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Review of RTI in the Common Core Classroom: A Framework for Instruction and Assessment

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Review of *RTI in the Common Core classroom: A framework for instruction and assessment*
Vaughn, S., Capin, P., Roberts, G., & Walker, M. (2016). *RTI in the Common Core classroom: A framework for instruction and assessment*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Many classroom teachers are seeking answers to complex questions regarding the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in the context of a Response to Intervention (RTI) model. How does a teacher follow the rigorous standards of CCSS and meet the literacy needs of students with learning difficulties? In their recent publication of *RTI in the Common Core Classroom: A Framework for Instruction and Assessment*, Sharon Vaughn, Philip Capin, Garrett Roberts & Melodee Walker (2016) provide practical solutions with vivid examples of implementation to assist teachers in fostering an RTI framework that supports all students.

Response to Intervention is a flexible, multi-tiered framework for implementing high-quality instruction that Vaughn et al. connect to the Common Core State Standards. In this three-tiered RTI framework for intervention, Vaughn et al. expect that all students have access to a high-quality research-based curriculum that is based on the CCSS. In the first tier of RTI, research-based core instruction for all students is the essential element. Some students may also need additional differentiated support within the Tier 1 context such as frequent check-ins, culturally relevant teaching, and content taught through a variety of expressions (visuals, multisensory experiences, and varied texts). Vaughn et al. (2016) take a strong stance for clear expectations for Tier 1 instruction, including the belief that if a high percentage of students are not successful with Tier 1 instruction, the curriculum and instruction should be re-evaluated (p. 8). For example, if the data produced through frequent progress monitoring, which are

assessment measures used to monitor students' responses to instruction, do not provide evidence of student success, the instruction should indeed be altered. The authors emphasize:

This reevaluation and determination of appropriate adjustments to instruction can be accomplished by evaluating how to best support the implementation of the CCSS-aligned core curriculum and any additional components that may be needed so that all students can access the curriculum. (pp. 8-9)

If students are not progressing according to valid and reliable assessment data in Tier 1, students will advance to evidence-based Tier 2 instruction. Tier 2 instruction is specifically designed for at-risk learners who need supplemental intervention. Even when Tier 1 instruction is effective, 15-20 percent of students will typically need Tier 2 interventions. Tier 2 interventions are implemented through intensifying elements such as increasing instructional time, reducing of group size, and aligning of instruction to students' targeted learning needs with materials that may be differentiated. If after progress monitoring, students still are not progressing according to grade level benchmarks, then they begin receiving Tier 3 instruction. Tier 3 interventions should only target 3%-5% of the student population, and it is intense and highly individualized based on specific learning needs. Vaughn et al. (2016) provide precise examples of high-quality teaching through student and teacher vignettes, student learning outcomes and appropriate interventions. The practical support offered by Vaughn et al. progress from research-based whole class instruction at Tier 1 to supporting students with learning difficulties at Tier 2, to modifying curriculum, intensifying instruction, and increasing the progress monitoring for individual students at the Tier 3 level. The term "modify" is used in the broadest sense at this point of changing the curriculum based on student-level data. The authors

also mention that it is recommended that the RTI team use collaborative input to make these decisions regarding modification.

With an effectively organized book, Vaughn et al. (2016) create a repertoire of research-based resources for teachers that promote the attainment of CCSS in a Response to Intervention classroom. The book begins with an introductory chapter articulating how RTI connects with the CCSS. In subsequent chapters the authors discuss fundamental concepts related to Foundational Reading Skills, Using Narrative and Informational Text to Enhance Comprehension, Writing within an RTI System, Content Area Reading Instruction within an RTI System, and conclude with a well-constructed Question and Answers for Teachers section. The authors explicate the CCSS ten anchor standards. The explanations draw heavily from the scientifically-based research from the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) and more recent studies that focus on foundational skills and reading for meaning sections. The standards are embedded throughout the text with corresponding lesson plans, descriptions of implementation, and narrative examples of how to meet rigorous standards at each tier of instruction.

Chapters begin with highly relevant vignettes addressing the concerns of many teachers. For example, in Chapter 2, Vaughn et al. (2016) describe a classroom teacher's dilemma,

While Ms. Davis is concerned about her students' below-grade-level-word reading skills and the effect of this on their reading comprehension performance, she is not sure how to best support her students in word reading. She is also concerned that dedicating time to word- reading instruction will hamper her students' growth in reading comprehension.

(p.

23)

This quote is one example of how the authors bring to light relevant and significant concerns of classroom teachers regarding their reading instruction in an RTI classroom. The chapter flows into a response to these concerns followed by practical solutions based on reading research about word level reading and interventions that are highly effective in altering reading achievement. Vaughn et al. (2016) focus on differentiating foundational reading skills instruction for all students by addressing concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, and fluency. Multiple, detailed recommendations are made for each component of foundational skills, with an emphasis on a preview of learning, explicit teacher modeling, guided student practice and systematic review of skills. Progress monitoring recommendations are expertly made with an attentiveness to making adjustments in instruction if students are not making achievement gains.

Throughout each chapter, the authors provide the reader with examples of student data outcomes and instructional ideas for each tier of RTI that have the potential to effectively support student progress. The authors provide annotated bibliographies with recommended readings and additional resources that encourage further exploration of the research. Each chapter concludes with interactive discussion questions for Professional Learning Communities that foster opportunities for school communities to reflect on their current practices and learner outcomes. Through meticulously developed examples of research-based practices, this text provides a conduit for critical conversations that could lead to professional development in school communities centered on student achievement outcomes, as well as suggestions to adjust curricula to align better with CCSS expectations.

The authors frequently refer to *evidence-based interventions* and *research-based curricula* throughout the text. On page 5 in the Key Terms chart, they provide definitions to these terms as follows:

Research-Based Curricula- Includes design features that have been researched although the exact curriculum has not been studied using a rigorous design. This is used in Tier 1 instruction.

Evidence-Based Curricula- Includes interventions with efficacy that has been supported by data from scientific, rigorous research designs. This is used in Tier 2 instruction and modified to meet individual learner needs in Tier 3. (p.5)

Since there is an overuse and widespread uncertainty about what these two terms mean in the field of literacy (Duke, 2011; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Munger, 2015), it would have been helpful if Vaughn et al. (2016) acknowledged that there is confusion regarding these terms. The definition of *research-based curricula* may leave too much interpretive leeway for school districts deciding on curriculum in Tier 1. Hill, Seth, Lemons, & Partanen (2012) demonstrate concern about the efficacy of studies regarding Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction, because investigators often do not account for the contributions of Tier 1 instruction. The lower quality Tier 1 instruction can produce “false positives” of students who mistakenly appear to need Tier 2 instruction. While Vaughn et al. (2016) broadly promote the use of research to inform instruction, expectations for Tier 1 instruction should also be grounded in implementing practices with an evidence base. This point could be further clarified in the book. For example, with the varying definitions of “evidence-based” (Duke, 2011; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Munger, 2015), an explanation regarding this confusion in the field of literacy of what “evidence-based”

practices versus “widely-used” and possibly ineffective practices are could better support the delivery of evidence-based practices.

In the chapter addressing Reading Comprehension of Narrative and Informational Text, Vaughn et al. (2016) focus on specific strategy instruction and provide effective references of research defending and precisely describing this practice through model lessons and articulate narrative. The authors do address concern over the widely-used practice of close reading compared to strategy reading as a process to extract meaning. They diplomatically confront a misconception regarding abandoning the substantial research base on strategy instruction for comprehension for the more popular, but less evidence-based, practice of close reading. The authors demonstrate a dedication to using research to inform accepted instructional practices and prompt the reader to reflect critically on teaching practices.

Vaughn et al. (2016) acknowledge the challenges teachers face in assisting students to reach successful writing outcomes. The authors empathize with teachers as they articulate the challenges of effective writing instruction. There are examples of writing pieces at each grade level in the CCSS, but “teachers must rely on other sources to access models and procedures aligned with evidence- based practices and recommendations” (p. 74). Therefore, Vaughn et al. support teachers by providing detailed charts describing multiple writing tasks linked to the CCSS with recommendations at each tier of the RTI model. Similar to other sections of the book, these charts are extremely helpful by giving precise, explicit examples that are both affirming and gently corrective for teacher pedagogy as teachers seek to implement an RTI framework for instruction. The authors also link research to practice by articulating the importance of student and teacher dialogues, discussions, and debates throughout the writing process. They provide examples and non-examples of the type of feedback students should receive throughout the

writing process as well as recommended venues for online publishing of student work. The chapter on writing is expansive because the principles and strategies can be applied to any type of writing. The authors specify how the RTI process supports students and allows for fluidity between the tiers of intervention.

Chapter 5 addresses content area reading instruction and focuses mainly on Tier 1 instruction that develops the language of the disciplines to support students' comprehension. Vaughn et al. (2016) refer to two previous research studies focused on comprehension development on Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) (Vaughn, Klingner, Sawson, Boardan, Roberts, Mohammed, & Stillman-Spisak, 2011) and Promoting Adolescent Comprehension of Text (PACT) (Vaughn, Swanson, Roberts, Wanzek, Fall, Stillman-Spisak, Solis, & Simmons, 2013; Vaughn et al. 2015). The lesson exemplars and research-based explanations thoughtfully inform practitioners of how to develop students' understanding and motivation in content area learning. The authors' voice provides a contagious anticipation of how a content area learning might be transformed through content area reading.

As the book concludes, the reader has powerful tools to apply an RTI framework. Teachers may experience a renewed sense of energy, motivation, and knowledge base to apply a RTI Framework to the Common Core Classroom. This brief, yet detailed, text provides sought after answers to perplexing, relevant questions that resonate with teachers around pertinent topics of Response to Intervention in the Common Core Classroom. There is a strong link in this text between pedagogy and research, which is anchored in the use of models, lesson plans, charts, and examples. *RTI in the Common Core Classroom* would be an ideal book for a Professional Learning Community context in which educators could subsequently apply the recommendations

to improve student learning outcomes. This book is highly recommended to support research based instruction using an RTI framework in the Common Core Classroom.

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