

Response to Intervention (RtI) for Gifted Children

The Association for the Gifted, a Division of the Council for Exceptional Children

Introduction

The Association for the Gifted, a division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC-TAG) recognizes the importance and the impact of the Response to Intervention (RtI) method of identifying and serving students with diverse educational needs. The position paper on RtI issued by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) specifically addressed the needs of children who are “twice-exceptional” indicating that these needs must be met through the provision of “access to a challenging and accelerated curriculum, while also addressing the unique needs of their disability” (CEC Position Paper on RtI, 2007, p. 2). The inclusion of students who are twice exceptional within the RtI framework provided a starting point for addressing students who are gifted. In this paper we extend the application of RtI to include children who are gifted.

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education and the Council of Administrators of Special Education (2006) state that RtI “challenges the assumptions that separate, often disconnected “silos” are the best method to address the learning needs of students...” (p. 4). Thus, while gifted education has organized and maintained programs separate from general education, the nature of general education is shifting. The Council for Exceptional Children (2007) has noted that RtI “must be viewed as a schoolwide initiative, spanning both special education and general education” (p. 1). Gifted education must review its relationship to general education given the framework of Response to Intervention model and the changing relationships among the components of education. In addition, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (2005) has noted that RtI must be addressed within the context of cultural learning and that the diversity of students must be recognized through the nature and implementation of RtI.

Position Statement

It is the position of The Association for the Gifted of the Council for Exceptional Children that the Response to Intervention model be expanded in its implementation to include the needs of gifted children. The use of the RtI framework for gifted students would support advanced learning needs of children in terms of a faster paced, more complex, greater depth and/or breadth with respect to their curriculum and instruction. It should also be noted that students who are gifted with disabilities may need more than one level of intervention and advancement in terms of curriculum and instructional strategies.

Critical Elements of RtI

There are several aspects of RtI that are critical to its development and implementation across educational spectra, including students with gifts and talents. These components include: (a) universal screening, assessments, and progress monitoring; (b) established protocols for students who need additional supports and services; (c) problem-solving that includes parental involvement to determine what the student/child needs; and d) a tiered system of intervention, based on level of need and support.

Screening and Assessment Issues

Universal screening is a process through which all students and their educational performance are examined in order to ensure that all have an equal opportunity for support. It is our contention that universal screening be applied for the purpose of recognizing student strengths and abilities in an effort to provide appropriate education to students whose development is advanced. A universal screening process helps to ensure that access to high-end learning opportunities are open for all students.

Progress monitoring, a key component of RtI, is also appropriate for students who are gifted. For these students, who learn more easily and quickly in their area of strength, progress monitoring should be used to document mastery. Once mastery has been documented, students must be given opportunities to continue learning with enriched and advanced materials related to their area of strength.

Established Protocols

Established protocols are based on standard treatments that have been shown through evidence-based studies to be successful. While these protocols have been designed to promote acquisition of new knowledge and skills for most students, they also need to include curriculum and materials that are differentiated and respond to students who are ready to learn curriculum that is beyond their current grade level. Gifted students need to be able to access a flexibly-paced, advanced curricula that provides depth and breadth in their area of strength.

Problem Solving Approach

The problem solving approach is tailored to individual student's learning needs. When children are not responding to effective curriculum, then individualized adaptations are made. While problem solving approaches consider primarily students who are not progressing when compared with their same-age peers, they also need to address gifted students who are not progressing at above-grade levels commensurate with their abilities. These accelerated interventions allow students to increase their levels of knowledge and skills in their areas of strengths and may include advanced educational options such as continuous progress learning, curriculum compacting, advanced placement, grade or subject skipping, and post-secondary enrollment.

The standard protocol approach uses a common, standardized curriculum in Tier 1, monitors students to identify those that are not making progress as expected, provides for collaboration among special and general educators, and refers to specialized services in Tier 3 if the students not progress as expected. While the standard protocol approach is used primarily for children who may need additional support for success to meet grade level standards, it needs to be differentiated and use with children who are advanced or beyond grade level.

Collaboration between professionals guides both approaches. If the general education classroom curriculum does not appear to be effective, then professionals and parents work together to develop plans for student success. This collaboration is particularly important for students from diverse backgrounds and whose achievement is uneven. These professionals need to include general, special, and gifted educators who determine when individualized adaptations are needed. If the general education classroom cannot provide sufficient improvement in all students' learning then special services are considered.

Tiered Supports and Services

The current implementation models of RtI demonstrate multiple levels of intervention, with the more significant levels of intensive intervention serving the fewest numbers of students with the most intense needs. Typical models have three levels of intervention, with Tiers I and II focused on small group interventions, increasing in intensity to the individual level of Tier III (CEC, 2006).

When considering gifted students, each tier is governed by the intensive services required for students whose achievement is greater than typical students in specific areas. RtI for gifted students differentiates the depth and breadth, pacing and complexity of content for students within each Tier through acceleration and enrichment opportunities. Gifted students who need more intensive services beyond the general education differentiated curriculum, will move into different tiers.

Systemic Needs

Fluidity and Flexibility

According to the Council for Exceptional Children's position paper (2006), RtI services are "flexible and fluid, based on student need." When considering the needs of gifted children, a similar level of flexibility is needed, since gifted children, and particularly twice-exceptional students will not demonstrate high levels of achievement in all areas. A flexible system of continuous and comprehensive services allows schools to meet the needs of gifted students at varying levels of development. In this way, services are less dependent on a student's label and more dependent on a student's need.

Professional Development

Faculty and staff need to become aware of, and capable of progress monitoring across a wide range of developmental levels. As noted by the Council for Exceptional Children (2006), professional development includes development of essential knowledge, skills and beliefs and attitudes. For gifted students, such knowledge, skills and attitudes are clearly noted in the NCATE Preparation Standards established through collaboration with CEC-TAG and NAGC (Johnsen, VanTassel-Baska, & Robinson, 2008). Such training in strengths-based educational strategies is needed at all levels of education, from state to classroom levels.

Resources

There is a wealth of literature available in the fields of gifted education and special education regarding appropriate funding. Because RtI is an allowable expense through IDEA and gifted children with disabilities must be served under IDEA, it is foreseeable that many of these services can be incorporated by realigning them to meet the needs of all students. In addition, existing funds under special education and gifted education can be aligned to meet these varying needs, using the same process that focuses on growth of all students.

Twice-Exceptional Students and RtI

Nowhere else is the issue of a flexible system of RtI most appropriate than with children who are gifted with disabilities. The current system of RtI allows great flexibility in services designed to support a child's area(s) of challenge. However, it is even more critically important to support a child's area(s) of strength as well. A system in which both systems co-exist and flexible services can simultaneously provide support, remediation, enrichment and acceleration, can provide a cohesive, unified system of education for children with such diverse needs.

Concluding Comments

CEC-TAG is committed to working with general and special educators in developing RtI models that are inclusive and respond to students with gifts and talents. RtI provides a true opportunity for all students to grow and to learn something new every day.

References

- Council for Exceptional Children (2007). CEC's position on Response to Intervention: The unique role of special education and special educators.
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- Ryser, G. (2008, April). *Growth model analysis: Implications for gifted education*. Presentation at the TAG Division meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children annual conference, Boston, MA.
- Wisconsin School Psychologists Association (2006). *WSPA Position paper on Response to Intervention*.
<http://www.wspaonline.net/PositionPapers/WSPA%20RtI%20position%20statement.doc>

The National Association for Gifted Children and its Board of Directors have reviewed this position and express general support for its views and concepts. November 2009.