Alternative Facts Are Alive in Education As Well: A Response to Johns, Kauffman, and Martin

Consortium for Evidence-Based Early Intervention

The authors of this paper are comprised of experienced educators, teachers and administrators, many with up to 50 years of every day experience trying to bring research-based instructional and behavior practices to all students, former state directors of special education, and university professors who have contributed to the long-term knowledge base of "what works" in general and special education. We collectively take issue with a paper recently disseminated through Sped Pro entitled *The Concept of RTI: Billion Dollar Boondoggle*.

This paper is a self-published document disseminated through *SpedPro*, a non-refereed, non-peer-reviewed listserv. As such, it has the same credibility as a letter to the editor. There are no safeguards nor checks on the statements made. Unfortunately, in this era as well as many efforts to enhance educational practice, appearance of a paper anywhere can get transmitted widely and, without careful reading, takes on the attributes of "facts" even though those facts may not be accurate and there is a weak scientific basis for the argument.

This situation is exactly what has been happening with this paper. We have seen it cited on a variety of other listservs.

Given the established national credentials of two of the paper's authors (Edwin Martin and James Kauffman), it is not surprising that potential readers may accept the paper's statements on their reputation alone. We were frankly surprised that two professionals with such a highly regarded history of leadership in the profession of special education would be associated with this unclear, rambling, disjointed, factually incorrect, and misguided piece.

From its sensationalized title, the paper consists of pages of disconnected, incoherent topics that are characterized by distortions, half-truths, incomplete truths, and just plain falsehoods. The paper consistently conflates Response to Intervention (RTI) with Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS). RTI is a process that serves as a component of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) identification in IDEA 2004. As originally conceived, RTI had a special education focus. MTSS is a framework that is much broader than RTI and is one way to build a coordinated, early intervention system (CEIS), where general education provides more options than just special education to meet the needs of at risk students. The paper seems to suggest that RTI advocates seek to "repeal and replace" IDEA 2004 with "RTI." RTI is not, nor has it ever been suggested, to replace IDEA. All aspects of the identification process apply to methods that emanate from RTI, including

the requirements for a comprehensive evaluation, parental notification, and access to the evaluation process at any point in the MTSS process.

What is most disturbing in these authors' criticisms is not just the misstatements about what RTI and MTSS are and are not, but that the authors offer no recognition of the long-standing problems in (a) special education identification, (b) general education's failure to promote positive development and promote powerful early intervention, or (c) the lack of pervasive and persuasive evidence of special education's effectiveness. One can only infer that the status quo (e.g., an SLD eligibility process that was psychometrically flawed and morally unsound, and wait-to-fail model with few general education options for at risk students, and lack of identified special education outcomes) is acceptable in 2017. Where is the evidence that traditional cognitive assessments are related to improved outcomes for children with learning and attention disabilities (See Schneider & Kaufman, 2016)?

We have some questions for the authors of the Johns, Kaufman, and Martin paper.

1. **Is their disdain for RTI an implicit endorsement of the use of ability achievement discrepancy models or its more complicated and even less reliable counterpart, patterns of cognitive strengths and weaknesses, as their preferred method of SLD identification?**

   If so, this position goes against the facts. Ability-achievement discrepancy formulae *are* psychometrically flawed and morally wrong. Education has more than 35 years of accumulated facts on this issue.

   Ability- Achievement Discrepancy

   Algozzine, B., Ysseldyke, J., & Shinn, M. R. (1982). Identifying children with learning disabilities: When is a discrepancy severe? *Journal of School Psychology, 20*, 299-305.

   Barnett, D. W., & Macmann, G. M. (1992). Aptitude-achievement discrepancy scores: Accuracy in analysis misdirected. *School Psychology Review, 21*, 494-508.

   Heller, K. A., Holtzman, W., & Messick, S. (1982). *Placing children in special education: A strategy for equity*. Washington: National Academy Press.

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   National Association of School Psychologists. (2003). *NASP Recommendations for IDEA Re-authorization: Identification and Eligibility Determination for Students with Specific Learning Disabilities*. Bethesda, MD: Author.

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Steubing, K., Fletcher, J. LeDoux, J., Lyon, G.R., Shaywitz, S., Shaywitz, B. (2002). Validity of IQ discrepancy classifications of reading disabilities: A meta-analysis. *American Educational Research Journal, 39*, 469-518.

Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses

Burns, M., K., Peterson-Brown, S., Haegle, K., Rodrigues, M., Schmitt, M., Cooper, M….VanDerHeyden, A. M. (2016). Meta-analysis of academic interventions derived from neuropsychological data. *School Psychology Quarterly, 31*, 28- 42.

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Kearns, D. M., & Fuchs, D. (2013). Does cognitively focused instruction improve the academic performance of low-achieving students? *Exceptional Children, 79*, 263-290.

Kranzler, J. H., Floyd, R. G., Benson, N., Zaboski, B., & Thibodaux, L. (2016). Classification agreement analysis of Cross-Battery Assessment in the identification of specific learning disorders in children and youth. *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, 1-13.

Miciak, J., Fletcher, J. M., Stuebing, K. K., Vaughn, S., & Tolar, T. D. (2014). Patterns of cognitive strengths and weaknesses: Identification rates, agreement, and validity for learning disabilities identification. *School Psychology Quarterly, 29, 21-37.*

Miciak, J., Fletcher, J. M., Stuebing, K. K., Vaughn, S., & Tolar, T. D. (2014). Patterns of cognitive strengths and weaknesses: Identification rates, agreement, and validity for learning disabilities identification. *School Psychology Quarterly, 29, 21-37.*

Miciak, J., Williams, J. L, Taylor, W. P., Cirino, P. T., Fletcher, J. M., & Vaughn, S. (2016). Do processing patterns of strengths and weaknesses predict differential treatment response? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *108*, 898-909.

Schneider, W. J., & Kaufman, A. S. (2016). Let's Not Do Away with Comprehensive Cognitive Assessments Just Yet. *Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology*.

Stuebing, K. K., Fletcher, J.M., Branum-Martin, L., & Francis, D. J. (2012). Evaluation of the technical adequacy of three methods for identifying specific learning disabilities based on cognitive discrepancies. *School Psychology Review, 41,* 3-22.

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2. Do the authors believe that general education is committed to, and successfully implementing research-based intervention(s), that promote early intervention, prevent disabilities, and reduce the need for special education for some students?

If so, this position goes against the facts. Since passage of the federal special education law (PL-94-142 of 1975), the number of students identified as SLD grew astronomically until recent years. Numerous task forces identified the lack of general education options for early intervention as a major factor in this

increase. However, the number of students identified with SLD has begun to decline, which some attribute to the emphasis on early reading in many states and to *Reading First*, which state-level data showed a reduction in special education referrals and placement.

Learning Disabilities Roundtable. (2002). *Specific learning disabilities: Finding common ground*. Washington DC: US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Innovation and Development.

National Academy of Science. (1985). *Placement in special education: Historical developments and current procedures. Report of the Panel* (pp. 23-44).

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Scull, J., & Winkler, A.M. (2011). Shifting trends in special education. Washington DC; Fordham Foundation.

As a point of fact, to remedy the widespread failure of general education to meet the needs of at risk students with reading and mathematics problems, IDEA-97 inserted *lack of instruction* as a reason why a student should not be determined eligible and went further in IDEA-2004 by requiring evidence Of appropriate instruction in reading and math in general education with data documenting progress provided to the parent regardless of the identification method selected by the district. The only visible effort to support general education providing more research-based and early intervention has been variations of a problem-solving model (Grimes & Tilly III, 1996; Iowa Department of Education, 1990, 1991; Marston, Wallace, Thompson, Lau, & Muyskens, 2011; Marston & Magnusson, 1985; Tindal, Wesson, Deno, Germann, & Mirkin, 1985), Instructional Support Teams (Kovaleski, Tucker, & Stevens, 1996), or similar efforts that are now collectively labeled MTSS.

3. **Do the authors believe that as currently implemented, that beyond procedural compliance, special education provides the powerful intervention(s) that students with disabilities need to be successful in school and the workplace?**

   If so, this position goes against the facts. Students who receive special education continue to lag significantly behind, a problem that has been noted for decades (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; President's Commission on Special Education Excellence, 2002). The outcomes have resulted in a shift in focus for the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) from compliance evaluation to one of Results Driven Accountability. From the Delisle and Yudin letter to Chief State School Officers of May, 2014.

   > In 2013, math and reading scores for fourth and eighth graders reached a new high on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Dropout rates are down and college attendance is up, especially for African- American and Latino students. This is real and meaningful progress. However, ***we cannot claim the same progress for students with disabilities for whom the achievement gaps continued to widen*** (our emphasis). On the NAEP, from 2009 to 2013, proficiency levels decreased for students with disabilities while they increased for non-disabled students, making the gap in proficiency larger between the two groups. This was the case for fourth and eighth graders in math and reading…
   >
   > Given these numbers, it is clear that a comprehensive, integrated strategy which leverages all available resources, strongly supported by your agency is essential ***if*** (our emphasis) we are to fulfill the ideals of IDEA: equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for students with disabilities.

What Supports the Argument(s) of Johns, Kauffman, and Martin?

Beyond the opinions of the authors, the only *facts* for their assertions come from the recently released report conducted by the Institute on Education Science (IES) (Balu et al., 2015). This study was a *post hoc* evaluation of *implementation* of RTI in 146 schools in 13 states that relied heavily on extant data and survey results. Although the IES study was well intentioned and provides information about the challenges of implementing any innovation with fidelity, its findings must be tempered with critical thinking regarding the methodological compromises that the retrospective design required. Concerns have been expressed (e.g., Shinn & Brown, submitted for publication) over External Validity (i.e., were the "right" participants studied), and Internal Validity, particularly construct validity of putative cause and effect (i.e., was the RTI intervention consistent with the features of RTI).

The authors erroneously interpret the IES report (Balu et al., 2015) and selectively report only the sections that support their arguments about RTI outcomes. They ignored the considerable lengths that the IES report made to present a case for the challenges of implementing RTI consistently and with integrity, where only broad brush strokes (e.g., universal screening, tiered services) about key features have been offered. The data

in the IES Report provide evidence that there was *little difference* between the reading instruction that students *Above* (no RTI Intervention) and *Somewhat Below* the grade-level margins (RTI intervention) received. As a point of fact, the Report details that students in *both* the *No RTI* and *RTI* groups received additional intervention. At the minimum, one-third to almost one half of the schools reported that they provided additional intervention to *all students* beyond core instruction. In other words, up to 50% of students who scored *above* the criterion for grade-level proficiency also received additional intervention and their results formed part of the conclusions about RTI effectiveness. An Institute of Education Sciences guidance document on RTI by many of the same researchers (Gersten et al., 2009) reported that implementation of RTI in controlled settings with guidance from individuals with expertise external to the school (e.g., researchers) was effective for improving reading skills, especially in grade 1. This guidance document built upon previous research and concluded that "well-designed and closely monitored small-group reading interventions could be beneficial to early-grade readers in terms of improving their specific reading skills" (p. 2). See Shinn and Brown (2017) and Fletcher (2015) for greater detail on methodological concerns about the IES study.

RTI is not defined in Federal Law, even as SLD eligibility, and thus it has been implemented as a variety of practices--some good and some bad. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of widespread RTI practices because of varied implementation. So be it. But the Report itself discusses this problem as well as the variation in achievement outcomes. Of 119 schools, 38 had positive outcomes, with 4 reliably better than chance; 81 were reported to have negative impact with 15 reliably worse than chance.

But the problem of lack of specificity of RTI intervention is not unique. For example, from its outset it also has been difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of special education services for students with disabilities because *special educa*tion has been variously defined, variously implemented, and with varying degree of fidelity. Should we be talking then about the potential for the Billion Dollar boondoggle of special education?

Summary

The only statements that we may find agreement with are those describing the difficulties of implementing meaningful and powerful systems change in schools that are typically under-funded and are poorly designed for making significant changes in the airplane's design while it is being flown. We take issue with the report's statement that "everyone involved in RTI is very busy doing everything except effective teaching." As

professional educators, we find such statements insulting and one that makes it clear to us that the authors have not spent time implementing RTI in practice.

RTI/MTSS has been sustained with decades of national efforts to enable schools to build better general *and* special education services, based on more than 30 years of accumulated research and national task forces (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Learning Disabilities Roundtable, 2002; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1999, 2001, 2002; President's Commission on Special Education Excellence, 2002). These groups' recommendations, that included students and parents (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2002) culminated in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and IDEA 2004. The recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), the latest re-authorization of 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, includes MTSS as an innovative framework to be used to improve outcomes for our nation's students at risk.

The recommendations and federal law have indeed been translated into school-based practices, albeit imperfectly, to improve outcome for all students. Instead of recognizing that changes in law occurred based on studies of school practice, research and science, and advocacy, the paper suggests profit motives, career self-interests (e.g., school psychologists), and RTI as an anthropomorphism as reasons for these changes in law.

Such distortions, without facts, jeopardize meaningful educational improvements much like we have seen with initiatives like *Reading First*.

Such distortions need to be, and have been, challenged and refuted. Facts matter, alternative facts do not!

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