
Introduction

The data gathered in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and in the Third International Mathematics and Science study (1995), along with Richard Allington and Sean Walmsley's publication *No Quick Fix: Rethinking Literacy Programs in America's Elementary Schools* (1995), were among the catalysts that propelled the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate that every child will be a reader and a writer by the year 2014. This mandate ushered in a requirement that every school would have a strategic plan in place to ensure that all students would be successful. As an answer to the mandate, innovative ideas such as professional learning communities (PLCs), differentiation of instruction (DI), and response to intervention (RTI) came to the forefront.

It didn't take long for the works of notable individuals such as Howard Gardner, Carol Ann Tomlinson, Heidi Hayes Jacobs, Robert Marzano, and Susan Rosenholtz to gain notoriety, providing insight into students' learning profiles, readiness, and interests and into educators' collaborative discussions. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (*Frames of Mind*, 1983) became a vehicle for recognizing and understanding how students learn in a holistic and natural way. His evidence showed that a child might be at very different stages of cognitive development at different times. He believes that students' minds are open to learning and that teachers must develop multiple opportunities for them to investigate and think.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Carol Ann Tomlinson's first book, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms* (1995) followed Gardner's research and offered strategies to meet the needs of all students through differentiation of instruction. Differentiation of instruction is a philosophy that requires educators to

shift their thinking pedagogically, with the major focus being on the delivery of new content and skills, providing multiple experiences for students to process the content and skills, and giving students various opportunities to show what they know and can do through time, choice, and voice. This change in paradigm meant that all students would be provided specific plans of instruction that used the four quadrants of the brain—visual, oral, auditory, and kinesthetic. School districts embraced Tomlinson’s ideas in large part because they fostered student achievement through differentiated teaching and learning while addressing district mandates in curriculum.

Heidi Hayes Jacobs (2004) enhanced the earlier curriculum mapping work of Fenwick W. English (1999) through a detailed process that focused on assessment, dialogue, reflection, student learning, and the curriculum itself. Mapping enabled teachers to identify redundancies, gaps, and threads in the curriculum both horizontally (within grade levels and across content areas) and vertically (between grade levels) over time. Jacobs’s roadmap was a way to look long-range at a unit of instruction and short-range at the immediate lesson within the unit. It included essential questions for the how and the why of the lesson, means for flexible grouping of students, instructional strategies, and diverse approaches to assessment.

To help educators further transform their teaching, Robert J. Marzano wrote *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2001), in which he highlighted nine essential categories of instructional strategies:

1. Identifying similarities and differences
2. Summarizing and note taking
3. Reinforcing effort
4. Homework and practice
5. Nonlinguistic representations
6. Cooperative learning
7. Providing feedback
8. Generating and testing hypotheses
9. Graphic organizers

When combined with Jacobs’s mapping of curriculum and Tomlinson’s differentiation of instruction, these strategies enhance student thinking and learning.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

These individuals along with their innovative practices paved the way for adaptations in education that are occurring in the 21st century. As schools began to put differentiation into practice, as they began learning to map their own curricula, as they began to implement research-based instructional strategies, and as they collaborated and reflected on their own practice, they also realized that they needed to spend time discussing how to better implement those changes and how to incorporate the new ideas within the boundaries of their own culture and thinking.

As early as 1989, Susan J. Rosenholtz was hard at work cultivating ideas about key elements of professional learning communities. Her research on improving practice centered on teacher reflection, collaboration, and input. And while delivery, planning, and individual learning profiles became effective means of classroom practice, she recognized that school transformation and improvement were still “owned” by the building administrator. Rosenholtz determined that until there is divergent thinking and shared decision making by teachers, there will be little or no chance for lasting change. Additionally, her research indicates that “teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy are more likely to adapt and adopt new behaviors and more likely to stay in the profession” (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 74).

Linda Darling-Hammond led the effort to develop national standards for teachers that reflect on what they need to know in order to teach diverse learners. Her work was based on the premise that the better we know our students, the quicker we can intervene in their learning. She summarized it all by saying, “These students need creative and innovative teachers with positive attitudes” (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 359).

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004 to better meet the needs of students with disabilities through early interventions and services. As schools identify students who are at risk early and intervene in their education quickly, the likelihood of the special education program becoming the dumping ground for difficult-to-educate students is reduced. RTI, a general education initiative written into the reauthorized act, offers educators a framework in which to structure early intervention strategies. At its core, RTI supports students who are at risk by removing barriers to learning.

According to Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, and McGraw (2009), “Response to Intervention (RTI) is a roadmap for student success in the general

education classroom. It is a wonderful tool you can use to help all of your students especially those who keep you up at night” (p. 1). Mary Howard’s *RTI From All Sides* (2009) describes RTI as a “multifaceted way to look at students and make effective, excellent, collaborative plans for literacy instruction” (p. xiii). Its focus is on providing early and effective instruction for students in both academic and behavioral areas.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is written with thoughtful intent to provide educators with the professional knowledge they need regarding DI, RTI, and PLCs. This knowledge will enable them to monitor, adjust, and reflect on current teaching practices and assist them in establishing robust learning communities within schools. It provides answers to the questions, “What’s in it for me?” “How is it relevant to my current practice?” “How do I do this when I have so much other stuff on my plate?” and “How do PLC, DI, and RTI fit together?”

The book includes several kinds of resources that educators will find helpful:

- Research and theories supporting PLCs, DI, and RTI
- Examples from the field of education—practical strategies used in K–12 classrooms and examples from our own reflective notebooks
- Collegial conversation guides and protocols for establishing PLCs
- Walk-through checklists and learning-style surveys that are easy to use and educator friendly
- Demonstrations of how to integrate PLCs, DI, and RTI, which—when implemented faithfully over a two- to three-year period—will yield rich and rewarding teaching and learning environments
- An outline of the nonnegotiables of PLCs, DI, and RTI

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