Innovation in Training School Psychology Students in RTI: University-School Partnerships

Suzanne Little[1]

Augustus Little[1]

Carolyn Petersen[1]

Sean Ferguson[1]

Mel Blair[2]

Carrieanne Selzler[2]

Abstract

In response to changes in legislation, many schools, districts, and states have shifted from the use of a discrepancy model to response to intervention (RTI). To gain the maximum effects of RTI, school psychologists collaboratively plan and implement strategies with educators and administrators. Pre- and in-service training programs for school psychologists are responding to better prepare future practitioners for a change in the role of the school psychologist. This manuscript presents a training program's efforts to better prepare future school psychologists in RTI through field-based learning in partnerships with public schools. Details of the partnerships with the local public schools and the field-based learning that occurred based upon that partnership will be discussed. Qualitative data from both the students participating in the experience and the site-based coordinators are analyzed and recommendations for similar partnerships are suggested. Implications for training programs are noted.

Keywords: training in school psychology, university-public school, training in RTI, roles of school psychologist

Introduction

Changes in legislation have resulted in a demand for school system reform resulting in the implementation of response to intervention (RTI) models in schools (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). Given that RTI is a systems-level initiative beginning in the general education setting, effective RTI models require collaboration among stakeholders. Research has highlighted the need for increased training and support for school staff in order to implement these programs successfully as RTI requires expertise in varied skills and processes (Haager, 2007; Samuels, 2011; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009).

In response to legislation, many public schools and states shifted from the use of a discrepancy model to RTI in which educators intervene early to assist students who are performing below expectations. School psychologists have traditionally spent the majority of their time administering standardized assessments, such as intelligence tests, and providing written and verbal explanations of those assessment results in reports and meetings (Fagan & Wise, 2007).

[1] Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA, USA.
[2] Cle Elum-Roslyn School District, Cle Elum, WA, USA.

The traditional discrepancy model of utilizing the school psychologist did further the attempt to identify and place students who perhaps were unsuccessful in the general education classroom. However, this model was unlikely to utilize the vast expertise of school psychologists in areas such as data-based decision-making, consultation, interventions, leadership, and systems-level change. In an RTI model, psychologists report spending more of their time consulting and working with school-based intervention teams to determine appropriate interventions for struggling students (Sullivan & Long, 2010). To gain the maximum effects of appropriately implementing RTI, school psychologist must collaboratively plan and implement RTI with school-based educators and administrators.

In response to the broadened roles for school psychologists, pre- and in-service training programs for school psychologists are working to better prepare practitioners and professionals-in-training for a change in the role of the school psychologist (Hawkins, Kroeger, Musti-Rao, Barnett, & Ward, 2008; Barnett, et al., 1999; Lentz, Allen, & Ehrhardt, 1996). This manuscript details training for school psychology students in RTI through field-based learning in partnerships with public schools.

Existing Literature

Response to Intervention

RTI refers to a comprehensive, student centered, assessment and intervention approach that incorporates a group of procedures that can be used to determine how students respond to changes in instruction over time (Canter, 2006). It is a data-driven method for identifying and helping struggling students in need of more intensive instruction than what they experience in the general classroom (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Although RTI models of practice and the specific components involved in implementation continue to be refined and developed (Crepeau-Hobson & Sobel, 2010), there is a general understanding of RTI as an educational delivery model. RTI can be viewed as both a model for delivery of services as well as a method for identifying students with disabilities. Historically, school psychologists have used the IQ-achievement discrepancy model to identify children with specific learning disabilities, but now, they may use RTI in place of the discrepancy model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). In RTI, a problem-solving model is used to identify, define, and address academic and behavioral difficulties for students using scientific, research-based instruction. RTI is considered to be proactive and focuses on both prevention and intervention for students from preschool through high school. Competencies that have been noted to increase the likelihood of success in RTI include collaboration and consultation; instruction in elements of RTI amongst administrators, faculty, and staff, evidence-based prevention, instruction, and intervention; and data-based decision making (Fuchs, 2003; Lentz, Allen, & Ehrhardt, 1996).

O'Connor and Freeman (2012) reported the importance of school psychologists being a critical component of RTI implementation. Their expertise in the areas of measurement and data interpretation and management help them to be influential pieces of effective RTI systems. The authors also felt that, despite school psychologists' excellent skill set as related to RTI, they must be diligent in promoting their value in order for administrators to fully realize their potential and utilize their skills effectively.

School Psychologists' Roles

When looking at the history of school psychology, the role of the school psychologist traditionally lies in assessment. However, in more recent years, the role has transitioned into that of problem solver (Deno, 2002; Reschly & Ysseldyke, 2002) requiring school psychologists to combine their understanding of psychology and education in order to help the children with whom they work. Nationally, data on how school psychologists spend their time have been consistent (Ysseldyke, et al., 2006). During more than a hundred years of their existence as professionals, the majority of school psychologists' roles were devoted to individual assessment and counseling (Magi & Kikas, 2009).

However, over the last 30 years, consultation with teachers and parents has become more and more prevalent. Gutkin and Conoley (1990) described the 'Paradox of School Psychology' – their perspective that to be able to serve children more effectively, school psychologists must work with adults (parents, teachers, but also the community). In addition to serving individual students, school psychologists have embraced collaboration with parents, educators, and the community (Christenson, 1995). School psychologists work closely with parents, teachers, and school staff through collaboration and consultation to identify and address learning and behavior problems that interfere with school success.

In a study by Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingsford, and Hall (2002), eight hundred school psychologists were surveyed on the roles and practices. Assessment was reported as the most common role followed by consultation in a distant second. Currently, school psychologists more frequently work in districts that utilize a problem-solving model, and this allows for school psychologists to fill more diverse roles. Specifically, school psychologists engaged in improving academic competence, social and emotional functioning, family-school partnerships, classroom instruction, and school-based child and family health and mental health services for all learners (Ysseldyke, et al., 2006). The role of the school psychologist in RTI is not clearly defined, but school psychologists training in relevant issues such as instructional methodology, and assessment and knowledge of research in the schools make school psychologists important members of the RTI implementation team (Burns & Coolong-Chaffin, 2006). "Every school psychologist has the background to adapt and master RTI with a modicum of continuing professional development" (Fagan, 2007, p.6). This change in role from that of predominately a psychometrician to more of a problem solver will require school psychologists to be more open to change and additional training (Canter, 2006).

School Psychologists' Role in RTI

With many school psychologists working in the traditional role of "test and place," a significant change in role involving less assessment and more consultation, collaboration, and interventions could be alarming for some school psychologists. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005) discussed the undefined roles of school professionals in RTI. They specifically addressed the role of the school psychologist as unclear within RTI models. School psychologists working in RTI settings would likely take on different roles than those working in more traditional service delivery models. Some roles that school psychologists are well-prepared to take on in RTI frameworks include designing interventions for those students and consulting with teachers regarding interventions, conducting screenings, monitoring students' progress, providing professional development for teachers, taking leadership roles in implementing RTI at a systems level (Machek & Nelson, 2010). However, school psychologists have a unique set of skills that make them well-prepared to take on new roles in an RTI model including data-based decision-making, consultation and collaboration, and assessment. With collaboration among various educational professionals being a key in maximizing the effectiveness of RTI implementation (Nellis, 2012), school psychologists can serve as leaders in RTI initiatives and teams.

Even though the implementation of RTI is increasing, only a few studies have examined the impact of RTI specifically on school psychologists. In a survey of over five hundred members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), Sullivan and Long (2010) found that school psychologists working in schools implementing RTI overwhelmingly reported involvement in the process (88%). Further, 71% of respondents indicated that they spent less than a quarter of their time on academic interventions, although 64% reported that they were spending more time on academic interventions than they had prior to the implementation of RTI.

Some have questioned the future security of school psychology positions with the move away from the discrepancy-based model for the identification of learning disabilities.

Canter (2006) stated that these changes build on the expertise of school psychologists in the area of assessment, but they do require school psychologists to change their role from being a "psychometrician" to being a "problem-solver" who utilizes a variety of skills to help with prevention, intervention, and assessment (Kaplan, 2011; Lau, et al., 2005). Lau et al. (2005) indicated that involvement in the problem-solving model of RTI emphasizes the school psychologist's role of consultant and leads to opportunities for school psychologists to assist in system change. Further, Lau et al. reported that this role allows school psychologists to impact the barriers to learning for diverse students and can promote psychological services in schools.

In research by Machek and Nelson (2010), school psychologists reported eagerness to engage in several roles within an RTI model. However, interest in participating in those roles may be stronger than the ability to do so in some areas. Half of their sample did not perceive themselves as capable of taking a leadership role in RTI. They reported that most participants perceived their abilities as a consultant to be higher than their abilities to directly engage in RTI roles. Particularly, school psychologists feel capable of engaging in consultation about academics and academic interventions, but they often do not feel comfortable in delivering those interventions. Machek and Nelson (2010) also suggested that training programs need to produce graduates with abilities to lead such efforts.

School Psychology Training Programs

While most programs teach students the history of school psychology and emphasize the change in roles over time, it is not clear whether field-based experiences, practicum, and internship regularly provide opportunities for experiences in the new and expanded roles for school psychologists (Tarquin & Truscott, 2006). Shernoff, Kratochwill, and Stoiber (2003) noted that school psychology students with training in evidence-based interventions are better prepared to fulfill the demands of their roles as school psychologists and are more likely to improve student outcomes (Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2000). Calhoun, et al. (1998) described several benefits to including training graduate students in evidence-based interventions including preparing future practitioners to meet job demands and improving student outcomes for success.

Many professional organizations have identified competencies for beginning professionals, but merely having standards is not sufficient. Early career professionals need time to learn content and reflect on the application of that content (Danielson, 1996). Hawkins, et al. (2008) argued that such skills are critical for young professionals, and that schools need practitioners who have these skills immediately. Pre-service training in RTI may assist in developing these skills.

Field Experiences in School Psychology

In professional training programs in psychology, a field-based experience or practicum is the first step in the process of developing skills in independent practice and professional competence. These supervised training experiences introduce students to core competencies of the profession; bring lecture, readings, and classroom experiences to life; and lay the foundation for future training and experiences (Hatcher & Lassiter, 2007). These activities may be part of courses focusing on distinct skills or as part of an extensive course experience that covers a range of skills. The primary purpose of these practical experiences should be on developing skill and competency in school psychology students (Li & Fiorello, 2011). Hawkins, Kroeger, Musti-Rao, Barnett, and Ward (2008) noted that characteristics such as data-based decision making, evidence-based interventions, teaming, and problem-solving reflect skills that are needed immediately by young professionals. The core components of RTI are critical for school psychologists in their training, and field experiences and specific coursework should be designed to provide effective training in RTI.

Hawkins, et al. (2008) described a collaborative field experience in RTI designed by school psychology and special education faculty. In this study, the researchers coordinated a field-based experience in RTI for school psychology and special education graduate students in collaboration with a local school district. Hawkins, et al. (2008) designed the experience to serve as practice before the internship training experience. In their study, the purpose of the experience was to design pre-service interdisciplinary training in RTI and describe the outcomes for trainees and training programs. As part of this study, faculty in school psychology and special education programs collaborated with a local school to arrange a field experience for students within those programs. Specifically, the school psychology students assisted in the design and evaluation of group, targeted, and individual interventions while evaluating assessment data to determine appropriate placement within tiers. Positive outcomes for trainees in developing greater skill in RTI implementation and for public school students in academic growth were noted. While school psychology training programs usually provide traditional practicum and internship opportunities, earlier and more frequent opportunities to work within the school setting is a beneficial experience for students.

Partnerships with Public Schools

Universities are tasked with preparing students for careers in school psychology in both the theoretical and applied practices of the profession. Additionally, the culture and ideas of the profession will change, so the trainers can only prepare their students to continue to be mindful of the growing evidence-base and the public that they will serve. In summary, training requires the synthesis of all of the aspects—education, practice, public interest, and science (Eby, Chin, Rollock, Schwartz, & Worrell, 2011). Tourse, et al. (2008) surveyed recent graduates of a M.A. School Psychology program on their experiences. The researchers found that the students often cited field assignments as being the most important components of their preparation. The field is where theory becomes real and apparent. Students learn from watching highly qualified professionals at work; they also learn from supervised practice. Cooperative agreements with public schools allow university professionals-in-training to have extended opportunities to observe, ask questions, and experiment with their future professional role (Prater & Sileo, 2002). Young professionals may also apply new skills, identify areas for improvement, and examine their understanding of the application of concepts in real-world situations (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine, & Rude, 1998).

Collaboration and Educational Change

Volpe and Briesch (2013) described successful research relationships with schools as including mutual respect, mutual benefits, and trust. They note that long-term school partnerships in which both the researchers and the school are benefitting are most likely to succeed. Shapiro and Clemens (2009) write of an implementation model for effective change containing several parts. The first involves context, or more specifically, that context within a given education environment should not be limited to just the academic setting. Willingness of faculty to implement collaborative models is a key to educational change for both pre- and in-service professionals.

The second of Shapiro and Clemens' (2009) suggestions for effective collaborative change involves the creation of a conceptual model for implementation that includes a long-term vision for realizing change. Models may focus on statewide change after success in local areas (Grimes, Kurns, and Tilly, 2006) or individual case consultation in problem-solving that leads to local and/or state level change (Stollar, Poth, Curtis, and Cohen, 2006). Models such as these may provide the foundation for change that supersedes many current, unofficial models for collaboration that rely on basic communicative skills and courtesies existent within the schools.

Shapiro and Clemens' (2006) final suggestion for collaborative change involves the physical capacity of a given school.

School capacity, while often considered a fundamental concept, must be considered when implementing change processes. Overloaded classrooms and overworked faculty contribute to ineffective social programs that do not foster healthy collaboration and implementation environments for RTI.

Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Shamberger (2010) write that evidence for intimate, effectual personal relationships in the special needs working environment has existed for nearly 50 years. They refer to the process of *collaborative consultation*, a term that implies a need for cross-profession cooperation amongst teachers, as well as between teachers and other qualified and involved personnel, including school psychologists, administrators, and the parents involved on a case by case basis. In fact it is believed that through the process of information sharing and education in the initial training phases, tolerance towards a collaborative effort can be instilled among all participants in order to facilitate effective communicative strategies (Silverman, Hong, & Trepanier-Street, 2010).

Method

While not experimental, the current case study was designed to answer the research question of the utility in developing a field experience in a consultation-based model of RTI for school psychology graduate students. The intended goal was to allow graduate students to apply skills learned in class and to further their professional development while also benefitting public school students who were participating in the project.

The implementation of such an experience holds beneficial implications for the university training program, graduate student trainees, public school, cooperating teachers and staff, and participating P-12 students. Specifically, having the graduate students working closely with each other and school faculty and staff at the school level affords an environment rich for the sharing of resources, ideas, and interventions. Further, as noted in Hawkins, et al. (2008), this provides an opportunity for trainees to develop a better understanding of professional roles and relationships within the school setting. This also allows for practicing professionals to see the school psychologist in a broader role. Specifically, having the trainees operating primarily in the general education classroom is a different perception of the school psychologist than most professionals currently have.

Description of Partnership Model

In an effort to afford graduate students in a school psychology training program field-based experiences in RTI, a school psychology faculty member partnered with a local school district to coordinate a one-half day per week school-based experience. Specifically, this experience was not part of a practicum, but it was a course-embedded field experience. A local school was contacted and meetings were held to establish the partnership including both logistical (time/day) and experiential (experiences for the graduate students and benefit for the school district) components. University and other school-based staff collaboratively identified faculty and staff to serve as on-site facilitators, and expectations for the role and experiences of the graduate students during the field-experience were discussed and agreed upon.

The school district selected for this partnership was already several years into the process of implementing RTI before the partnership began and had participated in building-wide in-service training in fundamentals of RTI, utilization of benchmark assessment data, and grouping for interventions. The elementary school was further along in the implementation of RTI than the secondary schools, but the middle school had begun to implement RTI.

Arrangements were made that the graduate students would be hosted for the term by an elementary or middle school teacher or staff member delivering tiered instruction in the RTI framework.

The students would have opportunities to become familiar with, observe, assist in, and deliver a variety of tier one, two, and three curricula to offer support for P-12 students in addition to their regular interventions. Areas for intervention and participation by the graduate students included reading, writing, math, and social skills. The school district benefited from having consistent, one-on-one or small group intervention for their neediest students. Many course assessments were site-embedded meaning that the graduate students completed reviews of curriculum, observations of students, analyses of data, and research on evidence-based interventions for student with whom they worked.

Participants

Graduate student participants were two separate cohorts in the end of their first year of the training program and had previously taken courses covering topics such as academic and intellectual assessment, introduction to school psychology and special education, interviewing skills for school psychologists, counseling theories and behavioral analysis. A total of fifteen trainees participated in the experience over the course of two years. Trainees met with the instructor of the course that was aligned with this field experience to review logistical issues (time, day, and location) and expectations. Further, a site-based orientation was held at the cooperating school to orient the students to the RTI framework at the school and to provide an opportunity to meet their site-based facilitator. In a separate meeting, site-based facilitators where provided an overview from the site coordinator on the nature of the experiences and expectations for the graduate students.

Trainees attended the site placement each week during the term for one morning per week. Activities included gathering benchmark assessment data, reviewing curricula utilized at various tiers, observing tier one instruction, observing and delivering tier two and/or three instruction, and identifying research-based interventions for a student/students with whom they worked. Trainees received university level group supervision during the experience through weekly face-to-face meetings during class, and they also completed bi-weekly reflective journals summarizing their experiences and reflecting on activities they had completed and their professional growth. The faculty member reviewed and provided feedback to trainees on journals and other assignments submitted and also visited the graduate students at the site every two to three weeks. On-going discussions with the site coordinators provided the opportunity for the faculty member to receive feedback on site-based performance of trainees and to trouble-shoot any challenges as they arose.

Results

Results included qualitative survey results from the school site partners and exit interviews and reflective journals from the graduate students. Voluntary paper-pencil surveys were available to the teachers and staff who participated in on-site collaboration with the graduate students. Of the fifteen school staff members who participated over the course of two years, fourteen completed the voluntary survey while the final staff member opted not to participate. Further, qualitative information in the form of reflective journals and exit interviews was gathered from the student participants. All fifteen of the graduate students who participated in the model provided feedback after the completion of the experience and course. Data from each group was reviewed for themes across participants, strengths of the program, and areas in need of improvement. Data was reviewed by the lead researcher who developed themes based upon information gathered in the surveys from graduate students and site supervisors. Additionally, observations made by the university supervisor were considered when developing themes. Finally, students and school-based participants reviewed and confirmed the themes developed by the lead researcher and modifications were made to the experience based upon the feedback received.

Feedback from School Partners

Anonymous paper-pencil surveys were made available to the site coordinator to distribute to the cooperating site-based faculty and staff. Fourteen of the fifteen site-based facilitators completed the survey. Survey items were open-ended questions designed to solicit input on trainee performance and strengths and limitations of the experience.

Feedback on trainee performance indicated that the graduate students' participation in the school districts' RTI framework was largely positive. Responses in faculty and staff feedback on trainee performance included recognition of the professionalism of the students and an appreciation for their work to help the P-12 students make progress. Recurring responses regarding the strengths of the program that were indicated were an appreciation for the extra support for the P-12 students and appreciation for the research and resources from the graduate students on additional evidence-based interventions that may support the P-12 students' achievement. In other words, it was reported as a bi-directional partnership developed and not a one way relationship existed.

Program limitations that were reported included a desire for the trainees to participate over a longer period of time, an interest in the graduate students' support be in addition to (above and beyond) the support that the P-12 students were receiving already, and a request for more clarity on the expectations for the type of experiences that the graduate students needed. Further, the interest in the program continuing in future years was expressed by the facilitators.

Feedback from Graduate Students

Feedback was obtained from the graduate student participants through bi-weekly reflective journals, through on-going group supervision, and in exit interviews and discussions completed in the form of a focus group. Exit interviews and discussions were conducted after the completion of the experience and course and were voluntary. The information gathered centered on the quality of the experience and the strengths and limitations of the project. All fifteen of the trainees provided feedback on the experience.

Based upon the focus groups completed with graduate students, all trainees were overwhelmingly pleased with the quality of the experience and indicated a strong benefit in seeing RTI in action and participating in the delivery on evidence-based interventions. Specifically, all graduate students agreed that they developed more confidence and skill in applied abilities. Examples provided by trainees included delivering one-on-one and small group academic interventions, working on an individual social/emotional intervention, leading small group social skills training groups, and individual work with students with unique needs including language acquisition concerns, communication difficulties, and truancy concerns. All trainees reported that they had opportunities to review curriculum and participate in experiences at all tiers of the RTI framework and saw RTI applied in multiple contexts (across academic content areas and to social/emotional concerns). Nearly all graduate student participants reported feeling that they had grown as professionals and had made a positive impact on P-12 student learning.

However, one trainee had a less productive experience during the first half of the project due to a lack of clear communication on the expectations for the experiences that the graduate students were expected to have. Once addressed through open communication through the faculty supervisor and site-based coordinator, more opportunities were available to this trainee which led to a more effective placement (with the same site-based facilitator) during the second half of the experience.

All trainees identified strengths of the experience including the variety of experiences; the hands-on nature of the experience; the opportunity to apply what was learned in class; the ability to work with P-12 students in need of support and intervention; the opportunity to work with a variety of professionals; the opportunity to see RTI applied in a variety of contexts. While the majority of the graduate students agreed that they felt their work was making a significant impact on student learning. Some trainees (less 20%) also reported some limitations of the project including the need for more detail and clear communication of expectations with the school site; a lack of facilitator awareness of expectations which lead to a misuse of trainee time; a lack of fidelity of implementation of one of the interventions observed in the school setting; and the need for more time at the school site in the experience. The graduate students all reported that the experience was valuable and should be continued with the cooperating school.

Discussion

Since NCLB was enacted, educational research evaluating the effectiveness of both student assessment and collaboration within the schools has increased. This project was an attempt to develop that awareness and cooperation with the faculty and administration of one public school district and a regional state university. In doing such, the intended goal was that graduate students had applied experience in RTI interventions and public schools and their students benefitted from additional support in areas of need.

Implications for Training Programs

Based upon this research, there are implications for school psychology training programs in their practice of training future school psychologists. First, continuing to expand the opportunities for trainees to work in applied settings while utilizing a consultation-based model is important. Interns and early career school psychologists have higher expectations for the ability to work within a system and to serve as a leader in that system, and trainers of future school psychologists should take the challenge of providing more opportunities to develop these skills in an applied manner. Further, incorporating student experiences in the broader roles of the school psychologist including consultation, the delivery of academic and social/emotional interventions, and systems level change will afford early career school psychologists more skill in these areas.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. First, the study is not experimental, rather it is a case study. The data collected from site facilitators and trainees was qualitative in nature. Further, the study was conducted in a community in the Pacific Northwest with graduate students from a regional university in a rural school district. Therefore, there is likely limited ability to generalize these results to other situations. However, the project can be used as a foundational piece for other programs to utilize in building their own partnerships for training school psychology students in RTI.

Future Research

Future research could expand on this model. Specifically, it would be important to study faculty (both public school and university) perceptions of collaborative training agreements and their impacts on student success (both P-12 and university). Further research should specifically focus on the impact on academic achievement of P-12 students involved in these collaborative agreements. Finally, research on the effectiveness of graduate students in future field-placements or internships after specific or targeted practica or field-placements would be of interest.

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