

## **RTI and DI: Making the Connections Explicit!**

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The 2004 Reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) prompted many American schools to change from a discrepancy model using intelligence test scores and classroom performance for determining the presence of a learning disability to a new paradigm. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a teaching and learning process using research based instructional practices reflecting learners' needs, monitoring student learning progress and modifying and adjusting instruction as necessary to insure continued growth. Response to Intervention (RTI) procedures are used for students who are having difficulties academically as well as those who might be experiencing behavior issues. RTI is primarily a general classroom initiative, rather than a special education service. However, special education professionals may be involved in planning or implementing the instructional interventions along with the classroom teacher.

In academic interventions, the Response to Intervention process engages educators in a problem solving model where learning differences are identified, teaching and learning interventions are planned and implemented, and student progress is monitored. Does this sound familiar? The critical elements of *differentiation* are the foundation of Response to Intervention. **You can not RTI without DI!!** In addition, RTI has the potential to strengthen and deepen the practices of differentiation in the classroom.

In implementing RTI, teachers as part of a team of school professionals identify a student's *academic difficulties*, determine the student's *strengths, interests and talents*, review data on the student's learning progress, and then *design specific interventions* to increase the student's success in learning. This same reflective process utilizing data and designing instruction based on student needs is used by classroom teachers in determining when and how to differentiate instruction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the method utilized in RTI for creating multiple pathways for student learning. UDL specifically responds to the needs of struggling learners in the classroom by using a variety of instructional methods (differentiating process), offering students multiple ways in which they may demonstrate their learning (differentiating products) and providing opportunities for students to engage in their interests (choice in content, process, or product). UDL reflects the strategies utilized in differentiated instruction.

Response to Intervention and differentiation are closely linked. However, some school leaders fail to make the connections for teachers. What results is a perception that RTI is just another educational bandwagon. Unless the relationship between DI and RTI are carefully explained (or even better diagrammed!!), teachers can assume that their school

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is moving away from a focus on differentiation into RTI. Although school leaders, curriculum directors, and professional development staff may think “of course, it’s obvious,” we need to be explicit in specifically outlining the relationship. **RTI builds on teachers’ skills in differentiation.**

If a teacher is skilled in differentiation, it will be easier to implement RTI. As RTI is implemented, differentiation is deepened because its strategies become even more specific to a learner’s needs. What does each offer the other?

### **What Response to Intervention Offers Differentiation**

- More frequent monitoring of student learning progress
- Broader assessment tools: standardized assessment results plus formal and informal assessments including work samples, parent/teacher/student rating scales, observations of students, and teacher logs, as well as information about outside-of-school experiences including parent input, information about the student’s physical condition, social and/or cultural background
- Greater sensitivity to individual academic progress
- Interventions (differentiation) that more specifically match skill deficits
- A more comprehensive problem solving approach to planning interventions (differentiation)
- A greater adherence to appropriate implementation of best practices in teaching and learning
- Collaborative problem solving with a team of school professionals
- Consideration of appropriate growth based on expected progress for the grade level
- More strategic use of paraprofessionals and/or co-teachers in the classroom
- More intensive small group instruction based on needs (Tier II)
- Data-based reflection on the success of an intervention (differentiation)

### **What Differentiation Offers Response to Intervention**

- Preparation of teachers for RTI-like thinking
- Awareness of and implementation of research-based best practices in teaching and learning
- A recognition of the importance of assessment in informing instruction
- A broader range of instructional strategies to respond to differences
- Variety in instructional methods
- An acceptance that not all students will be doing the same thing at the same time.
- Use of pre-assessment and formative assessment to make data-based decisions on appropriate differentiation for students

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- Awareness of and planning for differences in readiness, interests, and learning preferences
- Ability to differentiate content, processes, or products
- Involvement of ALL students in respectful, engaging and significant work
- Use of tiered assignments to match students with just right, right now learning experiences
- Skills in grouping students in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes
- Experience in using choice in content, process, and products
- The strategies and management skills of flexible instructional grouping

It is suggested by proponents of Response to Intervention that implementation of RTI will create a renewed interest in research based best practices, that teachers will become more skilled and specific in responding to learning differences, and that instruction will be enhanced for all students. I suggest that it is the linkage between differentiated instruction and RTI that will successfully create the kind of student centered, learner responsive classrooms that we need in our academically diverse schools.

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