

RtI and the Gifted Child: What Every Parent Should Know

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Education has seen its share of trends and movements that either help or hinder the optimal development of the gifted child. In 2001, Congress passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in a concerted effort to reach children who were not meeting minimal standardized goals of achievement. Response to Intervention (RtI) is yet another approach to ensure services for children who demonstrate special needs in the classroom. Neither NCLB nor RtI were designed with gifted children in mind. However, NCLB had sweeping ramifications for how money was spent in schools, and RtI may govern how gifted children—with and without accompanying disabilities—are identified and served.

Response to Intervention is a regular education initiative, designed to provide additional learning support within all classrooms for students who fail to respond appropriately to regular instruction. By federal law, mandated RtI teams plan and supervise supports for students who are “not responding” to the grade-level curriculum by performing below average. RtI is the first response to such special needs before other types of services (e.g., special education) are invoked. If successful, RtI interventions may eliminate the need for further services. If such interventions prove inadequate, RtI plays a pivotal role in identifying children for further services.

Although Response to Intervention strategies are legally mandated only for

children performing below grade level, the RtI model has been extended in some places to identify and serve children with advanced learning needs—those performing above grade level. The notion is that if a team of teachers can find struggling students through ongoing classroom assessment and create viable options for them, such a team also should be able to identify students in need of advancement and differentiate accordingly. In this way, RtI can function as a comprehensive system of classroom interventions to meet a variety of student needs, including those of gifted students and the twice-exceptional (i.e., 2e; gifted children with disabilities). The RtI model has thus been promoted as a vehicle for placing gifted education into the realm

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of regular education, instead of offering supplementary services, and for accommodating both the strengths and weaknesses of twice-exceptional children in the same environment.

Most school districts have either finalized their RtI structures or are doing so now, so the form RtI programs will take may already be evident in local schools. In an era of increased fiscal scrutiny, many districts have cut programs for which RtI could potentially be a substitute, including some entire gifted and talented departments, along with the knowledge and experience that goes with them. Given the right adaptations for gifted children and appropriate teacher training, the RtI model has potential to fill the vacuum and increase appropriate differentiation for all children. However, emerging RtI programs raise concerns about the methodology employed in identifying and serving both gifted and twice-exceptional students. With RtI approaches as yet untested for the gifted, parents of gifted students need to monitor their children's progress

with a clear understanding of how RtI typically works.

Based on the notion that all children should receive high-quality classroom instruction (the first tier of intervention), RtI identifies children who fail to respond successfully to that instruction—they perform below grade-level expectations—and provides additional tiers of intervention to assist them. For example, a child still struggling with reading after typical instruction may be identified for additional targeted help with reading—a second tier of intervention. If the second tier intervention is successful, subsequent regular instruction with the class may be adequate. However, if the child continues to struggle, a third tier of more focused intervention is offered. Under RtI, teachers or teams—with or without special education professionals—identify a child's needs through ongoing classroom assessment and apply additional tiers of intervention as needed. How is the gifted child, with or without disabilities, likely to be affected?

RtI for the Twice-Exceptional Child

Crucial to gifted students is the increasing adoption of the RtI model to meet the needs of twice-exceptional students, who are both gifted and disabled in one or more areas of learning, processing, attention, social, and emotional/behavioral concerns. In most schools, such difficulties are now first evaluated in the classroom through an RtI approach, instead of through assessment by school psychologists and other relevant specialists for special education services. If RtI interventions are offered to address the problem and prove insufficient, then special education services are sought under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), with RtI providing the primary documentation of need.

Changes in the Identification of Disabilities

IDEA 2004 redefined how the nation's schools should systematically identify and remediate the learning deficiencies of our children in accordance with RtI. Children with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) were newly defined as having deficits in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, or mathematics problem solving, as evidenced by below-grade-level performance. This new approach circumnavigated the IDEA 1995, which defined a learning-disabled child as one who achieves at a significantly lower level than his or her ability would predict. In assessment terms, an SLD previously could be diagnosed if the child scored significantly lower on an individual achievement test in some area of academic achievement (e.g., reading) than he or she scored on an ability or IQ test. The numerical discrepancy documented the degree to which the child was affected by the disability. Such a discrepancy was, and continues to be, one of the primary methods of detecting a learning disability in a gifted child. However, IDEA 2004, stated that schools must not require a substantial score discrepancy. Although schools may still consider test score discrepancies to diagnose SLDs under IDEA 2004, some states no longer allow their use.

Can RtI Improve Services for Twice-Exceptional Children?

Many gifted advocates have embraced the RtI model for the 2e child because it allows accommodations for both strengths and weaknesses, and combats the misconception that a child can be either gifted or learning disabled, but not both. In addition, RtI allows teachers to identify a problem

quickly and address it, rather than waiting for the child to show the required score discrepancy—essentially waiting for the child to fail.

However, learning disabilities in gifted children can be subtle. Under RtI, teachers who may not have an adequate understanding of the traits that commonly characterize the 2e learner bear considerable responsibility for both diagnosing weaknesses and addressing them. Although teachers will receive training in RtI, will they receive instruction in how to identify gifted children who may be underperforming in their classrooms? Twice-exceptional children often achieve at an average level in their weakest curricular areas due to strong compensatory skills, or masking, and appear to teachers to be progressing normally. Most RtI structures are designed to identify only children performing below average. Yet, gifted children who score average usually exhibit a variety of learning difficulties not seen in typical students. For example, it takes a toll on 2e students to continually use their reasoning ability to compensate for weaknesses. They fatigue more quickly, experience more stress associated with schoolwork, and show variability in their performance when they are ill or overloaded. Parents must provide considerably more support to 2e children just to ensure they meet average performance expectations. Will such characteristics be recognized as symptoms of twice-exceptionality, or will the 2e child be viewed as “bright but lazy”?

Of even greater concern is the movement by some RtI advocates to eliminate any use of the discrepancy model of identifying a specific learning disability, as some states have done. Thus, the one approach that could determine that a child is twice-exceptional—with both gifted reasoning strengths and a significant discrepancy in academic achieve-

ment necessitating intervention—would be eliminated. Without the use of test score discrepancies, a gifted child who is reading at grade level (\geq 25th percentile) is considered to be achieving at appropriate levels despite having an IQ in the very superior range (\geq 98th percentile). In the states that still allow the use of test score discrepancies, a teacher or team can request individual assessment within the RtI framework to explore underachievement (usually a third-tier intervention); however, educators must suspect a problem to do so. Will individual assessment be utilized when needed to clarify a child's needs and prevent the 2e child from being missed?

Private examiners of gifted children report increased testing requests for 2e children who are struggling in school, but who have been denied services because they are perceived by teachers as doing fine. In Colorado, a state that has eliminated the use of test score discrepancies, the number of school psychology positions has also been reduced, thus curtailing the state's ability to find 2e children in a way that cannot be quickly reversed. Budget cuts during times of recession make such decisions attractive to states; however, they place families of 2e children in a Catch-22 situation. If denied services, and even private comprehensive assessment data is disallowed by schools, families have little basis for appeal and the right to due process is undermined.

Comprehensive individual assessment becomes essential when a disability, or second exceptionality, is suspected in a gifted child. An RtI approach alone may fail to provide the necessary intervention, and neglect to alert parents of a problem, before a cycle of failure begins. Yet, comprehensive assessment can identify it quickly. Providing a reading tutor can be pivotal for a gifted child with a reading disability and can prevent years of

academic struggles. Interestingly, requiring a child with an IQ score of 135 to score lower than average in reading (below 90) to qualify for services under RtI requires a far greater score discrepancy (more than three standard deviations) than was previously required under IDEA 1995—and lengthens the time until services can be provided, instead of shortening it. This inequity for gifted children has been largely overlooked in conceptualizations of how to include the gifted in RtI.

For twice-exceptional children who are successfully identified through RtI as having disabilities, classroom teachers will need to understand the intricacies involved in educating unique and diverse gifted children. The use of a strongly remedial approach when addressing deficiencies can frustrate and disengage the gifted child from the learning process. The authors' combined experience working with gifted children has revealed the need to support their strengths first—offering sufficient complexity, pacing, and challenge—while accommodating student weaknesses second, as gently as possible.

IDEA 2004 utilizes RtI as a means of identifying and addressing specific learning disabilities; however, some schools have expanded its scope to include gifted children with specific conditions such as autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Comprehensive assessment by specialists is critical for such complex diagnoses, invaluable to guide interventions and accommodations in school, and should not be replaced by RtI. Some 2e children have been denied accommodations because they do not appear to teachers to be “impaired enough.”

RtI philosophy also is affecting 504 Plans. Provided under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 504 Plans serve many children who do

not qualify for remediation or instructional services under IDEA 2004 by mandating classroom accommodations such as extra time, preferential seating, or the use of a keyboard. Previously, 504 Plans were available with reasonable evidence of a disability; however, some children recently have been turned down because they are “not below average” or because test data supporting the disability cannot be used. Section 504 Plans extend into college and the work place. If the 504 Plan is denied for a young child with disabilities due to such RtI restrictions, the chance of a child receiving any support later in school is diminished because it was not needed in the lower grades. Furthermore, the failure to provide formal classroom accommodations affects requests for accommodations on standardized tests, such as College Board exams, which require not only a recent assessment before the test is taken, but also a history of formal accommodations.

RtI for All Gifted Children

The RtI model, with its focus on daily interventions in each and every classroom, has the potential to offer all gifted students consistent, differentiated instructional strategies without requiring the student to have been previously labeled as gifted. However, identifying gifted students through high achievement has always had limitations and misses many. Because challenging such students appropriately is essential to their future success, supplementary identification approaches, not just RtI, must be preserved to identify gifted students and ensure classroom teachers address their needs.

It is hoped that the application of the RtI model to the provision of services for gifted and 2e children will increase teacher awareness of diverse gifted characteristics and curricular

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needs, and dispel myths about gifted students that too often limit their options in schools. Gifted children are not all the same; many have problems, and they need extra support.

What Can Parents Do?

Parent advocates need to monitor RtI implementation in schools. If an RtI framework strengthens classroom identification of learning needs and improves differentiation—without missing gifted and twice-exceptional children—gifted education will move a step forward. Robust school programs that ensure multiple assessments of giftedness (not just through RtI), maintain a child’s access to individual assessment to clarify needs, and adapt RtI criteria

to identify 2e children appropriately (looking not just at below average children) are most likely to succeed.

However, if a gifted child's advanced learning needs are overlooked and options are out of reach, parents need to advocate for more appropriate programming. If there are substantial discrepancies in a child's academic performance that suggest learning disabilities, or if other disorders are suspected, comprehensive individual assessment is essential to explore deficits and guide intervention. If a child shows evidence of disability and the RtI process has failed to recognize it or provide successful interventions, the child has the right to a timely initial evaluation for special education services. A recent memorandum from the United States Department of Education states:

It has come to the attention of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) that, in some instances, local educational agencies (LEAs) may be using Response to Intervention (RtI) strategies to delay or deny a timely initial evaluation for children suspected of having a disability. States and LEAs have an obligation to ensure that evaluations of children suspected of having a disability are not delayed or denied because of implementation of an RtI strategy (Musgrove, 2011, pg. 1).

Although IDEA 2004 requires states to use RtI as part of the comprehensive evaluation process for determining specific learning disabilities, RtI cannot constitute the entire process. States that have terminated their use of test score discrepancies substantially restrict a child's access to comprehensive, individual evaluation. If such assessment is not available in a child's school, private assessment and therapeutic interventions may be a parent's only choice to explore and address disabilities. However, some schools are refusing to consider such assessment

data to guide services or when a denial of services is appealed. By federal law, test score discrepancies can still be used to diagnose learning disabilities but are not required. The following "Final Rules" on the implementation of IDEA 2004 are available in the Federal Register (the "comment" raises the question and the "discussion" delivers the official answer from the U.S. Department of Education):

Comment: Many commenters stated that the elimination of discrepancy models would result in an inability to identify children with SLD [specific learning disability] who are gifted. One commenter stated that a scatter of scores should be used to identify children with SLD who are gifted.

Discussion: Discrepancy models are not essential for identifying children with SLD who are gifted. However, the regulations clearly allow discrepancies in achievement domains, typical of children with SLD who are gifted, to be used to identify children with SLD. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 46647)

A student has the right by federal law to needed accommodations for disabilities even if participating in advanced or accelerated (i.e., gifted) programs. Likewise, a student receiving accommodations for disabilities has the right to be considered for advanced or accelerated programs that are otherwise appropriate. Participation in one does not restrict participation in the other (Monroe, 2007).

Clearly, RtI and IDEA 2004 policy changes are affecting 2e students now. Whether or not RtI programs ultimately direct all gifted education—and can be successful—is unclear. Substantial differences are apparent in the ways RtI programs are developing in

different areas. Change is the singular certainty, exacerbated by dwindling school budgets.

Because collaboration between parents and schools is emphasized in RtI models, it is a good time for parents of gifted and 2e students to ask questions and provide generous input. How is RtI being incorporated in your school? What type of gifted and 2e identification models are being used? Are teachers receiving staff development in gifted and talented issues? Are gifted experts a part of your district's RtI team? Discuss these issues with school personnel. If you have sought help or evaluation from outside professionals, share it with your school. Many educators report considerable confusion about the rules they must follow, and significant problems for students now may warrant early and critical policy changes in schools. If RtI specialists, gifted educators, and parents collaborate, RtI programs that truly support gifted education are more likely to develop and succeed.

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