

Response to Intervention and the Disproportionate Representation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Special Education

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Response to Intervention (RTI) is a term that is generating many varied descriptions and explanations (Christ, Burns, & Ysseldyke, 2005). Indeed, how it is being implemented can vary greatly from one instance to another (see Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007, for some examples). Although the term and how it is operationalized might be new, the concepts underlying it are not (Gresham, 2007); they are present in other fields such as medicine, agriculture, and economics and have been present in education for at least the past 30–40 years. One of the earlier instances of RTI in education is generally considered to be the findings and conclusions synthesized in a National Research Council report titled *Placing Children in Special Education* (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). Why are some educators, advocates, and parents considering RTI as a way to address some of the issues surrounding disproportionate referral and placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs? Because it, and some of its core principles, has been presented as a viable solution for over a quarter of a century. Before going into more detail about RTI, though, let's first review a little background on disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs.

What is Disproportionate Representation?

The basic premise of disproportionate representation is that, all other things being similar, students from different groups should be identified for special education services in similar proportions. For example, if 6% of the Caucasian students in a given district are identified for special education, we would expect about 6% of the African-American students, 6% of the Latino/a students, and 6% of any other group to be identified. This is not always the case, as some groups of students have greater needs for certain services (e.g., a higher percentage of Latino/a students often need English language instruction). This can lead to one group showing up as overrepresented (having a higher percentage identified—say 10% in the previous example) in the group receiving a certain service or placed in a certain program. There can also be underrepresentation if a group has a smaller percentage identified (say 3% in the previous example). Disproportionality is the catchall phrase that encompasses both over- and underrepresentation—that is, representation that is not proportional.

Disproportionality can be examined for any way of grouping students—by sex, language proficiency, receipt of free or reduced price lunch, or race/ethnicity. The last grouping is the most common one that has been examined, as it continues to be an important civil rights concern in the United States (National Education Association, 2007). It is also the focus of this article, but it is important to keep in mind that the principles and problems can be applicable to other groups of students, too. Most of the history of disproportionality has focused on culturally and linguistically diverse students.

History of Disproportionate Representation in Special Education

In 1968, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) began conducting a biennial survey of elementary and secondary schools in the United States (see Donovan & Cross, 2002, for a more detailed description). One focus of the data in these surveys has been placement in special education programs disaggregated by various student characteristics (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity, receipt of free/reduced price lunch, language proficiency). The patterns of disproportionality have remained relatively stable at the national level for the past 40 years (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Finn, 1982; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999).

Most research on disproportionate representation has focused on the number of students identified for services or within specific programs or placements; however, calls have recently increased for shifting the focus away from documentation of disproportionality and directing it instead to the generation of solutions (e.g., Donovan & Cross, 2002; Markowitz, Garcia, & Eichelberger, 1997; Serna, Forness, & Nielsen, 1998). Researchers are stepping up to the challenge by examining additional factors that might be important for addressing students' needs, such as restrictiveness of placements (i.e., the percentage of time a student spends with his or her typical peers—a lower percentage indicating a more restrictive placement; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006); eligibility for multiple services, including special education and English language learner services (de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Zehler, Fleishman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson, 2003); and linking disproportionality to the achievement gap (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). These considerations, coupled with some of the core principles of RTI, show promise for addressing the issue of disproportionality.

However, there is first another important point about disproportionality to consider. Why is disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services problematic? If every child is provided opportunity and services that are perceived as positive and effective on the basis of his or her needs, disproportionality is not a problem in and of itself (although it could be a reflection of broader social problems). Therein lies the heart of the concern. Special education programs and services are often not perceived as positive or effective; in addition, the processes for identifying and delivering services is not always applied equally or fairly (see Hosp & Reschly, 2003, for a more detailed discussion). These are some of the reasons that RTI is being viewed as a promising way to address the underlying problems illuminated by disproportionality patterns.

How RTI Might be Able to Address Disproportionality

Several of the characteristics of an RTI model can be useful for monitoring and addressing issues of disproportionality. A few of the most critical involve a focus on outcomes, individuals, and data.

Focus on Outcomes

A key goal of any RTI model is to improve the outcomes for all students. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, but all must involve high-quality instruction delivered with good fidelity (i.e., delivered as it was intended or developed to be delivered). Instruction and intervention must be aligned with students' needs. In other words, if we are meeting students' needs, then the outcomes we expect will come to pass. In relation to disproportionate representation, the outcome that has been measured in much of the research and litigation is the number of students from various groups that are identified for special education services. Identification of entitlement for a service is not an outcome in an RTI framework (it could be an important indicator, but is secondary to the outcomes). An outcome would be something like reading proficiently or demonstrating appropriate social skills. Therefore, monitoring of disproportionality should not be based solely on a head count, but rather should include a focus on differences in outcomes experienced by various groups.

The achievement gap is probably the most common example of differences in outcome. Studies have consistently demonstrated differences in achievement for various racial/ethnic groups (see Peterson, 2006, for a summary). To illustrate how an indicator such as identification rate can relate to an outcome such as achievement, consider a school or district in which a specific racial/ethnic group is overrepresented in special education but is achieving as well as any other group. The indicator may show a problem (overrepresentation), but the outcome does not (there is no achievement gap). This example is a simplification of the issue, but it demonstrates that a focus on important outcomes is critical. It is also important that the outcomes be examined at various levels—the district, the school, the classroom, and the individual.

Focus on the Individual (as Well as the Classroom, School, and District)

Aligning our instruction and intervention with student needs is an important component related to the focus on outcomes. The tiered nature of service delivery in RTI allows more efficient provision of instruction and intervention—if a lot of students share similar needs, it is more efficient to provide it to them as a group (or in small groups) than to provide it individually. Needs for services that are more intense should be present in smaller groups of students. The general proportions of the tiers in the RTI pyramid show that about 80% of all students are successful with high-quality Tier 1 instruction, but approximately 15% will need some supplemental services, and 5% will need the most intensive services. If the students requiring Tier 3 services are disproportionately from a specific group, it might be the case that

the Tier 1 or Tier 2 interventions are not sufficiently meeting the needs of this group of students. There are other plausible explanations that could occur (e.g., the group started off performing below their peers because of the effects of poverty), but noticing a trend in placements and outcomes should raise a flag to educators to at least examine the issue to determine if a solution is possible so that the need for more intensive services is prevented.

Research on disproportionate representation has almost exclusively been conducted at the state, district, or school levels because of the focus on patterns of placement or identification. Although some have argued that there needs to be a greater focus on the individual and a determination of the degree to which a school/district is meeting his or her needs (i.e., a focus on outcomes rather than indicators), this has been difficult because of the lack of consistent individual data across schools, districts, or states. The focus on use of data in RTI might help to change that pattern.

Focus on Data

A central feature of RTI is that many important educational decisions need to be made and that they should be based on data. Data need to be collected, aggregated, and analyzed so that decisions can be made about individuals, classrooms, schools, districts, and states. The accountability provisions for adequate yearly progress (AYP) from the No Child Left Behind Act provide for some comparisons at the state, district, and school levels by requiring the disaggregation of data comparing different racial/ethnic groups. However, AYP data cannot be used to make decisions about classrooms or individuals.

Although educators have always collected data to make decisions about individuals or classrooms, until recently this was often not done in such a systematic manner that those data could be aggregated or compared to make decisions. Screening was generally not done universally, and more detailed evaluations were only conducted when a problem reached a level of significance warranting a referral for special services or were often so idiosyncratic that all students were not given the same measures or even ones that were comparable. A good RTI system requires the use of universal screening with reliable measures that can be used to make decisions about individual performance as well as about classrooms, schools, or districts. Merely collecting additional data may serve to make people more aware of the issue and thus more likely to do something to address it (Johnson, 2002).

Conclusions

Clearly, given its long history and the consistency of patterns of disproportionality, a simple solution does not exist. Different states have different requirements and plans for determining disproportionality (Burdette, 2007). In addition, there are variations in enforcement that affect how disproportionality is determined and what it looks like in practice (Hehir, 2002). Plans to address issues of disproportionality need to be developed and implemented at the systems level—as most RTI models are. To date, there are only a few guides for how to address disproportionality with RTI (Hosp & Madyun, 2007; Klingner & Edwards, 2006), but you can be sure that they will not be the last.

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Additional Resources

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Web Resources

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