***RTI IN OUR ISLAMIC SCHOOLS***

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify Response to Intervention (**RTI**) as a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. The **RTI** process begins with high-quality differentiated instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. RTI is a critical and crucial component missing in our current day Islamic schools. Differentiation in the classroom is the first necessary step in the RTI process. Within this paper, research was reviewed to support the idea that differentiation and targeted interventions provided to students at risk are fundamental components in the RTI process. Approaching differentiation in our educational systems require researching, understanding, and implementing the RTI multi-tier approach in its entirety. Based on this research, we can conclude that the RTI method, with all of its components, requires an understanding of what high-quality differentiated looks like in the classroom.

Statement of Problem

Response to Intervention (RTI) was originally designed as a process to help identify students with learning disabilities. RTI is an approach which identifies students early and provides interventions and targeted instruction at increasingly levels of intensity. Differentiated instruction is at the heart of RTI and it holds the greatest level of importance in this process. The biggest problem our Islamic schools are currently facing is having the ability to understand the absolute necessity of differentiated instruction in our classrooms. Differentiated instruction provides our students with the greatest opportunities for academic success. Current research supports that differentiated instruction, when fully implemented and understood, can significantly improve student achievement (Goddard & Goddard, 2007). Response to Intervention begins with effective and differentiated instruction to all students in the general education classroom. Understanding the connection between effective differentiated instruction and providing interventions to struggling students is absolutely essential for our Islamic schools. Al Falah Academy, located in Lilburn, GA is an Islamic school, which provides pull-out and push-in highly targeted intervention support to struggling students, has documented success with their implementation of the RTI process. This growing Islamic institution highlights the necessity and importance of implementing an effective RTI procedure to ensure the academic success of all students. Our Islamic schools have to begin taking the responsibility of becoming competitive institutions that serve our entire community of diverse learners. Implementation of RTI and differentiated instruction in our institutions will help contribute to fulfilling our obligation to our communities.

Review of Literature/Research

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was signed into law in December 2004. This version of the law allowed for educators to utilize RTI as a process for identifying students with learning disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). RTI can now be implemented in the early primary years and utilized as an effective approach to identify students at risk.

RTI allows for educators to meet the individual needs of students and closely monitor their individual progress. At Al Falah Academy, we utilize a four tier process to adequately provide support and interventions to students at academic risk. The student’s progress is closely monitored at each tier of RTI to identify the level of intensity required for research-based instruction and interventions. Tier 1 of RTI consists of high quality classroom instruction. The utilization of a small Differentiated instruction, such as flexible grouping is provided at the tier 1 level and helps support diverse student learners. According to Betty Hollas, Differentiation is when you consistently and proactively create your students with different pathways to be successful (Hollas, 2003).

The needs of the student are used to create interventions that use research-based methods to address the needs of the student (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006). Research suggests that our RTI process must begin in the classroom with differentiation being provided in the areas of content, process, and product. However, if a student requires more support that what differentiated instruction can provide, a student would be considered for tier 2. Typically teachers may recommend a student for Tier 2 after a considerable amount documented classroom interventions, support, and differentiated instruction has been provided to the student (Baker, Fien, & Baker, 2010; Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007). The teacher would submit an official RTI referral form, which would document all of the strategies and interventions provided to the student. In many cases, a student is immediately moved to tier 2 after a thorough review of their universal screening results. Tier 2 provides students with research based interventions in a small classroom environment alongside additional targeted approaches in the general education classroom. For example, a second grade struggling math student that has been identified by his teacher in the classroom as having significant skill gaps and falling under the fifteenth percentile in mathematics would receive sixty minutes of targeted pull-out math instruction during an extracurricular class.

When a student doesn’t respond to the interventions provided in tier 2, the student will be considered for tier 3. Typically, the interventionist and coordinator recommends and decides to transition a student from tier 2 into tier 3 after analyzing weeks of data, implementing a variety of strategies and learning goals, and monitoring the student’s rate of improvement. At tier 3, students receive a more specialized and individualized targeted instruction plan, which may include special education or one on one instruction (Sanford, Brown, & Turner, 2012).

Methods

There are two primary methods of RTI; the problem solving method and the standard treatment protocol method (Fuchs & Fuchs 2006). These two methods address the needs of diverse and struggling learners in the classroom. Our Islamic schools should only launch the RTI process after brainstorming how to effectively implement the problem solving and standard treatment protocol method. Prior to implementing a full RTI process at Al Falah Academy in Georgia, this growing Islamic school began with slowly introducing and implementing an intervention program into their school culture.

The problem solving method can be implemented primarily in the general education classroom. It basically identifies a problem, utilize a researched based intervention to address the problem, and modify and adapt the interventions to suit the individual needs of the student. An unmotivated student that exhibits a lack of capability to complete a task due to missing skills or cognitive strategies may require the teacher to provide verbal and visual support during a lesson (Haring et al., 1978). Therefore, this method is very individualized and focuses on solving the learning problem.

The standard treatment protocol method is adapted for all students to utilize small group instruction to address their learning deficits. This method, as utilized for several years at Al Falah Academy, is primarily provided outside of the general education classroom in a small intervention classroom. The students are typically pulled out of an elective class, such as Arabic between forty to sixty minutes for intense targeted intervention support for reading and/or math. Students that require additional interventions move through the tiers as needed and the level of intensity is increased at every tier level. Students are moved into tier two based upon teacher recommendation and low standardized test scores. For example, a struggling first grade reader whom tested in the twentieth percentile in reader would automatically qualify and be recommended for tier two intervention support. The students receive targeted intervention support at this tier until they no longer require this targeted support or require more intensified support to rectify the problem. It is important for every tier to be completed properly in this method.

Regardless of which method is utilized, monitoring the progress of each individual student is critical. The school must have a standard which defines what is considered progress or responsiveness, such as a standardized adaptive assessment or a basic running record. Measuring the responsiveness of the students with the standards helps determine the effectiveness of each method. RTI allows educators to utilize data to drive collaborative decision making utilizing both recommended methods (Feifer, 2008).

Implementation

RTI is an approach that has very broad guidelines and methods. In an effort to fully implement an effective RTI program in our Islamic schools, guidelines need to be further clarified and implemented. RTI allows for a lot of flexibility from educators and this could easily cause confusion and errors in the effective implementation of this approach. Our schools need to implement practical guidelines and protocol for each component of RTI, such as the components of progress monitoring, a timeframe for each tier, and guidelines for data collection.

At my Islamic school, Al Falah Academy, we began a slow implementation process by first selecting a rigorous and research based standardized assessment, which is to be administered to all students three times a year. Then, we created a pull-out intervention program in a small classroom environment for the students that scored below the fortieth percentile in reading and math. We provided rigorous, targeted, and intense interventions during daily forty minute sessions for our struggling learners. These two practical methods allowed our school to decrease our low academic achieving student population by over sixty percent per semester.

Practical implementation should begin with investing in hiring an intervention coordinator who specializes in the RTI process, special education, and differentiation. The success of this task eventually requires the creation of special intervention department and this can only be done with someone leading this role. It should be the responsibility of the intervention coordinator to build a RTI team to assist with data analysis and the problem solving process. An effective RTI team may consist of a pull-out intervention teacher, an administrator or principal, intervention coordinator, and the classroom teacher. As an example, my school decided to utilize multiple grade level RTI teams in addition to one overall RTI leadership team. It is the responsibility of these teams to meet on a regular basis to discuss student progress and set learning targets and goals for their students. Next, the school must choose a credible universal screening tool to continuously monitor the growth and academic levels of the students (Jenkins, 2003). Many of our Islamic schools utilize the ITBS or NWEA MAP assessment as an effective screening tool.

Another practical implementation strategy our schools can utilize is to provide additional support and interventions for all struggling students. Islamic schools should choose an elective class or period to service struggling learners in a small classroom environment or there should be an opportunity for an interventionist to provide support in the general education classroom. Both of these routes require a weekly progress monitoring plan and frequent data analysis. Many Islamic schools in Georgia have benefitted from the Title I tutoring program, as it provides financial support from the government for Title I zoned students. Title I provides options for the private Islamic school to reduce the overhead cost of intervention.

A documented differentiation procedure should be implemented after RTI is clearly defined in our schools. Guidelines for a specific protocol for differentiation and a reasonable timeframe during the tier 1 phase should be established prior to implementation. General education teachers should be differentiating instruction for all learners in their classroom.

Differentiation should begin with identifying what the students know, understand, and can do for each and every learning goal. When teachers identify what each student already knows and can do, they can created tiered assignments for each learning goal. The students may have slight variations in the level of complexity, pacing, and structure of the assignment to help meet the needs of each individual student. A third grade teacher may decide to group her students into three learning groups for a reading lesson. Each group would have the same goal, but their assignment would vary in level of requirements and intensity based upon their levels. An additional and effective strategy for differentiation is the use of technology in the classroom. Software, the internet, and handheld devices can provide students with opportunities to master learning expectations and goals utilizing a variety of different tools. At Forest Lake Elementary School in Columbia South Carolina utilize Palm Pilots for reading and computer software programs to allow students to present their learning in ways that best support their learning style (Edutopia, 2010). Differentiation should be encouraged on all tier levels and our teachers should be required to constantly be developed in this area.

Implementation requires our schools to educate ourselves and our communities about the importance of early intervention of learning problems. We must tackle this massive deficit in our educational institutions one Islamic school at a time. We must begin realizing the importance of providing an Islamic and academically rigorous environment for all members of our community, including our struggling and unique learners. We must brainstorm, collaborate, and work together to address the needs of all of our students. RTI is a massive undertaking, but with the help of Allah and national unification, we can effectively implement it in all our schools. We will only truly benefit from RTI if we decide to work together.

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Sabria Mills is currently serving at Al Falah Academy as an Intervention Coordinator. Sabria Mills is currently Georgia certified in elementary and special education. In addition, she currently holds an ESOL Georgia certification. She currently serves on the administrative team at Al Falah Academy and monitors the growth and success of students at risk. In addition to her role as an academic interventionist, she facilitates the RTI process by supporting and coaching teachers, screening and supporting English language learners, and creating data driven student goals. She currently resides in Atlanta, GA with her husband and three daughters.