

# The Relationship between Teacher Knowledge and Effective RTI: When We Know Better, We Do Better

by Carol Tolman

If you knew me, you would likely know how much I adore being surrounded by classrooms full of children soaking up knowledge, hanging on their teachers' every word. So imagine my delight when I visited a first-grade classroom in March and saw children engrossed in their favorite books. One particular boy, sitting off to the side, caught my attention. Appearing to devour a Mo Willems classic, Brayden (not his real name) rapidly flipped through the pages as he shared his enthusiasm for Elephant and Piggie's adventures in *I Will Take a Nap* (2015). Since his teacher understood that to read better you must practice often, she organized daily individual book readings, often referred to as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time. Looking over Brayden's shoulder, I could tell that he enjoyed the book as he smiled and laughed at the pictures. I asked if he would mind reading a section of the book out loud, which he did without hesitation, misreading the words 'rested' as 'red,' 'cranky' as 'cool,' and 'floating' as 'fly.' He seemed to look at the first letter of difficult words and simply guess, choosing words that made no sense to the meaning of the story. When I asked him to tell me a bit about what he just read, he said it was about animal friends that fly in the air, clearly not the gist of this adorable story; elephant and piggy are taking a nap, not flying. Frustrated with this experience, I left Brayden to his "reading."

When asked, Brayden's teacher concurred with my concern for his lack of progress. She had previously discussed Brayden with team members, suggesting that he "probably had a comprehension issue" and needed Tier 2 or Tier 3 pullout supports with Title 1 or special education teachers to "fix it." She predicted that he would be identified as "special education" by third grade. Beyond that, she was out of options and at a loss for what to do. At a loss, that is, until she learned what she needed to know to have an impact on all students.

## Teacher Expertise Makes All the Difference

Armed with high-quality professional development, data analysis, appropriate instructional materials, and coaching supports, Brayden's teacher became adept at meeting his needs, ameliorated his reading and spelling difficulties, and avoided a referral. Just how did she do this? By developing an understanding of how the English language is organized, learning the science behind how brains process text, and teaching in a diagnostic-prescriptive manner. These, and other topics, are thoughtfully and thoroughly covered throughout this issue of *Perspectives*. I will focus on this last idea to illustrate my point: When teachers know better, they do better. Response to

Intervention (RTI) does not work without knowledgeable teachers. And, while not all reading issues can be ameliorated during Tier 1 instruction, many can.

## A Diagnostic-Prescriptive Approach to Instruction

Please know that I, too, once struggled to have an impact on my weak students' progress. When faced with students who did not learn to read the typical way, I tried harder, kept them in for recess, taught my lessons a little louder, held after- and before-school tutoring sessions, and employed parents to provide more review of what I taught in the classroom ... as if that was going to make a difference. More of the same ineffective, uninformed instruction led to the same disappointing results.

So, what does work? Let's revisit Brayden's situation to identify what an expert teacher, armed with the knowledge of how to teach reading, can do based on classroom observations and expert error analysis.

Earlier, we saw that Brayden misread the word 'rested' as 'red,' 'cranky' as 'cool,' and 'floating' as 'fly.' Can you identify specific error patterns? What parts of each word were read accurately? Inaccurately? What can this tell us? Review the following chart to identify Brayden's strengths and weaknesses:

Target Word	rested	cranky	floating
Error	red	cool	fly
Initial letter-sound	correct	correct	correct
Final letter-sound	correct	incorrect	incorrect
Middle letter-sounds	Accurate vowel sound; missing three letter-sounds.	Missing five letter-sounds; inserted wrong letter-sounds.	Correct initial blend 'fl,' inaccurate with the rest of word.
Other observations?	-ed morpheme omitted; this has been taught.	Brayden has not been taught that -y says /ee/ at the end of a multisyllable word.	Vowel team 'oa' and suffix -ing has been taught; Brayden should be able to read this word.

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## Abbreviation

RTI: Response to Intervention