

The Many Faces of Special Education Within RTI Frameworks in the United States and Finland

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Abstract

Response to intervention (RTI) can be considered an everyday practice in many parts of the United States, whereas, in Finland, only recently has a new framework for support in learning taken shape. Choosing Finland as the comparative partner for this policy paper is justified as its educational system has been widely referenced on the basis of good Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. The results of the present comparative article showed first, that the U.S. RTI was primarily intended for diagnosing and preventing learning disabilities whereas the Finnish RTI is mainly an administrative structure for support. Second, the U.S. RTI includes clear definitions regarding the intensity, duration, and content of support provided within each tier whereas the Finnish version contains no explicit guidelines for support. Third, the U.S. RTI assumes no special educational services in the first two tiers, but the Finnish framework includes special educational services from the onset of support. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords

response to intervention, Finnish framework of support in learning, special education, policy paper

Special education has a long history of seeking its own place within education systems (Deno, 1970). Thus, the need to look into its many roles within school systems is, from time to time, essential (D. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010) as many countries are in the middle of developing support service frameworks for all students. Policymakers and people working in the field of education largely agree, at least on an ideological level, that all students should be able to study and have access to highly flexible support frameworks in their local schools and in their natural learning environments within general education classrooms (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009; Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012). Another important viewpoint is, however, that some students need differentiated or individualized planning for support and instruction (Sabel, Saxenian, Miettinen, Kristensen, & Hautamäki, 2011; Vellutino et al., 1996).

Some researchers see a persistent divide between general and special education (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). This discussion has also been the focus of recent research literature tapping into the different ways of interpreting response-to-intervention (RTI) frameworks (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010; D. Fuchs et al., 2010) as well as the manner in which the role of special education and special needs teachers has been depicted within RTI frameworks (W. W. Fuchs & Bergeron, 2013; Vaughn,

Denton, & Fletcher, 2010). There are no previous studies on the similarities and differences between the RTI frameworks of the United States and Finland in the context of the role of special education as a service system, not to mention the roles of special needs teachers. It was thus expected that the findings would be informative, thereby deepening insights about support services in both of the targeted countries and guiding other countries initiating similar reforms. The present policy paper examined and compared the background and structure of the RTI frameworks, as well as the way in which support is provided within them (as in the intensity of support and student placement within the frameworks), with a specific focus on the roles of special needs teachers and general education teachers in two educational ecosystems (the United States and Finland).

To provide some context for our article, we begin with a discussion on the educational reforms leading to the formation and implementation of the RTI frameworks. In

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1975, the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA). In 1990, the EHA was modified and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was revised in 2004. Federal laws, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), require states to provide special education according to federal standards. This provision is also a condition for receiving federal funds.

Taking a few steps back from the current situation, little attention was paid to special education in the Finnish Basic Education Act (1998, 2010). The curricular document following the law (POPS/Opetushallitus, 2004) was the first document in Finland to include clear regulations for special educational services within the Finnish school system. In 2006, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture established a steering group whose focus was to develop a new strategy for developing special education in compulsory school. In 2008, after the publication and dissemination of the new strategy, major funding across the whole country was targeted at municipalities with the intention of supporting local development and the eventual implementation of a new multilevel support system for learning. Based on this strategy document, a renewed Basic Education Act was introduced in 2010 and officially adopted in August 2011 in every Finnish school. In Finland, the executive interpretation of the law describing the new three-level framework is made by the Finnish National Board of Education. However, because Finnish schools have relatively broad autonomy in curricular choices, staff structure and other issues, there are possibilities for practical, municipality-dependent interpretations.

We now briefly identify the differences between the school systems in Finland and the United States. The school system in the United States consists of public and private schools. School boards have control over curricular choices, but the educational standards and standardized testing are run by state governments. Private schools are generally free to determine their own curriculum and staffing policies, with voluntary accreditation available through independent regional accreditation authorities. The average school age ranges from about age 5 to about age 18. Overall, there are approximately 76 million school-aged children in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). In Finland, the school system is public, and there are no private schools. Children enter the compulsory schooling system the year of their seventh birthday. Compulsory schooling lasts 9 years until the child reaches the age of 15 or 16 (depending on the time of year the child was born). The overall educational standards are administered by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, but schools can freely implement them in their own curricula (www.min-edu.fi). According to Statistics Finland, in 2015, whole Finland's population is approximately 5.5 million (https://www.stat.fi/til/vamuu/index_en.html).

The overall comparative results of the two frameworks are presented in Table 1. Special education as a service system has a different background in the two countries. Special education programs across the United States have been mandatory since 1975. In the United States, to receive special education services, a student must meet specific eligibility criteria (Zirkel, 2011). The criteria require that an assessment be completed by trained personnel and that a student demonstrate a disability in a specific category (e.g., autism, specific learning disability, intellectual impairment, emotional or behavioral disability). Depending on the student's individual needs, he or she may be included in a general education setting, or placed in a special school, and may receive many specialized services in a resource room or self-contained classroom (see Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009).

The origins of the RTI approach in identifying learning disabilities can be traced to a National Research Council study (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982), which proposed that the validity of a special education classification be judged according to specific criteria. Since then, RTI has evolved into a systematic tool for implementing identification, evidence-based instruction, close monitoring of student progress, and decision making for all levels within the system, including administration, teachers, and parents (see D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; D. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). As for the effectiveness of RTI in the United States in terms of academic achievement, it may be deemed an early intervention approach that can improve the academic performance of at-risk students (Sullivan & Long, 2010). However, the variability in research designs and intervention programs chosen for these studies has been critiqued in the literature (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005).

Although there are many interpretations of RTI framework, as Zirkel's (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) work has indicated, it might suffice to say that the standard RTI consists of three tiers (see also Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). According to D. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton (2012), in the three-tier RTI Smart model, *Tier 1* is for all students. Screenings are conducted several times per year to perform a timely identification of at-risk children. Each at-risk student's progress is closely monitored. If the child does not respond to the first level of group-oriented interventions and other instructional support (such as differentiated instruction), he or she typically moves to the next RTI level (*Tier 2*). The student then receives research-based instruction, sometimes in small groups, sometimes as part of a classwide intervention. The length of time spent in Tier 2 is longer than in Tier 1, and the intensity of the interventions is greater. If the child does not respond adequately to the interventions in Tier 2, then a third level (*Tier 3*) becomes an option for continued, yet more intensive, often individual research-based intervention. See Table 1 for some general comparisons of the models.

Table 1. General Descriptors of the RTI and Finnish Framework.

Descriptor	RTI	Finnish framework
Year of formal acceptance of the model	2004	2010
Implementation year (and type)	2004 (the first willing states and schools)	2011 (obligatory for all schools)
Main purpose of the framework	Prevention, LD identification, early support in learning	Prevention, early support in learning
Framework level label	Tier	Level of support
Expected percentage of students within		
Tier 1/general support	80% ^a	80% ^b
Tier 2/intensified support	15%	15%
Tier 3/special support	5%	5%
Observed percentage of students within		
Tier 1/general support	80% ^c	? (16% ^d)
Tier 2/intensified support	15%	6.5% ^e (74.5%)
Tier 3/special support	5%	7.3% ^e (37.6%)
Length of		
Tier/Level 1	Maximum 8 weeks ^f vs. school year ^g	NS
Tier/Level 2	9–30 weeks ^g	NS
Tier/Level 3	Minimum 15–20 weeks ^g	NS

Note. RTI = response to intervention; LD = learning disability; NS = not specified.

^aSee National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2005). ^b<http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2012/liitteet/okm05.pdf?lang=fi>, p. 26. ^cBender and Shores (2007). ^dPercentage of part-time special education (= inclusive education) received as general support (school year 2011–2012). Note that part-time special education is provided as one form of support at every level in the Finnish framework. The percentage of general support is around 80% to 85%, but it is not currently being followed statistically as it may consist of very short-term support. ^eStatistics from autumn 2013. ^fSee <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>. ^gJohnson, E., Mellard, D., Fuchs, D., McKnigh<t, M. for NRCLD (2006).

In Finland, eligibility for special educational services is mainly defined within schools according to a multiprofessional evaluation that includes the views of teachers, special needs teachers, and parents (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007, 2010). This approach means that a formal diagnosis is not needed for someone to receive special educational services. Accordingly, this also means that no formal criteria for support exist. The majority of special educational services are provided within schools for free. However, a specific diagnosis based on a doctor's or psychologist's assessment is mandatory for extra services delivered outside the school system (e.g., various therapies and medication). As in the United States, in Finland, many of those students who earlier studied in small groups or self-contained classrooms (Kivirauma & Kivinen, 1988) are nowadays integrated into general education classrooms. This has further resulted in a smaller number of special schools and self-contained classrooms (Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2013). The selection and use of different instruction methods in Finland among special education teachers (as well as other teachers) have been manifested as responsibilities with no specific accountability. Moreover, teachers in Finland have been seen as trustworthy and responsible professionals (see Finnish Education in a Nutshell, 2013), hence the reason there are no national assessment procedures in use.

The Finnish RTI-like framework is divided into three levels of support. Although it is not intended for any specific area, it can be utilized for a student's overall learning and/or targeted solely for reading, for example. The first level of

support—*general support*—is intended for students in need of occasional help, usually within regular classroom settings. The second level—*intensified support*—is implemented when a student is in need of a longer period of support in a specific area, such as literacy skills or mathematics. The third level—*special support*—is for students who mainly use individualized education plans (IEPs) in one or several subjects. It is important to note that the effectiveness of the practices relating to the Finnish framework on learning outcomes is not being followed in the same manner as in the U.S. RTI. For example, to date, there are no measures for RTI fidelity for teachers in Finland. In sum, based on the comparisons of the background and structure of the RTI frameworks in the United States and Finland, we see that in the United States, special education services have been deemed a very separate system in comparison with general education. This appears to be less so in Finland. Moreover, the origins of the RTI in the United States seem to be related to the renewal of diagnostic procedures whereas the Finnish framework primarily echoes administrative systematization of the support provided in schools.

Student Placement and the Intensity of Support Within RTI Frameworks in the United States and Finland

The RTI structure of support also differs in the United States (see Table 2). In Tier 1, support is mainly given in general

Table 2. Division of Work Between General and Special Education Service Systems.

Descriptor	RTI Finnish	Framework
Tier 1/general support		
Participation from general education ^a	High	High
Participation from special education ^a	None	Low
Main forms of education/student ^b	With	With, IG, SG
Possible roles of special education teacher ^c	Coll, Cons	Coll, Cons, PT, Mix
Tier 2/intensified support		
Participation from general education ^a	High	Mod
Participation from special education ^a	None-Mod	Mod
Main forms of education/student ^b	With, SG	With, IG, SG
Possible roles of special education teacher ^c	Coll, Cons, PT, ^d Mix	Coll, Cons, PT, Mix
Tier 3/Special support		
Participation from general education ^a	Mod-High	Low
Participation from special education ^a	None-High	High
Main forms from education/student ^b	With, IG, SG, ^e SC ^e	With, IG, SG, SC
Possible roles of special education teacher ^c	Coll, Cons, PT, FT, Mix	Coll, Cons, PT, FT, Mix

Note. RTI = response to intervention.

^aDegree of participation as an educational within-school service: None, Low, Mod = Moderate, High. ^bWith = within general education classroom; IG = individual guidance; SG = small-group instruction, resource rooms; SC = self-contained classroom. ^cColl = collaborative; Cons = consultative; PT = part-time; FT = full-time; Mix = mixed. ^d"Inclusive teaching" is a term used in the United States, not part-time special education. ^eProposed in D. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010).

classroom settings (With). Only small-group guidance is added in Tier 2 (small-group instruction [SG]). In Tier 3, there are differing interpretations on the forms of support ranging from individual guidance (IG) to inclusive education (With). For example, research (see Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer, & Tilly, 2013) has shown that support in Tier 1 is given in general education within general education classrooms and sometimes in smaller groups with paraprofessionals, reading experts and so on. In Tier 2, a special needs teacher may teach during "tier time" (see <http://www.rtinetwork.org/essential/tieredinstruction/tiered-instruction-and-intervention-rti-model>). Jenkins et al. (2013) also reported that Tier 1 included mainly differentiated instruction and that this form of support was offered within classrooms. Tier 2 included student progress monitoring and more intensive support for learning.

Berkeley et al. (2009) found wide-ranging variation in Tier 3 within RTI models across the United States and that it is often unclear when the special education process begins. Jenkins et al. (2013) reported more intensive interventions and progress monitoring in Tier 3. Once again, there was a variety of models for serving students with IEPs in Tier 3.

According to the Strategy for Special Education (Opetusministeriö, 2007) within the Finnish framework, general support consists of cooperation between home and school, mentoring and tutoring, using a study plan, student counseling services, and afterschool club activities. The instruction is given mainly within general education classrooms although IG and SG are also possible forms of this short-term support. Because the main goal of general

support is to prevent further learning difficulties, inclusive special education (e.g., SG in resource rooms) is also suggested as a form of support (see Table 2).

At the level of intensified support, special education teachers play an important role in planning a student's everyday schoolwork in the Finnish framework. Flexibility and individual needs in instruction, including multifaceted differentiation, are important. Typically, the student receives support in literacy skills and mathematics or in both. This support is provided only by a special education teacher in Finland (Opetusministeriö, 2007). Inclusive special education is the main form of support at this level and is intended for all students. Along with the learning plan, a pedagogical assessment is also made.

In Finland, the most intensive level of support consists of every possible form of support (including support provided within levels of general support and intensified support; see Table 2) that can be offered in school, including special educational services. Instruction at this level is often given in general education classrooms, in small groups or in self-contained classrooms, but above all, it is based on individual planning. As in the U.S. RTI framework, every student has an IEP at this level of support.

The intensity, duration, and content of support are not defined within the Finnish RTI, hence the reason that NS (not specified) has been used in Table 2 for the Finnish RTI. In the research literature and the documents guiding the U.S. RTI implementation (Gersten et al., 2009), there are quite specific suggestions for (a) intensity, (b) duration, (c) content, (d) assessment procedures, and (e) group sizes concerning different tiers of support (see Table 2). This is a

significant difference between the RTI frameworks in the United States and Finland. In this sense, the U.S. RTI comprises a highly interventionist approach whereas the Finnish RTI is at the initial stages of its path of perhaps getting there someday.

The Role of Special Needs Teachers and Special Education Within the RTI Frameworks

RTI implementation is neither just a simple question of administration nor mainly a question of practicalities in terms of how a struggling student receives support. There are people behind the whole system doing the actual work: assessing, analyzing, planning, and executing support. Consequently, within RTI frameworks, this is primarily a question relating to the division of labor between general education and special education as two service systems. More particularly, this is a question of the division of labor between general education teachers and special needs teachers. Our analysis of the roles of general education and special education within RTI frameworks indicated that within the U.S. RTI framework, special needs teachers are only minimally involved in the education of children with disabilities in Tiers 1 and 2 and that the structure and function of Tier 3 may be interpreted as multifaceted because of a great variety of possible roles for special needs teachers (see also Table 2).

According to Simonsen et al. (2010), in Tier 1, special educator roles might include serving as trainers, consultants, and collaborators. In Tier 2, these might include serving as trainers, consultants, collaborators, and implementers. Finally, in Tier 3, special educator roles are similar with Tier 2 roles (Simonsen et al., 2010).

However, these results seem to reflect very different types of RTI interpretations, as, for example, in the recently revised RTI2 manual used in the state of Tennessee (see RTI2, 2015). Special education as a service system has a separate section in the RTI manual. Thus, in Tennessee, special education services are available to a student only after Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 have failed to help. The idea behind this is to provide equal support for all children within their own classrooms (RTI2, 2015).

As another example, in a RTI implementation survey of representatives from 62 elementary schools across the United States (Jenkins et al., 2013), there appeared to be no specific role for special needs teachers within Tier 1 (see Table 2). Moreover, many U.S. states have not included any special educational services in Tier 2 interventions (see Berkeley et al., 2009).

That said, the comparison between the U.S. RTI with the Finnish system illustrates that the division of labor within the RTI system can indeed be done differently without violating the idea of promoting inclusive practices and providing equal support for all students. The Finnish RTI involves special needs teachers, for example, as co-teachers within regular

classrooms at every level of support (Thuneberg et al., 2014). In Finland, special needs teachers take part in assessing students' learning outcomes, planning support in multiprofessional teams, and also teaching at all levels of support. It depends on a school whether the teacher's work is more consultative or collaborative or whether he or she also works in a part-time or full-time resource room. General education teachers are expected to provide differentiated materials for students as well as to participate in multiprofessional team meetings where support is planned and support outcomes are evaluated for further refinement (for further information, see Takala, Pirttimaa, & Törmänen, 2009).

As Table 2 shows, the role of special education teachers in the United States, usually from Tier 1 to Tier 2, is collaborative or consultative whereas all possible forms of support are present at different tiers within the Finnish framework. The collaborative mode of working is emphasized. Full-time support (FT), as in mainly working in self-contained classrooms, is a possibility at the most intensive level of support (special support) within the Finnish framework.

Moreover, teachers themselves have been used as informants in different types of survey studies on the impact of restructuring the support frameworks. As for the U.S. RTI, Werts and Carpenter (2013) conducted a survey of special education teachers in one state. Their results showed that these teachers view general education teachers as involved in the majority of tasks throughout the tiers, although they perceived involvement as decreasing from Tier 1 to Tier 3. Therefore, special education teachers viewed their involvement as increasing from Tier 1 to Tier 3 (see also Swanson et al., 2012). As might be expected, the forms of working varied from collaboration and consultation to instruction. One interpretation of the RTI model in the United States has been that Tier 3 is where special education comes into the picture (Berkeley et al., 2009).

In addition, Leonard (2012) conducted research on the roles of special needs teachers in relation to RTI implementation. She described their roles as collaborators, interventionists, diagnosticians, and managers (see also Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008). She concluded that many special education teachers in the United States have perceived an increase in the amount of time they spend collaborating with other professionals and assessing students. The results of the study also indicate changes relating to the essential components of RTI, including increases in universal assessments and progress monitoring. The qualitative analysis (Leonard, 2012) revealed additional reports relating to job stress and general education accountability.

More recently, the Finnish Association for Teachers (2013, OAJ in Finnish) conducted a survey examining how the implementation of the reform has succeeded from the point of view of different types of teachers (general education and special needs teachers) and school principals. Second, they asked the teaching personnel whether there

was progress in terms of the intended support for learning. The teachers maintained that as the division of work between different kinds of teachers overlaps more than ever before, in particular, the instruction and training provided for general classroom teachers were no longer seen as adequate. These findings suggest that there is an ongoing change in the division of labor between general education teachers and special education teachers in Finland (the renewed RTI-like framework came into effect in 2011).

General Conclusions and Summary

In the present study, we presented and compared two similar RTI frameworks, particularly their multitiered structure. Overall, as expected, we identified many common strengths (e.g., early support offered to all students) and shortcomings (e.g., similar processes in both countries in the sense of relatively little instruction on how to implement the new frameworks in the beginning of the implementation process). Some policy improvement suggestions as well as practical implications of the present analysis can be extracted from our findings on both countries.

In the present policy paper, the three main foci were to examine, first, the U.S. RTI as a framework for preventing and “diagnosing” disabilities and learning disabilities and the Finnish RTI as an administrative framework for systematizing support services. The second aim was to examine RTI from the perspective of student placement within the framework as well as a framework for creating a range of progressively intensive support services for learners who are struggling. Third, the focus was on examining the roles of different personnel in the different contexts in which support is provided. We shall shortly discuss the role and justifications of special education as a service system within schools.

The first research aim was to examine and compare the general characteristics of the two frameworks. We found that the main purposes of the two frameworks differed. For example, in the United States, although RTI has been accepted as one means of LD identification, states can still choose whether to use it or the classic intelligence quotient (IQ) discrepancy model and research-based identification. By contrast, every school in Finland is required to adopt the new framework via a legislative process. The Finnish RTI is not a framework for diagnosing disabilities. Instead, it is a framework for structuring and systematizing support services for all students.

As for RTI, the role of state-level politics in the United States as part of the organization of the U.S. political system needs to be taken into account as it reflects and, in part, accounts for the complexity of the system. Relatedly, RTI itself needs to be considered as a political artifact aligned with the federal general education reform (i.e., NCLB and Reading First [RF]). RF and RTI both require scientifically based reading instruction and emerged within the larger

movement toward standards-driven educational reform in the United States. Many of the same people involved with the RF policy were also involved with the policy development around RTI (D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

The second aim of the present policy paper was to examine RTI in both countries as a framework for creating a range of progressively intensive support services for learners who are struggling. In the United States, tools for supporting the learners were available through research work well before the RTI was legitimized (Gersten et al., 2009; Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007). However, as the Berkeley et al. (2009) survey showed, the implementation processes, and thus the selection and use of the available tools, have varied from state to state. Conversely, this work has only just begun in Finland. The Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education has granted funding for universities and private research centers (such as the Niilo Mäki Institute), which have developed research-based assessment tools and procedures and progress monitoring and computerized games and tasks.

These materials are free for schools, but there are no official recommendations relating to their use. Consequently, a great improvement for the Finnish RTI would be to establish a national resource center (such as that of the RTI network in the United States) to go further with the systematization of support services and the provision of evidence-based support programs within schools. These changes would still allow the flexible use of the RTI framework while also helping students in inclusive settings. “Pedagogical freedom” (see Sahlberg, 2010) of the teachers would change into a bit more structured direction, but as the main point is in helping the struggling students, it would probably be worth the change.

The third aim was to compare the role of special education within the frameworks. An important difference between the two frameworks is that whereas the role of special education (O’Connor & Klingner, 2010) differs from that of the general education system in the United States, this presents some major problems regarding the division of labor in the RTI implementation process. Furthermore, Tennessee (RTI2, 2015), for example, considers special education as a service system that is made available to a student only after the three tiers of support have failed to help (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015). Notwithstanding, this indicates the willingness to promote more inclusive ideology and practices, as suggested by Simonsen et al. (2010). By contrast, the renewed Finnish Basic Education Act includes special educational services at all possible levels of educational support, including from the onset (Sabel et al., 2011).

Thus, from the viewpoint of the Finnish RTI, one could consider whether resources might be saved if special needs teachers were to plan and execute support for students (Ahtiainen et al., 2012). This also leads one to consider

whether resources and time (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009) would be saved if special needs teachers were involved at least in Tier 3, if not in Tier 2, in the U.S. RTI. In other words, does inclusion mean excluding special education services and special needs teachers? The RTI system in the United States withholds massive training programs for RTI specialists. Perhaps a more logical way to train RTI experts would be within special needs teacher training programs (in the first place, most of the knowledge needed to implement RTI procedures comes from special needs teacher training programs).

Another finding with a major impact on the clarity of the roles of general education teachers and special needs teachers was that whereas within the Finnish RTI framework there are no accurate instructions for developing, choosing, and using suitable interventions for students who need support in learning, the amount of mandatory administrative reporting has increased (Finnish Teacher Association, 2013). Otherwise said, the interpretative work has been left to municipalities and teachers who have traditionally been considered the trusted professionals within the Finnish school system (Sahlberg, 2010). However, special needs teachers in the United States have also reported increases in job stress and accountability since the implementation of the RTI (Leonard, 2012).

In both the Finnish and U.S. RTI systems, general education currently plays a greater role in assessing and teaching students in need of support in learning. For example, with appropriate division of work between regular classroom teachers and special needs teachers, the U.S. regular classroom teachers have more time to focus on the core curriculum, and special needs teacher can work with children who are in need of extra help in learning strategies, for example. Special education may then continue to play a substantial role at least in Tier 3, but preferably starting from Tiers 1 and 2.

In sum thus far, according to the results of the present study, it appears that the role of special education teachers within the RTI frameworks is not very clear in either of the study countries. There appears to be a strong emphasis on the work of regular classroom teachers (differentiated instruction, collaboration, co-teaching as suggested forms of support) at least in Tiers 1 and 2 within the U.S. RTI whereas special education teachers are present at all levels of learning support in the Finnish framework. Based on experiences from the Finnish framework so far (Finnish Teacher Association, 2013), it would be worth considering to organize instruction, especially in Tier 1, with collaboration between general and special education teachers in the American RTI, as well.

Cochran-Smith and Dudley-Marling (2012) have suggested that collaborative spaces have the potential to unite diverse communities and create new synergies in both general teacher education and special teacher education. Co-teaching has been acknowledged as one way of bringing special educational knowledge into the classroom (Kohler-Evans, 2006)

and is present especially in RTI models emphasizing recursive problem-solving approaches (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003) as well as within the Finnish version of RTI (Thuneberg et al., 2014). Co-teaching is indeed a way of bringing multiprofessional collaboration into everyday practices. Even so, the question remains whether individual learning needs (as in a student in need of Tier 2 or Tier 3 support) can really be met in classrooms full of students with a diversity of skills. This requires systematic research in both countries.

Finally, as stated in the beginning of the article, special education as a scientific discipline, and a service system within schools, has to clarify and even justify its role from time to time. Recently, intervention researchers have concluded that flexible support programs are the most effective in helping learners who struggle (Lemons, Fuchs, Gilbert & Fuchs, 2014; for a review, see Slavin & Lake, 2008). These findings indicate that “full-inclusion” versions of the RTI, with all support brought to the students’ classrooms, is not the ultimate answer, and neither is a fully segregative model where a student is always pulled out of the classroom to obtain support. Therefore, even though there are different RTI interpretations, and many faces of special education continue to exist, there is no single superior interpretation.

There are at least three factors that might be seen as limitations when interpreting the results of the present policy review. First, the three-tiered RTI was used as the reference in the present article despite the existence of other variations of the framework. Thus, that it was not possible to address all types of RTI in the present article. Second, the results of the present review may reflect some views and regulations with which not all readers are in agreement. For the present study, some generalizations had to be made to permit comparisons between the U.S. and Finnish RTI frameworks. Third, this comparative study focused only on two countries. Even so, comparing the U.S. system against the Finnish version is potentially important because Finland has enjoyed a great deal of international attention due to excellent results in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies (see Linnakylä, Välijärvi, & Arffman, 2011). As illustrated earlier, there is also a long way ahead for both countries in refining their conceptualization and implementation of RTI.

In sum as to conclude, the main contribution of the present study was twofold. First, it showed that one way to view the ongoing reforms is in the context of the standardization of the general education system. The second way is to interpret the ongoing reforms as a renaissance and the redefining of special educational services provided by schools. Both viewpoints are also needed in the future as our mutual goal is to offer the best possible learning support for all students.

The making of any educational reform and the re-organizing of support frameworks are resource-relevant

questions. The more intensive the needed support, the more funding will be needed because more individualized interventions and instruction and larger collaborative groups of parents and professionals will then be working with the student. This further indicates that the available resources need to be wisely distributed. Therefore, precise instructions in implementation processes, as well as in how to interpret new laws and strategies, are of essence. The contrary will generate waste both in terms of time and money. However, the frameworks are never ready. Instead, as Regan, Berkeley, Hughes, and Brady (2015) have recently stated, the implementation work is still ongoing in the United States as well, after a decade of formal acceptance of the RTI.

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