

COMMENTARY

Thoughts on Rethinking Response to Intervention With Secondary Students

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We appreciate the opportunity provided by the editor to respond to the commentary on our article (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010). We also appreciate the editorial team of *School Psychology Review* for selecting our article as a Featured Article within the journal (Vaughn, Cirino et al., 2010). We interpret this as an indication of the interest in response to intervention (RTI) broadly and particularly as it relates to understanding reading interventions for secondary students within an RTI framework.

Our intention in this commentary is not to provide a rebuttal to the comments made by Fuchs et al. (2010)—because we agree fundamentally with their commentary. However, we want to clarify some of the essential issues related to RTI with secondary students and our understanding resulting from several years of

conducting assessments and experimental studies within an RTI framework in middle schools (Denton et al., in press; Vaughn et al., 2008; Vaughn, Cirino et al., 2010, Vaughn et al., 2009).

Identification and Screening for At-Risk Readers in Secondary Grades

We agree with Fuchs et al. (2010) that RTI at the secondary level must be different in some fundamental ways from RTI at the elementary level. We think that one of the fundamental issues pertains to universal screening. We argue that universal screening for reading problems at the secondary level—considered by most to be an essential feature of RTI at the elementary level—can be accomplished through extant data sources and in most cases does not require additional testing.

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By the time students reach the sixth grade and higher, educators have considerable information about which students demonstrate reading difficulties. Data sources such as state-criterion-referenced reading assessments and yearly norm-referenced reading achievement tests are commonly available, often with other progress monitoring measures used to document students' progress. Based on our recent studies and the observations of Fuchs et al. (2010), these data sources can provide reliable information to determine which older students are at risk for reading problems and require further intervention.

If these measures are employed as screening tools, their use may not simply be a matter of passing or failing, and some scrutiny may be required to determine the level of performance associated with risk status. Although our experiences and studies have shown that this can be done in reading, we suspect a similar process can also be conducted in other academic areas, such as math. In reading, most of these assessments involve comprehension, so some follow-up assessments may be needed to identify the domains of reading that require intervention, but this can be brief. In general, this approach conserves resources for intervention, which should always be the highest priority for students who are struggling. We think that the best way to identify the majority of students who need additional intervention at sixth grade and above is based on consistently low achievement in an academic area of significance despite overall strong instruction at the classroom level using research-based interventions.

Tiers of Intervention for Older Students With Reading Difficulties

Fundamental to the successful implementation of RTI with *younger students* is the implementation of successively more intensive tiers of intervention to respond to students' instructional needs based on their lack of response to previously implemented research-derived interventions. Our empirical evidence from multiple intervention studies as well as our clinical experience indicates that secondary students with low reading achievement can be assigned to

less or more intensive interventions based on their current reading achievement scores rather than moving them from less intensive to more intensive interventions based on their response. We agree with Fuchs et al. (2010) that there is both empirical and practical evidence to support this view. Empirically, we can identify more and less impaired learners and group them as determined by diagnostic profiles (e.g., word reading and comprehension) and then assign them based on need to more or less intensive interventions. For example, our best predictor of low RTI in Year 3 of treatment (Vaughn, Wexler et al., 2010) is very low reading achievement at the beginning of Year 1. Thus, students with the lowest reading scores can be placed in the most intensive interventions early without having to successively pass through less intensive interventions to document what we already know—they have significant reading problems.

Types of Interventions That Hold Promise for Older Readers With Significant Reading Difficulties and Disabilities

Fuchs et al. (2010) cite an outstanding research article by Torgesen et al. (2001) in which older students with significant impairments in reading were provided very intensive intervention (one-on-one tutoring) for two 50-min periods a day, resulting in dramatic gains in word reading and comprehension, but not fluency. This study encouraged many researchers and educators to be hopeful that students whom we typically consider minimal or no responders (e.g., older students with very low reading) would be highly responsive to more intensive reading interventions. Consistently, students with significant reading problems who have had limited instruction or poor instruction, benefit from research-based intervention (see for review, Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007). More difficult to establish have been effective interventions for students who are minimal responders to *previously effective* interventions (e.g., Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Barnes, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2009). In Denton et al. (2006) intensive intervention focusing on decoding skills was provided for 2 hr per day over 8

weeks in Grades 2–3 for students who did not respond to Tier 2 intervention as reported in a previous study by Mathes et al. (2005). This 8-week intervention was followed by another 8-week intervention providing fluency and comprehension intervention for 1 hr per day. Although the average amount of improvement (from baseline to post-test, not in relation to a “control” group) was about 0.50 standard deviations, only about half of the students showed a significant response to this intervention, with some showing no gains.

In a recent communication with Torgesen (March 2010), he indicated that he could not rule out that the gains made in his study could be partially explained by the inadequate core and supplemental instruction provided previously to the participating students, who were all identified for special education. This brings us to the issue of what instructional practices make sense for older students with intractable reading impairments. We think that there are many issues to consider, including the relative impact of language impairment, attention problems, and other factors related to self-regulation and the extent to which these can be understood empirically and effective treatments implemented. At this point, there is a need for studies to focus on intervention for students at any grade level who are identified as inadequate responders given that previous intervention studies likely include students who have not had adequate instruction. The limited gains in middle school studies like Vaughn, Cirino et al. (2010) may reflect in part the focus on students who are demonstrably difficult to teach. To provide intensive intervention at the secondary level, the number of children requiring intervention needs to be reduced so that more intensity can be achieved. In our view, this highlights the importance of district-wide RTI models that aggressively attempt to prevent reading problems in elementary school so that intense intervention can be provided to inadequate responders for whom a long-term commitment to improved reading skills must be made. Based on our experience in schools, we believe this number is 2–5% of students, which is half of students who receive

special education services for learning disabilities in reading. Literacy is such a cornerstone to adult independence that this level of effort is warranted for any student who demonstrably does not respond to quality instruction.

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