

Project Construct *Connections*

A newsletter for administrators

2008

Response to Intervention and Constructivism: Strange Bedfellows?

By Bryan and Kristen Painter

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It is fair to say that most, if not all, educators truly want students to succeed at the highest levels possible. We're held most accountable for students' academic achievement, but in our hearts and minds, we want kids to develop and grow as whole human beings, thriving academically as well as socially, emotionally, and physically. It's also fair to say that, in the current educational climate, schools and districts across the country have regularly failed to meet these goals with many students, especially those in minority subgroups and in poverty. Reasons for these failures are varied and can be debated at length, as can possible solutions to the shortcomings.

Without oversimplifying the complexities of school improvement, it could be argued that our essential work in helping students succeed isn't fundamentally complex at all: We must focus on relationships, and we must focus on good teaching. Opinions will vary about what good teaching is—and, for that matter, how it can be measured or evaluated—but our belief is that best practice is grounded in constructivist philosophy. We believe students will have the greatest opportunities for success, no matter what challenges they bring to the classroom, when they work with teachers whose practice emphasizes the following:

- meaningful opportunities for conversations and exploration of ideas
- engagement with and problem solving around authentic tasks
- individual and shared meaning-making in the classroom and beyond school walls
- consistent focus on the needs, strengths, interests, and learning preferences of each child
- ongoing evaluation of and reflection about practice, with changes made to meet the needs of students.

In addition, students are more likely to be successful with teachers who, when students struggle, don't ask, "What's wrong with this child?" but rather "What do I need to change about my instruction, the curriculum, or our environment that might support his or her learning?"

But what happens when students continue to fail, in small or large numbers, despite our best efforts as teachers and even schools? No Child Left Behind, the legislation and the idea behind it, has collectively changed schools' approach to student achievement. We may not always like it, but grade-level expectations, subgroup scores, and Adequate Yearly Progress are in the forefront of our minds now, and they're all tied directly to one measure: standardized test scores.

With the stakes so high and the clear need to support students across subgroups, many schools are looking for new ideas and new ways of thinking. One idea getting a lot of attention—Response to Intervention (RTI)—is actually not that new at all. RTI is a general education initiative that's been around in varied forms for more than three decades but has recently gained popularity with its inclusion in the 2004 reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

So how does RTI fit in with our constructivist beliefs about teaching, learning, and schooling? At first glance, it may not. The core structure of RTI calls for additional instruction for students who aren't successful with the core curriculum and instruction that all students "receive." That alone doesn't sound very constructivist, implying that knowledge is something delivered from one person to another. Also, RTI's backbone is data-based instructional decisions. Constructivist educators have not historically had a strong attachment to the type of data often referred to in "data-based instruction." The data that excites us is the kind about which we can tell a story—such as Alex, who came into fourth grade hating to read but by mid-fall had found a favorite author, or Kiki, who after lunch count added page two to her story about her baby brother that she had started the day before.

So is it possible for constructivism and RTI to coexist in the same school? Can constructivist educators actually be themselves in a school committed to RTI? We believe the answer is yes, and furthermore, we believe efforts aimed at student achievement within an RTI philosophy can and will be enhanced by teachers and principals committed to constructivist teaching and leadership. To better explore these possibilities, we should first learn more about RTI.

What Is Response to Intervention?

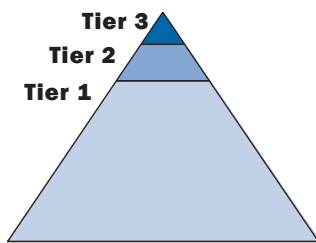
Response to Intervention is generally regarded as a systemic approach to problem solving around student growth and achievement. It is simply a way of teaching to students' needs, using data to examine how students are responding to our work, and adjusting our instruction accordingly. Key components include quality instruction around big ideas; early intervention opportunities; and the use

of data to screen student needs, monitor their progress, and adjust instruction accordingly. Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005) call RTI “an assessment-intervention model that allows schools to deliver sound instructional methods to students...who might otherwise fall through the cracks” (p. 2). They go on to describe RTI as an “objective examination of the cause-effect relationship(s) between academic or behavioral intervention and the students’ response to the intervention (Brown-Chidsey and Steege, 2005, p. 2).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) defines RTI as a “multi-step approach to providing services and interventions to students who struggle with learning at increasing levels of intensity” (Cortiella, 2006, p. 1). The use of RTI is also viewed as a data collection alternative to the discrepancy model (IQ versus performance), in the event a student requires testing for a learning disability.

Dave Tilly (2007b) describes RTI as a school-wide approach to the achievement of every student, arguing that the varied definitions of RTI are merely different spins on the same idea. It is not a curriculum, nor is it a one-size-fits-all panacea. It is about problem solving, data analysis, and good teaching. In its purest sense, Tilly (2007a) says, RTI could stand for Really Terrific Instruction aimed at helping all kids be successful and meet achievement expectations.

At the heart of RTI is a three-tiered framework (see figure below) for identifying and exploring students’ needs and the supports they require to meet social and academic expectations. The tiered triangle or pyramid is based on the idea that all students should receive “quality, universal instruction” and that this instruction likely will not be sufficient to meet all students’ needs. Additional strategic and



targeted supports for some children will be necessary.

In theory, 80% of students in any school should meet academic and behavioral expectations when engaged with a strong instructional program that includes teaching

to varied interests and levels of readiness. These students, who are successful within the core curriculum, fall into the large Tier I portion of the intervention triangle.

A subgroup of students, roughly 15–20%, may require additional strategic teaching beyond the core instruction in order to be successful. These students (Tier II) would ideally be supported through small group instruction in the classroom. Strong teachers should be able to meet these learners’ needs—with the right knowledge, skills, and strategies—over time and with persistence. Students identified for Tier II supports should be monitored on a regular basis to ensure they are progressing toward achievement benchmarks.

An even smaller subgroup (Tier III) consists of students who are significantly behind peers on a given skill—or several skills—and require intense supports beyond the core and strategic efforts already discussed. Instruction at this level is essential to school-wide RTI success, as it targets the students who, historically, have fallen so far behind expectations, they’ve never caught up. Even our best teachers—constructivist or not—often need assistance supporting these learners. Instruction at this level must focus on the specific needs of these students and should be research- and evidence-based. It often comes via standardized, scripted programs highly focused on minute skill development with small increments of growth. Put bluntly, Tier III interventions are designed to be followed to the letter and are only child-centered if the teacher makes them so.

Strengthening the Core

How does sound constructivist teaching, built on opportunities for individual and shared meaning-making, fit into an RTI approach for supporting kids? Our opinion is pretty simple: Not only can constructivism fit into an RTI approach to schooling, it must be the foundation of the core instruction provided for all students. In the spirit of RTI, constructivist educators need to renew their commitment to the principles that underlie their philosophy of teaching. We need to examine what it truly means to meet all kids’ needs. We need to tailor our instruction so all students have an access point to new learning and enough challenges to push them forth. In other words, we need to strengthen our core instruction. By strengthening the core with a commitment to our constructivist

principles, we can and will see higher numbers of students be successful in the classroom. There will be fewer needs for Tier II strategic supports and even less demand for intense Tier III interventions.

Will there still be times we need to problem solve with others and even get others’ support? Absolutely. Hard work and quality instruction don’t always equate to academic success, no matter how much we want them to. Schools that embrace Response to Intervention recognize that problem solving is a critical piece of good teaching. Teachers share strategies and collaborate around issues that impact student achievement. While some schools hold countless meetings to talk about student needs and admire the problem, RTI encourages teachers to develop a shared commitment to systemic data collection, sound instructional strategies, and the appropriate use of researched-based interventions. Constructivist educators have much to offer in this model of problem solving. Many are expertly skilled at identifying the needs of students, based on their actions and work, and love the challenge of finding strategies to connect with learners and make a difference for each student.

Ultimately, we must remember that our greatest impact on student achievement—as teachers, principals, and instructional leaders—will always be through the core instruction we provide all kids. Instruction provided to 100% of students will have a greater impact on achievement than strategies or interventions aimed at less than 20% of those we teach. Quality constructivist teaching, built on constructivist principles, will result in more effective instruction and thus greater achievement for all students.

References

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St. Louis, Missouri
August 5 & 6

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September 20 & October 11

St. Charles, Missouri
September 20 and October 11

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October 4 and 18

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All modules are held Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. unless otherwise noted.

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Kansas City, Missouri
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St. Louis, Missouri
November 8 and December 6

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Project Construct Connections is a newsletter for district, building, and agency administrators that supports their work with Project Construct teachers and caregivers.

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