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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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# Implementation of Response to Intervention for English Language Learners

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## Implementation of Response to Intervention for English Language Users

### Preamble

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a foreigner and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a foreigner and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a foreigner and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a foreigner or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'" (Mathew 25: 34-46)

### Introduction

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This passage reminds us that salvation is a gracious gift of God, not something merited by conduct. Nevertheless, good deeds are the fruit of our salvation and manifest God's grace in our lives. They are the proof of our saving faith. What better way to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit than for educators to show immense joy, peace, patience, love, gentleness, goodness, and faith (Galatians 5:22-23) to all of the children on their class rolls, most especially those who are needy or weak.

It has never been difficult to identify struggling learners in the classroom. The general education curriculum is challenging and all learners need varying degrees of intervention to aid their success. Foreign students who have limited English proficiency pose a special challenge for educators who feel ill-equipped to meet their needs. As Christian educators, it is vitally important that we set a strong example for our colleagues with regard to students learning the English language. Although the "all-must-pass-the-test" accountability measures put in place by No Child Left Behind may seem unfair and may make foreign students appear burdensome to the general education teacher, they are just as "fearfully and wonderfully made" as their English-speaking classmates (Psalms 139:14).

### Discussion

#### *What is RTI?*

In the past, the "Discrepancy" model was the primary mode of identifying students who may need the most intensive interventions for an actual Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Students could qualify for special education "only if an assessment revealed a discrepancy between their aptitude and achievement" (Richards et al, 2007, p. 55). To put this differently, students could qualify for special education if the learner demonstrated average or higher intelligence with an achievement gap of two standard deviations below the norm on a

standardized achievement measure in one or more academic areas. In hindsight, there are two major criticisms of this method of SLD determination. First and most cruelly, the “wait to fail” model often takes years of documentation before the gap is wide enough for the learner to actually qualify for specialized intervention services. Secondly, the discrepancy model fails to “...enhance services for students, particularly the provision of early intervention to struggling students” in the general education classroom (Richards et al, 2007, p. 56). By focusing on proving the deficits in the learner, we unintentionally fail to focus on the interventions he needs. We inadvertently strive to produce failure as the end product and self-fulfilling prophecy of the achievement gap that we so carefully document.

The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework addresses the criticisms of the deficit model by providing for the actual research-based interventions as part of the overall evaluation. Teachers are no longer forced to “prove failure” but instead are encouraged to utilize scientifically-based teaching methods to promote academic success for all learners. If the student suffers with a true learning disability, the student’s deficits can be documented while he is enjoying the benefit of sound teaching practices in general education. Student progress doesn’t inadvertently become a roadblock to the help he may truly need. If the gap between his achievement and the achievement of the norm group is not closing in spite of intensive, research-based teaching practices, the student may still be deemed eligible for specialized instructional services through special education.

#### *Determining specific learning disabilities for ELL students*

Today students who are new to the United States and in the midst of English language acquisition present especially challenging problems for school officials in determining Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). English Language Learner (ELL) education is grossly underfunded

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given the growing numbers of foreign students entering American schools. Many schools offer minimal service to ELL students. These in turn provide modest information for the general education teacher who is struggling to discern and distinguish limited English proficiency from an actual learning disability. The symptoms are “shared and difficult to disentangle” (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008, p. 13). Data-driven, curriculum-based assessments, and research-based instruction helps build a meaningful, comprehensive representation of the learner that can be assessed for a learning disability. RTI is especially promising for those students because of the emphasis on how the learner is progressing compared to his peer group. Research warns us that “...tests and other evaluation materials must not be racially or culturally biased” and “tests and other evaluation materials should be administered in the child’s native language or other mode of communication” (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008, p. 11). Great caution must be exercised as test data is interpreted and analysis of all data, including discrepant pieces, must be considered when determining eligibility and constructing the individualized education plan (IEP).

This unique group of students is already present in American schools with more on the way. It is safe to assume that some of them will arrive with little or no educational background, little or no English proficiency, and possible learning disabilities. Our task is to disentangle these factors to provide free, appropriate, public education to all learners on the class roll. To increase the rate and level of learning for English Language Learner (ELL) students, general and ELL teachers must work closely to set realistic goals and provide on-going instruction and assessment which helps identify the learner’s true needs. Further research is needed to examine practical steps that districts can take to address the diverse language needs of the area. When formal testing needs to be offered in the native language, finding the qualified personnel to administer and interpret assessments is especially challenging. General education teachers with

little or no training in ELL are called upon to begin to provide measurable, research-based interventions for struggling ELL students. These concerns must be addressed for RTI to be valid in the planning of effective instruction and the reliable identification of disabilities.

Teacher attitude or receptiveness toward RTI has been shown to influence results (Elium & Samson, 2008). Teachers are often identified as most concerned about the increase in quantity of the workload and job description changes. They are also concerned about inadequate support and assistance from their administration and district with implementation and they wonder to what degree RTI will improve services for ELL students. Probably the single most influential group involved in designing instruction to increase student achievement and RTI for English Language Learners are the practitioners who implement the necessary interventions: teachers.

#### *RTI / Student Achievement*

According to the Georgia Response to Intervention Manual, RTI is defined as

‘a practice of academic and behavioral interventions designed to provide early, effective assistance to underperforming students.

Research-based interventions are implemented and frequent progress monitoring is conducted to assess student response and progress. When students do not make progress, increasingly more intense interventions are introduced.” (2008, p. 13).

Although no one specific framework exists for RTI implementation, it is commonly agreed that true RTI provides for two specific things: research-based instructional practices (which include interventions for those who struggle) and progress monitoring to verify the learner’s response to instruction or interventions. For ELL students, careful collaboration with a language specialist must coincide with instructional planning and progress monitoring. The data

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available from the language specialist may provide crucial insight into the ELL student's progress in language acquisition, which will in turn provide clues to the actual responsiveness or non-responsiveness to interventions. Research based instructional strategies are the core of good quality classroom teaching. Then progress monitoring is used to assess students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction.

RTI documentation aids in reducing over-identification of disabilities due to subjectivity and variability and maintains "emphasis on high-quality, evidence-based practice to provide an alternative to special education" placement (Mastropieri, et.al., 2005, p. 529). ELL students are often frightened, homesick, and perhaps even a little angry at finding themselves in a new place and surrounded by strangers who do not talk like or understand them. A friendly face and a kind tone of voice provide a strong first impression. Christian educators must remember to think compassionately and provide caring guidance to foreign students. Ephesians 2:12-13 reminds us to "...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship... foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." But because of the kindness shown to us through Christ, "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household..." In great humility and gratitude, we can worship the Savior of the world by demonstrating His example of lovingkindness.

RTI is probably most identified with instructional planning for reading or math achievement concerns; however, its efficacy with behavioral interventions is also well documented in research. Interventions for students with behavioral or attention concerns may be school-based, classroom-based, or individually administered. RTI data collection practices can

aid with the quantitative statistical analysis of whether an "...intervention reduces the student's at-risk status and helps prevent the development of emotional and behavioral disabilities" (Cheney et al, 2008, p. 108). Research suggests that school-wide interventions and positive behavior support systems sustain students' emotional, behavioral, and social needs by providing them with consistent access to positive caring adults, multiple opportunities for success, plenty of positive feedback from teachers, greater acceptance in the school environment, and constant reinforcement of positive social behaviors. Simultaneously, RTI is useful for identifying non-responders who need more intensive interventions and may be eligible for special education support. When the reduction or prevention of behavior problems is the goal, RTI data can help determine how ELL students are truly responding to the behavior intervention.

### Conclusion

Research reminds us repeatedly that early intervention is paramount to student achievement. For struggling ELL students, the decision to strategically intervene for those who speak another language begins and ends with the general education teacher's willingness to "do the hard work." One by one, struggling English language learners who need intensive interventions, benefit from the RTI process by getting the help they deserve in a systematic fashion. The frameworks are only as effective as those who provide them.

Matthew 25:40 reminds Christian educators, "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" As we labor as unto the Lord, let us never be found guilty of failing to intervene on behalf of struggling students, especially those who have come from foreign lands. They deserve the highest quality teaching methods paired with progress monitoring to insure their continued success as they

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assimilate into our culture. Perhaps the seeds of kindness shown and the knowledge acquired will soften hearts toward the message of Christ.

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