

Words Can Shape the Destiny of Children in the RTI Process

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On the wall of my office I have a plaque with words from an anonymous wise soul that reads:

- Watch your thoughts, they become your words,
- Watch your words they become actions,
- Watch your actions they become habits,
- Watch your habits, they become your character,
- Watch your character, it becomes your destiny.

These simple but profound words remind me each day that what we think, say, and do really does matter. In reflecting on these words, and on how we communicate in our field of special education, I am troubled by the current words we are using with one of the newest of our initiatives, Response to Intervention (RTI).

RTI began as a small change in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA's) language that allowed us to use funds for students with possible learning disabilities to provide pre-referral support and more intensive instruction. This allows us to intervene early and thus help these students succeed. In spite of its modest beginnings, the RTI initiative has blossomed into a movement that is influencing how the needs of students are met across general and special education. Indeed, the RTI movement now has the potential to reform educational practices by reshaping how the needs of children who face challenges are addressed.

The focus of RTI on (a) collaboration between general and special education, (b) using evidence-based practices, (c) designing high-quality learning environments for all children, (d) using problem-solving approaches, (e) involving families, and (f) providing responses that address the varying intensity of needs of our students is exciting. With RTI's implementation, we have a wonderful opportunity to move forward in a way that truly places students and their needs in the forefront of decision making and builds capacity for strong partnerships between general and special education.

So why am I concerned? I am concerned because while there are many positive changes connected with RTI, the language used to describe these changes is not keeping pace. RTI has forced us into new ways of thinking about how we meet children's needs, yet this new way of thinking remains mired down by language that continues to communicate deficits.

The words we use in RTI to describe children who struggle in spite of our supports carry a negative message. We hear these children called "**non-responders**," and we discuss their "**inferior responses**" and their "**failure to respond**." The language of RTI, with its deficit focus, blames the child for the fact that he or she is struggling to learn! In fact, the child who faces the most challenges is deemed to be the most "**non-responsive!**" These terms are used in spite of the fact that the child is responding and that in some cases the response given by the child is amazing given the challenges he or she faces.

In addition to the negative references to children who face challenges, we must be careful regarding another use of language to describe this new approach. With the levels of services, we see tiered hierarchies that provide increasingly intensive supports to meet students' needs. This

exciting educational approach has, unfortunately, been accompanied by the use of terms like "**Tier 3 student**" to describe students who receive more intensive supports. This may seem like a small point, but it is an inaccurate and damaging use of language. In RTI, the services are tiered, not the students. When we call a student a "Tier 3 student," we are once again locking the child into a place, a level, and are forgetting that the student's needs often cut across levels and change in dynamic ways over time. By labeling the student instead of the supports and services, we are further reinforcing the erroneous idea that our student's traits are "fixed" and that he or she is indeed, and will likely remain, a "Tier 3 person." This language undercuts the major purpose of RTI, which is to allow for more flexibility in meeting students' needs.

The message communicated with these words to other educators, parents, and, most importantly, to the child is damaging. This negative message holds the child responsible for the challenges he or she faces and for learning at a rate that does not meet our expectations. This language undermines years of work to use person first, respectful, and appropriate language when we talk about all individuals. Within special education we have led the way to reshape our language to reflect the worth and dignity of individuals. The new emergence of deficit language connected to RTI moves us backward instead of forward.

Improving the Language of RTI

Because RTI is still relatively new, we have a chance to get the language right before it is set in stone. We can reframe the words we use to reflect the positive spirit of the movement. We can use the words to capture the child's response from a positive perspective with phrases like:

- "The child's response to this intervention indicates a need for more intensive support for..."
- "The child's response shows he or she faces continued difficulties with..."
- "The child's response gives us useful information in planning to meet his or her needs."

These phrases may seem cumbersome, but think how different the message is. First, we acknowledge that the child has indeed done something—she or he has responded! Second, we are automatically positioned to reflect on what this response means and to move proactively toward the next steps of support. These phrases also allow us to begin to broaden what we mean by "response." The word response can be used to encompass more than the child's behavior; it can include the teacher, the parent, and the environment as we work together to meet the child's needs. We can further reframe this to reflect the positive elements of RTI through phrases like:

- "Responsive education designed to meet the needs of all children."
- "Intensified responses to provide additional opportunities for children/students who need more support."
- "Special educational responses for individuals who face more intensive learning challenges."
- "Appropriate responses to help the child meet with success."

Changing the use of the word "response" to include both what the child does and what we do for the child captures the essence of the RTI movement. This reinforces the collaborative spirit of RTI. Reflecting the spirit of RTI in the language we use to describe what we are doing is critical. The words we choose will shape our actions, which will become our habits, and our character, and will help us create a climate where each child we teach can fulfill his or her destiny.

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