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# EXAMINING THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATOR IN A RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION MODEL

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the special educator within a response-to-intervention (RTI) framework and to examine what instructional behaviors special educators evidence most frequently in the advanced RTI tiers. Seven special educators from the state of Kansas participated in this study. More than 7,000 minutes of observational data were collected, focusing on role components and instructional practices. Interviews were conducted with all participants. Data collected regarding the roles that special educators play showed that they are required to perform a wide array of tasks in various settings in collaboration with multiple professionals, students, and parents. Observations also showed that special educators are using their limited amount of instructional time in practices that produce the greatest effects, but there were little differences noted between instructional practices in the advanced tiers of instruction.

This study was conducted in three phases: pre-observation, observation, and post-observation. During the pre-observation phase, researchers asked the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) to nominate schools to include in the study, considering the following criteria: (a) nominated schools must be currently implementing RTI and (b) the list should include schools that were experienced in implementation (i.e., minimum of three years of implementation) and schools in the beginning of implementation.

During the observation phase, each teacher was observed for three consecutive, full school days (i.e., five minutes before the first bell of the day until five minutes after the last bell of the day). During each observation day, the researcher focused on two aspects of the role of special educators within an RTI framework: what tasks their role consisted of and what instructional practices they used throughout their day.

During the post-observation phase, the researcher conducted interviews with each participating teacher. The researcher also contacted teacher participants via phone to ask follow-up questions as necessary.

Figure 1 shows the combined results of observations of all seven teacher participants in regard to the roles they perform throughout the school day. The researcher recorded a total of 7,622 minutes of observation (i.e., three

## GOALS

This study examined the role and instructional behaviors of the special educator in a response-to-intervention (RTI) framework in regard to the following:

- The proportion of the special educator's time spent in four key roles: collaborator, interventionist, diagnostician, and manager
- The behaviors within each role in which special educators engage most frequently
- The instructional practices used most frequently by special educators
- The instructional practices used by special educators aligned with effective instructional practices that have been identified in empirical literature

## PROJECT STAFF

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school days per teacher, or 21 school days). As illustrated, the *Manager* role constituted the largest proportion of time (33 percent). Of that 33 percent, the data were broken down further to explain what tasks were included in the role component and what proportion of time was spent in each task (see Table 1). *Collaborator* and *Interventionist* constituted 27 percent of total time; specific tasks are listed in Tables 2 and 3. Finally, the *Diagnostician* role constituted 13 percent of the total. Further dividing the data on this component shows a detailed list of tasks and their proportion of occurrence (see Table 4).

Figure 1. Key role components data, all teachers combined

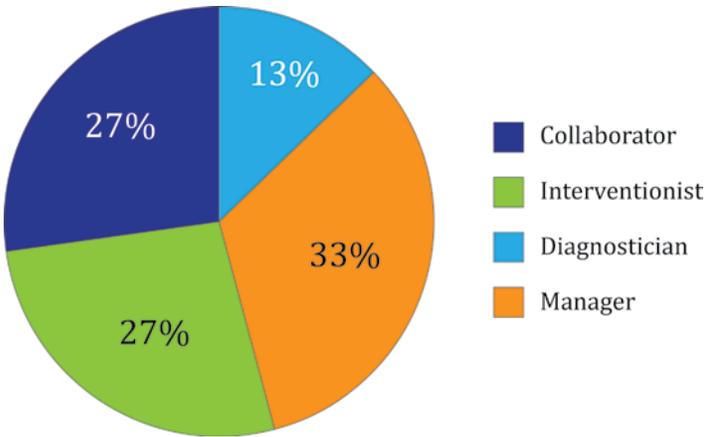


Table 1. Percentage of Time Spent in Manager Role Component Tasks

Tasks Within Manager Role Component	Percentage of Time in Specific Task
Doing Paperwork	53%
Conducting Meetings/Administrative Duties	13%
Providing Student Transport	10%
Doing Email	7%
Gathering Materials for Instruction	7%
Engaging in Off-Task Behaviors	7%
Tending to Personal Needs of Teacher	3%
Assisting with Personal Needs of Student	0.16%

Table 2. Percentage of Time Spent in Collaborator Role Component Tasks

Tasks Within Collaborator Role Component	Percentage of Time in Specific Task
Assisting in Classroom	23%
Consulting with Students/IEP	20%
Consulting with Students/Behavior	15%
Consulting with Paraprofessional/Student	10%
Consulting with Related Service Providers	9%
Scheduling and Managing Paraprofessional	7%
Providing Support to General Educators/Special Education Characteristics	6%
Providing Support to General Educators/Accommodations	5%
Communicating with Parents/IEP	3%
Providing Support to General Educators/Assessment and/or Intervention	1%
Providing Support to General Educators/Pedagogy	1%
Planning with General Educators	.4%

Table 3. Percentage of Time Spent in Interventionist Role Component Tasks

Tasks Within Interventionist Role Component	Percentage of Time in Specific Task
Using Evidence-Based Practices	42%
Providing Intensive Instruction	29%
Providing Supplemental Instruction	24%
Doing Ongoing Progress Monitoring	5%

Table 4. Percentage of Time Spent in Diagnostician Role Component Tasks

Tasks Within Diagnostician Role Component	Percentage of Time in Specific Task
Explaining/Discussing Assessment Results in RTI Team Meeting	24%
Explaining/Discussing Assessment Results in IEP Team Meeting	20%
Participating in Professional Development/Basic Skill Assessment	20%
Identifying Proper Accommodations/Modifications with Team	10%
Identifying Proper Level of Intervention with Team	8%
Participating in Professional Development/Functional Skill Assessment	6%
Implementing Special Education Eligibility Test	4%
Implementing Basic Skills Assessment	4%
Implementing Functional Skills Assessment	2%

The researcher gathered instructional practices data by watching the special educators while they were engaged in instruction and recording what instructional practices they were using every 30 seconds during instruction. Instructional practices were categorized as those with greatest effects and those with typical effects according to Hattie (2009). The results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Proportion of Time Spent by All Teachers Engaging in Instructional Practices with Greatest Effects vs. Typical Effects

Instructional Practices with Greatest Effects		Instructional Practices with Typical Effects	
Feedback	11.93%	Physical Observation	11.08%
Exposure to Reading	11.38%	Not Engaged in Instruction	9.24%
Manipulate/Generalize	10.21%	Lecture	2.05%
Fact/Concept Review	9.29%		
Giving Directions	8.95%		
On-going Assessment	8.20%		
Skill/Strategy Review	6.67%		
Modeling	4.63%		
Questioning	3.24%		
Video	1.96%		
Listening	1.06%		
Graphic Devices	0.07%		
Describing Skill/Strategy	0.04%		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>Total</b>
	<b>77.63%</b>		<b>22.37%</b>

The researcher also analyzed instructional data according to the tier within an RTI framework in which it took place (Tier 2 or Tier 3), as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Proportion of Instructional Time Spent Engaging in Instructional Practices with Greatest Effects and Typical Effects in Advanced Tiers

Instructional Practices with Greatest Effects			Instructional Practices with Typical Effects		
	Tier 2	Tier 3		Tier 2	Tier 3
Feedback	11.32%	12.64%	Physical Observation	19.63%	5.71%
Exposure to Reading	12.82%	10.73%	Not Engaged in Instruction	6.63%	9.98%
Manipulate/Generalize	11.41%	11.22%	Lecture	1.68%	2.34%
Fact/Concept Review	8.40%	10.41%			
Giving Directions	9.37%	8.25%			
On-going Assessment	5.48%	9.32%			
Skill/Strategy Review	1.50%	9.06%			
Modeling	5.84%	3.57%			
Questioning	2.92%	2.74%			
Video	0.97%	2.97%			
Listening	2.03%	0.89%			
Graphic Devices	0.00%	0.12%			
Describing Skill/Strategy	0.00%	0.06%			
	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>72.06%</b>	<b>81.97%</b>		<b>27.94%</b>	<b>18.03%</b>

# RESEARCH DESIGN

PRE-OBSERVATION



OBSERVATION



POST-OBSERVATION

## CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First, special educators were found to spend more than a third of their total time engaged in managerial tasks such as paperwork and emails. Of their time spent in managerial tasks, 55 percent of time was spent completing paperwork, which amounts to about 17 percent of their total time spent as special educators. This is equal to about one day per week spent completing paperwork.

Second, special educators spent about a fourth of their time in the role of Collaborator, but the specific tasks they engaged in that constituted collaboration varied. Three of the seven teachers spent a proportion of their time in the general education classroom while the remaining four teachers were not observed in the general education classroom at all.

"...They are wonderful teachers, but I see that line in the sand and I said 'OK' and came back to my side. I am still waiting, kind of standing there...but at this point it is definitely, it is two different things (i.e., special education and general education). It is two different islands."

—Teacher referring to collaboration with general educator

The teachers who collaborated with general educators shared responsibility with general educators in each tier of instruction. The four teachers who did not collaborate with general educators saw their role as only providing services in Tier 3, where collaboration was required with students, parents, paraprofessional, and related service providers. Additionally, collaboration with paraprofessionals constituted a significant proportion of time spent in the Collaborator role by all but one of the teachers in this study.

Third, in the RTI models in which the special educators worked, the way in which students with disabilities were identified differed from traditional methods. Four of the seven teachers did not administer achievement or IQ tests to make special education eligibility decisions but instead they were responsible for gathering and

"I think the paperwork...that is huge...being the only [special education] teacher in my building...my situation (i.e., one person to complete all required paperwork) is a lot of missed instruction time...a lot!"

—Teacher referring to time spent in manager role and doing paperwork

analyzing curriculum-based measures to identify students with needs. Two of the three teachers who were still using achievement and IQ tests expressed that the longer their school implemented RTI and the more experienced they became with curriculum-based mea-

sures, the less their role would require them to use the traditional methods of identification.

Fourth, one-quarter of the special educators' time was spent engaged in tasks related to instruction. Out of that fourth, three-fourths of the instructional time was spent engaging in instructional practices that produce the greatest effects (Hattie, 2009). This means that only 19 percent of their total role was spent in instructional practices that previous research has shown to yield the greatest effects. Again this is equivalent to approximately one day per week being devoted to effective instructional practices.

Finally, instruction in Tiers 2 and 3 were found to be generally the same with the exception of the occurrence of the special educator engaged in physical observation substantially more in Tier 2 than Tier 3. This occurrence can be explained by the fact that those teachers who were engaged in Tier 2 instruction were being used in the general education classroom by the general educator to conduct physical observation of students during the general educators' delivery of instruction.

## REFERENCES

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York: Routledge.