Theory Into Practice

Using the Content Literacy Continuum as a Framework for Implementing RTI in Secondary Schools

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Using the Content Literacy Continuum as a Framework for Implementing RTI in Secondary Schools

This article discusses the Content Literacy Curriculum (CLC) as a framework for conceptualizing and implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) at the secondary level. It is our belief that the CLC offers an excellent RTI implementation framework for secondary schools interested in addressing literacy in the context of improved academic achievement as a schoolwide effort. CLC implementation can be accomplished within a general problem-solving approach to RTI. However, a few components may need amplification for the CLC to become a comprehensive RTI system: Universal screening must address all the important aspects of literacy, including writing; schools must develop a broader approach to progress monitoring; schools must pay closer attention to the scope and function of decision-making teams; and, although fluid movement across levels has always been an important component of the CLC, for RTI to work, greater attention to this aspect is needed.
The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) has developed a Content Literacy Continuum (CLC; Lenz, Ehren, & Deshler, 2005) to provide a framework for organizing schoolwide literacy efforts in middle, junior, and senior high schools. The CLC involves five levels of literacy support that should be in place in every secondary school. The five levels in this continuum offer a structure to conceptualize and implement a comprehensive initiative to make literacy a priority to meet the challenges of high literacy that all adolescents face today. The CLC emphasizes the importance of infusing literacy instruction throughout the curriculum and of involving a host of secondary educators with different types of expertise to address the broad array of needs presented by adolescents.

The CLC has been implemented in secondary schools since 1999. Its use predates the current movement in education toward a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. However, in considering the intent and structure of the CLC, it is apparent that the framework dovetails well with the essential nature of the RTI framework. A few components of RTI may need amplification within a CLC context, but the structure works well as an RTI initiative. The purpose of this article is to discuss the CLC as a framework for conceptualizing and implementing RTI at the secondary level—why it is a good fit and how CLC levels and RTI tiers relate.

Understanding the CLC and RTI Frameworks: The Content Literacy Continuum

The CLC is a framework designed as a schoolwide approach to address the content literacy needs of students in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Content literacy is defined as the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and strategies needed by students to learn in each of the academic disciplines (Ehren, Lenz, & Deshler, 2004). The CLC is a comprehensive approach to narrowing the achievement gaps experienced by many adolescents often related to lack of literacy proficiency, while maintaining curriculum rigor for all students. It involves the packaging of research-validated literacy practices with tools of the Strategic Instruction Model (Deshler et al., 2001) as anchors. It is organized around five levels of instruction/intervention that increase in intensity as required by student needs. Planning and adoption are rooted in school improvement processes and revolve around high-quality professional development.

Level 1: Enhanced Content Instruction addresses the mastery of critical content in academic subjects for all students utilizing the listening, speaking, reading, and writing access skills necessary to manipulate subject matter. Tools such as content enhancement routines (Bulgren, Deshler, & Lenz, 2007), graphic organizers, prompted outlines, structured reviews, guided discussions, and other instructional tactics are used at this level to organize and enhance the curriculum content in ways that promote understanding and mastery by all students. For example, a history teacher may coconstruct a concept diagram with students to engage them in thoughtful analysis of the concept of democracy.

Level 2: Embedded Strategy Instruction focuses on student use of content literacy strategies to acquire, manipulate, and demonstrate knowledge in specific subjects as an integrated part of course learning for all students. At this level, teachers incorporate instruction on selected content-appropriate literacy strategies into their classes. Routinely, while teaching subject-matter material, teachers look for opportunities to teach students particular strategies that would help them manipulate the information being taught. At this level, a chemistry teacher might work with students on a strategy to write a summary for a lab experiment.

Level 3: Intensive Strategy Instruction is intended for students who need more intensive strategy instruction to master independent use of content literacy strategies. Some students who
struggle with literacy have great difficulty mastering embedded literacy strategies as presented in Level 2. The instructional conditions (i.e., the large numbers of students, little time for individual feedback, limited opportunity to ask questions for clarification, etc.) may not be conducive to their learning. In Level 3, therefore, Learning Strategies (Schumaker & Deshler, 2006) are taught within an explicit 8-stage instructional model (Ellis, Deshler, Lenz, Schumaker, & Clark, 1991) designed for and validated with struggling learners. This intensive instruction is usually provided by someone other than a subject-matter teacher. So a reading specialist might teach a small group of struggling students the Self-Questioning Strategy if they need to learn a more effective comprehension strategy during reading.

Level 4: Intensive Basic Skill Instruction targets foundational language and literacy skills that students (usually below the fourth-grade reading level) must acquire to be successful learners. Students receiving instruction at Level 4 learn fundamental content literacy skills through specialized, direct, and intensive instruction in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Examples of targeted instruction at this level include work in reading decoding and fluency, as well as basic comprehension skills.

Level 5: Therapeutic Intervention involves intensive therapy in language underpinnings for students whose language impairment thwarts learning. In Level 5 interventions, students with underlying language disorders learn the linguistic, metalinguistic, and metacognitive underpinnings they need to acquire the necessary content skills and strategies. Generally, at this level, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) deliver small-group, curriculum-relevant language therapy (Ehren, 2002) in collaboration with other support personnel teaching literacy. For example, an SLP might analyze the root causes of a problem identifying main ideas and work on understanding idea hierarchy; i.e. big ideas and small ideas. SLPs also assist content teachers in making appropriate accommodations in content instruction for students to promote their success.

CLC and RTI—A Good Fit

Rationale

Secondary schools interested in embracing RTI as a school improvement framework may find the CLC to be a useful approach for several reasons.

- The history of CLC implementation provides an experiential base for approaching a secondary-level, schoolwide literacy initiative within an RTI frame of reference. As increasing numbers of secondary schools explore ways to operationalize RTI, schools utilizing the CLC will be navigating charted waters. The CLC offers a history at the secondary level with lessons learned about successful implementation that can be applied to adoption of a literacy-focused RTI approach.
- The literacy focus of the CLC helps schools respond to exigent needs in adolescent literacy. RTI exists in many forms; some are literacy-oriented, and others are more general problem-solving in nature. The current broad-based concern for the status of adolescent literacy in this country makes the CLC an attractive orientation for an RTI initiative; however, its use does not preclude a more general problem-solving framework within which to operationalize the CLC.
- Both the CLC and RTI share a focus on strong core instruction with opportunities for intervention when needed. In any RTI framework, core academic instruction must be differentiated and be of high quality to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Further, opportunities must be present for increasingly intense interventions for students whose needs cannot solely be met within core instruction. Levels 1 and 2 of the CLC focus on core instruction, with levels 3, 4, and 5 addressing the needs of students who need intervention.
- RTI rests upon the use of scientifically based practices in instruction and intervention, which is also foundational to the CLC. The CLC employs research-validated tools from the KU-CRL for Content Enhancement Routines.
and Learning Strategies for levels 1, 2 and 3, along with other scientifically based tools at these levels. Further, in Level 4, research-based tools and practices from a variety of other sources are used. Finally, in Level 5, SLPs use evidence-based practices in language therapy with content enhancement routines and learning strategies as a context.

- RTI utilizes progress monitoring to target appropriate interventions. Data-based decision making is central to CLC implementation. What kind of intervention does a student need? In what specific literacy areas? For how long? How intense does it need to be? These are all questions germane to deciding how to structure classes and support services in levels 3, 4 and 5 of the CLC.

- RTI interventions supplement, rather than supplant, universal instruction. Within the CLC framework, all students are involved in CLC levels 1 and 2, which is where universal instruction takes place in RTI. For students who need more than subject-area teachers can provide, additional intervention is provided, usually by support personnel (e.g., reading teachers, special education teachers, SLPs, academic tutors) in levels 3, 4 and 5.

How CLC Levels Relate to RTI Tiers

Although CLC and RTI frameworks both involve increasingly intense instruction for students who struggle, it would be inaccurate to equate a CLC level with the corresponding numerical RTI tier. For example, Level 2 is not the same as Tier II. Level 2 in CLC does not involve intervention the way Tier II does within RTI. It is more of an additional layer of core instruction focused on teaching students how to learn. Whether Levels 3 and 4 can be considered Tier II or Tier III, respectively, depends on several factors, including the intensity, duration, and degree of individualization of the intervention.

Another way to look at the relationship between CLC and RTI is to position CLC levels within RTI tiers as shown in Figure 1.

Both CLC Level 1 and Level 2 address content instruction in general education classes for all students. In Level 1, the concern is with mastery of content standards in academic areas. Here teachers use instructional tools to focus instruction on critical content in a way that promotes manipulation of language processes to enhance content learning. Teachers might use visual devices as anchors to explain the relationships among ideas. Therefore, in Level 1, content instruction is enhanced for all students.

Level 2 is an added layer of content-area instruction, in which teachers embed the strategy instruction needed to help students master the content. At this level, which is integrally delivered with Level 1 instruction, teachers teach students how to take responsibility for their own learning by using strategies to help themselves access the content and demonstrate what they know. Within these levels, instruction is differentiated as far as it is feasible for secondary teachers to do within their responsibilities to meet content standards. RTI Tier I is universal core instruction and, therefore, encompasses both levels 1 and 2 of the CLC.

In the CLC, levels 3, 4, and 5 are for students who need more than the general classroom teacher can provide alone. Level 3 offers intensive strategy instruction for students who need more than the embedded strategy instruction they receive in Level 2. The instructional methodology differs from that in Level 2, although the strategies may be the same. The more intense version (Level 3) involves a specific research-validated instructional sequence implemented with smaller groups of students. It likely requires support personnel for delivery, because content teachers would not have the time to provide this kind and intensity of instruction. In RTI terms, CLC Level 3 could be either Tier II or Tier III, depending on its intensity, duration, and the degree of individualization needed for student success. For example, if a student struggling with identifying multisyllabic words becomes part of a small group of students who receives six weeks of instruction in a word identification strategy, we would consider that an RTI Tier II intervention. Another student who is struggling in many areas of reading comprehension may need to take a semester- (or year-) long course where he learns...
Figure 1. Alternate view of relationships among Content Literacy Curriculum levels and Response To Intervention tiers.

Primary Instruction (Tier I)
- CLC Level 1 - Enhanced Content Instruction
- CLC Level 2 - Embedded Strategy Instruction

Secondary Interventions (Tier II)
- CLC Level 3 - Intensive Strategy Instruction
  o (short term, less intense, may be standard treatment protocol)
- CLC Level 4 - Basic Skill Instruction
  o (short term, less intense, may be standard treatment protocol)

Tertiary Intervention (Tier III)
- CLC Level 3 - Intensive Strategy Instruction
  o (longer duration, more intense, more individualized)
- CLC Level 4 - Basic Skill Instruction
  o (longer duration, more intense, more individualized)
- CLC Level 5 - Therapeutic Intervention
  o always “specialized instruction”

A variety of reading comprehension strategies and where a good deal of individualization will take place. We would consider that an RTI Tier III intervention. Assuming that a student needs ongoing intensive intervention, such practice may constitute specialized instruction that occurs in special education.

In Level 4 of the CLC, struggling students, usually those performing below a fourth-grade reading level, receive the basic skill instruction they need in reading and writing to be able to use strategies effectively in reading and writing. For example, they may work on decoding, fluency, reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, writing composition, and other language skills, including listening and speaking. If they have skill gaps that can be filled in small-group instruction of limited duration, we would think of this as RTI Tier II work. On the other hand, we would think of students who need long-term intervention in basic skills, for example, in the form of an intensive reading course, as receiving Tier III intervention. Reading specialists and special education teachers may be valuable providers of this basic literacy skill intervention.

Students with language impairment who need therapeutic intervention on the language underpinnings of listening, speaking, reading, or writing would always be considered as receiving specialized instruction or related services in special education. Such intervention would occur at Level 5 of the CLC. Some school districts would classify work in special education as part of RTI Tier III, and some as Tier IV.

Interventions in the CLC should not be bound by time or defined by location or personnel. In other words, there may be a number of different configurations for any intervention. Specifically, intervention may occur outside of the school day or school year (e.g., after-school programs or summer programs employing strategic tutoring). Most important, intervention can be implemented in a variety of settings and by a host of personnel; for example, (a) services by an SLP can be provided at any level of the CLC and in several locations, including bringing Level 5 services into a content classroom; (b) special education teachers may provide Tier II, Level 3 support to students who do not have disabilities.

Related to location for delivery of services, the role of the special education teacher has been a source of some confusion in RTI. In trying to emphasize the role of general and compensatory (Title I) education within RTI, special education is frequently discussed outside the parameters of RTI. RTI, like the CLC, involves a continuum of
Response to Intervention: Critical Issues

instruction/intervention with increasing intensity. Within that continuum, special education services play a role when students need specialized instruction or related services of greater intensity, duration, and individualization than is provided in either general or compensatory education, and students are eligible for those services under state and federal law. Therefore, special education fits under the umbrella of RTI. In RTI and CLC, progress data gathered throughout a student’s involvement in preliminary tiers or levels become part of the comprehensive evaluation that must occur prior to a student’s placement in special education. In essence then, special education is part of the continuum with focus on the services provided, not the place in which they occur.

Special education services can be provided in many different locations, including general education classes. Further, within RTI approaches, it is common for special education teachers to provide intervention in tiers other than those involving special education.

Ensuring Balanced Strength Within and Across RTI Tiers (or CLC Levels)

The common adage, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link,” is a potentially useful metaphor when thinking about implementing a tiered intervention system like CLC within a school. In short, if every tier of an RTI system is not solidly conceptualized and implemented with integrity, the system will not realize its full potential to help all students and may, indeed, ultimately collapse. The following three scenarios illustrate the use of the chain metaphor, with each link of the chain representing an instructional tier or level.

**Scenario 1.** In this scenario, instructional programming is characterized by general education teachers readily referring students out of their classes to support services (e.g., special education, Title 1) as a primary means of dealing with academic or behavioral problems. Thus, in this scenario, when limited efforts are made to meet the needs of struggling students within the general education classroom, there tends to be an overreliance on support education services. This overreliance may cause the number of students served by support education (in this case, depicted by the third link in the chain) to grow and for those services to become “oversubscribed” (this scenario is depicted in Figure 2 with the larger-sized or stronger link in Tier III and the smaller or weaker links in tiers I and II). However, over time, the quality or effectiveness of services provided in Tier III will likely become compromised (because of growing teacher/student ratios, burned-out teachers, etc.), and the overall system will begin to fail. Thus, what was at one time a strength (i.e., high-quality services in Tier III) becomes weakened; additionally, because teachers in the lower tiers (I and II) never built their capacity to provide more intensive and/or individualized instruction to struggling students, all tiers in this scenario gravitate toward a state of overall low-quality services, in which all links of the chain are relatively weak (see Figure 2a).

**Scenario 2.** In this scenario, instructional programming is characterized by general education teachers assuming major responsibility for meeting the needs of struggling learners within their classes. In some instances, these schools/teachers philosophically believe that the primary source of instructional intervention should be designed and provided within
the context of the general education classroom. Thus, because limited efforts are made to meet the needs of struggling students with professionals or services outside of the general education classroom, Tier III services may be marginalized or seen as not being central to the overall instructional program in the school. In short, there may be an overreliance on the skills and capacity of the general education teacher to meet nearly all of the instructional needs of students who are struggling.

Just as in the first scenario, such overreliance on the general education teacher may cause the number of students and the complexity of the problems presented by those students to overtax or exceed the skills of the general education teacher. This scenario is depicted in Figure 3, with the larger-sized or stronger links shown in tiers I and II and the smaller or weaker link in Tier III. However, over time, the quality or effectiveness of instruction provided in Tiers I and II by the general education teacher may become compromised (because of growing teacher/student ratios, increased complexity of student needs that exceed teacher skills, burnout teachers, etc.), and the overall system will begin to lose effectiveness and may ultimately fail. Thus, what was at one time an area of strength (i.e., high-quality, differentiated instruction in tiers I and II) becomes weakened; additionally, because Tier III was somewhat marginalized or undersubscribed, its role was not defined and operationalized as being central to the goal of improving academic outcomes for all students, and its capacity was not developed. Over time, therefore, all tiers may become weakened and ineffective in providing effective, differentiated instruction to students by teachers with varying skill sets (see Figure 3a).

**Scenario 3.** In this, the ideal scenario, it is recognized that each tier or level in an RTI system (like the CLC) represents a vitally important and unique component of instructional options for students. Each tier is differentiated from the other tiers by (a) what is taught, (b) how instruction is provided, and (c) the role that the teacher plays. Additionally, specific steps are taken to ensure close collaboration across the tiers (or levels). Unless steps are taken to ensure coordination across the tiers (or levels), a system of silos is likely to evolve, in which the planning and instruction deal only with what is occurring within one level of instruction with no attention being given to the larger picture and how all components of the system can be leveraged to improve student achievement.

Because of the diverse and complex needs of students, an effective RTI system like CLC requires distinctly unique instruction or intervention at each tier. The skill sets of the teachers are, by definition, also unique and important to the overall effectiveness of the system. If one component fails to do its part, undue pressure and burden are placed on the other tiers, eventually leading to overtaxing and a breakdown in the system. In short, CLC like any successful RTI program, requires integrity within and across each of the tiers. Each leads to a strong link in the chain in order for the overall chain (or RTI system) to be strong (see Figure 4).
Like any improvement effort in education, it is unrealistic to think that a full-blown CLC framework can be put in place overnight. Successful implementation of CLC takes time. Plans should be made to phase in different instructional levels over several years. There is not necessarily a best place to begin when establishing a tiered intervention framework. Some schools choose to build on an area of strength as a point of departure, whereas others start by focusing on an area of greatest need. For example, if a school has a well-established supplemental reading program that might serve as an anchor for CLC Level 3 services, a logical expansion strategy might be to focus on ways to bridge the reading strategies taught in Level 3 into instruction being delivered in the general education classroom. Doing so will facilitate the successful transfer and application of those strategies in subject-matter materials. On the other hand, if a school is especially concerned about the poor performance of some of its subgroups in meeting AYP and opportunities for these students to receive explicit, intensive instruction are lacking (hence, a weakness), it may choose, as a point of departure, to focus on building or bolstering intensive, clinical-type instructional options for students.

Conclusion

This article discussed the CLC as a framework for conceptualizing and implementing RTI in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Our experiences with secondary schools implementing CLC and with others seeking to put an RTI system in place have prompted the articulation of the link between the two constructs presented here. After careful analysis, it is our belief that the CLC offers an excellent RTI implementation framework in addressing literacy.

It is important to note that other school improvement targets, for example, behavioral issues, need not be abandoned when adopting the CLC and that CLC implementation can be accomplished within a general problem-solving approach to RTI. However, as discussed in this article, some components, such as literacy assessment, broader progress monitoring, and increased responsibility by a decision-making body, may need amplification for the CLC to become a comprehensive RTI system that provides fluid movement and tiered levels of supports for students.

As with any schoolwide initiative, utilizing the CLC as an RTI framework requires sustained effort over time. It will not happen overnight. The adoption process for the CLC, already developed, provides a concrete structure with a track record for middle, junior, and senior high schools wishing to engage in RTI.

References


