

Using Formal Assessments along with Response to Intervention for Students with Learning Disability in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to understand the importance of response to intervention with formal assessments in the public school systems in the United States and transfer this knowledge in order in introducing response to intervention with formal assessments in Saudi Arabia. An interpretivism theoretical perspective was used in this phenomenological study, which included structured interviews with three participants in the special education field. Three themes that emerged from the findings were divided as follows; implementation of assessments in the United States, importance of response to intervention, and the current situation of assessments and response to intervention in Saudi Arabia's educational system. Participants agreed that in order to apply response to intervention in Saudi Arabia, it is important to assure the establishment of response to intervention and formal assessments by encouraging policy makers, teachers, and parents to work as a team in order to create laws that will support the implementation of response to intervention.

Keywords: Response to Intervention (RTI), formal assessments, learning disabilities.

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Assessments are the backbone of special education; professionals use them to identify the present levels of performance, strengths and needs of students, monitor progress towards goals, and to determine eligibility for special education services. Appropriate and valid assessments are critical to making informed decisions regarding a student's education. According to the Federal register (2010), "These assessments are intended to play a critical role in educational systems; [to] provide administrators, educators, parents, and students with the data and information needed to continuously improve teaching and learning".

Early identification of problems and data based decision-making and intervention is one of the goals of assessments. Early identification processes, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), are important to identify students with disabilities, such as learning disabilities (LD) and to possibly prevent students from failing. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2008) define RTI as a method by which to identify students who are academically at risk. For the purpose of this article we use Berkeley et al. (2009) definition of RTI, "RtI can be defined as student-centered assessment models that use problem-solving and research-based methods to identify and address learning difficulties in children."

Students at risk for special education services perform below their peers, struggle to maintain at par academic level in the classroom, and need extra support. Moreover, Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2008) point out that "RTI is meant to provide earlier intervention and prevention and more valid disabilities identification" (pp. 71-72) by constantly monitoring students' academic progress. In this regard, Gatti (2004) discussed the need for a system to benefit all children, especially those who have a learning disability (LD). According to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) (2011), a learning disability " is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are: reading, writing, listening,

speaking, reasoning, and doing math.” In order to provide the best services for students’ assessments, screening, and intervention there are processes that should be used in all school settings. Gatti (2004) claimed that classrooms and education should, in order to best support students and to improve lifelong skills, use both formal assessments and RTI.

There are several formal assessments in the United States. These tests serve to evaluate student achievement, development, and behavior for students with special needs. Many of these various assessment tools are standardized so that students may be easily evaluated and identified. McLoughlin and Lewis (2008) mentioned that assessments for special education are a systematic process used to make important decisions regarding a student’s education. Formal assessments are “designed to compare the performance of one individual to that of a normative group” (McLoughlin and Lewis, 2008, p. 9). These assessments can aid in identifying students who may have learning disabilities. Using both RTI and formal assessments together, educators can ensure the most accurate identification possible.

Currently, students with LD in Saudi Arabia are diagnosed by what Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) refer to as the “Wait-to-Fail Method.” This implies that a student must fail even before educators notice that the student has a learning disability. Consequently, students end up even further behind in their education than they would be if they were diagnosed earlier. As a native Saudi Arabian teacher, the primary researcher found that schools in Saudi Arabia do not have a history of using formal assessments or implementing a system similar to RTI. Few laws exist in special education that demand evidence-based research in formal assessment methods and RTI processes. Evidence-based on research is essential to support the necessity of using RTI and formal assessments in schools in order to prevent students from being left behind in the classroom.

The problem addressed in this study springs from the lack of formal assessment and early intervention processes, as well as the lack of research-based evidence on formal assessment, intervention, and identification process Saudi Arabia. The goal of this study is to examine the history of RTI in the United States and to understand professionals' perspectives on using the RTI process as an alternative means of identifying student who have a learning disability. This study will be helpful in informing researchers who use similar attempts to improve the identification and intervention processes in Saudi Arabia by implementing RTI and formal assessments. The findings of this study will also support the development of teamwork between educators, teachers, and parents to build laws that support the use of RTI in Saudi Arabian schools. To assist in illuminating some factors on this issue, this research addressed the following research questions: (a) How do the RTI model and assessments aid in preventing students with learning disability from failing in the United States? (b) How might the RTI model and assessments aid in preventing students with learning disability from failing in schools in Saudi Arabia?

Method

This research study was based on qualitative methodology, in which acquired descriptive detailed data was collected directly from the participants. The findings are presented in the voice of participants, and interpretation is based on their different answers and points of views (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), qualitative researchers use research and participants to address or describe the problem. This study is classified as a phenomenological study, which, according to Merriam (1998), concentrates on the construction of an experience or a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomena being examined was the role of Response to Intervention (RTI) and formal assessment in identifying students with learning disabilities (LD) and possibly preventing these students from failing.

Theoretical background of the study

The theory of interpretivism was the underlying basis for this qualitative study. The purpose of interviewing the participants was to understand and investigate their different interpretations on the role and advantages of applying RTI and assessments. According to Crotty (2004) “interpretivism was conceived in reaction to the effort to develop a natural science of the social” (p. 67). In addition, Crotty clarified that the interpretivist researcher interprets data and findings and may check with other experts regarding those interpretations. Using interpretivism will help to establish the difference between the theory and the application of a process. Thus, this study will help educators to understand the practical application of RTI. The interpretivism theory fits well within a phenomenological research design by gathering data based on personal experience in order to understand the phenomena, which is using RTI in the classroom, as opposed to a theoretical point of view.

Personal research stance

The primary researcher received her teaching license for special education in Saudi Arabia. She spent six years teaching as an elementary teacher for students with learning disabilities. While working as a teacher in Saudi Arabia, she observed that there were gaps in process and a lack of appropriate services and intervention for students with learning disabilities which could help them before they fail in classes. From her experience, the educational system in Saudi Arabia embodies the wait-to-fail method when identifying special needs. Currently, the primary researcher is a doctoral student in a special education program at a mid-sized public university in the Rocky Mountain western United States. Having spent few years in the educational system in the United States, she has had the opportunity to learn more about RTI and how RTI works with formal assessments. During this time, her observations of the schools in the United States, especially, the implementation of RTI aligned with formal assessments, led her to conduct research about the advantages of applying

RTI and assessments and the possibilities of adapting these processes in Saudi Arabian schools. Consequently, she interviewed participants who have experience with RTI and assessments with learning disabled students. As Merriam (1998) writes, the researcher “uses data that are the participant’s and the investigator’s firsthand experience of the phenomenon” (p. 12).

Participants and Setting

Merriam (1998) writes that using a non-random sampling is the most practical method for qualitative research. Qualitative research also relies on choosing a sample base that allows the researcher to discover the most valid and relevant information. For this study, the researchers selected a sample base to gain insight about RTI and formal assessments. Based off of Merriam’s method about qualitative studies, using purposeful, convenience sampling methods, three participants were chosen who have both expertise and experience in special education, and who are familiar with using RTI in the elementary school setting. Moreover, each of these participants were able to provide unique views on using RTI, as they had different educational backgrounds and worked, as educators and administrators, in different districts in the Rocky Mountain area.

Researchers followed the university procedures for working with human subjects. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained throughout the study by assigning a pseudonym to each of the participants, as was also done with the school district name.

Participant Descriptions

Creswell (2007) pointed out that in a phenomenological study, the participants must have experienced the phenomenon to be qualified to express their own experiences and views about it. These three individuals, two females and one male, chosen for the study have theoretical and practical experience in RTI and assessment; therefore, they made excellent candidates to interview. The participants were also selected in part because

they could relate the information provided about Saudi Arabia to the student population that they worked with on a daily basis. Moreover, as RTI is a new phenomenon in the United States, the participants have active roles in developing the RTI process in the United States. Although the participants were from the United States, the primary researcher described the current situation in the public schools regarding the identification and intervention for student in Saudi Arabia.

Rebecca is a faculty member in a mid-sized public university in the Rocky Mountain area of the United States where she teaches special education graduate courses and trains special education teachers in RTI. She additionally works as a special education teacher in a large public high school that encompasses students from a variety of different ethnicities and backgrounds. She has been working as a special educator at this school for ten years. RTI has been implemented in the school for one year. Ashley is a principal in a small primarily Hispanic public elementary school, where she took the leadership role in implementing RTI. Her background also includes working as a special educator for several years. Matt has five years of experience as a principal in a small elementary school. This school teaches students from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. He has an educational background in special education and general education. He is preparing to use RTI in the next school year at his elementary school. Both Mrs. Ashley and Mr. Matt are leaders in the RTI team and have been actively using RTI for all students in their respective schools. Furthermore, each participant was involved in statewide training in using RTI. Thus, while the number of participants may be considered small, each participant has varied experiences and shared diverse views and perspectives to answer the two research questions. Two participants are veteran implementers of RTI and therefore, could speak to the long terms effects and implications of RTI while one participant, as a new implementer for RTI, could speak to the rationale for and challenges of initial implementation of RTI in their school.

Method of data collection

The basic purpose of the phenomenological method in this study, described succinctly Creswell (2007), “is to reduce individual experience with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). This study used a series of individual interviews in order to collect data about RTI and assessments. Creswell (2007) continues by saying that “the important point is to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it” (p.131). The phenomenon in this study was the role of RTI and formal assessments to potentially prevent students who are at risk of having learning disabilities from failing. The role of RTI was described and explained by individuals who have experienced and observed the process. The participants were asked specific questions about the RTI processes and assessments for students with learning disability.

Procedures

Following Merriam’s (1989) methods, the participants’ interviews were audio recorded using a digital audio recorder to assure clarity, accuracy and detailed field notes. The first author conducted all the interviews individually, in a single meeting, at a mutually convenient place and time. Each semi-structured, in-depth interview lasted approximately 40-50 minutes. Expert opinion was sought from a colleague who is immersed in qualitative research to ensure the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. Questions included some basic information about the participants’ professional and educational background followed by open-ended questions on participants’ perspectives on the use of RTI. Specifically, the following questions were used during the interview: 1) How was RTI effective to help identify students who need to be referred to special education? 2) Regarding assessments, what is the role of a) formal assessments in diagnosing students with special needs? b) informal assessments in diagnosing students with special needs? and 3) In your professional opinion, what do you think will be required in order to

implement laws regarding RTI and formal assessments in Saudi Arabia? These questions served as guiding questions only and the interviewer frequently asked the interviewee to expand upon an aspect of their responses to ensure that the question was answered or to seek clarification.

Furthermore, some questions were not directly asked if the interviewer felt that the question had already been thoroughly addressed by the respondent. At the end of the interview each participant was provided an opportunity to add anything else that may not have been covered by the interviewer or to provide any final comments. At each subsequent interview, additional questions or comments that addressed the emerging themes that had arisen during previous participant interviews were added as appropriate in order to seek the interviewee's views on them. The data were collected during the spring academic semester of 2009. Following the university procedures in working with human subjects, participants were mailed an explanation of the purpose of the study and the consent form in advance to allow time to be read and sign the form.

Analysis of Data

According to Merriam (1998), the data in qualitative research are analyzed based on the content of the interviews and other documentation collected during the research study. Moreover, Creswell (2007) mentions that in a phenomenological analysis, the researcher must follow guidelines in order to analyze and then group the data from specific phrases and meanings into themes. When the data are grouped into these themes, the researcher can then present a description of the phenomenon. Overall, the processes of sorting and coding the data into themes become the “core elements of qualitative data analysis.” (Creswell, 2007 p. 148) Moreover, the concept of triangulation as described by Merriam (1998) was employed by using multiple sources of data from multiple professionals who worked in different schools and settings in different capacities to help establish validity. Continuous respondent validation was also sought during the interview to further ensure the credibility of the results. While conducting

this research study, both Merriam's (1998) method of collecting the data and Creswell's (2007) guidelines of sorting the data were adopted. In this study, the analyzed data were organized in themes based on the participant's responses, which discussed the phenomena based on the participants' different views and answers. The three themes emerged are as follows: a) implementation of assessments in the United States b) importance of response to intervention c) situation of assessments and response to intervention in Saudi Arabia. In the third theme, in reference to the current situation of assessments and response to intervention in Saudi Arabia, the data were further split into two additional sub-themes: Adopting formal assessments used in the United States in Saudi Arabia and implementing RTI in Saudi Arabia. Below we discuss the findings from the investigation.

Findings

Many educators have traditionally relied on aptitude-achievement tests to identify student with learning disabilities (LD), which typically do not demonstrate the true abilities of students. Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, and Saunders (2009) support the idea that the discrepancy between achievement tests and IQ often lead to misdiagnosis, either from diagnosing too many students who do not need interventions or missing students who do need interventions. According to Mr. Matt "it will no longer be the discrepancy model" that will be used to identify students with LD. In order to solve this problem in the educational system, various experts have discussed alternative methods of assessment, such as RTI.

RTI refers to individual, comprehensive, student-centered assessment models that apply a problem-solving framework to identify and address a student's learning difficulties (Deshler, Mellard, Tollefson, & Byrd, 2005). Mrs. Rebecca stated, "RTI will help to identify students who may currently not be identified and it will help us to reach students who may need help but should not be identified as special ed."

Implementation of assessments in the United States

Currently, there are a variety of formal and informal assessment models in the United States that evaluate achievement, development, and behavior of students with special needs. Many of these various assessment tools are standardized so that students with LD may be easily identified and evaluated. Participants mostly agreed that formal and informal assessments are important. However, there was agreement amongst participants that formal assessment provides the baseline data about students' achievement. On the other hand, there are some participants who preferred informal assessments because they believe that these assessments are more in-depth and detailed. In this regard, Mrs. Ashley stated,

Informal assessments would be a little less in identifying special ed. students than the formal assessment. And I think that you do have to have some formalized, standardized test because I can, as a teacher, make an informal assessment and set students up to fail if I want to, I can make an assessment for my student that I know they aren't going to be able to pass if I really wanted to push them into special ed. But if I use a formal assessment that's standardized and based on norms and state standards then it takes that, piece out of it. So I think they [formal assessment] still need to be there but it ultimately starts with informal and leads up to the more formalized process.

McLoughlin and Lewis (2008) mentioned that since assessment for special education is a systematic process used to make important decisions regarding a student's education, it is important to understand the definition of formal assessments, standardized tests, and achievement tests. Mrs. Rebecca considered the balance between the formal and informal assessments;

They [formal and informal assessments] both have a place [in education] and I think that sometimes we tend to not look at the informal piece. [Informal assessments is] in fact the piece that a classroom teacher is

going to be doing every single day and if you teach a classroom teacher how to use that informal assessment diagnostically . . . [it] can then be used formally. If you just watch the child, observe them, and document that, that is important information as well.”

Using diagnostic tests provides teachers with valuable information regarding a student’s needs. The goal is that the more detailed the information is for the teacher to act on, the better the potential education a student will receive during his or her academic years. Furthermore, Mr. Matt highlighted the importance of the teachers’ role in the assessment process, “the results of formal assessment from a good teacher are simply acknowledging what that teacher already knows through many informal interactions. There’s a real balance to it and right now I think the balance is too strongly towards the formal.”

Moreover, Mrs. Ashley added that “I absolutely think that formal assessments, [and] standardized assessments are key to labeling a child special ed. Otherwise you run the risk of having a child that just has [a] personality conflict with the teacher [meaning] you have a child that’s going to be stuck in special ed. forever when it was really they [the student] just needed a different way of looking at . . . [the] instruction.”

In addition to standardized tests, screening and methods of early intervention should also be an ongoing process. Speece and Case (2001) recommended that ongoing assessments and evaluations are the most beneficial and accurate method to identify children with special needs as well as students who show signs of academic failure. This aligned with what Mrs. Ashley mentioned,

We use it as one piece of data after a child has be[en] sent on to the Special Ed. referral process It does help, it just gives more information about the student [and] how the student learns, are they having auditory processing difficulties, are they a special learner are they a visual

learner. . . . It's one of the last pieces of data that's actually collected in the RTI process.

Moreover, Mr. Matt mentioned the importance of sharing the results with the students themselves in the RTI process,

...And a little test that you give, a small one you can say "here's where you did well, here's where you didn't do so well' you can do an immediate error analysis with the child. . . . [and] help them go through the thinking of the test rather than simply giving them some kind of score."

Importance of Response to Intervention

Recently, in the United States, there has been more support and evidence for the use of RTI in public schools. A more recent use of RTI and other intervention systems is noted by Grigorenko (2009): "The U.S. education system has been using problem-solving approaches to instruction for many years" (p. 123). Grigorenko (2009) continues to mention that many of these early intervention systems, while used, have not been under the name Response to Intervention, but have been known by several other names, depending on the school or the state. Adding to this notion of a more recent trend towards increasing use of RTI in schools, Mr. Matt pointed out,

"The reason that RTI is happening now in the United States is sometimes . . . kids would not qualify for special education because they were low in their IQ and they were low in their performance. Only if they were high in their IQ and low in their performance were they getting into special education. So RTI says, we need to be able to help all kids."

The Wait-to-Fail tradition has been a limitation in education for many years. It does not adjust to a student's needs in a timely and economical manner. Mr. Matt mentioned, "If you have an intervention you're trying, you don't want to wait until the end of the year to see if it's working."

Thomas (2007) stressed, “This Response to Intervention (RTI) Model provides a new window for school leaders to view special education and general education” (p. 1). He endorsed the idea that RTI would provide better education to all students, particularly those with learning disabilities, because it moves away from the achievement discrepancy model. Mr. Matt agreed,

“One of the things about RTI is that it helps teaching. Teachers recognize that it’s a continuum. It’s not like you have a kid who’s special ed and a kid who’s not – there’s a whole range in between So it really is very effective but again it’s just plain good teaching.”

Kavale, Holdnack, and Mostert (2005) differentiate between the current aptitude-achievement model and the RTI model. In the aptitude-achievement model, a student who initially tests poorly will be referred to special services, although the initial evaluations are not always specific enough to provide the correct services. Mrs. Ashley pointed out,

“With RTI there is such a focus on data-based instruction and such a focus on data collection that instead of dealing with the teacher saying ‘well I think he has a problem,’ and ‘I think he’d be better here,’ and ‘I don’t think he’s really made much progress,’ it takes a lot of guess work out of it – we don’t really go off the teacher’s gut anymore. It’s ‘show me the data. How do you know he’s not learning,’ and it’s you can’t just give up on a kid, they have to try different interventions before they push them out into special ed. So it’s been very effective.

When compared to RTI, conversely, if an instructor notices that a student is not succeeding in the classroom the student may be identified for interventions with the help of the teacher’s observations. Afterwards, if the initial accommodations do not work for the student, the teacher may easily make a second report to apply new accommodations. Mr. Matt said,

I really like the kind of instruction where you can get individual responses from students fairly readily. For example they might have a little

12- by -12 piece of white board with a marker and they're asked to give the solution to a problem, they all write the problem and hold it up. That way the teacher gets a really informal quick spot check of which kids are really following along well and they each get to have their own individual responses instead of just the one student that gets called on raises their hand."

Kavale, Holdnack, and Mostert (2005) describe the ideal process of RTI: if the students show improvement then an intervention is no longer necessary, and then the student returns to the standard curriculum. After an intervention has been in place and the student does not respond, then a more intensive intervention would be needed. If the student still does not respond to the more intensive intervention, then the student might be diagnosed with a learning disability after a thorough evaluation by a multidisciplinary team, and even more intensive remedial services would be required

Mr. Matt gives an example of the RTI process: "If you look at the eight learning disabilities that there are – that are being designated under RTI, many of them are around reading."

If a student continues to function poorly in the classroom, RTI steps would continue until the student is provided appropriate services in or out of the classroom, which support academic achievement. As Mr. Matt Pointed out, "We tried something we knew worked for most kids – if it did work, we kept doing it, if it didn't work, we found something else. So that was our evaluation as it was at one point but now, there is more documentation around the official RTI designation that has to take place."

Current Status of Use of Assessments and Response to Intervention in Saudi Arabia.

There are a number of noticeable differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia regarding the use of early intervention, formal assessments, and the implementation of these practices. Currently, in Saudi

Arabia, students are evaluated through informal testing conducted by teachers. To assess students who potentially have LD, teachers take materials from the curriculum and make a test with which students are assessed. If the student does not pass the test, the teacher will test using materials from the grade level that is lower. Unfortunately, this procedure takes considerable time and is not very accurate. Saudi Arabian students with learning disabilities may not receive intervention early enough to be truly beneficial.

Students with LD in Saudi Arabian schools experience the Wait-to-Fail practice in which they do not receive special services until they fail and need to repeat the class. Often, a general educator will tell a special needs educator that a student is not performing the same as the other students. Subsequently, parents will seek more information from the general educator as to why their child is not succeeding in the classroom or behaving in a similar manner to his or her siblings or other peers. These comments are what prompt the referral steps to begin the student's process of informal assessments, observation, and building an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Eventually, after this long and delayed procedure, students at risk for LD and potentially needing services will be enrolled into a resource room for support services.

Teachers in Saudi Arabia typically expect that all students will understand the curriculum equally without differentiating between the students' needs or taking into account students with LD. Unfortunately, students with LD are usually unable to understand full curriculum and/or some of the materials taught in class. Some teachers fail to keep in mind the capacity of individual students, and the abilities of students with LD given their different needs. Chidsey (2005) expanded upon this problem, "a reading disability becomes a problem when the teacher expects the students to study text they cannot read Since these problems are created in relation to environmental demands, they are situation-centered rather than person-centered" (p. 20). The previous thought explains the

current special education environment in Saudi Arabia. Chidsey (2005) discussed the idea of a situation-centered form of education. In other words, there is a perception that people should have the same educational needs. In Saudi Arabian schools, assessment is situation-centered, as students are all perceived to have equal learning abilities and learning capacity.

Regarding the current situation in Saudi Arabia, participants in this study mentioned three main issues that would help the implementation of RTI and formal assessments in Saudi Arabia. The findings regarding the implementation of RTI and formal assessments reflect the issues mentioned by participants. The findings for this area are subcategorized into three segments.

Recommendations for adopting assessments used in the U.S. for use in Saudi Arabia

In order to assist with early identification of learning disabilities and other disabilities in Saudi Arabia, the participants agreed that it could be beneficial to use the formal assessments used in the United States. However, these assessments should be taken under careful considerations. Mr. Matt suggested, “In some ways it is okay to use American assessments in Saudi Arabia. [However], a good assessment will confirm what a good teacher knows already.”

The unique characteristics, attributes, and needs of students and their families from diverse backgrounds must be considered when collecting data. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires that assessment teams take into account a child’s English language proficiency status as well as a child’s experiences and cultural background. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) also emphasizes that special educators need to understand the effects that culture, language and other variables have upon the assessment process in order to make the assessment process culturally responsive (CEC, 2001). Similarly,

participants stressed that although the tests developed in U.S. could be useful, it is important to consider culture differences. Mrs. Rebecca supported this idea,

“[Formal assessments] would have to be more than just translated, I think that people from Saudi Arabia would have to go through and make it culturally correct There are tests that are not language specific that could be used – some of the cognitive tests that could be used no matter what language a child speaks.”

Implementing RTI in Saudi Arabia

Since Saudi Arabia does not have an early intervention process or RTI, the participants were interviewed to gain insight regarding the best methodology to introduce RTI to Saudi Arabia. Participants had several ideas regarding the most effective strategies to introduce RTI. However, there were several ideas that were similar across the interviews. One similarity among the participants was the idea that many people, including teachers, would be hesitant to include students with LD or adopt a new method of identifying students who need support. Mrs. Ashley suggested,

“[When introducing RTI] I wouldn’t even call it RTI or tell the teachers that you’re going to force them to integrate students. Instead of pushing people to include kids in their curriculum they have to show the data [teachers need data on why] that the kid is not learning, number one, and number two, what have they done to encourage them to learn. So I do believe that if you focus more on data than on the actual process of integration you’ll get farther with people who are maybe reluctant to keep students in their classroom.”

Another idea that was expressed by participants was the need for change to happen gradually within the education community. As Mrs. Rebecca suggested,

“I think you always start with what we are doing currently. .because it’s important when you are going to change a system that you

have people who are already in the system so you can . . . take what is working now. [For example] teachers who have already been working in the system can go back and say ‘this is what works, how about if we start adding this?’ and slowly integrating what is working in the US with what works with Saudi Arabia. If you look at what’s worked and what hasn’t across different countries and then look to countries that are similar and integrate slowly I think it’s the best process.”

Mrs. Rebecca continued to emphasize the idea

“... that a lot of informal pieces will be used initially, and that the first levels that we are going to be using [is] a lot of teacher observation, teacher developed tests as well as some of the more aptitude achievement tests, that there will be a place for them. And again there will be those other interventions that will take place –it will be do we assess this child or not.”

G.J. Duhon et al. (2009) mention the importance of how the outcome of interventions in education plays a role in changing educational policies. Duhon et al. (2009) write that RTI and other early intervention methods have shown to be an effective form of data collection for teachers, especially when referring a child for special education services

Regarding the implementation of laws, the participants agreed that changes in the law need to spring from a community wide effort. Additionally, they mentioned that laws cannot change overnight, they need to be given time to become recognized. Often laws are created by what the citizens need. Mrs. Ashley supported this idea when she stated, “I think it was 1970 something [that] the first special ed. law [was written] that said “you will educate all students.” Until that happened, there were some students that never got education because they had disabilities.” She continued:

“[The change in laws is going to] come from citizens pushing the government to make the law but it takes the government to enforce the law

in order to insure that all students have the access to free and appropriate education. It definitely comes from bottom up.”

Mrs. Rebecca supported Mrs. Ashley’s ideas by stating:

“I always have thought of the special ed laws as coming from parents because that’s how it all started and I think, I know that no matter what culture, parents around the world want the same thing. They may verbalize it in different ways but, bottom line, all mothers, all fathers want the same thing for their children.”

Mrs. Rebecca continued:

“[To change the laws in Saudi Arabia] I think it’s going to take a team of people that represent different areas. I think it’s going to take teachers, parents, and possibly even students that are going to speak from their different aspects of what they need. There are going to have to be government representatives that represent the power that can then say ‘this is how it will come about’.”

Conclusion

A qualitative study was conducted to understand the perspectives of teachers and administrators who use RTI in the United States with the aim of gaining an insight into the process they used to implement the RTI model to aid in preventing students with learning disability from failing in the United States. This knowledge will support the implementation of RTI in the Saudi Arabia. The participants emphasized the importance of RTI as a meaningful tool, along with formal assessments, for identification of learning and behavioral problems. They believed it can be used to improve instructional quality and provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school. Participants also shared their perspectives on the possible barriers in implementation of RTI in Saudi Arabia and provided suggestions to overcome these barriers.

Given the importance and use of RTI as established in the United States there is an immediate need to begin a dialogue at the policy and practice level amongst all stakeholders in Saudi Arabia—parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and policymakers-- to use RTI as a means of early screening and identification of students who may need additional supports and modification to succeed in schools. While study has some limitations [e.g. participants are representative of one geographical area in the United States., sample size may be considered small, and richer sources of data such as students and parents interviews, classroom observations are missing], this study is important in that it will provide a basic framework for this dialogue and discussion. In our extensive literature search we were unable to find another study that seeks to answer the questions or provide suggestions for the use of RTI in Saudi Arabia.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations and suggestions for further research were derived from the results of several studies and discussion of participants involved in this study. Since implementing assessments and RTI in Saudi Arabia is challenging due to the lack of strong research, formal assessments that can be used specific in the cultural and geographical context, and early intervention for learning or problem behaviors in schools, additional concerns need to be addressed. Participants recommended that parents, teachers, and policy makers work as a team in order to develop laws that will support the RTI process, thus assuring the establishment of RTI and formal assessments. Thus, it is imperative that all stakeholders who are invested in the success of children in the schools investigate, example through focus groups, the most effective and resourceful process needed to implement RTI taking into account Saudi Arabia 's available resources and cultural, social, and political context. This may results in revising existing laws or establishing new laws supporting the implementation of RTI and formal assessments in

Saudi Arabian schools. The benefits of evidence-based research will lend itself to supporting new laws and standards throughout public schools in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, evidence-based research, updated laws and policies will lead to a more successful implementation of RTI processes across the country from elementary schools to high schools.

In order to successfully implement the steps needed to implement RTI, teamwork among policy makers, educators from different backgrounds, and parents, is critical in order to support the process of change. Additional research is recommended in order to improve the implementation of RTI in schools, and researchers should investigate why many educators and other professionals often have concerns with RTI. Moreover, more research is indicated to see how long interventions need to be provided and how much improvement is necessary in order to benefit students.

In conclusion, because there is a lack of laws, research, formal assessments, and early intervention, there must be a gradual, but great deal of change in special education policies, education, and research in Saudi Arabia. With the help of evidence-based research, policymakers in Saudi Arabia can begin to establish laws that will ultimately create a better educational environment for all students. This change should come from existing successful models (legal and educational) that are used in the United States and then be adapted to the cultural, linguistic, and economic needs in Saudi Arabia. Finally, policymakers in Saudi Arabia who work in special education must encourage more research that will ultimately work to support the needs of students with LD.

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