Chapter 2

Response to Intervention (RTI):
Differentiating Instruction for Struggling Readers

Differentiating instruction is essential if we are to help every child succeed. In Chapter 1 we saw in the Teaching/Learning Cycle how high quality instruction is offered to all students. We also saw that small group instruction is offered selectively to some learners according to their particular learning needs as identified through the assessment-driven literacy profile. Thus, high quality developmental reading instruction is offered to all learners, sometimes in differentiated small group instruction. But what happens when our best efforts do not work for some learners even after we have offered second or even third rounds of explicit instruction as shown in the Teaching/Learning Cycle?

In recent years a new model for addressing the needs of struggling readers has emerged called Response to Intervention, or RTI. In this chapter we see how RTI is used in reading/literacy instruction in assisting struggling readers to fill in learning gaps as quickly as possible and return them to core (i.e., developmental) literacy instruction.

WHAT IS RTI?

RTI: Three-Tiered Instruction

With the emergence of frequent progress monitoring assessment and instructional differentiation as central features of effective literacy instruction, so too has the acceptance and use of Response to Intervention (RTI) models grown in popularity. In RTI, all students are initially screened to determine if they are making adequate progress in developing established literacy benchmark skills, objectives, and standards. Students who are shown in initial screening assessment to be on track in their literacy development continue to receive core reading instruction, or “Tier 1 level” developmental instruction. In Chapter 1, the Teaching/Learning
Cycle we discussed is Tier 1 instruction. Students discovered to be lagging substantially behind in literacy development, or at-risk of failure, receive specially selected evidence-based interventions in reading and writing, or “Tier 2 level” instruction.

Tier 2 interventions are intended to fill in learning gaps as quickly as possible and return students to core (i.e., developmental) literacy instruction. Tier 2 interventions are delivered at least three times per week in small group settings in addition to regular classroom instruction. Frequent and regular progress-monitoring assessment is used to determine the success of Tier 2 interventions with students. All instructional interventions must be documented and are must be offered for a substantial amount of time (e.g., a minimum of eight weeks). If Tier 2 instructional intervention fails to accelerate or positively impact a student’s literacy learning, then Tier 3 evidence-based interventions are attempted with greater frequency and delivered in even smaller groups or individually until the student shows a positive response. Figure 2.1 places the Teaching/Learning (Tier 1) model from Chapter 1 into the context of Response to Intervention (RTI).

In summary, RTI integrates high-quality, evidence-based instruction and frequent use of reliable and valid assessments in a systematic way. In this way struggling learners can be quickly given the chance to succeed using alternative instructional interventions. One online tool we recommend for those just learning about RTI are the training modules offered by The IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University at http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/index.html.
Response to Intervention (RTI), though not an entirely new concept, represents a major theoretical and practical shift in federal policy and law that affects both regular and special education classrooms. RTI is intended to increase student access to rapid instructional intervention when they begin to struggle in literacy instead of the “wait to fail” discrepancy model that was in effect for so many years. There are several concepts central to Response to Intervention (RTI) models (McCook, 2007).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Concepts Typically Associated with Response to Intervention Models (RTI)</th>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Universal screening.</strong> All students are evaluated according to “benchmark” norms for literacy development. Benchmark data are collected three times per year in the fall, winter, and spring. Data from these benchmark assessments must be “user friendly” and shared with teachers, principals, parents, and school district staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Measurable definition of the problem area.</strong> If a problem in reading and/or writing development is thought to exist, then a specific definition of the problem must be stated.</td>
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The problem area description must be specific and lend itself to objective measurement. It cannot be anecdotal or opinion data.

- **Baseline data prior to an intervention.** Once a learning problem has been tentatively identified, the teacher will use a curriculum-based measurement (CBM) to identify specifically the performance of an individual child on a specific measure (e.g. words read correctly in one minute). The CBM must have the capacity to compare the child’s performance to that of the class, school, or performance nationally by other children.

- **Establishment of a written plan that details who is accountable.** Once a student (or group of students) having a learning deficit is identified, an intervention plan is created. This plan cannot simply include the same teaching strategies and materials as were used before and expect a different result. In the written plan the teacher must describe which learning strategies are to be used, who will provide the instruction, when and where it will be provided, and for how long before the next progress monitoring assessment is conducted.

- **Intervention is delivered.** Teachers use an “evidence-based” instructional interventions, a commercially published program having substantial evidence as to its effectiveness (What Works Clearinghouse is a good source to identify these [see online at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/]), or locally developed core literacy instruction program with a clearly articulated scope and sequence of instruction.

- **Progress monitoring.** These assessments are meant to be formative in nature (occur while instruction is being provided so that adjustments can be made). There should be a variety of data collection methods that measure a student’s development over time so as to evaluate the student’s response to the intervention.

- **Comparison of pre-intervention data to post-intervention data to determine effectiveness.** The purpose at this stage is to find out if the intervention worked. A decision making rubric should be used to make that determination.

One of the concepts central to the use of RTI models is the systematic and planned use of valid and reliable assessments (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008). These assessments have undergone extensive evaluation to be certain that the scores obtained actually measure what is supposed to be measured in stable, consistent, and dependable ways. Another concept central to the use of RTI models is making instructional decisions based upon systematically collected assessment data rather than on impressions, hunches, or incidental observations such as what some once called *kid watching* (Haager, Klinger, & Vaughn, 2007).

The use of “scientifically-based” or “evidence-based” core literacy instructional programs and practices are usually a part of RTI models. Teachers implement core literacy instructional programs and practices that have been shown in multiple studies to endow students with
consistent, replicable learning advantages over other tested interventions (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005). To discover which of these programs have been found effective, we recommend you consult the website for What Works Clearinghouse online at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/.

As noted earlier, RTI models envision the prevention of student reading failure through the systematic implementation of a series of “tiered” or cascading instructional safety nets in which identified students receive timely, targeted, high quality, intensive, evidence-based core and supplemental instructional interventions (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

“Outsourcing” is OUT

Although research on the effectiveness of various literacy instructional interventions has been in place for many years, the findings of this research have not always been consistently consulted or used by classroom teachers to inform their classroom instructional decisions. Furthermore, when students in the past failed to make adequate progress in becoming readers and writers, they were often required to refer students for out-of-the-classroom special services. This “outsourcing” of teaching interventions was no doubt owing to the many federal regulations regarding how struggling students were to have access to such special programs as Title I and special education under Public Law 94-142. A kind of silo effect has resulted from these regulations that tended to place special service providers (i.e, Title I and special education teachers) out of the regular classroom instead of working as a team.

Today many teachers are working harder than ever to differentiate their literacy instruction in the classroom. They are also able to work with other educators as a team to offer the best learning experiences possible within the context of the regular classroom. School leaders and policy makers have viewed shifts in practice associated with the use of RTI models positively. This is so much the case that the use of RTI models has been made part of the law in the

reauthorization of two federal educational programs: the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In so doing, educational leaders and policy makers at the federal level have set up an expectation that RTI methods will become an essential feature of effective literacy instruction and assessment in today’s classrooms. However, at this juncture RTI is not a federal mandate for the states.

Connecting the Use of RTI Models to Assessment

As previously elaborated in Chapter 1, there are four major assessment purposes: (1) screening assessment, (2) diagnostic assessment, (3) progress-monitoring assessment, and (4) outcomes assessment. Screening assessments are administered at the beginning of the academic year to all students to determine if there are pre-existing concerns about any given student’s literacy development and growth that may put him or her at risk for making inadequate progress in classroom literacy instruction. If students perform as expected according to grade level benchmarks on screening assessments, then there is no need for additional assessment beyond progress-monitoring and these students are likely to be well served with a high-quality, evidence-based classroom core literacy program (Tier 1). On the other hand, if students perform below expectations on literacy screening assessments, then this may signal the need for additional diagnostic assessment to pinpoint the source of the problem. Diagnostic assessment will help you to design interventions that address potential problems.

During the school year students’ progress is monitored at least three times at predetermined intervals using progress-monitoring assessment. For students identified as making inadequate progress in literacy, these students are assessed or progress-monitored weekly and preferably bi-weekly (McCook, 2007) to determine if they are making desired progress. If progress
monitoring shows acceptable literacy growth for these at risk learners, then one can conclude that the literacy intervention in use is effective and can be continued. If progress monitoring demonstrates little or no student progress, then the intervention selected is not having the desired effect and another or additional literacy instructional intervention may be needed.

At or near the end of the school year, state and federal mandates often require that outcomes assessments be used to determine the overall effectiveness of the literacy program for all students. Typically outcome assessments are one of two types. They are either norm-referenced tests (NRT) in which students’ literacy progress is compared with other students nationally, or criterion-referenced tests (CRT) in which students’ progress is judged against established literacy benchmarks or standards.

All students are entitled to receive high quality, evidence-based, grade level literacy instruction regardless of their performance on screening, diagnostic or progress-monitoring assessments. The literacy instruction or core classroom literacy program offered to all grade-level students within classrooms is referred to as Tier 1 intervention.

**Figure 2.2 An Alternative RTI Three-Tiered Instructional Model**

Decisions about Tier 2 literacy interventions are determined initially from the results of screening assessments. Tier 2 literacy interventions often occur in small (1:5, 1:4, or 1:3) differentiated instructional groups in the regular education classroom (McCook, 2007; Walpole & McKenna, 2007). It is recommended that Tier 2 students receive a minimum of 30 minutes
per day/three times per week or daily if possible of evidence-based instruction designed to *supplement* the core literacy program in small group in addition to 90 minutes of core instruction. The professional delivering Tier 2 services may be the classroom teacher and/or a specialized teacher (e.g., Title I or special education teacher) or an external interventionist. Supplemental Tier 2 instruction may be delivered in the regular classroom or outside the classroom. The duration of Tier 2 instruction is usually at least eight weeks. If Tier 2 interventions are found to be insufficiently effective over time and students have not responded, they then move into *Tier 3* level interventions.

Tier 3 interventions provide the last layer of instructional safety-netting intended to address the needs of struggling literacy learners. Tier 3 interventions, as with Tier 2 interventions, can be provided within the classroom through what is called a *push in* approach, or outside the classroom in what is referred to as a *pull out* approach. At Tier 3 students receive even more intensive and sustained instruction in addition to the core literacy program. It has been recommended that Tier 3 students receive a minimum of three 30-minute periods daily of supplemental instruction (i.e., in *addition* to the core reading program other children also receive) using evidence-based practices (McCook, 2007). In terms of assessment, Tier 3 students receive progress monitoring twice a week or at a minimum weekly on target skill to ensure adequate progress and learning. In cases where a student has not made sufficient progress after Tier 3 interventions have been tried and documented over time (at least eight weeks), she is then assessed further by a certified diagnostician to determine whether the student qualifies for special education services.

**RTI and Problem-Solving**

**Response to Intervention (RTI)** models are intended to provide teachers and other educational service providers with a model for an integrated approach to problem solving. Based upon the work of Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005, p. 64-87), we list a sequence of 10 steps for problem solving students’ literacy progress as found in typical RTI models (See Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Ten Steps to Problem Solving Students’ Literacy Progress in RTI Models</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Implement “evidence-based” core literacy instruction programs and practices in Tier 1 instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Collect <em>progress monitoring assessment data</em> on all students at three, equally spaced, “benchmark” intervals during the academic year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Identify which students scored below established literacy benchmark targets or indicators.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Provide daily doses of additional “evidence-based” and targeted literacy instruction in small groups (Tier 2) for identified students scoring below established benchmarks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Frequently monitor student progress in daily small group literacy instruction to determine students’ response to the intervention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Review small group literacy instruction to revise or discontinue based upon results of frequent progress monitoring of students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. If revisions are needed consider increasing the intensity, duration, or frequency of small group literacy instruction groups to meet students’ literacy instructional needs.</td>
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</table>

8. After making revisions, continue to review, revise or discontinue the use of small group literacy instruction based upon frequent progress monitoring data.

9. If after making revisions to small group literacy instruction students evidence the need on progress monitoring assessments for additional instructional support, recommend a student for comprehensive literacy diagnostic evaluation.

10. Determine eligibility and need of the student for supplemental literacy instructional support services (Tier 3) including special education, Title I, tutoring, speech-language, and English language learning programs.

**Alternative RTI Models**

Although a three-tiered RTI model is typical in most school districts, scholars continue to debate RTI models with more than three tiers (Shanahan, 2008). For example, preliminary research on the use of a three-tiered RTI model showed that students’ who received Tier 1 + SS (traditional school services) outperformed an historical control group at the end of year on the Letter Naming, Phonemic Segmentation, and Oral Reading Fluency DIBELS subtests (Good & Kaminski, 2002) and on two subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson Reading Mastery Test (Woodcock, 1987). Students in a Tier 1 + 2 instruction treatment group outperformed the students who received Tier 1 + SS (traditional school services) and the historical control group (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Elbaum, et al., 2004). These results indicate greater effectives for using RTI models to increase at-risk students’ literacy progress compared to an historical control.
group and a comparison group that received Tier 1 + SS (core reading instruction plus traditional special services) offered in most schools (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007).

Because RTI models of instruction are intended to provide every student equitable access to effective literacy instruction, we now turn our attention in this chapter to how classroom teachers can provide effective Tier 1 and 2 literacy instruction that is responsive to the needs of each student. In the following sections of this chapter, we discuss the elements of effective, evidence-based core literacy instruction programs and practices (Tier 1) and differentiated small group literacy instruction (Tier 2) in the regular education classroom.

**Response to Intervention (RTI): Effective Tier 1 Reading Instruction**

Effective Tier 1 literacy instruction is anchored in the findings of scientific research evidence. Scientific research evidence is derived from studies that report the results of experiments in which one or more instructional interventions are tested against a control or comparison instructional intervention (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). Scientific research reports are published in “blind” peer reviewed research journals. Blind peer review means that the reviewers do not know the identity of the authors submitting the report for potential publication. Blind peer review protects against studies being selected for publication based upon an author’s reputation and not on the quality of the study. For an instructional intervention to be considered “evidence-based” findings or results from multiple studies must come to the same conclusion about its effectiveness. Findings from a single study or even a few studies (less than a dozen or so) are insufficient to qualify an instructional intervention as evidence-based. Thus, the “bar” for claiming that an instructional intervention is “evidence-based” is extremely high and classroom teachers are well advised to use these practices and programs. Teachers can familiarize

**Essential Components of Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction**

In the past two decades, a series of reports have been commissioned to determine the essential evidence-based components of literacy programs and practices that students of all ages need to be taught in order to become successful readers and writers. One of these reports was sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences and National Research Council. Prominent reading and education experts convened to review existing research studies to determine which skills, concepts, and strategies must be taught to prevent students from falling into early reading difficulties or into eventual reading failure. This panel issued a report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). A companion document intended to make the findings of this research report more accessible to parents and teachers was published in 1999 entitled *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children’s Reading Success* (Burns, Griffin, and Snow, 1999). In these reports, this National Research Council spelled out several essential, evidence-based literacy instruction components that need to be taught to prevent students’ from encountering early reading difficulties and failure.

Two years later, in direct response to a U.S. Congressional mandate to examine the status of “scientific” research on teaching young children to read, the report of the *National Reading Panel on Teaching Children to Read* (2000) was jointly published by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institutes of Health, and the U.S. Department of Education. A companion document entitled, *Put Reading First: The Research*
Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read (Armbruster & Osborn, 2001), was distributed with the intent to widely disseminate the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000) report to parents and educators.

We now know that highly quality, evidence-based literacy instruction programs and practices focus instruction on the following essential components of effective literacy instruction:

- Oral Language Development
- Concepts of Print
- Letter Name Knowledge
- Sight Word Recognition
- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Writing/Spelling
- Volume Reading and Writing

Rather than elaborate on each of the foregoing essential, evidence-based literacy instruction components here, we provide detailed treatment of each in the remaining chapters of this book. In these subsequent chapters, we describe the background knowledge teachers need, the assessment tools and procedures, and instructional strategies associated with the use of each of the evidence-based components of effective literacy instruction listed above.

An equally important component of evidence-based reading instruction includes students’ access to appropriately challenging and volume reading and writing of a variety of text types such as books, poetry, graphic novels, etc (Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2000; 2006).

Access to printed texts and print making supplies or materials may include but are not limited to:

- a variety of interesting and appropriately challenging reading and writing materials to include both good literature and information books
- supportive and assistive technologies for learning to read and write
- socio-dramatic, literacy enriched play in kindergarten
• adequate time for reading and writing instruction
• adequate time for reading and writing practice
• extra time and expert help for those who struggle
• outreach to and involvement of parents in interacting with their children around reading and writing

**Characteristics of High Quality Literacy Instruction**

The quality of literacy instruction provided by the classroom teacher is the single greatest determiner of a student’s later literacy achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Several studies have described the practices, beliefs, and knowledge of exemplary elementary classroom literacy teachers (Au, 2006; Block, Oaker, & Hurt, 2002; Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, and Morrow, 2001; Rogg, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2005). Taken together these research reports reveal identifiable characteristics of teachers whose classroom instructional practices led to exceptional reading achievement for their students. Highly effective literacy teachers who make a difference in their students’ literacy achievement shared the following characteristics as shown in Table 3:

**Table 3: Characteristics of High Quality Literacy Instruction**

- *Instructional Balance* – Teachers integrate explicit instruction into authentic reading and writing experience within connected text.
- *Instructional Density* – Teachers instruct a large quantity of skills/concepts/strategies per hour of instruction. Every moment in the classroom is oriented toward promoting literacy learning – even lining up for lunch or recess!
- *Instructional Scaffolding* – Teachers support students as they develop the ability to independently perform literacy processes and tasks.
- *Work in the Zone* – Teachers determine each child’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through assessment prior to providing instruction.
- *Encourage Self Regulation* – Teachers structure the classroom environment and learning activities so that students understand expectations, behaviors, and outcomes to promote independence, cooperation, and task completion.
- *Integrate Reading and Writing* – Teachers use reading and writing in mutually supportive ways. Children learned to “read what they write” and “write what they read.”
- *High Expectations* – Teachers expect all children to learn and meet high standards of literacy performance.
• **Effective Classroom Management** – Teachers painstakingly organize classroom spaces and provide students procedural training about purposes and expectations. Routines and procedures are clearly defined, well understood, conspicuously displayed, and consistently applied.

• **Skills/Concepts/Strategies Explicitly Taught** – Teachers teach literacy strategies, skills, and concepts through explanations, modeling, and a gradual release of responsibility over time to independence. Teachers believe that reading and writing skills, strategies, processes, and concepts are “taught” not “caught.”

• **Quick Transitions Among Literacy Instruction Activities** – Teachers strive to maximize instructional time by minimizing transitions between literacy learning activities in the classroom. Procedures for making transitions should be smooth, orderly, and quick – typically around 1 minute.

• **Volume Reading and Writing** – Teachers provide abundant daily opportunities to read and write texts.

• **Match the Task Difficulty to Student Competence** – Teachers that the tasks assigned in reading and writing are sufficiently challenging to promote engagement and progress but not so challenging as to induce frustration and failure.

• **Connect Literacy Across the Curriculum** – Teachers teach and encourage students to use reading and writing skills, strategies, and concept when learning in other curriculum content areas.

• **Positive, Personally Reinforcing Classroom Environment** – Teachers maintain a classroom “atmosphere” of respect, support, collaboration, and clear expectations.

• **Multi-dimensional Word Recognition Instruction** – Teachers teach children to use letter-sound information, word parts and patterns, and contextual information to identify unknown words.

• **Printed Prompts Prominently Displayed** - Teachers recognize the human tendency to forget rules, routines, and procedures. Such critical information is conspicuously displayed.

• **Sufficient Daily Allocated Literacy Instruction Time** – Teachers set aside between 120 and 180 minutes per day for high quality, evidence-based literacy instruction.

• **Culturally Responsive Instruction** – Teachers build upon their students’ varied cultural, linguistic, and personal background experiences and knowledge. They teach with books and text materials in which children can see others similar to themselves.

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**Grouping Students for Tier 1 Literacy Instruction**

Tier 1 literacy instruction typically makes use of multiple grouping formats so as to meet each student’s needs. Although the exclusive use of whole-group literacy instruction is not significantly associated with strong gains in students’ literacy growth; conversely, too much small group instruction time results in students spending large amounts of time in independent seatwork or in centers engaged in relatively low level literacy learning activities with little or no...
accountability. Exemplary classroom teachers seek a balance between using both whole-class and small-group instruction when offering Tier 1 and 2 literacy instruction in classrooms (Taylor, 2008).

Because literacy instruction and learning is a social as well as a cognitive endeavor, whole-class instruction can engage teachers and students in a classroom community of socially shared literacy activities, demonstrations, lessons and discussions. Shared literacy learning activities generally provided in whole-class instruction ought to be a regular and integral part of daily literacy instruction (Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992; Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998; Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000). A few examples of shared literacy learning activities during whole-class instruction include telling stories; teacher demonstrations of strategy use; dramatizing stories; reading books aloud, discussing books, sharing student-authored stories, poems, songs; reading enlarged texts of stories, songs, poems, raps, and jingles; and participating in an experiment or some other active-learning experience.

Establishing a Routine in Tier 1 Literacy Instruction

Children develop a sense of security when the events of the school day revolve around a predictable sequence of literacy learning events and activities. Students find comfort in familiar instructional routines and daily classroom schedules in a well-organized and managed classroom (Morrow, Reutzel, & Casey, 2005). There are any number of ways to organize the activities and instruction for Tier 1 literacy instruction. However, one of the most critical considerations for the teacher is time allocation and scheduling.

There seems to be a fairly wide range as to how long literacy instruction should be in the elementary school classrooms, but many schools require 120 -180 minutes of instruction each day in reading and writing. Shanahan (2004) also recommends the allocation of at least 120
minutes per day for Tier 1 literacy instruction. As shown in Figure 2.3, this total time allocation of 120 minutes of Tier 1 literacy instruction is further sub-divided into four 30-minute literacy instructional blocks focused on the essential elements of evidence-based literacy instruction, namely word work, fluency, comprehension and writing.

**Figure 2.3 Example of a 120-Minute Tier 1 Literacy Instruction Block**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Work</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>30 Minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategy Instruction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>Writing and Spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>30 Minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>30 Minutes</strong></td>
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</table>

The purpose of the 30-minute word work instructional block is to develop students’ phonological and phonemic awareness, concepts about print, letter name knowledge, decoding and word recognition, and spelling concepts, skills, and strategies. During these 30 minutes, the effective literacy teacher provides the whole class with explicit instruction on each of these word-related skills, strategies, and concepts. Students receive clear verbal explanations or “think-alouds” coupled with expert modeling of reading and writing concepts, skills and strategies. Having clearly modeled reading and writing word work concepts, skills and strategies, teachers then provide students guided or supervised practice.

The purpose of the daily 30-minute fluency instructional block is two-fold. First, students are given brief explicit lessons that help students to understand the elements of fluent reading: accuracy, rate, and expression. Students also see and hear their teacher model the elements what one means by fluent reading as well. This is followed by the teacher involving students in reading practice to develop fluency. Effective Tier 1 literacy teachers use various formats for
reading fluency practice including choral reading, such as echoic (echo chamber), unison (all together), antiphonal (one group of students reading against another), mumble reading (whisper), line-a-child, and so on. For those who are unfamiliar with these choral reading variations, we recommend reading Opitz and Rasinski’s (2008) *Good-Bye Round Robin*, or Raskinski’s (2003) *The Fluent Reader*. Students also read in pairs, with same-age peers or older peers from another age- or grade-level classroom. Each pair of children alternates the roles of reader and listener. After each oral reading by the reader, the listener provides feedback. Student can also prepare for an oral reading performance. To accomplish this objective, effective Tier 1 literacy teachers select one of three well-known oral reading performance approaches: readers’ theater, radio reading, and recitation.

The purpose of the *writing* instructional block in Tier 1 literacy instruction is to develop students’ composition skills, spelling, writing mechanics, and grammatical understandings. Effective instructional practices used within this time allocation include modeled writing by the teacher; a writer’s workshop, including drafting, conferencing, revising, editing, publishing, and disseminating; and direct explicit whole-class instruction on each of these writing skills, strategies, and concepts. We also strongly recommend that daily lessons provide a time allocation for sharing children’s writing in an “author’s chair” or using some other method of disseminating and sharing children’s writing products.

The purpose of the *comprehension strategies* 30-minute instructional block is to develop students’ vocabulary and comprehension strategies. Effective instructional practices used within this time segment include explicit instruction of vocabulary concepts, using a variety of methods and requiring a variety of responses including word play and word awareness (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Johnson, 2001; McKenna, 2002). As for comprehension instruction, effective
Tier 1 literacy teachers focus attention on explicitly teaching evidence-based reading comprehension strategies, including: question answering, question asking, story and text structure, graphic organizers, monitoring, summarizing, and activating/building background knowledge. At some point in time, effective Tier 1 literacy teachers teach students to use a set or family of multiple comprehension strategies such as reciprocal teaching (Palincsar, 2003), concept oriented reading instruction (Guthrie, 2003; Swan, 2003), and transactional strategies (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Shuder, 1996) to be used strategically while interacting with a variety of texts over long periods of time (National Reading Panel, 2000; Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005).

**Systematic and Explicit Tier 1 Literacy Instruction**

**Systematic instruction** means that classroom teachers teach each grade-level’s identified “scope” or range of literacy concepts, skills, and strategies found in a the school’s adopted core literacy program. Systematic instruction is also interpreted to mean that teachers teach this range of concepts, skills and strategies in the “sequence” or order that is spelled out in the core literacy program. The range and order of literacy concepts, skills, or strategies identified to be taught in the core literacy programs are typically found in the “scope and sequence” chart located in at least one each grade level program teachers’ manuals or editions. It is important to note that systematic does not mean that teachers must pace the instruction as found in many teachers’ manuals. Appropriate instructional pacing requires that teachers to observe student responses to the pace of instruction and make needed adjustments.

**Explicit instruction** means that classroom teachers state a clear, concise instructional objective to be taught. A clear, concise instructional objective identifies a specific literacy concept, skill, or strategy to be taught along with the cognitive thinking processes and assigned
tasks to be completed. An example might be – Students will learn to blend letter sounds in consonant-vowel-consonant words (cvc words) to pronounce words with a short /a/ vowel sound. Next, teachers provide students explanations about why it is important to learn the identified literacy concept, skill or strategy as well when and where it will be useful in literacy (Duffy, 2003). This is followed by the teacher modeling and “thinking aloud” how to understand a literacy concept or consciously performing or demonstrating the thinking process steps needed to effectively use a literacy strategy (Duffy, 2003; Hancock, 1999). After modeling, the teacher “scaffolds” by guiding and coaching students’ use of the concept, or strategy and gradually releasing responsibility (See Figure 2.4) for using the thinking processes associated with literacy concepts, skills or strategies from the teacher to students during subsequent lessons over many days, weeks, and months (Duffy, 2003; Hancock, 1999; Raphael, George, Weber, & Nies, 2009).

Figure 2.4: Gradual Release of Responsibility Model of Instruction

Tier 1 instruction also includes differentiated instruction. What is meant by differentiated instruction? Differentiated literacy instruction implies a movement away from a “one-size fits all literacy curriculum” and is intended to meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classrooms today. For example, many children from high poverty circumstances need a much
greater infusion of vocabulary instruction than do children from more affluent families (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Johnson, 2001). Tier 1 literacy instruction is focused on responding to individual, specific literacy learning needs identified by studying the data obtained from the use of screening, diagnostic, or progress monitoring assessments.

Optiz (1998) describes flexible groups as allowing “students to work in differently mixed ability groups depending upon the learning task at hand” (p. 10). Small differentiated literacy instruction groups vary in size from 2 -8 depending on the number of students with similar instructional needs. Group membership is never fixed and varies according to students’ response to the interventions offered to them in Tier 1 literacy instruction.

As teachers work with students in differentiated small literacy instruction groups, they provide targeted, explicit lessons and teacher guided practice to help students understand and use effective literacy strategies embedded in the reading and writing of texts. Students in differentiated small instruction groups are placed in appropriately challenging text levels, typically the instructional level text. Instructional level text typically represents a difficulty level where students can read the text with 90-95% accuracy.

To achieve full differentiation within these small instruction groups, classroom teachers pursue the teaching of dissimilar literacy learning objectives in each group. In other words, differentiation requires teachers to identify objectives within each group of students that meet their specific literacy learning needs. Teachers engage each small instruction group in different learning routines, objectives, tasks and activities. For example one small instruction group might focus on activities and tasks that help students to recognize high frequency sight words fluently, while yet another small instruction group might be focused on a lesson in which students are focused on writing a summary of a text to demonstrate comprehension. We point out these
features of differentiation because in many schools teachers form small groups for “guided reading instruction” in which the only difference is the level of text used in the group. The objectives, format, routines and activities in many “guided reading groups” are the same such as – introduce the book, take a picture walk, read the book, retell, revisit the text, and so forth.

We repeat with emphasis, Tier 1 literacy instruction provides all students with increased, targeted, intense instruction and practice to meet individual literacy learning needs. For some students Tier 1 literacy instruction offers much needed time for “double doses” of teacher directed explicit instruction and guided practice to learn a previously taught but not yet mastered literacy skill, concept, or strategy. For other students, Tier 1 literacy instruction offers students the opportunity to extend and accelerate the acquisition of advanced literacy skills, strategies and concepts in literature circle groups or book club discussions beyond those typically taught at grade level.

In summary, Tier 1 literacy instruction is not intended to address individual or specific literacy learning needs but rather to provide all students equal opportunity to receive grade level, evidence based literacy instruction. High quality Tier 1 literacy instruction is systematically and explicitly taught to the whole class of students and in small groups using either a commercially published or locally developed literacy instructional program. Evidence-based Tier 1 literacy instruction requires that teachers allocate sufficient time for literacy instruction at least 120 minutes daily. This allocated instructional time is often distributed across four essential components of effective literacy instruction – word work, fluency work, comprehension strategy instruction, and writing. Shanahan (2003) has reported increased student achievement when high quality, evidence-based Tier 1 literacy instruction is provided to all students as described here.
TIER 2 INSTRUCTION: TRIAGE IN CLASSROOMS

Tier 2 reading instruction is typically taught by the classroom teacher although other educators and service providers, such as reading specialists, tutors or aides, can be asked to assist in providing Tier 2 literacy instruction in push-in or pull-out programs. Nevertheless, the responsibility for designing, documenting, and coordinating effective Tier 2 literacy instruction rests with the classroom teacher. In many effective schools, classroom teachers work together as teams, often with the assistance of other specialized teachers (e.g., literacy coaches, special education teachers, Title I teachers), to analyze student needs and develop written plans of action.

According to RTI Action Network (2009) and others, Tier 2 literacy instruction is intended to assist students not making adequate progress in the regular classroom in Tier 1. Struggling students are provided with increasingly intensive instruction matched to their needs on the basis of levels of performance and rates of progress. Intensity of instruction varies across group size, frequency and duration of intervention, and level of training of the professionals providing instruction or intervention. These services and interventions are provided in small-group settings in addition to instruction in the core literacy curriculum (Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000; Gregory & Chapman, 2002; Tyner, 2004). Students who continue to struggle at this level of intervention are then considered for more intensive Tier 3 interventions.

Another concept central to the success of Tier 2 literacy instruction is the concept of “curricular alignment.” Teacher-directed Tier 2 literacy instruction, especially when other providers are involved such as reading specialists or classroom aides, can assure that students receive instruction in literacy strategies, concepts, and skills that align with the scope and sequence of skills, concepts and strategies and the academic language that is used in Tier 1 core
classroom literacy instruction. The failure of supplementary literacy instruction provided to students has often been attributed to a lack of alignment between classroom literacy instruction and the instruction provided in addition to or beyond the classroom (Allington, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 1999). Alignment of Tier 1 and 2 literacy instructional programs has been shown recently to significantly and positively affect literacy growth among at-risk students (Wonder-McDowell, Reutzel, & Smith, in preparation).

**Providing Independent Practice during Tier 2 Differentiated Small Group Instruction**

Teachers must also plan productive work for those students who are not participating in differentiated small literacy instruction under the direct supervision of classroom teacher. The question teachers ask often ask us goes something like this, “What do I do with the other 20 children who are not in my differentiated small literacy instructional group?” For this purpose, many elementary classroom teachers use learning centers, stations or activities. When planning learning centers, stations or activities to support Tier 2 small group differentiated literacy instruction, there are several important decisions to be made before doing so.

Teachers need to consider how many learning centers they can reasonably manage while simultaneously providing a small group of students with Tier 2 supplemental literacy instruction. For an inexperienced teacher, managing the complexities of multiple literacy learning centers may seem too much! Literacy learning centers are not the only effective way to provide students with meaningful practice in reading and writing. Pairing students with peers or buddies can be used to provide those students in a class with effective reading practice when they are not participating in a small differentiated literacy instruction group under the direct guidance of the classroom teacher. Involving other educators in Tier 2 classroom literacy instruction-- such as
Reading Recovery teachers with differentiated assignments, aides, tutors, and reading specialists-can provide additional personnel and supervision for other small groups in a classroom.

For other more experienced teachers, the question is not whether to use literacy learning centers or stations but rather how to design effective literacy learning centers that promote the learning of essential literacy skills, concepts or strategies.

There are several key features associated with effectively designed literacy learning centers. Unsupervised literacy learning centers are established primarily to give students independent or peer-assisted practice in applying literacy concepts, skills, or strategies previously taught by the classroom teacher! Therefore, if learning centers are not staffed by another educator, materials and tasks to be independently practiced in literacy learning centers should never represent new or novel learning experiences.

Literacy learning centers should provide students with practice of the essential components of evidence-based reading instruction—fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and word recognition. Literacy learning centers that focus on low level completion of seatwork activities or participation in easy, repetitious games to keep students occupied are not useful and do not represent the most effective use of classroom or practice time. Engaging students in applying their literacy learning in reading and writing of texts or interaction and discussion around texts in a variety of formats is clearly preferred. Students must also have well defined and structured assignments, tasks, or activities that require them to demonstrate completion, performance, and accountability. Teachers, who fail to state expectations, give clear directions and assignments and hold students accountable for the time spent in literacy learning centers, will find that students do not consistently make good use of independent practice opportunities wasting valuable instruction time.

Procedures for using literacy learning centers need to be explicitly taught, modeled, and practiced under the guidance of the teacher prior to allowing students to engage in the independent use of literacy learning centers. Likewise procedures for transitioning among a variety of literacy learning centers need to be explicitly taught, modeled, and practiced to reduce transition times. Teachers who design effective literacy learning centers clearly display a) literacy learning objectives, standards, or benchmarks; b) rules or behavior to be expected in literacy learning centers, and c) directions for completing student assignments, tasks, or work in literacy learning centers.

Training Students to Effectively Use Literacy Centers

Reutzel and Morrow (2007) have developed a “six-week” literacy learning center procedural training process for successfully engaging students in independent or guided practice activities found in classroom literacy learning centers. At the beginning of the school year, literacy learning centers should be ready to be used by the students, but teachers should be tempted to let students use them right away! Allowing students to enter and use a variety of literacy centers or stations and the accompanying print/literacy tools at the very beginning of the school year without adequate procedural training is an invitation for a classroom management disaster. Cordon off the literacy learning centers for few weeks, usually five to six weeks. We’ve actually seen classrooms in which teachers use yellow plastic crime scene tape to cordon off the literacy learning centers at the beginning of the year! During this time, students will be trained to successfully enter, move among, and engage in tasks found in literacy learning centers. A daily schedule of literacy routines and a literacy learning center rotation chart needs to be posted in the classroom and reviewed each day.
During the first week of the school year, ignore the literacy centers around the room. Focus attention on whole group instruction. Spend small amounts of time collecting informal assessment data on children’s behavioral abilities to follow directions, listen, and remain on-task and focused in whole group settings. Administer literacy screening tests to all students in the classroom during this first week if possible. Finally, spend a bit of time learning about student’s interests, attitudes, and motivations generally and those specific to reading and writing.

By the second week, tell students that in a few weeks they will be working more often in small groups and in the literacy learning centers set up around the classroom. But, before they can do so, there is much they need to learn. Doing this heightens students’ curiosity and motivation to learn literacy learning center expectations and procedures. Also during the second week, briefly in 2 minutes or less, explain what each literacy space of the classroom is for, such as a paired reading, word work, and writing centers. Take about 5 minutes each day to explain one or two literacy learning until all centers have been described.

The third week select one-two literacy learning centers to more fully explain and model how students are to enter, use, clean up, and rotate or move to other small group and literacy

learning centers in the classroom. On the first day of the third week model how students should move from their seats to one-two literacy learning centers in the classroom. On the second day of the third week, explain that a team leader will be appointed by the teacher to lead their group in a quick review of the rules and directions each day through a quiet oral reading of the posted rules and the directions for working in the literacy center.

On the third day of the third week, the teacher models how and where students are to seat themselves in the literacy center(s). Once seated, students wait for the team leader to distribute materials necessary for completing the displayed task in each center. On this same day, the teacher discusses the expectations for completing assigned literacy center tasks. On the fourth day of the third week, the teacher explicitly explains the consequences for failure to follow center directions and obey the rules. She directs student’s attention to posted consequences display in each literacy center. On the last day of the third week, the teacher models the literacy center clean-up process.

The training of these one-two selected literacy or content-area learning spaces will likely require approximately 10 minutes per day for the entire third week of the school year. This training process is repeated at a slightly accelerated pace over the next two weeks, weeks four and five, within each of the remaining classroom literacy centers or stations. During the final week of training, teachers form small groups with assigned team leaders to role play movement to, use of, and clean-up of literacy centers. The wise teacher realizes that students must be able to role play and practice these procedures to fully internalize them. During role play, anyone who fails to follow directions precisely causes the entire group to stop and re-practice the expected procedures. Remaining firm about meeting expectations as students role play their use of literacy centers will save many potential management problems later.

Making Efficient Transitions among Literacy Centers

Training students to make efficient movements between literacy centers and into and out of various classroom activities is essential for minimizing transition times and maximizing literacy practice and instructional time. Experience has taught us the value of using timers, stopwatches, etc, to motivate students to accomplish transitions briskly and without dallying. A worthwhile goal is to reduce transition times to a single minute. We recommend a quick four step process to make this happen.

Table 3: Making Efficient Transitions When Using Literacy Centers

| 1. | Signal students to freeze and listen for directions using a hotel registration bell, turning off the lights, etc. |
| 2. | Provide brief, well sequenced, and repetitive oral directions coupled with displayed written directions. For example, say and display something like – 1) put materials away and 2) line-up. Children must listen or read to get the directions for what is to be done. |
| 3. | Signal using your hotel bell, lights, etc. for students to follow the oral and written displayed directions. |
| 4. | Signal students to move to the next classroom literacy center or return to their regularly assigned classroom seats. |

An excellent resource for more information about designing and implementing effective literacy centers is found in Morrow’s (2002) book, The Literacy Center: Contexts for Reading and Writing, 2nd Edition.

TIER 3 INSTRUCTION: INTENSIVE LITERACY INTERVENTIONS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

As classroom teachers continue to monitor students’ progress and responses to small group differentiated literacy instruction provided in Tier 2, they systematically determine if students are failing to make adequate progress toward established literacy learning benchmarks, standards or objectives. Students who are not responsive to Tier 1 and 2 classroom literacy instruction require diagnostic assessment and more specific and intensive literacy interventions.

Tier 3 literacy instruction and assessment is provided by the classroom teacher and/or other specialized educational providers such as reading specialists, Title I teacher, or special education teachers as consultants, (McCook, 2007). Supplemental Tier 3 instruction should be offered a minimum in three 30 minute sessions per week, daily if possible, in small group (1:1, 1:2, or 1:3) or individually in addition to core literacy instruction. Progress monitoring assessment occurs as much as twice a week or, at a minimum, weekly on targeted literacy skills to ensure adequate progress and learning (McCook, 2007).

In the rare cases where Tier 3 supplemental instruction is not successful, the student may then be referred for further diagnostic testing to determine whether the student may qualify for special education services. Figure 2.1 shared earlier shows one model for three-tier RTI instruction along with a fourth step, consideration for special education evaluation and services.

Special educators are becoming more and more informed about how to use RTI procedures in making eligibility decisions for students requiring special education services. For those special educators seeking more information about how to use RTI processes to provide effective Tier 3 assessment and instructional services, we recommend the book entitled, *Response to Intervention: Principles and Strategies for Effective Practice* (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

**An RTI Caveat: “Tiers to Tears”**

The final regulations for the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were published in the Federal Register on August 14, 2006, and became effective on October 13, 2006. Because the RTI section of the legislation still allows for the discrepancy formula to continue in use, children could still be denied needed services if they have cognitive limitations...
(Cooter & Cooter, 2009). For example, a fourth grade child with a tested IQ of 75 reading on a first grade level may be working toward their potential according to a discrepancy formula and, thus, not be eligible for extra services. We feel that RTI is an idea whose time has come.

**Summary**

Response to Intervention (RTI) is not a program! RTI is a systematic way of viewing multi-tiered literacy instruction and intervention in the regular classroom. Shanahan (2008) summarizes three generally agreed upon elements of RTI models that classroom teachers should know. First, the classroom teacher bears the major responsibility for providing a high quality and differentiated program of core literacy instruction in Tier 1. Second, the middle tier describes targeted instruction that can be provided by the classroom teacher or other team members in addition to the core literacy program. As students with learning difficulties progress from Tier to Tier, they receive further assessment and supplemental literacy instruction with increasing intensity.

RTI is firmly rooted in the collection and analysis of student data to make decisions about how to plan the most effective literacy instruction that meets individual students’ learning needs. A key to success in using RTI models is a team approach involving committed educators who work together to address the literacy learning needs of each and every student! In conclusion, the use of RTI models provides struggling students with a rich and varied menu of literacy assessments, interventions, and instructional providers.
Selected References


Literacy Assessment: Making Sense of What Students Know and Do. New York: Guilford Press.


**Recommended Readings**

