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## Strength-Based RTI: Conceptualizing a Multi-Tiered System for Developing Gifted Potential

*This article explores the possibilities of a strength-based Response to Intervention (RTI) model for developing and identifying gifted potential. Although much has been written about the promises and challenges of RTI in recent years, the utility of RTI for meeting the needs of gifted learners has not been fully explored. This article seeks to address this void by examining RTI's potential to meet the unique learning needs of gifted and talented students, discuss challenges teachers might face, and invite gifted education*

*advocates and researchers to explore and expand on this dialogue.*

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A RECENT POSITION PAPER ON Response to Intervention (RTI), issued by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 2007), specifically addressed the needs of gifted children with disabilities; by doing so it opened the door for gifted education to be part of the RTI dialogue. The recognition that the educational needs of twice-exceptional learners must be addressed by “access to a challenging and accelerated curriculum, while also addressing the unique needs of their disability” (CEC, 2007, p. 2) invites educators, researchers, and advocates of the gifted to explore how RTI can be conceptualized not only to meet the needs of gifted students with disabilities, but all potentially gifted learners. In

fact, The Association for the Gifted, a division of CEC (CEC-TAG), reiterated this in their recent position statement by recognizing the potential of an RTI framework for gifted learners.

The Response to Intervention model be expanded in its implementation to include the needs of gifted children. The use of the RTI framework for gifted students would support advanced learning needs of children in terms of a faster paced, more complex, greater depth and/or breadth with respect to their curriculum and instruction. (Council for Exceptional Children, the Association for Gifted, 2009, p. 1)

All gifted children, including those from underrepresented gifted populations (e.g., students with disabilities, racially, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, children living in poverty), must be considered as we conceptualize the possibilities of a strength-based RTI model for developing and identifying gifted potential. Although RTI is an emerging practice that is implemented in a variety of ways, the general framework revolves around a collaborative, multitiered, problem-solving and intervention process designed to help struggling learners placed at risk of school failure. How then can we shift our conception of RTI from one that is exclusively focused on students' perceived deficits and helping students at risk, to include a culturally sensitive, strength-based system, designed to identify and nurture students' potential giftedness? What would Tier 1 look like for a gifted student with learning disabilities? What would Tier 2 look like for a gifted English language learner? What would Tier 3 look like for a highly gifted 9-year-old? How can we conceptualize a fluid and flexible tiered system of supports so that students can simultaneously access interventions that support their learning challenges while also nurturing their potential giftedness? These are just a few of the important questions to consider as we begin to conceptualize RTI as a multitiered system for developing gifted potential.

Much has been written about RTI over the last few years, however, to date, very little has been written about exploring the possibilities of how RTI can meet the needs of gifted and talented

learners. This article seeks to address this void by examining RTI's potential to meet the unique learning needs of gifted and talented students and explore what challenges we might face.

Gifted education is in poor health. As a field, gifted education is, and has been, faced with numerous challenges, besieged with criticisms, and rife with inequities. Gifted programs and their advocates have been called *elitist*, and the legitimacy of special services for gifted learners has been questioned and criticized (Sapon-Shevin, 1994; 1996). Among the most significant and legitimate criticisms and concerns has been the continued and persistent underrepresentation of students of color and students with disabilities served in gifted programs (Bernal, 2002; Bianco, 2005; Bianco & Leech, in press; Ford, 1998; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford & Harris, 1999). Many would argue that long-held deficit ideologies and the social construction of difference are largely to blame. Ford and Grantham (2003) and Valdés (2003), among others, have suggested that deficit thinking and lack of teacher referral for gifted programs are key factors in the continued underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted programs. When teachers view students through a deficit lens, their perception becomes blurred; the focus is on what students cannot do. As a result, students' gifted abilities go unrecognized; consequently, they are not considered for gifted screening—even when they meet or exceed school district's requirements. The racial, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic imbalances in how gifted students are identified and served in gifted programs continue to plague the field (Borland, 2005; Patton, 1997) and, according to Ford and Grantham (2003), "until deficit thinking becomes dynamic thinking, the unnecessary underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted education will continue" (p. 217). Clearly, something needs to change.

Borland (2005) called for a paradigm shift in gifted education with less (or no) focus on identifying or labeling students as gifted; Instead, he suggested, we should direct our efforts to providing students with culturally sensitive, differentiated curriculum that is guided by students'

educational needs. Perhaps Borland would agree that conceptualizing RTI as a culturally responsive, multi-tiered system for developing gifted potential has promise.

### **A Possible RTI Model for Developing Gifted and Talented Potential**

The following conceptualization of an RTI model for developing gifted/talented potential is presented as an invitation for dialogue and needed direction for research.

#### **Tier 1**

Tier 1, a school's core curriculum, is a critical factor in developing a high quality RTI model for developing and identifying gifted and talented potential. The foundation of Tier 1 must be on culturally responsive, high quality curriculum and instruction that nurtures all children's capacity to learn and excel. The focus becomes providing multiple opportunities for students to explore, develop, and demonstrate their interests, strengths, and talents. In other words, in order to recognize students' advanced abilities, there must be opportunities for their potential to emerge (Gentry, 2009). This means that high-quality curriculum and instruction is intentionally designed to cultivate and ignite students' gifted potential. Tomlinson (2005) described high-quality curriculum and instruction as having several key components: (a) focuses on rich and profound ideas grounded in essential topics of the discipline; (b) guides students in understanding where, why, and how to use what they learn; (c) engages students affectively so they find pleasure in learning; (d) recognizes and accommodates for variation in students' learning styles and interests; (e) calls for students to solve meaningful problems, address issues, and create meaningful products; (f) leads students in their capacity as thinkers; and (g) is relevant to students' lives, including gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and exceptionality.

The success of Tier 1 in a RTI model for developing and identifying students' potential rests with the general education teacher's knowl-

edge, skills, and dispositions—and the supports in place to help preservice and inservice teachers develop them. The majority of gifted and talented students (whether they are identified or not) spend all or most of their day in the general education classroom with teachers who are unprepared to meet their needs (Starko, 2008). According to the *State of the States in Gifted Education Report, 2008–2009* (NAGC), only five states require coursework in gifted education at the preservice level. Too few classroom teachers know how to recognize the characteristics of gifted learners (Bianco, 2005; Bianco & Leech, in press; Croft, 2003) or provide quality instruction for their advanced students; fewer still recognize the paradoxical nature of twice-exceptional students or how to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse gifted learners. Fortunately, however, with the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), all teacher preparation programs will be required to include information pertaining to teaching gifted learners. According to Hughes and Rollins (2009), the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) is currently exploring the core knowledge, skills, and dispositions considered critical for general education teachers.

Another essential component of Tier 1 involves universal screening (NASDE, 2005). Universal screening, in this case, is used to identify those students who are achieving at high levels within the general education classroom. It is essential that whatever screening tools are used can not only capture students' strengths and advanced abilities across multiple domains, but they should also be culturally sensitive. Because most screening within traditional RTI models is based on grade level core curriculum, it will be important to consider including above-grade-level screening instruments, as well (Brown & Abernethy, 2009). Data from the universal screening will help teachers identify which students might need more intensive, strength-based interventions. When advanced students have exceeded expected grade-level benchmarks or have demonstrated the need for more intensive interventions to advance their learning, a second tier of targeted interventions is necessary.

## **Tier 2**

Tier 2 interventions, offered in the general education classroom, are planned in collaboration with the general education teacher, the family, and the school or district's gifted education specialist. These interventions are designed so students receive differentiated instruction and enrichment opportunities to explore the core curriculum (at or above grade level) in greater depth or at an accelerated pace. According to Robinson, Shore, and Enerson (2007), "As much as 50% of the general curriculum can be eliminated for high-ability elementary students in the regular classroom with no differences in achievement test scores in reading, mathematics concepts and social studies" (p. 117). Beyond differentiated instruction and curriculum compacting, Tier 2 interventions may include outside resources by involving community members in the form of mentors or summer internships.

Planning Tier 2 interventions for twice exceptional learners or gifted English language learners requires a greater level of collaboration with other school specialists, such as the special education teacher or the ESL/bilingual education specialist. These students require dually differentiated curriculum—programming that considers the full range of students' abilities and learning challenges. Baum, Cooper, and Neu (2001) described dual differentiation as "meeting the needs of students who exhibit two contradictory sets of learning characteristics by creating a balance between nurturing strengths and compensating for learning deficits" (p. 481).

Interestingly, twice exceptional students or gifted English language learners may receive more than one set of targeted, Tier 2 interventions, one for helping them meet their need for accelerated learning (strength-based RTI model) and the other for supplemental instruction because adequate progress was not achieved at Tier 1. For example, a gifted English language learner who excels in mathematics, yet struggles with literacy, may receive strength-based, Tier 2 interventions consisting of curriculum compacting in her area of strength, while also receiving targeted Tier 2 interventions in reading instruc-

tion. When thinking about Tier 2 (or Tier 3) from each of these perspectives, the goals are distinctly different. On one hand, in a strength-based RTI model, the goal is to continuously challenge the student by providing Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions for an indefinite period of time. Conversely, the primary goal of Tier 2 in the traditional RTI model is to provide short-term remedial interventions so that students who (based on progress monitoring data) respond to treatment can be reintegrated into the traditional curriculum. Students who continue to need support or who have not responded to treatment are referred for more intensive interventions (NASDE, 2005).

## **Tier 3**

Tier 3 interventions in a strength-based RTI model are warranted when high achieving students' needs require more than what can be offered by Tier 2 interventions. According to Hughes and Rollins (2009), the criteria for accessing Tier 3 interventions would need to be based on clearly established protocols. Coleman and Hughes (2009) suggested that, with parent involvement, formal nomination for gifted identification be considered at this level. Whether formal nomination occurs or not, Hughes and Rollins suggested three possible Tier 3 interventions for the advanced learners: (a) intensive acceleration such as grade skipping; (b) early advanced placement (AP) classes; or (c) early college entrance.

What might a strength-based RTI model look like in practice? The following example illustrates the potential RTI holds for nurturing gifted and talented abilities.

### **Tier 1: Developing Gifted and Talented Potential in the General Education Classroom About Diego**

Diego was one of several Spanish speaking English language learners in Mrs. Neil's fifth grade class. Mrs. Neil noticed that, despite

Diego's emerging proficiency with the English language, his work was consistently creative and imaginative. Diego had an intense interest and strength with all things related to science. He was extremely knowledgeable in the areas of entomology and arachnology and can spend many hours creating detailed drawings of various insects and spiders. His interest with the subject inspired him to spend several weekends creating an illustrated book (written in Spanish and English) detailing what he observed in one of his documentary videos on arachnids. Diego preferred the company of adults, and enjoyed challenging teachers to test him by asking him anything about spiders! Diego also demonstrated artistic talent, excellent interpersonal skills, and learns most concepts rapidly. Diego's parents reported that he spent most evenings doing homework, reading, and writing or illustrating short stories about spiders in both English and Spanish.

### **The Classroom Context**

Mrs. Neil was an experienced and imaginative teacher. Despite her school district's demands of focusing on the grade level content standards, she developed strategies to incorporate those standards within creative and engaging interdisciplinary thematic units. She was intentional in her approach to including multicultural perspectives and attends to the diversity in her class.

As Mrs. Neil planned her science unit built around the fifth grade content standards and corresponding benchmarks (Standard 3: Students know and understand the characteristics and structure of living things, the processes of life, and how living things interact with each other and their environment), she consulted with the school librarian to collect various resources for students. She also consulted with the ESL teacher to make sure she was providing the kinds of language supports her students need. She planned her thematic unit to include art, reading, creative writing, social studies, and technology. As part of her instructional planning, Mrs. Neil created a comprehensive menu of process and product

options for her students to explore and choose from. She met with small groups of students to discuss their interest in standards-related topics for small group or individual projects and what options are available for their final products.

Diego chose to work independently and wanted to focus his project on spiders from around the world. Building on specified learning objectives, Diego would use books, maps, the Internet, and videos to research his project. His final product would be creating a visual display illustrating what he learned about various spiders and their habitats.

In this brief example, Mrs. Neil has incorporated many aspects of high quality curriculum and differentiated instruction that provides multiple opportunities for students to explore, develop, and demonstrate their interests, strengths, and talents. These key components represent Tomlinson's (2005) notion of quality instruction.

### **What Might Tier 2 Look Like for Diego?**

Mrs. Neil recognized that Diego's sophisticated interest and performance is above grade level in science. Although she was an experienced and creative teacher, Mrs. Neil needed the guidance and resources of the gifted education teacher to develop strategies to keep Diego challenged and engaged. Along with Diego's parents, they met to discuss and plan how this can be accomplished through Tier 2 interventions. Diego's parents agree to plan frequent trips to the library and local science museums. The gifted education teacher suggested that they incorporate real world problems and authentic assessment into Diego's plan, as well as explore the possibility of finding an expert professional to act as Diego's mentor.

Diego, the resident expert on spiders, was aware that many young children fear spiders. With the help of his teachers, Diego would create a survey to learn what his peers knew and did not know about spiders, what they would like to know, and what specific fears they had. Diego would use his survey data to research and develop a presentation to clarify misconceptions,

allay fears, and then share this information with his peers in the form of a visual presentation. This real world project became an avenue for further research, enrichment, and authentic assessment.

Investigating real world problems and using authentic assessment can evaluate students' abilities in authentic, real world contexts. Students use analytical skills and demonstrate concepts they have learned by engaging in any number of activities. Authentic assessment is based on student performance and students are asked to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. As a result, this method of assessment lends itself well to using students' strengths, an ideal alternative to traditional assessment for diverse gifted learners.

### **What Might Tier 3 Look Like for Diego?**

In Diego's case, Tier 2 interventions might hold his interest and keep him challenged for a period of time; however, based on continued progress monitoring and evaluating his performance, Diego may need more intense and individualized services (in his area of strength) beyond what can be provided in the general education setting. Tier 3 for Diego may be formal nomination for gifted/talented identification and services.

### **Challenges With RTI as a Model for Developing Gifted and Talented Potential**

RTI holds promise for developing and nurturing gifted potential; however, there are significant challenges that must be addressed. The success of RTI as a process for identifying and developing gifted potential largely depends on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of classroom teachers. First, as a foundation to Tier 1, teachers must provide culturally responsive, high-quality curriculum and instruction that allows students' gifted potential to emerge. This requires knowledge of relevant pedagogical models and

sophisticated skills in differentiating instruction and curriculum. Sadly, research has consistently documented that classroom teachers lack the knowledge and skills to effectively differentiate instruction and curriculum to meet the needs of gifted learners (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Slavin, 1993; Westberg & Daoust, 2004).

Teachers must also have the knowledge and skills related to identifying characteristics of gifted learners—including those from underrepresented populations. Inadequate teacher training has frequently been cited as a reason for the under-identification of gifted students including those with disabilities (Johnson, Karnes, & Carr, 1997; Silverman, 2003) and other underrepresented groups. Being able to identify gifted potential "is the educator competency that predicates all other successful services" (Croft, 2003, p. 561). Information concerning the characteristics and unique needs of gifted learners should be part of every teacher's training (Bianco, 2005; Bianco & Leech, *in press*).

### **Conclusion**

Gifted education, like special education, is not without problems—particularly for racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse learners. With well-prepared teachers, a strength-based RTI model holds promise for responding to the needs of all learners—including gifted learners from underrepresented populations. As RTI continues to evolve and schools grapple with defining, refining, and implementing this model to meet students' needs, gifted education researchers and advocates need to be part of the dialogue and explore the possibilities of developing a system that is responsive to the needs of all learners. RTI holds promise as a strength-based, multitiered system for developing gifted potential.

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**TIP**