Meeting the Needs of Gifted Students Within an RtI Framework

by Mary Ruth Coleman
and Claire E. Hughes

> "The purpose of RtI is squarely improving results for students: All students. Indeed, RtI is not about special education, nor general education, nor talented and gifted, nor at-risk, nor migrant education . . . RtI is about Every Education" (Tilly, 2009, p. 12).

Response to Intervention (RtI) is sweeping the country, changing the way children's educational needs are recognized and met. RtI was introduced through special education legislation as part of IDEA 2004 and offered an alternative approach for identifying students with learning disabilities (Bender & Shores, 2007). Its impact today, however, has moved well beyond this initial goal (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007). RtI is designed to bring together information about the child's strengths and needs with evidence-based instructional approaches that support the child's success (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2009). Although RtI is still an emerging practice, it hinges on a collaborative approach to recognizing and responding to the needs of each child. This collaborative approach requires educators to think about the child first and match the supports and services to the child's strengths and needs. The allocation of resources follows the supports and services, promoting synergy rather than increasing fragmentation, as the needs of the child increase. In other words, within the RtI model, when the child's needs are the most intense, educational *resources can be combined* to provide greater support. This use of resources differs significantly from the traditional approaches where as the needs of the child intensify, the supports and services become more separate and rigidly codified with clear boundaries delineating the allocation of resources.

Key components of RtI include: (a) a tiered approach to supports and services; (b) early intervention prior to formal identification; (c) screening, assessments, and progress monitoring (dynamic assessments to determine the child's needs and to plan instruction); (d) the use of standard protocol interventions; and (e) collaborative problem-solving and planning for the child with the parents. This article will explore what gifted education might look like within an RtI framework.

The Tiered Approach to Supports and Services

The use of tiered approaches to supporting strengths is not new for gifted education. We have relied on curriculum differentiation strategies that promote tiered lessons and units for many years (Tomlinson, 1999). The tiered approach within RtI extends this thinking to the supports and services provided. What this might look like in each service tier is briefly presented below.

Tier I

The general education classroom offers a quality learning environment, nurtures all children with a focus on high-end learning opportunities, uses dynamic assessments

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including whole-class screenings for potential, and uses standardized progress monitoring to document children's mastery of the curriculum. (The general education teacher is responsible for supports and differentiation.)

Tier II

A collaborative approach provides additional supports and learning opportunities for children based on strengths and needs. It responds to the child based on data showing evidence of strengths, needs, and interests; provides supports often to small groups of children within the general classroom setting; administers individual assessments to understand the child's strengths and develop plans for differentiated instruction; and uses a standard protocol to offer additional challenges and high-end learning opportunities. (Collaboration between the general and gifted education teachers is essential, with parents being included in the discussion of the child's strengths and weaknesses.)

Tier III

More intense and individualized services are provided to meet the needs of the child. Assessments, including additional information regarding the

child's strengths and a body-of-evidence (including standardized measures), are conducted to look at the child's needs. Nomination for formal identification is considered and parents are included in the decision making. (The gifted education specialist may take the lead at this point.)

Early Intervention to Support the Child's Strengths

The focus of RtI is on early intervention, the early provision of services that build on the child's strengths and address his or her learning needs. Early intervention is critical in order to prevent problems, to mitigate the impact of existing problems, and to ensure that strengths do not diminish. Early intervention generally focuses on remediation to shore-up areas of weakness for the child. For gifted children, however, the early intervention focuses on nurturing potential to support the child's areas of strength. With the RtI approach, early intervention can begin as soon as the strengths of the child are recognized—often well before the child is formally identified as gifted. In this way, the child's strengths are nurtured during the first years of schooling, building a strong platform

for the child's continued success. In many schools, formal identification of giftedness does not take place until the end of second or third grade; thus, young children with high potential are left with little to no additional support. Early recognition of and response to the child's strengths is important for all children, but it is essential for young gifted children from culturally/linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged families. The focus on early nurturing of potential helps to ensure that each child is placed on a trajectory for maximum success.

Screening, Assessment, and Progress Monitoring

The use of screening to recognize children with high potential is part of the culture of gifted education. Screening remains critical within an RtI approach. Assessments concentrate on the child's strengths and include both formal and informal measures to document the child's needs. The newer feature of assessment, introduced by RtI, is progress monitoring. Progress monitoring requires the use of dynamic assessments to monitor the child's mastery of specific learning objectives and to inform instruction. It relies on standardized measures of skill development and on curriculum-based measurements of content mastery. These measurements are used to document where the child "is" in relation to normative expectations when compared with others of his or her same age and/or in relation to curriculum mastery for grade-level expectations. For gifted children, in their areas of strength, this documentation must reflect early mastery of content and may require the use of off-grade-level measures to accurately capture the child's learning levels. In this way, progress monitoring documents the child's actual mastery so that

appropriate adjustments in curriculum and instruction can be made. Thus, for gifted children, progress-monitoring data become the foundation for curriculum compacting by documenting the need for additional enrichment or acceleration.

Standard Protocols for Instruction

The use of research-based practices to provide appropriate support for children is a mainstay within RtI. Research-based standard protocols are developed to bring consistency to instruction and to help ensure that all children have access to learning opportunities that are grounded in "best practice." Standard protocols provide teachers with predetermined and ready-made lessons, strategies, and instructional materials to be used with their students. Currently, most standard protocols are aimed at providing intensive support for children who are struggling with reading or math. Standard protocols for gifted students will look different from these because they will focus on the child's strengths, ensuring that rigorous curriculum is provided. Standard protocols for children in their areas of strength have not yet been widely developed within our field. As we move to develop these, we can draw on our rich history of curriculum differentiation to design high-end learning protocols that can be used to support children with strengths and interests across the curriculum (Tomlinson, 1999; VanTassel-Baska, 2003).

Collaborative Problem-Solving With Parental Involvement

In addition to the use of standard protocols to respond to the needs of children, RtI includes a collaborative problem-solving approach. Some advocates of RtI see these as mutually exclusive approaches to addressing children's needs. For gifted children, however, standard protocols *and* collaborative problem-solving approaches seem to be extremely compatible and mutually complementary. Standard protocols can and should be used to meet the needs of gifted children, yet these alone often will not be enough. Collaborative problem solving is a key addition because it (a) ensures that families are included as partners in planning; (b) provides a vehicle to allow planning for the child to go beyond standard protocols (e.g., social and emotional needs, dual-enrollment opportunities, interest-based learning, independent studies); and (c) can be used to plan for gifted children with more unique and/or complex needs (e.g., twice-exceptional children, gifted English language learners, highly gifted children). Collaborative planning across school personnel and with families has always been considered important within gifted education and should remain so within an RtI framework.

Conclusion on RtI and Gifted Education

Thinking about how gifted education fits within an RtI framework provides an opportunity to reexamine what we believe about meeting the needs of children. Some reflections on RtI for gifted education include:

- the emphasis within RtI on early intervention or the recognition of strengths prior to formal identification reminds us of our commitment to nurture potential in all children;
- the provision of tiered responses that scaffold learning and support

across general and gifted education reminds us of our commitment to excellence for all;
- the use of dynamic assessments that inform instruction reminds us of the importance of data-driven decision making;
- the use of standard protocols reminds us that rigorous curriculum is central to differentiated instruction; and
- the use of collaborative planning reminds of the importance of partnerships with parents as we plan to meet the child's needs.

All in all, done correctly, gifted education can be a good fit with the RtI approach! **GCT**

References

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