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ARTICLE

A case study on the effectiveness of the Response to Intervention model (Tier 2 & 3) in improving academic achievement for MYP (grade 6 and 8 students) in a Hong Kong international secondary school

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Abstract

The subject of Response to Intervention (RTI) has gained significant traction in educational discourse since its emergence as an innovative approach in 2003 (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2003). The implementation of RTI was catalysed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA 2004), as previous practitioners predominantly relied on the inadequate IQ-achievement discrepancy (IAD) method for identifying children with learning disabilities (LD). This led to a disproportionate identification of minority students in education. Consequently, RTI has been widely adopted with the aim of optimising and standardising the identification process for children with LD. This case study investigates the efficacy of RTI in an international secondary school in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), with a particular focus on grade 6 and 8 students. The school employs the RTI model to accommodate learning diversity by utilizing a three-tiered system designed to support academically struggling students. The investigation commences with a literature review to scrutinize the RTI's theoretical framework, effectiveness, and limitations. Subsequently, the research methodology is delineated, encompassing the research design, data analysis, and findings, which elucidate the RTI's impact within the HKSAR international school context. While the findings corroborate the efficacy of RTI, they simultaneously reveal the shortcomings of its implementation and the pragmatic challenges associated with such interventions in real-world educational settings.

Introduction

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a model that was still an emerging innovation in 2003 (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012, p. 195) and increasingly implemented into mainstream education post Individuals and Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEA 2004), as previous practitioners were sorting lower IQ-achievement discrepancy (IAD) to identify children with LD (Ardoin, et al., 2005, p. 362). Thus, the identification of children with LD that requires academic intervention has been increasingly optimised and standardized in comparison to the previous IAD model that overwhelmingly identified minority students in education. (Alahmari, 2019, p. 895).

Despite the increasing popularity of the RTI model in education, there has not been any particular instruction on how to effectively implement a framework or method for measuring students' responses to an intervention reliably and validly. Scholars have identified three main concerns with the RTI model, firstly, “the psychometric challenge on the reliability of diagnosis” (Fuchs, et al., 2012, p. 263). Secondly, “the exclusion of high-ability students with reading disabilities” (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009, p. 2). Thirdly, the most significant is the implementation challenge ensuring the reliability of delivery of evidence-based interventions (Burns, et al., 2016, p. 720). This paper aims to address some of these questions by examining the effectiveness of

the RTI model in supporting academically struggling students with LDs in meeting academic standards and achieving academic independence (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 93).

This case study examines the effectiveness of RTI in an international school in HKSAR. The RTI model is utilised at this school to support learning diversity and utilises a 3-tier model to provide support for academically struggling students. The tiers of support are adjected as student needs increase, based on multiple points of evidence and ongoing assessments. The focus of this study is on Tier 2 & 3 students from Year 6 – Year 8 who primarily have LDs. The interventions include small group instruction and LABS (Language and Academic Skills Building Classes) for both Tier 2 & 3 students, as well as 1-1 support for Tier 3 students. Originally, the study targeted only Tier 3 students, but due to a low number of students in Tier 3, the case study expanded to Tier 2 also to get a larger sample size. The study, therefore, aims to assess the effectiveness of RTI in facilitating academic independence for these academically struggling students with LDs.

This case study is a hybrid approach that uses triangulation of literature review, observations, and semi-structured interviews to assess the effectiveness of RTI in facilitating academic independence for Tier 2 & 3 students. This is not to be confused with the Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) (American Institutes for Research, 2023), as RTI focuses on mainly academic concerns, whereas MTSS also, covers "academic behavioural, and social-emotional needs" (Eagle, et al., 2015, p. 161). Therefore, the research question is *"To what extent is the RTI model effective in providing support for Tier 2 & 3 students to meet academic targets, and does it facilitate the attainment of academic independence amongst these students?"*. This research question is significant as it addresses the limitations and challenges of the RTI model and has significant implications for education policies and practices.

Literature Review

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model has been widely implemented in schools across the world to identify and support academically struggling students with LD (Gersten, et al., 2009). The effectiveness of RTI in meeting academic standards/targets is of great interest to educators and researchers. However, despite its widespread use, questions remain about its best practices for implementing RTI in a standardised and optimised manner to be reliable and valid. This literature review synthesises a range of research on the background, implementation, effectiveness, limitations, and challenges of RTI. Additionally, it will be used as part of the theoretical triangulation, to answer the case study research question above.

Background and Theoretical Framework

The RTI model emerged post-IDEA 2004, in contrast to the IQ-achievement discrepancy method/wait-to-fail model (Hughes & Dexter, 2023) to identify children with LD (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 93). It is a multi-tiered approach, with three tiers, providing a systematic and data-driven approach for identifying and supporting struggling students and identifying those who are eligible for special education (Jimerson, et al., 2007, p. 4). Moreover, (Fuchs, et al., 2012) described the implementation of the tiering system toward "early intervention and prevention" (Fuchs, et al., 2012, p. 264). Thus, this definition/description for the implementation of RTI will be used to assess the case study later on.

Tier 1 is "high quality instructional and behavioural supports" (Gartland & Strosnider, 2005, p. 251) for all students, in which teachers will differentiate and personalise education based on student needs. (Fuchs, et al., 2014, p. 14) makes a comparison of tier 1 to the healthcare system, to stress the importance of prevention, which could result in lower costs and subsequent tiers (Fuchs, et al., 2014, p. 14).

In contrast, Tier 2 is targeted support, often involving small group instruction, (Fuchs, et al., 2014, p. 13) that relies on "intensive, scientific, research-based instructions" (Gartland & Strosnider, 2005, p. 251), personalised for individual needs. When students' progress monitoring throughout time shows "performance lag behind those of peers from Tier 1" (Gartland & Strosnider, 2005, p. 251). The interventions are often led by specially trained adults (Fuchs, et al., 2014, p. 13). Therefore, ongoing progress monitoring is conducted via this stage, and if students do not "adequately benefit" (Fuchs, et al., 2014, p. 13) via the first two tiers, Tier 3 interventions would be provided to those students.

Finally, Tier 3 interventions are the most intensive, however, there is still no consensus on what services this tier should entail (Duffy, 2018, pp. 15-16). Tier 3 usually entails one-to-one tutoring, with a mix of instructional interventions. At this tier ongoing analysis of student performance is "critical… to identify successes and failures" (Gersten, et al., 2009, p. 4) of instructions for individual students.

RTI's theoretical framework is not inherently positivist, but the implementation can be viewed in this way due to the consistent use of data-driven decision-making to support academically struggling students (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 225). This is not to say that qualitative assessments are not made to inform decision-making, however, RTI, in general, is a highly evidence-based intervention (Gartland & Strosnider, 2005, p. 250). Overall, RTI is highly individualised, and data-based, and contends that even the most effective interventions will not work for everyone, as there is "no one size fits all" (Al Otaiba , et al., 2018, pp. 830-831) intervention.

Implementation and Effectiveness and Limitations of Tier 2 & 3 Interventions

RTI is an improved alternative approach to IAD for early identification and achievement outcomes for students with LD (Al Otaiba , et al., 2018, p. 830). RTI has six core defining features, which can be applied across different subject areas (i.e., literacy, numeracy, social studies, art, behaviour, and PE) (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 225). To summarise the six core features, RTI is supported by scientific research, multi-tiered, standardized problem-solving, and data based on decision-making, with regular and systematic screening for early identification of struggling students (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 226). Thus, the implementation of RTI has focused on various aspects, including the fidelity of implementation, professional development, and the role of the school leadership team (SLT).

The identification process is thorough, at the beginning of the school year, prior assessment data is assessed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 94). All students will begin in the general education instruction, however, progress is monitored, at around 8 weeks (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 94), if at-risk students are unresponsive to the general education. They may be tested on a standardised achievement test, and psychometric tests could be administered (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 226). The student will move up in intensity based on several pieces of evidence, to make informed decisions.

According to the Institute of Education Sciences, the panel of experts and scholars, view RTI's implementation and evidence-based approach, as having two main strengths, in accurate identification reducing inaccurate referrals via the IAD, to special education, especially of ethnic minority students, low-income students, and students who received weakening reading instruction (Gersten, et al., 2009, p. 5). Secondly, the panel believes that RTI holds the most potential for serious collaboration between Special Education (SE) and general education, as the most objective intervention (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 5). Therefore, the implementation of RTI is highly objective and standardised which can be applied to schools as an effective and objective

intervention in improving student achievement and reducing the inaccurate referrals of students into the LD category.

Henceforth, there is a growing body of evidence supporting RTI's effectiveness in improving academic achievement, and reducing students referred to SE (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007, p. 541). (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 18 studies published between 1995 to 2005 and found "positive outcomes" (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007, pp. 558-559) for students participating in extensive interventions. Furthermore, there was a significant correlation found between smaller group sizes and the efficacy of the intervention (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007, p. 552). Thus, it can be argued that tier 2 and 3 interventions when given in a smaller group instruction including 1-1 instructions also, could be highly effective interventions.

Furthermore, a multitude of studies correlate in terms of the effectiveness of RTI, when RTI is implemented with fidelity, it could lead to improvements in reading and math performance (Balu, et al., 2015, p. 100) (Denton, et al., 2006, p. 448). (Balu, et al., 2015) found that the implementation, standardisation of each tier, and frequency all have significance in the outcomes of the reading interventions (Balu, et al., 2015, p. 17), additionally signifying the importance of small group intervention and the frequency. Thus, although, RTI has been shown to produce positive outcomes, there are a lot of potential limitations due to the number of factors that need to be met, which have been expressed by numerous scholars such as for LD screening, identification, and intervention outcomes (Burns, et al., 2005, pp. 390-391). Therefore, this case study will utilise this critique to critically analyse the schools' RTI intervention, which will be reflected in the data analysis section below.

Though these criticisms are valid to a certain extent, when RTI is done with fidelity, RTI has shown positive effects on secondary school student's academic performances. This is the core interest of the case study regarding the effectiveness of RTI (Tier 2 and 3) on students' academic performances. (Vaughn, et al., 2010) conducted a large randomised trial with sixth-grade students who were risk students in reading and found that those who received Tier 2 interventions exhibited significant gains in word reading, comprehension and fluency when compared to the control group students (general instruction) (Vaughn, et al., 2010, pp. 16-17). These results can be mirrored by which also observed higher efficacy of Tier 2 interventions when compared to Tier 1 on reading, decoding fluency, and comprehension (Denton, et al., 2006, p. 447). Additionally, Fuchs cites O'Connor et al, 2010, and Simmons et al 2011, who also observed similar results for RTI in secondary education (Fuchs, et al., 2012, p. 273). Thus, the importance and effectiveness of RTI can be demonstrated from the several studies cited above, which reflect the effectiveness of tier 2 and 3 interventions on secondary students struggling with reading and maths.

Overall, RTI has shown potential in improving academic achievement for secondary students, while there are scholars that highlight the limitations of RTI. The intervention could have significant implications when conducted with fidelity, meaning the standardisation of frequency, size, duration of instruction and the specialised expertise of the instructor (Fuchs, et al., 2012, p. 273). Furthermore, Fuchs proposed the Smart-RTI in 2012, this includes improved screening practices, multistage assessment to determine appropriate tiering, and a role for special education (Fuchs, et al., 2012, p. 263). All these methods, combined with the use of technology, collaboration, and funding provide guidance on maximising students' opportunities for success (Fuchs, et al., 2012, p. 270).

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to explore the implementation of RTI in an International School in HKSAR using a hybrid approach, which employs triangulation through the literature review, semi-structured interviews, and direct observations. The case study follows Stake's definition of a case study as a "strategy of inquiry, in which… explores the depth a program… bounded by time and activity" (Stake, 1995, p. 36), and researcher collect "detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures" (Creswell, 2009, p. 30). The following methodology details the methods employed to address the research questions systematically and rigorously.

Research Design

Although Stake takes a qualitative approach, this case study will differ slightly, utilising a mixed methods approach, and embracing a more pragmatic research model due to the hybrid approach. To provide brief context, the school of interest did not agree to disclose student data for this research, therefore, the hybrid approach is chosen. Through this design, the study aims to describe and interpret the experience of various stakeholders, uncover potential gaps in the RTI model, and provide insights for future improvements in the RTI program.

This was conducted in three stages: a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and direct observations. The literature review was used to gather evidence in support or demonstrate limitations of the RTI model specifically Tier 2 & 3, and best practices of RTI. This allowed for a better understanding of the RTI framework and its development since 2004 and guided the formulation of research questions for the interview protocols.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of three interviews, with key stakeholders of implementing RTI, such as the head of the Learning Enhancement Team (LET), and two tenured specialist teachers of the LET. These interviews were conducted using a pre-prepared set of open-ended questions, which were designed to elicit rich, context-specific information on the participants' experiences and perspectives related to the implementation of RTI (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). Additionally, according to Creswell, semi-structured interviews are commonly utilised in educational research to gain detailed information from participants about their experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2009, p. 30). The interview data was note taken with answers standardised for each response for all participants to ensure accuracy.

Direct observations were conducted as a complete observer, with the researcher not participating in the lesson being observed. This observation method allows for the objective collection of quantitative data on the RTI program and its implementation, which can help researchers better understand the complexities of teaching and learning (O'Leary, 2020, p. 43). Observations focused on the processes, interactions, and instructional strategies used with the LABS or 1-1 classes observed. Field notes were taken during the observation to systematically record the events observed, as well as the researcher's reflections and interpretations of the data.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study adhered to all ((BERA), 2018) and school regulations, maintaining the highest level of ethical standards. All the data collected via the observations and interviews were consensual and conducted anonymously.

Overall, this design is a hybrid approach, making use of primarily more heavy qualitative data to triangulate the findings, to increase the objectivity of the research and findings. Triangulation will be used to establish the validity of the case study to answer the research question.

Data Collection and Findings

Semi-structured interviews:
Three staff members were selected for the interviews, they were briefed prior about the topic of the interview. However, the questions were not given before the interview, in total ten questions were asked, participants were told to answer freely, and roughly the interview would last for at least 10 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility to provide more follow-up questions, and more in-depth responses (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 45). This is particularly important as when exploring complex or sensitive topics such as RTI, it has been highly effective.

The questions asked during the interviews covered a range of topics related to the TRI model, including the reasons for its implementation, the model's structure, data collection methods, decision-making processes, interventions, parental involvement, effectiveness, and challenges of RTI. The responses from the three staff members were analysed and summarised in detail to provide a comprehensive overview of the RTI model's implementation and outcomes. The data collection process involved both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data included student outcomes measured through data scores and academic performance improvements, which were observed approximately 60% of the time. However, since there was no control group, it was challenging to determine the effectiveness of RTI. The qualitative data collected provided additional insight into the RTI model's implementation, including the decision-making process and challenges the staff faced.

The LET team plays a crucial role in the decision-making process, overseeing the collection of data from formative and summative assessments, the educational psychologist's assessment, and teacher, student, and parental feedback. Based on this data, the LET teamwork with educational psychologists and SLT to identify and address student needs. The tiering process was largely based on the educational psychologist's judgement, with personalised interventions developed by the LET teachers based on their experience and the student's needs.

Parental involvement was highly important in the RTI process, with parents asked to support at home using the strategies and provide feedback on the progress. Though in reality according to one of the LET teachers parents in general are very hands-off (1 in 25) and are actively reaching out. Progress monitoring was ongoing, with data collected every 2-4 months, and interventions usually lasting between 6-8 weeks, occurring 2 times per week. Smaller group interventions and 1-1 interventions were found to be most effective, with around 60% of students in Tiers 2 & 3 making progress in meeting academic standards post interventions.

However, the effectiveness of RTI recorded by all three LET team members are varying largely due to student individual needs and observed progress to be slow. One LET member mentioned academic independence is harder to observe as around 40% of students stay on at the end of each cycle of interventions. Additionally, all three answered strongly that time constraints were the biggest challenge in implementing RTI, with the head of LET mentioning they were understaffed. Additionally, one LET member mentioned that push-in strategies were found to be challenging as students may not prefer them, and conflicts of strategies between teachers and LET teachers occurred during push-in.

Overall, these interviews provided a comprehensive overview of RTI's implementation and outcomes, with both quantitative and qualitative data. The LET team plays a crucial role in decision-making, and parental involvement is important although in reality, most parents are hands-off. While the effectiveness of RTI varied depending on the individual's needs, the data scores indicate that RTI was better than no intervention. The

main challenge observed was time constraints, which required SLT and school boards to create solutions to address.

Direct observations:

Two observations were conducted, the first one was a (Tier 2 intervention) year 6 LABS class, and the second was a (Tier 3, 1-1 intervention) with a year 8 student. Starting with the first observation, 4 boys and 1 girl were in the class, all with LDs (ADHD), 2 boys and 1 girl had both ADHD and dyslexia. The duration of the LABS class was 70 minutes, and it prepared them for an upcoming Science summative assessment. The teacher used a range of classroom management strategies to keep students in check, as the students would easily lose focus throughout. The teacher used inquiry-led learning, with enhanced support, the lesson material was highly engaging, ranging from interactive online learning, on BrainPOP and Kahoot, followed by a discussion to debrief the activities. Some students had ADHD fidget toys to stay focused, however, two boys were very disruptive throughout which resulted in one boy being held behind after school for negative comments on another student. Overall, constructivist methods followed by inquiry-led learning were deployed. Lesson aims were achieved and reflected via the plenary that involved students writing their feedback on the lesson. In terms of the achievements, the teacher mentioned 3 of the students including the girl were just scoring pass grades (3), with one boy achieving above-average scores (5-6).

The second observation of the Tier 3 1-1 lesson lasted for 45 minutes with a year 8 male student. The student had ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia, and joined in year 7. He has one 1-1 session per week, mostly on maths which this student struggles a lot with. The rest of the sessions are LAB classes. The Head of the LET administered this intervention, which required high-level specialist strategies, which aided the student to grasp the concepts in very small steps. The student's progress is very slow and could take up to a month to make progress, the student scored a 0 and 3 in prior assessments and needs a minimum of grade 3 to pass. Therefore, tier 3 interventions are needed, as without the student would not pass or progress.

Data analysis

The data collected from both the interviews and observations reveal that students do benefit from Tier 2 & 3 interventions, which can be measured by data scores and feedback from students. However, the main challenges observed revealed that time constraints were the main challenge observed from the interviews. This correlates with the observations as the lessons only take place twice a week and only for 6-8 weeks, which is not to the standard that Fuchs and the IET panel would recommend of “10 – 20 weeks… frequency of three to four times a week” (Fuchs, et al., 2014, p. 13) (Gersten, et al., 2009, p. 7). Thus, it could be argued that the slow progress mentioned by all three LET staff could be due to the time constraints and not because of the RTI Tier 2 & 3 interventions' lack of efficacy. Therefore, when it comes to the implementation of RTI, the duration and frequency of the intervention are essential to the outcomes.

In terms of the academic outcomes which were observed in the interviews around a 60% success rate in aiding students in achieving academic standards. This reinforces the literature which records the efficacy of RTI at a secondary school level as reflected in the literature review, with (Vaughn, et al., 2010, pp. 16-17) finding from a large-scale study, that tier 2 reading interventions were highly effective when compared to a control group. Moreover, as both the observations were a small group and 1-1 interventions, the EEF, observes small group intervention as effective, with 62 studies to evidence this (EEF, 2021). Additionally, as recorded in the interviews most students in Tiers 2 & 3 have LDs with a majority identifying with ADHD, Dyslexia, and Dyscalculia. Miciak and Fletcher found that personalised and specialised interventions that

emanate from RTI service delivery models may “improve outcomes” (Fletcher, 2020) for children with dyslexia and other LDs. This could also be observed from the observation as the personalised 1-1 intervention administered by a specially trained teacher, had supported the student to achieve the academic standard.

Although, the past grades have reflected failures, overall, the student has been making it past the standards. Without, the intervention the student would no doubt fail and be unable to grasp the concepts. Therefore, when triangulating with the interviews, observations, and through the literature review, the case studies question can be answered to a certain extent as being effective, though as mentioned by the Head of the LET, there is no control group to compare. But what is certain is that without RTI at this school, students with LDs would struggle with just general classroom instruction. Therefore, RTI although with its limitations, in terms of time constraints, has potentially positive effects on student academic outcomes.

Conclusion

Overall, this case study has answered the research question, through the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the literature review, semi-structured interviews, and direct observations. From the triangulation, it was observed that RTI Tiers 2 & 3 interventions were effective in students’ academic outcomes, recording a 60% success rate from the case study interview and also reflected in the observations in which all students were achieving the academic standards.

Although in Tier 3 1-1 intervention, the student had failed previous assessments, the average was still a passing score. The intervention, however, could be improved with the advice provided in the literature review from Fuchs’ smart-RTI, in which the school could potentially implement more on the role of special education, technology, improved implementation (Fuchs, et al., 2012, pp. 263-270). In addition to the main challenge that was found from the interviews, in which time constraints were the main challenge when implementing RTI. Therefore, when implementing RTI, standardisation of guidelines and following the guidance provided by both Fuchs and the IES panel would be paramount in influencing academic outcomes. Moreover, the Head of the LET also mentioned the understaffing issue, which could be a contributing factor to the outcomes. Though with its flaws, RTI (Tier 2 and 3), has demonstrated its effectiveness in student outcomes from the year groups of 6 and 8. Henceforth, although this case study had no issues with the identification or quality of interventions, the implementations could be improved in terms of the length and frequency of the interventions. Overall, the effectiveness of the small group interventions via Tiers 2 & 3 interventions have shown potential for improving the academic achievement of students suffering from a variety of LDs, and that a separate specialised unit/team responsible for identification, implementation and progress monitoring is vital for struggling students with LDs.

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