RTI IN PRACTICE
A Practical Guide to Implementing Effective Evidence-Based Interventions in Your School

James L. McDougal
Suzanne B. Graney
James A. Wright
Scott P. Ardoin

Includes CD-ROM
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About the CD-ROM
My experience in the schools began in 1990. I received my first fulltime position as a school psychologist in a diverse urban elementary school. The majority of the students were on free/reduced lunch and many came to school lacking basic developmental skills like language concepts and exposure to written text. At that time we had many models of reading instruction—some that emphasized phonics and others that focused on reading in story books. The assessments used were inconsistent, varied by the classroom, and were of varying technical quality. While many students learned to read, many also struggled and languished in school, receiving one literacy program or another but not one tailored to their specific needs. My role as the school psychologist was that of gatekeeper to special education. That was incredibly troubling to me as I was responding to students’ needs too late to make a real difference and my assessments were usually diagnostic and not intervention oriented.

Based on the work of some innovative educators from our district (including Jim Wright) and a neighboring university, I worked closely with a first-grade teacher to design a reading intervention program for our students. With her master’s degree in reading and my increasing skills in Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM), we trained para-professionals (i.e., teacher assistants) to implement supplemental instruction and progress monitoring assessments with struggling primary grade students. Meeting weekly with these para-professionals, we significantly improved the reading of most of our intervention students and substantially reduced the rates of initial evaluations for special education. I quickly became convinced that this was the way to do business in the schools. At the same time, I became increasingly frustrated.
I had to beg and borrow to get $500 for a set of leveled reading books for our intervention project. Meanwhile, the system had no problems handing down numerous student retentions—estimated at $8,500 per student—an expensive “intervention” without empirical support and one linked to increased dropout rates and other deleterious outcomes.

This frustration, coupled with support from my family and my administrative supervisors (Dr. Denise Johnson and “Special” Ed Erwin), led to my return to school for doctoral training. There, under the tutelage of Drs. Joel Meyer and Bonnie Nastasi, I received solid training in consultation, prevention, and educational intervention. I became increasingly convinced that responding to one academic (usually literacy) crisis after another was not the way to educate children. I wanted to participate in an educational model that ensured that all students were developing basic academic and behavioral skills (especially those related to literacy), one that was systematic and schoolwide, and one that responded to a student’s need early in their school careers.

Just prior to working on this preface I had the good fortune to attend a presentation from John Corcoran sponsored by the School of Education at SUNY Oswego. John is the author of The Teacher Who Couldn’t Read, which chronicles his life as an illiterate child, adolescent, and adult who eventually cracked the code to literacy at the age of 48. I was taken with the emotion in John’s presentation, which for the audience was quite moving. John spoke of his first years in school, entering at the age of six filled with an eagerness to please, with enthusiasm, and innocence. John labeled this time and this portion of his personality as “Johnny the innocent.” He described how he persisted in his eagerness to learn even after being put in the “dumb row” in class. By third grade, John knew he was in trouble and that he couldn’t read. He prayed for help so that he would wake up being able to read like the other children in his class. Falling further behind and still unable to read or to complete the required schoolwork in middle school, John became the “Native Alien,” the outsider who peered in at the literate world without access to it. At school he was angry, frustrated, and a behavior problem who would rather fight, spit, and turn desks over than allow the literate society to harm and embarrass him further, requiring tasks from him for which he did
not have the tools. In high school, John described “going underground”—hiding his illiteracy and creatively using his athletic and social skills and his intelligence to survive. He chronicled his elaborate schemes for getting test answers, having friends sneak him exam booklets for essays, and passing courses without literacy. These strategies were successful enough for him to obtain a college degree and secure a job as a teacher, even though he could not read or write a simple sentence.

As John described his shame as a member of the illiterate society, I felt the powerful and raw emotion of my own shame. This shame was rooted in my participation in the bureaucratic educational machine that produced plenty of John Corcorans, many of whom lacked the social skills, creativity, and athletic ability to negotiate the tremendous barrier of illiteracy. I participated in meeting after meeting that responded to academic causalities much too late, with too little, and without seriously focusing on the obvious goal of teaching the student to read. I wasted hours doing irrelevant assessments (some even involving puzzles and blocks) so that I could tell teachers what they already knew—that Johnny couldn’t read. We would give students time to see if they would eventually get it and argue over which largely ineffective intervention to apply—retention or social promotion. My guts would churn at having to play by the rules, which meant that you didn’t criticize literacy instruction even if it lacked a direct and explicit focus on important early skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics. It meant I had to try to manufacture a discrepancy between an IQ score and an achievement score to get a student the needed reading services. I am guilty of administering additional tests to a student because I did not obtain the desired severe discrepancy required by my district in order to label a student as learning disabled. I would explain my additional testing in professional meetings as my search for the student’s true potential and level of functioning, all the while fully knowing that additional scores add error to the discrepancy formula and make it more likely that I could eventually call the student “disabled.” I had to play by rules that required me to sit on my hands and observe struggling students until the standardized tests I used could measure the extent of their academic failure. My only option for many students was special education; it was given only to
“eligible” students and it was designed largely to reduce expectations for these students and “modify” or slow down the curriculum for them.

In special education, students were often served too late (after third grade) and the monitoring of their academic progress was even worse than in regular education. I once read an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), which is required for all special education students. The goal for a second-grade student with a severe learning disability in reading read as follows: “Michael will decode unknown sight words with 80% accuracy by June 15th.” The progress monitoring was done quarterly and included a rating scale from NP (no progress) to P (progress). So although Michael was challenged by a significant barrier to literacy, he received no direct or focused instruction for it, nor did his goal contain any specific elements that were directly measured. Further, his IEP for the year indicated that he had made SP—some progress. My assessments of Michael indicated that while he was in third grade, he lacked the phonemic awareness and decoding skills of an average first-grade student. After multiple meetings with the school and a tremendous effort on the part of his mother, Michael was given targeted literacy instruction and his IEP goals were changed to reflect specific growth levels in phonemic awareness and decoding tasks. Now in middle school, Michael is still behind his peers, yet he has broken the code of literacy. Without a tremendous amount of advocacy for Michael over the course of several years, he would have continued to be a non-reader, another Johnny Corcoran.

Today there is little debate over what constitutes explicit and systematic early literacy instruction that is required to assist nearly all children to learn to read. In essence, the reading wars are over. We also have well researched progress monitoring techniques, especially in literacy, which can be used to screen all children for skill deficits and to monitor their progress toward grade-appropriate functioning. These tools are available for use by educators and in many instances they are available online and free of charge. Yet the troubling fact remains that these tools have yet to become the standard in the industry. Many districts and even some states have been slow to adopt RTI procedures and continue to use the failed practices of the past. We have the tools to eradicate almost
all illiteracy in our nation and we are not consistently using them. This is tremendously troubling to me and a major impetus for coordinating the writing of this book.

With that as my segue, I would like to introduce my coauthors and then give a brief summary of the book. I have known Jim Wright since I went to pursue a master’s degree in School Psychology. We both went through the same program, we were both employed in the same district for a dozen or so years, and we both sought to change the status quo. Jim has doctoral-level training in school psychology, and training and certification in both school psychology and school administration. For many years, Jim has devoted much of his time to what I believe is the finest educational web-based resource available today, Interventioncentral.org. Jim and I have worked together for many years and it has always been to my benefit when our paths have crossed. Suzanne Graney and I first met when I was applying for a position at a neighboring college. While I did not obtain that particular position, I did meet a wonderful colleague with extraordinary training in RTI and progress monitoring. She has university training as well as experience and skill working with educators in the real world of the public schools. Scott Ardoin and I first met when he was a doctoral student and I was his supervisor for a field experience in consultation. As is often the case, the supervisor learned as much as the student. Scott has been a friend ever since; he makes a wonderful gumbo, and has done some pivotal research advancing our understanding of student progress monitoring. Lastly, Kelly Powell Smith was asked to join us to discuss the reintegration of students from special education into the typical classroom. We are thankful to Kelly for taking the time work with us.

In the preparation of the book we wanted to develop one comprehensive guide to implementing RTI in the school setting. We wanted to strike a balance of presenting background, conceptual information, and relevant research with hands-on forms for implementation, recommendations for educators, and case examples. We have organized the book into five sections. The first section provides an introduction that includes some history of both learning disabilities as well as emerging models of RTI. The next three sections cover assessment, instructional considerations, and decision making across the three tiers of RTI. The last
section addresses the numerous organizational considerations in implementing a far-reaching schoolwide model for improving instruction and accommodating students’ learning concerns. In addition to the text, we have also created a companion CD that contains forms and resources for educators implementing RTI procedures.

While we acknowledge the shortcomings and unknowns in implementing comprehensive models of RTI, we are also convinced that these comprehensive and innovative strategies constitute a better way of conducting the business of education. Universal student screenings, evaluation of core instruction, early and responsive intervention for struggling students, and informed instructional decisions based on concrete data are the educational practices that will ensure that the next Johnny Corcoran will break the code to literacy in the primary grades and not middle adulthood. Having participated in the traditional educational model that responded to academic failure with retention, social promotion, and referral to special education, we are now at a time where the science and educational best practices dictate that we prevent academic failure and respond to delay with timely interventions that are sufficiently intense to be effective. These practices constitute a major evolution and will take considerable time and effort to be fully embraced by our educational system, but we feel that this will be time and effort well spent. We are hopeful that this text can be a support for this educational evolution and that it can be useful for guiding and training the educators of the present as well as those to be recruited for the future.

Jim McDougal
State University of New York
Oswego, NY
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LEARNING DISABILITIES: DEFINITION
AND BACKGROUND

The concept of learning disabilities dates back to the early 1960s. In 1968 the label of “specific learning disability” was added as a federally designated category of handicapping conditions (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Lloyd, 1999). One of the first to address the definition of learning disabilities was Samuel Kirk. In 1962 Kirk wrote:

A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing arithmetic, or other school subject resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbances. It is not the result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional factors (Kirk, 1962, p. 263).

In Kirk’s description can be seen many components of the modern definition including a conceptualization that LD (1) is a deficit in processing (2) that results in reduced academic performance in one or more areas, (3) is possibly related to a cerebral (pertaining to the central nervous system) dysfunction, and (4) is not the result of other handicapping conditions. Later in 1965, Barbara Bateman proposed a modified definition of learning disabilities that removed emotional factors as causal in LD and more significantly suggested that it could be identified by an “educationally significant discrepancy” between estimates of intellectual potential and actual performance level (for discussion, see Hallahan, Kauffman, &