Originally published in
" Communique: The Newspaper of the National Association of School Psychologists"
(December 2007, volume 36, number 4)

All Kinds of Minds®
A NON-PROFIT INSTITUTE FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING

RtI and Phenomenology

by Craig Pohlman, NCSP

Recent discussions about RtI have centered on the role of school psychologists as consultants lending their expertise to classroom teachers for instructional decision-making (e.g., Hosp, 2006; Jiron, 2005; Stecker, Fuchs, and Fuchs, 2005). This article proposes that school psychologists can positively affect RtI, but only when they thoroughly understand students' learning needs and utilize that understanding for differentiated instruction.

The key is to first understand students. A phenomenological approach affords detailed and deep understanding of learning breakdowns, as well as student assets. Learning phenomena are like clues and they are everywhere in a classroom: how a student responds to one kind of question vs. another, the extent of elaboration in a writing assignment, selection of strategies for solving a math problem. Parents can provide extensive information about work/study habits in the home environment. Students can provide clues to their learning as well, especially if they are asked the right questions and we listen to what they tell us. Testing results, standardized and qualitative, offer another layer of information for many students.

The next critical step is to organize the phenomena into a framework so that it can be interpreted and more readily communicated. Many theoretical models are available for this purpose. As long as the model contains key elements for academic skill development (e.g., attention, memory, and language), the model should serve its dual purposes of facilitating analysis and communicating findings. The result should be a profile or balance sheet of strengths and weaknesses. Every student possesses a unique profile that describes the aspects of learning that come naturally and those that require more time and effort.

Equipped with a struggling learner's profile, a school psychologist can then support RtI at every tier. At tier 1, students flagged as having weak skills through curriculum-based measurement (CBM) can be better matched to strategies. For example, two second graders scoring low on reading decoding probes will need differentiated instruction if the school psychologist and teacher determine that Student A struggles with word sound manipulation activities (e.g., rhyming, syllabication) and Student B does not. Student A likely has weak phonological processing and would benefit from activities designed to strengthen his capacity to hear and manipulate phonemes (e.g., games, software). Student B, on the other hand, may appear to have a more pervasive memory weakness undermining her capacity to relate sounds to symbols in her memory banks. Simply knowing that a particular skill is weak is not enough—the factors underlying a skill's slow development are needed to guide differentiated instruction.

Learning phenomena are like clues and they are everywhere in a classroom: how a student responds to one kind of question vs. another, the extent of elaboration in a writing assignment, selection of strategies for solving a math problem.

At tier 2, students who have not responded adequately to tier 1 interventions will need more intensive remediation. Again, a phenomenological approach informs decisions about what types of strategies have the highest probability of success. This may involve selected, targeted assessment to explore hypotheses. For example, a third grader who has had continued difficulty with writing sentences, despite numerous attempts at remediation, may be found to have limited active working memory capacity, necessitating adjustments in his instruction (e.g., added emphasis on staging the writing process and use of software).

(continued on reverse)

A great deal would already be known about students' profiles once they reach tier 3. For example, it may have been revealed that a fifth grader has weak receptive language at tiers 1 and 2. Additional assessment at tier 3, however, may target the sentence and discourse levels as the trouble spots in his receptive language. Also, some students may need to have their profiles revisited with new hypotheses. A fourth grader thought to have weak attention, but who has not responded to interventions, may actually have a weakness in another area, such as spatial ordering or neuromotor function, that is underlying attention "symptoms" (e.g., impulsive work habits, rushing through tasks, inconsistent quality control).

RtI seems very well suited to identify and address particular types of learning problems at certain grade ranges. CBM probes are tailor-made for tracking fluency in decoding, writing, and math in the elementary grades. But the skills students are asked to acquire as they progress through school get more difficult to track with probes. For example, Silberglitt, Burns, Madyun, and Lail (2006) found evidence that CBM for reading was decreasingly related to statewide achievement test scores as students progressed into the middle grades. An important question, then, is how numerous kinds of pernicious academic problems can be spotted and remediated or accommodated, especially in the middle and upper grades. CBM probes are not designed to flag very real learning issues such as disorganization, tenuous comprehension of concepts, trouble with long-term writing assignments, limited focal maintenance, and social difficulties. A phenomenological approach can help fill such gaps inherent in CBM.

A host of information can be gathered about a student's learning profile to complement CBM data. By understanding the nature and underlying factors for a ninth grader's rampant disorganization, for instance, the school psychologist can make better recommendations about the degree and kind of support needed regardless of the tier. In short, if RtI is to help all struggling students, then all phenomena—both quantitative and qualitative—need to be considered.

RtI is gaining momentum and will be with us for some time. Basic premises of RtI are sound: that academic problems need to be identified early, students should get levels of support based on level of need, and that progress should be closely monitored. The risk, though, is that RtI will be implemented as a rigid system that over-relies on CBM and certain types of data. Few would argue that a student can be summed up with a set of end-of-grade test scores. Similarly, it makes no sense to limit our understanding of a struggling learner to a series of CBM probes. School psychologists, if they are to be effective consultants and advocates for students, need to look at the range of phenomena that are available about student's profiles. When it comes to understanding a student, more is more.

References

Hosp, J. L. (2006). Assessment practices and response to intervention. *Communiqué, 34* (7), 7–8.

Jiron, C. (2005). Intelligent testing, not intelligence testing: To test or not to test? *Communiqué, 34* (4), 27.

Silberglitt, B., Burns, M. K., Madyun, N. H. & Lail, K. E. (2006). Relationship of reading fluency assessment data with state accountability test scores: A longitudinal comparison of grade levels. *Psychology in the Schools*, 43, 527-535.

Stecker, P. M., Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2005). Using curriculum-based measurement to improve student achievement: Review of research. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42, 795–819.

Craig Pohlman, PhD, NCSP, Senior Clinical Scholar at the All Kinds of Minds Institute, is the author of *Revealing Minds: Assessing to Understand and Support Struggling Learners*.