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Policy Brief: Exploring Response to Intervention's Effectiveness with Students of Color

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Introduction

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model was first introduced by Fuchs and Fuchs (1998). RTI was originally a *treatment-validity model* that offered multitiered assistance for early readers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). One of RTI's central purposes was to provide an alternative way to identify students as having a Learning Disability (LD) or Specific Learning Disability (SLD) to receive special education services (Braden, 1987; Cone & Wilson, 1981; Evans, 1992; Finían, 1992; Payette et al., 1995). Before RTI, a discrepancy between student IQ and student achievement was primarily used to identify individuals as (S)LD (Mercer et al., 1996). RTI was promoted to “modify the ecology” (Sabnis et al., 2020, p. 289) or change the instructional strategy (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Cartledge, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2007). In short, RTI tries to provide high-quality instruction to ensure that individuals are not incorrectly identified as (S)LD due to lack of opportunities to access quality instruction, rather than relying on standardized assessment measures.

Since achievement testing, IQ tests, and standardized assessments were notoriously racially and culturally biased (Willis, 2019), it was assumed that this new alternative approach would address the overrepresentation of students of Color (SOC) in special education (Carnine, 2003; Doughty, 2001; Singham, 2003; King & Coughlin, 2016; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015; Townsend, 2002; Willis, 2019; Young et al., 2005). This was promising to special educators, given racial disproportionalities had been an identified issue in special education since the late 1960s (Dunn, 1968). But, after two decades of implementation, has RTI been successful at diminishing racial disproportionalities? Through this policy analysis, I seek to explore the effectiveness of RTI programs at diminishing racial disproportionalities in special education. Additionally, I will briefly review the legislative context of the RTI policy. I also will examine a

contributing factor (educator ideologies) to the effectiveness of RTI policy. Finally, I will end the analysis with implications and future policy directions.

Research Overview

Although RTI appears to be backed by research and logic, RTI continues to be plagued by racial disproportionality and an overrepresentation of SOC in specialized programs (Albrecht et al., 2012; Artiles, 2011; Enrique et al., 2013; Hartlep & Ellis, 2012; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Marston et al., 2003; Skiba et al., 2008; Willis, 2019). Moreover, RTI policy continues to minoritize SOC, and many teachers continue to hold a deficit view of these students despite the prevention and intervention RTI model (Orosco & Klinger, 2010; Sabnis et al., 2020; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). To take up the call of Sullivan and Artiles (2011), it is necessary to hypothesize why racial disproportionality still exists in special education programs and why RTI is not an effective remedy.

RTI Educational Policy Legislation

During his presidential candidacy, George W. Bush ran on a platform of a public education system in calamity; his message was that our public-school system had failed SOC and children in poverty and now was the time for equity (Willis, 2019). Continuing his equal rights education platform as president, Bush proclaimed that “education is the greatest civil rights issue of our time” (Bush, 2002). President Bush seemingly intended to promote equity for individuals with disabilities, emerging bilingual students, and SOC through the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB required assessment data to be disaggregated by race and assigned states to define major racial groups. NCLB promoted student ability to read as crucial and provided substantial federal funding for reading instruction. Race and equity played a significant role in President Bush’s education platform and the passing of NCLB.

In light of the NCLB legislation, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) met to develop a plan to address reading and special education. The commission presented a recommendation to implement a preventative model, rather than a deficit model. Carnine (2003) stated during his testimony that the best way to improve education was through quality instruction and "scientifically-based" intervention. The recommended preventative "scientifically-based" model was RTI. With RTI, students would be identified as "at-risk" early and would be provided with necessary supports and quality instruction; this early intervention would reduce referrals for special education testing (Carnine, 2003). Moreover, RTI would reduce the overrepresentation of SOC referred and ultimately placed in special education programs. In other words, Carnine (2003) and the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) endorsed RTI as the remedy for lack of reading achievement in diverse student populations.

In 2004, the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) was reauthorized and extended. It included funding for RTI and recommended local school districts to implement RTI to support reading. IDEA 2004 also required local districts to monitor and examine data for overrepresentation of race and ethnicity in special programs. Some congressional members pushed back, questioning the effectiveness and limited data available surrounding RTI (Willis, 2019). Supporters of RTI cited research by a limited number of scholars (Fuchs & Fuchs) and were able to buy more time to address concerns. Even so, conflicting research by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the National Center for Education Statistics (2004) continued to reveal racist tendencies and overidentification of SOC. The following year, IDEA 2004 was amended to address students of diverse cultures, emerging bilinguals, and familial involvement.

Once again, IDEA 2004 promoted the RTI model as a solution to address the overrepresentation of SOC in special education.

IDEA 2004's RTI policy appealed to educators and politicians alike, as it provided funding and scientific, research-based instruction and high-quality general education for all students and appeared to be more equitable (Willis, 2019). Yet Sabnis et al. (2020) assert that scholars (like: Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2006) believe the "logic and practice of RTI to improve education for all students (universal) may not be adequate to disrupt the oppression of minoritized students (specific) in K-12 education, given how historical, economic, institutional and ideological forces produce disproportionality in special education" (p. 286). Similarly, Skiba et al. (2008) argue that interventions, like RTI, may not be effective because "it cannot be assumed that interventions that have been shown to work on improving educational outcomes will also be effective for groups that have been traditionally marginalized" (p. 281). Thus, many of the underlying assumptions of RTI are flawed for students of Color (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015).

Discussion and Analysis

RTI and Students of Color

One of the original intentions of RTI was to reduce the overrepresentation of SOC in special education (Carnine, 2003; Doughty, 2001; Singham, 2003; King & Coughlin, 2016; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015; Townsend, 2002; Willis, 2019; Young et al., 2005). While many small-scale studies tout the effectiveness of an RTI model for diverse individuals—including SOC (Marston et al., 2003; Tilly, 2003)—others contend that RTI is failing to meet this goal (Albrecht et al., 2012; Artiles, 2011; Enrique et al., 2013; Hartlep & Ellis, 2012; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Marston et al., 2003; Skiba et al., 2008; Willis, 2019). Aligning with special education

“tradition,” Willis (2019) asserts that SOC and students living in poverty are more likely to be labeled at-risk for reading failure. Bartolomé (1994) describes the discriminatory at-risk label as the current euphemism for any “subordinated students” (p. 180). Moreover, despite widespread adoption of the RTI model for more than a decade, reading achievement gaps persisted between SOC and their white peers (Willis, 2019). How can a program be effective when it labels individuals, provides instruction that is not culturally relevant, and continues to produce achievement gaps between SOC and their white peers? Since the program is largely ineffective for a growing population of students, Kavale et al. (2008) contend that RTI may merely be a sociopolitical stunt.

Georgia Case Study

Enrique et al. (2013) examined disproportionality risk ratios of African American students who received special education services in Georgia, a state that incorporated RTI, during the 2006-2009 school years. The authors note that their study is merely a preliminary step to investigate the complex relationship between RTI and disproportionality of African American students in special education. Enrique and colleagues found that African American students identified and placed in special education increased in the initial three years of RTI implementation. This suggests that more research and improvement are needed regarding disproportionality in special education placements (Enrique et al., 2013).

National Disproportionality

Hartlep and Ellis (2012) analyzed National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems' (NCCRES) national statistics on disproportionality by race and disability from 2000-2006. Throughout the six-year period, Hartlep and Ellis determined that: (1) RTI has not diminished the likelihood of being wrongly identified as (S)LD; (2) some Asian Americans are

underrepresented in specialized programs, and finally; (3) African American students still remain the most at-risk for being placed in special education. Hartlep and Ellis (2012) argue that “RTI, in essence, could be labeled as merely an extension of an already Eurocentric and culturally biased battery of education processes and practices (p. 93).”

Educator Ideologies

Since teachers and other educators implement RTI, it is important to examine their ideologies. Although RTI is aimed at preventing diagnosis of (S)LD and providing early interventions, teachers continue to assume that if a student does not make adequate progress in the RTI process, the student must have an internal deficit or the child must come from a deficit background (Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Sabnis, 2020). The following two studies highlight teacher ideology and a culturally diverse population group.

Emerging Bilinguals and RTI

Orosco and Klingner (2010) studied RTI implementation at an urban elementary school with a large population of emerging bilinguals. This small-scale study focused on teacher ideology of RTI implantation (implementation?) and teacher perceptions of emerging bilinguals. RTI research is often quantitative in nature (Kozleski & Huber, 2010) and rarely considers “students’ differences, teachers’ instructional behaviors, or classroom and school contexts” (Orosco & Klingner, 2010, p. 273). Eight school professionals participated through interviews, researcher observations, school-wide assessment, and participant instructional documents. The data was collected from the same school over a five-month period. This study reveals a need for additional teacher training implementation of RTI and differentiation. Also, it indicates that districts must develop policies that consider socioculturally guided instruction and assessment.

Additionally, Orosco & Klingner revealed that most teachers and school ideology were a major hindrance to the RTI process. Teachers often cast judgment based on Eurocentric norms and rarely sought to understand emerging bilinguals' culture and values. RTI can be ineffective because teachers often believe in a "one-size-fits-all" policy rather than truly valuing and understanding students from culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

African American Students and RTI

Sabnis et al. (2020) explored white teacher perceptions and ideologies of implementing RTI within a mainly African American student population. During the semi-structured interviews, two important themes emerged. First, many teacher participants were unclear about the components of effective RTI instruction; they believed intervention was merely re-teaching in the same way. Second (and more important to this analysis), many teachers held a deficit view of their students. Study participants described their perceived learner-centered causes of ineffective RTI. Educators attributed lack of RTI success to students that *can't do* (e.g., lack of skill) or students who *won't do* (e.g., behavior or attitude problems). Normative forces and Eurocentric ideology permeated teacher participant interviews (Sabnis et al., 2020). Ultimately, it appeared that RTI tiers "came to be a typology of ability in a way that paralleled the traditional typology of special education student and general education student that RTI proponents meant to eliminate" (Sabnis et al., 2020, p. 302).

Research Implications

This body of research has revealed that there is an overrepresentation of SOC in special education that RTI has not remedied. One contributing factor to the ineffectiveness of RTI is educator's deficit ideologies of students and SOC. Many educators fall prey to student deficit

ideologies and culturally deficit ideologies. Often teachers may liken cultural differences with cultural deficits, which can permeate teacher perceptions of students (Sabnis et al., 2020; Klingner & Solano-Flores, 2007; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015) and can cause a culturally biased implementation of RTI (Gerber, 2005). RTI is another deficit-based approach to instruction and may lead to sorting children, particularly those that are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). Ultimately, attempts to promote RTI are insufficient to close achievement gaps because they do not change educator ideology of student deficits that inform implementation (Kozleski & Huber, 2010; Sabnis et al., 2020).

As the United States has become increasingly diverse, a focus of educational research has been on how to teach all students regardless of their background (Brown- Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Many of the proposed strategies and policies (like RTI) come from a deficit-based view of students, especially SOC. Educational culture often assumes that when an individual student does not succeed there must be something wrong with the student, rather than the educational policy or establishment. RTI continues to carry out these deficit-based beliefs by “exonera[ting] Eurocentric biases’ culpability and maintain the modus operandi—which results in over-representation” of SOC in specialized programs (Hartlep & Ellis, 2012, p. 93). Educators must challenge this deficit-based ideology (Bloom et al., 1965) as well as educational policies that perpetuate these thoughts, and move towards a more humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 1994).

It is imperative that we move away from a deficit view and reframe our ideologies. We must move towards to a more holistic and progressive approach—a culturally relevant pedagogy, (Ladson-Billings, 1995) informed by culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). Culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching improves academic achievement for SOC

(Au & Kawakami, 1994; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). These practices are necessary to foster equity for our students. If widely implemented, these practices could ultimately reduce the overrepresentation of SOC in special education. In short, if we consider all students—especially those that have been historically marginalized—when developing our curriculum and planning our teaching, we will see a reduction in SOC in specialized programs.

Conclusion

Students of Color have long been expected to shed their cultural identity and learn according to Eurocentric norms (Bartolomé, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2002). RTI is no exception to this. Culturally responsive teaching demands that our diverse student populations have the same opportunity that white, middle-class students have—the chance to learn in a way that has relevance to their own cultural identity (Gay, 2002). To provide an equitable schooling for students, we must give each student what they need. As culturally responsive educators, we acknowledge that student diversity is good, differentiated instruction is necessary, and culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy enhances student experiences and fosters student learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

It is time to reframe and reimagine our current policy and pedagogy. RTI is largely ineffective for a growing population of our students. Now is the time to create transformative educational environments and experiences for our SOC. If we include all students' backgrounds, cultures, and identities, especially those that have been historically marginalized, when developing a pedagogy (and policy), more students will be academically successful (Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Thus, we must consider culture when developing curriculum and implementing interventions, such as RTI (The National Center for Culturally

Responsive Educational Systems, 2005). We must engage in critically conscious reflection of our practice (Sabnis et al., 2020) to ensure that all students receive a culturally relevant and responsive education. As educators, we have the responsibility to embrace our political power to advocate for policy change, so that every child's race, identity, and culture is affirmed and valued in our schools.

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