

EPS Phonics PLUS and a Three-Tier Approach to Reading Instruction

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Response to Intervention – an approach to reading instruction that involves a three-tier model of teaching – is about to make a huge impact in schools. Promoted under federal special education legislation, the goal of this three-tier service delivery model is to reduce special education designations for children whose primary problem is with reading instruction by providing well designed instruction and interventions in the general educational environment. In other words, schools are expected to make sure that a child receives a well-designed instructional program before he/she is designated as “learning disabled” and referred for special education services.

“RtI is a service delivery approach that guides educators to anticipate, recognize and document student learning, and to provide timely, well-targeted and effective instruction. How students respond to this instruction ... determines a student’s eligibility for classification as LD” (Horowitz, 2005).

Background

Many children are placed in special education because of reading problems. Approximately half of the children receiving special education services in school are designated as having a specific learning disability. More children are classified as having specific learning disabilities than any other type of educational handicapping condition. And it has been estimated that as many as 80% of these children are referred because they have trouble learning how to read.

Children have traditionally been identified as learning disabled on the basis of a discrepancy between their ability and their achievement. In other words, children were considered LD if they were struggling with reading despite normal (sometimes above normal) intelligence and no physical, cognitive, social or emotional problems that would cause problems in their learning to read.

Three-Tier Model

Rather than designating a child with learning disabilities as eligible for special education services based solely on this ability–achievement discrepancy, Response to Intervention involves a model for providing instruction for children having difficulty in learning to read (Kovaleski, 2003). The model aims to insure that children are not assigned to special education until we are sure that quality general education has been provided. It sets children up to succeed rather than waiting for them to fail. Traditionally, learning disabilities in some children were not diagnosed until the children were in the third grade or later – too late for early intervention. In this three tier model, children are identified early, and they are offered increasingly intense intervention if they fail to respond to the instruction they receive.

This instruction is provided in a three-tier model that includes:

Tier I is for all children and involves high-quality instructional services provided for children in the general education classroom. Instruction is expected to be research-based.

Tier II is for children whose performance lags behind their peers in the general classroom setting. It involves more specialized and intensive remediation as part of regular classroom instruction.

Tier III is for children who still do not progress with Tier II support services. It involves comprehensive evaluation by a multisensory team to determine eligibility for special education and related services.

It’s important to remember that RtI does not involve a specific set of strategies or materials—no single approach or formula for teaching. In other words, RtI is not a “program” in the sense of Reading Recovery™ or a

particular basal series. Rather, it's a school-wide model for delivery of services designed to effectively meet the needs of all children. Nevertheless, this three-tier model provides a promising approach that is sure to be used in schools of the future. "This Three-Tier Reading Model is meant to be descriptive of how to approach instruction for students with reading difficulties, not prescriptive of the only way to proceed" (University of Texas, 2005).

What does this three-tiered model look like—and more specifically, how does *EPS Phonics PLUS* lend itself especially well to instruction at each stage of the process?

Tier I

Tier I involves the standard reading instructional program in the regular classroom. Children receive high-quality, research-based instruction in a general educational setting.

The results of the work of the National Reading Panel (2000), upon which much of Reading First is based, points to the importance of providing direct, systematic instruction in five crucial areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. These five components have become the pillars of instruction in most classrooms, and they provide the foundation for the content of *EPS Phonics PLUS*.

Phonemic awareness The past several years have heightened an awareness of the importance of phonological and phonemic awareness in learning to read. This importance can hardly be overstated. "A child's level of phonemic awareness upon entering school is widely held to be the strongest single determinant of success that he/she will experience in learning to read – or conversely, the likelihood that he or she will fail" (Adams et al, 1998, 2).

Phonemic awareness is an essential component of *EPS Phonics PLUS*. From the very beginning of the kindergarten program to the end of grade 3, phonemic awareness remains an instructional component. Activities are designed to help children develop the ability to recognize and produce rhymes, identify sounds in different positions in spoken words, substitute individual sounds in words, blend onsets and rimes, identify syllables, and otherwise identify and recognize the sounds of their language as a prerequisite in learning to read,

Phonics Research confirms what common sense suggests – that phonics is an essential component in reading instruction. The importance of phonics in learning to read is what might be called in the general parlance, a "no brainer." First, it's impossible to master an orthographic system based on the alphabetical principle without it. Also, research over the years has demonstrated that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is essential in helping children learn to read (Savage, 2007).

EPS Phonics PLUS is a program that provides this explicit instruction in a systematic way, within the context of regular classroom instruction. From kindergarten through third grade, *EPS Phonics PLUS* provides activities that engage children in word building, word analysis, word families, and word sorts, as well as other activities designed to help them learn all the phonetic elements of their language – consonants, consonant blends and digraphs, long and short vowels, variant vowel sounds, vowel digraphs and diphthongs, and other orthographic features.

Vocabulary Vocabulary provides the foundation for reading success. Even the most zealous phonics advocates recognize the need for a strong emphasis on vocabulary in the classroom. "Preoccupations with decoding skills and lack of attention to teaching vocabulary and listening comprehension in the early grades may result in an imbalance in instruction and seriously compromise students' vocabulary development (Juel et al, 2003, 15). Even for children who decode easily, word knowledge is the key to their comprehension.

Vocabulary instruction is at the core of *EPS Phonics PLUS*. High-frequency words are practiced as sight words. Phonics elements are taught within the context of activities involving synonyms and antonyms, homophones, compound words, words with classical roots, content-area words, analogies, and other activities to deepen and broaden children's word knowledge. As part of vocabulary development, activities include prefixes and suffixes, contractions, possessives, and other elements in structural analysis.

Comprehension The goal of all reading is, of course, comprehension. Reading is part of the communications process and without understanding, communication does not take place. Evidence suggests (National Reading Panel,

2000) that children can be taught to use comprehension strategies that will help them become readers who understand what they read.

EPS Phonics PLUS recognizes the centrality of comprehension in the reading process. Comprehension is directly and explicitly included in activities and lessons that involve questioning, think-alouds, recognizing story structure, retelling, predicting, and the application of strategies such as QAR and K-W-L. Passages of connected text contain phonics elements essential to learning to read. Teachers and children encounter inferential and critical thinking questions. In short, the complex and critical element of understanding text is a foundation of the program.

Fluency Reading fluency is related closely to comprehension. Fluency is, in a sense, “where the rubber meets the road” in reading, in that it bridges the gap between word recognition and comprehension. The fluent reader recognizes words, connects ideas, and delivers text in a fluid manner with expression that conveys meaning.

Fluency is developed through repeated reading, a feature of many of the lessons in *EPS Phonics PLUS*. The program also includes plays, poems, and other material appropriate for individual, partner, and choral reading. Plays and poems, which are meant to be shared aloud, give children a real reason for repeated readings and the incentive to do so well. Word walls in the earlier books focus on automaticity, which is a prerequisite to fluency.

Literature and Informational Text To these five pillars of reading instruction must be added a strong dose of reading practice. When all is said and done, a reader is not someone who *can* read; a reader is someone who *does* read. Not only does good literature provide children with knowledge of the world’s literary heritage, but stories and poems also provide strong motivational material for language instruction. Informational text prepares children for the kind of language and structure they will encounter in textbooks throughout their school careers.

The inclusion of quality children’s literature as a vehicle for helping children learn phonics sets *EPS Phonics PLUS* apart

from other phonics programs used in classrooms. The first activity in kindergarten involves a nursery rhyme to develop phonemic awareness. Throughout the program, lessons are centered around rhymes, stories, plays, folk literature from many cultures, and expository text selections incorporate all parts of a comprehensive reading program.

Writing Writing is, of course, an essential part of literacy instruction for children in tier one. The strong relationship between reading and writing has long been established (Pearson, 1985; Adams, 1990). Writing supports and applies children’s developing knowledge of orthography and provides what has been called “a natural gateway to reading.”

Writing is also an important part of *EPS Phonics PLUS*, as children in the early grades learn to write letters and words and children in the later grades write stories, poems, book reports, and other written products.

In short, instruction at Tier I seeks to prevent failure by offering the most effective program possible to the greatest number of learners. It takes place with a solid comprehensive instructional program in the regular classroom.

EPS Phonics PLUS provides materials for systematic, direct, whole-class reading instruction for all children.

Tier II

Tier II is designed for children who fail to make adequate progress with regular reading instruction. Children who do not learn as quickly and as easily as their classmates have long been a concern of teachers, of course. Research indicates that meeting the variable needs of children’s literacy levels and linguistic abilities remains at the top of teachers’ concerns (Ganske, Monroe and Strickland, 2003).

Tier II intervention builds on that which is provided at Tier I. Intervention at this level involves giving children an additional 30 minutes of reading instruction each day, with the intent of supporting and reinforcing skills that have been taught as part of the core reading program. It’s important to remember that Tier II intervention augments and supports regular classroom reading instruction. “The goal is to get

students back on track so they can continue to succeed without further intervention” (University of Texas, 2005, p. 75).

Tier II instruction is typically carried out in small groups or in tutorial settings which provide children with more opportunities to respond. Groups are organized according to the needs of children, based on ongoing skills assessment. Teaching is paced according to children’s skills levels, as well. As with Tier I, intervention at Tier II should be systematic and explicit, and it should focus on the five essential components of a comprehensive reading program. Obviously, phonics is an essential component of this instructional agenda.

Children whose performance indicates that they are having difficulty in learning to read need lots of review, reteaching, practice, and differentiation in the classroom. Tomlinson (2004) talks about the need to recognize the need for differentiation and then to develop classroom strategies to facilitate learning for the struggling reader. For children who struggle, additional, alternative materials and strategies are essential for reinforcement and practice of essential phonics and other reading skills. These activities review and extend learning for children who do not catch on easily the first time around.

EPS Phonics PLUS provides for differentiated instruction with well-designed *Differentiated Instruction Guides* for grades 1 – 3. These guides provide additional differentiated instruction for the lessons and activities in the student book. Once teachers determine which children need an extra amount of practice and reinforcement, they can provide additional help with the *Reteach and Practice Guide*. All of the lessons are carefully coordinated with lessons taught as part of Tier I instruction and provide differentiated alternatives for children who need the extra help, either in the regular classroom or in a tutorial setting.

Some children struggle with learning to read because their first language is not English. A *Differentiated Instruction Guide for English Language Learners* provides suggestions for teachers to customize instruction for these children. Suggestions are related directly to the lessons/activities in the core student book of *EPS Phonics PLUS*.

Tier II aims to address the needs of children who struggle. It can take place in regular classrooms and/or resource rooms, and it features instruction in small groups by classroom teachers and educational specialists. Typically, a round of Tier II instruction lasts from ten to twelve weeks. Based on careful assessment of their instructional needs, children can be referred back to a normal classroom instructional routine, placed in another round of Tier II instruction, or placed in Tier III if Tier II instruction seems to be inefficient. “Tier II intervention is designed to give students two chances to meet the benchmark before being identified for Tier III instructional intervention” (University of Texas, 2005, p. 80).

Tier III

Tier III involves children who continue to experience problems and who may qualify for special education services. These are the children who need more instructional time each day, along with effective help in acquiring effective learning strategies. Intervention is intensive and highly focused, and it often takes place in full- or part-time special education settings. Instruction is typically customized in small groups or one-to-one tutoring.

For children who continue to experience problems in learning to read, reading instruction often consists of direct and specific language-based instruction using a synthetic phonics approach that focuses directly on sound-symbol correspondences. In this approach, letter-sound relationships are made explicit from the beginning. Children learn to blend isolated sounds into words. Drill and practice in sound-symbol relationships and blending are essential to making decoding skills automatic.

Multisensory phonics/language programs such as Orton-Gillingham, Spalding, Wilson, and other systems are often used. While these programs obviously differ from each other in some important details, in general all of them:

- Begin with a strong emphasis on learning letters and sounds
- Follow a specific sequence of instruction that is carefully scripted.
- Feature a multisensory approach to instruction, with a close integration of visual, auditory, and

- kinesthetic/tactile modalities to reinforce learning
- Sometimes use color coding as a visual clue
- Use nonsense words or pseudo words as part of instruction
- Use decodable text as the basis for instruction (Savage, 2006)

All of these programs focus on learning the structure and system of English orthography as a means of helping children – especially those who struggle with reading and writing as a result of a learning disability – learn to succeed.

While these programs have to be effective for many learning disabled students, they require a heavy commitment on the school's part. Also, programs typically require considerable preparation on the teacher's part. It's not unusual for teachers to attend workshops for as long as a year before they are deemed qualified to teach a particular program. While some children with special learning needs are served by teachers prepared specifically to do so, *all* classroom teachers are faced with children with learning needs and differences.

In Tier III, instruction is adjusted with multiple examples by way of scaffolding and other techniques. Task difficulty is adjusted by breaking down tasks into smaller steps. More examples and practice and different types of responses are required of the children.

EPS Phonics PLUS provides a *Learning Differences Differentiated Instruction Guide* with lessons to supplement the core program activities. The guide can be used by special needs teachers working in a pull-out setting or by classroom teachers who face the challenge of differentiating instruction for a group of children with diverse learning styles. Lessons are based on principles of systematic, explicit, multisensory phonics-based instruction in the tradition of Orton-Gillingham.

When used by special ed/resource teachers outside the classroom, the *Learning Differences Guide* promotes coordination between the child's two instructional settings. In schools, it often happens that while the classroom teacher is working on a particular phonics element, such as the long *o* sound, the resource teacher may be working on another

element, such as the short *u* sound. Because follow-up lessons in the *Learning Differences Guide* are coordinated with lessons in the core program, learning opportunities are closely linked, and the teacher and children both avoid the confusion of working from different texts. Allington (2006) points to the danger of the type of "instructional fragmentation" possible with the Three Tier model: the danger of using different instructional packages for each tier. *EPS Phonics PLUS* avoids the type of fragmentation of reading instruction that struggling readers often receive, since it provides a set of materials for carefully coordinated reading instruction that has been shown to increase pupil achievement for children at all three tiers.

Tier III instruction addresses the same area of reading instruction as at the other Tiers, but with appropriate adjustments for students who continue to struggle more seriously than classmates. Teaching is done in small groups. Groups are formed based on skills deficiencies to allow intervention to address students' needs more directly. Materials emphasize the five essential components of a comprehensive reading program. Instruction is systematic and explicit, providing additional adaptations and multiple applications for repeated practice.

Assessment and Other Features

Integral to instruction at all three tiers is systematic assessment that gathers evidence to inform the decision-making process. Data are gathered to document how well students are reacting to instruction and to monitor how well children are making satisfactory progress. Benchmark testing is done at least three times a year. Monitoring student progress – both to trace progress and to inform instruction – is central to the process.

Assessment is integral to *EPS Phonics PLUS*. Pretests and posttests precede and follow each unit at each grade level. Also, informal assessment is integrated into activities as appropriate throughout. In the second and third grade books, many of the assessment items are modeled after items on state-mandated high stakes tests required of today's schools.

Also integral to RtI is a collaborative approach by the school staff for all aspects of the intervention process. At all levels,

classroom teachers are joined by other educators—special education teachers, reading specialists, psychologists, speech and language therapists, tutors, paraprofessionals, sometimes medical personnel, and other “external interventionists,” along with school administrators, all of whom take active roles in sharing their talents for student instruction and assessment. The teacher, however, remains a central figure in the child’s education.

Ongoing professional development is another feature of the program. This professional development is designed to give teachers the tools they need to insure that every child receives quality reading instruction at every level.

Conclusion: The Teacher on the Team

A Three Tier model of reading instruction is not a magic wand or silver bullet. In a nutshell, it is a preventive model that aims at catching struggling students *before* they fail in learning to read. It attempts to provide support that children will need during the first four years of their school lives.

Research over the years has consistently pointed to the teacher as the key to successful learning. Based on a decade of studying exemplary classroom teachers, Allington concluded, “In the end, enhanced reading proficiency rests largely on the capacity of classroom teachers to provide expert, exemplary reading instruction (Allington, 2003, 747).

The teacher remains the central figure in the child’s education. But quality educational programs in the hands of skilled educational practitioners make a formidable combination to the benefit of children.

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