Effective Practice of Response to Intervention for English Language Learners Using the

Concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education

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Abstract

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a popular multi-tier approach used in education in the United States to identify and support students with specific learning needs in general education. English Language Learners (ELLs), students for whom English is not the "native" language, pose an important challenge for optimally effective practice of RTI. Ineffective practice of RTI regarding ELLs can result in misdiagnosing language and cultural issues as learning issues and, thus, using inappropriate interventions, or, worse yet, unnecessarily or inappropriately referring ESL students to special education. The author argues that using the concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education throughout the RTI process can help decrease the possibility of misdiagnosing and implementing inappropriate interventions for ELLs and instead achieve optimal practice of RTI for these students. In short, the purpose of this article is to show how two concepts can help guide effective RTI practice for ELLs and identify some effective practices.

Key words: Response to Intervention (RTI); English Language Learners (ELLs); Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT); Critical Multicultural Education (CME); Effective practice

Employing the concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching (using native languages, home cultures, performance styles, and prior learning experiences in teaching) and Critical Multicultural Education (by addressing the issue of equity in academic success) can promote the optimal practice Response to Intervention (RTI) for English Language Learners (ELLs) by decreasing the possibility of misdiagnosing, and implementing inappropriate interventions for ELLs, so that these students are less likely to be unnecessarily and inappropriately referred to special education. The purpose of this article is to explain why and how the two concepts can guide effective RTI for ELLs. The discussion provides information on RTI and its relation to ELLs, explanations of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education, and suggested practice of RTI as guided by these two concepts.

RTI and Issues with ELLs

RTI is an increasingly popular multitier approach used in education in the United States to identify and support students with specific learning needs (Abou-Rjaily & Stoddard, 2017; Brown & Sanford, 2011; Haager, 2007; Hagan, 2010; Higgins, 2015; Johnson et al., 2018). ELLs, students for whom English is not the "native" language, pose an important challenge for optimally effective practice of RTI (Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Kalyanpur, 2019). The danger of ineffective practice of RTI regarding ELLs lies in misdiagnosing language and cultural issues as learning issues and, thus, using inappropriate interventions as a result of which, students are referred to special education when they do not need it (Klingner & Hoover, 2014). As public schools struggle to provide the appropriate instructional support for the rising, diverse population of ELLs (Johnson et al., 2018), Ruiz (2020) also argues that, especially in rural schools, insufficient training and limited experiences in teaching ELLs due to local demographics may lead the RTI instructors to ineffectively instruct ELLs and prescribe inappropriate interventions. The challenge is prevalent as research into this matter is sparse. Solutions to this issue need to focus on taking ELLs' language, cultural, and prior experience, as well as social justice into consideration when practicing RTI for ELLs.

Although no widely recognized, clearly delineated model of RTI exists, the concept is generally acknowledged as a three-tier approach (Johnson et al., 2018) seeking to increase academic and behavioral success of all students through early screening and appropriate intervention with research-based instruction provided by an adequate force of qualified educators. The approach was originally developed for use in special education, but, through a history of promising results, has expanded to, and become established practice in, general education. Interventions in RTI supplement, rather than replace, the general curriculum

(Hazelkorn et al., 2011). Although the RTI approach can be applied at all grade levels, ". . . it is likely that the development of language and literacy skills will be addressed most prominently in the early grades . . ." (Dickman, 2006, para. 1).

In tier one of the general RTI structure, all students receive quality, research-based instruction along with periodic screening assessments to identify students at risk of deficient progression. Such students typically receive supplemental instruction and close monitoring in the regular classroom. Those showing inadequate progress after a reasonable period of usually eight weeks or less (statistically, about 15% of tier one students) are moved to tier two interventions, which are based increasingly on individually assessed needs. Tier two measures can take place in the general classroom, in groups, or both, and can last longer than those in tier one (one semester or trimester or less). Students not making desired progress after tier two measures (statistically, about 3% of tier two students) move to tier three, which includes additional instruction targeting specific deficit areas for the individual student. Tier three measures typically last about one grading period. Students remaining unresponsive to tier three measures are referred for comprehensive evaluation and special education (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

ELLs are "non-native speakers of English . . . in the process of attaining proficiency English" (Wright, 2010, p. 1). ELLs represent a segment of students in the U.S. projected to grow significantly in number and diversity for years to come (Johnson et al., 2018). By 2019–20, the ELL population in public schools had grown by almost 1 million and a half students to a total of 5,115,887 ELLs, representing 10.4% of total student enrollment (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, n.d.).

This group constitutes a substantial portion of students struggling in various content areas (Higgins, 2015). They tend to score at or above designated math and reading proficiency levels

in lower numbers than their native English speaking counterparts (Fry, 2008), and also tend to be overrepresented in special education programs (Higgins, 2015). Data indicate that these trends are substantially related to issues of education (Fry, 2008). In general, educators have difficulty distinguishing between deficits related to difficulties in acquiring skills in a second language (English), and those related to other learning difficulties or disabilities (Golloher et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Klinger & Harry, 2006; Lesaux, 2006; Wagner et al., 2005). Thus, ELLs are often misdiagnosed as having a learning disability or language (or speech) impairment, and are placed into special education programs as a result (Orosoco et al., 2008). However, experts are optimistic that these tendencies can be averted if RTI is properly adjusted and implemented to better serve ELL students (Higgins, 2015), which is where Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education become of paramount importance.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally Responsive Teaching has become increasingly popular to a widening body of researchers as an effective way to teach populations of culturally diverse students (Bassey, 2016; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010). Culturally Responsive Teaching is the concept of ". . . using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relative to, and effective for, them," by teaching, "to and through the strengths of these students" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). This concept implies that teaching materials, instructional strategies and assessment methods based on students' cultural backgrounds, knowledge bases, and prior experiences should be employed; moreover, it implies the use of ELLs' first languages as scaffolding to facilitate effective learning when necessary (Diaz-Rico, 2012). The methods of culturally responsive

teaching provide educators practical guidelines on creating an equitable learning environment for every student (Kelley & Djonko-Moore, 2022).

Culturally Responsive Teaching requires substantial understanding of students' cultures in order to effectively connect them to, and exploit them in, teaching methods and practices (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). It teaches to and through cultural diversity (Gay, 2013). Instructional designs considering students' diverse experiences and learning styles as well as using multicultural resources facilitate academic and personal success for all students (Gay, 2000; Young & Sternod, 2011). Effective teaching and learning occur in culturally supported, learner-centered environments where students' strengths are identified, nurtured and engaged to promote achievement (Orosco, 2017; Richard et al., 2007). Culturally Responsive Teaching is especially important concerning ELLs, since barriers often occur in the teaching and learning process because teachers, and other students, do not share the cultural perceptions of ELLs about the nature of relevant learning. Using Culturally Responsive Teaching, teachers can adopt or adapt classroom organization, curricula and interaction patterns that benefit both mainstream and ELL students (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2010). The effective practice takes considerable effort. Partial or shallow implementation will yield little if any results. Culture is a rather complex and profound concept. Just showing some token symbols or events, such as foods, dances or holidays, is not effective Culturally Responsive Teaching and will not achieve desirable results (Nieto, 2004; Smoke, 1998).

Critical Multicultural Education

The concept of Critical Multicultural Education runs counter to the common use of Eurocentric epistemology, especially in schools serving diverse populations of students (Gay, 2000). It highlights systemic social and academic inequalities and the strengthened dispositions

needed to dismantle them (Bybee et al., 2021). The idea emphasizes equity rather than equality in promoting academic success of all students (Rios & Stanton, 2011). Equality implies providing the exact same educational resources, processes and assessments for all students in a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning, which does not serve diverse portions of the student population as well as it serves the mainstream. Conversely, equity espouses the use of whichever, and however many resources, processes and assessments necessary to achieve equal academic success of all students (Rios & Stanton, 2011).

Critical Multicultural Education brings students' diverse backgrounds and experiences to the center of education and demands a democratic teaching and learning environment. It aligns with promoting social justice (Bassey, 2016). It provides students equal opportunities to succeed in academia (Banks & Banks, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 2009; May & Sleeter, 2010), and holds that all students, regardless of background, have a right to pursue academic success in education, and that "education is . . . achieved only when we provide equitable educational opportunities with high expectations for all students" (Brown & Sanford, 2011, p. 2). Along with this notion, and another important concept within Critical Multicultural Education, is empowerment of students (Banks & Banks, 2003; Gay, 2000; Grant & Sleeter, 2009), which necessarily incorporates student-centered, democratic, critically multicultural pedagogy in which students become culturally competent, critically conscious, and politically active and responsible, both consuming and producing knowledge for self and social improvement (Bassey, 2016; Gay, 2000; Shor, 1992).

The Effective Practice of RTI for ELLs

An essential part of maximizing effective RTI for ELLs is understanding the cultural and cognitive backgrounds of ELLs, which include education and language. Using Culturally

Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education can facilitate the efficient acquisition of such understanding for educators. When students' first languages, home languages, cultural backgrounds and prior experiences are involved in the RTI approach, and when ELLs' backgrounds can be brought into the democratic dialogues in teaching and learning processes, students' learning issues can be more likely distinguished from issues due to their lack of language and cultural proficiency. The misdiagnosis of language and cultural issues as learning issues can be effectively decreased and therefore appropriate interventions using cultural responsive materials and instructions can be employed accordingly. When misdiagnosis is decreased and appropriate interventions are implemented, ELLs are much less likely to be referred to special education when they do not need it.

In relation to RTI, both Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education emphasize particular care in the screening and progress monitoring processes regarding ELLs (Haager, 2007). Instruments assessing and measuring these factors should be selected with due consideration for specific characteristics of the ELLs they serve, namely, their native languages, performance styles, and prior experiences and knowledge. As an example, certain ELLs may not have a phonological awareness concerning some aspects of English, as their native languages or dialects do not contain comparable sounds (Diaz-Rico, 2012; Hagger, 2007). In these cases, only linguistically and culturally sensitive and responsive assessments are sure to screen and monitor effectively. Moreover, only when ELLs' native languages, performance styles, prior experiences and background knowledge are considered can effective screening and progress assessments be developed. On this note, standardized test scores are insensitive to ELL circumstances and often lead to improperly penalizing ELLs or misclassifying them into special education (Brown & Sanford, 2011; Higgins, 2015; Orosco et al., 2008).

Conversely, using ELL first languages in instruction, assessments, and progress monitoring can reduce these unwanted incidents (Higgins, 2015), as educators would be able to determine if exposed deficits are due to language barriers as opposed to learning challenges.

Beyond adequate, continued professional development and proper development of screening and progress assessments concerning ELLs, and to facilitate success in these areas, RTI, Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education in unison suggest the formation of school-level, collaborative teams. Such teams should be knowledgeable in successful RTI theory and practice; duties should include developing, maintaining and disseminating a knowledge base of the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the school's ELL population.

RTI educators should make efforts to get to know and understand, not only the language and cultural backgrounds and circumstances of their ELL students, but also of the students' families. Doing so can provide important insights into learning patterns and characteristics of particular individual or groups of students, as well as get parents and, perhaps, extended family members, more involved in the education process. For instance, some ELLs may have extensive conditioning into teacher-centered education, in which students are expected to passively receive information from teachers and discouraged from participating in discussions or giving other sorts of input. Moreover, in several of such cultures, parents also take a passive role, leaving the expertise of education to the teachers and institutions (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Understanding such variables can help educators account for them in monitoring and assessment, and adjust for them in instructional strategies (Orosco, 2010), while developing strategies to help ELLs adapt to their current learning environments. Also, efforts to understand ELL families should result in mutual exchanges of information with ELL family members, creating better

understandings, and active involvement in developing increasingly effective learning processes,

on both sides. In other words, such contact should inform family members of the learning

situation and their stake in it, and prompt them into more involvement.

Further, in light of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education,

in screening and progress monitoring of ELLs, educators should use *true peers*, or "students who

have the same or similar level of language proficiency, acculturation, and education

backgrounds" (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, as cited in Brown & Sanford, 2011, p. 16), in

conducting their assessments. Comparing similarly situated students affords more accurate

determinations of performance than comparing students to those with clear language and cultural

advantages (Brown & Sanford, 2011). Thus, using true peers makes ELLs less likely to be

penalized for their lack of language and cultural proficiency, or misdiagnosed as having learning

issues and inappropriately referred to special education; it facilitates fair education and the equity

of academic success for all students.

Also, educators should set rigorous but realistic and reachable goals for ELLS that meet,

and indicate achievement of, grade-level standards. Students need to be appropriately stretched

and challenged. Becoming familiar with students' first languages, home cultures, and prior

experiences, and taking them into consideration in the RTI approach, helps identify appropriate

goals, and provide adequate attainment support, for ELLs.

In a larger context, for RTI to be effective for ELLs, schools must have language

education programs, and adequate resources to support their function, in place to accommodate

the varying degrees of language needs and knowledge among the ELLs these schools serve.

Moreover, successful practice requires educators to have a comprehensive understanding of the

language programs within their schools, including content, monitoring and assessment, as well as

abilities to accurately determine first and second language skills. Such understanding, and the ability to apply it, requires continued professional development opportunities and convenient access to experts in all areas of ELL facilitation (Higgins, 2015; Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018). Educators who lack knowledge, skill, or resources to properly instruct ELLs, should try not to participate in teaching, assessing, and intervening (Vaughn & Ortiz, 2010).

In all, RTI for ELLs should be guided by Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education in order to maximize the accuracy of screening, monitoring, and interventions. Students' first languages, home cultures, performances styles, and prior experience should be utilized toward the successful practice of RTI, a democratic learning experience, and the equity of academic success.

Conclusion

RTI is congruent with Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Multicultural Education. Indeed, its mission of successful education (equity of academic success) for all students strongly supports incorporating the two overall concepts into its practice, which would include scientific inquiry into effective techniques and results. The abovementioned practices are espoused by both concepts, and thus, fit well into RTI and can better ensure effective practice concerning ELLs. Schools need adequate language programs to accommodate their ELL populations and properly trained educators to run them. Institutions should form groups within their ranks of educators who are trained and knowledgeable in RTI and the needs of their ELL populations, and ensure educators have easy access to RTI resources and experts beyond the institution itself. In other words, collaboration at all levels is key. Educator competence in areas relevant to ELLs and the effective practice of RTI for these and all other students requires adequate, continuing professional development (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Golloher et al., 2018).

Effective RTI for ELLS also requires knowledge of ELL language, culture and educational backgrounds and prior experiences, so they can be considered and exploited in classroom instruction and incorporated into accurate and fair learning and progress monitoring assessments and measurement instruments (Brown & Sanford, 2011). Effective RTI for ELLs requires, not only an understanding of ELL cultural and language backgrounds, but an understanding of ELL family backgrounds and situations as well. When these objectives are accomplished, educators can accurately create appropriate, challenging but reachable goals that promote and achieve optimal learning for ELLs. Along the way, educators at all levels should pursue and record their progress in reaching these goals, and disseminate the information regarding successes and setbacks. Such communication will aid educators in different locals about what works and what does not, providing scaffolding for immediate successes and further improvements in overall RTI and its theory and practice concerning, and responsive to, ELLs. RTI research in this last respect is certainly an open opportunity.

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