies, practices, and people), particularly in urban districts, ignores the complexities of ethnicity, race, language, poverty, and disability. For too long, educational inequities have contributed to the misidentification and miseducation of urban youth. Now that RTI and evidence-based instruction are mandated in all schools, we must build a base of evidence for implementation for all populations.

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