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Response-to-Intervention:

A Future Educator's Review of the Process

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Topic Selection

After recognizing the lack of preparation given to early childhood education majors for working with students with special needs, I chose to pursue Response-to-Intervention, a new method of diagnosing learning disabilities, as the topic of my senior honors project. Over the course of the project, I hoped to gain an understanding not only of what RTI was, but also hoped to see its effectiveness in diagnosing learning disabilities in comparison with the old method of simply comparing IQ and achievement. My hope was that through furthering my knowledge in this area, I would not only be able to provide more adequate instruction to students with special needs, but also begin to recognize every child's strengths and weaknesses and as a result be able to make more appropriate curricular matches for all my students.

Project Initiation

In order to gain a better understanding of this topic, I first sought out help from Dr. Michael Hannum, a professor in the special education department at The University of Tennessee. Dr. Hannum encouraged me to contact a leading researcher in the field, Dr. Lynn Fuchs of Vanderbilt University, to both gain an overview of the RTI process and to gather some of the current research findings for using RTI to diagnose and/or help prevent learning disabilities. Through email contact with Dr. Fuchs, I received an extensive PowerPoint presentation which detailed two of her recent studies of using RTI in both diagnosing reading and mathematics disabilities. Beyond using merely Dr. Fuchs research, I further sought out information on the process in various education journals through one of the university's online databases. After gaining a comprehensive

understanding of the process, as well as the results of using this method, I created my own PowerPoint presentation to present to Dr. Hannum's Special Education 402 course.

Teaching a Collegiate Level Course

After reviewing the appropriateness of my PowerPoint presentation, Dr. Hannum invited me to teach his 402 course one evening. Although nervous about presenting to a group of my peers, given my background in teaching preschoolers, I reluctantly agreed and scheduled a time to present my new knowledge of RTI. While I struggled initially in the presentation, speaking rather rapidly and failing to pause often enough for questions, I soon became comfortable in my role as "professor" and, by the end, was hopeful I could teach another section of the course. Although scheduling prevented a second presentation from occurring, I left the experience having gained confidence in my own teaching abilities.

A Truly Educational Experience

Beyond merely gaining confidence in my teaching abilities, I further learned a great deal about both RTI and my role as a future educator. In regards to RTI, I learned the basics, what it is, why it's useful for general educators, and the benefits of using it instead of the former "wait to fail" approach to name a few. In regards to my role as a future educator, I learned just how important it is to be sure I am meeting the needs of all my students, regardless of their disability status. I further recognized the importance of constantly assessing my students to be sure they are progressing, rather than regressing or stagnating. While I realized that regular formal assessments, as used in the RTI method for at-risk students, may not be feasible to conduct on all my students due to time constraints and budgetary concerns, I further acknowledged the benefits of informal

evaluations to ensure appropriate curricular matches are being made for every student throughout the year. Overall, however, the most substantial realization that I obtained from this experience was that it is my job to educate all students, not attempt to push that burden off on others (special education teachers, etc…) due to challenging circumstances. In addition, I learned just how lacking my knowledge of teaching students with special needs was, due to both inexperience in the field and extremely limited course requirements in my program at UT. As a result, my aim at this point in my career is to further my education in the graduate program at UT, gaining knowledge and experiences through a one year internship at Christenberry Elementary School.