

RESPONSE TO INSTRUCTION AS A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE SERVICE DELIVERY FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ON BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study examined Response to instruction (RTI) as model for sustainable service delivery for learners with learning disabilities with emphasis on teachers' perceptions on benefits and challenges. Two objectives and two research questions were framed as a guide and collected data were analysed using relative important index (RII) statistical analysis. The research employed a cross-sectional survey methodology involving population of 892 teachers and 463 respondents were purposively sampled for the study. Data were collected through the use of a self-structured questionnaire tagged: “*Teachers Perception on RTI Questionnaire (TPRTIQ)*”. The instrument was validated and trial tested and yield a reliability coefficient of .76 and .81 respectively, the instrument had section A, which focused on biodata of participants and section B consist of 23 items with four points Likert response scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD), items 1 to 12 focused on benefits of RTI and 13 to 23 was on challenges of the model. The findings indicated that teachers acknowledged challenges such as insufficient financial resources, difficulties in monitoring instructional progress, resistance to change and inaccurate needs assessment data, lack of specialists in the field, support personnel when using the model. Base on the finding, it was recommended that, continuous professional development of personnel, effective data collection and management, appropriate funding, legal and policy support for quality and sustainable service delivery for learners with learning disabilities should be promoted.



Keywords: Response to Intervention, Sustainability, Learning Disabilities, Teachers' Perception.

Introduction

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model of service delivery propounded by Edward L. Thorndike in 1905 is a framework that aims at providing early and targeted interventions to students with learning disabilities and other related academic or behavioural disorders. It is a multi-tiered approach that involves three levels of intervention. At the first tier, all students receive high-quality instruction and interventions in the general education setting. This universal instruction is designed to meet the needs of the majority of students. In the second tier, students who are not making adequate progress receive targeted interventions that are more intensive and individualized. These interventions are provided in small groups or individually and are designed to address specific skill deficits. In the third tier, students who continue to struggle despite receiving targeted interventions receive even more intensive and individualised interventions. These interventions may involve specialised instruction, additional support with instructional accommodations, increase frequency and close monitoring of progress (Hawken, Vincent & Schumann, 2018, Alsalamah, 2020, Obi & Adie et al 2020).

The RTI model emphasises the use of evidence-based practices and data-driven decision-making process. It relies on ongoing assessment and progress monitoring to determine the

effectiveness of interventions and make decisions about the need for additional support. This data-driven approach allows educators to identify students who are not responding to interventions and make more informed decisions about their educational needs as there is evidence to support the effectiveness or otherwise of the RTI model in improving outcomes for students. (Hawken et al., 2018; Denton, 2022).

Denton (2012) and Alsalamah, (2020) has shown that RTI can lead to improved reading outcomes for students at risk of reading difficulties as well as effectively reduce disruptive behaviours among students with emotional disturbances. However, it is important to note that there are also concerns and challenges associated with the implementation of RTI. These include issues related to the identification of students, the lack of empirical support, and the potential negative impact on students with disabilities (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2019). Response to Intervention as service delivery model in special needs education practice has been used in many schools across the United States to support students with learning disabilities. As a multi-tiered approach that aims at identifying and providing targeted interventions to students who are struggling academically. The goal of RTI is to avoid wait to fail syndrome and prevent students from falling behind before providing the support they need to succeed (Spencer, Wagner, Schatschneider, Quinn, Lopez, & Petscher, (2014). The use of RTI has been a topic of interest and research in the field of special education, Hawken et al (2018), Reynolds and Shaywitz (2019) affirmed that the goal of RTI is to identify and address students' needs as early as possible in order to prevent long-term difficulties, avoid wait to fail that characterized some approaches in education of learners with learning disabilities and improve outcomes.

Orim and Uko (2017) examined the benefits, challenges, and prospects of RTI from the perspective of teachers just as Spencer et al (2014) found that over two-thirds of school districts in USA have either started implementing or fully implemented RTI. This indicates that RTI has gained significant traction and is being recognised as a valuable approach to supporting students with learning disabilities. However, the stability of identification criteria for learning disabilities at the state level is a potential concern. Each state is allowed to use its own criteria to determine a student's learning disability status, which may lead to inconsistencies in identification (Spencer et al., 2014). This highlights the need for standardised and reliable identification criteria and procedure to ensure that students are identified, assessed, receive appropriate placement and support. Orosco and Klingner, (2020) focused on the implementation of RTI with English language learners (ELLs). It highlighted the need for specific guidance for schools with a growing population of Latino ELLs. This suggests that RTI models need to be culturally responsive and address the unique needs of diverse student populations.

Teachers' perceptions of the RTI reform effort have also been explored. Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, and Cardarelli (2020) found that, teachers generally viewed the reform effort positively but also expressed concerns about its implementation. Teachers recognised the benefits of using data driven model to provide input into instructional planning but also raised concerns about the practicality and feasibility of implementing the model in their classrooms. In the realm of global trends and challenges within the field of education, Response to Intervention (RTI) emerges as a strategic framework that harmonises seamlessly with the overarching objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular resonance to goal 4. This goal underscores the imperative of providing equitable access to quality education for everyone. RTI's central tenets of early intervention and inclusivity align perfectly with the SDGs' resolute commitment to ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of education (O'Flaherty & Liddy, 2017). RTI, through its proactive approach to identifying and addressing learning difficulties becomes an instructional instrument globally that endeavours to mitigate educational disparities. By intervening at the earliest stages of a student's learning journey, RTI does not only rectify learning obstacles but also serves as a catalyst for reducing effect of learning disabilities and educational inequalities. This crucial facet is essential in levelling the

educational playing field and safeguarding the principle of equal educational opportunities for all, as advocated by the SDGs.

Moreover, RTI's emphasis on cultivating foundational skills among students aligns with the broader SDGs' vision. These foundational skills serve as the bedrock upon which lifelong learning and sustainable development efforts are built. By nurturing these skills, RTI contributes to the development of individuals who are better equipped to engage in sustainable development endeavours, fostering a global citizenry that is more adept at tackling complex, interconnected challenges facing our world (O'Flaherty & Liddy, 2017). In essence, the RTI model represents more than just an educational framework; it functions as a powerful tool for addressing the global challenges that afflict education systems worldwide. Through its dedication to nurturing the potential of every learner and serves as a conduit for transformative change in the education space, aligning itself harmoniously with the Sustainable Development Goals and advancing the cause of quality education for sustainable development on a global scale. It stands as a beacon of hope, illuminating the path towards a future where quality education knows no boundaries and the promise of a better world is within reach for all including those with learning disabilities.

Students with learning disabilities have the highest prevalence in most schools and classrooms. This has implication on all stakeholders especially teachers whose professional responsibility is to meaningfully drive instructional process. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the disability, it is often overlooked and the effect is underestimated. Historically, students with learning disabilities have faced significant educational challenges, often lacking timely and effective interventions (Orim, Ewa, Okon, & Okeiyi, 2023). RTI emerged as one of the models of intervention with promising and research evidence solution, the framework aimed at preventing academic failure and identifying students' needs at an early stage. However, as the use of RTI becomes a trending practice, questions arose about its long-term viability and effectiveness, particularly for students with learning disabilities who require on-going support. Understanding this involves recognising the broader context of educational reform efforts and the on-going quest to provide equitable and sustainable support for all students as hall mark of RTI. To achieve this, teachers play crucial role in the success of the model, making their perspectives vital in assessing the benefits and challenges, with view of ensuring sustainability of services for students with learning disabilities.

Reynolds and Shaywitz (2019) discussed the shift from a "wait-to-fail" approach to a watch-them-fail approach in the context of RTI. They highlighted implementation problems such as the lack of consideration for bright struggling readers, the relative and contextual nature of identification, and the shortcomings of RTI as a means of diagnosis or determination of a disability. These challenges suggest the need for student-based data to guide effective intervention. Orosco and Klingner (2020) focussed on the use of the model with English language learners (ELLs) in an urban elementary school. They described the perceptions of school personnel and the challenges they faced in using RTI. Rodríguez, Areces, García, Cueli, and González-Castro (2021) discussed the application of RTI to neurodevelopmental disorders, including specific learning disorders (SLD) in reading, written expression, and mathematics. They highlighted the benefits of implementing RTI for intervention with at-risk students and the efficacy of interventions within the RTI model. The study also emphasises the importance of executive functions in SLD and the potential use of virtual reality in adapting RTI.

Fletcher and Vaughn (2019) provide an overview of RTI as a model for preventing and remediating academic difficulties. They discuss the integration of general and special education, the use of screening and progress monitoring assessments, evidence-based interventions, and schoolwide coordination of instruction. The authors also address the controversial shift away from discrepancies in cognitive skills for identifying learning disabilities and the need for more research on the use of RTI data for identification.

Alahmari (2019) emphasised the importance and effective use of RTI for improving the identification of students with learning disabilities. The study highlights the need for significant

investment in professional development to equip teachers with the necessary skills required to use RTI for sustainable service delivery. It also discusses the situational supports that can help teachers develop their skills and effective provision of services using the model. Crepeau-Hobson and Bianco (2022) explored the promises and pitfalls of RTI for gifted students with learning disabilities. They discussed the focus on deficits in RTI and the need to consider students' strengths. Crepeau-Hobson and Bianco also describe the multitiered nature of RTI and its potential benefits and challenges for identifying and serving students with learning disabilities.

Burns, Egan, Kunkel, McComas, Peterson, Rahn, and Wilson (2013) addressed the sustainability of RTI at the school level and suggest specific activities to ensure its continuation. They discuss the challenges brought about by system change and the need for training in generalisation and maintenance of behaviour change. Cavendish, Harry, Menda, Espinosa, and Mahotiere, (2016) highlighted the challenges of implementing RTI in diverse settings and the confusion over its components for practice. The study emphasises the need for research on day-to-day implementation in real-world school settings. Greenfield et al (2020) examine teachers' perceptions of an RTI reform effort in an urban elementary school. The study presents both positive views and concerns about RTI, including the use of data to inform instruction and the better identification of English language learners for special education services. Abou-Rjaily and Stoddard (2017) discussed the use of culturally responsive guiding questions in an RTI framework. They highlight the absence of culturally responsive methods to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in RTI and provide recommendations for effective use of the model.

Purpose of the study

The thrust of this study was to:

1. Assess the perceived benefits of RTI model of service delivery
2. Identify the Challenges of using the model when providing services for learners with learning disabilities.

Research questions

1. What are the benefits of RTI as perceived by school teachers?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter when using the RTI model to provide services for learners with learning disabilities?

Methodology

This study utilised a cross-sectional survey methodology to investigate teachers' perceptions of RTIs as a sustainable model of service delivery for learners with learning disabilities. This design involved collecting data at a single point in time from a diverse group of teachers. The population of the study were 892 teachers in the Calabar Municipal and Calabar South Local Government Areas of Cross River State. That is 538 in Calabar Municipal and 344 in Calabar South. The study adopted a purposive sampling technique to select 463 respondents. Inclusion criteria were those with Bachelor degree and above in special education, those who have participated in State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) training workshops, have experiences working with children with learning disabilities, those who have attended either National Annual Education conference (NAEC) or National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET) conferences and have not less than five years teaching experiences as at the time the study was conducted. Data collection was carried out through a 23 self-structured questionnaire tagged, "Teachers Perception on RTI Questionnaire" (TPRTIQ). It was validated, trial tested and yield a reliability coefficient of .76 and .81 respectively. The instrument had section A, which focused on biodata of participants and B consisted of 23 items with four points Likert response scale ranging from Agree, Strongly Agree (SA) to Disagree and Strongly

Disagree (SD), items 1 to 12 focused on benefits of RTI and 13 to 23 was on challenges of the model. The collected data were analysed using relative importance index (RII) statistical analysis.

Result

Research question one: what are the potential benefits of RTI as perceived by school teachers? The Relative Importance Index (RII) was utilized to assess the perceived benefit of implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) in an educational context. The RII is calculated based on the responses of individuals who rated these benefits on a Likert scale, with options ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD), represented by numerical values from 4 to 1, respectively. The result of the analysis is presented in table 1.

Table 1
Relative importance index showing perceived Benefits of response to intervention

		SA(4)	A(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	TOTAL	N	A*N	RII	Ranks
1	RTI has improved student learning outcomes through customised Instruction.	500	375	306	60	1241	463	1852	0.67	11
2	RTI has helped identify and support students with learning difficulties more effectively thus encouraging early intervention.	548	597	244	5	1394	463	1852	0.75	5
3	RTI has enhanced communication and collaboration among educators and stakeholders (e.g., parents).	572	660	174	13	1419	463	1852	0.77	2
4	RTI has helped identify students' specific learning needs more effectively.	560	591	230	11	1392	463	1852	0.75	5
5	RTI has enhanced teacher-student collaboration in addressing academic challenges.	616	531	240	12	1399	463	1852	0.76	3
6	RTI has enhanced teacher-student collaboration in addressing academic challenges.	796	435	182	28	1441	463	1852	0.78	1
7	Increase in student engagement as a result of implementing Response to Intervention (RTI).	296	405	374	67	1142	463	1852	0.62	12
8	RTI can significantly reduce the number of students referred to special education programs, thus helping to maintain students in general education classrooms and providing an appropriate support system.	404	582	316	10	1312	463	1852	0.71	9
9	RTI can support school accountability by providing need data on student	332	597	344	9	1282	463	1852	0.69	10

	progress.									
10	RTI can generate valuable instructional data, aiding teachers in making data-driven decisions about curriculum, teaching methods, and interventions, thus enhancing teaching effectiveness.	488	609	256	10	1363	463	1852	0.74	6
11	By reducing the need for special education services and focusing on prevention and early intervention, RTI can lead to cost savings in the education system.	400	672	276	1	1349	463	1852	0.73	8
12	RTI promotes inclusive education by striving to keep students with diverse learning needs in general education classrooms, fostering a more inclusive and diverse learning environment.	560	528	244	25	1357	463	1852	0.73	8

*A*N= highest weight on the scale, RII = relative important index, Rank = Item ranking based on the weight assigned to the item by the respondents*

Table 1 ascertained the perception of teachers on the benefits of RTI. It presents data on the perceived benefits of Response to Intervention (RTI) as assessed through a Relative Importance Index (RII). The RII scores range from 0.62 to 0.78, with higher scores indicating greater perceived importance. The results indicate that the highest-rated perceived benefit of RTI is that it has led to better individualized educational plans for students" with an RII of 0.78, ranking first. This suggests that respondents highly agree that RTI has a positive impact on individualized education plans. The second and third highest-rated benefits are "RTI has enhanced communication and collaboration among educators and stakeholders" (RII = 0.77, rank 2) and "RTI has enhanced teacher-student collaboration in addressing academic challenges" (RII = 0.76, rank 3), highlighting the importance of collaboration in RTI implementation. On the other hand, "Increase in student engagement as a result of implementing Response to Intervention (RTI)" received the lowest RII of 0.62, indicating relatively weaker agreement with this benefit. This implies that RTI is perceived positively in terms of its benefits, particularly in terms of individualized education plans, collaboration, and addressing specific learning needs.

Research question two: What challenges do teachers encounter when using the RTI framework for instruction in their classrooms to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?

The Relative Importance Index (RII) was utilized to assess the perceived challenges of implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) in an educational context. The RII is calculated based on the responses of individuals who rated these challenges on a Likert scale, with options ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD), represented by numerical values from 4 to 1, respectively. The result of the statistical analysis is presented in table 2

Table 2
Relative importance index showing perceived challenges of response to intervention implementation

		SA(4)	A(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Total	N	A*N	RII	Ranks
13	Lack of resources (e.g., time, personnel, materials) for RTI implementation.	412	429	318	58	1217	463	1852	0.66	10
14	Resistance to change among educators and staff.	504	612	258	4	1378	463	1852	0.74	4
15	Difficulty in accurately assessing and identifying students' needs.	480	690	200	13	1383	463	1852	0.75	3
16	Difficulty in assessing and monitoring student progress effectively.	528	627	224	10	1389	463	1852	0.75	2
17	Inadequate training and professional development opportunities.	484	585	262	16	1347	463	1852	0.73	5
18	Insufficient financial resources	656	525	190	29	1400	463	1852	0.76	1
19	Lack of skilled professionals	232	384	390	82	1088	463	1852	0.59	11
20	Creating schedules that allow for the effective implementation of RTI	356	582	338	11	1287	463	1852	0.69	8
21	Resistance from staff	236	609	370	16	1231	463	1852	0.66	10
22	Teachers working with diverse student populations.	416	621	276	14	1327	463	1852	0.72	6
23	Difficulty in tracking student progress	316	669	316	3	1304	463	1852	0.70	7

Table 2 indicated challenges teachers faced in using RTI model in providing services to learners with learning disabilities. Challenges identified are, insufficient financial resources (RII = 0.76) rank the highest in perceived importance. This indicates that respondents consider a lack of financial resources to be the most significant obstacle to successful RTI implementation. Following closely behind is the difficulty in assessing and monitoring student progress effectively (RII = 0.75), which highlights the importance of accurate progress tracking in the RTI process. Additionally, resistance to change among educators and staff (RII = 0.74) and difficulty in accurately assessing and identifying students' needs (RII = 0.75) are also recognized as substantial challenges. These findings suggest that addressing financial constraints, improving progress monitoring methods, and fostering a culture of change acceptance and accurate needs assessment are critical factors for successful RTI implementation. On the other hand, challenges such as a lack of skilled professionals (RII = 0.59) rank lower in perceived importance, suggesting that respondents may consider this issue as less critical in the context of RTI implementation. Similarly, creating schedules that allow for effective RTI implementation (RII = 0.69) and resistance from staff (RII = 0.66) are rated lower, indicating that they are seen as relatively less challenging compared to the other factors assessed. This finding implies that insufficient financial resources are perceived as the most significant obstacle to successful RTI implementation, followed closely by challenges related to progress monitoring, resistance to change, and accurate needs assessment, while issues like a lack of skilled professionals and schedules are seen as less critical.

Discussion of findings

The findings regarding the perceived benefit of Response to Intervention (RTI) by teachers are overwhelmingly positive. RTI has proven to be highly effective in enhancing education through individualized education plans tailored to each student's unique needs, fostering collaboration among educators, and effectively addressing specific learning challenges which ultimately leads to improved student outcomes and a more inclusive and responsive educational environment. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions play a crucial role in the use of this model of interventions. They are more willing to use an intervention that they perceive as useful and feel knowledgeable about. They also influence the professional practices of their fellow teachers through their impact on the overall school climate as well as opinion leaders (Schatz, Fabiano, Raiker, Hayes, & Pelham, (2021). Therefore, Holdaway, (2015) confirmed that it is important to consider teachers' perspectives and provide ongoing support and training to ensure the successful use of the model for provision of intervention services for students with learning disabilities.

Ross, Romer and Horner, (2011), are one of these studies that support the present findings, it found that teachers who adopt RTI model with fidelity had significantly lower levels of burnout and higher levels of efficacy. This suggests that RTI can contribute to teachers' well-being and job satisfaction. Additionally, it was reported that RTI helped improve classroom behaviour and could be integrated into their schedule without disrupting academic lessons. Carlson, Engelberg, Cain, Conway, Geremia, Bonilla, and Sallis (2017), indicate that RTI can have positive effects on classroom management and instructional time and use of other supporting services. Findings from this study also suggest that success of RTI requires addressing various obstacles, including insufficient financial resources, challenges related to progress monitoring, resistance to change, accurate needs assessment, lack of skilled professionals, and scheduling issues. Insufficient financial resources are often perceived as the most significant obstacle to successful use of the instructional framework. This is supported by research studies of Elizabeth Talbott, Daniel, Maggin, Eryn Van Acker and Skip Kumm (2018). These studies highlighted the need for adequate funding to support the implementation of evidence-based interventions, professional development for educators, and the necessary resources and materials for effective instruction. Without sufficient financial resources, schools may struggle to provide the necessary support and interventions to students, leading to limited progress and outcomes.

The findings also identify difficulties associated with monitoring progress of students' needs and intervention process as challenge. This is validated the study of Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood, Arreaga-Mayer, Wills, Longstaff, & Veerkamp (2008), which reported that monitoring progress of students and intervention process can be tasking because it requires accurate data-driven and effective decision-making mechanism. Just like Ysseldyke, Burns, Dawson, Kelley, Morrison, Ortiz, & Tindal (2006) posited that inadequate professional development of staff, non-availability of skilled professionals affect effective use of RTI as frame work for meeting instructional needs of learners with learning disabilities, this study revealed that data on-going progress may sometimes be difficult to get because inability of recruiting and retaining skilled professionals, low salaries, workloads, and limited professional development opportunities schools can offer. The study shares the concern for collaboration among stakeholders especially on intervention related issues, as cardinal it is there is no functional model of collaboration design and use to ensure that every student's need is met. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) corroborate this finding as noted that no one profession or professional has the key to unlock learning disabilities as one services begins where other ends.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of teachers regarding the benefits of Response to Intervention (RTI) as a model of instruction for sustainable services

delivery for learners with learning disabilities. Teachers recognize RTI's effectiveness in improving student learning outcomes through individualized instruction, early intervention, enhanced communication and collaboration, and the identification of specific learning needs. However, the study also underscores several challenges in the successful implementation of RTI, including insufficient financial resources, difficulties in progress monitoring, resistance to change, accurate needs assessment, the availability of skilled professionals, and scheduling issues. To ensure the long-term sustainability of RTI, it is essential to invest in early intervention, evidence-based practices, prevention of over-identification, a tiered support system, a collaborative approach, ongoing professional development, data management, funding and resource allocation, legal and policy support, research and evaluation, and cost-effectiveness. By addressing these factors, RTI can continue to serve as a valuable model for supporting learners with learning disabilities and promoting inclusive and sustainable education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There should be collaboration and communication among educators and other stakeholders in education to promote and enhance the use of RTI model in schools to maximized the benefits.
2. Stakeholders through collaboration should secure adequate resources to support the use of the model and initiate channels to mitigate challenges teachers faced.

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