As teachers, we have the honor and privilege to enhance and influence the minds of tomorrow’s readers.

When the first day of school arrives, students walk into our classrooms with feelings of excitement and nervousness, with smiles on their faces, and anticipation in their hearts.

“I wonder if my teacher is nice?”

“What am I going to learn this year?”

“How many field trips will we take?”

“When is lunch?”

These are some of the questions that our students may be thinking as they enter our classrooms. As we greet the students, questions fill our minds about them, a curiosity about who they are and how best they will learn and be successful this year. As teachers, during the first month of school, we dissect their minds, hearts, and backgrounds to discover what makes each of them unique. We ask questions about each student:

“What do they do well?”

“Which skills and strategies do they demonstrate to exhibit a wide mental grasp, and which ones do they still have ahead of them to command?”

“What important personal pieces of the puzzle create the whole child?”

Our job as educators is to find the answers to these questions and get to know each and every child as a learner. It is vital to know the whole child so we can speak into their lives and teach them in a way that is best for their distinct learning essentials, which in turn will help them become successful. Keeping this in mind, we turn to assessment, the collection of data that will enable a teacher to make the best instructional moves possible for each child in his or her care. When we open the window of assessment, we receive a fresh wind of the way a learner thinks and believes. It is then the responsibility of the educator to respond to these newly found assessment artifacts and provide instruction accordingly: “We must move beyond thinking about the predictive tests as indicating which children can learn and which cannot and use such indicators to predict how much of what kind of instruction will be needed to develop the literacy of all children” (Allington & Walmsley, 2007, p. 7).

Response to Intervention (RTI) 101

RTI is a conceptual framework to reach students who need specific support to propel their learning forward. This framework has been identified in various multitiered models. However, we need to remember that it is the instruction that is tiered for specific skills and strategies, not the actual whole child. When implementing the RTI framework, we need to be fluid and knowledgeable, always aware of what’s working for a child through progress monitoring, and what needs to be discontinued to protect the child’s rate of success. The National Center on Response to Intervention suggests that schools “identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness” (NGRTI 2010, p.2). Figure 1 identifies an RTI three-tier model of intervention. While various RTI models exist in schools today, all should focus on the use of high quality, responsive instruction by certified educators.

Tier Instruction vs. Tier Students

“Whatever approach is taken to RTI, it should ensure optimal instruction for each student at all levels of schooling” (IRA RTI Commission, 2010). For RTI to be successful the core instruction a child receives (Tier 1) should be high quality, developmentally appropriate instruction. If a teacher finds that a student is not successful with Tier 1 instruction, then Tier 2 instruction may be necessary. This level of instruction would be modified and more intense, targeting specific needs of the learner as indicated through assessment and observations. However, if a student is not responding to the Tier 2 instruction or intervention after a certain amount of time and data collection, we must examine why the student is not proceeding and what will be the best next steps to move towards success. It is possible that Tier 2 instruction needs to be...
adjusted to fit the needs of the whole child or the student may need an even more intense and modified instructional approach that targets their specific needs as determined by assessment and data collection. This more intense instruction versus the concept of tier student labeling.

Then the question emerges: Should educators be thinking of RTI as a more systematic instructional framework supporting and strengthening the whole child, rather than a specialized program?

RTI frameworks contend that we assess the progress of each student on a regular basis in order to determine what instructional moves are best for each student. With a school system that is being inundated with standardized testing, we must not lose sight of the big picture. Our charge is to create thinkers, to create students who can take a piece of writing, read it, and synthesize it into usable information for a specific situation. This begins with solid initial instruction as the key towards a foundational footing for progress and being responsive to students’ needs as they arise.

Teachers must be able to know the child “as a reader.” We begin with the journey of knowing our readers with initial assessments steering us to better understand the minds of our readers.

Identifying Initial Behavior Indicators to Know Your Readers

Knowing a reader’s characteristics on a developmental level can assist educators as they design
appropriate instructional plans for their students. The reading behaviors of students can be characterized in stages or levels of reading. Suggested levels are: Emergent, Early, Transitional, and Fluent. No matter the actual grade level, classrooms today have a variety of these stages of readers in any given room. Knowing your reader means to know them by the traits of their developmental behaviors. These behavior indicators allow the educators to identify the learner’s specific reading abilities, determining if the students exhibit the specific behaviors on a rubric scale of never, rarely, often, and always. Each behavior indicator aligns to a common core standard and a reading strategy, which then elicits specific “teacher talk.” The teacher talk an educator provides supports the learner to process information through higher order thinking and ultimately authentic application of specific strategies.

Table 1 and Table 2 are examples of primary and intermediate initial behavior indicators for the onset of assessing in the reading component areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Each demonstrates how they align with a specific reading strategy, Common Core State Standards, explicit teacher talk, and academic key vocabulary for the strategy being taught. According to Marzano and Pickering (2005), providing a student with explicit understanding of terms of the subject being taught is critical for the understanding of information being taught. In Table 1 and Table 2, the academic vocabulary represents key terms the educator implants into the instruction to ultimately enhance the application of the strategy by the reader.

Developmental Stages or Levels of Reading
Click the links below for assessments for each of the Developmental Stages of Reading in PDF format:
- Emergent Reader Assessment
- Early Reader Assessment
- Transitional Reader Assessment
- Fluent Reader Assessment

Assessments for Dissecting the Reader’s Soul (Mind, Will, & Emotions)
There are many tools available for teachers to utilize in diagnosing a child’s literacy strengths and needs. Below are some basic tools that we find invaluable as initial student assessments. Keeping in mind that we assess FOR the learner!

Oral Reading Records (Mind)
An oral reading record is a tool that includes a measure for accuracy (i.e., concepts of print, letter and sound knowledge), comprehension (i.e., predicting, retelling, summarizing), and fluency (i.e., phrasing, pacing, expressing). There are several choices available for formal Oral Reading Records. Many reading series also include a reading record assessment piece. A teacher may even complete an informal reading record on a student-selected text as a quick “dipstick” for a child’s reading ability. Whichever resource a teacher chooses for recording the student’s reading behaviors, it is a goldmine of information about a reader.

Example of Essential Artifacts for Learner Profile:
• What visual information does the reader use to decode the text?
• Does the reader attempt to make sense of the text?
• Is the reader able to retell the text they have read? Is their comprehension literal, inferential, or both?
• Does the reader read as they talk, sounding like they are having a conversation? Do they use rhythm and intonation?

Sight Words/High Frequency Word Lists (Mind)
Regardless of what educators call them, these are words that glue text together. As a reader glides over the majority of words in a text, their mind is free to focus on words that may cause difficulty. As they decode words that are not considered high frequency words, the reading brain is able to hold onto the context of the text and continue to make meaning while solving unknown words. Reading becomes comparable to filling in the blank because if almost all of the words in the text are familiar, it’s easier for the reader to solve the unknown word using phonetic clues as well as context clues. We assess this word knowledge one-on-one with each student, documenting how many words they have mastered and where we need to begin instruction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component &amp; Strategy</th>
<th>Common Core State Standard</th>
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<th>Teacher Talk</th>
<th>Academic Vocabulary</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phonemic Awareness:</strong> Isolating &amp; Identifying Phonemes</td>
<td>RF.K.2; 1.2 Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).</td>
<td>Identifying and separating individual sounds by positioning the mouth, lips, teeth, and tongue to correspond with appropriate sounds.</td>
<td>“How do you position your mouth for the vowel sound in the word <em>dig</em>?” “Describe the position of your mouth for that sound.”</td>
<td>Position Isolate Identify Recognize Separate Specific Attention Focus Compare &amp; Contrast</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phonics:</strong> Synthesizing &amp; Analyzing</td>
<td>RF.K.3; 1.3; 2.3 Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.</td>
<td>Distinguishes and applies letter-sound correspondence.</td>
<td>“Examine the word and think about how the sounds and letters are associated.”</td>
<td>Explore Determine Distinguishes Decode Patterns Take Apart Combine Associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fluency:</strong> Phrasing &amp; Pacing</td>
<td>RF.K.4 Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding. RF.1.4; 2.4 Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</td>
<td>Listening &amp; observing modeled reading. Follows an assisted reader as an echo. Reads with appropriate phrasing.</td>
<td>“Listen to the passage being read. Try to use the same expression and pace as you echo what you hear.” “Try to push your eyes forward ahead of your voice.”</td>
<td>Voice Rate Tone Pitch Chunking Flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary:</strong> Associating &amp; Categorizing</td>
<td>L.K.5; 1.5; 2.5 With guidance and support from adults, explore word relationships and nuances in word meanings.</td>
<td>Express an awareness of word meaning. Demonstrates an increased vocabulary through word relationships.</td>
<td>“Reflect on the words and determine how they connect.” “Examine the features of these words and describe how they are associated.”</td>
<td>Connect Associate Relate Organize Link Sort Categorize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension:</strong> Summarizing &amp; Determining Importance</td>
<td>RL. &amp; RI.K.2 With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details. RL. &amp; RI.1.2 Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson. RL. &amp; RI.2.2 Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.</td>
<td>Participates in discussion about elements (main idea, story elements, compare/contrast). Previews text and identifies key features/essential information. Reconstructs the text through a retell.</td>
<td>“What was happening at the beginning, during the middle, and close to the end of the text?” “Describe the overall focus of the story or text.” “What are some essential facts?”</td>
<td>Essential Details Specifics Retell Gist Main Idea Condense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 1** Primary Alignment
Example of Essential Artifacts for Learner Profile:

- How do the students demonstrate “word awareness” in their literacy (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening) learning?
- How did they pronounce the words?
- How many words did they instantly identify and at what level?
- In analyzing the results, what word-analysis can be determined (i.e., slow rate, guessing, vowel or syllable patterns noted)

**Interests, Interviews, and Inventories (Will & Emotions)**

With our initial assessments, we know about what the child can do and what the child needs academically to move forward. The other half of the puzzle in creating a picture of the whole child is considering who they are on the inside. Interest Inventories or Individual Interviews can elicit valuable information to apply to instructional decisions to motivate and engage the learners. Using questionnaire type inventories for

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<td><strong>Phonics: Analyzing</strong></td>
<td><strong>RF.3.3; 4.3; 5.3</strong> Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.</td>
<td>Distinguishes and applies letter-sound correspondence, syllabication patterns, and morphology (common prefixes and suffixes).</td>
<td>“Examine the parts and patterns of the word. How does studying the word help you?”</td>
<td>Identify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fluency: Phrasing Expressing</strong></td>
<td><strong>RF.3.4; 4.4; 5.4</strong> Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</td>
<td>Reading seamlessly with a flow. Applies prosodic functions (pitch, stress, tone) to convey meaning.</td>
<td>“Continue the seamless flow by pushing your eyes forward ahead of your voice.”</td>
<td>Voice&lt;br&gt;Rate&lt;br&gt;Tone&lt;br&gt;Pitch&lt;br&gt;Flow&lt;br&gt;Prose&lt;br&gt;Poetry</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary: Contextualizing</strong></td>
<td><strong>L.3.4; 4.4; 5.4</strong> Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade level reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.</td>
<td>Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</td>
<td>“What clues are in the sentence that support the meaning of the unknown word?”</td>
<td>Context&lt;br&gt;Clues&lt;br&gt;Prefixes&lt;br&gt;Roots&lt;br&gt;Multiple-meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension: Determining Importance</strong></td>
<td><strong>RI.3.9</strong> Compare and contrast the most important points and key details presented in two texts on the same topic. <strong>RI.4.9; 5.9</strong> Integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.</td>
<td>Distinguishes between significant and supporting details of text. Evaluates, interprets, and analyzes essential information and main ideas of text.</td>
<td>“How do you know these details are more important than others?” “What support did the author give to determine what is essential?” “What are some essential facts?”</td>
<td>Essential&lt;br&gt;Key Details&lt;br&gt;Compare &amp; Contrast&lt;br&gt;Integrate Specifics&lt;br&gt;Main Idea&lt;br&gt;Condense&lt;br&gt;Author’s Purpose</td>
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</table>
parents to complete at the beginning of the year can be very helpful in getting to know your families too. Consider including questions that help you understand each family and their unique situations. Ask questions that will help you determine if the child is a visual or auditory learner by asking, “Does your child need to see something to understand it or can they just hear it and understand?” Parents know their child. Don’t be afraid to ask either/or questions to determine some basic individual characteristics for each student.

**Example of Essential Artifacts for Learner Profile:**

- Who is important to them?
- What is their home life like or how do they spend their weekends?
- Do they travel or have they only been in our hometown their entire life?
- How do they learn best or what is their favorite subject in school?
- Are they afraid of some things? If so, what?
- What are two books they recently read and enjoyed?
- Did you select this book because of your love for ________? (modeling our awareness of their interests in relation to their reading selections)
- What are some of their favorite TV or movie characters?
- If they had to prioritize the following list, what would be their top three activities: being read to, reading, attending a movie or watching TV, listening to music, playing music, playing video-type games, or participating in sports?

When these questions are answered, we can truly begin to design our instruction to meet the needs of the whole child.

**Reading Conversations, Conferences, and Classroom Observations (Mind, Will, & Emotions)**

When you meet someone new the only way to get to know them well is through conversations and observations. Our students aren’t any different! During our first few weeks (and beyond) we spend a lot of time sitting side by side with our students, catching brief conversations as time allows. It is the teacher reading with, and connecting with, the child over a series of meetings. In the back of our minds we have the knowledge we gained from the interest inventories, interviews, and questionnaires, and now we can confirm our thoughts through simple conversation. It also begins a personal reading relationship that is intended to be natural and honest. Along with this, anecdotal observations of behaviors during independent reading will help to get to know that child as a reader and their reading behaviors during their autonomous stage.

**Example of Essential Artifacts for Learner Profile:**

- What connections have you made to your reading?
- What strategies were you using today when reading?
- What questions did you generate while reading today?
- Is this a “just right” match for you? Why or why not?

As assessment data is compiled, a picture profile of the whole child begins to emerge. There are many avenues of thought for teachers as they assess a child because reading isn’t a linear process. There are many “if-then” statements to be considered as we plan our instruction and interventions for all students.

While doing these assessments we must remember that children are ever-changing and fluctuating in their learning. This is a beginning point, where they are right now. As educators we must adjust to the fluctuation throughout the year. Remember, we are here to build on their successes; each and every child will be successful this year in their own unique way.
Responding to Intervention Needs

Once our academic and personal data is collected for each child’s profile, we are ready to determine which needs are crucial as a child’s next step in reading instruction. Armed with this complete picture of the whole child, we can determine instructional moves for our class via whole group instruction (read aloud and shared reading), small group instruction, and one-on-one instruction or conferring. We now have an instructional plan in place that is truly connected to our children’s literacy needs, as well as their personal interests, desires, and learning styles. This is what RTI is asking us to do—be responsive to the pertinent individual needs of our students so we can help them move forward in their academic growth. We have state and national standards that are expected for each grade level; however, we know that meeting the individual needs of our students in conjunction with meeting the state or national standards is important. If our instructional choices are catered to our students needs, we will be helping each student grow in their own unique way, while gaining momentum with the standards in place.

A large part of our job as educators is to get to know our students. We must meet them where they are and in return have them on a track that is expeditiously moving forward. We can only change their current level of knowledge by planning instruction that works for them, not against them. This is why beginning of the year assessments and observations are a pivotal start to the year. It is also most important to boost the confidence of our students and help them become successful in their learning. We cannot do this unless we know our students and respond to them as whole children! When each student knows we care about their success and wellbeing, they will care about our efforts to help them learn. Theodore Roosevelt once expressed a statement that we need to be reminded of today in our classrooms, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

As teachers, we must take these ideas that are so appealing on paper and put them into practice in our classrooms. The idea of accomplishing this can be daunting, but it’s possible. Below, Mr. Nick Leduc, an intermediate educator, shares how he puts RTI theory into practice:

I fill the first day of school with the emphasis on literacy. We read three picture books and I was able to begin to see each student as a thinker. With me reading, it takes the decoding skills out of the picture. I have already put them in reading partners and they sit on the floor near me as I read. The first book we read was Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes. They turned and talked to their partner several times during the reading. When the students are talking, it allows me to listen in to each conversation. As I am doing this, I can jot notes about each student. This allows me to begin to assess their thinking. So within twenty minutes of the start of the school year, I am beginning to make some choices for them in the coming months. Obviously, this type of informal data is not research based, nor usable in the traditional sense of assessment. However, I can use the information in my first meeting with each child, as I begin to create their learning profile.

This year, as I listened in, I heard Benjamin, a Bosnian son with an absent father, discussing his worries. He stated, “I get worried like Wemberly all the time. She is like me because I worry about school.” He went on to say, “I don’t want my teacher to yell at me.” Now, as the reading teacher, I realize that a small group would be most appropriate for him in the beginning of the year. He is a little nervous about teachers and is probably nervous about having a male teacher. If I were to formally
assess him on the first day, he will be nervous and I will not get an accurate assessment and it could begin a cycle of fear. We must know where they are coming from to get them where they need to be.

Next, after listening informally, a group conference will occur. This meeting happens during the first week of school and continues throughout the year. Benjamin, along with several other boys in the group, showed interest in Star Wars. Benjamin had a very simple picture book with a Star Wars theme. It was easy enough for all of them to read independently. I was listening for fluency and for “sounding out words,” their ability to show word analysis skills. The boys loved the book and I was able to learn pertinent information about each of them as readers. They also were able to walk away from the meeting having something in common. They all loved Star Wars and a friendship has grown.

In that same meeting, I listened as Benjamin read. He read in a different tone of voice than he talked and he had trouble decoding words. In my notes, I added that he may be reversing letters and not recognizing consistently occurring chunks of words. I knew right there that some “word work” was going to be necessary. I did not hear the same issues with the other boys, so I knew Benjamin and I were going to be practicing word work strategies. I was beginning to wonder if the visual processing of letters and numbers was an issue, or if he even had a strong command of phonemic awareness strategies such as isolating and identifying sounds or segmenting syllables.

The group meeting was a huge success. As Benjamin was beginning to trust me as a teacher, I wanted to meet with him one on one, but the time was not right yet. I knew I needed to formally assess him, but that could cause some stress, so I needed another very low-stress meeting to allow him to know that I wanted to help him become a better reader.

I decided to schedule a meeting with him during lunch by filling out a simple party invitation to join me. I told him that I had a great book that I thought he would like. With Benjamin, I was afraid that it would make him more nervous, so I just talked to him during lunch and made the date. I made him feel like it was the most amazing thing to do, for us to be able to read one of my favorite books together. The meeting was scheduled for independent reading time.

With the groundwork laid, he does not see me as an adversary or the owner of all learning. He now sees me as the coach that cares, or his partner in becoming a better reader. In our class, similar events happened in the first month with all of my students. Each gets a different treatment, but all of them see me as a person with their best interests at heart. They “don’t care how much I know, until they know how much I care.”

So, once my minilesson on the “manners of independent readers” was concluded, the other students went to their individual reading “nooks.” I made eye contact with Benjamin (he was grinning at me), and we met in my meeting place. I read the book to him, but purposely stumbled over some of the bigger words. I did some of the “fix-up” strategies that we will be using. I also told him that I struggled with sounding words out when I was a kid. He smiled when I made a mistake, and I accused him of laughing at my mistakes. He responded, “I mess up sounding out also.” Suddenly, we had something in common; my problem was his problem. I finished the book and we talked about his problems reading and he was very honest and forthcoming about how the words do not always make sense to him. I asked him if we could meet again so I could test his reading. He agreed and we “sealed the deal,” with our class’ secret handshake.

The next process is to identify more formal assessments to add to their learning profiles. From the results of the assessments, I begin to chart where I think I need to start with each student. At this stage it is important to not lump the students into tracks or groups. So, Benjamin and I met for his assessment and he leveled out to the equivalency of a first grade reader. He struggled in the areas of phonemic awareness, comprehension and fluency. The assessment makes sense to me and I was fully expecting this level of success, however I was more able to support him in the assessment. With all of the information that I have gathered, from informal conversations, shared reading, to the formal assessment, I am able to set up the methods that I will use to raise
that level to an acceptable third grade level. Solid initial instruction on “grade level” is the key, as well as “on his level” small-group support. It will not be an easy road, but if I expect him to make the investment in me, I must reciprocate. For right now, he and I are reading together very briefly during independent reading each day, and I have him reading aloud at home and school. He also meets with me in a group situation each day immediately after the minilesson. This helps him focus on his individual tasks during reading. I also will meet formally with his family and begin to look into how we can work as a team to support him.

I fully believe that each learner can make significant gains with specific focused instruction, patience, hard work, and a teacher that is a supporter, cheerleader and coach. With this start, Benjamin and I have laid the groundwork for a heavy bit of reading intervention. He will not be yelled at, humiliated, or singled out and I will have his back the entire way. More to come on Benjamin in future articles.

Valerie Ellery

has served the field of education with passion as a National Board Certified Teacher, curriculum specialist, reading coach, staff developer, and an award-winning international author and consultant.

These monthly articles will be written in collaboration with three National Board Certified Teachers, Amy Gaston, Lynne Kralik, and Nick Leduc to provide a classroom perspective. They are also certified Creating Strategic Readers Staff Developers with Valerie Ellery.

References


