

# Cultural Considerations and Challenges in Response-to-Intervention Models

## *An NCCRESt Position Statement*

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We at NCCRESt are encouraged by the potential of RTI models to improve educational opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse students and to reduce their disproportionate representation in special education. At the same time, we are concerned that if we do not engage in dialogue about how culture mediates learning, RTI models will simply be like old wine in a new bottle, in other words, another deficit-based approach to sorting children, particularly children from marginalized communities. As with earlier identification criteria, RTI models must be based on students having received an adequate opportunity to learn. The concept of adequate opportunity to learn is a fundamental aspect of the definition of learning disabilities (LD): when children have not had sufficient opportunity to learn, the determination cannot be made that they have LD. It is problematic to conclude that student factors explain lack of progress with a certain intervention, and then move students into second or third tiers in an RTI model, or decide they belong in special education without considering additional factors. Opportunity to learn is a complex construct that includes not only *access to key resources* (qualified teachers, funding, relevant and rigorous curriculum), but also factors related to the *nature and implementation of school activities* (e.g., culturally meaningful task criteria, teacher-student shared understandings of the purpose of tasks and activities, culturally inclusive participation frameworks in classroom discourse, school deficit ideologies about low-income racial minority students used in referral and placement practices).

Ultimately, the most effective interventions for culturally and linguistically diverse students will come from bringing together diverse perspectives and from careful examination of notions about disability and culture within their full socio-cultural and historical contexts. We offer our viewpoints on the role of culture in RTI in the hope of engaging in conversations with others involved in this work.

Schools and school systems that are predicated on continuous improvement and responsiveness to the changing needs of new generations of students work to deepen their understandings of race, class, gender, language, culture, and democracy and develop practices that promote the success of all students. Our position on RTI is grounded in the belief that educational systems must become culturally responsive for culturally and linguistically diverse students' needs to be met (Klingner, Artiles, et al., 2005). We suggest various principles and questions to inform future intervention design efforts and research on RTI as well as promote changes in practice.

### 1. Intervention design should be based on a theory of culture in learning

RTI models should be based on a theory of how culture mediates learning processes. As Moje and Hinchman (2004) noted, "All practice needs to be culturally responsive in order to be best practice" (italics added, p. 321). This view is especially relevant when considering the cultural nature of human development and learning (Cole, 1998; Rogoff, 2003). Culture is not a static set of characteristics located within individuals (e.g., ethnicity, social class), but is instrumental and indexed in practice (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Thus, culturally responsive teachers make connections with their students as individuals while understanding the socio-cultural-historical contexts that influence their interactions and practices. It is important to acknowledge that current school practices and the normative curriculum are responsive to the dominant culture in society, yet they are generally not responsive to communities whose cultural practices differ from mainstream culture (Ladson Billings; 1995; O'Connor, in press). However, research suggests that culturally responsive interventions can be designed and implemented to support learning (Au, 1995; Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Engestrom, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2001a, 2001b).

It is equally important to acknowledge that research is also a cultural endeavor. Thus, researchers must become aware of how their assumptions and understandings about the role of culture in learning shape the questions addressed in their studies and the ways in which data collection is carried out. Researchers' implicit assumptions also shape the analytic and interpretive decisions made in projects about whether cultural factors and processes matter (Lee, 2002; Paredes, 1984; Walker, 1999, 2005). For these reasons, researchers must systematically incorporate in their studies a cultural view of development and learning (Boesch, 1996; Goodnow, 2002; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002).

#### Challenges for culturally responsive RTI: Culture theory design considerations

- 📍 How do we account for culture when designing interventions and conducting research?
- 📍 What practices can we adopt in the design and reporting of research to make visible the cultural assumptions of researchers?
- 📍 How can we design research that transcends the view of culture as independent variable and instead relies on practice-based models of culture?
- 📍 What are examples of instruments that have equivalent meanings across cultural communities?
- 📍 Can we create models to guide the effective implementation of experimentally developed interventions in contexts where practitioners' beliefs, institutional tools (e.g., curriculum), and school rules compel practitioners to be culture-blind and culture-mute?
- 📍 Consider changes in the sampling of situations and tasks (Goodnow, 2002, p. 241)
- 👉 Consider situations where others are not physically present but form an anticipated audience, a 'voice of the

mind.'

- ☞ Consider not only what each person contributes but also what is expected from each.
- ☞ Look for ways of combining an interest in shared tasks and in everyday situations.

## 2. Research must account for how contextual contingencies and irregularities across contexts challenge ecological validity.

RTI models are based on the premise that all instruction should be evidence-based. But evidence derived in what contexts? Central to our approach is the belief that instructional methods do not work or fail as decontextualized generic practices, but work in relation to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are implemented (Artiles, 2002; Gee, 2001). Whereas quasi- and experimental studies can point to which instructional approaches are most effective under certain conditions, they do not provide information that can help us understand essential contextual variables that contribute to the effectiveness of an approach, or increase our awareness of implementation challenges, or provide information about the circumstances under which a practice is most likely to be successful (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Experimentally controlled interventions are typically recommended as the best option for practitioners who work in highly complex school environments. However, the limitations of interventions developed on the basis of people's performance in experimental conditions vis-à-vis people's performance in everyday life are rarely acknowledged (Lave, 1997). For instance, neither the experimenter nor the subject is likely to know how the [experimental] situation is related to previous situations in which the subject has been routinely involved ... And there is unlikely to be a clear understanding of differences between the distribution of problems-to-solve routinely encountered by subjects, and the experimental tasks as samples from that or some other domain of problems ... Experimental situations also differ from other new situations, in the timing of performance demands. In everyday life, one would rarely be called on to perform immediately in a new, ill-specified situation, until one understood "what's going on" (Lave, 1997, p. 65, emphasis in original)

Important variations across schools can also affect the performance of students. We know that variations in program implementation and effectiveness across schools and classrooms are common (see the First Grade Studies for a classic example, Bond & Dykstra, 1967). What is occurring when this happens? Is it the program, the teachers' implementation, or the school context? School level differences (e.g., Kozol 1991) must be taken into account when interpreting variations in program implementation and research results. Also, schools are dependent on larger societal influences that should not be ignored (e.g., inequitable resource allocation) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Thus, we promote a systems approach to reform that entails looking across multiple layers of the home, community, school, and society-at-large (Klingner, Artiles, et al., 2005; Ferguson, Kozleski, & Smith, 2003; Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997; Shanklin et al., 2003). Debates about instructional methods and considerations of student performance should be framed within the larger context of how literacy practices interrelate with issues of social practice, culture, and power across these levels (Artiles, 2002; Gee, 1999).

Within-school variation is also significant. As the field considers how RTI models should be implemented, not enough attention has focused on the role of classroom teachers. Variability in classroom instruction is to be expected, based on differences across teachers, curricula, and the wider school context. Considering there is substantial variation in teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, it is unrealistic to assume that all teachers will be able to implement interventions in such a way that we can have confidence they are providing students with an adequate opportunity to learn. When children are struggling, school personnel should first consider the possibility that they are not receiving adequate instruction before it is assumed they are not responding because they have deficits of some kind (Harry & Klingner, 2005). By looking in classrooms, we can tell a great deal about teachers' instruction, the activity, and the ways teachers and students interact. On-going analyses of general education classrooms should be an essential component of RTI models (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). However, we must ensure such examinations focus on classroom cultures and connect what occurs in the classroom with influences across the educational system.

To conclude, a significant challenge for RTI models is to draw from interventions that are ecologically valid. As a starting point for future deliberations, we offer three conditions that research must meet in order to be ecologically valid (Bronfenbrenner as cited in Cole, Hood, & McDermott, 1997, p. 54, emphasis in original):

[Research] must maintain the integrity of the real-life situations it is designed to investigate. Second, it must be faithful to the larger social and cultural contexts from which the subjects come. Third, the analysis must be consistent with the participants' definition of the situation, [i.e.,] the experimental manipulations and outcomes must be shown to be "perceived by the participants in a manner consistent with the conceptual definitions explicit and implicit in the research design."

#### Challenges for culturally responsive RTI: Ecological validity considerations

What criteria should be applied when making the determination that a practice is evidence-based, has ecological validity, and should be used in a given setting?

- Ⓢ What are the reasons for variations across schools?
- Ⓢ How do school literacy practices interrelate with students' social practices, cultures, and differential power?
- Ⓢ When we observe in classrooms:
  - ↪ What do we notice about the nature of the relationship between a teacher and students?
  - ↪ How are students supported?
  - ↪ How does the teacher promote interest and motivation?
  - ↪ What can we conclude about the culture(s) of the classroom?
  - ↪ What can we conclude about students' opportunities to learn?
- Ⓢ How can we make sure that instruction is culturally responsive to children's needs?
- Ⓢ What should the time period be between discovering that the instruction is not responsive to children's needs and developing a new instructional plan?
- Ⓢ Who should monitor this process?
- Ⓢ What guidelines can we use to determine the "culture specificity" of our research questions? That is, how do we know whether the "problems" we pursue in our projects are construed the same way by the study participants? Do these problems or questions have the same meaning and importance in the communities where we recruit study informants? (Boesch, 1996)
- Ⓢ How can researchers use their understanding of the world of experiences lived by their research "subjects" in the design of interventions? What do we lose in the data collected and research findings when we reduce

complex lives to the category of “subject?” (Boesch, 1996)

### 1. Intervention research must have population validity (Bracht & Glass, 1968).

As we focus on finding evidence for “what works,” it is essential to find out what works *with whom* (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996). When deciding if a practice is appropriate for implementation as part of an RTI model, it should have been validated with students like those with whom it will be applied. As noted by Pressley, “Experiments should include students who are the intended targets of the instruction being evaluated” (2003, p. 68). Too often, culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly English language learners, are left out of research samples, or demographic characteristics are not described sufficiently (Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Simmerman & Swanson, 2001).

#### Challenges for culturally responsive RTI: Population validity considerations

- Ⓢ What should RTI's first tier look like for culturally diverse students? For English language learners? For students living in high poverty areas?
- Ⓢ What should the second tier look like? Should it be the same for all? If not, how should it vary, and how should this be determined?
- Ⓢ When population validity is violated, what does this say regarding a study's assumptions about what matters and who counts?
- Ⓢ How can culture theory inform sampling strategies that acknowledge the limits of the notion of representativeness?
- Ⓢ What sampling guidelines can we use to enhance population validity? For instance (Goodnow, 2002, pp. 239-240)
  - 👉 Look carefully at the bases for choice: why this group rather than another?
  - 👉 What is the nature of your link to this group and their perception of what you do or what you expect?
  - 👉 No social group is homogenous: Look for within-group differences
  - 👉 Could the question I have in mind be answered by looking within my own culture?

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